READING, NOVELS & THE ETHICS OF SOCIABILITY:

TAKING SIMMEL TO AN INDEPENDENT ENGLISH BOOKSHOP

Introduction

In the cultural imaginaries of reading that have come to the fore in modern societies, two stand out for their seemingly contradictory character: the first is that reading is an escape from sociability; the second is that reading can compensate for the limits of our understanding of others. Two modernist writers capture these imaginaries. Proust's *Days of Reading* (2008:82) claims "With books there is no forced sociability. If we pass the evening with those friends—books—it's because we really want to." Conversely, T. S. Eliot's *Notes on the definition of culture* (1949:87) asserts that "[w]e read many books because we cannot know enough people; we cannot know everyone whom it would be to our benefit to know, because there are too many of them" (Eliot, 1949:87) In this chapter I am going to argue that reading novels in contemporary society combines these two contrary sensibilities to forge an ethics which dramatises one problem of modernity.

One sociological vision paints modernity as a societal condition where individuals experience cognitive homelessness (Berger et. al. 1973). As more and more people live together but know less and less about one another, other people perplex us as much as we perplex ourselves. Modern life is experienced as fragmentary and as such can give rise to the desire to make sense of ourselves, others and our times as value unto itself (Simmel, 2013). 'The novel' is arguably one such cultural device for making sense of the self and others in this way (Lukács, 1975; McKeon, 1987; Watt, 1957). The experience of novel reading brings modernity's fragmentary tensions to mind: novel reading is an experience in trying to make sense of ourselves and others, thereby making reading a refuge from sociability while also making this experience of understanding others pleasurable and, therefore, sociability by other means.

The German sociologist Georg Simmel will be our guiding thinker in this chapter. Simmel's primary focus was the impact of modernity's social forces upon the individual psyche. "For the essence of modernity", he claimed,

> is psychologism, in the sense of a way of experiencing and interpreting the world through inner reactions, indeed *as* an inner world. Modernity is the dissolution of firm contents in fluid elements of the soul, which itself has been purged of all substance and whose forms are pure movement. (Simmel, 2020:317, original emphasis)

A complex passage, but Simmel is saying that in modernity the self experiences "relentless transformation" (Barbour, 2012:230); an experience reflected in modernist artworks. Modernism responds to the problem of intrapersonal incoherence: as life becomes

fragmentary, our selves reflect this fragmentation in its aesthetic representations (Witkin, 1997; Smith, 2021a). In modernist aesthetics the forms by which we make sense of ourselves are just as changeable as the contents of these forms. As an aesthetic object, the practice of reading reflects our modernity: epitomised by the novel, reading is private, solitary, inner-directed and able to provoke our ability both to 'feel' and reflect on our 'feelings' (Varul, 2015; Chartier, 1993; Taylor, 1989). Understanding the novel this way is certainly the result of a sustained effort to annex reading practices from their material and institutional foundations, thereby giving rise to "the ideology of the solitary reader" (Long, 1992:110). But that said the solitary reader remains social; solitary reading is meaningfully directed (it is a choice to turn away from others (Thumala Olave, 2020)). Therefore, a cultural sociology of reading must take this dynamic between self and subjectivity, and the affordances of the aesthetic medium, as its central object of study (Zelinsky et. al., 2021; Smith, 2021a; Thumala Olave, 2020; 2018).

While Simmel's vision of modernity is generalised, suggesting all modern people experience modernity in his terms, it would be more appropriate to say that Simmel's modernity is a reflection of his position as a member of a highly educated, bourgeois set of intellectuals and artists who came to endorse a view of modern life in the above terms (Harrington, 2020; Moebius, 2021). That said, the voices and views of my participants, as members of an educated and privileged English intellectual class, can be interpreted as sharing Simmel's views on modernity: they, too, turn their social experience into inner reactions. What I wish to do is discern an ethics of individualism within such sentiments. So I am going to further the thesis that what we know as 'the novel' epitomises and formalises the experience of how one type of modern subject deals with living with more and more people that know less and less about one another (Varul, 2015). Central to my argument is that the truth of reading could also be the truth of what Simmel (1949) called 'sociability': when modern subjects read novels, the existential feeling that it may well be impossible for so many of us to live together in any mutual understanding is resolved into a 'play-form'. When we read, this cognitive homelessness is made into a problem to be confronted and pleasurably explored. Thus the ethics of sociability is: in reading, as in sociability, a society of unalike people finds a way for all to remain alike in their uniqueness.

Ultimately this chapter seeks to outline the ethics of sociability as a contribution to a theory of the self and individuality in modernity, illustrated and substantiated by ethnographic material from readers at an English independent bookshop. I am not reporting on practice, rather using participants' accounts to illustrate a conception of self-other, self-society relationality. I break this thesis down into three parts, starting with an application of Simmel's theory of self, society and sociability. Second, I present an outline of how participants' accounts give substance to this sociability ethic. Third I detail an ethnographic illustration of sociability ethics through my participants' discussions of W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1996). The methodological strategy of this chapter is inspired by Alexander & Smith's (2003) structural-hermeneutics. Upon examining my ethnographic material, I noticed a

coherent vision of (often but not exclusively) novel reading which could be meaningfully illustrated through the modernist aesthetics of Eliot and Proust. By first outlining how this aesthetic finds its structural analogue in Simmel's vision of sociability in modernity, the chapter then hermeneutically reconstructs this vision of sociability in the accounts participants gave of their vision of *The Bookshop* and novel reading.

