Becoming Liquid: Exploring the Narrative Pattern of an 'Implosion' in a Fragmented Novel

Janina Sophie Diller

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Bath Spa University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Writing, Publishing and the Humanities

Bath Spa University

The research disclosed in this publication was funded and supported by the German Academic Scholarship Foundation.

June 2025

This study was approved by the Bath Spa University Ethics Panel on 21/08/2024. Should you have any concerns regarding ethical matters relating to this study, please contact the Research Support Office at Bath Spa University (researchsupportoffice@bathspa.ac.uk).

No new datasets were created during the study.

Abstract

This study investigates the patterning of fragmented narratives, more specifically, what I will develop as the pattern of an implosion.

This thesis consists of two parts, the autobiographical novel in fragments, titled *Becoming Liquid*, and the critical component, *Writing a Fragmented Novel: Exploring the Narrative Structure of an 'Implosion'*.

Becoming Liquid is an experimental narrative that traces the journey from Germany to (post-Brexit) England and back, from being a daughter and granddaughter to being a mother. In glimpses of life, daydreams, history and art, it explores what it means to be home and to be rooted while everything changes.

The critical component *Writing a Fragmented Novel: Exploring the Narrative Structure of an 'Implosion'* contextualises and investigates what I will call the 'implosive narrative pattern' of a novel in fragments, and its specific value for writing my novel.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will outline what I mean by fragmentary writing and its historical and contemporary meaning. Using the example of Ali Smith's *Artful*, I will explore the potential of gaps in fragmentary writing and will delineate their benefits for writing about art. Further, I will investigate the openness to include other media, such as photography, in fragmentary narratives.

While writing in fragments has long been a technique used by writers for various purposes, and has been discussed in the context of Romanticism, Modernism and Post-Modernism, the patterning of the fragmented novel has been deeply investigated by Jane Alison in her recent book *Meander, Spiral, Explode*.

In chapter two and three I will explore patterns that were important for my own novel during the writing process and how I came to the final shape of *Becoming Liquid*.

Based on what Jane Alison calls the 'radial' pattern in narrative, I will establish the concepts of exploding and imploding novels. I will provide case studies of Maggie Nelson's

Bluets and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* in terms of their narrative pattern and compare them to my own novel. I will suggest my reasons for writing an imploding novel, rather than an exploding one. Finally, I will conclude with why I find the narrative pattern of an implosion especially fitting to write my experience of becoming a mother.

With the delineation of the implosion as a narrative pattern and the practice-based research of its use for writing about motherhood, this study contributes to new knowledge in the field of creative writing in two ways: a new categorisation of a specific narrative pattern in fragmentary writing, and the suggestion of a method for shaping a literary text in fragments.

Keywords: fragmented narrative, autofiction, motherhood, implosion, narrative patterns, narratology

Table of Contents

[the creative section of the thesis on pages 1 – 264 has been removed from this digital version at the author's request]

Writing a Fragmented Novel: Exploring the Narrative Structure of an 'Implosion'

Introduction: What is an Implosion?

The larger part of this PhD thesis is the creative piece, the novel *Becoming Liquid*, which is an autofictional narrative in 162 fragments. With autofiction I mean an autobiography written with a fictional approach. *Becoming Liquid* is an experimental novel about unexpected motherhood and the feeling of being unrooted in times of climate crisis, migration, and wars. The novel traces the narrator's journey from Germany to (post-Brexit) England and back, from being a daughter and granddaughter to becoming a mother. In glimpses of life, daydreams, family history and art, it explores what it means to be home while everything changes.

This second part of my thesis, 'Writing a fragmented novel', is a contextualising essay that explores the process of writing a fragmented novel with the narrative structure of an 'implosion' and argues in favour of the narratological power and ability of this narrative form to open innovative ways of reflecting on the world.

The *Cambridge Online Dictionary* defines an implosion as 'the act of falling towards the inside with force'[1]. This definition includes some crucial aspects of an implosion and, as I will argue in the following thesis, of an imploding text. The first is 'falling,' describing a movement in a specific direction, namely towards a source of gravity. This is attributed with the addition 'with force', which suggests a certain power that causes this movement, a force that determines the direction. The target of this movement, then, is the source of this gravitational force, the centre or nucleus of the implosion. The *Oxford English Dictionary* points out another aspect: besides the figurative meaning of an implosion, here an implosion is

[1]'Implosion,' Cambridge Dictionary, accessed January 25, 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/implosion.

defined as 'the bursting inward of a vessel from external pressure'[2]. The shape, or 'vessel,' that holds and defines appears as a crucial part of the implosion. Throughout my thesis I want to keep these aspects of the implosion in mind: the centre as a source of gravity towards which everything is pulled, creating extreme density and ultimately a metamorphosis into something new. I'm going to translate these terms – the vessel or shape, the force or gravity of a centre and the inwards motion – into narratology and explore what they mean for writing, more specifically, what they meant for writing my novel.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will outline what I mean by fragmentary writing and its historical and contemporary relevance. With the example of Ali Smith's *Artful*, I will explore gaps and in-betweenness in fragmentary writing. In this context, I will also briefly investigate a fragmented narrative's potential to include other media, such as photography.

In chapter two, I will examine form, patterns and shape in fragmented narratives, and the process of finding these for my novel. While writing in fragments has long been a technique used by writers for various purposes, and has been discussed in the context of Romanticism, Modernism and Post-Modernism, the patterning of the fragmented novel has been more deeply investigated by Jane Alison in her recent book *Meander, Spiral, Explode*. After discussing different non-linear narrative patterns, I will focus on the pattern Jane Alison calls 'radial'. Based on this, I will establish the concepts of an explosion and an implosion as a narrative pattern. At the example of Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, I will illustrate the key aspects of an exploding novel, in order to delineate them from the pattern of an implosion. In chapter three, I will then further explore the idea of an imploding novel and its relevance to my own writing, providing a case study of Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* as an example for an imploding novel. I

[2]'Implosion,' Oxford English Dictionary, accessed January 25, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/implosion_n?tab=meaning_and_use.

will close with why I find the narrative pattern of an implosion especially fitting to write my experience of becoming a mother.

1) Chapter 1: Fragmentary Writing

1.1) Introduction to Fragmentary Writing

When I started writing *Becoming Liquid*, I had the sense that one linear narrative was not true enough. There were thoughts popping up in my mind that interrupted the narrative, associations to a line I had written, images, things, places connected to a paragraph, a situation described. I felt like the text wanted to be more, needed more dimensions, a network spreading out, not only on the surface of a blank page but out, into space, into the world.

Writing in fragments seemed to be a way of avoiding the expectation and limitation of ultimate plot resolution, and, thus, to open the writing. As Stewart Martin writes about W.G. Sebald's fragmentary novels, 'the accumulation of [Sebald's] biography-like texts suggests a form of combination beyond the parameters of the published books, as if Sebald were constructing a larger, unfinished and perhaps unfinishable work.'[3] Although Steward here talks about Sebald's books in relation to each other, rather than about the fragments within the books, I would suggest that their ability to connect with one another, beyond the frame one book, and to remain unfinished, begins with the fragmentation within the autobiographies and a consequential openness.

Through fragmentation in my own writing, I wanted to achieve such an openness, a porousness that allows the narrative to be alive. To write about my life as it happened required me and my narrative form to be open for improvisation, open for bits and pieces of which the exact purpose or place might not be clear right away but only to be established in retrospect. Fragmentation, therefore, was one of the first parameters set for my novel.

---

[3] Stewart Martin, 'W.G. Sebald and the modern art of memory', Radical Philosophy 132, Jul/Aug 2005, https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp132_article2_wgsebaldmodernartofmemory_martin.pdf (last retrieved 17 January 2024), 19.

In order to further analyse the purpose and potential of fragmentation in my own writing, I first need to establish the framework of what I mean by fragmentary writing and in what ways my writing meets this framework. After a brief definition of what I mean by fragmentation and fragmentary writing, in this chapter, I will use Ali Smith's *Artful* as an example to illustrate the use of gaps and in-betweenness as a necessity for art, creativity and empathy. The analysis of Smith's work helped me to develop this aspect in my own writing. With a comparative glance at W. G. Sebald's works, I will explore the potential of fragmentary writing to include other art forms, especially photography – a recurring theme in my novel. Finally, I will connect fragmentary writing to focus and distraction in and of the writing.

1.2) What is Fragmentation and Fragmentary Writing?

> '[T]he words *fragmen* and *fragmentum* derive from *frango*, which means 'to break, to shatter, to crash.' A fragment is a piece of a whole which has been ruptured.'[4]

Vanessa Guignery provides this definition in the foreword to the 2019 volume *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction.* The word fragment points to a fracture, something that isn't whole anymore, something missing – a '*no more*' and '*not yet*', as Sibylle Baumbach indicates in her article 'Only Connect'[5].

The fragment in writing has often been a way of accepting that wholeness is or was never possible, as Caroline Levine observes in her account of the deconstructionist approach to this problem:

---

[4] Vanessa Guignery, *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction* (Delaware, USA: Vernon Press, 2019), xii.
[5] Sibylle Baumbach, '"Only Connect": The Aesthetics of Fragmentation and Mindful Literary Studies,' *Literature and Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Cultural Concerns – Concepts – Case Studies, ed. Nünning et. al.* (Trier: WVT, 2022), 10.

> 'Jacques Derrida argued famously that no work of literature can ever achieve a closed unity, since each word takes on its identity in and through its relation to other traces or marks that are not in fact contained in any given object but unfold in the unending process he called différence,'[6]

A novel can only show a fraction of the world. It relies on the reader's knowledge of the world, on their ability to fill the gaps that are left open with their experience of how the world works, how relationships work.

Literary theorist Terry Eagleton gives the novel's dictionary definition as 'a piece of prose fiction of a reasonable length', immediately claiming that the novel resists clear definition and is ultimately anarchic. In his *Introduction to Literary Theory*, he further explains the literary reading of a novel:

> '[R]eading a novel remains different from reading a road sign because the reader is not supplied with a ready-made context to render the language intelligible. A novel which opens with the sentence: 'Lok was running as fast as he could' is implicitly saying to the reader: 'I invite you to imagine a context in which it makes sense to say "Lok was running as fast as he could".' The novel will gradually construct that context, or if you like the reader will gradually construct it for the novel.'[7]

Writing a novel is creating a context within which a (fictional) character can logically exist. In an autofictional work, however, the boundaries of the fictional are blurred. The narrator is not only a fictional character but also an existing person in the world outside the

---

[6] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 25.
[7] Terry Eagleton, *Introduction to Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 76.

novel. The frame of the narrative is challenged. While I wrote my novel, I reacted to encounters and experiences in my real life – some I included, some not. I provided gaps and left certain things out – in order to protect people around me or for aesthetic reasons or because I felt they wouldn't add meaning to the narrative. I changed scenes so they work better to create a context for my partly fictional characters and so that they will communicate better with other scenes of the book. An obvious example is Jonna, the alter-ego of the first-person narrator who, at first, mostly overlaps with the narrator and with my own life but who gradually becomes more fictional. When I was pregnant, Jonna became the fictional version of myself without the pregnancy. This self became harder to hold on to over time and ~~that~~ fades towards the end of the novel, as I will explore in chapter two and three.

While at times this constant evaluation of current events, private and political, was challenging, the decision to write a novel and not a memoir was a decision for a certain freedom – the characters are fictional after all. At the same time, it was a decision for wholeness, for a beginning and an end that my life, as lived, could not yet have.

There might not be plot resolution in a conventional sense as one might expect in a detective story or romance where something has been resolved, be it a love interest or a murder. Yet, *Becoming Liquid* does come to an end. The birth as the end of the novel is a natural end to a certain period, the pregnancy and the narrator's time as a young woman who is not a mother. It brings the narrative about pregnancy and about motherhood and daughterhood to a close. Instead of a resolution, this close is more of a metamorphosis, though. The narrator's life drastically changes, reflected in the recurring image of the butterfly, as I will further discuss in chapter three. Through this frame, the fragments of the novel retain a certain shape which to find and define was the main goal of the thesis.

'Why not acknowledge the finitude and necessary incompleteness of fiction?' Merritt Moseley writes in his chapter 'What is fragmentary fiction?': 'why not […] have some fun with it?'[8] He outlines how writers since the nineteenth century have played with fragmentation in order to embrace, as well as override the limitations of linear fiction writing. Indeed, according to D'Ambrosio, the 'exploration of non-linear forms has constituted a parallel tradition in the history of the novel'[9].

Historically, fragmentation has often been used to express shatteredness. And indeed, fracture is a theme that it is hard to avoid when writing about changing national identities, moving between countries, and current as well as historical politics in Europe, as I do in *Becoming Liquid*. At the same time the existential experience of giving birth causes fracture for the protagonist on a personal level. The narrative lies in pieces. To move between these pieces and to question the idea of wholeness and stability when it comes to nationalities and identities is a crucial part of my work and is expressed through the form of fragmentary writing.

Guignery traces fragmentary writing back to German Romantics such as Schlegel and Novalis, for whom fragmentation emphasizes the impossible ideal of completion – a concept I connect to and question in reflections upon Caspar David Friedrich's paintings in *Becoming Liquid*[10]. The fracture of the first and second world war present in modernist writing shows in the story of the narrator's grandmother in Becoming Liquid – a story the narrator learns in fragments and pieces together from narrated memories, photographs and old journals.

Throughout the last century and the beginning of this, in fragmented writing, it seems, the focus lies on the fracture, the moment of separation between fragments and their distraction.

---

[8] Merritt Moseley, 'What is fragmentary fiction?' *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction*, ed. Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drag (Delaware: Vernon Press, 2019), 6.
[9]Mariano D'Ambrosio, 'Fragmentary Writing and Polyphonic Narratives in Twenty-First-Century Fiction' *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction*, ed. Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drag (Delaware: Vernon Press, 2019), 20.
[10] Janina Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 49, pp.97-98.

Literature after 9/11 often uses fragmentation to evoke the sense of a shattered world, a shattered self, distrust and instability, with the Twin Towers as an image of 'horrifying fragmentation'[11]. Fragmentariness is an expression of something rather negative, of destruction, hopelessness, and frailty. A fragmented self can be found in my novel as well, albeit not in a mournful or damaged way. The narrative is told in Jonna's and the first-person voice. These characters are alter-egos to each other but with the narrator's pregnancy they clearly separate. Their identity is divided, albeit not broken. Each of them remains full and possible, although Jonna fades to the background as the I-narrator comes more into focus. They are an attempt to deny linearity with the narrative moving back and forth between them. Their stories sometimes cross, sometimes diverge.

Especially for female writers, fragmentary writing '[provides] an opportunity […] to eschew the traditional narrative line, based in chronology, and organise their work in a way that allows them to speak more freely about their *embodied experiences*',[12] as Callahan writes in her article on 'The Female and the Fragment(ed)'. As a young mother writing candidly and without shame about birth and pregnancy, including its losses and anxieties as well as joys and wonders, I see myself as part of a minority that was invisible or mediated mainly by the male gaze in literature and culture for a long time. Fragmentation constitutes a way of expressing marginalised experiences, and offers writers like Roxanne Gay or Maggie Nelson a freshness and agency through which they are able to tell their stories 'on [their] own terms',[13] so Callahan observes:

---

[11]Ted Gioia 2013, 'The Rise of the Fragmented Novel (An Essay in 26 Fragments)' *Fractious Fiction*, http://fractiousfiction.com/rise_of_the_fragmented_novel (last retrieved 23 February 2022).
[12] Shannon Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed)', Body Studies, vol. 2, no. 2, Cabrini University, https://bodystudiesjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2-The-Female-and-the-Fragmented.pdf (last retrieved 22 January 2024), 10.
[13] Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed),' 12.

> '[A fragmented narrative, or essay] – one that may be called lyric, mosaic, segmented, braided, collaged, or sectioned, depending on your theoretical preference – provides the space for women to talk about their bodies and identities in a way that is consistent with their lived experience. The fragmented form disrupts the notion that there is one, single, correct 'master narrative,' traditionally a tool for propagating a patriarchal view of the world.'[14]

Fragmentary writing, thus, is also a political decision. A decision against a patriarchal master narrative, against linearity, against the idea of a unified whole (with its dangerous proximity to fascism). Caroline Levine mentions feminist scholars such as Lucy Irigaray, who break with the concept of wholeness and 'its willingness to imprison, to create inclusions and exclusions'.[15]

This said, however, I do not argue against form and against the idea of a whole in general. In fact, finding the shape of my novel as a whole, was a major part of my writing process and research as I will discuss further in chapter two. Thus, I will base my argument on Levine's concept of form and of a whole as a decision for or against certain 'potentialities'[16], a set of rules that can then be followed or questioned.

Gioia names three stages of fragmentary writing that have been strong features throughout the last 150 years:

> 'The first stage focused on the *fix-up* [the attempt to join fragments together to create something new], The second stage introduced the *cut-up* [with emphasis on

---

[14] Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed),' 10.
[15] Levine, *Forms*, 25.
[16] Levine, *Form*s, 6.

disjunction]. The third and perhaps final stage seeks an exemplary wholeness, a fitting together of the fragments into brilliant patterns.'[17]

It is this last stage I am most interested in, the pattern in which fragments come together as a (new, more porous and less linear) whole, a shape that rises from pieces. While Moseley describes postmodern writers such as Ballard as wanting to capture 'the mind's randomness'[18] through fragmentation, I try to convey connectedness instead – possibly a more contemporary approach to fragmentation. According to Gioia 'the new fragmented novel is holistic and coalescent. It resists disunity, even as it appears to embody it.'[19] In line with this, I use fragmentary writing to focus on the arranging and the connectivity of fragments: The in-betweenness and gaps hold the potential to be filled with creativity. I am interested in the shape and pattern in which fragments come together.

In contemporary prose writing there are different ways in which fragmentation is consciously being used. These include fragmentation as a 'formal and typographical [device]'[20], for example through the use of footnotes or endnotes; stylistic fragmentation, for example through polyphony; and fragmentation as the content of the writing. Often, of course, these different forms of fragmentation, form, style, and content, combine or overlap.

