

The Unbearable Openness of Death: Elegies of Rilke and Woolf

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Despite generic and philosophical distinctions, the elegies of Rainer Maria Rilke and Virginia Woolf embody a modernist poetics of insufficiency, one which remains endlessly open to death. Death, The Duino Elegies and novels like Jacob's Room and To the Lighthouse reveal, is both the object, and potentially inexhaustible source, of art. But instead of treating consolation with contempt, as Jahan Ramazani has argued, their modernist elegies emphasize the human desire for recovery and full presence, for transcendence, while offering themselves as proof that art cannot transcend death. This elegiac tension, their poetics's insistence that mourning be without closure, does, nevertheless, contain a poignant and vital sublimity of its own — challenging us not only to grieve differently, but also to see the life around us in formerly unsuspected ways. For these two modernists, then, the elegy constitutes the process of reopening the wound, and the consolation that leaves readers profoundly affected and ultimately dissatisfied.

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But I now made the contribution of maturity to childhood's intuitions — satiety and doom; the sense of what is inescapable in our lot; death; the knowledge of limitations; how life is more obdurate than one had thought it.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF
THE WAVES

*Wir, Vergeuder der Schmerzen.
Wie wir sie absehn voraus, in die traurige Dauer,
ob sie nicht enden vielleicht.*

'How we squander our hours of pain.
How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration
to see if they have an end.'

—RAINER MARIA RILKE
"DIE ZEHNTE ELEGIE" /
"THE TENTH ELEGY"

The modernist elegy is a poetics of insufficiency.¹ With absence, death and the finitude of human existence recognized as insuperable facts, the modernist poetics nevertheless possesses an irrepressible compulsion to give some figure to what has been lost. And while it holds few illusions about the recuperative capacity of art, the modernist elegy self-consciously transforms death and loss, as Jahan Ramazani has said, into "the fuel of poetic mourning" (6). The idea that loss is "the experience from which poetry emerges into being" (Stamelman ix) is certainly not new nor unique to modernist literature. However, the self-consciousness with which elegists like Virginia Woolf and Rainer Maria Rilke reveal death to be a potentially inexhaustible source of art does manifest a deviation from the usual Freudian interpretations of the genre. Freud's view of mourning as a finite response to loss,² appropriated by Peter Sacks to create an elegiac narrative moving from "loss to consolation" (7),³ is inadequate to describe the complex relationship of Rilke's and Woolf's elegies and the notion of consolation, nor does it do justice to the radical openness to death demanded by their poetics. This is why Ramazani's "melancholic mourning" (xi) is a more accurate description of the openness of their elegiac processes: consciously holding onto the lost object, they refuse to bring grieving to an end.⁴ But while their poetics uses death to "intensify subjectivity" (17) in an increasingly capitalistic, technologized modernity, Rilke and Woolf diverge from Ramazani's definition of the modernist elegy in that they do not "scorn recovery and transcendence" (4), nor do they engage in "attacking and debasing the dead" (5). Rather, their elegies emphasize the human desire for recovery and full-presence—for transcendence—while offering themselves as proof that art cannot transcend death. The insufficiency of their poetics, their insistence that mourning be without closure, does, nevertheless, contain a poignant and vital sublimity of its own—one which challenges us not only to grieve differently, but also to see the life around us in formerly unsuspected ways.

Woolf's determination to preserve, as we shall see, the sting of death, might seem antithetical to Rilke's claim that death is not the end of life, but "the Open," the unilluminated half of existence with which life forms a whole. But despite generic and, more significantly, philosophical distinctions, their respective poetics remain endlessly open to death; they do not attempt to assimilate it or diminish

its alterity. Rilke at times revels in the aesthetic and transformative potential of death, while Woolf concerns herself with its existential blows, revealing just how devastating it can be. But their elegies share an undeniable compulsion to confront the human inability to adequately express loss and absence. Because their poetics of death uses insufficiency to strive for authenticity in art and life, the work of art becomes both the process of reopening the wound⁵—using the pain to make something of death and transience—and the consolation that leaves readers profoundly affected and dissatisfied. While Rilke's *Duino Elegies* do inscribe a hypothetical full consciousness and/or transcendence, his poetics, as with Woolf's, fails to transcend the conditions of its existence. Language, they both reveal, is at best capable of making immanent the radical absence through which we experience death. Their failures, if they can be called such, accentuate the irrevocability of loss, but they do succeed in providing dazzling, and poignant, glimpses into the ineffable. Death, for them, as for Wallace Stevens, "is the mother of beauty" (7).

RILKE'S POETRY OF PAIN

In his essay on Rilke, "What Are Poets For?," Heidegger writes: "The time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality" (94). As "a poet in a destitute time," Rilke undertakes the task of opening our eyes to "what remains fateful within this poetry" (139), which is, for Heidegger, its capacity to create a world or dwelling place.⁶ For Rilke, though, being capable of mortality is essential to the extent that it offers the poetic possibility of revealing the world and its *Dinge* (Things) as they are, and not how our normal consciousness perceives them to be. Because we hold so fervently to this transient world and its equally transient things, Rilke believes we are terrified by our finitude and see death only as we represent it to ourselves; that is, as the end which we ceaselessly flee. *The Duino Elegies*, however, turn toward it and make individual deaths an origin of creativity, fueling the inconclusive poetic quest to access "*den Tod, den ganzen Tod*" (172) 'death, the whole of death' (173). "[U]nbeschreiblich" (172) 'inexpressible' (173), this *Tod* is not God or Heaven, but the half of existence hidden from us. While he does tell us in *The Duino Elegies* that the poetic task in this realm is to preserve its transient things by internalizing, or "invisibilizing," them,⁷ the ultimate imperative is to cultivate here, through a profound openness to pain and death, a greater consciousness of the totality of existence.

