Daniel Weston

Writing life's substance: Claire-Louise Bennett's "shapeless" narratives

"I'm not interested in producing literature. It's life I want to put on the page", Claire-Louise Bennett asserted in an interview promoting her 2015 debut collection of short stories, *Pond* (O'Grady). The result of this commitment, B.D. McClay finds, is a writer interested "not in the shape of a life but in its substance". For many contemporary writers, Bennett seemingly among them, the history of the development of the fiction runs something like this: when it was new (novel, if you will), it hugely increased our capacity to look at the shapes of our lives, offering narratives that better reflected the reality of lived experience, particularly that of women who were central to its production and consumption; but in recent years, notwithstanding an *avant-garde* tradition and inheritance (running through modernism, postmodernism and the contemporary) that breathes some new life into the form, the novel has seemed increasingly like a prison-house, shackling writers to established narrative patterns that constrict representation into too-tidy trajectories. Bennett's texts simultaneously record and perform a striking attempt to free herself from given narratives, perhaps from the logics of narrative *per se*, to arrive at an account of life as it feels lived.

The novel continues to have defenders and champions, as well as detractors. For Peter Boxall, "the novel, more than any other art form or mode of representation, has provided, since its emergence in its modern form in the eighteenth century, the forms with which we have fashioned our cultural communities"; across its history "from Daniel Defoe to Zadie Smith" it has been and still is "perfectly fitted to the expression of the modern subject" and "able, more fully than any other form, to give narrative expression to the ways in which we might inhabit our bodies in space and time" (10, 15). Yet, others such as David Shields find the opposite to be true: "Increasingly, the novel goes hand in hand with the straightjacketing

of the material's expressive potential. One gets so weary watching writers' sensations and thoughts get set into the concrete of fiction that perhaps it's best to avoid the form as a medium of expression" (23).[1] Since the publication in 2010 of *Reality Hunger*, Shields' manifesto for writers in various forms "who are breaking larger and larger chunks of 'reality' into their work", the number of writers working on or beyond the borders of the novel has rapidly increased (3). Whilst Karl Ove Knausgaard has been seen by many as the preeminent example of this turn in recent years, Rachel Cusk is not far behind, often paired with Knausgaard in critical articulations, and women writers have made up a large proportion of the contemporary dissenters from novelistic orthodoxy.[2]

For many female writers, it seems, the state of affairs is gendered – the conventions patriarchal, and the limitations they place on women's stories more sharply defined. As a result, a list of recent prose experimenters includes female authors prominently – Annie Ernaux, Sheila Heti, Chris Kraus, Olivia Laing, Patricia Lockwood, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, to name only a few. In their output, "autofiction" is often practised by women looking for alternatives to patriarchal conventions of the novel *and* life writing. My purposes in relation to Claire-Louise Bennett are twofold: to describe what she takes from the tradition of women writing against the conventional novel and how she advances on what has come before, specifically, how she draws on modernist principles and develops them; then to account for the phenomenological characteristics of her preference for writing life's substance rather than its shape. In the process, I hope to show that hers is a major new voice emergent in contemporary literature, related to but also distinct from those of her contemporaries who are

[1] This stance is, of course, not unprecedented – for instance, Stacey Ostler has described how by the 1960s, the rise of new journalism and the nonfiction novel had already 'made clear the frustration with the novel as a vehicle for expressing the nature of contemporary reality' (44).

[2] For an example of the way Knausgaard and Cusk are paired, see Chris Power, 'After Autofiction', *New Statesman* 22 August 2018. Further, it is worth noting here that literary prize culture is now starting to take note of this shift and its potential relation to gender: 2024 saw the inaugural award in the UK of the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction, the new counterpart to the Women's Prize for Fiction, which was first awarded in 1996.

also in various ways riffing on the literary techniques and ideas that modernists pioneered. To be clear, in focusing on modernist intertexts, I am not aiming to diminish the importance of intervening phases. Bennett does a lot herself to demonstrate the importance of mid-twentieth-century experimentalism in her work – she does this both in *Checkout 19* and in numerous essays. I aim to note another debt which might be less explicitly signalled but is perhaps nonetheless more pervasive still.

"First Thing", Bennett's short story (flash fiction really, at under 200 words) provides an opening example of salient features and opens up some comparisons. The narrator – the same female protagonist of all the stories that make up *Pond* (2015) – is awoken and, to an extent, flummoxed by the arrival of a ratcatcher whose appointment she has not remembered after "three overflowing beers the night before". Typically for the collection, the focus is on the everyday things that surround her and how they are sensed (here, how they taste). She makes them both coffees and, "because I wasn't really here I didn't yet know how I like things, so I put two sugars and milk in my coffee, because that's how the ratcatcher takes his" (35). The woman, caught off-guard and not fully present, falls in step with her (male) interlocutor's preference, disregarding or momentarily not knowing her own. The prosaic and very briefly described material finds its indicative significance in showing the attention and vigilance required to constantly renew an interrogation of what seems given, normal, accepted. In this throwaway scene, the narrator weighs the coercion that social life lays upon the individual and, in recognising it, begins to establish grounds for resisting it that are defended more vigorously elsewhere in the stories. All of Bennett's prose writing to date (I'm writing in October 2024 so this is *Pond* and 2021's *Checkout 19*) charts the pressures of and, oftentimes, resistance to the given narratives that inform an unnamed narrator's daily life and sense of direction. The writing offers both an account of and, in its strange, sometimes obtuse shapes, an intervention in the ways that narrative might be reformed to better represent what

life, a woman's life but also just a person's life, feels like lived. In this shift, the writing takes a turn away from the social and towards the experiential.