According to D'Ambrosio, polyphony signifies the 'collapse of the traditional single authoritative voice of the narrator, still predominant in realist fiction'[21]. A contemporary example where polyphonic fragmentation is made visible through an experimental use of page space, connecting style and form, is Max Porter's *Lanny*. The various voices of the village

---

[17] Gioia, 'The Rise of the Fragment'.
[18] Moseley, 'What is Fragmentary Fiction,' 8.
[19] Gioia, 'The Rise of the Fragment'.
[20] D'Ambrosio, 'Fragmentary Writing,' 19.
[21] D'Ambrosio, 'Fragmentary Writing,' 19.

community in *Lanny* are visualised through italics and lines that meander on the page. Porter's polyphony not only includes the villagers, Lanny's friends and parents as narrators but also the place itself, embodied in the mystical figure of Dead Papa Toothwort. While Dead Papa Toothwort listens to the villagers' thoughts and their peculiar language, '[he] hugs himself with diseased larch arms and dribbles cuckoo spit down his chin,'[22]. Through polyphonic fragmentation Porter avoids a single authoritative narrator and finds the language to move from human to nonhuman – a challenge I face in my narrator's metamorphosis alongside the metamorphosis of the caterpillar, as I will discuss in more depth in chapter 3.2.

Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* doesn't use separated voices in order to create fragmentation. Instead, fragmentation is achieved through an arrangement of various different vignettes in the same narrative voice. These vignettes are visibly separated on the page and numerically ordered, connecting the fragments in logical continuity. This device is inspired by the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of Wittgenstein, a philosopher Nelson acknowledges as 'principal supplier'[23].

Beside these examples of visual fragmentation, there are narratives where fragmentation happens in the flow of the narrative. In Samantha Harvey's memoir *The Shapeless Unease*, there are no separate chapters with clear headings or numbering. Sections are merely separated by a small infinity sign (∞), again emphasising the continuity of the flow. Still, the first-person frame narrative jumps between a short story about a man who robs an ATM, thoughts about death and memories, as well as philosophical and political issues. Although the narrative voice and the visual flow of the writing are fairly continuous, the memoir could certainly be called fragmented because of the jumps and breaks contained. Additionally, fragmentation and fracture are recurring themes within the book.

---

[22] Max Porter, *Lanny*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2020), 8.
[23] Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017 (2009)), 91, 98.

Thus, there is not one kind of fragmentary writing, and – as seems appropriate for the subject of fragmentation – the outlines of the definition are rather blurry and pieced together from a multitude of concepts, movements and countermovements. Yet, for the purpose of this paper and the aim of my research, I suggest that writing in which fragmentation is consciously used as a formal or stylistic device, and/or where fragmentation is a substantial subject of the writing, this writing can be called fragmentary writing. In this thesis, I want to focus on contemporary works that use fragmentation in ways that are related to my own writing and inspired my novel. These include works that play with fragmentary form, such as Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, fragmentation in style and as content of the writing, as in Smith's *Artful*. In my own writing, I work with a combination of these three aspects in order to fathom the political and creative potential of fragmentation and its patterning.

1.3) Gaps and Fragmentation in Ali Smith's *Artful*

Although fragmentation is a central theme in Ali Smith's *Artful*, the structure of Smith's own writing on the first read doesn't seem entirely fragmented. While the frame narrative is interrupted by lectures on art and literature, both strands are fairly linear. The novel is not as dispersed and visually fragmented as other works discussed here, such as Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. Instead, Smith's approach to fragmentation is of a more reflective nature. She uses the protagonist's deceased partner's 'talks' as a metafictional tool and writes about fracture in a character's life, in writing and in art. Fragmentation is substantial to the content of her writing.

In my own writing, the sense of fragmentation is perhaps in between these two literary works. As in Nelson's *Bluets*, the fragments of my novel are numbered and clearly separated from one another. At the same time, I reflect on fragmentation in my work, in my characters' identities and in the artworks discussed – a commonality with Smith's *Artful*, which I will now examine further.

In Ali Smith's *Artful*, fracture is perceptible from the very first page. Her dead partner's 'unfinished stuff' leaves the first-person narrator broken and 'at a loss'[24]. She[25] finds herself unable to read and opens books at random[26]. The opened page in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* falls apart into questions, thoughts, and memories she associates with single words like 'workhouse' and phrases like 'this world of sorrow'[27].

Yet, although fracture, at first, seems painful and unwanted, further along in the novel fragmentariness turns into something more hopeful and desirable, even necessary.

Through her partner's imagined reappearance, the gap caused by their death only becomes more visible. The imaginary version of her dead partner is imperfect. They have to learn the meaning of words, learn to count[28]. While they seem to become more and more themselves throughout the first section of the novel, the narrator soon has to discover that her partner begins to vanish again. Starting with the eyes, only 'black spaces'[29] from the beginning, this version of her partner decays with every visit. Losing one body part after another, they become 'slightly more ragged-looking every time'[30].

One of the first headings of the narrator's partner's talks in *Artful*, '<u>2: I'm In Pieces, Bits And Pieces: the fragmentation imagination</u>'[31], sheds light on the connection between this physical fragmentation and imagination. The gaps in the partner's body, as well as in their talks are necessary in order for the narrator to be imaginative and to enable empathy:

---

[24] Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 5.
[25] Although Smith doesn't specify the gender of either her narrator or their partner, in the following, I will use female pronouns for the narrator, while using gender unspecific pronouns for the partner, as this is how I read the two characters.
[26] Smith, *Artful,* 3, 14.
[27] Smith, *Artful,* 7-8.
[28] Smith, *Artful,* 10, 18.
[29] Smith, *Artful,* 11.
[30] Smith, *Artful,* 50.
[31] Smith, *Artful,* 22.

> '[Fragmented writing] is also characterised by a lack of connective tissue, white space on the page in which the unspeakable, or the unknowable, appears as a result of the writer's collection of fragments coupled with the reader's projection of her own assumptions and experiences into this communal space.'[32]

Callahan points to the gaps, 'the lack of connective tissue' between fragments that enables the reader to partake and to insert themselves in the narrative and to share this space with the writer. In *Artful* this is the case on the level of the reader as well as the metafictional level of the narrator as a reader of her partner's talks.

In *Becoming Liquid* this aspect of fragmentation as creating space finds a parallel in the protagonist's reflections on blurred photographs. In comparison with the blurry old photographs of her grandmother, the narrator describes the effects of the renaissance painting technique of Sfumato:

> '*Sfumato* functions like a gap that we can fill with our interpretation. Subconsciously, we continue the painting where it is kept vague according to our own expectations, our hopes, and see a smile or a frown in the shades of Mona Lisa's features.'[33]

The narrator is fascinated with the technique of the sfumato and its potential for interpretation and individual engagement. The same can be said for the spaces between fragments, where written world and real world meet – the reader's mind and the narrator's as well as the writer's mind. These gaps are filled with expectations and hopes, as Ali Smith shows with her narrator's imagination of her partner.

---

[32] Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed),' 11.
[33] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 10, p.25.

In *Artful* the imagination of the 'you' as a social counterpart is crucial for the relationship between the narrator and her partner. Most obviously, this happens through the narrator's imagination of her partner returning from the dead[34]. However, the narrator isn't content with her imagination, as she 'couldn't even imagine you a good permanent nose'[35]. Although her imagination is vivid enough to create a physical appearance of her partner, it is a failure, quickly fading. Instead, she finds that the fragmented talks the partner left give her a better counterpart – one out of which she can create an exchange. Reading her partner's thoughts creates a connection between the two people, a bridge that spans the gap between their realities, between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In the narrator's mind, they are connected over the time gap that lies between writing and reading:

> 'I was wondering if, when you'd been writing it – with me in the next room […] with no idea you were writing these exact words I was reading now […] you'd thought at all about me'[36].

With the talk in the fourth section of the novel that is addressed as a letter to the narrator, this is amplified. Like a mirror cabinet, the narrator reads about her partner imagining her, imagining them: '& to imagine you imagining me here'[37], which again, she narrates to the reader of the novel.

This complex back and forth of imagination creates a sense of pleasure for each party involved, as well as a feeling of being gifted and loved. For the narrator, '[t]o be known so well by someone is an unimaginable gift. But to be imagined so well by someone is even better'[38],

---

[34] Smith, *Artful,* 9.
[35] Smith, *Artful,* 53.
[36] Smith, *Artful,* 78.
[37] Smith, *Artful,* 176.
[38] Smith, *Artful,* 179.

while for her partner, 'It gives [them] such pleasure to imagine [the narrator imagining them]'[39]. Across time and space, an intimate, loving connection is created between the two through their imagination and their ability for empathy.

Only the physical distance and the lack of knowledge of what exactly the other person thinks or feels, gives enough space for the creation of such a connection. In one of the last talks, Ali Smith sums this up as follows:

> 'Empathy, in art, is art's part-exchange with us, its inclusivity, at once a kind-ness, a going beyond the self, and a pickpocketing of our responses, which is why giving and taking are bound up with the goods, with the gods, with respect, with deep-seated understanding about the complex cultural place where kindness, thievery, bartering and gift-giving all meet, make their exchanges, and by exchange reveal real worth.'[40]

To Smith, this empathy is closely connected to art, and how we engage with art. It is telling that the first thing Smith's narrator thinks of when her partner appears without a nose, is how to replace the nose through a folded piece of paper[41]. She turns to some kind of craft or artwork. The creation of art seems to be encouraged and made possible through the fragmentation of the world and of her partner, while simultaneously, art is a way to repair and to bridge this gap (even if not with immediate success).

In my novel *Becoming Liquid*, the protagonist Jonna and her partner Elias both are artists. While Elias creates sculptures from found objects and stones they collect together, Jonna takes photographs. Often, she uses these photographs as postcards and writes them to

---

[39] Smith, *Artful,* 176.
[40] Smith, *Artful,* 171-172.
[41] Smith, *Artful,* 53.

friends and family members[42]. Her artworks become a means of communication and give her the ability to be palpably connected with someone who is physically distant, separated by a border, an ocean and by her decision to move to another country. The gap, the fracture that takes place in my work is of a different kind than the one in Smith's *Artful*. My protagonist doesn't mourn a dead friend. Instead, she moves from Germany to the UK and later back, always leaving someone or something behind: her family and partner, her friend Marla and parts of her own identity. Similar to Ali Smith's *Artful*, in *Becoming Liquid*, I establish art as a way to fill gaps. At the same time, these fractures are what enables the creation of artworks in the first place. The fractures of leaving one's home country, as well as living apart from my family and partner, initiated the idea of writing *Becoming Liquid* itself.

In *Artful* Ali Smith writes about the artists Cézanne and Kusama. To both of these artists, fragmentation and the idea of gaps are important. Especially in his later works, the specks of blank canvas that Cézanne leaves open are as crucial as the paint he adds in other places. Kusama, as Smith writes, would 'go over the edge [of the canvas] and into the rest of the space'[43]. Her artworks expand, they deny boundaries while acknowledging that the canvas is part of the world, the artwork a fragment of a bigger whole that can never be fully covered in polka dots. In the third section of *Artful*, 'On Edge,' the narrator's imaginary partner has dissolved to the point where it is only her partner's arm that she imagines. The hand on this arm '[talks] of Michelangelo[44]', another artist who is mentioned again and again throughout the novel. Michelangelo is famous for claiming that carving a sculpture from marble was like freeing the sculpture that had been inside the stone all along. He only takes away the superfluous material. Similarly, Ali Smith cuts the superfluous material from the narrator's partner. However, working in a different medium than Michelangelo, with words and language,

---

[42] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 36, p.79.
[43] Smith, *Artful,* 85.
[44] Smith, *Artful,* 141. Clearly a reference to T.S.Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock'.

what she leaves is not the physical shape of the partner's body, but their voice as it appears in the talks. Fittingly, the last word this voice utters is a fragmented word, 'possibili'[45]: an embodiment of openness. Fragmentation leaves space enough for art to be created, for possibility and potential.

While fragmentation in the artworks that Ali Smith mentions is fairly obvious, the fracture in Friedrich's and Tacita Dean's works, which I explore in *Becoming Liquid,* is perhaps less visible. Although Friedrich uses fragments of drawings to construct a landscape in his paintings, he tries to conceal the fragmentation of his work process. This is described in depth in section 49[46], where the narrator reflects on how fragmentation enables Friedrich to create landscapes of memory and emotion, rather than of reality. Fragmentation in Friedrich's process is necessary to create an idea(l) of a whole but is not supposed to be visible in the outcome. At the same time, gaps and fracture are objects of his works. Friedrich is concerned with the gap between the viewer and the sublime, the gap that separates the wanderer from the constructed landscape in the distance and from God.

Tacita Dean's fractured cliffs in the 'Chalk Falls' envision the UK border as a gap. The English landscape is fractured, falls apart. This moment of falling, of a landscape dissolving is reinforced by the visual 'gap' between the written notes and the drawn landscape: the perspective necessary to decode one encodes the other. As with the Sfumato, the inability to see clearly creates an openness, a tension between closeness and distance which I do not only observe in these artworks but also reflect on and aim to recreate in the writing. Tensions caused by both, physical distance and closeness can be observed in the protagonist's relationship to her mother. When she leaves Germany, her mother is saddened[47]; when she returns, there is a

---

[45] Smith, *Artful,* 188.
[46] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.96-98.
[47] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 9, p.20.

certain distance and tension still[48]. This tension that comes with long-distance relationships, and especially with one person's decision to move away, is present in the narrator's relationship to Elias as well, where, when he comes to visit her in the UK, it takes some time for them to readjust, to see each other clearly again[49]. However, the shift between closeness and distance can also be observed in the tonal variations of the different narrative strands. While many of the chapters in the last quarter of my novel feature the closeness and almost confessional tone of a first-person narrator who describes intimate moments of her pregnancy[50], this stands in contrast to the distant tone of essayistic thoughts about the geography of the river Danube[51]or Tove Jansson's stories and Gilles Deleuze's writing[52] in this section.

At the same time, the fragmentariness of the writing gives me the space and experimental freedom to include not only various narrative tones and essayistic fragments on art as well as on the environment, but also other art forms, such as photographs, in the writing. This is a potential of fragmentary writing that Sebald or Sheila Heti deployed, both using photographs to provide 'apparently factual evidence'[53], which supposedly proves the protagonist's existence in the same realm of reality as the reader's, as Stewart Martin claims in his criticism of Sebald's biographic novels:

> 'This, by turns mundane and hallucinatory, fusion of fact and fiction articulates the persistent theme throughout the works: memory and the attempt to mourn traumatic and repressed experiences'[54],

---

[48] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 95, pp.165-167.
[49] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 46, p.92.
[50] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 125, p.211; section 148, p.245.
[51] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 128-129, pp.214-216.
[52] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 146, pp.241-243.
[53] Martin, 'W.G. Sebald,' 18.
[54] Martin, 'W.G. Sebald,' 18.

While this is not the only correlation between Sebald and Heti's writing (both write about Jewish trauma after Shoah, both have an affinity to art and writing about art), I find it an especially interesting one in terms of writing memory in its unreliability and evasiveness. The inclusion of photographs in Sebald's biographical as well as in Heti's autofictional writing seems a proof of their character's realness while at the same time it makes moments of the narrative or memories visible. In *Becoming Liquid*, like Sebald and Heti, I play with photographs as seemingly reliable and the concept of autofiction as a text form that never quite reveals its full self. One never quite knows where memoir turns into fiction. This unreliability seems to me a crucial part not only of autofiction and, in fact, all biographical writing, but also of memory itself. Memory in my novel is closely connected with the narrator's grandmother, her loss of memory through dementia and, thus, the fragmentariness of her story of migration, which is interwoven with the narrator's life. The reconstruction of someone else's memory through photographs and notes and through childhood memories, results in a mosaic of colours, a picture that might not be naturalistic but rather attempts to capture an atmosphere. Like the blurry photographs, some details might be visible while others are not. Yet sometimes a blurry picture captures the core of a scene better than a clear one would. The photographs in my writing are an attempt to add another level of fragmentariness to the text, while at the same time, they represent the concept of memory and memoir writing, its fragmentation and unreliability.

Following Camelia Elias' argument for the fragment as performative, which for her 'means seeing fragments as acts: acts of literature, acts of reading, acts of writing'[55], one could add to the list fragments' function as acts of remembering, of bringing something, a small piece, back to mind and connecting it with other fragments, piecing together an image. This notion

[55] Camelia Elias, *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 5.

of the fragment not as memory itself, but as creating memory, provides the necessary fluidity and vagueness to express the nature of memory as well as giving the fragment the agency of creating, of art-making. Through fragmentation, the memory does not stay in the past but rather, it transcends into the future, revealing itself as alive and changeable, porous. This is also expressed in Jessa Fairbrother's artwork 'Conversations with my mother,' a series of photographs of a woman in a garden, the artist's mother, on whose face and body small flowers are stitched in bright yellow yarns. The flowers are arranged in circles and cover the person on the photograph, create a gap, a flower pattern, where their body and face would be. Created shortly after the artist's mother's death, these photographs show a hopeful attempt at the imprecision of memory. The face of a person might fade in one's memory. In the photographs, this is not expressed as a lack but rather the person is covered in yellow flowers: hopeful symbols of light and life.

Through the voice of the dead partner in *Artful*, Smith writes, '[i]t's the art of making it up, from the combination of what we've got and what we haven't, that makes the human, makes the art, makes this transformation possible'[56]. The blank spaces and gaps that lie between fragments are not only necessary for dialogue, human connection and empathy, as she shows in her work, but also for the creation of art. Only through this openness is there enough space for 'something [to grow] out of nothing, [to form] itself out of something else'[57].

Although Smith's frame narrative is strictly chronological and the talks are numbered and ordered, there is a countermovement that goes from death to birth, from completeness to fragmentation and further to a new sense of completeness. Smith, in one sentence, flows from Mercury, through language, to travelling and movement, from death to birth, where the sentence ends:

---

[56] Smith, *Artful,* 25.
[57] Smith, *Artful,* 71.

> 'Quicksilver is another word for Mercury, is another word for a planet that looks like a grey boulder in space, is another word for an element which is both fluid and solid, can change its shape yet still hold its form, is another word for Hermes, Greek god of art, artfulness, thievery, changeability, swiftness of thought and of communication, language, the alphabet, speechmaking, emails, texts, tweets; god of bartering, trade, liaison, roads and crossroads, travellers, the stock exchange, wages, dreams, guide between the surface world and the underworld, guide between the living and the dead, stealer of unbreakable nets for catching pretty virgins, god of free association, god of freedom of movement, fluidity, mutability of form, broad-hatted heel-winged god of all going-between, the deliverer.'[58]

Like quicksilver itself, this sentence stretches out over almost a whole page. From (deadly poisonous) quicksilver to birth, the sentence morphs in all sorts of different directions between Twitter and Greek gods. Endless potential and creativity is sketched out – the 'possibili' of life and art.

