***AFFINITY* BY SARAH WATERS.
A WAY INTO GENDERLESSNESS
POWERED BY OCULAR CENTRISM AND SPIRITS**

HÉLÈNE FAU

Universität des Saarlandes,
Saarbrücken, Germany
h.fau@mx.uni-saarland.de

Abstract: *Affinity by Sarah Waters tells the story of sexless and genderless spirits (and of their human bodily forms, the spiritualists) slowly taking possession of one woman, Margaret Prior, who actually, unknowingly, shelters inner predispositions to spiritualism prior to the spirits' intervention, giving thus credit to what her surname had proleptically heralded from the very start. It all occurs via ocular centrism, embodied by a powerful Gaze, slithering throughout the plot. It first mesmerises the spiritualists-to-be before catapulting them into a maelstrom of reversals and distortions. This twisting manoeuvre can be read as an attempt to outroot and erase previously assimilated societal constructs. The spirits' genderlessness can then deploy unencumbered. A liberating emancipation is finally completed. This article first dwells on ocular centrism before dealing with all the reversals and tiltings progressively coming up to the surface, as well as with genderless metonymic substitutes acting on behalf of the spirits.*

Keywords: *genderlessness, spirits, epistrophe, ocular centrism.*

“Spirits are sexless and genderless”
(Waters, 1999, p. 210)

1. Introduction

Sarah Waters's novel *Affinity* (1999) takes place in 19th century Britain where Selina Dawes, one of the two main female protagonists and a trance medium, organises dark séances at the house of a lady called Mrs Brink with the help of her maid Ruth. A mysterious man, her so-called spirit, Peter Quick, appears there and sets the ladies into trance. A child of 15 years old, Madeleine Silvester, attends the sessions with her mother. One day, she is injured and, at

the sight of her blood, Mrs Brink faints and dies. Selina Dawes is immediately arrested, judged and condemned to life imprisonment at Millbank. Two years later, Margaret Prior, an unmarried lady recovering from “old grief” and a visitor at Millbank, meets Selina Dawes. She is charmed and moved by the woman-spiritualist who regularly contacts her spirit-friends in her favour and promises her love and redemption once she is out of prison. Yet after Margaret has arranged everything to flee abroad with her, Selina escapes with the help of a matron and joins one of Margaret’s maids who, in fact, is Selina’s former servant, Ruth –, leaving Margaret abused, disappointed, angry and lonely. The novel reveals affinities between two women, each being the affinity of the other: “We were joined in the spirit and joined in the flesh – I [Margaret] was her own *affinity*. We had been cut, two halves together, from a single piece of shining matter” (Waters, 1999, p. 336). And Selina to Margaret: “my spirit does not love yours, it is *entwined* with it” (p. 275). These are affinities between an angel and a virgin or a devil and a sinner, depending on the way one looks at it. She-angels, devils, sinners to start with but she-creatures progressively moving towards genderlessness, that is to say into a gender void, ridden of gender specific attributes and ready to be filled with non-societal constraints, thus allowing an authentic room of one’s own. Genderlessness is not to be confounded with androgyny, the latter containing two parallel / simultaneous sexes as well as two parallel / simultaneous genders. Genderlessness, on its side, is characterised by the absence of gender, by a neutrality resulting from a deliberate tabula rasa act. Androgyny associates two entities whereas genderlessness gets rid of them in order to indulge into a mark-less territory free to be redesigned by its occupants.

2. Ocular centrism

As we shall see in this paper, *Affinity* is ruled by a circularity powered by ocular centrism. This circular visual supremacy undergoes – at one particular point – a reversal, thus disrupting the societally prescribed and chiasmatically entwining the characters and the story they are involved with. This cross-shaped shift’s intentionality, steered and fed by genderless spirits, will be analysed in what follows. In order to do so, I cannot but define as precisely as possible the “circular ocular centrism”, starting with a somehow mundane geometrical dimension before coming to a more metaphysical approach. The first thing to be stated is that the Piranesian prison of Millbank clearly and immediately reminds of Dante’s circles of hell in *The divine comedy*. It is made of “spiral, winding and circling staircases” (Waters, 1999, pp. 9, 22, 328). “Circling women form great elliptical loops in the yards” (pp. 14, 17) and

