Redemptive Mourning: Virginia Woolf's Transformation of the Elegiac Form

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I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it.

—Emmanuel Levinas

In 1925, after beginning work on *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf writes in her diary: "I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel.' A new — by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?" (*Diary* 34). Much critical attention has been paid to this turn to the elegiac in Woolf's work but the elegiac tradition had already haunted two of her previous novels, *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Critics have since quarreled over the particular qualities of Woolf's narratives that would allow us to either align her works within a traditional elegiac paradigm or to categorize her novels as anti- elegies that are intended to wholly subvert, satirize, or deconstruct elegiac convention. Those who find an oppositional discourse at work in Woolf's adoption of this form have described her novels by turns as "anti-elegy" (Spargo), "fiction-elegy" (Smythe), reconstructive feminist elegy (Schenck, Susan Bennett Smith), "satiric elegy" (Zwerdling), "cultural elegy" (Stevenson and Goldman), and modernist "self-elegy" (Ramazani). While it is clear that Woolf's experimental narratives serve to "supplant" the conventional form of the novel, and though her fiction elicits a critical reappraisal of the elegiac tradition, it would be misleading to regard these works as anti-elegiac. Rather, Woolf reinvigorates and reforms the elegiac tradition by employing it in working-through the ethico-existential problem of modern mourning. That is, in the attempt to find a stance of grief that is all one's own, a position in which one comports oneself towards death authentically. For Woolf, this mode of comportment would entail a perpetual resistance to the consolatory function of conventional elegies.

Woolf's elegiac works, in particular *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, serve as counter-elegies or perhaps novel-elegies in that they resist and reconstruct received conventions in order to produce a new elegiac form that is more responsible and ethically cognizant of the radical alterity of the other who is mourned. Unlike elegies from Milton to Shelley that thematize death in a way that makes the deaths of Lycidas and Adonais/Keats, for example, practically interchangeable, placing them within a formulaic work of mourning that dependably proceeds from despair to consolation, idealizing the transcendent mourned, Woolf's novel-elegies are consistently non-consolatory. Here, the resolution of grief is always deferred. Though Freud would claim that mourning in this way is pathologically melancholic, by honoring the radical asymmetry of the mourner and the mourned, the self and the other, Woolf develops novel-elegies that undermine what Clifton Spargo has termed the "fantasy of reciprocity" found in traditional elegies, and in doing so, creates a more ethical, more responsible literary work of mourning.

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Many critical readers of Woolf have recognized her opposition to consolatory resolution and insofar as this outcome is a fundamental component of the traditional elegy, they attribute her resistance to a wholesale renovation of the form. Moreover, they see this as an indication of Woolf's refusal to mourn, as her inability and unwillingness to grieve. For example, Mark Spilka claims that her "lifelong inability to love...seems to have been peculiarly intertwined with her lifelong inability to grieve" (7). Similarly, Tammy Clewell contends that Woolf's elegiac style is a function of her feminism, aimed at opposing the "consolatory paradigms that neutralize grief in antiquated salves and perpetuate [patriarchal] gender values" (199). She goes on to claim that by "waging a gendered form of rebellion against the aim of closure, Woolf's texts define a deliberate refusal to mourn as the only adequate response to death and wartime destruction" (199). Like many critics, Clewell often conflates the refusal of consolation with the refusal to mourn. Though Clewell fails to make this distinction, she accurately recognizes in Woolf's elegies that "only by refusing consolation and *sustaining grief* can we accept responsibility for the difficult task of performing private and public memory" (219, emphasis added). Clewell and Spilka, among others, misinterpret Woolf's anti- consolatory stance as a refusal to mourn or as a form of deficient, even pathological, mourning. Despite this erroneous conflation, Clewell rightly sees that "Woolf redefines mourning as an ongoing experience, an endless process where the living separate from the dead without completely severing attachments" (2). For critics like Celeste Schenck, it is this tenacious attachment to the mourned other that makes Woolf's novel-elegiac form a revisionary, feminist work of mourning. Ultimately, though, these readers have failed to recognize that Woolf's choice to allow her wounds to remain open, to take part in a working-through that is never complete, and to refuse to forget the mourned other, constitute the ethical nature of her elegies and her commitment to our responsibility for the other's death. Her rebellion against consolation is not a refusal to mourn, but rather a radically persistent grieving that recognizes a responsibility for the other that is not redeemed upon death. Instead, it is in this abiding openness to the past, this interminable and vigilant memory that allows for the possibility of redemption.