This hopefulness, the turn from fracture and gaps as signifiers for loss and grief to the potential and creativity that is possible through them, is what I find most inspiring about Ali Smith's *Artful*. In my novel *Becoming Liquid*, I aim to use fragmentation in a similarly positive way. For my conception of the imploding novel, this positivity, the potential to create rather than to destroy, is a key aspect and stands in contrast to the exploding novel.

---

[58] Smith, *Artful,* 183-184.

2) Chapter 2: Patterns and Shapes of Fragmentary Writing

2.1) Finding the Pattern

From very early on in my writing process, it was clear that I would write a fragmented novel. As outlined above, fragmented writing, to me, seemed the only way to write true to life, to interpersonal relationships and memory, while being open for art and creativity.

This process of writing, the accumulation of a narrative along the continuity of life has little to do with the dramatic arc of a conventional narrative, as described by Freytag's Pyramid: a plot that begins at a moment of conflict, rises towards a climax, from where it is followed by a denouement, a fade out. Although, initially created to describe classic tragedies, this plot pattern has often been applied to all kinds of narratives. It was repeated in endless examples of arcing novels throughout the last centuries and reinforced by John Gardner's criticism[59]. Instead, I was 'working from life to art'[60] – to use Jane Alison words for Eileen Gray's designing process. In *Meander, Spiral, Explode* Alison points out narrative patterns that depart from the 'masculo-sexual'[61] arc of Freytag's pyramid, using imagery and visual patterns like spirals, waves or networks. She explicitly uses terminology from visual arts or design[62]. As I am someone with a background in visual arts and a very visual way of thinking, Alison's approach seemed useful and congenial.

Finding the pattern of the novel, thus, means finding an image or metaphor(s) to visualise the narrative and the writing process. The term 'pattern' itself – a term Alison in her introduction connects to design (human efforts of patterning) and to pattern in nature

---

[59] Compare Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode – Design and Pattern in Narrative* (New York: Catapult, 2019). Jane Alison extensively argues in what ways this arc has become accepted as convention for various sorts of narratives and criticises this occurrence. Within the extent of this thesis, I am not able to further analyse the shape of the arc, but will build on her argument for a broader variety of patterns in narrative.
[60] Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode – Design and Pattern in Narrative* (New York: Catapult, 2019), 4.
[61] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 6.
[62] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 24.

(nonhuman patterning)[63] – suggests a visual structure and interconnectedness. In this chapter I will examine a number of images in terms of their capacity to describe the writing and, thus, their ability to help me understand and continue my work on the novel. Most of these images – the meandering river[64], the ordered connectivity of a network[65], the radial[66] – were initially raised by Alison and were adopted and modified by me to create connections with the form and content of my own novel. These images are closely related to images other critics, such as narratologist Marco Caracciolo and the writer Ursula LeGuin, have used to discuss narratives and the writing process.

To find the right pattern for *Becoming Liquid*, or rather to find the pattern that provides the closest translation of the narrative into a visual experience, I will connect these images with each other and link them to imagery within the novel.

2.1.1) Collecting

Like Jane Alison, one of my favourite writers, Ursula LeGuin, argues that the arc might not be the best fitting shape for a novel. Instead, she provides the image of the carrier bag as a vessel to collect the narrative in:

> 'I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag.'[67]

---

[63] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 21.
[64] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 118.
[65] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 188.
[66] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*,165.
[67] Ursula K LeGuin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,' *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 169.

While writing my novel, I was collecting and connecting, filling my 'carrier bag' with bits and pieces, scenes and metaphors. In LeGuin's Carrier Bag Theory, collecting becomes a central gesture of writing. Instead of crafting an arc, of diligently fulfilling a predetermined path, of plotting out the perfect line of a narrative (all of which certainly require and show a degree of mastery which I don't want to deny), I collect, I accumulate and assemble.

The idea of collecting, of accumulating and keeping resonates within my novel in various thoughts and images. These range from the protagonist collecting pebbles at a beach and the image of the fossil to a collection of photographs and the river as a metaphorical carrier.

Ursula LeGuin's Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction borrows its idea from the Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution[68], a theory that emphasises the importance of oral narrative and of collecting in humanity's history, beginning with nomadic life where the 'carrier bag' is what you take on your journey. It helps you to nurture and create, to carry culture, to find home in a new place and to tell your story.

When the narrator in *Becoming Liquid* packs her suitcases to go to England, she finds an envelope of photographs[69], another 'carrier bag' of memories. Throughout the whole novel, the narrator returns to these photographs and complements them with her own photos[70]. The act of collecting doesn't end with the inherited photographs. Instead, it is a process that connects the past to the present. The narrator's photographs are kept right next to her grandmother's, as becomes clear in section 10 and 102[71], where Jonna sticks her photographs on the wall in her room. Often, these scenes of revisiting the photographs are connected to packing or unpacking a suitcase[72] – an actual as well as metaphorical carrier bag. When this

---

[68] LeGuin, *Dancing*, 167.
[69] Diller, *Becoming Liquid,* section 10, pp.22-25.
[70] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, see section 29, pp.66-67; section 36, p.79; section 49, p.96; section 72, p.132 and section 116, p.197.
[71] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.22-25; p.175.
[72] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 10, pp.22-25 and section 116, pp.197-198.

suitcase is packed and unpacked for short trips to the sea and for long journeys across national borders, memories are revealed, recent and half-forgotten ones. They are rearranged and relived through the act of unpacking, given new life through the novel.

These scenes of collecting, of packing and unpacking, can be seen as metaphors for my writing process. However, as Dorothee Elmiger claims in her essay 'Das Problem des Jägers/ (Magic) Pocket Theory of Fiction[73],' storytelling is not only filling the carrier bag, with collecting. It also consists of the converse act of emptying the carrier bag, of revealing all the bits and pieces inside the bag and laying them out on the floor to show someone else, to tell the story to someone who listens or reads:

'Ultimately, everything is decided with the trick, the artifice – that gesture which transforms the gathered material by producing it from within the carrier bag in one or another way, and by laying it out on the table in a certain order, a constellation; that very specific gesture of the hand which reveals the content of the bag in this manner or another and knows to do this or that with it.'[74]

In *Becoming Liquid* this synergy between collecting and arranging is apparent in the imagery of pebbles and stones. Beginning with the prologue, where a child is on a beach and picks up shells and stones, rearranges them and places them around herself, the theme of pebbles, rocks and stones recurs throughout the novel. In sections 33-35[75], pebbles and fossils are explored as geographic memory, a thought that is continued in the reflections on chalk in Tacita Dean's 'Chalk Falls'. Rocks and fossils are accumulated minerals, matter such as the

---

[73] The translation of this essay is my own.
[74] Dorothee Elmiger, 'Das Problem des Jägers/(Magic) Pocket Theory of Fiction,' *Carrier Bag Fiction*, eds. Shin and Zeiske (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021), 81.
[75] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.76-78.

skeletons of marine organisms, collected and compressed over millions of years. At the same time, they are objects which the narrator, Jonna and her partner Elias collect. Sections 48, 50 and 74[76] describe situations where Jonna and Elias gather pebbles or shells on beaches in the southwest of England. This gesture of gathering is repeated in section 77[77], where the narrator collects seeds to envision the size of the unborn foetus.

In fragments 37, 48 and 50, Elias connects the collected pebbles, shells, or seeds to sculptures and artworks. He creates something from them. Creating and life-giving are also what the narrator's collected seeds in section 77 stand for. A contrast is provided by the forgotten shell in fragment 74[78] which 'smells of death,' as it was left in the narrator's pocket for too long. It was gathered but forgotten, not revealed from the carrier bag.

Besides photographs and rocks, the third main image of a metaphorical carrier in *Becoming Liquid* is the river. In the 'Spring' part of the novel, fragments about the river Danube and its significance for the narrator's family history are combined with the main narrative. The river carries people and their tragic stories, such as the imaginary ancestor in section 130[79] who emigrates from Ulm. At the same time, the river is metaphorically laden with abstract concepts like borders and ideologies. Later, the river also functions as a carrier of the narrator's sorrows. Several times[80], the narrator goes to a river, the river Avon or an unnamed river in Germany, when she feels upset: 'We go to the river to wash away our worries,' the narrator says in fragment 136[81]. The river helps the narrator to learn to let go, to cope with loss and sorrow, as 'in the delta the river lets go of all it carried' itself[82]. In the delta, all the things the river carried,

---

[76] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, p.95, 99 and 134.
[77] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.139-140.
[78] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, p.134.
[79] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.217-219.
[80] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, sections 63, pp.120-121; section 75, pp.135-136 and section 136, p.227.
[81] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, p.227.
[82] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 133, p.223.

sediments and water, flow into a nutritious landscape full of diversity – they are rearranged to form a wetland.

In these three metaphors from the novel – the envelope of photographs, the collection of stones and the river – a sense of collecting fragments and of arranging them to form new patterns becomes visible. The novel itself is a collection of fragments, including memories and photographs, history, essays and narratives. I used my great-uncle's notebooks as well as photographs I had taken on a hiking trip, conversations I had with friends and fictional scenes, as discussed in chapter one.

When I had written most fragments of the 'Summer' part of the novel, in a conversation I had with my supervisors we discussed the need for connectivity between the fragments to help the reader not to get lost between the various strands of the narrative and to keep engaged. What could be the shape that holds everything together, the two narrators, the photographs, the stories of my grandmother, the nature writing, the writing about art and philosophy? What is the pattern in which I lay these fragments out as a story? What is the form of the narrative that best serves the purpose of the text?

2.1.2) Form

I'm convinced that the pattern and shape, the form of the novel and its content cannot be separate. They follow one and the same cause, the same gravity. To know the shape of a novel means to gain deeper understanding of the writing and therefore to be able to order the fragments in a meaningful way. To find their pattern, find where they belong and where something is missing or needs more space to be developed, thus, is a central part of the writing process.

For this purpose, I would suggest breaking the concept of form down further and having a closer look at its constituents. Form, pattern, and shape are not the same. While I would define the shape of a novel as its outline, the frame it fills, the pattern of the novel is more concerned with the inner structuring, the immediate connection of its elements, as I will further explain below. The distinction of shape and pattern is a question of seeing the novel from the outside, after reading or writing a full version of it, as opposed to seeing it from the inside of the writing or reading process. Pattern is concerned with internal connectivity, with connections created throughout the process of writing.

Fragmented writing explores ideas like 'liminality' or 'hybridity'[83]. Thus, fragmented writing may seem at first to be a way of avoiding form, or at least certain forms. However, I would argue that for such hybrid texts form and a careful assessment of it might be even more important than in more conventional forms of writing. According to Caroline Levine, who argues in favour of what can be called New Formalism, 'Forms matter […] because they shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context'[84]. Form gives a frame, a set of rules valid for reader and writer alike. Through this frame, both are able to participate, to create the text, bringing their 'specific knowledge and experience'[85]. Levine describes a 'range of potentialities' that 'each shape or pattern' brings with it, or 'affords'. To think about form therefore doesn't constrict a writer. Instead, it helps to understand and to master the potential of what one writes. Only with a deep understanding of a text's structures and potentialities, one can then alter these and explore the interaction of forms and the creative potential of new or 'colliding forms'[86].

---

[83] Levine, *Forms*, 9.
[84] Levine, *Forms,* 5.
[85] Levine, *Forms*, 24.
[86] Levine, *Forms*, 19.

Levine detects one of the major suspicions against form in its association with wholeness and related 'frightening models of political control and totality, ranging from fascist wholeness to liberal assimilation'[87]. Like Levine, I do not understand form as a prescriptive and captivating whole. Rather, I see it as a way to describe and to understand, to delineate the meaning of a narrative and, as a second step, to consciously work with the structure that can be found. This can either mean to reinforce and strengthen it, or to deconstruct it for political reasons, as I decided to do with the narrative arc. The arc is a pattern I associate with patriarchy, with power hierarchies. Therefore, I see reasons to be highly critical of this form. Yet, in writing about becoming a mother, the chronological arc of the pregnancy is obviously pregnant. The growth of the narrator's pregnant body itself suggests an arc, culminating in the climax of the birth. As I did not want to reinforce the arc, I was careful to counter it with fragmentation, with meanders and loops. Towards the end, in the scenes of giving birth, chronology is disrupted in order to question the validity of the arcing shape and its usefulness in capturing the extreme and transformative experience of childbirth.

Still, I was looking for togetherness in my fragments. Levine argues that 'we cannot do without bounded wholes: their power to hold things together is what makes some of the most valuable kinds of political action [and, I would add, art] possible at all'[88], and further:

> 'Bounded wholes enable certain kinds of political possibilities that we might choose to embrace, even while we remain wary of their oppressions and constraints. I suggest here that we will want to draw on the containing and unifying power of concepts, despite their dangers, in the interests of genuinely emancipatory and transformative political [and artistic] work.'[89]

---

[87] Levine, *Forms*, 31.
[88] Levine, *Forms*, 27.
[89] Levine, *Forms*, 28.

In a narrative about transnational identity and trans*form*ation, it is crucial to consider what kind of a 'bounded whole' is best suited for the writing. A whole that 'affords' exactly these unifying powers while offering enough openness for transformation, life and change, instead of restrictions and oppression.

In the following, I will consider the aspect of *wholeness* as the 'shape' of my novel.

As Levine acknowledges, wholeness is only one aspect of form. In her book, she considers hierarchy, rhythm and connection ('the Wire'). For the purpose of my thesis, however, I will now turn to slightly different terms, which I find more fitting for the form of my own narrative.

Like Jane Alison, Marco Caracciolo analyses the 'patterning' of narrative and 'how formal patterns in narrative can contribute, both locally and globally, to the patterning of audiences' narrative experiences'[90]. He connects narrative pattern to pattern in science and nature and explores in what ways a correlation here can constitute a way to write eco-consciously in the Anthropocene. Similar to Alison, Caracciolo perceives narrative patterning in a visual sense, describing the structure in spatial rather than temporal terms. This is an approach I find useful and will employ in this study as well. The analysis of narrative pattern as spatial provides me with a visualisation that helps me to explore connectivity and to discover structures I might otherwise not see.

To describe narrative patterns Caracciolo turns to Arnaud Schmitt's image schematas, out of which I chose a few that seemed relevant for my own narrative:

---

[90] Marco Caracciolo, 'Form, Science, and Narrative in the Anthropocene,' *Narrative*, vol. 27, no. 3 (The Ohio State University Press, 2019), https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/30/article/734309/pdf (last retrieved 22 January 2024), 272.

'- Narratives that combine multiple story lines create an impression of SUPERIMPOSITION, as if the strands of the plot were placed on top of one another spatially.

- The MERGING image schema is evoked whenever these story lines come together (e. g. with characters meeting or action sequences converging), in what Arnaud Schmitt would call a plot 'knot.'

- The LINK image schema involves a thematic or diegetic connection between story lines that remain distinct, corresponding to what Schmitt calls a 'connector.'

- The CYCLE image schema is triggered whenever narrative foregrounds plot patterns that are alternative to the PATH model, in that they implement a circular or loop-like logic.'[91]

Although most of these schemata are modelled on plot-driven narratives and therefore perhaps not particularly fitting for my own fragmented narrative which could be described as more atmospheric, I still find the images interesting to investigate in comparison with Alison's patterns which explore more experimental kinds of writing. While '[i]mage schemata thus provide a language to conceptualise the formal dimensions of plot,'[92] I do not think any one of them is able to fully capture the pattern of a complex fragmented narrative like my own. Rather, a combination of multiple image schemata might help to understand aspects of the writing and its patterning. Indeed, in a more recent article, Caracciolo describes narrative patterns, especially 'multilinear' ones that 'challenge [a] path-like structure', as 'three-dimensional'[93].

---

[91] Caracciolo, 'Form, Science and Narrative', 281.
[92] Caracciolo, 'Form, Science and Narrative', 281.
[93] Marco Caracciolo, 'The Global and the Multilinear: Novelistic Forms for Planetary Processes', *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 55, no. 3 (John Hopkins University Press, 2023), p.327- 328.

Another aspect that appeals to me about narrative patterns as spatial entities is their 'form or shape that is derived from embodied experience'[94].

This notion of form as embodied has been perceived as particularly relevant for female and feminist writing, which often is concerned with the female body, Menkedick[95] and Callahan point out:

> 'As they [writers like Gay, Nelson and Boully] attempt to write their bodies, they must organise their texts in a form that most closely reflects the biological body.'[96]

Although Callahan does not further analyse the patterning of the writing, she states that '[c]onstructed fragments work in concert to point to a larger truth –[…] a truth about the female embodied experience – that can best be expressed in the decanted form.'[97]

Narrative patterns, therefore, are spatial and bodily, three-dimensional and can be derived from nonhuman or human patterns, in fact, connecting both scales, as 'the forms of nature are directly mapped onto the forms of the human body […], and subsequently onto the forms of storytelling […]'[98].

I will return to these definitions and aspects of shape and pattern in more depth throughout the next sections, but first I will continue with a close analysis of finding both in the process of writing my novel.

2.1.3) Shape

---

[94] Caracciolo, 'Form, Science and Narrative,' 281.
[95] Sarah Menkedick, 'A Mother's Fragmented Identity' *New York Times*, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/well/family/a-mothers-fragmented-identity.html (last retrieved 27 November 2023).
[96] Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed),' 10.
[97] Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed),' 14.
[98] Caracciolo, 'Form, Science and Narrative,' 285.

As discussed above, writing autofiction meant that one of my main premisses and methods was an openness to include situations or events that might happen to me during the process of writing. While it was clear that I would write in fragments, the overall shape of the novel and the pattern of these fragments were open to experimentation. This was at the same time exciting and challenging.

When I was about seven months into my PhD and had written roughly 20.000 words worth of fragments, mainly about moving to the UK, I learned about my pregnancy. This was a major change in my life, but also concerned my autofictional novel. Curiously, the pregnancy gave me a framework for the novel.