walk into a “circling descent” (p. 28) as though all female visitors and prisoners would go through various circles of hell before possibly heading for paradise. Besides, readers are told that spirits live in spheres, in a global and circular world (p. 191). “I might have moved, then, like a spirit, from one dull sphere into a higher, better one” (p. 166) says Selina who, before going to Millbank, lived in a world made of dark circles at Mrs Brink’s house: “I felt the circle gazing at me” (p. 231). In this sentence, as well as in the whole novel, circularity unites with ocular centrism. For it is *the Eye* which rules through most of the novel, *the Eye* which slyly spies on the women prisoners at Millbank. Even the vertical iron flap to view the prisoners is called the Eye (p. 23). “To gaze” – the most recurrent verb in this very vision-oriented rhetoric – echoes what Michel Foucault (2002) used to call the Sovereignty of the Eye in his writings on the Panopticon (pp. 228-264) and, doing so, does of course remind of the all-seeing-eye of divine watchfulness, a borrowed symbol from Antiquity. In *Discipline and punish*, Foucault (2002, pp. 233-239) refers to Jeremy Bentham who, in the 18th century, developed a new model, the panopticon, consisting in seeing everyone and everything from any point of observation without being seen by the ones observed. In the centuries to follow, this structure was to play a key role in designing new carceral institutions. For this very reason, the panopticon can, without any hesitation, be brought into synonymy with the absolute gaze reigning in *Affinity*. This absolute, quasi transcendental, and blinding gaze could also allude to the *pineal eye* (cf. *The passions of the soul*, 1649), a median and sophisticated third eye René Descartes called “the seat of the soul”, that is to say the point of connection between soul and body or to what Georges Bataille referred to as the organ of excess and delirium in *Visions of excess* (1927-1939). It is a disproportionate and dislocated eye whose gaze is so exaggeratingly hubristic that it leads to the total eclipse of usual vision as though all marks of existential referentiality had been suspended or completely discarded. Why all these elements being pointed at here are to be given pride of place in Waters’ novel needs no further explanation. The power of any all-seeing entity, as well as the suspension or even eradication of existential referentiality, as well as the hubris-dictated dilatation as well as the tiltings, as we shall see later on, un-dig the ground and pre-herald what is due to change. In other words, these precursors pave the way into genderlessness; they are its allies from the very start of the novel.

Most of the time, in *Affinity*, the Eye simultaneously stares and dilates, a practice which, according to Philippa Berry in *Shakespeare’s feminine endings*, is familiar to well-known Shakespearian characters. As a matter of fact, Berry writes that Shakespearian eyes often “seem ready to burst out of their sockets [...] at the excessive horror of that which they

see or think they see” (Berry, 1999, p. 78). The expansion or dilation of their pupils happens to be in relation with the laying open, the disclosure, the revelation of [dramatic] matters (Berry, 1999, p. 89). In *Affinity*, Selina’s eyes do frequently “widen” (Waters, 1999, p. 88), then close, then open again, “seem[ing] full, still, of an awful knowledge” (p. 89); “seeming larger and green as cat’s” eyes (p. 164); seeming “larger than ever and dark as a magician’s” (pp. 272, 273). In this context, it seems more than relevant to underline that the spirits’ and spiritualists’ dilating eyes are oxymoronically related to colours *and* darkness. They are either green or dark. It goes without saying that darkness unequivocally sends one back to the world of magicians, as we are reminded of in the quotation above. As for colours, they characterise a specific ability of the eye which is apparently solely given to spirits and their human incarnations. In the cabinet of wax at the British National Association of Spiritualists, where dozens of “bulging eyes” (Waters, 1999, p. 130) lull, Mr Hither, the person in charge, tells Margaret Prior that most people in England are deprived of such an ability, having “a condition of the eye” (p. 225). This implies, according to him, that they have “a condition preventing them from appreciating” a specific colour, in particular the colour red, until their eye “has corrected itself” (p. 226), if it ever does. Therefore, according to Mr Hither’s definition, “to see the scarlet” means to see the spirits (p. 226). In other words, the dilated perception of colours, and in particular of red, is only indebted to a bunch of selected persons the spirits have developed an affinity with and envisage to seduce. It is then only fitting that, throughout the novel, these scarlet seers recurrently blush. How could they not! At this stage, it seems more than appropriate to remind the readers of this paper that blushing, as a gestural emblem, belongs to what I am inclined to call “a natural body language”, as opposed to “a learned body language” resulting from a civilizational assimilation process, and that this natural body language, unlike words, always tells the truth. It is common knowledge that many scientists, in particular psychologists whose tasks occasionally consist in detecting lies, have proven that a natural body language does not depend on culture, age, social backgrounds, sex or gender. As it seems, there are only different types of situations into which human beings recurrently fall and to which their bodies naturally and identically respond. Should bodily expressions vary from one another, it would then be solely due to what has been learned and interiorised during educational processes. The late French anthropologist, Françoise Héritier (2009), was convinced that all the human cultures and societies of this universe shared an identical cerebral modus, “un même fonctionnement cérébral” (p. 79). In other words, we all possess a common anatomical pedestal from which natural/unlearned as well as unnatural/learned bodily languages will emerge. This leads us to