For those working from a psychoanalytic model of mourning, Freud and Derrida for example, the refusal or inability to be consoled is the mark of failed mourning. While Freud opposes this pathological, melancholic work of mourning to 'normal' bereavement, Derrida contends that it is the imminent failure of mourning that reveals the alterity of the other and the radical asymmetry that constitutes the ethical relation of the self and the other. For Derrida, failed mourning discloses "an essential anachrony in our being exposed to the other," indicating "the other's singularity and our own mortality" (Clewell 207). Derrida claims that "the acknowledgment of another's death entails an acknowledgment of our own death" and it is this "acknowledgment [that] names the condition for our ethical orientation in the world" (Clewell 207). Characteristically forwarding a deconstructionist fusion of Freud, Heidegger, and Levinas, Derrida argues that mourning "would have to fail in order to succeed" (173). According to Derrida, this failure prevents the reduction of "the lost other to an object for the mourner" (Clewell 207). The failure of mourning is characterized by an endless grieving which forgoes recovery and consolation. It is this interminability that makes grieving ethical in that it respects the "absolute excess" and radical alterity of the other that cannot be objectified in the process of closure and consolation. For Derrida, the failure of mourning is its success insofar as it maintains an ethical relation to the other as well as contributing to

our authentic comportment towards our own death. For Heidegger, we should recall, it is the manner in which we comport ourselves towards our imminent death that constitutes our way of living and our relation both to ourselves and to others. It is only when we become aware that the other's death cannot be thematized, experienced, or represented, that the other's death is that which is wholly their own, that we recognize the radical asymmetry that prevents the other's death from being fully worked-through. In Woolf's case, the aspects of her literary work of mourning that seem to indicate her failure to grieve are in fact the traits that signify the success of her grief and reveal her counter-elegies' ethical acknowledgment of alterity. It is her understanding of loss, trauma, and the wounds left by violence that conditions Woolf's social and political critique, for it is our relation to our mortality that grounds our "ethical orientation in the world."

Gillian Beer has written that "death was [Woolf's] special knowledge" (35). Indeed, her elegies, pouring forth from a wellspring of grief and trauma, seem to proclaim just such a tortured knowledge. But perhaps knowledge is not the most accurate word. This connotes that the other's death is something graspable, something that can be categorized and objectified by thetic understanding. But the untimely deaths of her mother, her sister Stella, and her brother Thoby, each exceed Woolf's capacity—or her desire—to comprehend. Woolf recognizes the profound incongruence, the gaping abyss that stands between even the most intimate of relations, and sees in this aporia an untraversable distance that will prevent her from ever knowing others, even her own family. Woolf conceptualizes this aspect of intersubjectivity long before the philosophers of such epistemic doubt. The ontological asymmetry that is constitutive of intersubjectivity and the correlative unknowability of the other will continue to haunt Woolf and will serve as a foundation for her new form of elegy and the ethics of mourning that she formulates in these works.

Woolf's first attempt to theorize the asymmetry that divides the self and the mourned other became *Jacob's Room*, an elegy for her brother Thoby who died of typhoid in 1906. The radical alterity of the other and the epistemic limitations that this entails situates the style of her first elegiac experiment. Beer writes that Woolf's elegies "compose themselves about an absence" and indeed *Jacob's Room* is rife with images and scenarios that serve to emphasize Jacob's absence, both literal and figurative. The first and last scenes of the novel provide a frame for the absence that the entire novel laments. In the scene on the beach, Jacob is already lost, inaccessible to us, as he will be throughout the novel, until his absence is most tragically felt when his mother and Bonamy enter his vacant room. When Woolf writes in the manuscript, "let us suppose that the Room will hold [the novel] together," it is not the room itself that serves as the nexus and structural frame of the novel but the absence of Jacob that its emptiness signifies (qtd in Roe xxxviii). Clewell insightfully notes that, "in elegizing Jacob as an irrecoverable absence from the start, Woolf refuses to allow even the narrative of his life to compensate for his loss" (200). By making Jacob figuratively absent from the elegy that mourns him, Woolf refuses to aestheticize or aggrandize his life. By resisting any attempt to represent an interior world that was inaccessible to her, Woolf's elegiac work of mourning remains ethically distant in recognition of the unknowable otherness of the other.