With the timespan of the pregnancy, the nine months of childbearing, as well as the three months that had passed since I left my home in Germany and moved to the UK, the circular, or cyclical – to return to Caracciolo's terms – shape of a year ensued for my novel.

In retrospect, the containment of the year appears to me as necessary to counterbalance the many lines and meanders, the fragmentariness, and the interconnectedness of my novel. It provided me with a temporal 'whole', clear and containing enough to hold the fragments of my novel together, while keeping porous enough to be open for more 'spatial' side-tracks and fluidity.

As well as giving a time scope for the main narrative, the year also structured the shape of the novel into four parts corresponding to the four seasons. I was surprised how well the plot fell into this shape. At the same time, this structure gave me a frame according to which I could adjust or fictionalise parts of the narrative and complement them with more reflective or essayistic fragments. During the process of editing and filling in the missing gaps, I realised that each of these four seasonal parts had its own colouring, its specific themes and predominant topics.

The first part, 'Summer', begins with my journey to England and topics such as transnational identity, searching for a new home and understanding a place through nature and landscape. This is followed by the second part, 'Autumn', which is partly about connecting with the narrator's human and nonhuman environment in the UK and partly about the protagonist's reconnecting with Elias, her partner. Towards the end of the 'Autumn' part, when Elias is back home in Germany, the narrator finds out about her pregnancy. The pregnancy constitutes a major change in direction for the narrator's life and her search for a home, as well as for the narrative of the novel. The narrator turns back towards her family and her home in Germany. Through fairy tales and an almost mystical approach she draws nearer to the Black Forest and searches a way back into her old home[99]. Winter is a time for reconciliation, for recovery, as seen in the narrator's relationship to her mother[100]. This is reflected in the use of temperature, the contrast between cold and warm. Physical touch is a key to her return home and to finding her place. In 'Spring' the narrator moves into her grandmother's house. With this return to her old family home, the circular shape of the I-narrator's story is completed and she can prepare for becoming a mother herself.

Up until the third part of the book, Jonna and the first-person narrator could have been identified as the same character. With the narrator's pregnancy, their paths diverge:

> 'Jonna is not pregnant. Of course she isn't. Why should she be. It is not part of her plan. It's not in her script, not foreseen for her.'[101]

Jonna isn't pregnant because she is a fictional character and pregnancy is not part of Jonna's story as planned by me as the author. The first-person narrator however, who is

---

[99] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 93, pp.161-162; section 104, pp.178-180.
[100] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 95, pp.165-167.
[101] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 82, pp.146.

modelled on my own life, cannot control her story. While the narrator's plans might have been different, her story develops in a direction the narrator, or I, could not have foreseen. From now on, these two identities break apart: the first-person narrator whose story is fluid and formable, subject to change and unexpected events, and Jonna, the alternative identity, who keeps going straight, follows the line of what was planned out for her. Here the opposite of a 'Merging'[102] happens: a division of two character-strands. While the circular shape of the first-person narration can be seen as a frame – a bounded whole – Jonna's narrative is a way of questioning this closed circle and of keeping the openness of other possible lives.

The separation between Jonna and the I-narrator becomes apparent in the physical movement of the two characters. Returning to Germany the narrator does not only leave her friends but also part of herself, of her identity, behind. This loss is personified in Jonna and Jonna's return to England in section 97[103]. Their physical separation happens alongside a shift of perspective from mainly third person in the first part to mainly first person in the last two parts of the novel. With this shift, I aim to create a closeness between reader and narrator, resulting in a sensation of the narrator being more closely connected to herself. Jonna is in the background now. With the growing significance of the pregnancy, her story becomes paler. At the same time, of course, her story is not lived by me. It is only a distant dream now, sometimes wistful, sometimes happily left behind.

After their separation, Jonna's and the first-person narrator's tones are melancholic and a certain sense of mourning is present in both narrative strands. Jonna feels cold and small[104] when she is back in England and doesn't quite know where she belongs. The first-person narrator feels lost[105] and somewhat suffocated by the cosiness around the Christmas holidays,

---

[102] Caracciolo, 'Form, Science and Narrative,' 281.
[103] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, p.169.
[104] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 106, p.182.
[105] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 105, p.181.

the closeness of her family. She mourns her loss of Jonna and Marla and hasn't found her place in Germany yet. The separation of these two characters is a disruption of the unified whole, of the resolution to the narrative. It creates a valuable fracture that is necessary for the exploration of multiple alternative identities and the openness to change in the novel.

2.1.4) Pattern

The shape of the novel emerges from the frame of the seasonal circle, the relationships of the narrator with other characters, with Elias, her mother and grandmother, as well as her connection and disconnection with Jonna. Each fragment does not stand in isolation, but rather they are closely connected with each other through themes or imagery, through characters, colours and repetitions.

These links are crucial for the meaning and for the content of the novel. In a way, the narrative does not lie in the fragments themselves, but rather in what is in-between them, in the lines and links that connect one fragment with another, that span the whole novel and hold it together. In this respect, fragmentary writing can be associated with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's assemblage theory, as explained here by Thomas Nail:

> 'If the elements of an assemblage are defined by their external relations, then it is possible that they can be added, subtracted, and recombined with one another ad infinitum without ever creating or destroying an organic unity. This is what Deleuze and Guattari paradoxically call a 'fragmentary whole' (What is Philosophy?, 16)'[106]

[106] Thomas Nail, 'What is Assemblage?' SubStance, vol. 46., no. 1, (John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 23.

This might sound like it doesn't matter how the fragments are combined or which are included and which not. However, according to Deleuze, 'in a multiplicity, what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what is 'between' them, the in-between, a set of relations that are inseparable from each other'[107]. Meaning is derived from the connections. Here, what is crucial becomes more obvious in the French original term of 'agencement': the agency, the decision of how to connect one element to another and all of them together which 'entails a constructive process that lays out a specific kind of arrangement'[108] – as I also explore in fragment 3 of my novel[109]. There is an agent, be it the writer or the requirements of the story itself, Callahan writes, who arranges the fragments in a certain way, who finds or creates a pattern and thus gives agency to the fragments themselves:

> 'The fragment is agential in that it forces the reader and the critic alike to interact with it on multiple levels, conceptualising and interpreting it in terms of both form and content'[110].

The reader or critic has to consider the connectivity of fragmented writing. They, as well as the writer, have to consider the 'mesh,' as Caracciolo calls the interconnectivity of (narrative) patterns in reference to ecocritic and philosopher Timothy Morton, '[suggesting] fragile interdependence, but also formidable complexity of pattern and connection'[111].

The pattern of my novel begins with the first word written but becomes clearer with every decision. Maggie Nelson says in an interview:

---

[107] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, transl. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987 (1977)), viii.
[108] Nail, 'What is Assemblage?' 24.
[109] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, p.8.
[110] Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed),' 11.
[111] Marco Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh – Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (University of Virginia Press, 2021), 22.

> ‘Every word that gets set down, every decision made – form, content, sentence structure, image – begins to define a work that previously was a kind of infinitely indeterminate mental cloud, or beautifully diffuse physical sensation. […] As the book comes into being, I’m often thinking, ‘this is it? This is all it’s going to be?’ For me, I think it’s this feeling, rather than that of not having anything to say, or a terror of the blank page, that can bring a sort of writer’s block.’[112]

Nelson describes a fear of a restricting wholeness that I am familiar with. For Nelson, writing in fragments is a way to avoid a fixed final form and to keep the book open for change and open to growth. To be able to keep writing without blockage, she writes in fragments, which she then arranges and edits in a second step. This means that a major part of working on the novel is not the writing, but rather the assembling, the connecting and (re)organising of the fragments. While I sympathise with Nelson’s point of avoiding the resolution of a fixed form, I also see the necessity of form and of a bounded whole, as explored above. To benefit from both, the freedom of fragmentation and the connecting powers of wholeness, I worked dialectically to find the shape and pattern of the book. The pattern is both prescriptive and descriptive: I write, I arrange and experiment with patterns and continue writing in reaction to these. Until the book was finished, I went through this process of writing, rearranging and editing countless times. Although at first, the fragments may have come intuitively and helped to avoid a restricting structure, to be able to describe their pattern ultimately helped me to continue and to edit the writing.

---

[112] Maggie Nelson in ‘The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition: An Introduction,’ Interview by Ben Segal, *continent*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2011), p. 160.

Through the connectivity between individual fragments, several layers of patterning occur, a 'vast "fabric" of interconnection'[113]. In the process of finding the right shape and pattern for the novel some narrative patterns seemed particularly fitting or considerable.

Perhaps the most common and widely acclaimed narrative pattern for a novel is that of an arc, as discussed above. So why not follow this well-working tradition? Even if I decided to write in fragments, I could still arrange these to form an arc. And indeed, the pregnancy gives the main narrative strand a sort of arcing shape, albeit one that wasn't initially planned as such. The narrative develops towards the birth of the child, which can be seen as the climax, and is followed by a short dénouement of post-natal haze. However, this is only one strand of the narrative and does not do justice to the multi-layeredness of the story. All those fragments that do not immediately belong to this linear narrative – the narrator's diverging identities as well as the essayistic fragments – would get lost in the attempt to fit the whole novel into an arc.

Instead, the fragments leave this well-trodden main narrative and meander. Jane Alison defines a meandering narrative as one that 'naturally wants to flow toward its end but doesn't want to get there *yet* – the pleasure's in the journey.' The narrative 'lingers by flowing along an extravagant arabesque of detours'[114].

Correlating with the image of the river that I use in the novel, this idea of a meandering narrative seemed appealing to me and, indeed, I do think some fragments could be described as meandering. An example of such a meander in *Becoming Liquid* would be sections 33 to 35[115], where, initiated by Jonna's trip to Chesil Beach, the narrative saunters from the pebbles on Chesil Beach to the etymological meaning of the word fossil, to fossils of jelly fish and then back to Jonna.

---

[113] Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*, 9-10.
[114] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 117.
[115] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.76-78.

The theme of pebbles, stones and rocks also occurs at other places in the book, mainly in scenes with Elias who collects stones[116], but also in the nature writing about the river Danube and in fragment 144[117], when the narrator goes swimming. Here, rocks are linked to the recurring theme of the island. One meander, one side channel, flows into another and as in the delta of a river, before long, the narrative resembles a network, a web of interconnected lines, rather than one single meandering stream.

The example Jane Alison chooses to represent the narrative pattern of networks and cells is W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*. Sebald's writing was often mentioned in discussions with my tutors, other students and writers as comparable to my own story. Alison writes about Sebald's *The Emigrants* that '[e]ach piece stands alone, but many threads knot them together.'[118]

Although Stewart Martin criticises Sebald for confining his notion of memory to a limited perspective on the Second World War, negating everything after the war, and therefore for being 'sentimental, arty and conservative,' he claims that Sebald's novels can be described as a '[r]e-assemblage of traces of the past into a coherent experience'[119]. For Alison, this experience is a spatial one, namely that of a web:

> 'Each section is already somewhat spatial, but it's when you read from one canvas [by which she means one narrative strand] to the next that you're in a truly spatial situation – literally wandering over separate blocks, wondering what pushes you on, what you're after'[120]

---

[116] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 37, p.80-81; section 48, p.95; section 50, p.99; section 74, p.234.
[117] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, p.237.
[118] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 202.
[119] Martin, 'W.G. Sebald,' 19.
[120] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 203.

Sebald's novel seems to be a web of memories. Their connectivity leads the reader deep into the narrative, almost like a spider's web in which one could get tangled up without guiding elements like the 'Butterfly Man', as Alison analyses[121].

Although I appreciate the interconnectedness and the equality of such a network, I do not think my own novel is quite as equally spread out. It is not quite as 'shapeless' perhaps. Returning to the image of the river in *Becoming Liquid*, the water's journey doesn't end with the wide web of the delta and its marshlands, it doesn't end with the sea and its web of waves. Rather the water evaporates, condensates and forms clouds, only to return to the earth as rain. The water's journey does not only meander and create a web, but it is also circular. As discussed above, the narrative pattern of my novel, too, has a circular layer.

My narrative is not 'smooth and steady,'[122] like the spiral in Jane Alison's description. Instead, as I leaf through Alison's book the illustration that strikes me as best-fitting to describe the pattern of my novel is that of the radial[123].

2.2) Jane Alison's 'Radials'

Jane Alison describes 'Radial or explosive patterns [as] born of a nucleus, kernel, black hole, whether they spoke outward or circle.'[124] In her chapter on radials, she gives a variety of images that help us visualise the radial, including the black hole, 'a firecracker spraying a shower of color,'[125] a blossoming gerbera, the sun or a volcano, circles of growth in a tree trunk, the pupil and iris of an eye and a Doppler radar screen'[126]. The diversity of these images shows that the

---

[121] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 215.
[122] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 143.
[123] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 177.
[124] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 165.
[125] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 165.
[126] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 179.

pattern of the radial is a complex one that can describe a multitude of appearances. What these images have in common is a centre surrounded by a circular arrangement of multiple particles (be it petals or light specks or streaks of colour). The elements of a radial narrative, therefore, are arranged in a circular shape around a central source of energy. This centre itself might not be visible at first, but rather shows through the force it implies on the elements that surround it.

Following Alison's definition of radials, one can nominate three crucial aspects of radial narratives: the centre, or nucleus; the circular or radial organisation of narrative strands or fragments; and the movement or gravity these fragments are subject to.

An example Alison gives for a radial narrative is Mary Robison's *Why Did I Ever*. The protagonist Money circles around a centre of pain, 'every so often losing her centrifugal force and falling into the fire'[127]. *Why Did I Ever* is written in numbered fragments arranged in a circle[128] of which the centre is pain or trauma. This pain, as well as Money's ADHD, shatters the narrator and her perception of the world, and creates a sense of distraction tangible for the reader, who is often left in confusion about the meaning and connectivity of single fragments. The force or direction of these fragments is 'centrifugal,' although sometimes they seem to fall and revisit 'the fire', the central pain. The fragments scatter from the centre: an explosion of daily life caused by a pain too hard to contain.

Jane Alison writes, 'Radials can be centrifugal or centripetal, but linear they are not.'[129] Yet, she keeps rather vague in her distinction between implosion and explosion. This detail, however, whether a narrative explodes or implodes, in my opinion, makes an immense difference and shouldn't be underestimated or put aside in a half sentence. Therefore, in the

---

[127] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 175.
[128] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 169.
[129] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 166.

following section, I will have a closer look at Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* as an example of an exploding narrative in order to later delineate the imploding pattern of my own writing.

2.3) Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*: An Exploding Novel

Fragmentation and the subject of the fragment is present in Nelson's *Bluets* from the very first paragraph. The narrative begins with a thought experiment, the supposed 'imagining' of falling in love with a colour. This imagining is accompanied by the image of the narrator '[shredding their] napkin as [they speak]'[130], a visualisation of fragmentation. Soon after, this first image is followed by the idea of collecting 'pieces of blue news'[131], with which Nelson gives us a guide to reading her book, an anticipation of the fragments and collectedness of what follows.

In chapter one, I define fragments as pieces of a whole, whether or not that whole has existed. This opens the possibility of creating a new whole. Moseley and Guignery emphasise the subjective aspect of fragmentary writing. Fragmentation is a question of relativity: a text is relatively more fragmented, or more perceptibly fragmented than another. The reader's judgment is what draws a line to other works of fiction – a line inevitably blurry, as all 'novels have to stop somewhere, and they will, necessarily, require some sort of fragmentation'[132]. Fragmentary fiction is 'fiction that *feels* fragmented, broken, unfinished, incomplete, incoherent'[133].

Perhaps the most obvious way in which this 'feeling' of fragmentation can be 'evoked [is] by the division of the text into single paragraphs or sentences which are separated by space'[134], thereby making the fragmentation visible on the page. This is clearly the case with Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, a collection of 240 numbered fragments, none of which is longer than

---

[130] Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017 (2009)), 1.
[131] Nelson, *Bluets*, 7.
[132] Moseley, 'What is Fragmentary Fiction,' 3.
[133] Moseley, 'What is Fragmentary Fiction,' 4.
[134] Guignery, *Poetics of Fragmentation*, xx.

a paragraph (although her paragraphs do vary in length). This shortness puts even more emphasis on the separating numbers.

Jane Alison writes about Mary Robison's *Why Did I Ever?* the following:

> 'The novel is made up of 527 crots, most numbered but many titled in ways that seem to refer to the content only by private joke. Each crot has its own flare of life – a miniature of agitation, humor, color, pain; absurd tumult lives inside these segments, and their sequencing is chaotic, too.'[135]

Although the general shape, numbered sections, seems similar to *Bluets*, the two books are radically different. Where Robison's 'sequencing is chaotic,' Nelson's segments are clearly arranged in a specific order and selected according to a certain pattern. Maggie Nelson states:

> 'While some of the fragments may seem disconnected or distinct, the truth is that they each had to fall into one [*sic.* of] the book's major categories, which included love, language, sex, divinity, alcohol, pain, death, and problems of veracity/perception. If I truly couldn't tether an anecdote or factoid to the thread, it eventually had to go.'[136]

In contrast to Robison's uncontrolled bits and pieces that, as Alison says, are both appalled and drawn into a central black hole, Nelson's fragments are closely connected, following each other not only by the linearity of counting, but also in a flow of content: certain topics often span more than one fragment. In fact, the count of paragraphs sometimes feels like the only disruption that separates one section from the next, while the line of thought continues

---

[135] Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 175.
[136] Nelson, interview, 160.

seamlessly. At other times, however, the sections lie far apart, such as fragment 180 on the 'princess of blue'[137]. This is the only time the princess of blue is mentioned in the whole book, and it remains separate from the surrounding fragments, staying in the parallel reality of a dream, only connected through the running numbers and of course the colour blue.

What becomes clear here is Nelson's curatorial role in selecting and arranging *Bluets*. Nelson herself reflects on the arrangement and connection of her fragments as a process of careful reordering:

> '184. Writing is, in fact, an astonishing equalizer. I could have written half of these propositions drunk or high, for instance, and half sober; I could have written half in agonized tears, and half in a state of clinical detachment. But now that they have been shuffled around countless times – now that they have been made to appear, at long last, running forward as one river – how could either of us tell the difference?'[138]

This image of the river is evoked again and again throughout the book. Yet, although I see the appeal in seeing the flow of fragments with the superimposed linearity of numbers as a river, I suggest this image must be evaluated carefully and is certainly not the only pattern of the book.