deduce that, in *Affinity*, blushing is a natural and therefore a genderless bodily “revealer” and that the “blushers”, when they genderlessly blush, make their “scarlet seeing” visible to the gazing Eye. Of course, in the novel, some of these blushers remain peripheral and do not succumb any further to the spirits’ attempted empowerment. For instance, Margaret’s sister-in-law, Helen, when Margaret evokes their forbidden past (Waters, 1999, p. 204), or Stephen, Margaret’s brother, when apostrophising his sister about the drugs she takes and, doing so, triggering back her own blushing (p. 293) or the maid Vigers (Ruth) when addressed by Margaret Prior (p. 294). Yet, being all closely related to Margaret Prior, these secondary blushers do play a key-role. Their unconscious intervention could indeed be read as a “diving board” into Margaret’s (already genderless) “scarlet seeing”. In any case, they strengthen it uniquely.

3. Epistrophic reversals, tiltings and twitchings

Yet if – in *Affinity* – the dilated gaze of the dark-eyed spiritualist with a special ability to see the scarlet does prize straight centeredness, direct focus, frontal fixity and geometrical circularity, it also undergoes – as mentioned before – a reversal with fatal consequences. For at one particular point, which is Margaret Prior’s visit to the reading-room of the Association of Spiritualists, it merges into a kind of carnival-like turning about – carnival being known for its inverting mania –, as though it was sucked up by a kind of *epistrophe* (cf. Neoplatonism; e.g. Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*), which is the return to the centre from whence we all came, the conversion to the self, the re-orientation of lower levels to higher spheres, the return to and the ecstatic union with the mystical One, thus implying here a cross-shaped shift in the cosmic process at work. The novel then redirects its route and indulges into a chiasmus-related scheme powered by spiritualism and spirits. It is indeed only after Margaret Prior’s visit to the reading-room of the Association that the Gaze stops widening out at Millbank (and in the reading-room), where it previously dwelt, and starts invading Prior’s private sphere. Therefore, the Association, which is nothing but a spiritualist secluded nest, acts as a pivot, a chiasmic trigger, a revolving panel with overwhelming transforming powers (Waters, 1999, pp. 125-154, 224-229), remaining though an invisible vacuum for the people with “a condition of the eye”¹ as long as their eyes have not corrected themselves. It has a reading-room and a terrifying cabinet of wax, reminding of both a cabinet of curiosities, exhibiting the most

¹ “The name-plate was never there, I am sure, two years ago; or perhaps I only never saw it then, when spiritualism was nothing to me.” (Waters, 1999, p. 127)

exotic items brought back from further countries in the 17th century (“The cabinet of spirit-moulds”, p. 229) and the chamber of horrors at Madame Tussaud’s. It is both fascinating and repelling. The wax cabinet contains various moulds of distorted limbs made by spirits. Mediums bring the ghosts that make the moulds: “the spirit obliges with a hand or a foot, or whatever; the limb is first plunged into the wax and then, very swiftly, into the water. When the spirit departs, it leaves a mould behind” (p. 130). There are “spirit-photographs, infant spirits, participating spirits”. It is all a “matter of the spirit” (p. 131). One of the casts there, the swollen hand of Peter Quick, has been “materialised” by Selina Dawes, under the “hand of her Spirit-Control, Peter Quick” himself (p. 130). It is as though the wax would invade the cabinet, as though there were “bulging eyes” and hands (p. 130) creeping all over². All these frightening and invading items materialise the crossing of the absolute Gaze, and of the genderlessness it helps introducing, to the private spheres of the newly elected one, Margaret Prior.