In Jacob, Woolf gives us a character that is continually approached but never inhabited, a character that remains opaque in every way. Not only are we exiled from Jacob's subjectivity, but we are only left with a sketch of his appearance. The episodic narrative of the novel, its unsettling movement, and the ambiguous omniscience of the narration allow us to only marginally come to know Jacob, and while we never encounter his innermost self, we are no more banished to the epistemic periphery than those closest to him.

Woolf traverses this space of the unknowable other both in the form and the content of *Jacob's Room*. The narrator of the novel speaks in an indirect, ambiguous register that problematically relates the thoughts of different characters. At one point, speculatively speaking for Jacob she states, "nobody sees any one as he is...they see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves" (JR 23). Not only does Woolf expound the impossibility of truly perceiving the other, of understanding a person "as he is," at the same time, she takes a critical stance in regard to her own elegiac enterprise, admitting that all elegy is self-elegy, all mourning, the mourning of one's own death. Here, she claims that no one elegizes anyone else; they only elegize themselves.

When the narrator goes on to conclude that "it is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done," it is as if Woolf is describing the way one must read this novel. As in our relations with every other, the insurmountable alterity that separates us demands that our limited understanding of each other be garnered through hints and the ineffable saying that underlies what is said (JR 24). Alex Zwerdling argues that Woolf "wanted to give the sense of someone who remains a permanently unknown quantity," but he does not go far enough with this formulation (900-901). In fact, Woolf resists treating the mourned other as a quantifiable thing. For Woolf, the other is neither a "sum" nor a "whole," but exceeds quantification or a simply cumulative piecing together.

Unlike the traditional elegy that enumerates the laudable characteristics of the mourned, idealizing the innermost qualities of the other's character, Woolf, elegizing her own brother, refrains from such sentimentality. Instead, as a consequence of the asymmetry that founds our sociality, we can only encounter or come to know "the massive fronts" that "conceal [the] secret code" of Jacob/Thoby, and every other (JR 57). While Woolf resists sentimentality and aggrandizing Jacob's death, this aspect of her counter-elegy performs a more ethical work of mourning than what is found in the idealizing poetics of conventional elegy.

But, Woolf does not merely remain mindful of alterity. While her narrator does directly exposit on the epistemic limitations of the ethical relation, the narrative of *Jacob's Room* itself performs and demonstrates the impossibility of entering into the ownmost sphere of the other's subjectivity. Woolf not only mourns her brother, but also the reality of this untraversable abyss that will perpetually prevent her, and all of us, from ever being truly intimate with anyone. She laments, "never was there a harsher necessity! or one which entails greater pain, more certain disaster; for wherever I seat myself, I die in exile" (JR 57). No matter the stance of her narrator, no matter the degree of our supposed intimacy with the other—as Mr. Ramsey will later remind us—"we die each alone." Preserving this separation is necessary for Woolf's creation of an elegy that remains sincere and responsible for the unwanted truth that an imperceptible gulf limits our potential relations. For, "such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love" (JR 70-71).