The poem, as the inconclusive figuration of this process, also nourishes the imagination by hypothesizing an infinitude that encompasses both life and death:

Death is the side of life that is turned away from, and unilluminated by, us: we must try to achieve the greatest possible consciousness of our being, which is at home in both these immeasurable realms and is nourished inexhaustibly by both. The true pattern of life extends through both domains, the blood with the greatest circuit runs through

both: there is neither a This-side nor a That-side, but a single great unity in which the beings who transcend us, the angels, have their habitation. (Rilke, *Selected Letters* 393)⁸

With death forever “turned away from us,” the poetry must re-imagine it as if it could be transcended. Rilke’s vision of the infinite,⁹ then, is firmly grounded in the finitude of this world. Whether or not it is possible to see as Rilke’s angels do—the aesthetic, not religious, figures whose full consciousness allows them to traverse this “great unity”—we can, in this realm, never know; yet we can draw upon the poetry that marks their absence. Inscribing, subjunctively, this full consciousness, Rilke thus uses the human inability to see beyond this finite world, and comprehend mortality, as the source for his poetic vision. What poets are for, to use Heidegger’s phrase, is to furnish the insubstantial, though aesthetically formidable, ground for belief in the angelic, the transcendent.

It would be a mistake, however, to romanticize Rilke’s elegiac process, with its poetic vigor drawn from lack and absence and death. Indeed, to tap the inexhaustibility of this half of existence, and open an Orphic glimpse of the other,¹⁰ all that is most painful in existence must be not only endured, but embraced. As humans are incapable of hearing, or enduring, God’s voice—if in fact there is such a thing—Rilke’s imperative is to develop, and with infinite patience, the will to hear the one voice, and the individual voices that constitute it, of those who died too soon: “*Aber das Wehende höre, / die ununterbrochene Nachricht, die aus Stille sich bildet. / Es rauscht jetzt von jenen jungen Toten zu dir*” (“Die Erste Elegie” 152) ‘But listen to the voice of the wind / and the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence. / It is murmuring toward you now from those who died young’ (“The First Elegy” 153). In the imminence of World War I, the silence of the millions who perished too soon makes the poetic demand to listen to their seemingly incomprehensible message virtually unbearable. But difficult as it may be, it is only by fully opening the self to this voice—hearing, so to speak, the void¹¹—that death can become transformative, and the elegy can begin the endless effort of rearticulating the murmuring message, giving their deaths a poetic function: “*Was sie mir wollen? leise soll ich des Unrechts / Anschein abtun*” (152) ‘What they want of me is that I gently remove the appearance / of injustice about their death’ (153). The poet, then, has both the ability and duty to transform death. These voices, which constitute both the poetic source and object, are absolutely necessary in Rilke’s poetics. Without them, this transient world would be uninhabitable for the imaginative spirit:

*Schließlich brauchen sie uns nicht mehr, die Früheentrückten,
man entwöhnt sich des Irdischen sanft, wie man den Brüsten
milde der Mutter entwächst. Aber wir, die so große
Geheimnisse brauchen, denen aus Trauer so oft
seliger Fortschritt entspringt—: könnten wir sein ohne sie?* (154)

In the end, those who were carried off early no longer need us: they are weaned from earth’s sorrows and joys, as gently as children outgrow the soft breasts of their mothers. But we, who do need

such great mysteries, we for whom grief is so often
the source of our spirit's growth —: could we exist without *them*? (155)

In comparing dying to the process of weaning (*entwöhnen*) the too-young dead from this mortal realm, Rilke simultaneously reinvents living as a long infancy. Like the milk nourishing the infant's body, grief is figured as the fundamental sustenance for the spirit. And in Rilke's poetics, it is difficult to distinguish the spirit's growth from the maturation of the artist's craft. The path towards this figurative adulthood, though, consists in precarious oscillations: the poet, in refusing to turn away from death while preserving his overwhelming sense of terror, allows it to become, in Blanchot's words, "the origin of poetic possibility" (142).¹² This, then, provides the ground for an ever-increasing authentic, albeit agonizing, relationship to life — and, by extension, an infinite approach to that larger death, "*the side of life that is turned away from, and unilluminated by, us.*"

There is a great difficulty, if not impossibility, in Rilke's poetic task. Not only are we obliged to an infinite dying — and the refusal of voluntary death¹³ — but also to name, and carefully so, what is unnamable and unintelligible. Rilke's word for it, the Open, has as its hypothetical referent an impersonal and transparent death, which can only be seen, as Blanchot says, "with the disinterested gaze of him who does not cleave to himself, who cannot say 'I'" (154). The poet who possesses self-consciousness, and inescapably so, must therefore imagine what it would be like not being able to say "I." This leads Rilke, in the eighth elegy, to say of the Open: "*Was draußen ist, wir wissens aus des Tiers / Antlitz allein*" (192) 'We know what is really out there only from / the animal's gaze' (193). So while the phenomenological gives way to the ontological in *The Duino Elegies*, there is, paradoxically, the necessity of trying to access the Open through an imaginative phenomenology. To intuit a sense of what actually is beneath the veil of this "*gedeuteten Welt*" (149) 'interpreted world' (150), it is necessary to look at the animal's "*Antlitz,*" 'countenance,' and imagine what it sees. But just as important as what it sees is how it sees; the full consciousness toward which the elegies aspire, Rilke argues, is much closer to the animal's degree of consciousness than our own:

I have tried to propose in the elegy, in *such* a way that the animal's degree of consciousness sets it into the world without the animal's placing the world over against itself at every moment (as we do); the animal is *in* the world; we stand *before it* by virtue of what peculiar turn and intensification which our consciousness has taken. (Qtd. in Heidegger 105)

The full, and enigmatic, development of the poetic consciousness thus seems to entail eluding representation with an absence of self-consciousness. What prevents us from being in the world, and thus seeing the whole of existence, is precisely the fact that we are conscious of it, our selves and the end that awaits us all. The "intensification" of the individual consciousness, which estranges us from the world, thus coincides with the representation through which our relationship to it is mediated.¹⁴ And this, as Blanchot argues, is a profound limitation, which reasserts the

insufficiency of our tools to establish a closer immanence to the world: "Through representation we reintroduce into our intimacy with ourselves the constraints of the face-to-face encounter" (134). While for someone like Derrida this encounter opens an ethical dimension to mourning,¹⁵ the "face-to-face" in Rilke's oeuvre means that our focus on the thing in front of us precludes a relationship to the whole. Needing representation both to relate to this world and to invoke a unified whole existing outside of representation, there is, in Rilke's elegies, not only an inexhaustibility of finitude, but also a profound disenchantment with it. We are denied not only that realm, but also this one.