Before I come to other structures, I will have a closer look at this linearity and the image of the river, as both are relevant for my own writing.

Besides the linearity of numbers marking each section of the book, lining them up like beads on a string, the narrator and protagonist of *Becoming Liquid* encounters lines in various ways. There are lines that connect, like those that are drawn between the stars of a

---

[137] Nelson, *Bluets*, 72.
[138] Nelson, *Bluets*, 74.

constellation[139] and lines that define but also lines that separate, like a border[140]. Linearity, as well as its disruption, plays a crucial part in the narrative. There is the autofictional narrator's matrilineal heritage, the connection between her and her partner, that she describes as a line[141] over the distance, there is the English coastline she walks, that is also a border she crosses frequently. And finally, there are the rivers, the Danube and the river Avon, that appear recurringly, like blue lines on a map.

In Nelson's *Bluets*, the river appears in many fragments and as many shapes, varying from Joni Mitchell's song 'River' in fragment 41[142] to the water in the ink in fragment 229[143]. With the image of the river and the flow of the fragments, Maggie Nelson acknowledges the reader's need for linearity in a text, while also admitting that this is just the surface structure, it is only how the writing 'appears'[144]. Only through the author's arranging and rearranging does the writing achieve its sense of flowing. The continuous movement of the river into which 'you cannot step […] twice' is countered by a sense 'that *something* is staying the same here'[145]. Nelson stays with the same central themes, the same nucleus. As pointed out above, the river is not only linear but may also become a web or a circle; it contains a multitude of patterns. Similarly, the narrative visualised through the image of the river may also take on a multitude of shapes. Here, I would add the image of the river's source from which water wells – another radial or explosion.

---

[139] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, Orion: section 3, p.8; section 68, p.127-128; small dipper: section 2, pp.5-7 47, section 58, p.112; others: section 103, pp.176-177.
[140] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, sections 18, pp.46-50; section 86, pp.153-154, section 87, p. 155; section 118, p. 200-203; section 128, p.214; section 131, p.220-221.
[141] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 38, p.82.
[142] Nelson, *Bluets*, 16.
[143] Nelson, *Bluets*, 92.
[144] Nelson, *Bluets*, 74.
[145] Nelson, *Bluets*, 81.

Perhaps I need to repeat that I think of the explosion in spatial terms, rather than in temporal terms. This means, the explosion is a pattern, a 'design' as Alison calls it, not something that happens chronologically. The temporal shape of the narrative may well be something else, a line, or even an arc. The patterning of the fragments, however, the connections between them beyond temporality, beyond the linearity of reading from number one to number 240, is what I would describe as an explosion.

If one looks closely, imagery of explosions or radials is frequent in *Bluets*.

Most visible is the explosive energy of blue in Nelson's book: a blue like the colour the narrator finds in Yves Klein's painting: a blue that 'radiate[s] out so hotly that it seemed to be touching, perhaps hurting, my eyeballs'[146].

'[Blue] is beautiful, […] it *radiates*'[147] – in the very physical sense of the word – Nelson explores in various fragments on the radial capacities of light, on optics and colour vision[148]. She grounds this on Newton and Goethe, and earlier theories of optics like Epicurus' concept of 'objects [which] themselves project a kind of ray that reaches out toward the eye, as if they were looking at us (and surely some of them are)'[149]. Although she points at various effects of colour vision, '[keeping] in mind the effects of all the various surfaces, volumes, light-sources, films, expanses, degrees of solidity, solubility, temperature, elasticity, on color,'[150] she ultimately returns to 'an object's capacity to […] scatter light'[151], a property that expresses outwards movement, fragmentariness, explosion.

And indeed, her fragments could be seen as rays that emanate from a central source of blue. For Jane Alison, 'radial [narratives] are those in which a powerful center holds the

---

[146] Nelson, *Bluets*, 30.
[147] Nelson, *Bluets*, 65.
[148] Nelson, *Bluets*, 28.
[149] Nelson, *Bluets*, 21.
[150] Nelson, *Bluets*, 20.
[151] Nelson, *Bluets*, 20.

fictional world – characters' obsessions, incidents in time – tightly in its gravitational force'[152]. In Nelson's *Bluets*, pain and the colour blue are associated with each other, and the narrator returns to both subject frequently. They become the centre of the narrative: its nucleus.

Pain features in many if not in all fragments of *Bluets*. The whole novel is 'tinted' in a pain that surfaces in various shapes: in Goethe's thoughts on 'color and pain'[153], in the narrator's friend who is quadriplegic after an accident and whose eyes are 'piercing, pale blue'[154], in the 'pain [that at times] drains [her friend's] color'[155], and in the 'prince of blue' who 'becomes a pain devil'[156].

> '[W]hen [the pain] comes round, everything before it, around it, and, perhaps, in front of it, tends to seem fleeting, delusional.'[157]

So Nelson describes the centrifugal force of pain. Watching herself weeping, the narrator sees 'lines arrive around [her] eyes like engraved sunbursts; it was like watching flowers open in time-lapse on a windowsill.'[158] In a slow explosion her pain and sadness radiate out of her (blue) eyes.

This explosion of blue does not happen without a certain violence. Nelson closely connects colour vision to (partial) blindness, a blindness, that, again, is associated with a radial pattern, when she is 'looking directly at the sun and noticing the dark spot that flowers at its

---

[152] Nelson, *Bluets*, 165-166.
[153] Nelson, *Bluets*, 10.
[154] Nelson, *Bluets*, 9.
[155] Nelson, *Bluets*, 38.
[156] Nelson, *Bluets*, 36.
[157] Nelson, *Bluets*, 87.
[158] Nelson, *Bluets*, 34.

centre'[159]. Pain is explosive and it causes destruction, it turns everything into a 'blinding, bad time'[160].

A chemical explosion is a release of energy appearing as the light and heat of fire. Although the narrator in *Bluets* at first denies the association between fire and depression when she reads about it in a self-help book[161], she later revises the vehemence in her first reaction and admits that she was too quick in judgment. Some fragments later, she comes around to contemplating that '[t]hen again, perhaps it does feel like a fire – the blue core of it, not the theatrical orange crackling'[162], and again, some paragraphs later, that 'blue is something of an ecstatic accident produced by void and fire.'[163] Although this latter quotation originally refers to the colour of the sky, to me it sounds like a surprisingly precise account of an explosion. The pattern of the explosion is enforced by the larger sense of looping and repetition in this example of returning to the image of fire. This is by no means the only instance of repetition in Nelson's *Bluets*. In fact, the whole book can be seen as a constant revisiting of the same themes: the colour blue and the pain of losing the 'prince of blue,' also embodied in the second person *you* who is addressed frequently[164]. This obsessive looping can be seen as the returning to a centre from which the narrator is expelled again and again, or as loops or rings around the centre (as in Alison's example of the tree's growth rings).

This leads me to the next point, the circular shape of an exploding narrative. In the illustrations of *Meander Spiral Explode*, Alison gives two possible visualisations for the radial.

---

[159] Nelson, *Bluets*, 64.
[160] Nelson, *Bluets*, 37.
[161] Nelson, *Bluets*, 53.
[162] Nelson, *Bluets*, 56.
[163] Nelson, *Bluets*, 62.
[164] E. g. Nelson, *Bluets*, 4, 5, 7, 8, 16, 25, 31, 35, 50, 71, 75, 78, 93, 95.

One is a sun-like shape with rays spreading out from a centre, the other an empty nucleus surrounded by circling lines. In *Bluets*, the overall pattern of the collection of fragments can be seen as a circle of blue fragments around a central pain. The circle is present in the looping of the narrative, for example in the repeated return to the *you* as an addressee, to certain philosophers and scientists like Goethe or Wittgenstein, or to the narrative strand of her quadriplegic friend. Furthermore, it is visible in imagery employed in the book, such as the shape of the male Satin Bowerbird's bower[165], surrounded by collected blue things. For Nelson, the blue of her fragments forms a frame, a circle around the central pain, 'so that it can be seen,' as she borrows Joubert's words[166].

The source of this pain, the actual moment of heartbreak, lies in the past – it is not visible in the plot of the book. 'What's past is past. One could leave it as it is, too,'[167] Nelson writes. The narrator, however, does not, 'leave it as it is'. Instead, she shows the destructive concentrated force of the pain through fragmentation and the circular arrangement of the fragments around this pain.

With her continuous occupation with this pain, one might assume a process of digesting, of breaking the central pain down and perhaps also of trying to gain a deeper understanding of it. However, as a reader I am left somewhat dissatisfied. I get a sense of never reaching quite deep enough, never actually grasping the blue core. We never learn much about the 'prince of blue' and don't know any details of the relationship except for a few snippets of sex. We do not know anything about the person behind the rather mystifying name Nelson gives the narrator's former lover. The lack of these details disconnects the pain from any real experiences. Instead of getting closer to the pain, the fragments are directed away from it. Pain becomes an abstract concept without body. This makes it difficult to relate and to empathise

---

[165] Nelson, *Bluets*, 26-28, 68.
[166] Nelson, *Bluets*, 48.
[167] Nelson, *Bluets*, 76.

and, thus, to believe in the immensity of pain and the energy released through the central heartbreak. Indeed, Nelson herself writes about the relationship that she is 'avoiding writing down too many specific memories […]. The most I will say is "the fucking."'[168].

As a reason, she offers a quotation from Chögyam Trungpa: "We don't want to pollute our world with leftover egos"[169]. I would, however, suggest that to me disconnection and therefore the distraction from and of the pain seems to be a more believable reason. Nelson turns away from the core of her pain and instead searches out theorists and scientists. From personal, almost diary-like fragments, she quickly turns to science and essays with an academic tone. Immediately after a fragment on heartbreak, for instance, the narrator talks to a biologist at her faculty[170].

The fragments of the book, 'blue reports from the field' as Nelson calls them, are brought to her by her 'correspondents'[171]. Ranging from philosophers to scientists, theologists, musicians, artists, and writers, these 'correspondents' include Goethe and Mallarmé, Wittgenstein, Newton, Joni Mitchell, and Yves Klein. With their reflections of and on blue, they circle Nelson's centre. With the fragmentariness of the writing, the positions of these philosophers and scientists, poets and musicians stay somewhat flat. Nelson can't and perhaps doesn't want to explore them in depth. Indeed, their theories are not important in and of themselves, but only in collage with each other do they create the information she seeks and add to her vision of blue. Each of them offers a different perspective, a new facet of information about the object surrounded. Through the collected effort of their perspectives, Nelson seems to attempt a piecing together of the blue centre, approaching it from different sides. Blue is investigated, studied, as if she is trying to deeply understand it.

---

[168] Nelson, *Bluets*, 78.
[169] Nelson, *Bluets*, 78.
[170] Nelson, *Bluets*, 16-17.
[171] Nelson, *Bluets*, 6.

Thinking in terms of narratology, one could suggest the narrative of the first-person narrator as spatially closest to the core of the heartbreak. All the other fragments, then, the essays, theories, and side narratives, disseminate around it. To include all these various perspectives, the theory and science, is an attempt at depersonalising the blue and creating a distance between the narrator and the central pain. Treating this pain as a philosophical or scientific problem and treating the colour blue as such, can be seen as a coping mechanism. And indeed, towards the end of the book, the fragments seem to become more hopeful, more concerned with 'light' than with blue or with darkness. The narrator is 'no longer counting the days' and the longing for the distant 'you' lies in the past[172].

In terms of understanding or grasping the core of the blue, however, this depersonalisation seems rather unsatisfying and indeed places me as a reader at an ever-greater distance from the colour blue and the narrator's personal pain and heartbreak. The narrative never reaches the deeply personal blue core. Instead, every glimpse of philosophy, every reflection of and on blue takes me further away from this core. The directionality of the fragments is outwards – they explode.

The analysis of the core, as well as the circular arrangement of the fragments could occur in both, an exploding or an imploding narrative. At a certain point, an explosion may look exactly the same as an implosion. The directionality of the fragments, however, differentiates between centrifugal and centripetal, between a force that pulls towards the core and one that pushes away. This directionality distinguishes between an exploding and an imploding narrative. Although this force causes movement, it is not the same as movement. As I am speaking of the radial as a spatial pattern and not a temporal one, I will therefore continue to use the term of 'directionality' rather than 'movement,' which implies a temporal scale.

---

[172] Nelson, *Bluets*, 95.

To further identify the direction of the fragments, I will now have a closer look at direction and direction-giving in *Bluets*.

As discussed above, the river is a recurring image in *Bluets*, mainly functioning as a metaphor for the flow of the narrative. A river, with its currents and undercurrents, its course and meanders, may contain a variety of directions. The river in *Bluets* is closely interlinked with the notion of drowning:

> '134. It calms me to think of blue as the color of death. I have long imagined death's approach as the swell of a wave – a towering wall of blue. *You will drown*, the world tells me, has always told me. *You will descend into a blue underworld, blue with hungry ghosts, Krishna blue, the blue faces of the ones you loved. They all drowned, too.* To take a breath of water: does the thought panic or excite you? […] If you are in love with blue you fill your pouch with stones good for sucking and head down to the river. Any river will do.'[173]

On the first glance, one could perceive the image of drowning as one that speaks for an implosion, rather than an explosion. One feels to be pulled towards something, towards the ground of the river or sea, into the blue centre. One 'descends,' sinks, is sucked into blue. Although Nelson draws the picture of someone being pulled downwards, she speaks of 'a wave – a towering wall of blue'. This offers a wholly different direction to the notion of drowning. With this image in mind, to drown does not simply mean to enter a body of water and then to be pulled towards a source of gravity. Rather it means that the body of water comes towards you. It towers above you before you are covered and swallowed. While the image of sinking

[173] Nelson, *Bluets*, 52.

into a body of water implies a certain agency on part of the person dying – the pouch of stones immediately reminds me of Virginia Woolf's suicide – the towering wave gives a different impression. In this case, the drowned person is helpless, fully at the mercy of the wave that washes them away, or – if we are thinking of an explosion and a wave of pressure – that blows them away. Thus, Nelson's reflections on drowning imply two different directions of narrative. Like the ambiguity of the close investigation through her correspondents, which in fact creates a distance to the core, drowning in blue can mean both: a decision to descend or an overwhelming wave. A being pulled towards the bottom, or rather, the 'bottomlessness'[174] of the central pain or a being blown away through the force of this core.

In favour of the first sense of direction, being pulled towards a centre, one could list the fragments on desire and on longing[175]. This force of longing, however, is weakened over the course of the narrative and, in fact, results, in a distancing and overcoming of the blue pain. Towards the end of the book, the narrator suggests that eventually the past and its pains will be left behind, and 'in time, [they] will stop missing you'[176]. Nothing lasts forever, not the strongest blue. The longing and missing, ultimately is washed away, like 'all words […] written in water'[177]. This force itself, in the end, is dissolved. It surrenders to the distracting directionality of the explosion: '[M]y mind is a sieve,' the narrator claims, 'I am mortal'[178].

Here, it might be useful to note, that I don't understand 'distraction' as a value judgement. Instead, I am interested in its sense of 'dispersal' and the directionality implied.

In their article 'Mind-Wandering and Attention in Literature', Karin Kukkonen and Sibylle Baumbach write that 'in 'the era of the wandering mind,' literature can tell us about

---

[174] Nelson, *Bluets*, 94.
[175] Nelson *Bluets*, 3, 4, 27.
[176] Nelson, *Bluets*, 93.
[177] Nelson, *Bluets*, 92.
[178] Nelson, *Bluets*, 62.

when and why our minds focus and when and why they do not.'[179] I would add writing – as a process and practice – as another way to learn about focus.

Indeed, fragmentary writing can be associated with writing distraction and writing distraction disorders like ADHD or autism, as Alison suggests in her example of Mary Robison's *Why did I ever*. For the reader, however, fragmentary writing can also function as a way to regain focus while reading. Kukkonen and Baumbach list fragmentation as a stylistic device that functions as an attention attractor:

> 'Fragmentation […] has been identified as a key attention-eliciting device used to foreground certain words and phrases (see Emmott et al. 2006; see also Baumbach 2021). Empirical research suggests that syntactic and visual fragmentation indeed draws readers' attention, leading to "more careful, deeper, processing [...] just as we have generally been assuming in the stylistic analysis" (Emmott et al. 2006, 23). However, it appears that sentence fragmentation has the strongest effect here […].'[180]

Further, they mention writing in short sequences, chapters and chapter-numbering, as a way to 'help [the reader] regain focus'[181]. In contrast to the distracting effect of fragmentation in the digital world, fragmented essays and, I would add, other long forms of fragmented literary writing, '[ask] for our sustained attention, our participation in reading, literally, between the lines, engaging with the fragments in order to apprehend the essay as a whole.'[182]

---

[179] Karin Kukkonen and Sibylle Baumbach, 'Mind-Wandering and Attention in Literature,' *Diegesis: Narratives between Attention and Mind-Wandering*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2022) https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/456 (last retrieved 23 October 2023), 15.
[180] Kukkonen and Baumbach, 'Mind-Wandering and Attention,' 10.
[181] Kukkonen and Baumbach, 'Mind-Wandering and Attention,' 10.
[182] Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed),' 14.

Fragmentation can, thus, be associated with both, attention or distraction, depending on the context and on the form, the shape and pattern of the writing.

Nelson works with numbered sections, as I do in my own novel. These function as a suggestion of forward movement and an attention-channelling device, as just outlined. However, in *Bluets*, with each section we focus on, our attention is drawn away from an inner personal pain, towards the outside: other people's pains, theoretical blues. The narrative centres around a personal painful moment in the past, yet we never really get to the point of what that moment is. Although our attention is channelled, it is not directed towards the centre, but rather strives away from it. With the force of the pain, the narrative explodes outwards, dispersing fragments of blue.

3) Chapter 3: What is an Imploding Novel?

Although I see Nelson's *Bluets* as one of the texts which most inspired the fragmentary form of my own writing, the sense of direction in the narrative points to a significant difference. As established above, Nelson's fragments are arranged in a centrifugal pattern. They explode from a central nucleus of pain.