Because of the grief that results from this "certain disaster"—the impossibility of a reciprocal relation with the other—traditional elegy resorts to idealizing the mourned other in order to recuperate a reciprocity that never really existed. Conversely, Woolf's counter-elegy "question[s] the very premise of reciprocity by reminding us of its impossibility" (Spargo 131). Clifton Spargo contends that the impossibility of reciprocity discovered by the elegiac process "reinscribes the crisis of loss as a matter for ethics" (131). The failure of real intimacy that can result from our inability to truly know one another causes us to develop a "wishful fantasy of reciprocity" in our commemoration

of the lost other that serves a compensatory function. The retrospective fantasy of reciprocity that is formed in response to the burden of failed intimacy is evinced by the trope of idealizing consolation found in traditional elegy. Counter-elegies, such as those written by Woolf, "make us aware that the transcendent premise informing any resolution of grief is really an idealized version of reciprocity" (Spargo 148). With her elegies Woolf interrogates and critiques the commemorative task of the precedent tradition that sought, through the retrospective idealization of the mourned, to restore an illusory reciprocity that would compensate for the failed mutuality that is a consequence of alterity. This "compensatory projection" suppresses human alterity and serves as a "fiction of idealized intimacy" that, in perfecting the other, reduces her to an idyllic symbol that signifies not the lost other, but present regret and the desire for a reciprocal relation that remains impossible. Instead of developing a narrative of intimate relations that would positively commemorate Thoby's life, fictitiously idealizing her lost brother and the connections that were severed by his death, Woolf composes a novel of radical autonomy and separation that, rather than doing an injustice to his memory, is a more ethical remembrance of his life that bears witness to the alterity that she remains responsible for after his death.

It must be noted as well that *Jacob's Room* is not only an elegy for Thoby Stephen, but for all of those who suffered the atrocities of the first World War. The war haunts the reader in advance, looming and anticipated. When Julia Eliot walks along Piccadilly, she experiences an ecstatic moment of prescient memory of the violence to come, in which "the tumult of the present seems like an elegy for past youth and past summers, and there rose in her mind a curious sadness, as if time and eternity showed through skirts and waistcoats, and she saw people passing tragically to destruction" (JR 168). Unlike the romantic, sentimentalized Victorian elegies for the fallen, Woolf writes an elegy for a life that is, in many ways, unexceptional, even relating banal, pedestrian aspects of its hero's life. In doing this she does not merely shy away from the hero worship, glorification, and idealization found in traditional war elegies, rather, with this text, Woolf aims a complex social and political critique at those who would exalt the violence of war. Alex Zwerdling sees *Jacob's Room* as a revisionist elegy that undermines the unethical idealization of the victims of war and the violence that it implicitly validates, even reveres, as the antecedent condition for the formation of heroic figures. He writes: "[Woolf] had an instinctive distrust for reverence of any kind, feeling that it was a fundamentally dishonest mental habit that turned flesh-and-blood human beings into symbolic creatures [and] indirectly glorified war" (903). Instead of turning Jacob into a figure of noble sacrifice, Woolf depicts a death that is "perfectly pointless" (Zwerdling 903). Woolf rejects the "grand frescoes of the heroic imagination" in favor of "the small canvas appropriate to" Jacob's unremarkable life (Zwerdling 911).

By resisting what Celeste M. Schenck claims is the "most important convention of elegy," the "deification of the dead one in a process that lifts him out of nature," Woolf does not allow Jacob—and by association, all those who fell in the war—to become a figure of noble sacrifice (15). The ascension "out of nature" that would conventionally allow for consolation is foreclosed by Woolf. We find no closure or resolution in Jacob's death, only a meaningless loss that Woolf will continue to mourn even when composing *The Waves* years later. For Schenck, the refusal of consolation is a markedly feminist subversion of the masculine elegiac. Moreover, by "refusing to mourn and separate" Woolf's feminist counter-elegiac inverts the "masculine model of redemption" (Schenck 18). This refusal to separate provides a "kind of tentative resolution through attachment