The Duino Elegies, reflecting their dissatisfaction with this world, embody an irrepressible desire for transcendence. Denied the limitless by standing "before" the world, the individual is equally incapable of establishing anything but arbitrary limits on this finite world because he represents it—that is, the limits of representation reveal that what is is infinitely greater than what the mind grasps. In things, there is the feeble reflection of a realm beyond, outside the human capacity to limit: "*Der Schöpfung immer zugewendet, sehn / wir nur auf ihr die Spiegelung des Freien, / von uns verdunkelt*" (192) 'Forever turned toward objects, we see in them / the mere reflection of the realm of freedom, / which we have dimmed' (193). To see, in this world, more than a dimly reflected image of this realm, and thus open the self to the "other side," consciousness must be transformed in such a way that the individual ceases to interpret the world, and instead enters into it, allowing the boundaries between subject and object to dissolve. The question of how to enter the world without knowing it is world, without interpreting, remains, alas, unanswered. Nevertheless, this transformation, if indeed it is possible, will be achieved only through a patient enduring of what is most painful—namely the unspeakable irreplaceability of death. Suffering must be embraced, and its tension continually increased, until the point at which the transcendent will, perhaps, disclose itself:

*Sollen nicht endlich uns diese ältesten Schmerzen
fruchtbarer werden? Ist es nicht Zeit, daß wir liebend
uns vom Geliebten befreien und es bebend bestehn:
wie der Pfeil die Sehne besteht, um gesammelt im Absprung
mehr zu sein als er selbst. Denn Bleiben ist nirgends.* (152)

Shouldn't this most ancient of suffering finally grow
more fruitful for us? Isn't it time that we lovingly
freed ourselves from the beloved and, quivering, endured:
as the arrow endures the bowstring's tension, so that
gathered in the snap of release it can be more than
itself. For there is no place where we can remain. (153)

What is essential to understand is that the Rilkean poetics is a dynamic and seemingly interminable growth, one that depends upon turning toward suffering, to use it instrumentally, and even actively solicit it. Separating the self from what is most loved, embracing and enduring the pain that shoots from the wound, is an act that

hastens the individual's approach to the Open—but is also inseparable from the poetic process itself. In both the approach and the process, the growth is inward; it is an accumulation of energy—meaning suffering—that will, some day, be unleashed. Thus, Rilke metaphorically conceives of the poet as bowstring and arrow, held in place by the power of an impersonal archer—a force indefinitely deferring the arrow's release, until it has the sufficient force to fly beyond the confines of normal consciousness and representation. As each loss increases the bowstring's tension, the inspiration for Rilke's poetics is a nearly infinite endurance. Elegizing is interminable, and it is only at the end of the elegy that the arrow, if ever, will finally be released. The “*Stunden in der Kindheit*” (170) ‘hours of childhood’ (171),¹⁶ receding behind, the infinite before us, the poet has “Nowhere”¹⁷ to remain or be, because loss is an ever-accreting quantity. Poetic vitality in this realm, though, is indistinguishable from the taut, ever-tauter, tension that springs from the insufficiency of this world. When the arrow finally flies, or its tension is relaxed, it will be the moment of full consciousness, or death, which seemingly amounts to the same thing.

The patience required is infinite; the individual can never know when or if he is there. With this affirmation that there is no poetics capable of revealing what one would actually see, the existence of the Open remains contingent upon the imagination. Words must be used to express a vision that is outside representation, and a place that defies geography: a “*mühsam[] Nirgends*”; “*die unsägliche Stelle*” (178) ‘laborious nowhere’; ‘the unsayable spot’ (179). Rilke's Open, offered as a vision of transcendence to the transient, desiring, and disillusioned¹⁸ inhabitants of modernity, thus resembles a negative theology: it is everything that is not here.

*Wir haben nie, nicht einen einzigen Tag,
den reinen Raum vor uns, in den die Blumen
unendlich aufgehn. Immer ist es Welt
und niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht: das Reine,
Unüberwachte, das man atmet und
unendlich weiß und nicht begehrt. (192)*

Never, not for a single day, do we have
before us that pure space into which flowers
endlessly open. Always there is World
and never Nowhere without the No: that pure
unseparated element which one breathes
without desire and endlessly *knows*. (193)

In this world, subject to transience and lack—and therefore desire—there is but “World.” Since this “where,” the Open, could only ever disappear when one tried to gaze upon it, Rilke's poetics offers, at best, an approach to it. But as a poet with a “*niemals zufriedener Wille*” (174) ‘never-satisfied will’ (175), this proximity is never enough. On the other hand, to enter into the Open, to actually breathe without desire, would be the end of poetry. The Rilkean elegy is, through and through, a poetics of insufficiency.

KEEPING THE WOUND OPEN: WOOLF AND THE BLOWS OF DEATH

Virginia Woolf, it would seem, subscribes to one of Rilke's fundamental aesthetic principles, that an authentic poetics absolutely needs the "*große Geheimnisse*" (154) 'great mysteries' (155) of death, insofar as they constitute an origin of the work of art. For her, though, death assumes a much more disturbing, existential dimension. Narrativizing the trauma of death's blows, her poetics draws vitality from loss, but it also evinces the sensibility that there is, in fact, a limit to the amount of grief that can be borne. Her elegies thus enact what Julia Kristeva, in a psychoanalytic register, has eloquently called an "enigmatic paradox that will not cease questioning us"; the dire reality is that "loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it" (9). Woolf navigates a Scylla and Charybdis of excessive and insufficient melancholy: the threat of artistic paralysis and a loss of what Benjamin would call the auratic,¹⁹ or authentic nature of the work of art.²⁰ As opposed to Rilke's more philosophical, less subjective form of mourning, Woolf seeks to create, indeed, an authentically auratic form of writing; one that provides a proper, private and utterly singular mourning. In part, what she tries to answer in her writing is how the individual can remain open to death while parrying death's shocks in order to prevent artistic and subjective incapacitation. She holds few illusions about the capacity of her art to recover what has been lost. Nonetheless, she believes that an elegiac art must try, endlessly, to express inexpressible grief—and it must seek out more authentic ways to live amongst the dead.

The final chapter of *Jacob's Room* is a particularly potent expression of a relentlessly open and inarticulable grief. What begins ostensibly as *Bildungsroman*, abruptly ends as elegy.²¹ Having died, offstage, in the war, the singularity of Jacob Flanders's truncated, unripe existence becomes an emblem for all the other young men whose potentiality was not fulfilled—those who were not allowed to grow into old age and disillusionment. From the opening image of Jacob clinging to "the old sheep's skull without its jaw" (7), we have the uncanny sense that we are already mourning him,²² a feeling accentuated by his fateful surname of Flanders, which immediately resonates with the famous battle at Flanders Field in the First World War. Waiting for the narrative to take us into his room, we have the understanding that the story of his life is his elegy.

