Making Sense: Materiality, Memory, and Imagination in Max Porter's *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers* and *Lanny*

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Abstract

In his first two novels, Max Porter mobilizes language and layout to immerse readers in all kinds of unfamiliar bodily movements and sensory impressions. As readers interact with various semiotic modalities simultaneously, the interplay of text and materiality becomes essential in the meaning-making processes. As such, multimodality is mobilized to allow readers to enact the perceptual and bodily experiences of the fictional characters they read about. To empathize with such unfamiliar bodies and perspectives, readers combine narrative cues with their own experiential resources and imagination in creative ways. Through close readings and cluster analyses of *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* and *Lanny*, I illustrate the theoretical and methodological advantages of incorporating textual materiality and methods from multimodality studies into 4E narratological theory. This entails acknowledging that the interaction between readers and materially constituted narrative texts cannot so easily be dissected into verbal and material components. I argue that it is precisely their simultaneous and multimodal semiotic effects that enable wonderfully unfamiliar sensory imagination throughout the reading experience. I posit that readers *make sense* of character experiences by imaginatively placing themselves in their position, combining narrative cues with their own embodied memories of similar experiences, allowing them to interpret what is narrated and to fill in narrative gaps.

Keywords: Max Porter, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, *Lanny*, 4E narratology, multimodality, embodied reading, textual materiality, sensory imagination

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What enables us to see the world through the eyes of certain characters? How do readers imagine unfamiliar bodily and perceptual experiences in narrative? And what formal strategies can literature employ to convey such experiences? According to 4E narratology, which understands reading to be embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 4), readers understand the sensory, bodily, and emotional experiences of fictional characters by imaginatively placing themselves in their position (Caracciolo 2014; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021; Armstrong 2019). To do so, they combine narrative cues with their own embodied memories of similar experiences, allowing them to interpret what is narrated and to fill in narrative gaps (Fernyhough 2012, 5; Caracciolo 2014, 6, 99; Silva 2024). However, this raises the question of how literature can also evoke experiences that may be entirely unfamiliar to its readers, challenging them to draw on their own embodied memories more creatively (Caracciolo 2014, 109). What strategies can narratives employ to convey, for example, animal perspectives or synesthetic modes of experiencing the world?

Max Porter's *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers* and *Lanny* lend themselves particularly well to investigate such questions.[1] More poetic than diegetic, both novels feature non-human narrators and immerse readers in a wide range of sensorimotor experiences.

Grief contains three perspectives: Dad, Boys, and Crow. At the start of the novel, Dad and the boys find it difficult to process the loss of their wife and mother. Dad experiences numbing grief, while the boys are struggling with the discrepancy between their emotional pain and the indifference of much of the world to it. Crow is based on Ted Hughes's *Crow* (1970) but also contains traits attributed to it by folklore and mythology as well as of the animal itself. It is Crow who helps the family to embrace their grief. Crow's therapy is one of intense sensory

[1] Throughout this paper, I employ *Grief* and *Lanny* when referring to these titles. References to specific passages will be preceded by the initials *G* and *L*, followed by a page number.

overwhelming, at once rendering Dad's numbness impossible and confronting Boys with surroundings that mirror their emotional suffering. In this way, throughout the novel, the characters learn to grieve *through* feeling rather than to suppress or abandon it as their surroundings seem to imply with expressions like "moving on" (*G* 99–101).

Like *Grief*, *Lanny* employs multiperspectivity, conveying the experiences of Lanny, a remarkable and often strange child, Lanny's Mum, Lanny's Dad, Pete, an artist friend of the family, and Dead Papa Toothwort, a mythical creature connected to nature and the English countryside. It also contains fragmented perspectives from other village inhabitants. While the novel is structured around Lanny's abduction by Dead Papa Toothwort, its meaning seems tied much more to diverse ways of experiencing the world. Lanny and Pete certainly display unique ways of sensing their surroundings, but Dead Papa Toothwort's perspective challenges perceptual categorization itself and invites a synesthetic kind of sensory imagination, in which seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting precede interpretation.

Clearly, both novels evoke unusual bodily movements and sensory impressions, for which Porter mobilizes both language and material form (layout, typography, images, etc.). In doing so, his work demonstrates the impact of textual materiality, "the specific forms and configurations taken by the signifier" (Dworkin 2020, 1), on meaning-making processes alongside its semantic properties.

While especially well-equipped to examine how embodied readers engage with textual narrative, 4E narratology often overlooks its material constitution. Conversely, studies that do foreground textual materiality rarely consider the role of embodied readers. This means that analyses accommodating the materiality of readers and of literature simultaneously remain rare and theoretical grounding for such analyses dispersed. It seems as if the material turn has turned into a material split, with scholars either studying the materiality of interpretation (4E narratology) or the interpretation of materiality (materialism). By integrating textual materiality into 4E narratology, I attempt to bridge this gap to demonstrate the inseparability of text, materiality, and embodied readers in meaning-making interactions. Crucially, this does not mean accounting for the ways in which textual and non-textual properties affect the reading experience separately, but also how they affect each other's meaning.

I will start by unpacking the impressive work that 4E narratology has done for understanding the ways in which embodied readers relate to narrative. Particularly by reconnecting 4E narratology with its philosophical roots, I will argue that it needs to recognize its initial commitment to materiality. Some important steps have already been taken to integrate textual materiality into a cognitive (Gibbons 2012) and a 4E narratological perspective (Caracciolo 2023),

but much work remains to be done. Integrating theoretical and methodological tools from multimodality studies into 4E theory, I highlight the opportunities of addressing textual materiality from a 4E perspective, especially in a multimodal context.

This is also where theory and analysis meet, as I examine Porter's work through cluster analyses and close readings. As *Grief* and *Lanny* contain different degrees of multimodality and experimentality, my analysis moves from more common formal properties, such as the presence of white space in *Grief*, to more experimental ones, like the curving lines of text in *Lanny*. In this way, even seemingly tangential choices like paragraph length are exposed as thoroughly impacting the reading experience. By considering these formal elements alongside their textual properties, I develop insights about the interplay between textual and material cues, perception, memory, and imagination that would otherwise surface separately and thus only partially.