If the places occupied by spirits are pivots, panels constantly revolving, spiritualists themselves are due to be inhabited by forces akin to tiltings and reversals. Selina Dawes *is* indeed a reversal herself. Her whole being is a mere “turning about”, a real *epistrophe*. She is first of all depicted as a religious being having “[...] the signs of the stigmata on a saint” (Waters, 1999, p. 163) or even as an angel (pp. 72, 153). When seeing her protégée for the first time, Margaret Prior finds that she resembles a saint or an angel in one of Carlo Crivelli’s paintings (p. 27), the *Veritas*, portraying a “stern and melancholy girl” carrying “the sun in the form of a blazing disk, and a looking-glass” (p. 52). “Stern” is a recurrent adjective applied to Selina in relation with Crivelli’s painting³, meaning she is relentless, unyielding, and inflexible like the (apparently) unflinching gaze inhabiting her at Millbank.

However, in spite of all these angel-like attributes, Selina Dawes constantly acts like a chameleon whose moods, tone and voice unexpectedly switch (Waters, 1999, pp. 86, 88). She admits being prone to mutations. The fact that these mutations seem to be triggered by the frequent tilting of her head (pp. 86, 109, 111, 245), a movement usually related to animals, and more specifically to birds, which confirms, at this stage, a more concrete passage into an “otherness”, deserves closer attention. Note though that Selina’s head is not the only “thing”

² Margaret Prior gazing at the “bulging wax” (Waters, 1999, p. 131) also reminds of Selina’s arms sealed with wax during the dark séances (p. 152) and a piece of glistening wax is also to be seen on Selina’s cell’s floor when Margaret visits her after a prisoner’s breaking out (Jacobs, p. 187) – as though the all seeing Eye was lying there, watching it all, “until the spirit’s purpose is fulfilled”, creeping up, in and out at Millbank, literally taking over and controlling the whole place (p. 188).

³ At the National Gallery, when looking at a girl copying Crivelli’s *Annunciation* (Waters, 1999, p. 243) Margaret Prior admires “the face and hands of the Virgin – the face was Selina’s, and seemed realer to me than my own”. Back home, Margaret pins up a reproduction of the painting in her room, thinking of Selina (p. 350).

the tiltings transpire through. Tables tilt at dark séances. Margaret Prior repeatedly tilts her notebook so that light falls onto what she has just written in it for Selina (p. 116). Even her bulging book tilts when she finds the velvet collar with the lock of brass in it (p. 294). Mr Hither tilts his head at the Association (p. 128). The carpet in Margaret Prior's room tilts "like the deck of a ship" when she finds a piece of Selina's hair on her pillow (p. 258). Her thoughts tilt when visiting Selina and planning her escape (p. 299). The tilting of Margaret Prior's fetish book, when passing from one hand to the other, is nothing but a translation of the spiritual transfer taking place between the two women. In a nutshell, all these tiltings, whose list could be easily pursued further, clearly show how ubiquitous the *epistrophe* is: everything reverses, turns, pivots (upon), moves from one to the other. Even the keys opening and fastening the Millbank cells are constantly turned in and out (p. 115). Margaret Prior permanently turns in and out waiting for the gates to let her in and out. Last, not least, if Selina sits at Millbank, it is because the "spirits had *turned* naughty" (p. 85, my emphasis)⁴.

As though all this did not suffice, there is always some twisting and twitching crossing the way of the spiritually predisposed characters at one point or the other in the novel. The following enumeration might seem superfluous. Yet, it indispensably consolidates what has been previously detected and shall not therefore be kept silent. Margaret's heart, for instance, is depicted as "a terrible kind of twist" (Waters, 1999, p. 245). She twitches when brought in contact with the spirits' fluid: "I felt myself twitch with the impulse to step and catch the fluid she [Miss Brewer] had wasted" (p. 250). She warns Helen about the "spirit-powers twist[ing] within you if you don't let them out" (p. 260). Miss Haxby declares to Margaret that "prison habits can turn" "twisting ways" (p. 268). Margaret and Selina are said to have "a twisting-connection" – "I felt an answering twisting in her" (p. 272). Margaret twists her hands "until the gloves made her flesh burn" (p. 272). "The twisting dust" whirls around Selina's cell (p. 272). She twitches when she meets Margaret outside the prison (p. 329) and last, not least, Viger's bed sheets twist in the deserted chamber (p. 341).

