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"Almost Unnamable": Suicide in the Modernist Novel

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“Almost Unnamable”: Suicide in the Modernist Novel

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Dissertation

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"Almost Unnamable": Suicide in the Modernist Novel

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Since Presocratic Greece, suicide in the West has been "known" and controlled, both politically and discursively. Groups as diverse as theologians and literary critics have propagated many different views of self-killing, but, determining its cause and moralizing about it, they have commonly exerted interpretive power over suicide, making it nameable, explicable, and predominantly reprehensible. The four modernist authors that I consider in this dissertation – Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner – break completely with the tradition of knowing suicide by insisting on its inscrutability, refusing to judge it, and ultimately rendering it "almost unnamable," identifiable but indefinable. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Victory*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Sound and the Fury*, respectively, these authors portray illustrative, but by no means definitive, modernist self-killings; they construct a distinctive representational space around suicide, one free of causal, moral, theoretical or thematic

meaning and, I argue, imbued with the power to disrupt interpretation. "'Almost Unnamable': Suicide in the Modernist Novel" examines the power of self-killing's representational space in early twentieth-century fiction, arguing for its importance not only to the history of suicide in the West but also to the portrayal of death in the twentieth-century novel.

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But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build.

— Anne Sexton, "Waiting to Die"

Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. The man himself is ignorant of it.

— Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"

[T]he greatest fallacy about suicide lies in the belief that there is a single immediate answer – or perhaps combined answers – as to why the deed was done.

— William Styron, *Darkness Visible*

For what it comes to for them is the total and unmistakable singularity of their situation, the *sitauation vécue* (lived situation) that can never be completely communicated, so that therefore every time someone dies by his or her own hand or even just tries to die, a veil falls that no one can lift again, which in the best of cases can only be illuminated sharply enough for the eye to recognize as a fleeting image.

— Jean Améry, *On Suicide*

Introduction: Reading Suicide

The four authors whose epigraphs begin this dissertation articulate a view of suicide particular to the twentieth century, one that emphasizes suicide's inscrutability. Sexton's "special language" (5), with which the would-be self-killer searches for a way to fulfill most effectively what she earlier calls her "almost unnamable lust" ("Waiting to Die" 3), but which lacks a vocabulary for rationalizing this lust or even the notion that it should be rationalized; Camus' similar insistence that the origins of suicide, like the origins of art, are not of the mind but of the heart, mute and inexplicable to both the suicidal and their survivors; Styron's insistence that suicide lacks justification, either simple or complex; Améry's assertion that self-killers cannot communicate their unique psychic atmospheres, thereby enveloping their suicides in an opacity that the living can glimpse but never pierce – these stances break with the long tradition in the West that suicide can be "known" and controlled, and together they inform two principal premises of this dissertation. I argue, first, that for both suicides and the living, the act of intentionally and willingly taking one's life is "almost unnamable," recognizable but beyond comprehension; suicides are cognizant of their desire to die and witnesses know that they have taken their own lives, but neither party can justify the desire or the act, at least in any stable, "objective" way. In Sexton's terminology, we can know the how but not the why of self-destruction. Second, art – primarily modernist fiction – more than sociology, psychology, natural science, or philosophy, all of which provide epistemological frameworks for understanding suicide, best accepts and depicts the

inscrutability I am delineating. As Camus implies, sociological approaches to suicide – and I would add all those approaches generated by the frameworks I just mentioned – fail to capture the individual's struggle with suicide's obscurity, aiming instead through their will to knowledge to explain in categorical terms what, like a great work of art, surpasses explanation and classification. Modernist fiction, on the other hand, explores without explaining the contingencies and nuances associated with a self-killing; illustrates without resolving the impossibility of lifting suicide's enveloping veil; and embraces, as two of its primary conditions, indistinctness and ignorance.