In this chapter, I will analyse in what ways the fragments of *Becoming Liquid* can be seen as organised towards the opposite direction, a centripetal force resulting in an imploding narrative pattern. I will investigate the attributes and capacities of an imploding narrative – the meaning of this kind of fragmentation and radial arrangement, the nature of the core, and the directionality of the narrative pattern – and outline in what ways Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* and my own novel can be seen as examples of such.

3.1) The Radial Arrangement of Fragments in an Imploding Novel

While an explosion shatters, causing chaos, disorder and destruction, an implosion pulls pieces of matter close with a connecting force. I would suggest that fragmentation in an imploding novel does not need a specific event of trauma or pain at the centre, as I found in exploding narratives. Fragmentation in an imploding narrative is not the outcome of a shattering event but rather the general appearance of life.

Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* begins with the wish 'to put together a world view'[183], a yearning for coherency, for connectivity and for understanding. To Heti's narrator the world outside 'the greyish and muddy landscape of [her] mind'[184] can only be seen or experienced in fragments.

---

[183] Sheila Heti, *Motherhood* (London: Vintage, 2019 (2018)), 1.
[184] Heti, *Motherhood*, 1.

Although *Motherhood* is not as visibly fragmented as Nelson's *Bluets* or my own narrative, it is not written in numbered sections and is told by the same first-person narrator throughout, the narrative can clearly be defined as fragmentary on various levels.

When one considers the chapter structure of the novel, one's attention is drawn to the page breaks and small symbols that mark two different levels of chapter division. The novel is separated into sixteen parts, each distinguished by a full-page break and a heading. These chapters are of various lengths, some not even ten pages long, others covering more than thirty pages. Excluding the very first chapter (~[185]), which might be read as a prologue, the first couple of chapter headings refer to placenames. They can be seen as a back and forth between being away and home – a returning ('New York'[186], 'Home'[187], 'Book Tour'[188], 'Home'[189]).

The eight chapters in the middle cover two full cycles of menstruation. Beginning with 'PMS'[190] and ending with 'Ovulating'[191], they pass two phases of 'Bleeding'[192] and being 'Follicular'[193]. Here, the back and forth, the circular movement of returning, happens within the body. The menstrual phases structure the narrator's experience in terms of both space and time. Time is inseparable from body, more specifically the female body. It determines a woman's life[194], breaks it into phases, into cycles, and with these cycles the novel's fragments are arranged in a circular pattern.

Indeed, the shape of cycles or circles as a contrast to moving forward in time is present throughout the novel, as Heti confirms when talking about *Motherhood* in a live conversation

---

[185] Heti, *Motherhood*, 13.
[186] Heti, *Motherhood*, 45.
[187] Heti, *Motherhood*, 53.
[188] Heti, *Motherhood*, 87.
[189] Heti, *Motherhood*, 99.
[190] Heti, *Motherhood*, 109, 171.
[191] Heti, *Motherhood*, 165, 233.
[192] Heti *Motherhood*, 139, 203.
[193] Heti, *Motherhood*, 153, 219.
[194] Heti, *Motherhood*, 25.

with Polly Barton[195] that I attended in May 2022. In numerous repetitions, the narrator circles around motherhood and the question of whether she should have a child. Through repetitions, an inconvenience like a broken shower becomes 'sensual'[196]. Even the mice in the wall gain a strange meaningfulness. Heti's repetitions of the same questions, the same self-inquisitions, are at the cusp of appearing lengthy and self-obsessed. Her narrator feels '*like there's a new phase of life I cannot reach*'[197]. 'There is nothing new'[198] Heti writes repeatedly, and in her many back-and-forths, her 'Maybe…, Then…, Yet perhaps…, Maybe…'[199], 'But…, Then again…, But…, Maybe…, Or maybe…'[200] she expresses an insecurity and a constant circling – a constant returning to the same thoughts and the same physical place.

Heti's narrator's own circling is reinforced by other people's opinions: a Swedish editor's anecdotes, an American writer and a Dutch publisher's experiences, conversations with a TV-producer, an interviewer, friends, strangers in the street, her therapist, psychic readings. Like Maggie Nelson in her use of 'correspondents,' Heti employs these conversation partners in an attempt to gain a better understanding of motherhood. Yet, although they take up a great part of the book and of the narrator's thoughts, these conversations don't seem to lead anywhere. Desperately, the narrator exclaims:

> 'I just read over a journal from a year ago and it could have been written today. NOTHING but NOTHING has changed! How maddening!'[201]

---

[195] Sheila Heti, Conversation with Polly Barton at Storysmith's event, Central Library Bristol, May 22, 2024.
[196] Heti, *Motherhood*, 93.
[197] Heti, *Motherhood*, 141.
[198] Heti, *Motherhood*, 176.
[199] Heti, *Motherhood*, 84.
[200] Heti, *Motherhood*, 102-103.
[201] Heti, *Motherhood*, 190.

However, it is exactly this madness, this taboo, that Sheila Heti uses her novel to break with. The self-perpetuating obsession with the same question is what is exciting and feminist in Heti's writing. She captures the sensation of a woman trapped in society's expectations, in a 'fear that without children, it doesn't look like you have made a choice, or that you're doing anything but just continuing on–drifting.'[202]

While the narrator is aware of her body and its cyclical ability to become pregnant, she waits for the time of motherhood, of being able to bear a child, to pass and for her body and its cycles to be less predominant in her life. She is desperate for something to change and searches for a force to move her forward:

> 'Why this constant oscillation? […] Desire stems not from deliberating over what you want – it comes from someplace deeper. […] Anywhere in your life where there is push and pull – look away from it to someplace else, to where the energy is going in one direction. Find your way into that stream and propel your life from there.'[203]

After the second chapter of 'Ovulating', for the final three chapters the title headings do not continue the circular movement but rather they break into a succession of small wave-symbols (~[204]). This symbol functions as a placeholder that provides an opportunity to break out of the restricting rhythms of the female body. An openness to birth or not birth, birth of a child or birth of a book. At the same time, the openness of the wave symbols and the repetitive use of certain chapter headings highlight the fragmentariness of the writing, the interconnectivity of chapters beyond linear chronology.

---

[202] Heti, *Motherhood*, 160.
[203] Heti, *Motherhood*, 182.
[204] Heti, *Motherhood*, 245, 261, 279.

Within these sixteen chapters, the narrative is structured into smaller fragments, vignettes and moments that might be separated by a pause in writing (a break in time) or a different setting (a break in space). These different levels of breaks and fragmentation, give the narrative a rhythm. The interplay of continuity and interruption is reinforced by Heti's experimental use of three coins, a variation of the I Ching. The conventional pattern of a continuous narrative is broken in favour of a more fragmented one while the circling obsessiveness of thoughts and habits are interrupted:

> 'It's an interruption of my complacency – or at least that's what it feels like, to have to dig a little deeper, to be thrown off. My thoughts don't just end where they normally would.'[205]

The coins' answers to her questions help the narrator to move forward and to respond while they also interrupt her circling thoughts. And indeed, on sentence level Heti's prose features a remarkably frequent use of dashes and sentence fragments, conveying a fragmented impression of the outside world as well as interrupting the narrator's thinking, her inside world. The circularity present in her novel as a rather captivating and restricting shape is broken.

In *Becoming Liquid*, fragmentation manifests not only in the numbered fragments and the reciprocal interruption of multiple narrative strands but also, as is the case with Heti's novel, in the use of imagery and the structure of the sentences, which are short and stripped bare of unnecessary words:

---

[205] Heti, *Motherhood*, 77.

> 'Jonna doesn't like this place in the northernmost corner of France but she does like its name. Gravelines. Grave Lines. She takes her boots off, her blue socks and with her toe draws a line in the sand. And another one beside it. Grave signs.'[206]

In this short extract, fragments of phrases and even of words are disassembled and disconnected from their original meaning. They are repeated and connected anew, creating new images, new meaning. Although the various narrative voices in *Becoming Liquid* – the third person and first-person narrator – the essayistic and personal sections slightly differ in their tone and the length and elaborateness of their sentences, a sharp simplicity is continuous. While in these first few sections the fragmentariness aims at a rather distant and cold sense of narrating, a detachedness, later, in the final sections when the narrator is in the late stages of pregnancy, it expresses the sharpness of pain:

> 'We walk up to the woods. I hold on to his arm. Every few minutes I stop and lean against him, breathe, focus on the green, the brown, the forest floor. Breathe. The air whistles as I exhale through my teeth. I count down, eight, seven, six, like we learned to, until my lungs are so empty my chest aches. I breathe in again.'[207]

Feeling unable to fully comprehend the experience of giving birth, the narrator renders her experience shattered, fragmented. Her sentences are interrupted by breathing, by coping with contractions.

However, as implied above, this does not mean that giving birth is the cause of fragmentation and therefore the shattering traumatic centre. Instead, fragmentation is the

---

[206] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 2, p.6.
[207] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 156, p.254.

narrator's way of perceiving the world, coming to culmination in the experience of giving birth to her child.

The notion of culminating is, of course, associated with the shape of an arc and the idea of closure or narrative resolution. Again, here, I think it is worth considering the term in a more spatial way. While a culmination from one perspective might express the shape of a peak that is reached and overcome, seen from another perspective it may appear radically different. From above, what first appeared as a peak might look like a radial: a centre compiled by circular layers of rocks and sediment.

As I have already discussed the implications of circles and radial arrangements in the structure of my own novel in chapter two, I will not go into detail here but will only briefly compare them to Heti's *Motherhood*.

Becoming Liquid entails a sense of circling and of repetition. The child in the prologue may be interpreted as an anticipation of the narrator's later child, as a child on the beach of Gravelines laying out stones for Jonna to find in the next chapter, or even as a child in a dream. Beginning with this child on the beach, the novel can be seen as forming a full circle, ending with the narrator's daughter laughing at herself in the mirror. This circular shape is reinforced by the imagery of the water cycle and the cycle of the year, as discussed in chapter two. Equally, the narrator's movement from Germany to the UK and back, her returning, like Heti's narrator's returning, can be interpreted as a circular movement, although not quite, as the story begins in France rather than in Germany. In fact, as this movement clearly describes a journey (the narrative does not end where it started) it can also be seen as evidence of a disruption of the circle. The first-person narrator changes drastically throughout the novel. In the beginning she is a daughter leaving her mother; in the end she is a mother herself.

Becoming Liquid does not fully submit to the circular shape. However, at the same time, it cannot be seen as a clear line (from England to Germany, from daughter to mother). Before

the narrator becomes a mother, she returns home to her own mother and to her grandmother. With every fragment concerning the narrator's grandmother, we are transported deeper into the narrator's family history, while theses fragments also help us to understand the narrator's decisions in the present moments and her hopes for the future. She moves back in time, deep into her family history, before she emerges towards a future with her own child.

A similar movement, resembling a circle but not quite fulfilling the shape, can be found in the mother and daughter relationships in Heti's *Motherhood*. '[A] curse that turns me towards fixing my mother's sorrow, just as she was turned to fixing her mother's'[208], as the narrator claims, connects the three generations of women. They form a circle of lost dreams and expectations: what one could not achieve the other is expected to continue, what sorrow one has another continues, and the hope is that it will be healed by the next generation. Heti's narrator returns to her grandmother, to the Magda within herself[209]. She tries to disentangle and connect her own view of the world and to heal the generational trauma, to dry her mother's (and grandmother's) tears and bring back a balance to the world[210]. Only after this is achieved can the narrator leave the circling, leave the curse, and look out into the future. Thus, Heti's novel is an attempt at leaving the obsessive circling of generational trauma.

Both novels use fragmentation to express a way of perceiving the world and in both the circularity which shapes the narrative on some levels is interrupted by others. While the first-person narrator in *Becoming Liquid* returns home, Jonna stays in the UK. She does not fit in the circle of returning. When she returns, the first-person narrator reconnects to the past in order to shape her future, to create a life for herself and her child. The experience of birth

---

[208] Heti, *Motherhood*, 198.
[209] Heti, *Motherhood*, 275.
[210] Heti, *Motherhood*, 277.

interrupts any circularity that might have been there. The circle of the year is interrupted as chronology is given up in a fragmented rendition of the experience[211]. The water cycle gets a different dimension, when the narrator becomes part of it, 'turns liquid'[212].

The circularity of a radial arrangement is both asserted and disrupted. The fragments are held in the suspension of a corona only by the force of the central nucleus. This force determines their directionality, their proneness to disperse or to deepen.

3.2) Directionality: Towards the Centre

In contrast to an exploding narrative, the fragments in an imploding narrative strive towards a centre. This directionality is expressed through an increasing closeness of focus. If we are thinking of focus in a visual sense, it means the selection of one specific object or level of perception out of the multitude of impressions one perceives. This means that while I talk to someone I might focus on this person's face, their eyes or their mouth. What happens behind them, however, will remain blurred until I shift my eyes' focus there. My focus can be widened or narrowed, can include large scale objects at a distance or close details – albeit not at the same time. Focus is a decision for attention (to a specific object) and precondition for judging distances. In our field of vision, we can only see clearly within a certain distance. On the other hand, if something is too close to us, we are not able to focus either. If we transfer the concept of focus to narratology, we see that the decision of where I place my focus in writing is a way of conveying distance or closeness and can draw attention to a specific scale of perception.

In an imploding novel, focus is increasingly narrowed (for example, from politics, art, history, to family and anxieties) and provides the narrative with a sense of direction. In Heti's *Motherhood*, there is a movement from broad focus, from not knowing what the book will be

---

[211] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 148-160, pp.245-262.
[212] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 147, p.244.

about in the narrator's first consideration of her coin-oracle, towards the narrow focus inside herself and inside her family. A directionality towards closeness and an increasing intensity is apparent.

When Heti's narrator remembers her mother working with a microscope, she admires her ability to see 'the truth' of something in the close focus of the microscopic eye[213], something so close its outer shape dissolves.

Heti employs a microscopic attention to her whole life, to her thoughts as well as her conversations, her family's past and herself. Fahlgren and Williams elaborate that '[i]n the case of Sheila Heti, 'the exercise of attention' is primarily focused on her intellectual and emotional exploration, pursued while life goes on day by day'[214]. The fragments in Heti's novel are directed towards the depth of her own thoughts, rather than dispersing from a central pain, as I found the fragments in Nelson's *Bluets* to do. They aim at a close, even intimate focus on the narrator's inner world and thus strive towards her centre.

According to Fahlgren and Williams, 'Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* concentrates on the self in its poignant and philosophical inquiry into motherhood, relationships, and work, and into the impact of the choice to have or not have a child.'[215]

The narrator's self is crucial to the novel, both, as a filter and medium to reflect on social and philosophical aspects of being a woman and of motherhood, and as an object of interest and narrative in itself. Fahlgren and Williams claim that *Motherhood* '[belongs] to a compelling genre of life writing where the careful attention to everyday life and personal thought deepens the interconnection between the self and the world.'[216] The narrator circles within her mind, as observed above. She shares endless oscillations of her own thoughts to a

---

[213] Heti, *Motherhood*, 179.
[214] Fahlgren and Williams, 'Contested Motherhood,' 137.
[215] Fahlgren and Williams, 'Contested Motherhood,' 136.
[216] Fahlgren and Williams, 'Contested Motherhood,' 150.

point where she might easily be misunderstood as self-indulgent. Yet, I would agree with Fahlgren and Williams, that '[t]he narrative underscores how the self and the social cannot be separated […] by laying bare Sheila's emotional response which opens up for different reactions.'[217] One might be annoyed by the narrator's endless discussions with herself, might even find her self-obsessed. Yet, this proves how much the narrator's self, her circling and her back and forth, disappoint our expectations of linearity and how much her attitude disrupts social norms. Heti's narrator describes numerous situations where other people – her friend Marion and many others – expect her to have a child. She remembers a doctor who deliberately delays an abortion, hoping she might change her mind. 'There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children,'[218] Heti writes, and one could add: she has time to focus on herself.

The self in Heti's novel is political as well as personal. Her narrator is at the same time herself (she is called Sheila, is a writer and is the author's age) and a character in a published book (the book is categorised as a novel and there are numerous differences between the fictional protagonist and the author, as Sheila Heti points out in a conversation with her mother[219]). Similarly, while in the narrative 'motherhood is not an isolated question, but a concern for society at large'[220], it is also a question that leads the protagonist deep into her family history, and her own self.

Thus, in spite of all its circling, *Motherhood* strives towards a close focus on the self, in a political as well as a personal sense. Heti reaches this increasingly close focus through writing. When the narrator hands her finished book to her mother, the novel becomes part of

---

[217] Fahlgren and Williams, 'Contested Motherhood,' 140.
[218] Heti, *Motherhood*, 32
[219] Sheila Heti 'Sheila Heti and her Mother, Agnes Vago, discuss Heti's novel, "Motherhood"' *YouTube*, March 2020, accessed April 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eE57I53H21Q.
[220] Fahlgren and Williams, 'Contested Motherhood,' 149.

its own narrative. In the 'birth' of the book all the pieces, all the obsessive thoughts, the anecdotes and opinions are pulled together.

In *Becoming Liquid*, a directionality closer towards the narrative's core, the birth of the narrator's child, can be observed in the narrator getting closer to her family history and her notion of 'home', as an increasing physical intimacy, and a close entanglement with the nonhuman (e.g. the landscape).

The narrator in *Becoming Liquid* searches for a home, a place to root and to connect. In the beginning Jonna seems to be mostly free-floating, embarking on the ferry to England. She refers to her past and her mother in a distant way, mediated through her camera[221]. In England, when she stays with her friend Marla, the narrator connects to her grandmother through old family photographs[222]. This encounter, again, is indirect, held at a distance by the camera's lens. Her relationship to Marla, however, makes Jonna feel more similar to her own grandmother. Marla is like a sister to Jonna: someone she admires and who, in some ways, serves as a model for her. Their relationship is like the relationship Jonna imagines between her grandmother and her sister, as depicted in one of the photographs. Thus, Marla brings Jonna closer to her own family, while Marla's child foreshadows the narrator's own future as a mother. Through meeting Marla, Jonna and the I-narrator move closer towards the core of the narrative, melting down past, present and future. The narrator is a daughter, a granddaughter, a (chosen) sister and ultimately becomes a mother herself.