Furthermore, "First Thing" (along with other very short stories like it in *Pond*) offers an opportunity to focus on the similarities between Bennett's project and that of some modernist writers in order to reveal key facets of her practice. In this regard, the realisation that the story's protagonist comes to – it's perhaps not unpacked quite enough in the story to be called a revelation – might be compared to a Joycean epiphany (though I am not suggesting a direct allusion). In *Stephen Hero* (1906, 1944), Joyce uses "epiphany" to describe "a sudden spiritual manifestation" (216); or, as Morris Beja glosses it, the moment of awareness that a character achieves in experiencing "sudden illuminations produced by apparently trivial, even seemingly arbitrary, causes" (13). Much of Joyce's fiction, especially in *Dubliners* (1914), is built around such moments of sudden insight [3] Beja argues that the epiphany first becomes a feature of the prose fiction in the modernist period and that although Joyce was the first to deploy the term in this context, he is certainly not the only writer doing something similar. Joyce's epiphanies are quite close to Virginia Woolf's notion of "moments of being", as described in her essay "A Sketch of the Past" (1939). For Beja, "'despite her many experiments with widely differing fictional forms, the technical device of the moment of vision appears in all her work, from first to last. Although she did not evolve anything remotely like a theory to explain such moments, she mentioned them more frequently than Joyce or even Proust." (144) Indeed, across a broader range of characteristics, as I aim to show, it is Woolf who provides the closer analogue for what Bennett is doing. Joycean and

[3] A comparison to James Joyce is also informative in a broader sense. When Ezra Pound assesses Joyce's short fictions in *Dubliners*, he might just as easily be describing aspects of Bennett's writing: "[Joyce] is not bound by the tiresome conventions that any part of life, to be interesting, must be shaped into the conventional form of a 'story'. … Life for the most part does not happen in neat little diagrams and nothing is more tiresome than the continual pretence that it does. Mr. Joyce's 'Araby', for instance, is much better than a 'story,' it is a vivid writing" (67). Living in Ireland and publishing initially with Irish journals and presses, Bennett will have found Joyce's presence pervasive.

Woolfian epiphany circumvents the received narrative logics of gradual revelation and character growth handed down from nineteenth-century forebears, in order to more readily approach how such moments really feel. Bennett's version does this too, but in contrast to these paradigms, the moment of recognition is presented in "First Thing" as an isolated epiphany, shorn of context and clipped out of any surrounding narrative that more typically builds towards the moment of realisation in modernist handling. This is only emphasised with the story's unusual syntax and unorthodox paragraphing.

Some of the basic details of Bennett's two published books and their genesis illustrate facets of their unusualness. *Pond*, the earlier of the two, was initially conceived as a stage piece (Bennett then worked in theatre) but was subsequently rewritten as prose to be encountered on the page, though with the intricacies and distinctive timbre of a performed voice still evident across this transition from spoken to largely interior, unspoken monologue (Clark). Two years prior to publishing the sequence *in toto*, Bennett's "The Lady of the House", which would feature in *Pond*, had won the inaugural White Review short story prize, an award set up specifically to reward "short stories that explore and expand the possibilities of the form".[4] The stories that make up *Pond* are discrete and separable, but they are nonetheless told by a single narrator, a woman who lives mostly in solitude in the west of Ireland, often without an interlocutor or, where one is present, it is a fairly superficially sketched one. Consequently, much of the stories' details relate to the internal mental process or remembered (rather than directly reported) interactions. The everyday and often mundane incidents of the woman's life open out onto bigger pictures – sometimes explicitly stated, sometimes enigmatically alluded to – in the manner of the encounter with the ratcatcher above. In other stories, the narrator cooks and eats, goes for walks, feels concerned about the value of her work, has half-conversations with her neighbours, but also thinks about the First

[4] See The White Review website: www.thewhitereview.org/prize/the-white-review-short-story-prize-2013/

World War and the bleak reality of the nineteenth-century Irish Potato Famine in the area in which she now lives. The reader is sometimes invited to ponder "meanings" without much guidance or sway. As Susan Stich describes it, "instead of presenting a plot leading to an epiphany of sorts, [Bennett] draw[s] the reader into a web of reflections sparked off by the minutiae of [her] female narrator's world, which encompasses the domestic, the exotic and the philosophical". The spatial arrangement of textual material that results has a quality of shapelessness. One possible trajectory is from the prosaic to the profound (sometimes mapping onto a movement from the concrete to the abstract, in turn), though just as often the destination is the comedic or the ridiculous. At times, the real "topic" of a story seems to be a hole in the middle, around which material (literary, and just general matter) gravitates, but which remains unspecified. This is what gives the stories their enigmatic qualities.

Checkout 19 is, by contrast, a continuous piece of prose, but one with the feel of stories interwoven rather than a single linear narrative, as might more commonly be expected from a novel (though the book has been marketed, as is the way with such texts, as fiction). The incidents are drawn from school years through university and beyond, they are more social than solitary (as *Pond* largely is), but they are not organised clearly into bildungsroman format. All the material across the two texts seems to emanate from the same consciousness – they are to be read as a series of incidents in the life and mind of a single narrator – as they are told, Joanna Biggs notes, "in the same beguiling voice". The copyright page in *Checkout 19* acknowledges that "some of the ideas and scenes in the following pages began life in the following essays", before listing pieces in *The White Review* (2020), *gorse* (2014), *The Stinging Fly* (2015). Whilst publication of excerpts before the release of a novel is *de rigueur* today, in Bennett's case the practice is indicative of the degree to which parts of the text stand alone, readily separable from their place (rather unsettled anyway) in the broader narrative arc. They also fit different contexts – as part of an extended autofiction here in *Checkout 19*,

as “essays” (note, not stories) elsewhere. Clair Wills calls the text a “book of linked essay-stories (essories?)”. Whilst *Checkout 19* is presented as a single piece of continuous prose in a way that *Pond* is not, the porous boundary between short story sequence and novel is further blurred in this picaresque narrative made up, it sometimes seems, of borderless vignettes.

The texts themselves put it beyond doubt that Bennett’s unconventional ways with narrative result from thoroughgoing engagement with ways in which her forebears have dealt with the disjuncture between literary form and lived experience. The lengthy accounts of reading in Bennett’s work, especially *Checkout 19*, describe an activity that cultivates a heightened alertness to the power of narrative (in writing as in life) to shape direction, both opening and foreclosing possibilities: “We were students of literature but we didn’t read in order to become clever and pass our exams with the highest commendations – we read in order to come to life” (200). Working through the ways in which Bennett draws upon and builds from her forebears, especially her female forebears, is, then, a productive critical procedure to frame what is important in her work. In tracing the debts, the characteristics of her twenty-first-century approach come more clearly into view.