Enactivism: Looking Inwards

Enactivism posits that "the vast sea of what humans do and experience is best understood by appealing to dynamically unfolding, situated embodied interactions and engagements with worldly offerings" (Hutto and Myin 2013, ix). As such, enactivists claim that intentionally directed cognition and perceptual experience are possible without representational content.

Following enactivist ideas, 4E narratology foregrounds the embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended nature of mind (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 4). As our linguistic and conceptual life is grounded in embodied experience (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, as cited in Bernini 2021, 111), 4E narratology looks to embodied interactions between readers and narratives to explain the phenomenological aspects of reading, proposing a close connection between experience and interpretation (Caracciolo 2016, 215). 4E narratologists propose a sensory kind of imagination during reading processes, involving mental imagery which depends on readers' experiential traces, "implicit knowledge derived from our prior sensorimotor interactions with the world" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 69).

It seems odd then, that despite its attention to the role of readers' material bodies in narrative engagements, 4E narratology rarely shows a similar commitment to the material dimension of narrative texts. Following Alva Noë's claim that "the brain is one element in a complex network involving the brain, the body, and the environment", what 4E narratology has done is to "look inward, to the neural plumbing", but at the same time it seems to have neglected looking outward, "to the way that plumbing is hooked up to the world" (Noë 2004, 214, 222). The more 4E narratologists focused on the material bodies of readers, the less material became the

narratives those readers were engaged with. As a result, a tendency emerged to relocate materiality in the virtual realm of readerly imagination.

As enactivists have shown convincingly, we cannot read without our bodies; without embodied perception, text becomes inaccessible. However, without textual materiality, there would be nothing to perceive either. There would be no cover to hold, printed text to see, or turned page to hear. In other words, "the ways in which we encounter narratives are material through and through: texts are always embedded in, and inextricable from, a certain material context" (Caracciolo 2023, 41). For 4E narratology to be truly enactivist, it needs to take up its commitment to materiality once again by paying attention to the role it plays in narrative engagements.

Materiality and Multimodality

It remains largely true that the materiality of literature, particularly the visual aspect of literary experience, has been overlooked (Gibbons 2012, 38). However, these material aspects are far from neutral and possess their own semiotic agency (Dworkin 2020, 11). Even 'normal' material properties, such as typeface, paragraphing, or footnotes, are essential to the text (Stanitzek 2005). Thus, attending to the materiality of literature, even in its most conventional forms, can reveal significations not accessible through conventional reading strategies (Dworkin 2020, 4–5).

The role of narrative materiality can be actively foregrounded through multimodality, "the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context" (Gibbons 2012, 8), for example by changing the orientation of the printed text to mimic the movement of characters through space (Caracciolo 2016, 216–217). As readers attempt to make sense of such foregrounded materiality, for example, by turning a book sideways, the engagement between the bodies of the book and the reader becomes more noticeable (Gibbons 2012, 41) and the value of 4E approaches to the embodied dimension of reading more apparent.

It is precisely through its unique combination of semantic and material properties that multimodal literature can invite readers to enact unfamiliar experiences on a bodily and perceptual level, making it especially well-suited to evoke diverse bodily and cognitive experiences. The returning blue color of the word 'house' in Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), for example, reminds one of synesthetic perception, whereas Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) mobilizes a vast amount of footnotes, acronyms, and abbreviations, to evoke various neurodivergent impressions, such as distraction, hyperfocus, dyslexia, and hyperlexia (Martens and Van der Gucht 2024).

Indeed, multimodality can "visualize that which defies visualization, a fictional rendition of subjective lived experience" (Kreitler 2026, 4, 52). Instead of confining unfamiliar experiences to

the representational level, the interplay between the semantic and material properties enables "a disorienting experience through bodily influenced forms of meaning-making – complexities that need to be experienced to be understood" (Willemsen and Kiss 2022, 3). As such, multimodal narratives help readers to fill in experiential gaps, much like those readers rely on their own experiences to fill in narrative ones.

Notably, literature always mobilizes different sensory modalities. One touches pages, hears them turning, and can even smell books. Especially if we take sensory imagination seriously, narratives are multisensory through and through. Readers do not only imagine the sound of visual words on the page, but other kinds of narrated perception as well. Because multimodality often draws attention to this, modes have often been differentiated based on their connection to each of the five senses (see, for example, Forceville 2006, 382, as cited in Gibbons 2012, 9). Thus, it seems necessary to clearly distinguish semiotic modalities from sensory categories here. Clarifying what a mode is may be a good start. Ruth Page defines it as "an open-ended set, ranging across a number of systems including but not limited to language, image, color, typography, music, voice quality, dress, gesture, spatial resources, and cuisine" (Page 2009, 6). Note that sensory boundaries are still quite apparent here. Being explicitly open-ended, Page's definition offers flexibility, while remaining concrete enough to retain its utility.

Crucially, different semiotic modes are not present separately but produce narrative meaning in their interaction (Gibbons 2012, 2). Consequently, an approach which enables simultaneous consideration of multiple modalities is needed. Cluster analysis, which examines local groupings of items, seems particularly well-equipped for this purpose, offering a flexible analysis of micro- and macro-level multimodal semiosis (Baldry and Thibault 2006, 31). Moreover, it has already proven its worth for the analysis of multimodal texts such as Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) or Tomasula and Farrell's *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2002) (Gibbons 2012, 46–126). Not losing sight of narrative elements and structure, I follow Gibbons' proposal to rely on structures of visual perception for cluster identification (2012, 17). Particularly the psychological concept of figure and ground seems useful here. Taking Peter Stockwell's work as a starting point, I consider self-containment, movement in relation to static ground, temporal or spatial precedence, and salient features such as details, brightness, color, and size to result in figure creation (2002, 15). I use these categorizations relatively flexible, to allow approaching clusters on their own terms, in their own textual, material, and narratological context. It is also important to note that devices harnessing dynamic force, directionality, and orientation can influence eye movement and reading paths (Baldry and Thibault 2006, 35–36). Consequently, I pay special attention to features deviating from

conventional western reading patterns (a typeset block, read linearly from left to right and top to bottom; Gibbons 2012, 4).