When the first-person narrator later travels back to Germany, her journey is a movement closer to her own family, her family history. It is a physical journey towards her roots. Here, Jonna connects more and more to her grandmother and to her mother up to the fourth part of

---

[221] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 5, pp.10-12.
[222] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 10, pp.22-25.

the book, where she almost 'establishes a dialogic relationship between [grand-]mothers and daughters.'[223] In section 130[224] this even leads to a brief shift into the perspective of an imagined ancestor, temporarily losing herself.

The depth of the narrator's family history is reflected in the river Danube, which is described as 'deep as a family'[225]. In the 'Spring'-part of the book fragments depicting the narrator's grandmother's experiences of migration are entwined with fragments about the river Danube. These are connected to the narrator's own physical descent into a river, her sensations of floating in the river[226]. The river thus both carries pain (the grandmother's) and ease of pain (the narrator's). In both cases it provides a current, a directionality, towards a personal core.

Like Sheila Heti's *Motherhood, Becoming Liquid* is written in the present tense. Even the sections in which the narrator explores her family's past don't use past tense. I chose to write in present tense because I wanted to avoid the convention of using past tense for creating a distance between the story told and the now, a distance between the narrator and the writer. The narrative isn't something that happened 'once upon a time'. It is my life story, told with the urgency and immediacy of a diary entry, albeit not as unedited.

Moseley writes:

'Over the past thirty years or so, the convention of using present tense narration […], loosens the chronological linearity that in traditional novels militates against fragmentation.'[227]

---

[223] Yi-Lin Yu, *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 2.
[224] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.217-219.
[225] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 132, p.222.
[226] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 126, p.212.
[227] Moseley, 'What is Fragmentary Fiction,' 7.

Writing in present tense helps me to create a sensation of free floating. It allows for an agility of moving from scene to scene without the heavy anchor of past tense. This renders a more fragmented narration of time possible as well as a focus on the 'now' of each fragment. At the same time, the narrative appears to happen as it is written, creating a sense of intimacy. For a work of autofiction, this immediacy helps to create the impression of the narrator occupying the same reality as the writer and reader.

Whereas the first part of *Becoming Liquid*, 'Summer', is mainly written in third person, staying somewhat distant from Jonna, the last part is written almost exclusively in first person. In the first part of the novel, the first-person sections carry a rather cold, academic tone, mostly concentrating on art criticism and nature writing. This tone only gradually changes when we get to know the narrator better. When her partner Elias comes to visit in the second part of the book, the first-person tone is used more frequently. The narrative becomes more intimate, more personal. Simultaneously, the themes covered by Jonna and the I-narrator shift. In the first part of the novel, the I-narrator is clearly restricted to memories and essays, whereas in the later parts she becomes increasingly present as a close protagonist, narrating intimate scenes as well as memories and observations. She becomes a more fully formed character, while also embodying the openness of autofiction, the ability to transform with the changes life brings. Jonna, meanwhile, tries to avoid the loss of control that comes with the openness of life writing:

> '[I]f she just holds still, if she doesn't move, doesn't leave her room, stays inside, contained, then time will pass without taking note of her and without anyone's notice she will get away, skip the days unharmed, unchanged.'[228]

---

[228] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 59, p.113.

While the I-narrator is open to transformation including the pain that comes with it – the birth of her child – and even moves towards it, Jonna wants to escape time and the changes it brings: aging, the loss of a family member[229] or the heartbreak of her partner's departure[230]. Jonna is held back by her fear of committing and of being hurt. The I-narrator, in contrast, continues to move forward towards major changes in her life at a speed she can hardly control. With this shift from third-person narrative to first-person, the narrative becomes more personal and daring, more intimate. I hope for a reader to feel an increasing closeness with the narrator.

This growing intimacy in terms of the narrator's mind and the thoughts she shares, is paralleled by a movement towards bodily intimacy. At the beginning, on a wide cold beach, Jonna is distant – from her family and friends as well as from me as the writer and the reader. She is a means of creating a distance between me and my story. Throughout the novel this distance reduces to the point of deepest intimacy when the narrator shares my experience of giving birth, including its pain and body fluids.

Writing an increasing bodily closeness partly is meant to express the narrator's sensual experience of her surroundings, through which she perceives closeness or distance. Up to Jonna's journey to the coast in section 31-32[231], the first part of the novel seems unusually cold given its association with the summer season. When she first moves to England, Jonna is often described as feeling cold, '[pulling] the navy-blue fleece closer around her body'[232] or watching the rain on her window[233]. Additionally, many of the essayistic sections in this part refer to snow: memories of snow in the Alps, snow in Dean's paintings and in the photograph of the narrator's grandmother. Although this is not necessarily connected to negative feelings, the

---

[229] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 60, pp.114-116.
[230] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 58, p.112.
[231] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.70-75.
[232] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 2, p.5.
[233] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 9, p.19.

coldness that appears persistent in the 'Summer' part is an attempt to create a sense of distance. Through the aloof, almost non-fiction tone of writing about art and the subject of distance within the paintings and landscapes described, be it the avalanches in Dean's drawings or Friedrich's vast seascape, the narrator's physical coldness is reflected as detachment.

Later, by contrast, when we reach the final part of the novel, one might get the impression of a rather too hot spring. The narrator goes swimming in the river[234], is outdoors often, feeling hot and sweaty, to the point of collapse on the day of the birth:

> 'Back into the heat. Like a wall, burning. Instantly, my forehead is wet with sweat. Cigarette smoke hangs in the air. I get sick.'[235]

Like her sentences, the narrator breaks down, dissolves in the heat. The outer force of the temperature parallels the narrator's inner disintegration when she gives birth. At this point, I want the reader to be close enough to feel the itching sweat on the narrator's skin, the bits of bark under her fingernails.

In this section the narrator's attention is tuned to a close focus on minute details, an intimate observation of her own body as well as her immediate environment:

> 'The sun throws a moving pattern of brightened patches. Some seem yellow like sand, others are lichen-green. Light flickers over my fingers. The pattern is continued on my skin where my knuckles stand out palely from the force of my hand holding on to the bark, bright like the pain.'[236]

---

[234] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 126, p.212.
[235] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 156, p.255.
[236] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 156, p.255.

The narrator's body is observed closely, with a focus so narrow as to only include small fragments like the skin on her knuckles. As the narrative breaks down, her perception to these small fragments and details of light and pattern, the narrator's body becomes equal with her surroundings and melts into them. In the process of giving birth, the narrator's self is disintegrated; she becomes part of her environment, part of the nonhuman. In fact, approaching the moment of birth with the precise and intricate perspective of nature writing was a key to finding the right voice and rhythm of writing an experience as hard to describe as giving birth.

Caracciolo writes in *Narrating the Mesh*:

> 'Instead [of a 'nature' that is separate and available to human exploitation] we need a language capable of capturing the constitutive embrace between humans and nonhuman realities – how human societies shape, and are in turn shaped by, biological, climatological, and geological forces.'[237]

He points towards a writing that creates depth and density through the connectivity and closeness between human and nonhuman realities. In *Becoming Liquid*, physical intimacy with the landscape is a recurring theme. Digging deep into red soil[238] when working in the garden, the narrator gets closer to family members[239], to her family history and to the notion of *Heimat*, home[240]. The garden and the soil are where roots are felt, but also where new perspectives are planted. When the narrator finds out about her pregnancy, she sends her partner seeds to symbolise the growth of their child[241]. This closeness with the nonhuman reaches its culmination in the core of the narrative, the birth and metamorphosis of the narrator. Here, the

---

[237] Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh,* 22.
[238] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 17, pp.42-44 and section 93, pp.161-162.
[239] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 122, p.207.
[240] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 131, pp.220-221.
[241] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 78, pp.141-142.

narrating perspective is close enough for the boundaries between the narrator and her surroundings to blur. When her child is born, the narrator's world is reduced to her own bed, cocooned, while her perspective is scaled down to that of a caterpillar. Identifying with the animal, the narrator asks:

> 'What does the butterfly/caterpillar feel when it is liquid? Does it feel anything at all? Is it painful? To shed your skin, to dissolve, to lose your shape?'[242]

In the birth, the narrator becomes animal herself. She, metaphorically, becomes the caterpillar. Like Heti's microscopic perspective, the narrator's focus gets so narrow that the shape of her body and her identity are disintegrated – the narrative implodes. The philosopher Timothy Morton in *Humankind* writes about the difficulty in finding the right words, especially the right pronoun, to include the nonhuman:

> 'I can't speak [the ecological subject] because language, and in particular grammar, is fossilized human thoughts: thoughts, for example, about humans and nonhumans.'[243]

Language not only reproduces, but embodies human thought in quite an immobile, static way – it carries assumptions. How can contemporary literature escape such a static means of expression in favour of a more alive one? I find the potential for such a renewal in experimental narrative forms and especially the narrative pattern of an implosion with its striving for closeness and towards a centre. To return to my example from chapter one, in *Lanny*, Max Porter shows how this can be achieved through polyphony and the 'collapse of [a]

---

[242] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 160, p.260.
[243] Timothy Morton, *Humankind* (New York: Verso Books, 2017), 13.

single authoritative voice'[244] – an achievement I greatly admire and aim for in my own work through the narrative pattern of the implosion. While Max Porter works with the vernacular, in *Becoming Liquid*, language becomes visible in my use of single German words. These of course highlight that the main part of the novel is not written in German, although it is my mother tongue. In German, a language that has been appropriated by fascist rhetoric, many words carry associations of oppression or nationalism. Words like *Erde/Boden* (soil), *Wald* (forest) or *Heimat* (home) need to be reclaimed, which I aim to do through a feminist perspective as well as a review of my own family history. Writing in English gives me the necessary distance to do this. At the same time, detailed nature writing provides me with a focus close enough to see the forest[245] or the soil[246] for what they are beyond language and its sometimes-burdensome associations. This close focus of becoming part of the forest, the river or the soil, of identifying with the butterfly, is an attempt at relearning the meaning of these words and thus reclaiming them from fascist abuse.

3.3) A Hot Melting Core: Getting Close Enough to Dissolve

With its ambitious one-word title, the core of Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* appears easy to define. And indeed, motherhood does function as the centre of the novel, albeit not quite as simply as one might presume. The narrator's relationship to her mother is as relevant as the question of whether she should have children. Motherhood is seen from the perspective of the narrator as a daughter and is approached as a societal phenomenon. The narrator asks how motherhood and art are related or rivalling options for her life. As time passes and the decision whether to have children becomes more urgent, Heti's narrator considers motherhood through mysticism, family history and conversations with her partner and friends – some of them mothers, others

---

[244] D'Ambrosio, 'Fragmentary Writing,' 19.
[245] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 104, pp.178-180.
[246] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 93, pp.161-162.

not. Fragments of the decision-making process accumulate. They amount to a whole novel, a book-length journey towards the centre of motherhood, 'this wrestling place,' as Heti calls it in reference to the biblical story of Jacob wrestling the angel[247].

Heti's choice of the image of wrestling is not arbitrary. Wrestling is a way of fighting that includes intimate physical contact and the fighters' movement of circling each other. Heti's narrator's fight is an intimate one, too. She seems to circle in close entanglement with ideas of motherhood, addressing questions to herself and society. On the last page of the novel, the narrator declares the end of this fight:

> 'Then I named this wrestling place Motherhood, for here is where I saw God face-to-face, and yet my life was spared.'[248]

In finishing the book, the wrestling is over, the fighters collapse, a decision is made. Like giving birth, this decision-making is a painful process:

> 'There is no coming to consciousness without pain. The pain that opens the door.'[249]

Decision making is central to *Motherhood*, beginning with flipping coins as a way of simplifying decisions to a clear *yes* or *no*, and ending with the narrator's decision to use the morning-after pill[250]. In a reflection about the choice to have children, the narrator states that 'A decision in the mind is pretty small. It doesn't make babies.'[251] Immediately she counters, 'If a decision in the mind doesn't make babies, why do I spend so much time thinking about

---

[247] Heti, *Motherhood*, 58ff.
[248] Heti, *Motherhood*, 284.
[249] Heti, *Motherhood*, 208.
[250] Heti, *Motherhood*, 264.
[251] Heti, *Motherhood*, 30.

it?'[252] and remembers her decision not to keep a pregnancy in the past. A decision in the mind is powerful enough to make 'no babies', if not to make one. Heti's narrator comes to accept this power, the strength of her own decision. Thus, reaching the centre of *Motherhood* is a process of self-acceptance, of accepting one's own will without shame and reluctance. When the narrator takes the morning-after pill, making a final decision against becoming pregnant, she feels relieved:

> 'like a storm passing over my soul. The storm has passed and the clouds have given way to a brighter day, lighting up the world all around me.'[253]

Sheila Heti's narrator is close to a mental collapse. She feels 'drained, depressed, worn through'[254]. And indeed, as she concludes herself, 'Nothing remains intact'[255]. She disintegrates and analyses all the fragments of her life, be it dreams, her relationship, her body, or conversations with strangers. She examines them in their smallest parts in order to reach the core of her query and make a decision. While for her mother this close attention is possible through the microscope, as discussed above, for Heti's narrator it is only possible through writing:

> 'I am sitting here, writing, in order to discover the simple secret of my existence–what sort of creature I am.'[256]

---

[252] Heti, *Motherhood*, 30.
[253] Heti, *Motherhood*, 266.
[254] Heti, *Motherhood*, 182.
[255] Heti, *Motherhood*, 183.
[256] Heti, *Motherhood*, 228

Although the theme of motherhood is closely linked to the female body, Heti's narrator stays somewhat detached from her body and in fact, at times feels betrayed by it[257]. While Heti's narrator moves away from motherhood as a real option for her life, a pregnancy becoming more and more unlikely[258], she moves deeper into her conceptual reflections on motherhood. She is 'mining [her] own heart and looking at the world around [her]; thinking deeper and more clearly'[259] in order to reach a solution. It begins to seem that for Heti's narrator, motherhood never was a practical option as much as it was a philosophical concept that could be explored in a theoretical, almost scientific way. While her narrator moves away from the bodily option of motherhood, she gets closer in theoretical terms. Indeed, in one of the last sections, Heti equates the book to a body sliced open for an autopsy[260], offering her writing instead of a physical body.

'The heart of the matter here is the act of writing,'[261] Fahlgren and Williams confirm. Heti's narrator places writing 'in the centre of [her] life'[262], giving herself energy to move forward. 'But how deep inside me my mother's face was! How it lay in the basement, the unfurnished barn, of my soul–so close, right there,'[263] the narrator exclaims towards the end of the novel. Motherhood as the central theme, the core of the novel, carries her own mother's face. On the one hand, this reinforces the narrator's role as the daughter, as the one who doesn't need to be a mother, who is allowed to be self-centred and who wants to stop her mother's tears. On the other hand, her mother gives her an example of what a mother does, what motherhood means, namely to '[sit] in her room and [work] hard'[264]. This definition of

---

[257] Heti, *Motherhood*, 151.
[258] Heti, *Motherhood*, 193.
[259] Heti, *Motherhood*, 131.
[260] Heti, *Motherhood*, 274.
[261] Fahlgren and Williams, 'Contested Motherhood,' 142
[262] Heti, *Motherhood*, 93
[263] Heti, *Motherhood*, 254
[264] Heti, *Motherhood*, 40

motherhood turns writing into a form of motherhood. It is a collapse of the dichotomy between being a mother and being a writer. Instead, suddenly both become one, both merge in a hot core of possibilities for the narrator's identity, for a woman's life.

As I do in my own novel, Heti uses the image of the butterfly hatching from its chrysalis to illustrate this core and the narrator's transformation through writing. Heti considers writing as the cocoon that holds the narrator safely enough for her to be able to write her book. In my own novel, I use nature writing about butterflies as an image for changes in the narrator's life and body. I am well aware that the butterfly is an image often used to illustrate transformation and thus might easily turn into a cliché. A close attention to unusual details and to the delicacy of the metaphor helped me to avoid the image becoming clichéd. Common to both novels is a curious interest in the caterpillar's dissolving – a biological detail that isn't widely known and slightly uncanny. In order to be transformed, the caterpillar has to turn into liquid. Its physical shape is annihilated. This detail is odd enough to add something new to the common image of the beautiful butterfly, while it also helps to envision the brutality and radicalness of the metamorphosis that takes place. At the centre of both imploding novels is a collapse, a disintegration of the narrator's life and identity in order to create something radically new, a future.

Whereas in Heti's novel the literary birth is central, in my own novel the real-life birth of the narrator's child generates a collapse of control, a collapse of time and of the self. Here, chronology is circumvented for a more impressionistic approach of the narrator's experience.

'161

The first few hours after a butterfly hatches from a chrysalis it is still soft, almost liquid. It moves slowly, pumping heavily. It looks like its whole body shakes with heavy

> breath. The butterfly doesn't really breathe. It learns to know its new body, the sensation, how to use its feelers, its long stalking legs. It is most vulnerable these few hours after hatching. Not yet accustomed to its new body and the body itself is still half-liquid, not fully dried yet. Like a ghost version of itself it could dissolve again any second. But it is a brighter version than its real self. Its wings shine in their new colours, untouched.
>
> 162
>
> I stand in front of the mirror with my daughter, in the same place where my great-uncle stood with me about 25 years ago. […]'[265]

In these last sections of *Becoming Liquid*, the narrator's experience of birth connects the returning image of the butterfly, its vulnerability as well as its potential beauty after it hatches, to the narrator's own body and her insecurity after the birth. The nonhuman and the human layer of the narrative become one. The narrator's identity dissolves with the distinction between the human and nonhuman. With this collapse, with reaching the core, the novel's imploding shape is completed.

Although in the first months of writing the novel the birth as nucleus wasn't apparent yet, it certainly is what holds the novel together as a whole now and what led me to the narrative pattern of the implosion. The pregnancy and its resolution in the birth provide a gravity to the novel. In spite of the actual pregnancy only being revealed in section 75[266], pregnancy, giving birth and motherhood function as central themes throughout the novel. Already in the first quarter of the book, there are numerous hints, attention attractors and clues that point to the

---

[265] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.261-262.
[266] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.135-136.

birth later in the book. The novel begins with the observation of a small child, soon followed by a conversation between Jonna and Marla about motherhood and abortion in section 11[267]. In section 17[268], a delayed period is mentioned as well as a dream of a child: the narrative is metaphorically pregnant with clues. This is countered by doubts, anxieties about wanting to stay 'unharmed, unchanged'[269] and a build-up of nervousness[270]. A story about rock climbing in section 64[271] metaphorically foreshadows a feeling of falling into a new part of life with no way back. Jessa Fairbrother's photo series *Role Play (Woman with Cushion)* and a memory of playing pregnant[272] provide a playful thought-experiment as well as a more fearful, grieving perspective that is expressed overtly in a conversation between the narrator and Marla on the narrator's diagnosis of PCO syndrome[273].