One of the chief activities of second-wave feminists in the sphere of criticism and theory was articulating a literary history of women’s rejection of patriarchal conventions. In the 1970s, Elaine Showalter used the term “gynocritics” to describe a programme that “begins at the point that we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture” (224). Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar demonstrated that “women writers participate in a quite different literary subculture from that inhabited by male writers, a subculture which has its own distinctive literary traditions, even - though it defines itself in relation to the "main," male-dominated, literary culture - a

distinctive history" (50). Written in this milieu, Rachel Blau DuPlessis's seminal *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985) offers a still-salient account of the ways in which given narrative forms have bolstered gender conventions, and how they might also be the site for resistance. The book argues that "there is a consistent project that unites some twentieth-century women writers across the century, writers who examine how social practices surrounding gender have entered narrative, and who consequently use narrative to make critical statements about the psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women" (4). Drawing on Marxist accounts of literature and their proposition that narrative structures are apparatuses of ideology, Blau DuPlessis finds that for the writers she studies – Olive Schreiner, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, H.D., Dorris Lessing, Adrienne Rich – "the romance plot, as a major expression of these social practices, is a major site for their intrepid scrutiny, critique, and transformation of narrative" (4). Blau DuPlessis focuses on the resolutions of romance plots which formerly only offered two endings for women: "social – successful courtship, marriage – or judgemental of her sexual and social failure – death". Thus, romance plots sublimated and/or subordinated the quest narrative conclusions that female heroines' male counterparts enjoyed (1).[5] Blau DuPlessis traces a history in which novels adhering to these patterns in the nineteenth century are rife with tensions – "felt as the 'patness' of a resolution, or the ironic comment of an author at closure" – and then twentieth-century fictions exhibit "the desire to produce several different figures at that place where text meets values" (7, 19). She goes on to chart case studies in which twentieth-century women writers perform varied deformations of accepted novelistic trajectories in service of the (re)discovery and insertion of women's quest narratives and, ultimately, a fuller female subjectivity.

[5] Here, DuPlessis is extending the work of Nancy Millar, who initiated scholarship on these 'two poles'. See Nancy K. Millar, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782*.

Bennett is evidently well versed in what this means, but her own project is not only a furthering of this reinsertion or an equalisation along gender lines. Rather, she undermines the very logics of narrative itself. In doing so she is perhaps paradigmatic of the ways in which twenty-first century prose writers are moving things along again from their forebears, just as Woolf *et al* did before. Prior to publishing her own writing, Bennett worked for many years in theatre and so can be reasonably assumed to draw on the questioning and deforming of narrative that have circulated in that sphere.[6] Broadly contemporary to Blau DuPlessis's work on the novel, drama-focused theorists were advocating for interventions in theatre form. Sue Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre* (1988) built the case for a "new poetics" (borrowing from but establishing fundamental differences to Aristotle's *Poetics*) that would "abandon the traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notions of form, practice and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in the art, support their liberation from the cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorisation of the male gender" (114). Potentially more radical than the correction of romance plots' limitations and the assertion of quest narratives for women, this thinking asserted that "the form of narrative itself is complicit with psychocultural repression of women" (124). Envisaging oppositional women's writing for the theatre, Case sketches some characteristics that, for my purposes, might just as easily be identified in Bennett's prose:

> It can be elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete. … Without closure, the sense of beginning, middle, and end, or a central focus, it abandons the hierarchical

[6] More detail on the impact that trends in theatre have had on Bennett's writing follows in the second half of this article.

organising-principles of traditional form that served to elide women from discourse. (129)

In tracing these positions, we have a starting point for an account of Bennett's writing and the striking form that its narratives take, or, more accurately, don't take, as well as a suggestion of some of the meanings that might be attached to the writing's strangeness. Turning to a few more specific twentieth-century inheritances from the tradition that Blau DuPlessis identifies will add flesh to the bone.

As I have noted, mid-century *avant-garde* writers are a prominent inspiration for Bennett, but for an investigation of her writing, as for many of her contemporaries, modernism is the moment for sustained questioning of established narrative paradigms that seems most pertinent. In this influence, Bennett is by no means alone: Robert Eaglestone has noted that twenty-first-century writing is characterized by "a return to a sort of modernism": "Drawing on the heritage of Woolf, Joyce, and Beckett, and on the experimental fiction of the next generation, B.S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Ann Quin, some writers find in these the resources to continue to develop fiction" (16). Bennett's developments are, I hope to show, striking and unique. Virginia Woolf is perhaps the most important novelist and critic in this lineage – Toril Moi, noting her fellow feminists' failure to fully engage with Woolf and arguing for her central place in this history, calls her "the greatest British woman writer of [the twentieth] century, … not only a novelist of considerable genius but a declared feminist and dedicated reader of other women's writing" (9). One of Woolf's most powerful articulations of a new direction for writing appears in the essay "Modern Fiction" (1919), where she describes the modern writer's dilemma when "life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless, we go on perserveringly, conscientiously,

constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds" (*Selected Essays* 8). The questions that this recognition prompts for Woolf – "Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (9) – are ones that have abided. She toyed with different descriptors for her texts – in a diary entry at the time that she was starting out on *To the Lighthouse* (1927), she wonders whether "elegy" might be more accurate than "novel" (*Diary* 34). Contemporary writers, I have been suggesting, also ask: "if they don't reflect life, must we write novels at all?"