While multimodality studies exhibit the attention to textual materiality that is missing from 4E narratology, it lacks the commitment of the latter to another materiality involved in meaning-making: the embodied reader. In what follows, I will integrate insights from multimodality studies along with its methodologies into 4E narratology to interpret multimodal and multisensory semiosis in *Grief* and *Lanny*.

Perception, Memory, Imagination

Enactivists understand experience and perception as embodied interactions between subject and environment and thus focus on sensorimotor patterns in these interactions (Caracciolo 2014, 98). As such, perception is not located exclusively in the brain; we gain visual experiences by looking around just like we obtain tactile impressions by touching things (Noë 2004, 73). 4E narratology has mobilized this enactivist focus on interaction to interpret narratives (Armstrong 2019; Caracciolo 2014). Despite being mediated by language, readers can simulate the embodied response of real-world interactions by enacting sensorimotor patterns they are familiar with through those interactions (Caracciolo 2014, 101–102). Here, simulation is understood as "an automatic (in the sense that it is obligatory), unconscious and prereflexive mechanism" (Gallese 2005, 41).

Furthermore, these ideas resonate with neuroscientific findings, as there is a substantial overlap between the brain regions used for visual perception and visual mental imagery (Ganis 2013, 11). As Jeannerod stated, "imagining a movement relies on the same mechanisms as actually performing it", because "imagined actions are indeed actions in their own right: they involve a kinematic content, they activate motor areas almost to the same extent as executed actions, they involve the autonomic system as if a real action was under way" (2006, 28, 39). These (simulated) perceptual experiences have distinct phenomenal characteristics, which are recognizable and verbally describable in perceptual terms (Hurlburt et al. 2017, 4). Consequently, the imagination of sensory experiences turns out to be perceptual itself.

Crucially, imagination is underpinned by memory (Fernyhough 2012, 5) and both are closely interwoven in our brains (Josselyn and Tonegawa 2020, as cited in Silva 2024, 215). As the experiences of real-world or fictional others are inaccessible to us, memory becomes an experiential resource on which we can draw to imagine them. It is in this way that Caracciolo understands "experiential traces" as a kind of sensory residue left by a large number of past interactions with the world, used to construct (narrative) experiences (2014, 46, 99).

In *Lanny*, we find a wonderful illustration of what this may look like, as we follow Pete's stream of consciousness when Lanny tells him he hates the smell of metal (*L* 38):

> The smell of metal scares me, he says.
> At once I am a child again, smelling my palms.
> Blood iron, coins, nails and pins.
> War men with bullets and rusty hinge grins.
> The smell of metal lingers on my lips and on my fingers.
> My father would have me count his coppers on a Sunday. Memory swings like a hard dirt rudder then slips up with a boom and a crack and catches the wind.
> God, Lanny, I say. I hate the smell of metal too. I despise the smell of metal on my hands.

As Pete is confronted with Lanny's verbal reference to a perceptual stimulus (the smell of metal), he *makes sense* of it through something resembling sensory imagination in reading processes. Different kinds of sensory residue from his own embodied memory seem to collapse into a composite kind of sensory experience, which leads him to conclude that he hates the smell of metal too. Notably, following particular olfactory associations with his palms and fingers, he cannot help but add that he despises the smell of metal on his hands. Just like Pete enacts a perceptual experience by combining a verbal cue with experiential traces, readers enact narrated perception by drawing on their own embodied memories. In this way, reading evokes an "experiential feel", resembling actual perception, which cannot be reduced to linguistic meaning (Caracciolo 2014, 95–102).

Numbing Grief: Where Are the Fire Engines?

In *Grief*, Max Porter aligns readers with characters but surprisingly does so by undermining the potential for sensorimotor imagination. It is the suspension of sensorimotor cues that conveys Dad's sense of numbness, as Dad feels "hung-empty" and considers the fact that "nothing moved" (*G* 4). The scarcity of perceptual stimuli and bodily movement results in limited opportunities for sensorimotor imagination, making it difficult for readers to feel anything. This enables a mirroring effect, where reader and narrator adjust to the storyworld similarly (Caracciolo 2016, 182). Like their father, the boys are puzzled by the lack of impact the loss of their mother has on their surroundings (Rivera-Izquierdo 2025, 93). Crucially, it is again an absence of intense perceptual stimuli that disturbs the boys, who would have expected the situation to call for "fire engines",

"screaming", "flinging bits of emergency glow-in-the-dark equipment" or "horrible levels of noise" (*G* 13–14).

To combat their senselessness, Crow submerges them in various sensations. Even before we encounter his perspective, he confronts the other characters with intense perceptual experiences. Strikingly, one of these sensations is an encounter that readers share with the characters. Just like the boys are astonished by the feather on their pillow, readers encounter such a feather on each part title page and thus discover a bodily trace of Crow before the character introduces himself to the others. Unsure of how to deal with this feather, both readers and the boys are inclined to "leave the feathers where they are" (*G* 3). Importantly, already Crow causes the boys to move from their beds to the floor (*G* 3) as readers decide to turn the page.

When Crow enters the story, Dad immediately gets "smacked back" as the entire range of his sensorium is overwhelmed (*G* 6): "a crack and a whoosh […] pitch black […] a rich smell of decay, a sweet furry stink of just-beyond-edible food, and moss, and leather, and yeast […] Feathers between my fingers, in my eyes, in my mouth" (*G* 6). Like Dad, readers are confronted and disoriented by the feathers, still unsure how to interpret them, but inescapably surrounded by them. The potential of this mirroring effect resides in the density of sensorimotor experiences, for many of which readers may draw on embodied memories of similar encounters.

Throughout *Grief*, Crow continuously confronts the father and his boys with intense sensory impressions. In this way, the initial feeling of senselessness is countered, and Crow enables characters and readers to make sense of grief, progressively dismantling the shared numbness. In Crow's words, the feathers are meant "for a little break in the mourning" (*G* 10).