Besides, at the very end of the novel, the coir Selina weaves after having been to the dark cell is not as innocent as it might seem at first read for coir, a "fibre from the husk of the coconut used in making rope and matting" (*Collins Concise Dictionary*, 1989, p. 249), comes from the Malayalam "kayaru" and means "to be twisted". The fact that, after this episode,

⁴ Selina also turns white as chalk when arriving at Mrs Brink's house (almost looking like a ghost, temporarily losing "her colours", Waters, 1999, p. 118). Mr Hither at the British National Association of Spiritualists says that Selina Dawes has "turned her back to" her spiritualists' friends since she is at Millbank (p. 134). When in her cell on the last evening before her escape she turns twice away from Margaret Prior, the reader guesses that she has betrayed her all the way. "She turned from me as if it hurt to have me gaze at her". She cannot bear Margaret's gaze any longer (p. 309).

Margaret Prior calls Selina's betrayal "a twisting" – "your twisting is done" (Waters, 1999, p. 351) – clearly shows that Selina has incorporated the twisting contained in the coir while weaving it. Actually, the spirits are the ones who invisibly instrumentalised the coir to find their way through her and have her act under their command. Therefore, the twisting or twitching's intentionality is to destabilise what has been considered to be "normal" and open up a crack within an entity, human or not, in order to creep up inside it and take over from there on. For this very purpose, the "unflinching" gaze of the first visits at Millbank has no choice but to temporarily flinch and it does indeed flinch (pp. 44, 46). It does get more and more unsettled and unsettling, "unfocused" – that is to say unfixed – (p. 248). The closer the story comes to an end, the more the eyes seem to disintegrate as though spitting out puzzled looks (p. 254). The permanent twisting and turning seems to have imposed (provisory) chaos upon fixity but it is a necessary chaos for, as I mentioned before, all these components are liberators paving the way into genderlessness. The constant turning about, away, from and to at Millbank after Selina's escape is no exception and no coincidence: everyone nervously pivots back and forth, Margaret keeps turning away from the matrons who turn back to her, then from her before she turns back to them. It is as though their eyes followed the swinging of a pendulum or the ticking of a bomb, as though everything and everyone had gone out of control, as though automatic puppets were going berserk, their mechanical guts having gone wild. All this until the spirits' assault has been completed. Until the genderlessness has replaced the fixed societal markers and Margaret Prior has been freed. Unfortunately, genderlessness is not automatic, unlike genderfullness, if I may use such a term to refer to the opposite notion. Genderlessness has to be fought for, in Margaret's world as well as in the present world we live in.

4. Margaret Prior's predisposition

One should not omit to mention though that Margaret Prior has – against all odds and this from the very start – a latent and non-conformist predisposition that facilitates her translation into genderlessness later on in the novel. She – for instance – never agreed to the marital union her family wanted to talk her into. She always refused to enter a convent. She felt more for her sister-in-law, Helen, than what her rigid education allowed her to and – what was quite uncommon at that time for a woman – she worked with her father, a renowned scholar, until his death. Nonetheless, in this family pre-life, she was known to have had "dismal spirits" (Waters, 1999, p. 33). Note the use of the term "spirits" here as a very subtle