rather than rupture" (Schenck 18). The critical consensus seems to be that Woolf openly refuses to locate any redemptive potential even in her own counter-elegiac work of mourning, but these readers fail to recognize that Woolf does indeed find the possibility of redemption not in the logic of elegiac consolation but in the openness to the past that refuses to relinquish attachments to the mourned. For Woolf, the inauthentic closure of consolatory forgetting is the very negation of the redemptive capacity of vigilant mourning. It is in remaining open to the past and the wounds and traumas that are inscribed there, in continuing to mourn without the hope or desire for a consolatory closure that would entail an irresponsible forgetting that annihilates the alterity of the other, it is by abiding in mourning that we find the possibility of redemption. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote, "the past, therefore, is not past;" in taking her stance of non-consolatory abiding, Woolf remains attached to the mourned other, taking responsibility for their memory, giving testimony on their lives and attesting to the loss that has created a wound that must not be inauthentically healed by unethical, self-serving consolation. Rather than transforming Jacob into an ascendant, idealized hero who, like so many others, nobly sacrificed himself for our freedom, Woolf provides a more sincere, ethical remembrance of the senseless death that was visited upon so many youths of their generation. Jacob *does* become a sacrifice, but his is an unjust death, not a deific symbol of redemption through war. Woolf's counter-elegiac provides a critique of the cult of the hero and the culture that permits such violence to be commemorated in the reverent tradition of the masculine elegy.

But, if the ethical relation of the self and the other demands the recognition of radical asymmetry and (pre-)ontological separation, then how is Woolf's feminist renovation of the elegy more ethical in its commitment to remaining attached to the mourned other? Insofar as Woolf's "endless mourning compels us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept responsibility for the difficult task of remembering the catastrophic losses of the twentieth century," she attempts to forge a connection of vigilant remembrance that not only bears witness to the other, but also to the otherness of the other, the radical alterity that prevents a reciprocity that we so desire as to resort to unethical, compensatory representations of the mourned that eclipse their fundamental autonomy (Clewell 199). The task of ethics is to navigate the paradox of a/symmetry that characterizes our relationships. We are equal, and yet unequal in that we are hostages to the limitations of our own subjectivity.

Much of the phenomenological tradition, which is in its nascent stages when Woolf is writing, is built upon discerning how we are to responsibly found a relation with the other when our onto-existential lot is to be always already inaccessible to one another. Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas, contemporary thinkers within this tradition, have taken slightly divergent stances concerning this paradox, the brief examination of which will help us to better understand how Woolf's opposition to the elegiac tradition's "fantasy of reciprocity" is an attempt to forge a new critical ethics of mourning that does not violate the intersubjective separation that makes human community a monadological "plurality of constitutive centers" rather than an "undifferentiated collective" (Zahavi 121). Woolf's early initiation of this ethical discourse is yet another proof of her status as a vanguard artist and thinker. In response to Levinas's claims concerning the necessary, pre-ontological separation that divides the self and the other, constituting alterity, Ricoeur argues that "ethics becomes impossible when the condition of selfhood deteriorates to a point where ethical action appears inhibited or prevented by a deficiency of reciprocity"

(Spargo 171). However, as with Woolf, for Levinas "ethics as reciprocity leads toward a defined set of answerable responsibilities that anticipate fulfillment, thus establishing a relation of equivalence between the responsive self and that to which it responds and, ironically, bringing to an end the very source of its provocation in the relation of inequality" (Spargo 171). Similarly, according to Ricoeur "the problem of ethics is how to admit this inequality through which the other has been designated without proposing it as irremediable" (Spargo 171). "The task of ethical solicitude," therefore, is a "'search for equality in the midst of inequality,' with ethics demanding to be returned always to the idiom of the possible" (Spargo 172). Woolf's counter-elegies are intended to contribute to the interminably deferred fulfillment of her responsibility to those that she has lost, "establishing a relation of equivalence" where the possibility of redemption in her openness to the past can "brin[g] to an end...the relation of inequality" (Spargo 171). Woolf's ethics of mourning provides a model of successful grieving that is able to overcome the asymmetry that prevents our unification in life by enabling us—in bearing witness to the mourned other—to be symmetrically attached in a relationship of responsible reciprocity.

Christine Froula writes that, with *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf is able to create a post- theological "communal elegy" for both the survivors and the victims of WWI, moving "beyond the 'satiric elegy' of *Jacob's Room* to explore the genre's full profundity, complexity, and power" (87). In this, her next elegiac work, Woolf moves from a personal, individual work of mourning, to the public sphere of communal mourning where her critical lens is trained on the culture that enabled the wound of the war to be inflicted and now endeavors to expel any remembrance that would reflect its role in the catastrophe. As with *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway* elegizes the victims of sacrificial violence, but on a scale that implicates the failure of English culture to take responsibility for the violence of WWI.