The Ethics of Sociability

Sociability refers to social association for no purposes other than the pleasure of those associated. This simple definition, however, belies the grand ethical use Simmel shall claim for it. For Simmel, sociability could solve "the great problem of association" (1949:255) and overturn the ethical tragedy of modernity (1949:260): the feeling that the individual is unable to find a place in collective life. Thus I wish to take Simmel's original, limited, vision for sociability and expand it to encompass a vision of self and other where both remain alike in their uniqueness.

In 'How is society possible?' Simmel (1971a) outlines why modernity creates the feeling that an individual is unable to find a place in collective life. He suggests that "social life presupposes an unquestionable harmony between the individual and society as a whole" (1971a:21) in order to confront our feeling that, much of the time, we feel ourselves pitted *against* society rather than in harmony with it. By suggesting a presupposed harmony between individuality and social life, Simmel is making the claim that without each individual lots of social life would not be accomplished. Our various roles, obligations, identities and facets of our individuality tie us to others and the social processes accompanying them. However this presumption of harmony between our individuality and position in society is not (always or ever) one of ethical harmony, or subjective happiness. What Simmel says of this harmony between individuality and social obligation is that it holds the possibility for a 'perfect *society*' in the sense that the ends of the individual could find their analogue expression in the inter-connections that unify each member of society. Society will always "be a reality in a double sense" (Simmel, 1949:254): one between the inter-relations of people (the causal nexus of obligation that binds us all together) and the individual's desires and purposes (see Simmel, 1971a:22f).

What Simmel is bringing to our attention is this: in modernity the Kantian golden rule (*treat every person as an end in themselves)* is broken in both directions. On the one hand, we are the means to other people's ends (*causal nexus*), on the other, we use other people for our own ends *(teleological nexus)*. Here Simmel reaches the ethical quandary to which his sociology of sociability gives two possible resolutions. The first resolves the relationship between self and society (Sociability I: Self and Society below). The second resolves the ethical relation between self and other (Sociability II: Self and Other below). But, thirdly, these two resolutions come with two further impasses found in their solutions. Impasses we

shall find reflected in modernist views on the ethics of reading below in sections Reading and sociability I: Being with others, and Reading and sociability II: Knowing others.

Sociability I: Self and Society

Even though many of our social roles rely upon us and us alone, we often live with the belief, at times married up with a structural fact, that we are replaceable. In sociability we are granted a feeling that we are essential to our relations with others. In sociability, Simmel (1949) points out that the tension between the individual's significance to the group and the group's dependence upon the individual is resolved into harmony. Because sociability is purpose-less, the coming together of sociable partners emphasises, and relies upon, the personalities of those present. Sociability lives and dies by the personalities of those involved: your personal amiability is the essential ingredient along with everyone else's. However, given the centrality of the personalities involved in sociability, sociability has certain thresholds or limits. To sustain itself, sociability gives rise to a special sociological reality held together by 'tact': you cannot press your personality too far, bring in inner-life turmoil, and neither can you emphasise your accomplishments too much. You cannot stress your life's contents but instead have them act as an immaterial backdrop to your personal amiability. Thus while sociability defines your individuality and its realisation in a collective and harmonious patterning, nevertheless there arises an artifice and superficial aura necessary to overcome all that makes everyone unalike and inharmonious sociable partners. It is as if Simmel is trying to say something like: sociability requires giving up much of your measure of significance for that measure of your significance to find its proper place in the social milieu.

Reading and sociability I: Being with others

The first impasse of sociability is that to gain a measure of your own significance exposes you to the judgement of others. To Marcel Proust, reading offers an antidote to sociability's exposure of our personalities to others:

> In reading, friendship is restored immediately to its original purity. With books there is no forced sociability. If we pass the evening with those friends—books—it's because we really want to. When we leave them, we do so with regret and, when we have left them, there are none of those thoughts that spoil friendship: "What did they think of us?"—"Did we make a mistake and say something tactless?"—"Did they like us?"—nor is there the anxiety of being forgotten because of displacement by someone else. All such agitating thoughts expire as we enter the pure and calm friendship of reading. (2008:82)

Proust has picked up on the perils of how much you must give up of yourself in order to achieve a measure of your own importance. In some way he feels all sociability to be forced

as there lurks the 'anxiety of being forgotten'. Proust's offering of reading as a restoration to the 'original purity' of friendship must be read as a negative value. Proust values the inner-life because the outer-world is disappointing as he falls out of the mind of others. Paul de Man (1979) finds a similar valorisation of the inner-life, pitted against the outside world, in Proust's *Á la recherche du temps perdu*. However, as de Mann (1979:60) points out, this "private existence of inward retreat turns out to be a highly effective strategy for the revival of all that seemed to have been sacrificed. The text asserts the possibility of recuperating, by an act of reading, all that the inner contemplation had discarded…" We read to forget the outside world, but in the very act of reading we come to value the outside world for what the inner-world lacks. Applied to the passage from *Days of Reading* above, Proust's claim that reading is sociability at its purest must be read as ironic: reading wouldn't be what it is were sociability not where you learn the pleasure of other people's company in the first place. Negatively conceived, Proust values reading only because of what he wishes he could have in sociability.