prolepsis. Her mother even thinks that her going out too much “invites her old illness back” (p. 223), that is to say the spirits which are, according to her, nothing but a flaw. Therefore, Margaret Prior’s predisposition to “otherness” had always invisibly floated around her, like a nimbus or a surrounding aura finding ways of expression through atypical items like drugs, ghosts, visions and quickenings. Indeed, prior to the encounter with Selina, Margaret takes – first against her will – chloral, a soporific and hypnotiser. Her mother forces her to ingurgitate a daily dose. Then the latter switches to a stronger medicine, laudanum (p. 258), after the fit her daughter has when finding Selina’s hair on her pillow. A little while later, Margaret deliberately takes laudanum, increasing the dose every time, as though anesthetizing herself or – one could say – encapsulating herself into a temporary stand-by, secretly and unconsciously waiting for a new life (p. 303). Sometimes, she even takes chloral and laudanum simultaneously to make her brother worry for her health. The narrator also confides that she took morphia two years before committing suicide after her affair with Helen (p. 321). Apart from this affinity with drugs, leading her to step out of her usual wits and habits, she draws closer and closer to ghosts. She describes herself as a “spinster” and, immediately after, compares unmarried women to ghosts (p. 58). She also admits that her flesh is streaming away from her: “I am becoming my own ghost” (p. 289). Her mother notices that she is always as pale as a spectre when coming back from Millbank (p. 223). Moreover, she frequently has terrible visions (p. 201), heralding the taking over of the ocular component mentioned in the previous paragraphs. She suddenly sees, for instance, her mother ageing or a spot of wax moving in Selina’s cell at Millbank or her father unclothed and sexless (p. 210) or the matrons wearing the prisoner’s belongings (p. 237). All these things, unreal in the reality of most of the other characters, seem more than real in her reality, thus unknowingly embracing the quantum theory or the fundamentals of transdisciplinarity, both acknowledging various levels of reality within one universe. As for the little “quickenings” she is occasionally prone to, especially when visiting Selina Dawes at Millbank, they are equally revealing. Of course, the word “quickenings” immediately reminds us of Peter Quick, Selina’s spirit, whom Margaret first associates with the feeling a mother-to-come has when the “baby within her gives its first kick” (p. 207). One could also interpret the “quickenings” as little societal earthquakes shattering the constructs and opening new cracks into a life-to-come. Once more, all the signs previously listed pave the way towards Margaret’s entry into genderlessness and freedom. They are even supported by a virulent physical transformation. When Selina confesses her affinity to her and her wish to flee out of Millbank with her, Margaret’s “face bulg[es] from its collar, her fingers swell in their gloves [!]” (p. 276). It is as

though spirit-matters were literally seeping and breaking through her. They help reveal and complete a metamorphosis which had actually been lurking in the background from the very beginning of the novel, long before the encounter of the two female protagonists.

5. Genderless metonymic substitutes

The wax cabinet – with all the materialising items it contains – acts, by appointment to the almighty spirits, like a metonymic substitute which is perfectly and solely genderless since it mirrors genderless spirits. Another metonymical reduction worth mentioning, also to be found in the Association’s reading-room, is the “soiled and grimy white-gloved hand” of a ghostly and elderly lady (Waters, 1999, pp. 128, 131, 133, 136). If the hand, in this case, does belong to a female character, it may be declared sexed but not gendered for this “grubby white hand” (p. 153) gestures within a cabinet of ghost hands which have freed themselves from any social construct they might have obeyed to in a previous sphere or life. They now simply lay on selected visitors, thus invisibly rehearsing what Selina Dawes did with young Madeleine Silvester earlier on in the novel. This genderless gloved hand, detached from the norm, executes the orders of the all-seeing-eye. Therefore, the gloved-hand carrier and missionary does follow a specific ocular path: it first gazes at something which is being looked at by someone else (p. 153) and then at this very person looking (p. 153), which means that what is being looked at undergoes a double ocular screening. While screening two entities at the same time, the gloved-hand’s gaze imprints itself on what is being looked at with the firm intention to be, from there on, absorbed and interiorised by the one looking. The mission of the metonymic substitute consists indeed in distorting, “un-taming” and redirecting the novice’s gaze in order to replace what Philippa Berry, in her study of the feminine in Shakespearian plays, calls the “material or worldly vision by an immaterial and spiritual vision” (Berry, 1999, p. 80). Even though the chosen one may attempt, at first, to resist the gaze’s efforts to take possession of his/her being⁵. However, whenever it happens, vision is de-materialised, de-socialised as well as de-gendered. Deconstruction transits via the ocular component. Going back to Margaret Prior, she does not necessarily yield easily to this decomposition, in spite of

