

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE: GENDER AFTER THE WAR

Tammy Clewell, 'Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, the Great War, and Modernist Mourning'

Why did Woolf believe that writing about the war needed to foster a new consciousness of death, one that stressed its absolute finality? Why did she insist on engaging the reader in an experience of wrenching and unalloyed grief? One reason, the novel suggests, is that nineteenth-century mourning customs no longer adequately expressed the complexities of loss, consoling despair at the cost of a deeper confrontation with mortality. Woolf wrote at a time when mourning rituals had already shed much of their Victorian extravagance, but the pages of her novel offer a virtual catalog of traditional modes of celebrating death: tombstones, burial customs, epitaphs, requiems, elegies, and monuments. This cataloging enables Woolf's narrator to parody those vestiges of defensive belief that continued to allow conventional mourning to offer consolation. The narrator, a decidedly skeptical consciousness, includes the religious rebirth of the dead in God and the secular tendency to shroud the dead in bogus praise among the relics of an outworn tradition. If the former fails to register death's finality by promising the transcendence of the soul, the latter serves to legitimate social values that do not honestly reflect the dead, a point the narrator makes when remarking that the tombstone for Betty Flanders's husband falsely describes him as a "Merchant of this city" in order to set an "example for the boys" (16).

[Susan Bennett] Smith focuses on Woolf's specifically feminist revision of Victorian mourning. Responding to a social situation in which nineteenth-century grieving was devalued as women's work, Woolf "deviates from tradition," according to Smith, "by not designating women chief mourners and by not feminizing male mourners" (318). Finally, Mepham links the development of Woolf's aesthetics to her critique of traditional mourning and argues that her "insight into the connection between literary form and forms of mourning should be understood not as a symptom but an achievement, an achievement which has cultural and historical rather than purely personal significance" (143).

Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, (New York: Routledge, 1995)

Others have argued before her that the Victorians connected race, class, and gender in ways that promoted imperialism abroad and classism at home ... but McClintock argues that these connections prove crucial to the development of Western modernity...:

Imperialism is not something that happened elsewhere -- a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity. The invention of race in

the urban metropolises. . . became central not only to the self-definition of the middle class but also to the policing of the "dangerous classes": the working class, the Irish, Jews, prostitutes, feminists, gays and lesbians, criminals, the militant crowd and so on. At the same time, the cult of domesticity was not simply a trivial and fleeting irrelevance, belonging properly in the private, "natural" realm of the family. Rather, I argue that the cult of domesticity was a crucial, if concealed, dimension of male as well as female identities -- shifting and unstable as these were. (5)

Gabrielle McIntire, *Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* Cambridge University Press, 2008

The choice to pair Eliot and Woolf is unusual. Eliot's conservatism and (late) religiosity have seemed to make his corpus incompatible with the work of a feminist, atheist, and avowedly leftist writer like Virginia Woolf. Indeed, Woolf and Eliot have never before been placed side by side, in dyadic conjunction, in a book-length study. Their work and their lives, though, reveal some striking proximities. Woolf and Eliot were almost exact contemporaries (born in 1882 and 1888, respectively), professional supporters of each other's work (Woolf's Hogarth Press, for example, published Eliot's second volume of poetry, *Poems*, in 1919, when he was still a relatively unknown poet, and Woolf herself set type for the Hogarth Press's 1923 edition of *The Waste Land*), and close friends for over twenty years. . . . We have little other evidence of the eros of Woolf and Eliot's relation, but evidently their connection held some form of sexual charge, and I offer this as a delightful biographical fragment that supplements the contiguities in their thinking about the past. They each separately fashion a poetics of memory where translating one's experience of remembrance and historicity to textuality – what I will be calling *writing time* – occurs by concurrently exploring the erotic and the sensual. Further, just as Sigmund Freud proposes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) that we think of the psyche's mnemonic layering as analogous to palimpsestic, architectural remains and ruins, both writers stress that time and experience leave *material* and *retrievable* traces – not just in the mind and body but also in the physicality and designs of topography that we are then called upon to interpret. Both are far more present to each other's thinking and writing than we have yet imagined, and their texts offer deeply compelling instantiations of a modernist condensation of the bind between memory and desire. This study, then, considers especially what kinds of work memory does in Woolf and Eliot's literary experiments; how memory is constructed vis-à-vis sexual and textual forms of desire; what kinds of ethics Eliot and Woolf were developing around sites of memory and desire; and, where and why memory fails.

Both Eliot and Woolf render recollection not simply as a nostalgic, sentimental revisitation of lost time, but as the potent and ineluctable condition of possibility for writing the present. They disclose a passionate cathection to the past's abiding presence in part by affirming the past's profound temporal *and* spatial proximity – and even contiguity – with the present. The rupture between then and now, and the hialat ground that such a break engenders, is acknowledged, but traversed and

repaired – sometimes in a single gesture. In 1930 Eliot writes, “The new years walk, restoring / Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem / The time.”¹⁷ Both writers are compelled to repeat tropes of resuscitating, restoring, and even redeeming the past, while they reveal that such efforts never signify simple mimesis or reification. The fecund work of revisitation they trace means that if history (personal, literary, cultural, and political) is severed from the present, then the cut is only partial. The connectivity that remains leaves both the room and the desire to reconstitute and reclaim the past through its most intimate signs.

What I am describing is also not just the stance of the melancholic, where, if we follow Freud's 1917 proposals, melancholia develops through a failure to recognize and release an attachment to a beloved object-choice after a traumatic loss, involving “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale.”¹⁸ We certainly find elements of melancholia in some of Eliot and Woolf's dispositions to the past, but I want to insist that their engagement with the problem of anteriority is more nuanced than this, involving pleasures and pains, attachments and renunciations, and, above all, a recognition of the still-becoming life of the past within the present's only partial fullness. Their affective attachments to the past are distinct from both the sentimentality of a pure nostalgia unable to release its melancholic commitments, and from those of a transcendental idealization of past time. While recent trauma studies have focused preeminently on mourning and melancholia as modern and postmodern modes of memory, I want to propose that Eliot and Woolf's projects open up a different mnemonic record. The past in their work is a cherished, if occasionally dangerous, material that is urgently required to flesh out – sometimes in a flash – the fragile and fleeting (almost absent) fullness of the present. We find a palpable thematization of attempts to accept that, like a beloved Other, the past *cannot give itself to us* once and for all, no matter how much we might desire such a fantastic resolution. Much of their writing is driven by what it might mean to reapproach this kind of temporal alterity. For, memory, like an Other, manifests a separate and ongoing *coming-into-being* that demands a ceaseless reopening to the work of its translation and transfiguration.

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