Sociability II: Self and Other

If the only way to gain a measure of your own significance to your social group is to practice tact and reserve, then the ethical imperative that sociability puts in place is to reciprocate: in sociability "everyone should guarantee to the other that maximum of sociable values (joy, relief, vivacity) which is consonant with the maximum of values he [*sic*] himself receives." (Simmel, 1949:257) An ethical perfection of Kant's injunction to treat others as an end in themselves, but one only achievable in the artificial setting of sociability. Sociability resolves the fact that we either are means to others' ends, or use other people for our own ends. The pleasures we receive from others is mirrored in the pleasure we give to our sociable partners. We are all irreplaceable because the pleasures of each other's company lives between the sociable partners. However, the landscape of modernity means sociable partners are often only possible *within* one's own lifeworld. While this limits the possibility of who we get to know, Simmel points out something much more radical which strikes at the heart of modernity's psychological condition of the self's relentless transformation: we have a deluded feeling that when we are in 'good company' we have returned to who we 'really are'. This is an illusion brought on by sociability in the context of a plural and differentiated society. We are not truer to ourselves in sociability than we are outside of it. Instead, sociability can achieve something that makes it appear as if this could be the case. Prioritising sociability's ability to relieve modernity's "objective content and material demands", we forget that "sociable man [*sic*]" is an achievement of modernity itself (Simmel, 1949:257).

Simmel is saying something more about the self than 'society' here. Simmel's view of the self is that we are nothing other than the multiplicity of events and experiences we undergo. We are products of fate and coincidence. But while this contingency of experience is what makes up the self, the individual is not the mere accumulation of all these particulars. Instead, the individual self is something "supra-empirical" (Simmel, 2010:114) that exists alongside the particulars of chance: the individual *as* a 'self' arises out of the movement

between the contents of experience so as to produce a sense of continuity between said discordant experiences. But this sense of continuity between experiences can never become conceptualised or fixed in our minds (see Simmel, 2010:114-117; Symons, 2017:44-45). If our experience is one of relentless transformation, any sense of continuity of 'who you are' is always a momentary accomplishment. If sociability makes us feel like we have found who we really are, among people who 'get us' (understand and want us) as we are, we are personalising fate. Those lucky enough to find sociable partners who 'get them', in a society where so much of the time we are misunderstood or feel ourselves misrepresented, are also lucky in another sense: sociability is chance, and contingency appreciated as such. Sociability is appreciated for its 'could have been otherwise' feeling that 'these people' may not have been the people 'I know and like'.

Reading & Sociability II: Knowing others

The second impasse of sociability is: you do not become more like yourself but instead expose how particular you are in a sea of difference. This is, perhaps, why T. S. Eliot views reading as sociability by other means. We read to overcome the shortcomings in modernity's plurality of points of view. Eliot writes in his 1949 *Notes towards the definition of culture*: "We read many books because we cannot know enough people; we cannot know everyone whom it would be to our benefit to know, because there are too many of them" (Eliot, 1949:87) Eliot's quotation arises from a chapter called 'Culture and Politics' where he explores the various similarities and dis-similarities between reading books and reading people. Eliot sees reading as a substitute for, and necessity in a modern society devoid of, personal relations and intimate knowledge of others. The observation is that in a society of too many people we need to 'read up on' the people we encounter to conduct sociable, *qua* political, relations with them. Beneficial in our reading 'too many' books is that we need to be 'well versed' in the people we encounter beyond our immediate circle and worldview. Like Proust, Eliot is stressing a negative value of reading as a shortcoming to sociability. We value reading not for its own sake, but for what it compensates for: knowledge of other people. The irony is that it is only in a society dominated by what Eliot calls 'too many people' that an interest in other people takes the form it does: we become interested in the lives of others (who they are, how they think, what passions move them, what fears they carry, what hopes they harbour) and so on, because we are this to them as well. We must think of ourselves as, in part, stereotyped from the outside. *Who are they?* is a question we ask when knowing other people acts as a lesson in knowing ourselves.

The Bookshop: **An ethnography**

I now turn to an ethnographic illustration of this ethics of reading and sociability. To hermeneutically reconstruct this ethic in rich, qualitative detail, it is necessary to first gain a sense of what the ethnography entailed, and the participants involved. I conducted fieldwork in June 2019 at an independent bookshop in a city in England known for its literary stature: writers' centres, two universities with prominent writing programmes and literature

departments, as well as libraries and other cultural centres (such as museums and galleries) make up a highly literary city. Consisting of two weeks immersion at the bookshop, the ethnography included interviews with the three booksellers, and seventeen interviews (lasting on average 45 minutes) with frequent patrons who have become acquaintances, and even friends, to the booksellers. Small scale, but immersive, the ethnography yielded rich information through which a 'thick description' can offer a subtle picture of the ethics discerned. Alongside interviews, the ethnography involved participant observation at three weekly events: a shared solitary reading event; a book launch and lecture by a philosopher on climate change, as well as a private book club organised and curated by the booksellers and their frequent patrons. I shall call this bookshop simply *The Bookshop*.