Lost and Found: Multimodal Mirroring

In internally focalized passages, readers tend to reenact the focalizing character's movements through the storyworld (Caracciolo 2016, 217). This process can be induced or influenced by deictic terms and parameters, such as pronouns, demonstratives, and adverbs, encoding the positionality of language users (Gibbons 2012, 30–36). Examining deixis in a multimodal narratological context, I posit both verbal and non-verbal cues can function as deictic elements.

In his work, Porter extensively employs the "route mode of internal focalization", where "the spatial references are mediated by a character who moves through space" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 86). Because readers resonate on a bodily level with these movements, immersion in the storyworld is heightened as they follow the characters almost step by step in kinesthetic

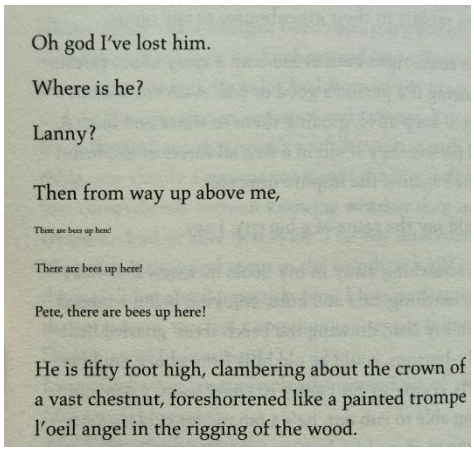
empathy. The following scene, in which Lanny's Dad goes to find him in the garden, is a good example (*L* 39–40):

> I tiptoe hurriedly across the bedroom, out onto the landing, down the stairs, avoiding the creaky step. I'm not sure why I'm being secretive. I go through the kitchen and out of the open back door.
> […]
> I wander over, heavy footfall and a cough so as not to surprise.

In this case, verbal deictic elements ("across", "out onto", "down", "through", "out", "over") combine with sensorimotor cues ("tiptoe", "heavy footfall", "cough") to immerse readers in the perspective of Lanny's Dad. This invites them to imagine these movements as if the character's body were at the center of their own experiences of the storyworld (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 68).

An opposite mirroring effect can be experienced in reading the second part of the book, when Lanny goes missing and the narrative structure and form collapse. Separate narrators become harder to distinguish as passages are no longer headed by the focalizer's name, new, unknown narrators appear, and the pages are filled with crosses as the only indication of a switch in perspective. As these crosses contribute to narrative fragmentation while obscuring deictic anchoring, it becomes difficult for readers to orient themselves. Language and layout work together to generate an impression of feeling lost for both readers and characters, whose unease rises as it becomes harder to grasp the fragmenting story structure or to find Lanny, respectively.

Multimodal deixis is especially apparent in an earlier passage, where Pete narrates a moment during which he thinks to have lost Lanny (*L* 56):


Oh god I've lost him.

Where is he?

Lanny?

Then from way up above me,

There are bees up here!

There are bees up here!

Pete, there are bees up here!

He is fifty foot high, clambering about the crown of a vast chestnut, foreshortened like a painted trompe l'oeil angel in the rigging of the wood.

While we already feel a certain distance and directionality because of the verbal cue "from way up above me", it is followed by a visually deviant feature: the smaller font size of the words "There are bees up here!". Because of its smaller (and continuously growing) font size, it stands out against the text surrounding it. Here, the capacity of visual salience to suggest sonic salience (Gibbons 2012, 21) is mobilized to create another mirroring effect between the reader and Pete. As the font starts out so small, it is relatively difficult for readers to make out the words. It is only once the font size increases, and the message becomes clearer, that Pete locates Lanny "fifty foot high, clambering about the crown of a vast chestnut".

Additionally, a synesthetic kind of connection presents itself. To interpret Lanny's spoken words growing in size, readers can rely on the experience of seeing visual stimuli enlarging to mean that they are getting closer. As the visual stimulus here concerns speech, however, vision has to be substituted for sound. As our embodied memory tells us, approaching sound is experienced as becoming louder and the excerpt allows for such an interpretation. Both visual and auditory messages also become clearer as they get closer. Thus, the combined textual and material properties of the narrative enable an embodied interpretation of growing volume and/or clearer understanding.

Both for Pete and for readers, the message starts out difficult to discern and ends up clearly intelligible. The combination of deictic language, deviant layout, and the narrative context enables readers to not simply imagine the increasing clarity of the message in the process of locating Lanny but to actually experience it as well. As the different semiotic modalities impact one another's deictic meaning, a higher degree of reader immersion and bodily resonance can develop. Importantly for my argument, this process cannot be fully grasped without jointly taking the material text and the embodied reader into account. Considering them separately risks reducing this complex interaction to its isolated parts.

Useless Objects

As mentioned, 4E narratology understands interpretation to rely on experiential traces of previous sensorimotor interactions (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 69). This is also why it has so easily accommodated Gibson's affordance theory, which states that we do not directly perceive object properties, but the possible actions those objects afford (1979, 127). Something strongly resembling those affordances also appears in the neuroscientific observation that seeing or hearing an object automatically triggers a "plan" for a specific action directed towards it (Gallese 2005, 27). Affordance theory thus accommodates 4E ideas about imagination and interpretation, while

emphasizing the role of interaction with materiality, making it an especially suitable framework for our integrated approach.

For 4E narratologists, affordances are also built into linguistic comprehension (Caracciolo 2014, 20). A clear example of how this works for readers presents itself in the "route" passage discussed earlier, where we follow Lanny's Dad to the garden. In imagining the narrated "avoiding the creaky step", many readers will still imagine the sound of that step (likely aided by the onomatopoeic character of "creaky"), even if it remains untouched in the narrative. Such perceptual simulation is grounded in previous experiences with creaky steps (and avoiding them), resulting in an awareness of their affordances even in the absence of interaction with them.