As Mrs. Flanders and Bonamy sort through Jacob's room on the book's final page, they find letters and paid bills, the signs of life's banality which echo, insufferably, the monotonous bustle of the London street. The indifference of this living mass to Mrs. Flanders's and Bonamy's intense grief, though, has the effect of breaking open the thin crust covering the wound. Against the apathetic tide of men and women, the only authentic gesture is to say something, anything; to scream out, well aware that the single voice makes but a faint ripple:

"Jacob! Jacob!" cried Bonamy, standing by the window. The leaves sank down again.

"Such confusion everywhere!" exclaimed Betty Flanders, bursting open the bedroom door.

Bonamy turned away from the window.

"What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?"

She held out a pair of Jacob's old shoes. (176)

What is most painful, what Bonamy is protesting, is the indifference with which the world reconfigures itself after the death of Jacob Flanders—and synecdochically, for the millions of others whose lives were arbitrarily abbreviated. No one is shouting out for Jacob. But in leaving us with only his empty shoes, Woolf begins the difficult process of trying to compensate for a lack of public grieving—by miming Jacob's absence, which succeeds, at the very least, in making us feel this loss intensely. The literal question posed by Jacob's mother, "What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?," is also addressed directly to us. Ending *Jacob's Room* before they can be thrown away, Woolf forces us to confront the fact that these things Jacob once wore on his feet lack an instrumental meaning without someone to wear them.²³ But just as well, these shoes signify in excess of themselves: they stand in for what is unspeakable; they are a figure expressing what is unsayable. Not telling us what Jacob's loss is, what it means, the shoes reveal that we have no words commensurate to the enormity of death—the individual or collective one. What we have, instead, are words that hover over "an abyss of sorrow" (Kristeva 3). "What are we to do with these old shoes?" Woolf asks. The answer, her poetics suggests, is to live with them: to accept their unbearable weight, and not try to throw them away.

To the extent that *Jacob's Room* is an elegy for all the young men lost in the Great War, its poignancy derives from the singularity of its synecdochical figure. And indeed, Woolf's elegiac writing has an intensely personal element: *Jacob's Room* is in part a dirge for her brother Toby, who was lost in the war, while *To the Lighthouse* is a feeling memorial for her mother. Reflecting on the loss of the latter in "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf realizes that what is most tragic and alienating about the death of a loved one is the fact that she becomes unreal. Absent, she is felt as an omnipresent wake that requires the living to relate to the world in a fundamentally different way. Because of this, mourning becomes the search for a way of existing that is commensurate with the loss, which is, of course, an impossible and interminable process. The prescribed forms of mourning, Woolf argues, are inauthentic, as they require external actions that do not reflect the inner reality of the mourner. In the arbitrary relationship between the conventions of mourning and the feelings of mourning within, an unreal space is opened. It is this difference that death inaugurates that is so painful, and it is this difference that is preserved, artistically, to respect the irreplaceability of the one we have lost:

The tragedy of her death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal; and us solemn, and self-conscious. We were made to act parts that we did not feel; to fumble for words that we did not know. It obscured, it dulled. It made one hypocritical and immeshed in the conventions of sorrow. Many foolish and sentimental ideas came into being. Yet there was a struggle, for soon we revived, and there was a conflict between what we ought to be and what we were. (*Moments of Being* 95)

Woolf's response, some thirty years later, was to write *To the Lighthouse*.²⁴ In this novel, she seeks the words necessary to narrativize what she considers to be the actual "tragedy" of her mother's death.²⁵ In exploring different narrative forms, the embodiment of the conflict between what one should feel and what one actually feels creates an authentic, elegiac aesthetic that pays proper respect to the singularity of Mrs. Ramsay's death. What we find, in this elegiac difference, is that in the seemingly infinite grief that still remains, there is an origin, a space of writing, that allows for a proper private mourning, as well as a way to face what life remains, authentically.

Grief, in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, is felt intensely, singularly and universally. In the remarkable "Time Passes" section, nature at the Scottish seashore appears to be unchanged, unruffled by the bellicose events across the channel. In the midst of this fluid passing of time, human life, though bracketed, manages to irrupt nature's placidity: Mrs. Ramsay has died in her sleep, Prue due to childbirth, and Andrew has been "blown up in France" (133). Faced with the irrevocability of local and geopolitical death, the narrator considers "those who had gone down to pace the beach and ask of the sea and sky what message they reported or what vision they affirmed had to consider among the usual tokens of divine bounty" (133). We cannot, the narrator tells us, reconcile these "tokens of divine bounty," nor look at them as an adequate consolation, with the brutality of humankind, and the arbitrariness of death. Despite the regularity of the waves, carnage has seeped into the sea, providing a symbol for the pain humans are inflicting upon each other. This "purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea"²⁶ is a tear down the middle of the canvas, making it difficult for those who go to the seashore for sublimity "to marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within" (134). Here, the gap between conventions regarding loss and the actual horror created by that loss assumes a universal dimension:

Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacency she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? Impatient, despairing yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations), to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken.

[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry.] (134)

Perhaps, occasionally, nature itself offers a symbol, that red stain visible to the human eye, suggesting that it can sympathize with human pain. Nevertheless, the pathetic fallacy, at least here, seems to deny any reaffirming message. In its function of unifying and completing the human and inhuman, there is a reflection of the irrepressible human desire to give an assimilable meaning to loss. The imagination, however, seems to have lost its capacity to make of the natural world an analogue for the violent, human one.²⁷ Mr. Carmichael's war poetry does meet

the populace's desire to have the losses of the war memorialized, but these forms of conventional mourning—what Sacks would call consolatory, and Ramazani recuperative, mourning—Woolf strongly hints, are ungentle and inadequate. Instead of a popular poetry that assimilates and therefore neutralizes what should remain unassimilated, Woolf offers us a broken mirror whose shards can never be pieced together into a unified whole. Her elegiac vision, though, asks that we continue looking at, or for, that thing whose reflection has shattered the mirror. With only fragments to work with, the attempt to adequately or accurately reflect it through art will never be completely successful. For the authentic elegist, however, the sole means of conveying a sense of its alterity and incommensurability is to continue gazing at and finding new ways of conveying its fragmented whole—this terrifying, as Eliot might say, “heap of broken images” (51).