Woolf herself comes toward a similar question elsewhere. In "Women and Fiction" (1929), she considers the moment when women began to write creatively in the eighteenth century, and asks "why did their art then, and why to some extent does their art still, take the form of fiction?" (*Selected Essays* 132) The answer she proposes is that as "the least concentrated form of art", it was "the easiest thing for a woman to write" amidst the myriad social requirements laid against her and in the absence of an established place for her in other literary milieux (134). She goes on to identify the difficulties necessarily involved in this endeavour, first in the "ill-fitting sentence":

> To begin with, there is the technical difficulty – so simple, apparently; in reality, so baffling – that the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use. Yet in a novel, which covers so wide a stretch of ground, an ordinary and usual type of sentence has to be found to carry the reader on easily and naturally from one end of the book to the other. And this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it. (136)

Altered, more elastic sentences abound in Woolf's writing. To pick a famous example, here is a sentence from the opening page of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), in which the squeak of a door's hinge in Clarissa Dalloway's London house reminds her of the doors thrown open at her childhood home, Bourton: "How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was), solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen …" (3). This sentence rolls on in associative patterns mapping the mind's meandering through another two increasingly intricate phases separated by semi-colons, on top of the four presented here, each with their own complex clauses and embedded voices. The effect is, as in the passage from "Women and Fiction", a sentence that "takes the natural shape of [a] thought". This, undoubtedly, is also characteristic of Bennett's writing, as will be seen in some of the focused close readings to follow. Suffice to say here that her sentences and syntax typically exploit an elasticity similar to Woolf's, avoid the usual hierarchical arrangement of ideas, often replacing causality with a freer sense of association, and opting for something more list-like, flatter. At the same time, they are far more conversational than might be expected, drawing on the stage soliloquy in their approximation of spoken qualities. The effect is sometimes one of hailing the reader as a co-conspirator in dissension.

Blau DuPlessis argues that Woolf's notion of "breaking the sentence", though not only found in writing by women, is nonetheless "a 'woman's sentence' because of its cultural and situational function, a dissension stating that women's minds and concerns have been neither completely nor accurately produced in literature as we know it. Breaking the sentence is a way of rupturing language and tradition sufficiently to invite a female slant, emphasis or approach" (32). In this carefully balanced account, Blau DuPlessis is navigating a key debate in feminist accounts of women's writing. Theorists of *écriture féminine* advocated writing

from the body: Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) argued that the feminine practice of writing that results "can never be theorized, eclosed, coded … it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system" (883); in related work, Lucy Irigaray suggested that "mimicry" might be a lever for women to "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation" (76). Cixous's notion of woman as a transhistorical essence was challenged by theorists who rejected what they saw as essentialising, arguing instead that woman is a social construct. Monique Wittig's insistence, in "One is not born a woman" (1981), that women "have been ideologically rebuilt into a 'natural group'" (2014) had a powerful influence in the '90s on queer theorists such as Judith Butler, who read gender as performative. Woolf's own writing, preceding these positions, had staged a similar debate – *A Room of One's Own* (1929) contains passages that advocate for women's writing as different, as well as others that argue for the cultivation of androgyny in writing; *Three Guineas* (1938) contains more of the former than the latter. These ideas all provide cues for thinking about Bennett's twenty-first century writing, but they require some updating for an era in which gender fluidity has, for many, brought about a movement away from male/female binary identity. Bennett's texts, especially *Checkout 19* are undoubtedly about women's experience, but they are also more broadly concerned with the limitations of social and literary convention, enacted by patriarchy, as they are felt by the individual irrespective of their gender identity.

If Woolf's question in "Modern Fiction" – "is life like this?" – offers an obvious critical spur and call to action, innovations with the short story from two other modernist titans – Anton Chekhov and Katharine Mansfield – are perhaps a more thoroughgoing influence on contemporary directions in the form, not least in Bennett's collection *Pond*. Chekhov's and, to a greater extent still, Mansfield's impact on the short story are diffuse and pervasive so the absence of specific reference to her work in Bennett's writing is no reason to

doubt her debt (witting or otherwise). Chekhov's pivotal role in defining the modern form of the short story is most obviously felt in two connected features of Bennett's collection *Pond* – the undiluted focus on a single persona, and the use of the form as a vehicle for exploring subjectivity. Chekhov famously recommended the selection of a single character for focus: "When you fashion a story you necessarily concern yourself with its limits: out of a slew of main and secondary characters you choose only one – the wife or the husband – place him against the background and describe him alone and therefore also emphasize him, while you scatter the others in the background like small change" (272/3). Bennett runs with this idea. As I have established, the stories that make up *Pond* are told in the first-person from the perspective of a single protagonist-narrator – a young woman living in circumstances similar to Bennett's own at the time (alone in a rural cottage with only infrequent visitors). This solitude only underlines the point. In Chekhov's terms, other characters in these stories are "small change" indeed (not developed as characters beyond mere outline). There is sometimes no interlocutor at all. Chekhov's method, serving this aim, produced stories replete with long, potentially tedious passages that revealed a character's traits in cumulative ways, through detail rather than prefatory exposition – of many possible examples, the provocatively titled "A Boring Story" (1889), replete with long monologues that the subtitle attributes to "the notebooks of an old man", is perhaps the most obvious. Bennett operates in a similar fashion. It is by an accumulation of seemingly throwaway or happenstance details (without orienting preamble) that the portrait of the narrator's habits of thought is revealed. Consciousness, and what it feels like as lived, are the subject matter of these stories, leading critics such as Andrew Gallix to observe that "reading *Pond* is an immersive experience. … One of the most striking aspects of this extraordinary book is how well we get to know the narrator – whose brain and body we inhabit – yet how little we know about her. We don't even learn her name". Finally, for Chekhov, the "under" or "below" text – what is

not said or done – is just as important as the surface in depicting this. Bennett follows suit. For example, what is the "broken, precious thing" that the narrator "needed to get rid of fast" (*Pond* 51) and throws in the pond at the conclusion of "The Big Day"? We're never told, but the gap is informative.

Katherine Mansfield, like Woolf, was heavily influenced by Chekhov. Mansfield remarked that his refusal to "solve" was "one of the most valuable things I have ever read. It opens – it discovers rather, a new world" (*Collected Letters* 324). Bennett too takes this cue – her stories are replete with unresolved details. A more thoroughgoing connection between Bennett's and Mansfield's writing lies in the link between portrayals of outsider figures and short story form. Clare Hanson has noted that the connection of the two is integral to Mansfield's work:

> [T]here is a clear connection between Mansfield's choice of the short story form and her marginal position. The short story is a genre which, both formally and in terms of its traditional content, has always been marginal, fragmented. Formally, the constraint of brevity prevents our having a complete, harmonious vision of experience. In terms of content, the traditional concern of the short story has been the portrayal of the experience of misfits, marginal figures of some kind. (300)

A Mansfield story like "The Tiredness of Rosabel" (1908, 1924) provides an example. The titular character, a young working-class woman, travels home on a crowded bus from the milliner's shop where she works, fantasizing initially about a roast dinner ("for which she would have sacrificed her soul") that far outdoes her own meagre evening meal (*Collected Stories* 513). Her various trains of thought, described in sentences full of associative dashes, move through several phases as she reaches her bedsit, before landing on a prolonged mental

occupation taking up the whole last third of the story. She imagines a relationship with a rich young man who has visited the shop earlier in the day to buy a hat for the woman he accompanies (whilst also propositioning Rosabel as he pays the bill). This mental flight of fancy is elaborate, dominating the final couple of pages with only brief, parenthetical returns to "the real Rosabel, the girl crouched on the floor in the dark" (518). The "shop girl" is marginal; the story that contains her and weighs her containment, brief. The fragment of a life focuses on deepening character without the propulsion of plot.