The use of object affordances in the absence of their execution reoccurs throughout *Grief*. As objects are laden with traces and potential, grief is exposed to be contagious, transferred by association between objects and subjects alike (Ahmed 2010, 29–37). Consider the following passage (*G* 20):

> The house becomes a physical encyclopedia of no-longer hers, which shocks and shocks and is the principal difference between our house and a house where illness has worked away. Ill people, in their last day on Earth, do not leave notes stuck to bottles of red wine saying 'OH NO YOU DON'T COCK-CHEEK'. She was not busy dying, and there is no detritus of care, she was simply busy living, and then she was gone.
> She won't ever use (make-up, turmeric, hairbrush, thesaurus).
> She will never finish (Patricia Highsmith novel, peanut butter, lip balm).
> And I will never shop for green Virago Classics for her birthday.
> I will stop finding her hairs.
> I will stop hearing her breathing.

In this scene, Dad finds himself in a house filled with traces of his dead wife, objects that he perceives only as their affordances for her. Following affordance theory, readers interpret these objects within the narrative context through their own previous interactions with them. Not coincidentally, many of these objects contain strong bodily associations. As readers connect these to Dad's wife, it is almost as if, through Dad's eyes, the make-up, hairbrush, and lip-balm conjure up her face, hair, lips, and eventually even her breathing. But, as she is of course no longer in the house and her traces are disappearing, the objects become useless, attuned to an absence which is made present through their affordances. A parallel presents itself: just like the objects, Dad is

oriented towards interactions with his wife that are no longer possible. In this waiting-for-nothing quality, they become equally redundant.

Unfamiliar Bodies, Synesthetic Perception

For 4E theory, empathy depends on imagination, internally simulating what the other must be feeling as if their sensations were our own (Armstrong 2019, 404). Neuroscientifically too, embodied simulation seems to be at the basis of social understanding, as we imagine someone else's experience through a sensorimotor re-enactment, producing a shared body state (Gallese 2005, 24, 32–39). In doing so, we need to rely on our own bodily resources to interpret the external (or represented) world through "a direct, automatic and unconscious process of motor simulation" (Gallese 2005, 35). Phenomenologically, this results in "an experienced sense of involvement in another person's bodily movements" (Caracciolo 2020, 243).

Importantly for 4E narratology, there is ample and growing empirical evidence for the role that embodied simulations play in language understanding and the embodiment of abstract concepts (Caracciolo 2014). Behavioral studies point to a similar conclusion (Caracciolo 2020, 244). Relying on the same resources to make sense of real-world or narrated interactions (Gallese 2005, 33) results in an empathetic feeling of becoming the character we read about (Armstrong 2019, 404; Caracciolo 2020, 240).

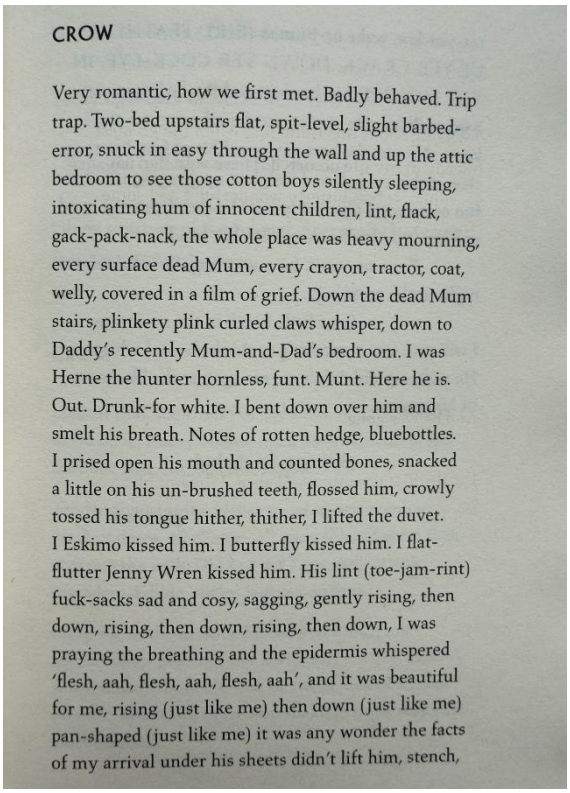
If, as 4E narratologists have demonstrated extensively, empathy depends largely on (sensorimotor) imagination, which in turn depends on memory, then empathy must, at the very least indirectly, rely on memory to some extent as well. Duthoy and Silva (in press) came to a similar conclusion when looking at the relation between empathy felt by readers towards characters and the readers' own (experiential) backgrounds. While differences in social position and culture can result in differing degrees of empathy, personal memories and their emotional intensity appear to be a bigger factor than identification with characters (Duthoy and Silva, in press). As such, readers are capable of empathizing with characters that are profoundly different from themselves (Fjällström and Kokkola 2015, 402). In fact, the (cognitive) weirdness of characters can even tinge reading experiences through feelings of strangeness (Caracciolo 2016, 208).

To empathize kinesthetically with characters' bodies so different from their own, readers need to rely on their own experiential resources and imagination in creative ways. The cues offered by the material text are essential in this process, as readers interact with various semiotic modalities conveying unfamiliar bodily and perceptual experiences. Indeed, as Porter reveals in an interview, his use of formal devices is meant to provoke empathetic responses from readers (Wojtas 2024,

106, footnote 4). While Porter seems to refer primarily to linguistic devices here (2019b), his use of non-verbal semiotic modalities enables similar effects in different ways.