Froula offers a Girardian reading of the elegy, one that accurately identifies Septimus as a prophetic witness who is made into a scapegoat, a pariah, by a community that must expel the memory of the war by essentially murdering a survivor who is being driven mad by his interiorized testimony. From Septimus's tortured memory of the "collective murder that his civilization has commissioned from him" comes the "astonishing revelation" that he seeks to impart to a "society strategically blind to its own violence;" but when his testimony falls on deaf ears, labeled as madness, as shell shock, and Septimus finds that his revelation can only be given "through his sacrificial death," he "foreknows that he must sacrifice his elegiac progress" in order to "perform the revelation that no one heeds" (Froula 113, 117). Septimus "the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer," would reveal the hypocrisy and truth of the war through his attestation, his "premonition of 'the birth of a new religion,'" thus encouraging English society to atone for the collective violence that it has enabled and be redeemed (115). But, as the scapegoat, Septimus must bear the burden of witness and be sacrificed as the redemptive surrogate for those who desire to forget. Froula writes: "Septimus's doctors act as agents for a society that scapegoats him for bringing home the murderous aggression it would disavow, that projects its aggression upon him and expels him, its symbolic embodiment, so that he seems to bear it away. But the scapegoat who does not suffer silently turns victimage into prophecy" (Froula 115). Like Septimus the prophetic witness, Woolf as counter-elegist refuses to forget, to remain silent, and thus "turns victimage into prophesy" by bearing witness to atrocities that would be reenacted on an even greater scale in the near future. Her call too is left unheeded. In this way, the elegist is figured as she who will not "bear it away" in forgetful silence, who will not be consoled, but rather finds redemption in the vigilant memory that openly bears the burden of interminable testimony.

While Froula correctly reads Clarissa as a feminine figure of the elegiac survivor-witness—a status transferred to her after the death of Septimus—she erroneously argues that Clarissa's "elegiac progress" is teleologically bound for "existential consolation," claiming that Clarissa finds secular redemption in consolation, which Froula describes as an "elegiac conversion" that "acknowledges loss, and affirms the consolations that reward the elegist's bowing to reality" (Smythe 72; Froula 125, 118). What Froula fails to recognize is that the modern elegist only finds redemption in the *refusal* of consolation. As Jahan Ramazani reminds us in his groundbreaking work *Poetry of Mourning*—in opposition to the model of healthy and successful mourning found in Peter Sacks's equally important work *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*— the "melancholic mourning [of] the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (Ramazani xi). For the modernist counter-elegy represents "not so much a suture as an open wound" that conveys "not [the] transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it" (Ramazani 4). A more accurate interpretation of the modernist counter-elegiacs of Virginia Woolf would stand as a middle term between the remarks of Froula and Ramazani. We must recognize that it is not consolation that is transcendent but the mourned other, and that it is not loss that is redeemed but the mourner who finds the possibility of redemption in her openness to a past that is never fully absent. As Levinas writes, "the absence of the Other is exactly his presence as Other" (Levinas 89). Even in life the other is radically transcendent, beyond my reach and capacity for understanding and thus irredeemably absent.

It is this absolute exteriority that individuates us, making us subjects infinitely responsible for ourselves and, as Levinas would have it, for the other as well. The redemption of the counter-elegist is not made possible by consolation, but in its refusal and the open opposition to the inauthentic and unethical solace of silence that would attempt to forget the other and unjustly annihilate her transcendence. By remaining open to a past that is never fully past, never wholly absent, the counter-elegist's vigilant remembrance continues to responsibly bear witness to the other, to refuse the unethical closure of consolation, and in the case of Clarissa, to take up the responsibility of testifying to the unjust death of a practically anonymous other, a stranger, so that the other may survive in memory. As with Lady Bexborough in "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street," Septimus/Clarissa/Woolf takes on the responsibility for bearing witness "for the sake of others...for one does not live for oneself" alone (*Party* 22).