The Bookshop is a cultural institution. Prominent novelists have used its writing rooms in its attic to finish their novels, as well as having writers and poets in residence. *The Bookshop* also has its own independent publishing arm championing both new and established writers. *The Bookshop* regularly features in 'Best Bookshop' lists in UK broadsheet newspapers and culture supplements. Something of this cultural prominence is reflected in my participants' identities and sensibilities. George (all names are pseudonyms), proprietor of *The Bookshop*, is also the editor-in-chief of the publishing house and prior to establishing *The Bookshop* worked as a writer and actor in television and theatre. John, chief bookseller at *The Bookshop*, has a degree in English Literature from Oxford University and prior to becoming a bookseller worked in digital marketing at the BBC. All fifteen interviewees were university educated and five had postgraduate degrees. Their professions also reflected their association with *The Bookshop*: two novelists and writers; two PhD students; one sometime academic; two English Literature and one Art History graduate, as well as a publisher and a literary translator. Other professions included a mental health nurse and a civil servant (one profession was not disclosed). These are socially and culturally privileged persons. A critical aspect of their social privilege is that they endorse and value the vision of modernity I have painted using Simmel's philosophy. Many modern subjects do not think of life in the terms described by Simmel, nor do many other people value reading in the same manner as my participants.

That said, the ethics of sociability being discerned here cannot be reduced to the participant's relative class position. Sociologists inspired by Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1986) are accustomed to treating literary tastes as reflective of class and educational backgrounds. However, central to my argument is not what my participants read in relation to other social groups, but why they read what they do, and what sense they make of what they read. The following interpretation is informed by the 'structural hermeneutics' of Alexander & Smith's (2003) strong programme of cultural sociology. The aim of structural hermeneutics is two-fold. On the one hand, the sociologist has to demonstrate the cultural autonomy of their object of study by bracketing out non-symbolic social relations, concentrating exclusively on the meaningful significance invested in their cultural object. This is the structuralist half to the procedure. In our case, this refers to the meanings and values, cultural codes and

discourses, surrounding the practice of reading in modernity mapped out in the previous section: reading is sociability by other means, either to overcome the impasse of too many people to know, or the obligation to give up our personality in sociable settings (The Ethics of Sociability). On the other hand, the sociologist has to fill these cultural structures "with the rich wine of symbolic significance." (Alexander & Smith, 2003:13) One must seek the 'inner meaning' of the cultural imaginaries of reading and sociability found in participants' accounts of reading, as well as the meaningful construction of the bookshop as a cultural institution in these terms. This is the hermeneutic half of the procedure. Therefore the accounts provided by my participants refer less to the practical, lived realities of *The Bookshop* but more to the meaningful construction of both *The Bookshop* and reading in their imaginations. Participants from *The Bookshop* held a philosophy of reading which allowed this sociologist to hermeneutically reconstruct their outlooks through the lens of the modernist aesthetics of reading outlined above.

I: The Bookshop's modernist ethos

The best place to start is with George's vision of what an independent bookshop ought to be. For him an independent bookshop

> could be, and should be, almost places of sedition. Places of dissent. That sounds a bit ridiculous - but certainly places of conversation and debate. And drinking, whether it is coffee or wine. ...I just think that if you are, sort of, a small pretty little bookshop, that's fine, you're still selling books - ...but there is an air of, I find, smugness that goes with it. I just despise it.

George is not describing what his bookshop is, but what he wishes it 'could or should be': he is aware of the elitist perception independent bookshops have, but he can see glimpses of what he wishes a bookshop to be in his own observations. "What is more interesting" George would say: "[are] the topics of conversation that happen amongst the customers, between each other, strangers, that way - it's like a piece of theatre. People who don't know each other go in; they often come out having had some sort of communal experience, whether it is a row or a moment of bonding over something." I was unaware of what George meant, but then I experienced it first hand. Our interviews were frequently interrupted given the setting: we would speak on the ground floor of the shop while customers browsed. During our first interview, George's friend arrived about ten minutes into our conversation at the same time a customer needed help. Awkwardly George's friend and I stood and made small talk until we spied Rory Stewart's *The Places in Between* on the table. We then spent the next ten minutes talking about Stewart's bid for leadership for the Conversative Party that summer. In George's terms, the book in his shop offered us a theatrical device to develop a bond when previously there was no bond at all.

George envisaged this form of sociability as a product of the 'hanging out' *The Bookshop* affords:

> Here the idea is very much, if you've got the time, like, the book you take home is like the icing on the cake of the experience of choosing it. You come here to spend some time - to think you know you might want something for yourself or someone else [...] spending time looking through a widely curated series of books, that aren't grouped together in small categories, but more like this [*gestures to table of books laid out on a large oak table in piles*], ... so that the process of selection and looking is, becomes, an actual part of the book you buy. So the book you take away is as a result of the journey you've been on while you're in here. [...] If you come in wanting a book, but don't know what it is, but half an hour later you leave with it: that is what I mean by hanging out.

George's statement is not to be understood as a truth exclusive to his bookshop, or evidence of how his customers understand or conduct themselves in *The Bookshop*. Rather George is working within the modernist cultural imaginaries of reading outlined in the introduction. The self goes in search of something without foreknowledge of what they are seeking. Browsing is a process of getting lost in oneself: as you browse you experience literature as an inner reaction to what suits your disposition. You move from one to another fluidly. George would say:

> When looking at an array of books like this it is like you're looking at an array of portals, and you could go down any of them, and what's right for now? And what's right for now will be different depending on where you are and what you've experienced - so if it is not therapy, it is not escapism either. Particularly as we stock a lot of non-fiction, in fact it is like arming yourself to go back and experience things differently. Differently rather than in a better way.