Although the narrator's unborn child is only really mentioned in section 77[274], located centrally within the novel in a conversation between the narrator and Jonna, motherhood is present all along. The core of the narrative exerts its pulling force long before it is visible.

---

[267] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.26-28.
[268] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, pp.42-45.
[269] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 59, p.113.
[270] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 62, p.119.
[271] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, p.122.
[272] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 67, pp.125-126.
[273] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 68, p.127.
[274] Diller, *Becoming Liquid*, section 77, pp.139-140.

4) Conclusion: Why Write an Imploding Narrative?

One might say, that's all very well, but isn't an explosion a lot more interesting and exciting than an implosion, a silent collapse? Why would one want to write a novel that implodes rather than explodes? What is the value of an imploding novel?

In the previous chapters I outlined the potential of writing in fragments as offering openness and flexibility, as well as space for connectivity. While I see an exploding narrative as fascinating and appropriate for writing about a central trauma, it did not seem the right pattern for my own narrative. With *Bluets*, after I finished reading, I felt like I remained on the surface and had never quite reached the centre, the point of the book. With my writing I do want to reach the centre, want to get to the insides.

With its tension between a circular shape and a directionality towards the centre, the pattern of the implosion provided me with a way of writing my experience of childbirth. Instead of ending in shatteredness and destruction, as an explosion does, the radical change of an imploding narrative is experienced more like a turning everything inside out. This dissolving and hopeful rearrangement seemed appropriate for the subject of early motherhood.

I do not want to deny the struggles, pains and difficulties of motherhood and the immense effort it takes to continue working creatively. Heti's clear dichotomy between art and motherhood is overcome by the decision to mother an artwork instead of a child. With my novel, I want to offer a more positive perspective on having a child and working creatively. I do not want the narrative to be one of regret and wistfulness. Instead, *Becoming Liquid* can be read as a response to Heti with a different answer to some of the questions she asks and indeed as an artwork empowered by the experience of motherhood and giving birth. In *The Paris Review*, writer and essayist Lauren Elkin concludes about recent novels on motherhood (including Heti's *Motherhood* and Nelson's *Argonauts*) the following:

> 'These new books recast motherhood not as the reactionary choice, the choice made because it's what's socially expected, but as something hard won, intellectually demanding, a form of creative labor. Not something that takes you away from your work but something that is now both frame and canvas for it.'[275]

I see my own novel within this context of literary works that explore the challenges of becoming a mother as well as the creative potential of this subject. According to Elkin, many of these novels use fragmentation, albeit for various reasons ranging from a sheer lack of time to aesthetic and political choices. As argued in chapter one, fragmentation seems to be especially accommodating for writing on liminality, for the margins and the extremes. Sarah Callahan in her article 'The Female and the Fragment(ed)' writes:

> 'The fragment, with its ability to handle contradiction – to have agency and to be part of a larger whole, to speak and to remain silent, to be both bounded and unbounded – allows [female writers like Roxanne Gay or Maggie Nelson] to represent their embodied experiences more fully, in a form that accurately reflects those experiences of bodily change and upheaval, to invite the reader in while still retaining control over their stories.'[276]

With the narrative pattern of the implosion as delineated in this thesis, I want to go a step further and suggest that within fragmentary writing the differentiation of specific patterns can help critics to further analyse the purpose of a text, and for a writer offers a precise device

---

[275] Lauren Elkin, 'Why All the Books about Motherhood?' *The Paris Review,* 2018, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/17/why-all-the-books-about-motherhood/ (last retrieved 27 November 2023).
[276] Callahan, 'The Female and the Fragment(ed),' 17.

for shaping a narrative. Callahan's conclusion on fragmented writing holds especially true for the pattern of an implosive narrative, where the fragments are both suspended in circularity and striving towards depth, closeness, and transformation in and through the core. I do not want to suggest that this narrative pattern might be particularly fitting for writing on motherhood in general, given that there is no such thing as a general experience of motherhood. However, the pattern of the implosion in my novel helped me to create meaningful connections between the fragments and to convey my personal experience of giving birth and becoming a mother at a comparatively young age – an experience that I perceived as an implosion itself.

Caroline Levine writes:

> 'Like Latour, I consider fictional narratives as productive thought experiments that allow us to imagine the subtle unfolding activity of multiple social forms.'[277]

From this point of view, my narrative form helps me to understand motherhood as well as the coming-together of a multi-layered identity. At the same time, the experience of becoming a mother crucially inspired the pattern of the novel and made it the book it is now.

---

[277] Levine, *Forms*, 19.

Bibliography

Some of the works mentioned below were not directly quoted in the thesis, but, nevertheless, played an informing role in writing my novel and critical thesis which is why I decided to include them in the bibliography. I will mark these works with an asterisk.

*Acre, Amy. *Mothersong.* London: Bloomsbury Poetry, 2023.

*Aciman, Alexander and Emmett Rensin, *Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books Retold Through Twitter.* London: Penguin, 2009.

Aikio-Arianaick, Inger and Rauni Magga Lukkari. *Erbmütter Welttöchter*. Chemnitz: Eichenspinnerverlag, 2015.

Alison, Jane. *Meander, Spiral, Explode – Design and Pattern in Narrative*. New York: Catapult, 2019.

Baumbach, Sibylle. 'The Economy of Attention and the Novel.' In *New Approaches to the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel*, edited by Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann, 39-58. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

– '"Only Connect": The Aesthetics of Fragmentation and Mindful Literary Studies,' In *Literature and Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Cultural Concerns – Concepts – Case Studies*, edited by Ansgar Nünning et. al. Trier: WVT, 2022.

– 'Mind the Narratives: Towards a Cultural Narratology of Attention,' *Narrative in Culture*, edited by Astrid Erll and Roy Sommer, 37-57. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019.

*Benjamin, Walter. 'Capitalism as Religion.' *Selected Writings* Vol.1, 288-291. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Harvard Press, 1996 (1921).

*Berry, Liz, *The Republic of Motherhood*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2018.

*Bocchi, Gianmarco. 'Photographic Encounters with (In)visible Mothers in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Erri de Luca's *Non ora, Non qui.*' *RCL*

— *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens/Journal of Communication and Languages* (2020): 150-167. https://doi.org/10.34619/jrh1-r457 (last retrieved 1 December 2023)

Britannica Encyclopedia. 'Gravelines – France.' Accessed January 7, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/place/Gravelines.

British Geological Survey. 'Fossils.' Accessed January 7, 2024. https://www.bgs.ac.uk/discovering-geology/fossils-and-geological-time/fossils/.

Buchanan, Ian. 'Assemblage Theory and Its Discontents.' *Deleuze Studies* vol. 9, no.3 (2015): 382-392. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

– 'At the Mall with Fish.' *Australian Humanities Review* 67, (2020): 1-16. Canberra: Australian National University Press. https://tr.uow.edu.au/uow/file/0f79554b-e237-4686-98fa-7939aeeae611/1/buchanan-2020-1-16.pdf (last retrieved 07.01.2024).

Callahan, Shannon. 'The Female and the Fragment(ed).' *Body Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2020): 9-18. Radnor, Pennsylvania: Cabrini University Press. https://bodystudiesjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2-The-Female-and-the-Fragmented.pdf (last retrieved 22 January 2024).

Cambridge Dictionary. 'Implosion.' Accessed March 16, 2024. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/implosion.

Caracciolo, Marco. 'The Global and the Multilinear: Novelistic Forms for Planetary Processes.' *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 55, no. 3 (2023): 325-340. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2023.a905805 (last retrieved 22 January 2024).

– *Narrating the Mesh - Form and Story in the Anthropocene.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021.

– ‘Form, Science, and Narrative in the Anthropocene’, *Narrative*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2019): 270-289. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/30/article/734309/pdf (last retrieved 22 January 2024).

Constellation Guide, ‘Orion’s Belt’ 2023, accessed January 7, 2024. https://www.constellation-guide.com/orions-belt/.

*Currie, Mark. ‘Maybe baby: uncertainty and decision in Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood.’ Textual Practice*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2022): 116-134. DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2020.1789207 (last retrieved 28 November 2023).

D’Ambrosio, Mariano, ‘Fragmentary writing and polyphonic narratives in twenty-first-century fiction.’ In *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drag, 19-32. Delaware: Vernon Press, 2019.

*Davenport, Thomas and John Beck. *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business.* Brighton (MA): Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

Dean, Tacita. ‘Vermittlungsfilm KUB 2018.04: Tacita Dean.’ Filmed April 2018 by Kunsthaus Bregenz, *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_UD2QciRMc (last retrieved 07.01.2024).

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Continuum, 2021 (1988).

– *What Is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Desert Islands and Other Texts*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), 2004 (1953-1974).

Deleuze, Gilles and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987 (1977).

*Dickson, E.J. 'Motherhood: Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't.' *Elle*, May 8, 2018. https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/a20318404/sheila-heti-motherhood-review/.

Diller, Janina, *Becoming Liquid*.

Eagleton, Terry. *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

– *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008 (1983).

Elias, Camelia. *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre.* New York: Peter Lang, 2004.

Elkin, Lauren. 'Why All the Books about Motherhood?' *The Paris Review.* July 17, 2018. https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/17/why-all-the-books-about-motherhood/ (last retrieved 27 November 2023).

Elmiger, Dorothee. 'Das Problem des Jägers / (Magic) Pocket Theory of Fiction.' *Carrier Bag Fiction*, edited by Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Sarah Shin and Mathias Zeiske, 75-81. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021.

Fahlgren, Margaretha and Anna Williams. 'Contested Motherhood in Autobiographical Writing: Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti.' *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*, edited by Helena Wahlström Henriksson et. al., 135-151. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

Fairbrother, Jessa. 'Role Play (Woman With Cushion)' Jessa Fairbrother – Works, 2015. https://jessafairbrother.com/projects/role-play-woman-with-cushion/ (last retrieved 08.01.2024).

*Gibbons, Alison. 'Fragments of a Postscript.' In *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drag, 197-206. Delaware: Vernon Press, 2019.

Gillespie, Sarah. MOTH – exhibition

Gioia, Ted. 'The Rise of the Fragmented Novel (An Essay in 26 Fragments).' *Fractious Fiction*, 2013. http://fractiousfiction.com/rise_of_the_fragmented_novel (last retrieved 23 February 2022)

Gordon, Helen. 'Rock of Ages: How Chalk Made England.' *The Guardian*, February 23, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/feb/23/rock-of-ages-how-chalk-made-england-geology-white-cliffs (last retrieved 07.01.2024).

Guignery, Vanessa and Wojciech Drag (Eds.). *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction*. Vernon Press, Delaware, USA, 2019.

Harvey, Samantha. *The Shapeless Unease*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2020.

Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood*. London: Vintage, 2019 (2018).

- 'Sheila Heti and her Mother, Agnes Vago, discuss Heti's novel, "Motherhood".' *YouTube*. March 2020, accessed April 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eE57I53H21Q.
- In conversation with Polly Barton at Storysmith's event, Central Library Bristol, May 22, 2024.

Jansson, Tove. 'The Island.' *The Paris Review*, February 13, 2019 (1961). https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/02/13/tove-janssons-the-island/ (last retrieved 07.01.2024).

- *Notes from an Island*. London: Sort of Books, 2021 (Swedish original: 1996)

*Kassabova, Kapka. *Border – A Journey to the Edge of Europe*. London: Granta, 2017.

Koblin, John. 'Nature Shows Are Hot Again,' *New York Times,* January 15, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/15/business/media/hot-nature-shows.html (last retrieved 20.12.2023).

Kraus, Chris. *I Love Dick*. London: Tuskar Rock Press, 2015 (1997).

Kukkonen, Karin and Sibylle Baumbach. 'Mind-Wandering and Attention in Literature.' *Diegesis: Narratives between Attention and Mind-Wandering*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2022. https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/456 (last retrieved 23 October 2023).

Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

LeGuin, Ursula K. *Dancing at the Edge of the World*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.

*Maci, Enis. 'Woraus die Tasche ist.' In *Carrier Bag Fiction*, edited by Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Sarah Shin and Mathias Zeiske, 28-35. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021.

Martin, Stewart. 'W.G. Sebald and the Modern Art of Memory.' *Radical Philosophy* 132, Jul/Aug 2005. https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp132_article2_wgsebaldmodernartofmemory_martin.pdf (last retrieved 17 January 2024).

Marris, Emma.'The Nature You See in Documentaries is Beautiful And False.' *The Atlantic*, April 2021. https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/04/problem-nature-documentaries/618553/ (last retrieved 07.01.2024).

Menkedick, Sarah. 'Op-Ed: Why Don't People Take Writing about Motherhood Seriously? – Because Women Do It.' *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2017. https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-menkedick-literary-value-of-motherhood-20170416-story.html (last retrieved 27 November 2023).

– 'A Mother's Fragmented Identity.' *New York Times*, August 31, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/well/family/a-mothers-fragmented-identity.html (last retrieved 27 November 2023)

*Moi, Toril. 'Describing My Struggle.' *The Point Magazine,* December 27, 2017.

Morton, Timothy. *Humankind*. New York: Verso Books. 2017

Moseley, Merritt. 'What is Fragmentary Fiction?' In *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drag, 3-18. Delaware: Vernon Press, 2019.

Nail, Thomas. 'What is an Assemblage?' *SubStance,* vol. 46, no. 1 (2017): 21-37. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2017 (2009).

– *Argonauts*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015.

– 'The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition: An Introduction' Interview by Ben Segal, *continent.* Vol. 1 no. 3 (2011): 158-170.

Oxford English Dictionary. 'Implosion.' Accessed March 16, 2024. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/implosion_n?tab=meaning_and_use.

*Parr, Michelann. 'Breaking the Silence of My Motherhood: Rabbit Holes, False Starts, (Un)Finished Fragments, Hopeful Connections.' In *Mothering Outside the Lines: Tales of Boundary Busting Mamas*, edited by Parr, Michelann et. al., 41-68. Ontario: Demeter Press, 2023. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.6879794.5. (last retrieved January 10, 2024)

Paskin, Willa. 'Art or Babies?' *Slate*, May 2018. https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/05/sheila-hetis-motherhood-reviewed.html (last retrieved 27 November 2023).

Porter, Max. *Lanny*, London: Faber and Faber, 2020.

*Ravn, Olga. *My Work*, translated by Sophia Hersi Smith and Jennifer Russell, London: Lolli Editions, 2023.

Robison, Mary. *Why Did I Ever*, Reprint edition. Berkeley: Counterpoint LLC, 2018 (2001).

Scholl, Christian. *Romantische Malerei als neue Sinnbildkunst.* Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag München, 2007.

Sebald, W G. *The Emigrants*, London: Vintage, 1997 (1992).

Shirm, Gretchen. 'Sheila Heti, Melanie Klein and *Motherhood*, Critique.' *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 63 no. 3 (2022): 309-320. DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2021.2024128 (last retrieved 27 November 2023).

Smith, Ali. *Artful*, London: Penguin Books, 2012.

– **Autumn*, London: Penguin Books, 2016.

– **Winter*, London: Penguin Books, 2017.

– **Spring*, London: Penguin Books, 2019.

– **Summer*, London: Penguin Books, 2020.

*Van den Akker, Robin, Alison Gibbons and Timothy Vermeulen. *Metamodernism*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* translated by Michael Beaney. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2023 (1922).

*Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. London: Vintage, 2020 (1931).

Yu, Yi-Lin. *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing.* New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank my supervisors Richard Kerridge and Dr Samantha Harvey. Thank you, for your belief in my project and the encouragement when I hardly believed in it myself. Thank you for the invaluable feedback throughout the last years.

Thank you also to Tim Liardet and Tracy Brain for stepping in as supervisors and for sharing their expertise and thoughts with me and thanks to Gerard Woodward and Amy Sackville for an insightful and helpful viva examination.

Thank you to the Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes who funded this PhD project with a PhD scholarship. Thank you for the funding, but also for the wonderful opportunities to connect with other academics and researchers across all disciplines. Thanks to all the incredible people I met there.

This PhD wouldn't have been possible without the exchange, the comfort and help of others. Thanks to the PhD cohort at BSU, to Claire, Miranda, Anna, Zosia, Amber, Toni and all the others who helped me become a better writer.

Thank you, Alyssa, for the walks along the canal and for offering me a place to stay when I was lost between moving houses.

Danke Eva und Alina, dass ihr immer für mich da wart.

Thank you to my literary and artistic companions along the way: the artists Tacita Dean, Caspar David Friedrich, Jessa Fairbrother, the writers Ali Smith, Sheila Heti, Maggie Nelson, Tove Jansson, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and many others, who gave wings to my thoughts and led me astray.

So many times I walked the same paths, the footpath up to little Solsbury hill, the paths through the moss in the Black Forest. Thank you to the Somerset hills, the Black Forest firs and Dorset butterflies for allowing me among them. For teaching me what belonging can mean.

My dear dear friend, Marilyn. You walked so many of those paths with me. I am so grateful to have found you. This book would not have been able to grow without your gentleness, without your generosity. Thank you for the hot chocolates, the night walks, the flowers and dances. For being a sister and an anchor, for sharing thoughts, stories, food and tears with me. Thank you so much, and thank you to your family, to Phil, Leo and Esmé, for giving me a home away from home.

And most of all, thank you thank you thank you to my family. This is for you, and I hope you don't mind my tears. Ich liebe euch.

Danke Mama. Danke Papa. Danke Felix. Danke, Oma, dass ich dir nochmal nahe sein konnte. Danke für die Zwetschgenknödel und die Erinnerungen, für die Wärme. Für das Vertrauen, obwohl ihr bis zum Schluss nichts von meinen Texten lesen durftet. Danke für das Kümmern und Aufnehmen. Danke, dass ihr mein Zuhause seid, immer.

Danke, Clemens. Für deine Liebe. Für alles.

Danke, Marlene, you spark of light, you butterfly.