The question of survival, of what will endure beyond one's death, and how one will be remembered after death haunt the pages of Woolf's next elegiac experiment, *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf writes in her diary upon the completion of the novel that she can finally lay the memory of her dead parents to rest now that she has elegized them. Does this mean that by writing the novel she has found consolation for their deaths? In her diary Woolf writes: "I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing The Lighthouse laid them in my mind;" and later in "A Sketch of the Past": "when [*To the Lighthouse*] was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her" (208; *Moments* 80). But in a letter written to her sister in May 1927, Vanessa Bell thanks Woolf "for having raised [her parents] from the dead in its pages" (Goldman 14). So, one asks, does this elegy exorcize the ghosts of her parents, laying their memory to rest so that the elegist no longer hears their voices, or does the elegy serve to forever exhume these specters, giving them an enduring voice that resists silencing? I would argue that the latter is the case, with certain qualifications.

To the Lighthouse satirizes the human desire to have the memory of one's life endure in the face of the vast and sublime expanses of time. But even as it wittily mocks such an endeavor, the novel, as an elegy, is a work that to some degree is one of remembrance and an attempt to enable the memory of the lost other to survive, maintaining the elegist's attachment to the mourned. Gillian Beer writes that *To the Lighthouse* is an exemplary example of "writing as survival," but whose survival, the mourned other, or the mourner who remains? It seems that Woolf's counter-elegies accomplish both tasks. The writer-survivor is able to work-through her mourning, composing a text that is infinitely repeatable thereby resisting the foreclosure of mourning, while the lost others are commemorated in such a way—in the idiom of the counter-elegy—that preserves radical exteriority and their transcendent individuality.

Beer writes that "in elegy there is a repetition of mourning and an allaying of mourning. Elegy lets go of the past, formally transferring it into language, laying ghosts by confining them to a text and giving them its freedom" (35). She sees in this novel an attempt by Woolf to "honor her obligations to family history and yet freely to dispose that history," letting go of their memory and expelling it in the cathartic and consoling task of writing them out of her life (Beer 34). The fallaciousness of this reading is evinced by the fact that the novel not only elegizes her dead parents but her sister Stella, in the figure of Prue, and most importantly that of Thoby, in the figure of Andrew. If Woolf's elegiac task were to "dispose" of the suffering over the death of Thoby, then the composition of *Jacob's Room* would have sufficed and Woolf would have no need to continue to mourn him in *To the Lighthouse* or to continue to elegize him in *The Waves*. Woolf's counter-elegiac work clearly has a therapeutic capacity to enable her process of working-though, but this is not a procedure of forgetting or of exorcizing the mourned other. It is not a letting go but is rather a process of radical remembering and writing survival in the dualistic sense that we have described. By continuing to write elegy after elegy Woolf persistently defers consolation, remaining open to the wounds of the past, and in the process sets up a counter-discourse to the Victorian elegy that seeks to rewrite the conventions in order to accommodate a more responsible, ethical, feminist configuration that founds a work of mourning on vigilant memory rather than self-serving oblivion.

Much like *Jacob's Room* the narrative technique found in *To the Lighthouse* is able to represent and preserve radical exteriority. Unlike the former, the narrator of the latter inhabits the psyches of the characters to highlight their inability to access the interiority of the other characters, foregrounding the transcendent separation that cleaves our relations. This aspect of Woolf's elegies not only serves to respect alterity but also to represent the way in which we experience it, how it affects and constitutes our relationships, and its role in identity formation.

With the "Time-Passes" section of the novel Woolf critically satirizes the conventions of the pastoral elegy, namely the pathetic fallacy that was so disdained by Ruskin. The pathetic fallacy, the technique of personifying the natural world in such a way as to have it mourn the death of the other, is rejected in Woolf's elegy. Here, as Mrs. Ramsey, Andrew, and Prue are dying unremarkable deaths, the natural world does not mourn at all. Instead, it descends upon their home, overcoming and subsuming it in the unforgiving and absolutely indifferent fecundity of a nature unconcerned with their mortality. The personification of nature is yet another function of the elegiac tradition's reversion to "hyperbolic reciprocity" and the idealization of the other. As Spargo put it, the pathetic fallacy "functions both as a screen for the mourner's projective, compensatory imagination and as the terrain of the impossible, indeed mythic agency standing in for or in advance