⁵ The redirected gaze or ocular manipulation at Millbank: the feminine inner darkness (the uncanny feminine flux) – reflected by the prison’s unsettling inner obscurity – is redirected/re-conducted into a dazzling light, a sunny radiance, a translucency by the female spiritualist, Selina Dawes, whose cell is by the way on the upper floor (like her room was at Mr Vinci’s house, Waters, 1999, p. 93), high up as though the darkness from below was canalised, pulverised and thrown out after having been transformed. Even Margaret Prior, when in Selina’s cell, has some “sign about her, something dishevelled or illuminating” (p. 189). Darkness has entered a new dimension. “My [Margaret’s] room is dark, but darkness is different to me now” (p. 304).

her pre-disposition, being still entangled within the conventions of her strict upbringing. She first tries to avoid the ocular grip of the white-gloved lady. She shuns returning her gaze and whenever she turns to Peter Quick's hand cast, she restrains herself from looking too intensively at it (pp. 153-154) as though she was unconsciously dreading what is yet to come. However, the fact that, at the end of the novel, she is left on her own, livid as a spiritual ghost, with only her gloved hand to hold and support her (p. 328), proves that the spirits have succeeded in taking over. She has become one of their metonymic substitutes, one of their gloved hands, and has finally freed herself from the social conventions that had weighed down on her for so long. In other words, the spirits have transferred their "genderlessness" onto her.

One more item is worth mentioning at this stage: the hair-filled locket, which Margaret Prior carefully hides from her mother and which was given to her by her dead father. As we rapidly guess, the hair belonged to Helen, her sister-in-law, with whom she had been forbiddingly in love. This medallion can therefore be seen as a fossil emerging out of a forced frozen past as well as a (reversed) metonymic substitute. Indeed, it is as though Margaret was wearing a kind of reversed Medusa around her neck, for the locks, which have been detached from the head they once belonged to, are now locked into a stony grave-like locket as though they had themselves turned into stone instead of turning into stone anyone gazing at them, thus inverting the well-known Gorgon's act. What once froze is now being frozen, which means that there is a switch from active to passive. The mesmerisation of the victims requests the intervention of both eyes *and* hair. Eyes and hair actually stand in a permanent correlation at Millbank where all convicts, reluctantly protesting when having their hair cut at their arrival (Waters, 1999, p. 77), hear the matron in charge say to Margaret Prior: "You would think I was after their eyes, wouldn't you, Miss Prior?" (p. 77). Besides, when Margaret Prior visits the clothes store room of Millbank and consciously peeps into Selina's box where her belongings and hair are kept, she immediately associates the hair with a snake (pp. 239-240): "It felt heavy and dry as snakes are", "The plait of hair might really have been a snake". In that sentence, Selina is depicted as a Gorgon whose hair – only a curling rope of it – is, later, mysteriously brought to Margaret's pillow at home (p. 258). The locket, locked in the closet beside the chloral glass at night, and very close to the pillow, mysteriously disappears (pp. 89-90). Numerous locket-related hints are to be found throughout the novel. The prosecuting lawyer at Dawes' trial, for instance, is a man called Locke. It goes without saying that this wittingly heralds both the conviction-to-come of the female spiritualist, Selina Dawes, for she will be locked into prison, and the "locket" at Margaret's neck because this

locket is, in a way, her private prison lock. Every time Selina reaches her emotionally, her heart beats fiercely “at the place her locket used to hang” (p. 276). She has become Selina’s prisoner. A temporary physical and emotional imprisonment unconsciously leading to a spiritual emancipation. Therefore, when she says “I watched the turning of the key in the stiff prison lock. I wished the key were mine” (p. 230), she does not only mean the lock to Selina’s cell but also her own lock. She is unknowingly paving the way for her own release after her own transformation.

