‘Touchment’: Inspecting Tactilism as Modernist Inheritance in Iris Murdoch’s Novels
By Arka Basu

Script

Here is a picture of Titian’s macabre painting *The Flaying of Marsyas*, which greatly compelled Iris Murdoch. The painting depicts the satyr Marsyas’ punishment for challenging Apollo in a musical contest. Marsyas loses and is consequently skinned alive. As gruesome as Marsyas’s fate appears in the painting, curiously, for Murdoch, it captured a moment of deliverance through the death of the ego.

[SLIDE: Murdoch on *The Flaying of Marsyas*]

Speaking of the painting in a 1985 interview, Murdoch claimed that Renaissance audiences would have associated it with an “image of the death of the self”; that if a “god flays you, […] you lose your egoism in this sort of agony, which is also ecstasy”.

[SLIDE: Titian’s *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1570 - 76)]

I leave it to you all to decide whether Marsyas looks particularly ecstatic in this scene.

[SLIDE: Murdoch on *The Flaying of Marsyas*]

What catches my attention in Murdoch’s remarks on Titian’s painting is the connection she seems to develop between the flaying of the *corpus* and the ego’s demise. This correlation seems to suggest that the self resides in the skin, and the skin informs the ego about itself.

[SLIDE: Surface Knowledge]

Over half a century before Murdoch’s interview, Sigmund Freud, in his 1927 English translation of “The Ego and the Id”, wrote, “The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body”. Freud’s empirical formulation of a “skin

ego" reflects a prevalent literary modernist attitude towards the sense of touch, which may be discerned in the works of D. H. Lawrence and Elizabeth Bowen.

[SLIDE: Has the mind gotten out of hand?]

For Lawrence, the skin is an organ that knows more than it lets on. [CLICK] In "Why the Novel Matters", he writes, "Why should I look at my hand, as it so cleverly writes these words, and decide that it is a mere nothing compared to the mind that directs it?" The mind's monopoly on sense and memory regularly comes under scrutiny in Lawrence's fiction.

[SLIDE: Modernist Haphephobia]

Lawrence's characters regularly suffer from haphephobia, which is an intense and irrational fear of being touched. [CLICK] In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel, a budding artist, cannot understand his lover's habit of putting her arm in his, which makes him inexplicably resent her. The aristocrat Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* eschews most forms of physical contact after he is maimed in the Great War. [CLICK] His fear of the tactile isolates him from his society and his wife, driving him to seek solitary pleasures of the mind, such as writing stories. These stories are "Clever, rather spiteful, and yet, in some mysterious way, meaningless" because Clifford is not in touch with others. His writings are solipsistic fantasies.

[SLIDE: Epidermal Epistemology]

While Lawrence regarded visual technologies like the Kodak camera and motion pictures responsible for a growing distance between the touching self and the other, both in literary forms and lived experience, Elizabeth Bowen, a truer modernist in this sense, took a different approach. A cinephile, a radio broadcaster, and an experimental author, Bowen's depiction of touching in her fiction frequently enlists the services of the other senses. [CLICK] Take for instance, *A House in Paris*. After speaking to nine-year-old Leopold, eleven-year-old Henrietta unable to make out what he is thinking. So, she sizes him up and copies his posture,

to try “to feel nearly as possible how he fe[els]”. When this fails, she looks at his ear and attempts to inspire an epistemological breakthrough by touching her own. Finally, when all else fails, she touches his arm. But this too provides no answers.

[SLIDE: Lighting on a pair of hands]

In sharp contrast, the sight of tactile contact provides a difficult conclusion for Portia, the protagonist of *The Death of the Heart*. The climactic scene takes place in a darkened cinema hall, where the serendipitous glint of a lighter reveals a clandestine pair of holding hands. Portia, who follows the light through its dizzying motions, finally catches her love interest, Eddie, touching someone else “with emphasis”. This momentary glimpse needs no further explanation for Portia, and dispels her romantic illusions.