of remembrance itself" (Spargo 159-160). Through her "collapse or inversion of the values of the pastoral" Woolf criticizes the unethical impulse to transfer remembrance and mourning onto a mythical surrogate, at the same time embracing mortality as so natural as to be almost trivial on the universal scale of nature (Stevenson and Goldman 181-182). In this way, Woolf is able to precariously balance her anti-pastoral ethics of mourning which advocates the necessity of the interminable grief and remembrance of survivors with Mr. Ramsey's misgivings about the unforgiving cosmic juggernaut that is sure to roll over the trace of his existence.

We have said that the commemorative idealization of the mourned other that is componential of the elegiac tradition that Woolf revolts against is an unethical mode of mourning insofar as it requires the denial of alterity. In addition, we have claimed that Woolf critically engages and parodies the cult of the hero, decrying its similar obviation of humanity, often implicitly serving as an apologetic for martial violence. But, if this is the case, then what are we to make of the seemingly mythical, imperial figure of Percival in her last and perhaps most lyrical elegy, *The Waves*?

Jane Marcus reads Woolf's parodic depiction of "Percival and Barnard as Hero and Poet" as a "fictional prophecy" of fascism, the oppositional function of which is "consistent with the socialist politics and antifascist ethics of *The Years* and *Three Guineas*" (Goldman 150, 155). Woolf exposes the unethical consequences of the cult of the hero and the role that traditional elegiacs have played "in the making of culture" in such a way as to provide "the grounding for nationalism, war, and eventually fascism" (Goldman 155). In exploring the function of the elegy, Woolf "revealed the ethical problems to be faced in using this patriarchal genre" but was able to overcome those problems by replacing the patriarchal conventions of the elegy—such as the idealization of the soldier-hero and the imminent consolation that resolves mourning—with the perpetual openness and tenacity of an ethically viable work of mourning (Goldman 155). With *The Waves* Woolf continues to develop her counter-elegies' function as a critical, feminist, oppositional discourse that "deconstructs the politics of the [traditional] elegy as an instrument of social control" which forwards an implicitly coercive and hegemonic message of the justification of violence in the garb of heroism.

Woolf does not engage in the convention of elegiac idealization with the character of Percival, but rather satirizes its function in the nineteenth-century tradition. In her depiction of Percival, or rather in the absence of such direct access, Woolf returns to the method of *Jacob's Room* where, like a traumatic event, the mourned other is under erasure, becoming a vacuous absence that cannot be represented. But this absence is not merely the negation of the presence of the other; it is such that the other exceeds the capacity of our understanding, transcending our ability to grasp and conceptualize.

With *The Waves* Woolf turns yet again to the death of her brother Thoby, elegizing him for the fourth time. Woolf writes in her diary upon completing the novel: "Anyhow it is done; & I have been sitting these 15 minutes in a state of glory, & calm, & some tears, thinking of Thoby & if I could write Julian Thoby Stephen 1881-1906 on the first page" (*Diary IV* 10). Though Woolf chose to not to indicate Thoby as the elegized, her sister was immediately able to recognize Thoby as the person that the work mourns. Vanessa Bell writes to Woolf that she wonders whether she has found "the lullaby capable of singing him to rest" (*Letters* 367). But singing him to rest was never Woolf's intention. Woolf's ethical work of mourning sets out to perform a counter-elegiac process that continues to defer the closure of grief, for this is the only way to take responsibility for the other and to bear vigilant witness to their memory.

And yet, one may ask, how are we to reconcile the forgetting that is arguably necessary for one to survive trauma with the, perhaps obsessive, remembrance of the counter-elegy? For Woolf, it is not the repressing procedure of consolation "that reward[s] the elegist's bowing to reality," rather it is only through remembering incessantly that one can truly work-through the trauma, only by facing the wound in its devastating actuality can we hope to be redeemed in our authentic openness to the truth of our past, free of idealization, heroism, and the aggrandizing veneer of a fetishized past that never was.

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