Woolf never suggests that the elegist could ever overcome the desire to make things whole or resurrect those we have lost—nor should she try. Instead, what the elegist can do is exploit the incumbent pathos so that the reader or witness feels an abyss of sorrow growing within. In *To the Lighthouse*, the process by which art achieves its insufficient consolations is represented ekphrastically through the painting of Lily Briscoe. As Lily begins, a decade later, to complete her unfinished painting, the stream of consciousness narrative reveals the complex vicissitudes of her feelings towards the absent Mrs. Ramsay. At one extreme of this unresolved ambivalence, we see this forty-four-year-old woman venting against and blaming a ghost, revealing the finesse of Woolf's psychology of mourning—its incompleteness and messiness:²⁸

oh, the dead! she murmured, one pitied them, one brushed them aside, one had even a little contempt for them. They are at our mercy. Mrs. Ramsay had faded and gone, she thought. We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, “Marry, marry!” . . . And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. (174–75)

Despite her slightly cruel desire to gloat over Mrs. Ramsay's failings as hostess and matchmaker, she nonetheless betrays the emblematic, if impossible, wish to cross the threshold between the living and dead. Coming to realize, however, just how fully the dead are at the mercy of the living, her feelings shift to pity and sadness and lead her to confront the patent indifference and unfairness of death. Gazing on “the drawing-room steps,” which “looked extremely empty” (178), Lily is overcome by the still-open, traumatic wound of Mrs. Ramsay's loss that is now felt in her body: “It was one's body feeling, not one's mind. The physical sensations that went with the bare look of the steps had become suddenly extremely unpleasant” (178). These steps have the capacity to disturb Lily's meditations because they have been emotionally transfigured—the re-intrusion of Mrs. Ramsay's absence imbues these empty steps with the power to wound. But it is precisely this “blow” or “shock”—this “moment of being” at the core of Woolf's aesthetic philosophy—that soon compels Lily to give an artistic form to it, that thing that has

made the presence of the steps so physically traumatic and painful. Lily's desire to paint, her response to death's blows, thus constitutes both an attempt at recuperation—of using artistic form to bring some aspect of Mrs. Ramsay back—and a visceral resistance against a life that is so "obdurate." "Why," Lily asks, "was it so short, why was it so inexplicable, she said it with violence, . . . then, beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape; if they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return. 'Mrs. Ramsay!' she said aloud, 'Mrs. Ramsay!' The tears ran down her face" (180).

The success of Lily's artistic endeavor, "to express that emptiness there," and seemingly Woolf's, "to express in words these emotions of the body" (178), is dependent upon the ability to integrate Mrs. Ramsay's absence into the canvas. While we, of course, never see Lily's vision, we do see, feelingly, that Mrs. Ramsay's absence has not only remained open, but somehow through Lily's "extreme fatigue," it has been reflected (209). And in this respect, we as readers may have intensely felt the loss, not only of Mrs. Ramsay, but also, perhaps, of Woolf's mother. This also reaffirms the emotional capacity of art and humankind to achieve a tragic sensibility, and thus to experience catharsis. But while this influx of emotion has the capacity to lessen Lily's grief and make a near-palpable semblance of Mrs. Ramsay materialize, this experience, too, is transient. The process of mourning remakes itself perpetually. It is as dynamic as any other force of life, and as such, one that makes and remakes itself, ebbs and flows repeatedly, like Woolf's famous waves. Lily's vision, with "a line there, in the centre," is an attempt to freeze this flux, this same flux from which it emerged (209). As opposed to faked, empty forms of conventional mourning, Woolf's complex, highly literary process constitutes, at the very least, an attempt to actualize an authentic and wholly singular form of mourning.²⁹

REBUILDING FROM THE RUINS OF LAMENT: "DIE ZEHNTE ELEGIE" AND *THE WAVES*

Just as Jinny of *The Waves* realizes that "beauty must be broken daily to remain beautiful" (174), both Woolf and Rilke affirm the sensibility that it is evanescence that allows beauty to be. And, as we have seen, the poignant beauty of their art finds its genesis in transience. But their most striking revelation is the limitlessness of this source. Despite her claim in "A Sketch of the Past," that after writing *To the Lighthouse* "I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her" (*Moments* 81), Woolf is nonetheless, here in her memoirs, still resurrecting her.³⁰ While memory most often has a very personal element in Woolf's writing, Rilke's broader cultural memory likewise keeps the past alive—and inspires poetry. By accentuating what he believes once was in human civilization, Rilke exposes just how impoverished he sees the modern age to be. He therefore asks his reader to remember, imaginatively, a point in human history when death had its dominion in life, while pain and agony were indescribably magnified in the face of loss.

The tenth elegy is perhaps Rilke's most explicit statement on what authentic, elegiac art demands: pain and absence and loss. Much as Lily draws artistic vitality from the abyss left by the death of Mrs. Ramsay and her children, Rilke poetically inscribes a weakening and decadent Lament-World, one in which the capacity to endure the inconsolable is ossified. Horrified by the swings, jugglers, shooting galleries, etc., at the carnival of ready-made consolations, the poetic voice watches approvingly as the newly-dead man continues his path away from the easily-entertained masses and closer to the "*Berge des Ur-Leids*" (210) 'the mountains of primal grief' (211). As with the Lament guiding the newly-dead man, Rilke's poetic voice can follow him no further than the base of the mountain; the absolute purity of that rarified air is strictly unknowable to still-living mortals. The poetic voice, therefore, must imaginatively project himself into the future, to a point at which he will have breathed this air and have the strength to sing, to the Angels, the praises of pain: "*Daß ich dereinst, an dem Ausgang der grimmigen Einsicht, / Jubel und Ruhm aufsingende zustimmenden Engeln*" (204) 'Someday, emerging at last from the violent insight, / let me sing out jubilation and praise to assenting angels' (205). All along, he imagines, the angels with their full-consciousness have known that pain and loss are the materials necessary to construct a lasting poetic edifice, a home.³¹ The foundation of the elegies themselves is, again, an imaginative ontology. The inscription of these angels provides pain a meaning and bestows the poetic voice with the confidence to proclaim, "*Wir, Vergeuder der Schmerzen. / Wie wir sie absehn voraus, in die traurige Dauer, / ob sie nicht enden vielleicht*" (204) 'How we squander our hours of pain. / How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration / to see if they have an end' (205). While at the scene of writing the poetic voice refuses to seek the end of pain, his existence, like Heidegger's *Dasein*,³² is inextricable from the possibility that it will have an end and that the moment of violent insight will come. If the capacity to create is directly proportional to the amount of pain that can be endured between here and *then*, the image of the bow from the first elegy is all the more appropriate for the Rilkean elegist. Just as the bowstring's tension is measured in the flight of the arrow, the grief and pain that provide insight and nourish the artistic creation can attain their full significance only belatedly. Resigning himself to the fact that the creation before our eyes is not and never will be sufficient to reveal the whole, the poetic voice proleptically laments his inability to endure even more suffering, and make more of it here and now:

*O wie werdet ihr dann, Nächte, mir lieb sein,
gehürmte. Daß ich euch knieender nicht, untröstliche Schwestern,
binnahm, nicht in euer gelöstes
Haar mich gelöster ergab.* (204)

How dear you will be to me then, you nights
of anguish. Why didn't I kneel more deeply to accept you,
inconsolable sisters, and, surrendering, lose myself
in your loosened hair. (205)

The true value of anguish cannot be realized until after it has elapsed; its full potential can never be exhausted. Rilke's unshakeable faith in the meaning of suffering and loss thus means that his poetics will always be insufficient. Pain must have a meaning, but there is no poetics capable of telling us what exactly that meaning is to be.

For the reader to be changed by Rilke's elegiac vision, a leap of faith is required: he must believe that the journey, despite its insufficiency, is itself transformative. If this belief is accepted, pain provides a shelter from modernity's estrangements, while finitude and transience hold the potential to disclose the world as it has never yet been disclosed. The newly-dead young man's pilgrimage thus supplants Christian narratives of redemption: if redemption is indeed possible, it will be achieved by refusing all consolation and affirming the infinite perishability of all that is here. Seeking the transient, he avoids the temptation of "*der letzten Planke, beklebt mit Plakaten des 'Todlos,' / jenes bitteren Biers, das den Trinkenden süß scheint, / wenn sie immer dazu frische Zerstreuungen kaun . . .*" (204, 206) 'the last of the billboards, plastered with signs for 'Deathless,' / that bitter beer which seems so sweet to its drinkers / as long as they chew fresh distractions in between sips . . .' (205, 207). He now begins to see: "*gleich im Rücken der Planke, gleich dahinter, ists wirklich*" (206) 'just in back of the billboard, just behind, the view becomes *real*' (207). It seems the inhabitants of the city have fallen because they find a Christian-like consolation in the belief of deathlessness. Because of their addiction to this elixir, their perception is dull and their spirits sluggish. To make grief blossom [*"blühender Wehmut"* (206)], to make the poem, all these consolations must be refused.

But rather than simply ignoring these people and their vulgar tastes, the speaker turns his anger towards them. That this has become their reality is an affront to the human spirit and the imagination. The speaker thus laments that he lacks the power to destroy these consolatory edifices, and reassert the life-affirming energy of death: "*O, wie spurlos zerträte ein Engel ihnen den Trostmarkt, / den die Kirche begrenzt, ihre fertig gekaufte*" (204) 'Oh how completely an angel would stamp out their market of solace, / bounded by the church with its ready-made consolations' (205). What we notice, again, is that the Angels' action of stamping out these consolations is subjunctive; *zerträte* is a signifier of what the speaker imagines they would do.³³ The grammar of the elegy thus reveals both its limitations and power. This poetics is not capable—at least not yet—of transforming its violence of thought into concrete action in this social realm. It will not inspire the masses to make a home in the city of grief. What it can do is use the difference between the actual and ideal to imagine what might be if we could endure as much as the poetic voice asks us to—this being the seeds of an individual transformation. Nostalgia for the grief that once was, or might have been, is therefore one of Rilke's most potent sources. From the rage and lament of this remembrance comes the desire to reinvent a world in the image of the one that might have been:

Wir waren,

sagt sie, ein Großes Geschlecht, einmal, wir Klagen. Die Väter

*trieben den Bergbau dort in dem großen Gebirg; bei Menschen
findest du manchmal ein Stück geschliffenes Ur-Leid
oder, aus altem Vulkan, schlackig versteinerten Zorn.
Ja, das stammte von dort. Einst waren wir reich. — (206)*

Long ago,
she says, we Laments were a powerful race. Our forefathers worked
the mines, up there in the mountain-range; sometimes even
among men you can find a polished nugget of primal grief
or a chunk of petrified rage from the slag of an ancient volcano.
Yes, that came from up there. We used to be rich. — (207)

Inasmuch as the poetic voice uses the fossils of grief and rage to make poetry, the elegy emerges from its own ashes. The will to look here for poetic vitality is thus reflected in the will of the newly-dead young man as he climbs ever higher. This journey, as the elegy makes clear, must be taken alone and the wisdom it may yield can never be articulated: “*Einsam steigt er dahin, in die Berge des Ur-Leids. / Und nicht einmal sein Schritt klingt aus dem tonlosen Los*” (210) ‘Alone, he climbs on, up the mountains of primal grief. / And not once do his footsteps echo from the soundless path’ (211). The experience of grief is intensely personal, and there is no guarantee that one will ever see what Rilke’s elegies claim will be seen. But his elegiac imperative demands belief that a vision of trees and fields and streams unhindered by conventional signification can be achieved: it is essential to believe they are much more than we perceive them to be. Perhaps one day all of this may be transcended; until then, for the poet, the only consolation can be an unshakeable faith in his art.