The suture between marginal form and marginal protagonist is accentuated in Bennett's stories (perhaps to a greater degree, even, than in Mansfield's). Bennett uses her narrator's social marginality to lever attention away from interaction, the content of most fictional plotting: just as in "The Tiredness of Rosabel", a typical story in *Pond* might contain remembered dialogue but no actual reported speech in the present. For Bennett, this creates space to dwell on her relationship with the material things of her world and the sensations they prompt. Instances of being are presented thus. In *Pond*, the "constraint of brevity" that Hanson notes in Mansfield is mitigated, but also perhaps further complicated, by the sustained relationship that the reader develops with a single narrator over a whole sequence of stories. Because the focus is largely on the phenomenology of experience, our knowledge of her identity remains partial (at best) even whilst we are exposed at length to her perceptions and mental processes.

Finally, a notable shift between Mansfield and Bennett is felt in depictions of female agency. Mansfield typically portrays the wasted lives of women who are unable to extricate themselves from the patriarchal order (much as they struggle against its constraints), whereas Bennett's narrator is, to an extent, liberated by comparison, though it must be said that many stories in *Pond* and passages in *Checkout 19* detail the ways in which women are curtailed and threatened. The feature of Mansfield's writing that I am referring to is perhaps most

explicitly apparent in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1921) in which the father, though deceased, looms large as a presence governing the mental lives of Constantia and Josephine. And yet, these women possess rich, unruly interiority. The story opens with this: "The week after was one of the busiest weeks of their lives. Even when they went to bed it was only their bodies that lay down and rested; their minds went on, thinking things out, talking things over, wondering, deciding, trying to remember where..." (*Collected Stories* 262). The first paragraph trails off here, expressing the endlessness of associative mental wandering. Rosabel, in the earlier story, is similar. Claire Tomalin's assessment of Mansfield – "her territory was that of the fragile emotions, half understood feelings, the fine edge between the ridiculous and the pathetic" – is also well suited to Bennett's dominant tone (3). This is perhaps the jumping off point: Bennett's stories might be said to work towards closing the gap between inner and outer life that remains a chasm in Mansfield's texts.

The ways that *Pond* and *Checkout 19* build on these influences are twofold: first, the texts map the ways in which existing narrative patterns seem ill-fitting (to revive Woolf's metaphor of plot-as-garment); second, they scope out some alternative positions. Both texts interleave both strategies; I will take each strategy in turn. *Checkout 19*, in its larger coverage of different phases of the narrator's life, includes more material in which the narrator remembers ill-fitting narratives as a large part of her childhood and adolescent experience. Sometimes this takes the form of measuring her own youthful efforts at writing against what she is reading. She finds her own efforts wanting. The comparison, she reports, is all the more pointed when she reads Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*, written when Sagan was eighteen, roughly the same age as the narrator is when she reads it:

> [T]he things I was writing at that time when I was that age had none of the clarity and assuredness of Sagan's work, they were autotelic and inscrutable and quite often when

> I read back over them I didn't understand them at all, they perplexed and disturbed me, they didn't tell a story, they expressed confusion and despair and desire and anger, irrepressible forces which issued out of the dissonance that existed between my interior life and the world around me, and nobody would want to read that, and I didn't want anyone looking at any of it anyway, apart from my friend Natasha. (78/9)

The recalled experience of a gap between what was felt and what could be shaped into narrative is, in the wider context of the text, an account of past failure and a staging post towards success (metafictionally, in this narrative that we are reading). It is worth noting that the failure of the juvenile writing is framed in two ways here: first, in personal terms, that felt experience won't conform to the shape of a story; second, in terms of the writing's social circulation – who might want to read it. The same species of disjuncture exists in other areas of the adolescent narrator's experience such as, for example, the idea of youthful promise (i.e. potential) promoted at school and in interactions with adults generally: "Well we all have promise, don't we? We all feel it thumping in us, especially around that age, seventeen, and its irksome. What are we going to do? Everyone wants to know all the time what are you going to do and nothing makes them quite so cross as when you don't want to do anything at all" (107). Nonconformity to the world's narratives gets bedded in in these instances, even if the narrator only later learns how to navigate this discord.

The passage on reading Sagan is followed quite soon by an account of reading Elaine Showalter's study of cultural ideas around female behaviour and treatment of female "insanity", *The Female Malady* (1987), and its dramatic impact on Bennett's narrator, giving a (gendered) context for the feeling of dissonance that the passage above describes. "The things that I read in that book by Elaine Showalter were absolutely harrowing and upset me a great deal. … Showalter's study argues that cultural notions of how women ought to conduct