While imagining reading as a portal has a longstanding history in cultural imaginaries of reading in modernity (Manguel, 1996), more crucial here is the emphasis George is placing on 'different' and its differentiation from alternative cultural imaginaries of reading ('better', 'therapeutic' or 'escapist') (cf. Thumala Olave, 2018). George's speech here shows more continuity with the imaginary found in Proust and Eliot where reading is either a recuperation of the burdens of the world outside of reading, or where reading assists life outside the text. To experience the world 'differently' through reading, as George suggests, captures the experience *of* modernity where the world of the self and the world of society are in constant flux. George is outlining a modernist self of relentless transformation: when he asks, "what's right for now?" he envisions the self as different from moment to moment and from person to

person. We can hear echoes of Simmel's vision of the self as a 'supra-empirical' entity, a momentary unity made in the flux of experience.

John, chief bookseller at *The Bookshop*, held similar views on the meaning of reading. He thought the notion of reading as therapeutic or escapist betrays the central good of reading. For John reading means

> ...'I want to carve out space to concentrate on a potentially really stimulating idea'. It [escapism] feels a bit selfish and I don't think books are selfish, they are that weird blend of social and private. Ideas grow and they find different angles when you share them and discuss them.

John is imagining the good of reading as the analogue good of sociability: it is an attempt to understand both oneself and others through a medium where 'ideas' happen. Notable here is how John envisages the process of self-other understanding: it happens 'in-between' self and other as reading 'blend[s] social and private'. What is being shared is an idea which 'grows and ...find[s] different angles' through an exchange between persons. John has placed reading and sociability in dialogue: understanding does not happen once or absolutely, it changes shape as the self is shaped by others.

Central to this conception of selfhood is George and John's vision of both what a book and reading is and can do. It is this philosophy of books and reading which comes to shape their meaningful construction of *The Bookshop*. John said:

> The book is a nice way to argue out ideas; like, Sebald. Ideas are weird things; sometimes it is very difficult to follow your own train of thought. They [books] are an interesting, intricately woven structure both in form and content, they're doing things that are very reflective of how we think. It is not about an answer, it is about the process *of* thinking. Obviously other art forms do similar things but the novel is strangely unique, in that respect.

John, at this point in our interview, wanted to distinguish *The Bookshop* from alternative means of acquiring books, namely through the internet, as well as the differences between reading a physical book and a digital alternative (on a phone or tablet). He therefore elevates the novel, and its ability to capture a vision of what it means to think, in order to valorise *The Bookshop*'s decision to eschew traditional categories and genre. Instead of placing stock in categories, all is laid out on large wooden tables and shelves around the four walls of the shop. John would say that when books are categorised in formal terms, it acts as an analogue to a concept of the self he and George wish to overturn:

> It's about thinking you know yourself, or knowing what you're interested in. Or sitting in the comfortable position of 'Oh, I'm the guy who knows about and likes, say, military history so I'll run straight to the military history

section. ...When you mix things up you are allowing people to, sort of, explore things they might not have picked up before.

George and John have forged a vision of *The Bookshop* which can be read in line with the modernist conception of the self outlined above. As Harrington (2020:78) says of Simmel's treatment of modernist artworks, their dissolution of firm contents is married up with "the quest, within this experience, for new horizons of unity, forged from ineluctable division and conflict." A quest which "symbolises a search by individuals for wholeness and uniqueness of experience in sensuous fulfilment, open always to risks of the strange and unfamiliar as dimensions of greater potential self-knowledge." (Harrington, 2020:78-79)

II: Modernist selves

But how can we capture this aesthetic in the accounts of those readers who share and value *The Bookshop*'s imaginary of reading developed by John and Geroge? Turning to two interviewees, Harriet and Graham, I want to illustrate how the accounts they gave of their reading lives required, from this sociologist, putting into practice the very quest Harrington (2020) described for 'wholeness and uniqueness' as firm contents dissipate and become hard to discern. All interviews were unstructured, beginning with the question 'So how did you become interested in reading?' From this, I would listen intently and ask questions on whatever was momentarily spoken about but then discounted in their story. Primarily listening to them speak, I would encourage their speech's own internal logic rather than ask directive questions. Methodologically we have life narrative interviews framed through the reading of books. Sociologically, the result is: on the one hand, we can view Harriet and Graham's lives as an inharmonious pattern of experience, chance and the contingency of events as their lives are unique. But, on the other hand, this unique pattern can also form a unity out of what they read. I am placed in the position of being able to tell their unique story through their reading, while making their living uniqueness something whole and consummated and, potentially, mis-representing that uniqueness in the process. By trying to read them through their own reading, I both misunderstood them as I turned their unique lives into wholes unified by their reading histories, as much as I understood them as individuals given that only they recount what they read in their own unique way.

A.   *Harriet's sociability of difference*

Canadian short story writer Alice Ann Munro ranks as one of Harriet's favourite authors. Because:

> There's just so much more to them [Munro's fiction] than there appears to be. With her stories it's always what's happening under the surface that's the most interesting. It is what isn't being said. She does it so well. [...] It is the implications, the things she chooses to tell you, the details she chooses to include, on the surface level, that then, kind of, not nag at you but they remain

with you as you're reading the story. And that kind of gets you thinking, and you finish the book and you just, kind of, have to sit and digest it, and almost let the true story come to you after you've read…

As well as capturing Munro's aesthetic, Harriet had - in the 2nd minute of our 45-minute interview - also described the process of understanding and recognition I would have of her. I took her to be a white Canadian woman who had, in her mid-twenties, decided to come to live and study for a PhD in England. Turns out Harriet had been born in Manchester to an English mother and moved to Canada aged 9, and, in fact, she was not white but mixed race as her father is Iranian. As with Munro's short stories, 'there's just so much more to' Harriet.