While Woolf would likely have reservations about Rilke’s quasi-mysticism and his contention that the living and dead comprise a harmonious whole, the internal structure of her elegiac writing is likewise shaped by the ties that bind the living to the dead and this realm to that other one. As we see in *The Waves*, Woolf’s figure for the connection between Percival and the sextet of Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Louis and Bernard is a thread. The pliancy of this thread means that the relationship between Percival and each individual is a dynamic one, oscillating between remembrance and forgetfulness. One of the fundamental questions of her elegies, as we have seen, is whether this bond can ever completely be severed. While Woolf emphatically responds in the negative, there remains the fear that such separation could one day come to pass. Ituating himself within something like a metaphysics of presence, Bernard entertains the possibility that Percival’s insubstantiality will ultimately lead to his complete disappearance:

I ask, if I shall never see you again and fix my eyes on that solidity, what form will our communication take? You have gone across the court, further and further, drawing finer and finer the thread between us. But you exist somewhere. Something of you remains. A judge. That is, if I discover a new vein in myself I shall submit it to you privately. I shall ask, “What is your verdict?” You shall remain the arbiter. But for how long? (155)

The word “arbiter” is apt here, given its multiple valences. It refers to the judge that Percival would have become, had he not been thrown from his horse. But it also refers to the ontological instability instituted by loss. Percival, in his absence, is now the arbiter of the living—the one to whom the living look for validation and legitimacy.³⁴ As Bernard seems to understand, Percival’s power as the judge will inevitably attenuate, the thread will grow finer; it will, though, if we are to listen to *The Waves*, never snap.³⁵ And much like Rilke, Woolf emphasizes the fact that we need this connection to the dead—without it, art and life would be diminished. There would not be the opportunities to see “a token of some real thing behind appearances” (*Moments* 72).

Before Percival’s death, Louis makes a prophetic remark which, in short, formulates *The Waves*’ own elegiac process: “Yet it is Percival I need; for it is Percival who inspires poetry” (40). The elegy is the poetry of loss. Loss is the necessary factor which engenders a desire to both recuperate that loss and bury it completely. To return, a final time, to Rilke’s bowstring: the tension of this thread, to the extent that it is endured, is what determines how deeply the imagination can penetrate the abyss. While Louis’s excessive self-consciousness precludes him from entering too far into its obscurity, he is aware that the elegist’s task is to render a fresh vision of past and present by weaving tapestries of the loose and ever-increasing threads of human existence:

My destiny has been that I remember and must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads, the thin, the thick, the broken, the enduring of our long history, of our tumultuous and varied day. There is always more to be understood; a discord to be listened for; a falsity to be reprimanded. (202)

The plaiting of this cable, as Louis recognizes, is an interminable task. There will always be more threads, and attempts to understand it all will inevitably fray and tangle. As with any elegist, though, he must continue as if full understanding could one day be attained: “Let us suppose I make a reason of it all” (202). This supposition of closure-to-come is an irrepressible element of the elegy; it is also a necessary one. Without the desire for closure, its absence would not have such power to wound—and the elegiac tension would be no more.

As with Rilke, Woolf shows this tension to be necessary if the appearances of the phenomenal world are to be pierced. There is, however, an ambivalence towards the tokens revealed by death. As Rhoda comes to realize, there is much ugliness residing behind appearances: “Look now at what Percival has given me. Look at the street now that Percival is dead. [. . .] I am alone in a hostile world. The human face is hideous” (159). But death also reveals beauty and inspires the imagination to give form to the world:

“Like” and “like” and “like”—but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? Now that lightning has gashed the tree and the flowering branch has fallen and Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing. [. . .] The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so

mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (163)

If triumph or consolation will be insufficient, the aesthetic transfiguration of perception and consciousness is for Woolf the greatest recompense we have for the shocks of death and the blows of grief. Refusing to flinch in the face of it, the elegist can reveal the world in all its terror, ugliness and beauty. While Woolf would likely decry Rilke's claim that we need the deaths of children to grow within, she does acknowledge the inevitability of such losses and the necessity of making something with them.

Just as the sun rises and sets in *The Waves*, its beams shaping and reshaping perception, we understand that form is not innate; in the endless transience of this world, art can but freeze one moment in time. Woolf's and Rilke's elegies therefore succeed in preserving the loss; they cannot and will not save us from it. Their elegiac power lies not in their ability to reveal the nature of loss, but in the capacity to express a sensibility of loss that exceeds the power of language—and more importantly, to make it felt. And, in the end, Rilke and Woolf both look longingly toward a new language, one that could actually reflect the unbearable openness of death:

But for pain words are lacking. There should be cries, cracks, fissures, whiteness passing over chintz covers, interference with the sense of time, of space; the sense also of extreme fixity in passing objects; and sounds very remote and then very close; flesh being gashed and blood spurting, a joint suddenly twisted—beneath all of which appears something very important, yet remote, to be just held in solitude. (*The Waves* 263)

Their poetics of death, in this last permutation, is a lament for the absence of a language in which word and feeling coincide. But it is precisely this lack from which emerges the modernist poetics of insufficiency. In their examples, Rilke and Woolf ask us to endure the tensions of death, and insist that art must continue its impossible attempts to articulate the inexpressible. To counter modernity's tendency to dilute both death and life, then, these two elegists immerse themselves in the loss and succumb to the temptation of endlessly reopening the wound. The pain may be unbearable and there may be no words adequate to express it, but that is precisely the burden of the thinking of death.

Notes

1. The poetics of modernist literature is what I call the poetics of insufficiency. Modernist writers, disenchanted with the world as they found it, continued to resist it, fully aware that the task was interminable and the language they used was itself insufficient. That is, they took on a void of meaning by using insufficiency and lack as the material with which to, in Beckett's words, go on.
2. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud states that both mourning and melancholy come to an end of their own accord (202, 212). Because the elegies of Rilke and Woolf consciously hold onto loss—the loss is not unconscious—mourning, rather than melancholia, is the appropriate term.

3. While Rilke and Woolf do seek to illuminate the types of (insufficient) consolation provided by the elegy, usually framed in terms of art, they repeatedly emphasize the incapacity of their art to achieve any satisfactory consolation. As opposed to Sacks's description of the genre in *The English Elegy*, in these elegies there are no "successful mourners" (6), and there is no "resolution" (8)—Oedipal or otherwise—of the loss. Instead, they attempt to prolong the process indefinitely.

4. In *The Poetry of Mourning*, Ramazani comes up with the term "melancholic mourning" to indicate the conscious nature of the loss in the modernist elegy, as well as its tendency "to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (xi). Both Woolf and Rilke endlessly reopen the wound, but they do not completely spurn consolation, nor do they attempt to suppress the desire for recovery and transcendence.