[SLIDE: The Modernist Inheritance]

Lawrence, Bowen, and Murdoch, each lived through a part of the literary modernist era, and it is certainly not news that the period’s dynamic shifts in culture, technology, and discourse influenced their writing. However, Murdoch’s inheritance proceeded from closer links to Lawrence and Bowen, whose work she had read and reread with enthusiasm throughout her own writing career. [CLICK] Murdoch wrote a statement in defence of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* when it went on trial for obscenity in 1960, arguing that “it forms part of the oeuvre of a great writer”, which was reason enough to keep it in circulation. [CLICK] Bowen, coming from an earlier generation of the Irish intelligentsia, considered Murdoch a friend. The feeling was mutual. Murdoch stayed at Bowen’s Court in 1956, and *The Red and the Green*, Murdoch’s most Irish novel, drew inspiration from Bowen’s *The Last September*.

[SLIDE: Tactile Instances]

Before I begin my discussion of the treatment of touch in one of Iris Murdoch’s early works, I wanted to present a snapshot of the tactile instances which appear in Murdoch’s first five novels. [CLICK] This will, hopefully, be a little more relatable for quantitative analysts in the

room, although I must add that my study is not an exact science. Tactile terminology may have non-tactile uses, my choice of keywords is arguably limiting, and it is not always possible to isolate one form of touch from another. However, quantitative approaches to touching in the novel do provide a general overview of haptic themes. In *The Flight from the Enchanter*, the threat of violence is continuously present, so the high frequency of terms such as "hit" and "strike" is not surprising. *The* Bell has a number of scenes that feature physical labour and the use of heavy machinery, which explains the high incidence of words related to object manipulation. *A Severed Head* is Murdoch's most racy novel out of her initial works, which is suggested by the density of words alluding to sexual contact.

[**SLIDE: *The Sandcastle***]

Murdoch's 1957 novel *The Sandcastle* features an extramarital affair between Rain Carter, a portrait painter, and Bill Mor, a public school master, who is having a midlife crisis. Several narrative details hint at the centrality of tactile experience in the novel—Bill's appears to damage everything he touches, Rain becomes frustrated with her portrait because she is unable to depict her subject's hands, an attempt to scale a tower gets out of hand, Persian rugs and locks of hair are caressed, and a malfunctioning hand-break results in a car ending up at the bottom of a river. However, in the interest of time, I want to focus on the tactile aspect of the relationship that develops between Bill and Rain in the book.

[SLIDE: An occasion for tactile contact]

The earliest vestiges of the affair, Bill later recollects, began when he touched Rain's hand. [CLICK] Setting the action at night, Murdoch is able to create an occasion for this interaction that does not inherently suggest an act of infidelity. Bill, by the time he touches Rain's hand in pitch darkness, has already become a tactile creature, feeling his way to her through haptic contact, a trail of noises, and flashes of light. [CLICK] Yet, touching has its limits. While Bill

feels “a strong shock”, “as if very distantly something had subsided or given way”, he is unable to put into words what exactly has changed.

[SLIDE: Contact sports]

The erotic encounter, which takes place later, overwhelms Bill. While he initiates proceedings, the experience of touching Rain “so shattering” that he has to hide his face. The self is brought to the very periphery of being as Bill conceals his face from Rain, unwilling to acknowledge, even to her, what this moment of tactile contact means for his marriage. Here, the skin seeks consolation in skin, while the other senses magnify the experience. Although Bill hears Rain’s beating heart and smells her cotton dress, he is blind to Rain’s caution when he kisses her. This reluctance has to be communicated through a gentle push. Eventually, words transpire.

[SLIDE: The skin speaks]

At the end of the affair, Bill tries to dissuade Rain from leaving him by telling her that she has made him see the world for the first time. A vision of the “beautiful world full of things and animals”, which Bill connects with Rain’s presence in his life, however, does not move her. In consequence, Bill tries to touch Rain’s hands in the hope that making contact while dispel his terror of losing her. But “all the comfort” has left his haptic action. Finally, Bill understands the language of the skin and accepts its verdict.

[SLIDE: Touchment]

Peter Conradi, Iris Murdoch’s official biographer, identifies ‘touchment’ as a nonsensical word Murdoch coined to capture her husband John Bailey’s antics through the course of their shared lives. Conradi continues by suggesting that while many women and gay men in Murdoch’s novels are comfortable with tactile contact, some of her male characters remain sensitive to it outside situations which flatter their egos. Conradi infers that touchiness is a defensive symptom of refusing entry to the world through our skin. Through this study, I

hope I was able to show you some precursors of this habit in earlier works, which guided Murdoch's hand.