themselves have made women mad – a point of view I shared, though in a more nascent unspecified form. It was just a feeling really." This feeling turns into outrage "because it was obvious wasn't it" that if a person is subjected to all manner of patriarchal controls, then "of course they are going to go out of their mind" (81/2). That the reaction is visceral, felt in the body, is a point to which I will return. The protagonist recognises that her own situation is ostensibly better than that of most women in the past, but nonetheless recognises that she shares with them a sense of placelessness: "I had no small children, no errant husband – I had plentiful friends, was getting educated – the world, I was told again and again, was my oyster – I could go anywhere, be anything. Yet in my heart I was bereft, grieving – homesick for a place I had never seen. For a place that doesn't exist, yet I belonged there nonetheless" (82). This motif, placelessness, repeated across the text, is the spur to withdrawal initially, but also to finding alternative ways to frame and shape stories that contest dominant narrative patterns and their disastrous social impact for female subjects who are subjected to them. Twenty pages or so after the Showalter passage, the narrator is told (by a male partner) that she is too defensive and, at that time, has no viable response: "There was nothing for it but to hold my tongue and accept every slighting word. He was right really. I was, overall, far too reactive. Just like a child" (101). The woman is made to feel infantilised by the patriarchy. Again, the text, in marking how women's subject positions are undermined, offers an alternative account and another version of the story. If *Checkout 19* does have a narrative arc, it is one that has as its end point the narrator reaching a more mature phase of writing, articulating, with gradually increasing confidence, what she calls her "supremely aberrant imaginings", of which the encounter with the Russian man whilst working at checkout 19 provides the book's titular example (162). These imaginings, it goes without saying, run counter to given social

narratives. It is notable, then, that the text ends with a scene of female writing, not without struggle and difficulty, but described in a tone that is almost euphoric.[7]

Checkout 19 contains many instances of preference for solitude. For example, the narrator's remembrance that "I always liked being in the girls' toilets during lesson time. It was nice to be on my own and see my face there in the mirror with nothing but clean white tiles all around me." Here, she feels "safe and far away" and as if she "stood out of time" (19). Or later, alone in Brighton, having not told anyone where she will be, she relishes the separation this brings, reminiscent of a pre-smartphone age (180). But it is in *Pond*, the earlier text concerned with a later, more circumscribed phase of the narrator's life, that solitude becomes a more sustained condition. In contrast to the placelessness that informs much of *Checkout 19*, the country cottage in *Pond* offers a place in which to retreat into seclusion. This is, crucially, a condition that opens out onto the possibility for thoroughgoing engagement of the self with the material things that surround it, and a transformation in the conception of self that follows from this isolation. There is a kind of attentiveness now available, the narrator finds, that is normally drowned out by proximity to others and entanglement in a social nexus. Seclusion also provides freedom from role-playing that allows for a loosening of social self, as Bennett has noted in interview: "in solitude you kind of remain a mystery to yourself because you don't have to represent yourself to the world all the time" (Stich). Bound together, then, are a withdrawal from ill-fitting narratives and a concomitant opening up of experiential subjectivity, deconstructing and building aspects of the same process.

Phenomenology is a term that has often been used in the critical reception of Bennett's work, especially *Pond*, to describe what is offered here. For example, Leo Robson

[7] There are, perhaps, indistinct echoes of Molly Bloom at the conclusion of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) in this, though Bennett's protagonist is writing where Molly is only permitted interior rather than *written* monologue.

finds that “the phenomenology of near-to-hand experience … is a tool for revealing a sensibility, worldview and way of being”. The sense of this capacious term that is intended here (and in other accounts like it) is phenomenology as the study of subjective experiences, or the meanings that things have in our experiences, concerned with reality as subjectively lived and experienced, and describing phenomena as they appear to the subject. Even where the term is absent, its meanings can be felt in critical responses to Bennett’s writing: Jia Tolentino notes that “the reader experiences the narrator’s world at the same pace she does, a thing chopped up into irregular units organized by vague questions and obscurely colored moods”; in similar vein, Andrew Gallix suggests that “what Bennett aims at is nothing short of a re-enchantment of the world [in which] everyday objects take on a luminous, almost numinous, quality through the examination of what Emerson called ‘the low, the common, the near’ or the exploration of Georges Perec’s ‘infra-ordinary’ – a quest for the quotidian”. Bennett has also spoken about the important role played by Bert O. States’ study *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (1985) in the writing of her own book – it “introduced me to phenomenology, in the context of theatre performance, and it very much helped to reassert the value of sensory engagement, of personal, embodied, experience, and in doing so it helped me exit the theoretical realm, it revitalized me and it revitalized my surroundings. The physical world bloomed back into focus” (quoted in Maughan). Elsewhere, she has described authors she admires, like Ann Quin, as writing with a “phenomenologically oriented sensitivity” (“Introduction” vii). In Bennett’s own stories, the result is the narrator’s sense that in solitude “I am perhaps reviving and honing my senses”, and that “the world is a scintillant and fascinating place when a half-remembered mystery leans within reach” (*Pond* 29).

In particular, the payoff that the protagonist feels for social alienation is a greater attunement to the non-human world. For example, several passages from the story “Morning,

Noon & Night" suggest kinship with creatures and the natural world: "The sun shone most days so naturally I spent most days out the front there, padding in and out all day long, and the air was absolutely teeming with so many different species … After lunch, I'd take a blanket up to the top of the garden and I'd lie down under the tree in the top garden and listen to things" (31); the narrator aims for "a bird-like exuberance, where there is nothing at all but continuous light and acres of blue" (32). Instances such as these lead Tolentino to suggest that the narrator is "sensitive to the point of being porous".

Confrontation between this phenomenological mode and the social world is felt most keenly in "The Big Day". The story concerns the preparations for a sort of fête or public open day to be held at the cluster of old historical buildings, of which one is the cottage that the narrator rents and lives in. She is suspicious of the event from the beginning, concerned about the public exposure of her private realm that it will bring. In preparation for the festivities of the big day, her landlady has erected a sign saying "Pond" next to the pond, presumably to warn visiting children of the risk that it potentially poses. The narrator is incensed and "can't help but assess the situation form the child's perspective":

> That sort of moronic busy-bodying happens with such galling regularity throughout childhood of course and it never ceases to be utterly vexing. One sets off to investigate you see, to develop the facility to notice things so that, over time, and with enough practice, one becomes attuned to the earth's embedded logos and can experience the enriching joy of moving about in deep and direct accordance with things. Yet invariably this vital process is abruptly thwarted by an idiotic overlay of literal designations and inane alerts so that the whole terrain is obscured and inaccessible until eventually it is all quite formidable. As if the earth were a colossal

> and elaborate deathtrap. How will I ever make myself at home in here if there are always these meddlesome scaremongering signs everywhere I go. (40/41)