For Harriet, fiction such as Munro's works on her in the way she describes because of how much is unsaid or implied. "You're privy to this experience" in reading Munro's fiction, Harriet claimed: "it relies more on feeling ...or a connection, or an understanding. I wouldn't say there's a lesson … [but] a guttural feeling, that impact, that internal kind of impact, within the mind. It is more of an emotional feeling kind of connection." It is this internal feeling of connection that Harriet prizes given her experiences of often being mistaken for white, and, in England and elsewhere, Canadian:

> *Harriet*: It is, like, where do you find that space - that happy medium - between two very different cultures within the same house. It is never really feeling like I was Iranian, but also ...feeling like my family is very different to other families I grew up with [in Canada]. ...There will always be that 'where do I fit? Where do I belong?' Almost always feeling like I'm on the periphery, not really, fully belonging, I suppose.
>
> *Daniel:* Are you an outsider everywhere?
>
> *Harriet*: [*laughs*] I think so, yeah!

All of us are outsiders everywhere in modernity: because while we have places where we feel we may 'fully belong', such as in sociability, to most people we are strangers and strangers are what most people are to us. In 'The Stranger', Simmel (1971b) points out that even in social relationships we take to be intimate, or unique to 'us', there is always something that could be shared with many others: that which we take to be 'ours' is accompanied by an uncanny feeling that others could share in it or claim it as their own. Which is to say that strangeness in modernity, as Goodstein (2016:49) points out, "is a configuration of the social internal to subjectivity itself." Harriet, therefore, far from being an unlucky person who is 'an outsider everywhere', has her own unique way of being strange to herself and others. A fact borne out in her appreciation for fiction about not belonging:

> People are given an opportunity to experience a culture by reading it but also feeling it. Like having that empathy and feeling it through the connection of the character they're reading it *through* [Harriet's emphasis]. Because when

you read a book you're reading about someone but you're also becoming them, in a way, especially if it is first person, you're kind of experiencing it on multiple levels. So I think when you're reading about someone who is very different from you it, sort of, fosters that kind of empathy that you would perhaps not otherwise ever get to experience for someone of a different time or a different culture, different place, race, sexuality, gender. It is very, kind of, freeing in a way, I suppose. You're able to take on all these identities in a way, for a short period of time, and experience the world in a different way.

Harriet's vision of reading is a sociability of difference: reading, for her, makes intrapersonal incoherence the value not the problem. Being misunderstood is the understanding. Coming out of a discussion about how she is mistaken for either a white woman or a Canadian woman, or perceived to be not fully any identity, Harriet has come to conceptualise reading as being about not coinciding with who you or others think you are. Reading is about existing in the 'in-between' of self and other. Prioritising the experiencing of Otherness, to Harriet reading is where we reach beyond ourselves to know ourselves as much as others.

B. *Graham's missed life as an anthropologist*

As with Harriet, I misread Graham. Well spoken, in his seventies, and very gentlemanly in his summer linens and Panama hat, I took him to be a retired academic, possibly a philosopher, or perhaps a literary thinker. His interview - the longest by far at almost two hours - was full of life and vivacity: he would tell me about his readings of Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, Bourdieu, then move onto William Carlos Williams, Virginia Woolf and then onto Sir Jonathan Bate's assessment of Shakespeare, and the time he met W. G. Sebald in a record store. I learned he read Homer aged 7, Camus aged 12, and continues to read at his desk making copious notes on everything.

I immediately felt connected to Graham. He told me that if he was feeling anxious he would, "like a Shepherd with his flock", go and inspect his books and rest his hand upon them. I do the same when feeling ill at ease, and I wondered who we could be to one another: Was Graham an older, upper-class version of this thirty-something, middle-class bookish sociologist? Were we peers in this intellectual world? What I mean is that the more I got to know Graham in the sociability of our interview, however, the less able I was to place him into an identifiable sociological category: what did he do, professionally? What was his education? What brought him to this bookshop? I could not perceive the structural forces at work upon him. Certainly privately and highly educated, but what did he do? He evaded the question of his working life until the end: "I've never actually worked" he said sheepishly. Initially I thought he was, as the UK Census used to list the occupational status of upper-class personages, a man of 'private means'. Turns out Graham's never having worked revealed a more turbulent history of the self.

He had studied anthropology at UCL in the late 1960s, and then became a PhD student of Mary Douglas. "Dreadful place" was his assessment: "Everyone was so shut off, protecting their own reputation. But she was brilliant." Graham's ambition was to rethink anthropology through continental philosophy:

> But it went horribly wrong and I got chucked out. It was politics with a small 'p'". [*laughs, sardonically*]. Intra- and inter-departmental politics. The trouble is I wanted to do something very theoretical, and they wanted me to do something very practical. And after that I had, well I wouldn't call it a breakdown, but I was disillusioned with university life - because I just wanted to share ideas. And they didn't. So when I left, with all the work that I had done that they told me was rubbish, [it] got handed to Ian Hodder at Kings, Cambridge, who was the person they looked up to, and he read it and said 'Come do a PhD at Kings!' And I thought, 'Oh god! That is all I need' I was in no fit state to do it ...but that was the justification that I was right and what I have done was worth something. Just draw a line under it.