5. Reopening the wound, as we saw in note 4, is a trope used by Ramazani to describe the process of the modernist elegy.

6. Gerald L. Bruns argues that for Heidegger in "The Origin of the Work of Art," "the work of the work of art, its truth, is to open up a world, a human dwelling place." The work of art is then seen as an event that creates a world but is not bound by it. Bruns continues, "The task of art is to set up a world, but the work does not belong to the world it establishes. The work belongs to the earth, which constitutes something like the absolute horizon of the world, the limit that determines the world's historicity and finitude."

7. The internalizing, or invisibilizing, of things in this realm is the focus, as we shall see, of the seventh and ninth elegies.

8. Letter to Witold von Hulewicz. 13 November 1925.

9. "To admit the one without the other," Rilke insists, "would . . . be a limitation which would ultimately exclude everything infinite" (*Selected Letters* 393).

10. The Orphic glimpse, for Rilke, consists in the poet's impatience to look into the "other night," the Open. In casting the eye on it, however, it immediately disappears. What Orpheus sees in "Orpheus, Eurydike, Hermes" when he fatefully turns around is not Eurydice, but her disappearance. For Blanchot, this is the inevitable, paradoxical, experience of writing.

11. This is reminiscent of Blanchot's murmur, or *il y a*, the voice the poet obeys in the space of writing.

12. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot makes the striking claim that "*The Open is the poem*." What is important for Blanchot is the impossibility of the poetic situation: the Open, the "Orphic space to which the poet doubtless has no access," is nevertheless the origin of the poetry, which ultimately fails in its quest to access it: "The Open is the work, but the work as origin" (142).

13. See, for instance, Rilke's poem on the suicide of young Count Wolf Kalckreuth, "Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth."

14. Speaking of this intensification in Rilke, Blanchot writes: "Through consciousness we escape what is present, but we are delivered to representation" (*The Space of Literature* 134).

15. Derrida, in *The Gift of Death*, argues that death—and the responsibility for the other which it entails—is precisely that gift which bestows upon the individual his or her absolute uniqueness and irreplaceability.

Now to have the experience of responsibility on the basis of the law that is given, to have the experience of one's absolute singularity and apprehend one's own death, amounts to the same thing. Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, "given, one can say, by death." (42)

16. For Rilke, children have a much greater capacity than adults to see what really is, to see the world in its purity. As the individual grows older, her "intensification of consciousness" prevents her from seeing with the eyes of a child.

17. In the eighth elegy, the poetic voice laments the human incapacity to see the pure realm of the open, in which one knows instead of sees. The "*Nirgends ohne Nicht*" is thus another figure for the Open (192).

18. Torsten Pettersson, in "Internalization and Death: A Reinterpretation of Rilke's 'Duineser Elegien,'" suggests that there are three general sources of anguish fueling the speaker's cries:

First, he has a keen sense of the transience of life, illustrated by the extended metaphors of evaporation in the Second Elegy and, in the Fifth Elegy, of the ever-crumbling formations erected by the acrobats. . . . The second problem arises from the fact that adult human beings, unlike animals and children, are ill-adapted to an adequate cognition of the world The third existential problem is sensuality, and, in particular, eroticism, the deep-seated power of which is deplored in the depiction of the river god of the blood in the Third Elegy. (732–33)

19. While Benjamin's notion of authenticity is explicitly concerned with the uniqueness of the work of art, "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (220), elegiac art, it would seem, loses this singularity and uniqueness when it ceases to emerge from an authentic experience of loss.

20. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva also argues that "the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow has been repudiated" (9).

21. In "*Jacob's Room*: Woolf's Satiric Elegy," Alex Zwerdling writes, "Unlike the classic *Bildungsroman*, *Jacob's Room* lacks a teleology. Woolf's hero remains an essentially molten personality interrupted by death at the stage of experimenting upon himself" (898).

22. Kathleen Wall, in "Significant Form in *Jacob's Room*: Ekphrasis and the Elegy," argues that Woolf provides us with the understanding that all of the novel is an elegy, that we know Jacob will perish (308).

23. Jacob's empty shoes, as with Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh's painting of the shoes, seem to constitute some sort of event or truth, the nature of which is discussed in "The Origin of the Work of Art." In *Jacob's Room*, we are also seemingly confronted with the strangeness of the work of art that opens a world but is not contained by it.

24. In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf says, "Until I was in the forties—I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse*, but I am too casual here to bother to do it—the presence of my mother obsessed me" (80).

25. Mark Spilka, among others, has pointed out the overt parallels between Mrs. Ramsay and Julia Stephen. He also contends that the seemingly excessive and ambivalent nature of Lily Briscoe's grief for Mrs. Ramsay is an expression of Woolf's own complex and contradictory feelings about her mother's death.

26. This image, as many critics have suggested, seems to specifically refer to the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German U-boat.

27. By connecting the war's carnage with this natural landscape, the pathetic fallacy has the effect, as Tammy Clewell argues, of "shattering [] an age-old affinity between the human and the natural" (212).

28. This is not unlike the process of mourning Freud describes in "Mourning and Melancholia."

29. This is the ideal of mourning for Derrida, as we see in texts such as *The Gift of Death* and *The Work of Mourning*.

30. Evelyne Ender emphasizes that Woolf's sense of loss—or more precisely, the memory of loss—ensures that her elegiac imagination can never run out of sustenance (218–19).

31. In this elegy, the poetic voice conceives of these hours of pain as "*Stelle, Siedelung, Lager, Boden, Wohnort*" (204) 'place and settlement, foundation and soil and home' (205).

32. Especially in this final elegy, it seems particularly apt to understand the poetic voice as existing through its possibilities.

33. Marielle Sutherland has made much the same point; Rilke's appeals to the angels, and the claims for his poetry, are couched in terms of hypotheticals:

This language of metaphor is removed one stage further into the hypothetical: *if* the dead *were* able to communicate, they *would possibly* give us a metaphor, i.e. there is no actual, received communication, only the possibility of this other language, imagined within the poem. (267–68)

34. This is an idea carefully and eloquently developed in Robert Pogue Harrison's *The Dominion of the Dead*. In his introduction, he makes the laconic claim: "Only the dead can grant us legitimacy" (x).

35. I agree with Susan Smith who argues in "Reinventing Grief Work: Virginia Woolf's Feminist Representations of Mourning in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*" that Woolf's elegiac writing—in this case *To the Lighthouse*—"describes varieties of grief work which establish some distance between the dead and the living without completely severing the connection." I would suggest, however, that this distance is less than Smith seems to believe.

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