What is sought is embeddedness, accordance. It is to be achieved through gradual cultivation without interruption. But it is signs and, by implication, language, that intervenes, with a negative impact, in one's vital relation with and attunement to the world. The result is the same feeling of placelessness described in *Checkout 19* and discussed above. Later in the same story, the narrator declares:

> English, strictly speaking, is not my first language by the way. I haven't yet discovered what my first language is so for the time being I use English words in order to say things. I expect I will always have to do it that way; regrettably I don't think my first language can be written down at all. I'm not sure it can be made external you see. I think it has to stay where it is; simmering in the elastic gloom betwixt my flickering organs. (44/45)

The missing language is one felt in the body, among the organs. By analogy, the stories all grapple with this problem: how to represent a different notion of self in language and narrative that are ill-suited to the purpose because they are predicated on an entirely different idea of self (that is, self as socially determined). Socialization is experienced here as a schism in the self. The alienation that results is thought to be irreparable. Elsewhere, the narrator says that "the desire to come apart irrevocably will always be as strong, if not stronger, than the drive to establish oneself" (*Pond* 22). For Bennett, disintegration might have its benefits – a kind of freedom is the prize that is bought thus, even if at a costly rate.

In *Checkout 19*, shifts in pronoun chart this disintegration. Describing a single narrator's experience, the text ranges across a variety of pronouns – we, she, you, I – with shifts commonly occurring at moments of tension and social insecurity. A subjective case is repeatedly abandoned for an objective variant when describing situations in which the narrator comes under pressure, often feeling compromised in the assertion or even presentation of self. In remembering formative experiences, doubt is expressed across a temporal divide: "And what exactly do I know about her, this girl at the table who would be me?" (16) The singularity of identity – often assumed to be the solid basis of autofictional writing today – is more than a little undermined by this uncertainty. The supposed navel-gazing cited by autofiction's detractors is sidestepped. A carefully managed confusion or indeterminacy comes about when the second-person narrative voice that has been the sustained mode for an extended passage of text then shifts to third-person "she", via the more familiar hypothetical "you" that is close in meaning to "one": "That's just the kind of scenario you'd find yourself in if you were popular, she knew that very well" (35). In short, then, via a variety of means, Bennett veers away from autofiction's typical projections of self to offer something far more tentative.

Bennett herself offers a lucid distillation of her aims in a piece written for the *Irish Times* around the time of publication of *Pond*. She describes the time in adolescence when one is expected to "make plans" and realise one's promise (that she returns to in *Checkout 19* as well) as the period when "what other people think [first] undermines and redirects many of your percipient impulses and cherished and private occupations" ("On writing Pond"). At this point, Bennett notes, she first began to write, but not with the aim of finding and stating one's place in the world which is so typical of the bildungsroman and, perhaps, the novel *per se*:

> The function of this impulsive activity [i.e. writing] was not to make sense of things, the opposite in fact – I wrote in order to keep rationality and purpose at bay, to prolong and bask in the rhythmic chaos of existence, to remain adrift from the social contract and luxuriate in the magnificent mystery of everything. I was writing, not to connect with other people, but to experience and augment my affinity with the universe.

The difficulty that quickly ensued, she goes on to note, is that, as we have seen repeatedly, the conventions of narrative run in the opposite direction to these contrary aims. Narrative "stonewalled me right from the off" because "to tell stories is a basic human strategy which enables us to develop and reinforce a cogent and enduring sense of self." But for Bennett this visible, surveyable self is only one function of a broader mode of being:

> Yet, despite its partiality, it is this portion we are duty-bound to cultivate and uphold throughout the course of our entire lifetime. This boundaried and stable self – the social being – doesn't concern me very much. What I want to delve into and express in my work is the peregrine self – the being who is fluid, exotic, and nebulous – what a very distinguished individual might disdainfully refer to as a "wishy-washy sort", who ought to "pull themselves together".

The result is a conundrum – how to "convey the permutations of a formless entity through a medium inherently geared towards the manifestation of a clean-edged and consistent character". What I have been arguing is that this mismatch, even if experienced initially as a

difficulty, is the productive force that drives Bennett's innovations and marks her texts as important contributions to contemporary autofiction.[8]

In moving towards a conclusion, then, I want to reinsert Bennett's writing into the broader patterns of contemporary writing, and the literary history on which she draws. The latter of these is perhaps the more straightforward undertaking. I have said that Bennett's innovations in the short story draw on movements initiated by modernists working in the form. Charles May has noted that when Chekhov's short stories first appeared, one of their most notable characteristics was the way in which they "seemed to focus on fragments of everyday reality": "critics saw that Chekhov's impressionism and freedom from the literary conventions of the highly plotted and formalized story marked the beginnings of a new or 'modern' kind of short fiction" (15/16). The critical reception of Bennett's work – as has been seen – often emphasizes a similar formal adventurousness serving a better apprehension of "reality". Woolf, who admired Chekhov's writing, asked the famous rhetorical question of the modernist prose writer: "Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?" (9) Bennett's writing, explicitly intertextual with a wide range of literary experimenters, is quietly but undoubtedly a twenty-first century response to Woolf's continually relevant prompt. From the modernist period, through mid-century and up to the contemporary, the short story has looked to harness new formal elements to a more accurate depiction of how lived experience (reality) really feels. Bennett writes in this tradition, accumulating small details as Chekhov does, but she goes further. She works towards an almost purified phenomenological account of how life feels. Alex Clark offers a useful formulation when she suggest that Bennett's writing captures "the frequency

[8] There are similarities here to the fluid self without clear boundaries that is at the centre of, say, Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy (2014-16), or Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008, English trans. 2017).

of being here". That is, Bennett achieves the pitch (in sound) of being alive. I have also suggested that Bennett's writing draws on another inheritance (one often closely entwined with that of modernism) – the lineage of women's writing against the confines of patriarchal narrative conventions that has been treated extensively by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and others. Bennett's phenomenologically oriented writing is, in some ways, a contemporary manifestation of Cixous's recommendation for women to write from the body, but it would also feel reductive to frame what is vital in Bennett and in today's milieu only with recourse to that framework. The limitations that Bennett writes against are very often those of gender, but they are also those of socialisation in general. Gender is amongst the important things to notice in her work, but whether it is the first thing to notice is less clear.