To Graham, his vitality and generosity of spirit with his reading is a way to live as Proust does: to find in reading an academic life restored to its (imagined…) 'original' purity, a purity of ideas for their own sake and a sharing of ideas for the pleasure they give you in thought. A life where ideas are not a professional reputation. "The really satisfying thing is", he told me as we ended our conversation,

> this chap, Toby [his niece's boyfriend], from Cambridge, who's thesis is on French philosophy, it was just so satisfying to talk to him. I introduced him to a Rilke poem that summed up his thesis and, 'oh god' he said, 'I wish I had known about that!' At least you can draw on experience when you talk to people who know far more about it than you do, but I know enough to, uh, it's satisfying. Otherwise I don't really have anyone else to talk to about this stuff.

Graham's story reveals a wish to have been an anthropologist: a wish that would mean that his talk of philosophy would have acted as, what Simmel (1949:256) might call, an 'immaterial backdrop' to his professional identity when in sociability. When I first spoke to him, I mistook Graham's philosophy talk in the sociable setting of the interview for his being a retired academic. Only to learn that this desire to speak to me contained a desire to be the person he would have liked to have been all those years ago. As we have found, in his interview with me and his talks with a Cambridge philosophy graduate, the only experience he draws upon is between the pages. Only occasionally does a Toby from Cambridge or a bookish sociologist come along so Graham can speak about philosophy.

Given the account we have traced so far between reading and sociability, we can say: in sociability we long for the assurances of reading, as in Eliot's dictum that we read to know more people or Harriett's vision of reading as a sociability of difference. Or, in reading we

wish for the vitality of other persons, as in Proust's anxiety of being forgotten or Graham's missed life as an anthropologist. There appears to be shortcomings on both sides. When I asked my participants about their reading lives, the sociable setting of the interview included those features of sociability which Simmel (1949:256) claims ought to have no place in it: individual "character, mood, and fate." When framed as a conversation about what they read, my participants find they can speak quite freely to someone they have never met before - this sociologist - about these qualities of their inner-life. In our modernist aesthetic, reading is about the inner-life. Here the interview is not a (*post hoc*) account of conduct but a sociable endeavour. However, unlike sociability where one ought to be tactful, here the interview allowed me to act more like a psychoanalyst than a disinterested social scientist. But when it comes to my interpretation of their inner-life as a sociologist, there appears to be many mis-steps: as much as I could use their reading lives to understand them, their reading lives also led me to many mistakes. Despite my intention to capture their inner-lives, sociability dictates that the picture painted of them is a product of the fleeting, ephemeral form of our sociable interview: an hour of conversation sat in the corner of an English bookshop only says so much.

III: Reading Sebald's *The Emigrants*

Turning to the final ethnographic illustration of the sociability ethic found in reading, I want to argue that W. G. Sebald's literature also contains a philosophical vision of the problems befalling the modern self: a self unable to overcome difference, nor their particularity, and find a place in the mind of others. Sebald's fiction was often mentioned by my participants and the following empirical material arises from a private book club event run by *The Bookshop* where all participants had read his 1992 novel *The Emigrants* (1996). Thus I take the following ethnographic vignette to be a way to both illustrate how Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1996) offered a philosophy of Otherness, but also how, in the sociable setting of the book club, an ethics of Otherness was talked about and formulated by my participants.

A word about Sebald and *The Emigrants* is necessary for orientation. Sebald's central preoccupation is the Holocaust and his native Germany's inability to properly comprehend, mourn or atone for it. All of his books are, indirectly, about The Holocaust. *The Emigrants* (1996) contains four portraits of persons the Sebaldian narrator knew who were either Jews who fled Nazi Germany, or persons who knew Jews lost to the Holocaust. They all subsequently commit suicide. John Limon's *Death's Following* (2012) argues that 'following' is the Sebaldian narrator's aesthetic response to the moral impasse of the Holocaust, thereby reflecting the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In Levinas' (1961) philosophy, our obligation to the dead is infinite because the dead intimate our own mortality: in the face of the other I see someone who is not me. Our time is not theirs; they die before or after us. As we witness death in the other, we become infinitely responsible for all Others. For Levinas and Sebald, ethics aims at "preventing the dying from joining the general mass of the unrelated." (Limon, 2012:93-94)

The conversation recounted here took place between John (30s, bookseller), Hannah (50s, no profession disclosed), Toni (20s, a Literature graduate who had recently returned from volunteering at a refugee camp), Diane (70s, retired, no profession disclosed), and mother and daughter, Caroline (50s, a mental health nurse) and Penelope (20s, an Art History student). These people had all met this evening, coming together for *The Bookshop*'s Sebald book club.

Toni began our conversation by recalling her favourite quotation from *The Emigrants*, wherein the Sebaldian narrator says memory is a view from a tower covered in mist and fog. John described how often in Sebald towns or cities are represented from great distances, evoking the feeling that they are toy towns, places where terrible things could not possibly happen. "Like in *The Rings of Saturn*", picked up Toni: "when he's in an aeroplane flying across, like, Holland and Norfolk, and he sees the patterns that are created through, like, farming and the roads and the electric lines, and it also gives him a moment of clarity of being like 'we are so interconnected', because when we are down on earth, we have no way of like, really, untangling all of this but [when] you come from a height you can kind of see it but you're powerless to do anything about it. There's just too many connections between everything, now we're just lost."