Krickle Crackle, Hop Sniff and Tackle: A Birdlike Crow

Porter wanted *Grief* "to be bird-like, to hop and soar and surprise as actual crows do" (Whitwham 2016). It is evident that Crow's sections in *Grief* indeed have a birdlike character to them. First and foremost, this is achieved through language. Porter employs short sentences with many but often short-term perceptual stimuli, mimicking the quick head movements of a bird (*G 9*):



CROW

Very romantic, how we first met. Badly behaved. Trip trap. Two-bed upstairs flat, spit-level, slight barbed-error, snuck in easy through the wall and up the attic bedroom to see those cotton boys silently sleeping, intoxicating hum of innocent children, lint, flack, gack-pack-nack, the whole place was heavy mourning, every surface dead Mum, every crayon, tractor, coat, welly, covered in a film of grief. Down the dead Mum stairs, plinkety plink curled claws whisper, down to Daddy's recently Mum-and-Dad's bedroom. I was Herne the hunter hornless, funt. Munt. Here he is. Out. Drunk-for white. I bent down over him and smelt his breath. Notes of rotten hedge, bluebottles. I prised open his mouth and counted bones, snacked a little on his un-brushed teeth, flossed him, crowly tossed his tongue hither, thither, I lifted the duvet. I Eskimo kissed him. I butterfly kissed him. I flat-flutter Jenny Wren kissed him. His lint (toe-jam-rint) fuck-sacks sad and cosy, sagging, gently rising, then down, rising, then down, rising, then down, I was praying the breathing and the epidermis whispered 'flesh, aah, flesh, aah, flesh, aah', and it was beautiful for me, rising (just like me) then down (just like me) pan-shaped (just like me) it was any wonder the facts of my arrival under his sheets didn't lift him, stench,

As readers, it seems hard to keep pace with Crow's movements. Before we can make sense of an impression, he's already moving on to the next one. However, through these short sentences and rapid succession of perceptual stimuli, we actually do get an impression of what being a bird may be like, seeing the world in quick bursts, our attention constantly redirected. The words chosen by the birdlike narrator reinforce this impression. Consider for example: "Krickle krackle, hop sniff and tackle, in with the bins, singing the hymns" (*G* 80). Throughout Crow's sections, such word association chains are common and often seem linked by their sound more than by their meaning. The result resembles a mimicry of human speech rather than meaningful language. Again, there is an impression of hopping from one linguistic snippet to the next. Crow does not plan ahead, but

senses while moving, thinks while speaking. Neither Crow nor readers can predict on which words they will land next. At the same time, the consonance seems to conceal a hidden kind of rhythm, only superficially accessible to humans through reader subvocalization.

Even though *Grief* is not as typographically experimental as *Lanny*, the typesetting does play a role in Crow's portrayal. While *Grief* contains a lot of blank space, this is far less the case for the passages narrated by Crow. There is some variation throughout the novel, but the contrast between the opening sections of the characters is certainly noticeable. The first section narrated by Boys contains six simple sentences, each as a paragraph on its own, with much blank space between the lines (*G* 3), while Dad's first section spreads over 27 paragraphs across five pages (*G* 4–8), with a similar amount of white space between them. The opening page of Crow's narration, on the other hand, is filled with one large block of text. The first significant blank space appears only when Dad makes a "ghoeeeze" sound twice within Crow's narration (*G* 9–10).

Thus, linguistic meaning, layout, and sound result in a birdlike Crow, "head down, tot-along, looking" (*G* 22). When readers are confronted with the typesetting, short sentences, consonant word associations, and rapid succession of perceptual cues, they are invited to enact quick movements paired with snap impressions. Especially when this behavior is experienced from the perspective of the other characters, its impact can overwhelm their sensorium as well as the sensory imagination of readers, resulting in another mirroring effect.

Filling in the gaps: synesthetic language and layout

Literature mobilizes the underspecification of language and the potential of these absences for improvisatory and unpredictable responses (Armstrong 2020, 146). This works via the principle of minimal departure, according to which readers fill in the gaps in narratives by assuming similarities to their own experiential reality (Ryan 2005, 447). Importantly, this reinforces immersion, as readers connect their own daily, nonliterary experiences to the narrative (Auyoung 2013, 60). Therefore, the impact of a narrative depends on the extent to which our engagement with its representational and expressive devices connects to our own embodied interactions with the world (Caracciolo 2014, 205).

The interpretation of metaphors similarly depends on our physical experiences of the concrete, sensuous world (Cytowic and Eagleman 2011, 16). Metaphorical language can give readers a sense of what an experience is like by weaving together two experiential traces, bringing about defamiliarizing effects (Caracciolo 2014, 108). In this light, it is particularly interesting to investigate how readers make sense of synesthetic metaphors, which express one sensory

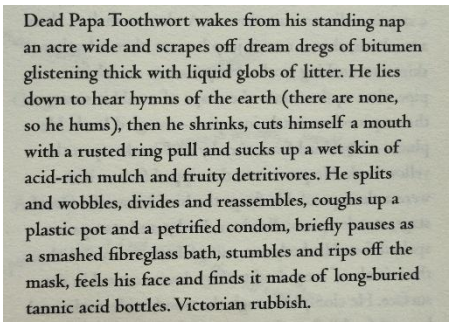
experience in terms of another. As such, readers must draw on embodied experiences in varied sensory modalities to imagine these metaphors as well as their indeterminacies. We find a wonderful synesthetic metaphor in the first sentence narrated by Lanny's Mum (*L* 11), which illustrates such opportunities for creative interactions: "In came the sound of a song, / warm on his creaturely breath". The words "In came" function as a deictic indication, suggesting something moving towards the focalizing character. Following are two references to auditory stimuli, "sound" and "song". At the same time, the sound of the words themselves creates a consonance. Therefore, semiotically, "sound of a song" is jointly articulated through linguistic meaning and subvocalization. To imagine the scene, readers can employ their own embodied memories of approaching sound. As the narrative has not suggested any visual stimuli yet, readers may assume that the singing entity is not yet in sight.

The second line introduces "warm". Temperature is not perceived exclusively as a property of observed objects, but also as a part of the sensing subject's psychological sensation (Shen and Eisenman 2008, 112). Consequently, the scene enables a phenomenologically closer and more intense sensory imagination. Then, this close-range stimulus is expressed as a property of "breath", which also can only be perceived from a very close physical proximity.