The ongoing (and likely endless) debates regarding the continued viability of fiction and its potential successors is also a context relevant to establishing Bennett's importance in the contemporary literary landscape. If Bennett's methods are highly unconventional, and the resulting writing feels quite strange, we can still say that she aims at reforming rather than junking novelistic discourse. The two sides of the debate, though ostensibly opposed, actually coalesce around several points of similarity. Pro-novel Peter Boxall notes that the form "has always, since its inception, exercised a kind of freedom from the conventions that it articulates", and that "it is written into the genetics of the novel form that it should exceed the conventions which it enables" (11). In the contemporary scene, this manifests as "the stirrings of a desire to re-apprehend the real, a desire to find new forms with which to examine reality" (45). Anti-novel David Shields sounds remarkably similar: "The word *novel*, when it entered the languages of Europe, had the vaguest of meanings; it meant the form of writing that was formless, that had no rules, that made up its own rules as it went along" (13); contemporary writers are "making a necessary postmodernist return to the roots of the novel as an essentially Creole form, in which 'nonfiction' material is ordered, shaped, and imagined as

‘fiction’”(14). Bennett’s work exists at this interface, as an *avant-garde* infused realism, aiming to record the phenomenological reality of experience and freeing up often unregarded notions of self in the process. It might not be a stepping outside of and away from fiction, but one of the most recent moments in its rejuvenation. Fitzcarraldo, the UK publisher of *Pond*, has a distinctive and recognisable uniform approach to book covers – blue for fiction, white for non-fiction, though much of what they publish actually lies somewhere on the borders between the two. In the context of all that I have said, their decision to publish Bennett’s short story sequence in blue looks less like blunt economics (fiction sells better) and more like an astute positioning of one of today’s most innovative prose writers.

Works cited

Beja, Morris. *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*. Peter Owen, 1971.

Bennett, Claire-Louise. *Checkout 19*. Jonathan Cape, 2021.

Bennett, Claire-Louise. "Claire-Louise Bennett on writing *Pond*." *Irish Times*, 26 May 2015, www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/claire-louise-bennett-on-writing-pond-1.2226535.

Bennett, Claire-Louise. "Introduction." *Passages* by Ann Quin, & Other Stories, 2021.

Bennett, Claire-Louise. *Pond*. Fitzcarraldo, 2015.

Blau DuPlessis, Rachel. *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies in Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Indiana University Press, 1985.

Biggs, Joanna. "We took out all the books we could: Claire-Louise Bennet unpacks her library." *Bookforum*, Mar/Apr/May 2022, www.bookforum.com/print/2901/claire-louise-bennett-unpacks-her-library-24825.

Boxall, Peter. *The Value of the Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Case, Sue-Ellen. *Feminism and Theatre*. Macmillan, 1988.

Chekhov, Anton. *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*. Edited by Ralph E. Matlaw, Norton, 1979.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875-893.

Clark, Alex. "Interview with Claire-Louise Bennett: 'If there were a revolution, I'd be there'." *Guardian* [London], 14 August 2021, www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/14/claire-louise-bennett-if-there-was-a-revolution-id-be-there.

Eaglestone, Robert. *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Gallix, Andrew. “Pond by Claire-Louise Bennet – review.” *Guardian* [London], 18 November 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/18/pond-claire-louise-bennett-review.

Gilbert, Susan, and Sandra Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979.

Hanson, Clare. “Katherine Mansfield (1888-1023).” *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Bonnie Kime Scott, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 298-315.

Irigaray, Lucy. *The Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, 1985.

Joyce, James. *Stephen Hero*. Jonathan Cape, 1969.

Mansfield, Katherine. *Collected Letters, Volume II*. Edited by Vincent O’Sullivan with Margaret Scott, Oxford University Press, 1987.

Mansfield, Katherine. *Collected Stories*. Penguin, 2007.

Maughan, Philip. “The Mind in Solitude: An Interview with Claire-Louise Bennett.” *The Paris Review*, 18 July 2016, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/07/18/the-mind-in-solitude-an-interview-with-claire-louise-bennett/.

May, Charles. *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice.* Routledge, 2002.

McClay, B.D. “Claire-Louise Bennett’s Women Without a Story.” *New Yorker*, 28 February 2022, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/07/claire-louise-bennetts-women-without-a-story.

Millar, Nancy K. *The Heroine’s Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782*. Columbia University Press, 1980.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. Routledge, 2002.

O'Grady, Megan. "Claire-Louise Bennett Talks About Her Genre-Bending Debut, Pond, and the Magic of Solitude." *Vogue*, 6 July 2016, www.vogue.com/article/pond-claire-louise-bennett-interview.

Ostler, Stacey. "New journalism and the nonfiction novel." *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, ed. by John N. Duval, Cabridge University Press, 2012, pp. 44-55.

Pound, Ezra. "'Dubliners' and Mr James Joyce." *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage, Volume I*, edited by Robert H. Deming, Routledge, 1970, pp. 66-67.

Power, Chris. "After Autofiction." *New Statesman*, 22 August 2018, www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2018/08/after-autofiction.

Robson, Leo. "Checkout 19 by Claire-Louise Bennett – review." *Guardian* [London], 18 August 2021, www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/18/checkout-19-by-claire-louise-bennett-a-life-in-books.

Shields, David. *Reality Hunger*. Penguin, 2010.

Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a Feminist Poetics." *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Mary Eagleton, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 222-225

Stich, Susan. "Claire-Louise Bennett: modes of solitude, embodiment, and mystery." *The Honest Ulsterman*, June 2015, www.humag.co/features/claire-louise-bennett.

Tolentino, Jia. "A work of fiction that will make you feel pleasantly insane." *New Yorker*, 11 July 2016, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-that-will-make-you-feel-pleasantly-insane.

Tomalin, Claire. *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*. Penguin, 1988.

Wills, Clair. "I want it, but not yet." *London Review of Books*, 12 August 2021, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n16/clair-wills/i-want-it-but-not-yet

Wittig, Monique. “One is not born a woman.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Lietch, Norton, 2001, pp. 2014-2021.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*. Edited by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, Hogarth Press, 1980.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Woolf, Virginia. *Selected Essays*. Edited by David Bradshaw, Oxford University Press, 2008.