> *Caroline:* But this book is phenomenological, isn't it, in the extreme. It is not kind of macro in any way, is it? It is very much 'in' that person, 'in' that time, and they're not really connected. The strange thing about it is they are four stories that are not connected.
>
> *John:* But there are weird little symbolic mirrors and
>
> *Toni:* Echoes.
>
> *John:* uncanny things.
>
> *Caroline:* But it has not got a macro overshadow. Well, you could impose it, I suppose.

Any pattern we make out of history, geography or our interconnections is, Sebald's *Emigrants* seems to suggest from our conversation, an imposition. Either as Toni says there are too many connections and we get lost; or connections are uncanny as John says; or shadows of wholeness are an imposition we make, as Caroline concludes. I had not read Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* (1961) prior to our Sebald discussion, but having now read it I learnt that, for Levinas, Western philosophy's problem is the tendency to reduce humanity to overarching wholes (Platonic Forms; Hegelian Spirit; &c.), thereby making us indifferent to the Other. To Levinas, the other is unable to be incorporated into a whole of any kind. I find this idea truly ethical; it is infinite love. But, that said, I think it is probably impossible to

live. Upon the reflection of our Sebald discussion here, a possible, liveable solution may be sociability.

While these conversants had never met before, sociologically speaking, they had a lot of abstractions in common (education, class, whiteness, Englishness) which made sociability 'easier'. But at a deeper, more profound level they had a lot to divide them. As simple as: no one else is them. For Simmel, the great solution to modernity's tragedy found in sociability is a reconciliation of the problem of totality: if other people use us for their own ends, but also society is but a means for our own ends, then sociability moves this problem over into the realm of shadows where no friction or tensions exists. Instead of using or being used, in sociability we come together and part without friction (Simmel, 1949:260). In our conversation about the problem of gaining a sense of where we can locate a totality or a universal view, we are also seeing unalike people give and take points of view and make space for one another. Indeed, I have given this exchange a totality it does not, necessarily, have; rather its wholeness is a possibility that arises from the mutual give and takes witnessed. I think Caroline may be right, and Levinas too, that totalities are impositions. But they are something we can make together, if only as contingencies. Diane, in fact, summed it nicely when the talk of our interconnection turned to shared memory:

> I make my friends laugh sometimes, I say 'Well you're the repository of all the memories I haven't got. Or that I can't remember. Or misremember. You know? So I have to keep you, you know, jokingly, *I have to keep you as my friend.' [We all laugh]*. That's where my reality is.

The implication of Diane's philosophy is that our life belongs to other people. We keep each other to keep something of ourselves. Coming out of a discussion of *The Emigrants*, a book whose ethics aims at preventing the dead from being forgotten, Diane offers an alternative ethics: we should not pity the dead, instead moral sympathy must be for those who are unable to live beyond themselves in the minds of other people. Diane's ethics underlines the vision of sociability and reading being offered here: sociability is you finding your essential place in the life of others, and reading is you finding all that cannot be located in sociability by other means.

Conclusion: from sociability and reading to modern transcendence

My argument began with two impasses: in sociability we seek to reach beyond the perils of modernity, and in reading we seek to reach beyond the perils of sociability. There is no escape for modern subjects. But while sociability returns us to modernity's condition of a plurality of lifeworlds and reading returns us to the need for depending on others, this is not, necessarily, an unbearable condition. We are always reaching 'beyond' ourselves and this is, in fact, the condition of the modern self (Simmel, 2010).

The situation I have described with reading and sociability has resonances with Simmel's (2010) later philosophical definition of life as transcendence. Here Simmel would argue that the modern self's possibility for transcendence lies, ironically, in our inability to escape ourselves: being ineluctably 'who we are' holds the possibility of our transcendence. Something he captures in his definition of life as both *more*-life and *more-than* life. Life is *more*-life because its vitality exceeds its momentary experience, but life is also *more-than*-life for once we have shaped life into content, practice and meaning for ourselves, something 'more than' life stands above this vital expression of living (Simmel, 2010:13-15). Simmel calls sociability a *symbol* of life: in its fleeting aura we feel vital. But it is also a symbol of *life*: in its enjoyment for its own sake, we find in sociability life at one remove. Life at play; life stylised by 'us' (Simmel, 1949:261f). When sociability makes us feel essential to others, there is *more*-life. But when we feel reading overcomes the limitations of how much of ourselves we have to give up to be essential to others, sociability becomes *more-than* life. When sociability recalls to us our uniqueness in a sea of difference (*more*-life), it also produces the feeling that we could 'read up' on others to overcome the plurality of the life we live with (*more than* life). Unable to go beyond ourselves, nevertheless the 'beyond' is what orientates the self (Simmel, 2010:15). For what the beyond designates is the unique way the self has of being contingent, of our being no one else and no one else being us (Simmel, 2010:17 & 76-77; Simmel, 2013:242). The result is, in attempting to go beyond ourselves, we all find a unique way of being both essential and inessential to one another and, to various degrees, comprehensible and incomprehensible to others and ourselves.

It is not a tragedy that in sociability we long for reading or in reading we long for sociability. The ethical pursuit discerned here is that the self is directed toward trying to find a place in the life of others and as well as being understood. All the while trying to understand others and find a place for them in themselves.

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