When Selina relates of the dark circles at Mrs Brink’s, she tells how Peter Quick had once fastened her tightly on a chair, saying to the worried attendants that the cords would held her “mortal parts” but not her spirit which could not be bound or locked⁶ (Waters, 1999, p. 232). Furthermore, while Selina is about to unlock Millbank’s locks – which according to the porter had always been a trouble (p. 312) – and escape, Margaret insists on her house being tightly locked (p. 297)⁷. Then Selina unfastens Millbank’s locks “as if they were made of butter” (p. 325) and vanishes. Mrs Jelf, the Millbank key keeper, meets Margaret Prior to explain why Selina did not turn up as previously arranged. Fully upset, Margaret gives the matron the key to her own house so that she can unlock the door. Inside the unlocked house, the lost locket miraculously reappears. Mrs Jelf explains to Margaret that Selina had stolen it, then given it to her, telling her that the curls it contains were curls of the child she, Mrs Jelf, had once lost (p. 334). Through this climactic revelation and last switch, the locket seems to be trapped again, this time in a maze of lies and betrayals. Yet, when finally closing and hiding it behind her gown, Mrs Jelf invisibly seals a re-appropriation act. She makes it hers again, liberating Margaret of the past it contains. Margaret tears the velvet collar with the lock of brass from her neck. It fiercely resists her grips, as though wanting to strangle her. She finally cuts it with her father’s cigar knife. It falls onto the floor, making the shape of an S, “in the form of an S”, reminding once more, of the serpent-headed Gorgon and of Selina (p. 338). The S subsists, but severed from the rest.

⁶ There is a phonetics kinship between “to look” and “to lock”, hinting at the grasping all-seeing-eye.

⁷ “The door to the house was fastened at half-past nine” (Waters, 1999, p. 302) as though she needed a breaking/interrupting counterpart to persuade herself not to do it. On St Agnes’ Eve, the night Selina is supposed to escape and join her, Margaret Prior bids Vigers to “make all the doors and windows very fast”, she hears her “slam the bolts”, check the fastenings and turn the key into her own lock (p. 313).

6. Conclusion

In *Affinity*, spirits and spiritualists – Selina Dawes, Ruth-Vigers, Peter Quick – are depicted as devils and crooks. No doubt. But they are also chiastically crossed with angels and angels chiastically identified with devils. Therefore, devils should be de-diabolised. Besides, being “sexless and genderless” (Waters, 1999, p. 210), they remind us that everything is not indelibly defined and that it has to be permanently re-defined. Nothing is fixed. Everything is interconnected. In *Affinity*, dialectically constructed beings are deconstructed and societally fixed norms, like gender, undermined. Remember Margaret Prior saying: “We [Selina and I] were joined in the spirit and joined in the flesh – I was her own *affinity*. We had been cut, two halves together, from a single piece of shining matter” (p. 336). Then, *Affinity* could well be the story of one single character, reflected by his/her shadow, his/her double, his/her alter ego, his/her genuine fake. *Affinity* could well be... However, if this still remains to be found, the way into genderlessness, pre-sketched by a myriad of enlarging and twisting precursors, has clearly, unmistakably, been revealed. Or so we hope. This article does come to an end but an end is always a beginning and as genderlessness is an open space akin to the most diverse beginnings, one should remain alert to them all. “What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning / The end is where we start from”, T.S. Eliot (2002, p. 208), *Four Quartets*, *Little Giddings*.

References

- Bataille, G. (1985). *Visions of excess: Selected writings, 1927-1939*. Allan Stoekl (Trans. & Ed.). Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- Berry, P. (1999). *Shakespeare's feminine endings*. London: Routledge.
- Collins Concise Dictionary*. (1989). Glasgow: Collins.
- Descartes, René. (1989) 1649. *The passions of the soul*. Stephen Voss (Trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing. (Originally published 1649).
- Eliot, T. S. (2002). Four quartets. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber. (Originally published 1942).
- Foucault, M. (2002). *Surveiller et punir*. Paris: Gallimard, pp. 228-264. (Originally published 1975).
- Héritier, F. (2009). *Une pensée en mouvement*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Waters, S. (1999). *Affinity*. London: Virago Press.

Hélène FAU wrote a PhD thesis in British literature entitled “Mouvements baroques et néo-baroques dans l’œuvre romanesque de Jeanette Winterson: entrée dans l’au-delà du postmodernisme?” under the aegis of Professor Nicole Boireau (Université de Lorraine, Metz, France). She has given papers on contemporary British writers at various SAES and SEAC Congresses and published two articles in previous issues of *Gender Studies*. Her research also focuses on textual iconography and gender in both English and French fiction. She currently teaches French Literature, civilisation and language at the French Department of the Universität des Saarlandes in Saarbrücken, Germany. She is also a member of the International Research Centre, CIRET (Centre de Recherches et d’Etudes Transdisciplinaires), co-founded by the Romanian scholar Basarab Nicolescu. <http://ciret-transdisciplinarity.org>