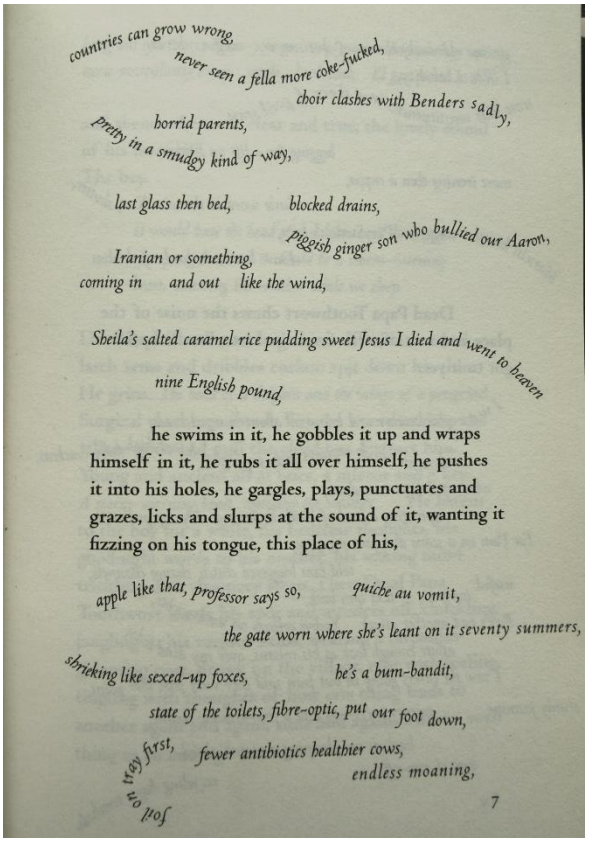
The combination of these two stimuli challenges readers to imagine the auditive "sound of a song" in terms of the close-range haptic "warm" and "breath". In fact, most synesthetic metaphors are a transfer from less differentiated sensations (smell, touch, taste) to more differentiated ones (sight, sound) (Tsur 2012, 437), mapping more accessible concepts onto less accessible ones (Shen and Eisenman 2008, 111). As a stimulus usually perceptible from a distance (sight or sound) is described through a stimulus usually perceived from close range (sound, smell of taste), we imagine it to be closer.

Combined with the deictic "In came", the imagined transfer from the sound of a song to the warmth of breath results in a unique multisensory delight and a sense of intimacy. Thus, what will reveal itself as a "singing child" is already imbued with sensory stimuli carrying positive, close-range associations for most readers ("song", "warm", "breath"). As this is one of the first scenes, Porter infuses his novel with synesthetic style from the start, drawing on readers' perceptual imagination to *make sense* of things.

This does not happen in isolation from other modalities of narrative action, which affect reader expectations as well (Kukkonen 2014). Dead Papa Toothwort's perspective offers an excellent example of such interplay between various modalities. The character is introduced through a highly but unfamiliarly embodied language (*L* 3):


Dead Papa Toothwort wakes from his standing nap an acre wide and scrapes off dream dregs of bitumen glistening thick with liquid globs of litter. He lies down to hear hymns of the earth (there are none, so he hums), then he shrinks, cuts himself a mouth with a rusted ring pull and sucks up a wet skin of acid-rich mulch and fruity detritivores. He splits and wobbles, divides and reassembles, coughs up a plastic pot and a petrified condom, briefly pauses as a smashed fibreglass bath, stumbles and rips off the mask, feels his face and finds it made of long-buried tannic acid bottles. Victorian rubbish.

Portrayed as a "shape-shifting and ethereal eco-creature" (Drager 2024, 42), Dead Papa Toothwort resembles the folkloric Green Man (Irigaray 2024, 52). Porter's liberal use of the character also ties it to the village, symbolizing its living memory (Irigaray 2024, 58). Peculiarly, his body also bears marks of the passing of time, such as "the initials of long-dead lovers carved in the surface" (*L* 4). The character invites a reading that senses before it interprets. "He sits still. He listens." (*L* 4). The things he hears appear in curved text; such typographical roundness typically evokes organic and natural associations (van Leeuwen 2005, 140). Thus, the typographic and semantic representation of Dead Papa Toothwort's perspective results in a sense that his perception differs from ours (*L* 7):

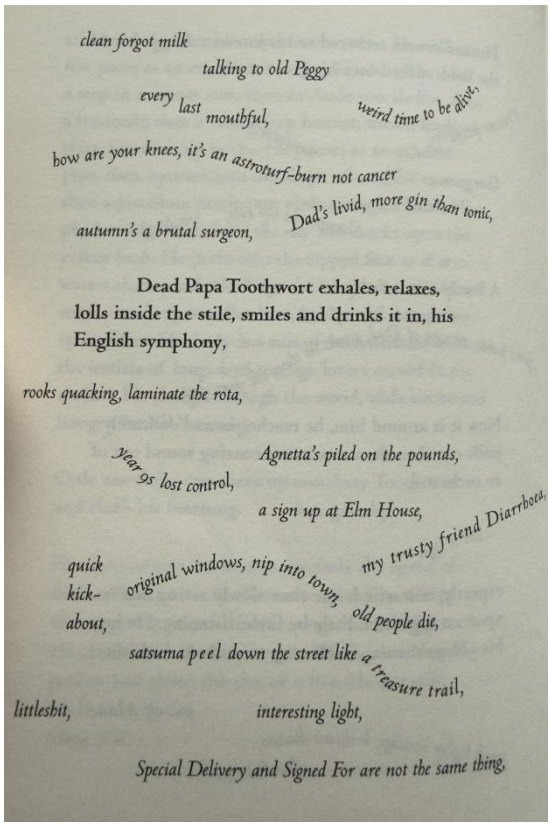

countries can grow wrong,
never seen a fella more coke-fucked,
choir clashes with Benders sadly,
horrid parents,
pretty in a smudgy kind of way,
last glass then bed,
blocked drains,
piggish ginger son who bullied our Aaron,
Iranian or something,
coming in and out like the wind,
Sheila's salted caramel rice pudding sweet Jesus I died and went to heaven
nine English pound,
he swims in it, he gobbles it up and wraps himself in it, he rubs it all over himself, he pushes it into his holes, he gargles, plays, punctuates and grazes, licks and slurps at the sound of it, wanting it fizzing on his tongue, this place of his,
apple like that, professor says so,
quiche au vomit,
the gate worn where she's leant on it seventy summers,
shrieking like sexed-up foxes,
he's a bum-bandit,
state of the toilets, fibre-optic, put our foot down,
fewer antibiotics healthier cows,
endless moaning,
7

Using synesthetic metaphorical language related to varying sensory apparatus, like skin ("rubs"), throat ("gargles"), and tongue ("licks and slurps"), readers are challenged to reinvent perceptual

categories to make sense of how they could "wrap" themselves in sentences or "slurp at the sound of it" (*L* 7). The challenge of imagining such perception lies of course in a lack of similar experiences (or in this case even a similar sensory apparatus) to draw upon.

As Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens insist, metaphors need to be studied in interaction with focalizers (2011, 72–73). Destabilizing separations between the natural environment and anthropocentric culture (Calder 2024, 80), Dead Papa Toothwort is the perfect focalizing character for synesthetic metaphors. By weakening the boundaries between individual and environment, subject and object, synesthetic transfers are perceived as more natural (Tsur 2012, 437). This, combined with the fact that readers don't possess the same perceptual abilities or experience to draw upon, enables a sense of curiosity and wonder, an imagined experience that is inaccessible in their daily lives.

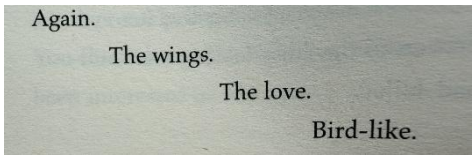
The bold typeface of these sections already draws reader attention, but the curved lines or even overlapping text, evoking overlapping sound fragments (Drager 2024, 43), deviate even further from traditional reader expectations. In this way, figure and ground become reversed as the murmurs of the village are brought to the foreground. Indeed, Porter found a way to make his novel "sound not text […] to spill over the page" (Porter 2019b). The use of synesthetic style across multiple modalities is crucial to achieve this (*L* 6):



The textual and material modalities of the novel join in multimodal metaphors (Gibbons 2012, 33), such as "satsuma peel down the street like a treasure trail" peeling down in a path-like form or "littleshit" written so closely together that you can almost see someone saying it through gritted teeth, pushing the letters through. Notably, the indexical reference of "littleshit" is enabled by the spelling of the word itself, consisting of many vertically oriented letters (l, i, t). As its readers navigate new ways to interpret textual and material elements simultaneously, *Lanny* draws attention to two connected ideas: that the specific material properties of the printed book cannot be understood separately from the text therein and that reading in itself is synesthetic, converting mostly visual stimulation into varied sensory imagination.

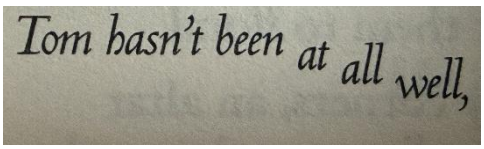
While throughout this paper I've argued that 4E narratology needs to take materiality seriously, I want to emphasize that this does not mean forgetting about text; it is the joint effect of both that needs to be taken into account. As I've demonstrated, the material form of language determines its meaning, but this is a two-way street. When similar material forms contain different linguistic messages, the meaning of the material dimension changes as well. In conventional formats, this seems so self-evident that it becomes hardly noticeable. In fact, "the typographic rectangle has become so predictable, ubiquitous, and neutral that it now appears, if we notice it at all, as the natural look of language in books" (Dworkin 2020, 21). Whereas unconventional formal features demonstrate their semiotic impact more visibly, their meaning too depends on their textual and referential properties. Not only does the textual modality change the meaning of a cluster as a whole, it also affects the meaning of its own material form, demonstrating their semiotic interdependence through feedback loops. This becomes clear from a comparison of two fragments, one from *Grief* and one from *Lanny*, both in a diagonal composition, evoking entirely different meanings.

In *Grief*, when Dad remembers a story about wings, making love and an expression of a birdlike body, the three elements are printed as follows (*G* 36):



As a multimodal metaphor, the material and linguistic modalities simultaneously create an impression of lightness, floating, and flying (a familiar metaphor for love).

In *Lanny* however, another diagonal arrangement prompts a very different association. One of the things Dead Papa Toothwort hears is (*L* 21):



In this case, a different feeling presents itself. By connecting the textual message to the descent of the words, the passage evokes another familiar metaphor: things going south or downhill. Taken together, these multimodal metaphors demonstrate once again how materiality and textuality cannot be examined in isolation, but always have a combined effect in meaning-making interactions.

Conclusion

Let us return to the opening questions. What enables us to see the world through the eyes of certain characters? How do readers imagine unfamiliar bodily and perceptual experiences in narrative? And what formal strategies can literature employ to convey such experiences?

I've argued that its unique combination of semantic and material properties makes multimodal literature especially well-suited to evoke unfamiliar bodily and cognitive experiences. In *Grief*, the birdlike perspective of Crow's passages depends on the interplay between language and layout, while Dead Papa Toothwort's synesthetic perception in *Lanny* can only fully be grasped by examining its multimodal semiosis from a 4E perspective. In both novels, textual materiality is mobilized alongside semantic semiosis to allow readers to enact unfamiliar experiences in unique ways.

While the novels' emphasis on sensory experience rather than narrative events invites a 4E approach that accounts for the role of embodiment, their multimodality also calls for a different analytical toolset. Inspired by 4E's rich interdisciplinary tradition, I attempted to show the theoretical and methodological advantages of integrating textual materiality into 4E theory when examining multimodal semiosis. This entails acknowledging how sensory imagination, bodily resonance, and kinesthetic empathy all depend on various semiotic modalities. Close readings and cluster analyses that took into account the joint effects of those modalities from a 4E perspective illuminated how these novels evoke perceptual and bodily experiences that may be entirely unfamiliar to their readers.

From this analysis can be concluded that readers *make sense* of narratives by combining their own embodied memory with textual and material modalities to imagine perceptual and bodily

experiences and that this process cannot so easily be dissected into verbal and material components. In this sense, meaning-making is always multimodal.

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