One more premise informs this dissertation: within the modernist novel, the break with the tradition of knowing suicide includes the refusal to pass moral judgment, both negative and positive, on self-destruction and on individual self-destroyers. Even Camus and Améry, both of whom display deep insight into suicide's opacity, moralize about the deed, articulating the common view that self-killing is either an unacceptable surrender to corrosive pressures or a suitable response to a life whose dignity has been destroyed (or is in danger of being destroyed) by such pressures: while Camus calls it a "repudiation" and concludes that the defiant, "absurd man," rather than accepting the absurdity of existence and killing himself, must "drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself" (41), Améry defends it as a way "to escape a life lacking in dignity, humanity, and freedom" (152), a view that informed his decision, two years after writing *On Suicide*, to take his own life.[1] In contrast, the modernist authors considered in this dissertation – Ernest

[1] Despite my conscious decision to avoid analyzing modernist literary suicide in terms of author psychology, I nevertheless feel obligated to point out that Sexton also killed

Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner – do not, in the works I examine, judge their protagonists' suicides, and they ask us in turn to withhold moral assessment; when characters in their novels interpret suicide – and it is through characters, not through authoritative narrators, that these writers provide provisional understandings of self-killing – they take pains to underscore the characters' interpretive limitations, absurdities, and insensitivities. It is through their representations of suicide, however, that Hemingway, Conrad, Woolf, and Faulkner ultimately disrupt

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herself and Styron struggled with manic depression, an illness he knew could have eventuated in suicide. Moreover, all the authors I discuss in this dissertation either ended their own lives or struggled with self-destructive tendencies: Hemingway shot himself; Woolf drowned herself after having attempted suicide twice before; Conrad, prior to joining the British merchant service, survived a suicide attempt – he shot himself in the chest – and Faulkner drank himself to death. Although it is certainly no coincidence that these authors write at great length and in multiple works about suicide, their psychologies and self-destructive tendencies do not inform my analyses of their novels, primarily because this dissertation is not psychologically oriented, but more important because examining representations of suicide in terms of author psychology produces only facile connections between author and text. (I make a minor, hopefully complex and illuminating exception in chapter three, with regard to Woolf.)

Robert D. Young and Jeffrey Berman illustrate my point. Based on conversations in "Indian Camp," "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, all of which obscurely depict self-killings and suicidal desires, Young deduces, "Hemingway believed his father an emotional coward but forgave him because he was escaping torture" (29). In other words, Hemingway's fictional suicides supposedly embody his ambivalence toward his father. Berman, a Freudian critic, endeavors "to show that to an extent previously unrecognized, the moral psychological, and dramatic complexity of each Conrad novel derives from the embattled confrontation with self-destruction" (25). To illustrate this view, Berman, reflecting on the ubiquity of the self-destructive impulse in Conrad's fiction, argues that Conrad's suicides are surrogate selves onto which he displaced his own death wish, thereby averting a suicidal fate. Although Berman offers nuanced, insightful readings of Conrad's texts, like Young, he ultimately articulates little more than that Conrad attempted to kill himself, thought often of self-destruction, and consequently wrote about it.

interpretation, rendering suicide morally vacant, causally unclear, and entirely unknowable.

My analysis of the representation of suicide in modernist fiction is in no way exhaustive: the representations I have chosen are illustrative rather than definitive. The modernist novel is replete with portrayals of ambiguous self-killings, and authors such as Conrad and Faulkner populate their *oeuvre* with them. I could have selected Edward Ashburnam's suicide in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* and Rhoda's in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* instead of Robert Jordan's impending voluntary death, at the hands of Fascist soldiers, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; Axel Heyst's self-immolation in *Victory*; Septimus Smith's self-defenestration in *Mrs. Dalloway*; and Quentin Compson's self-drowning in *The Sound and the Fury*. I have chosen these four latter portrayals of suicide, however, because critics have interpreted them the most, providing justifications and moral assessments, explicit or implicit, despite the novels' relentless attempts to render interpretation of suicide hollow. Critics who discuss them reinforce the longstanding desire not just to know, but to master and control suicide, and they do so through literary interpretation if not through theological or legal injunction; philosophical inquiry; or sociological, psychological, or scientific investigation. Against these critics, my overriding concern in this dissertation is not only to reclaim for these suicides their inherent impenetrability but also to restore to literature the moral and existential ambiguities, indeterminacies, and incongruities that are often explained away but that

capture so well the inexplicability of much human behavior and experience, including suicide.[2]

***

Suicide is perhaps the only deed that a performer cannot justify after the fact, leaving survivors to piece together narratives which led up to, encompass, and explain self-killing. Through words and actions, a would-be suicide demonstrates self-destructive desire, but it is survivors who structure these signs into a coherent plot, which they then read in hopes of gaining an answer to the inevitable question: why did so-and-so do it? The suicide note, the final text produced by a self-destroyer, lacks an authoritative mark, offers no transparent insight into motivation; it too, as Edwin S. Shneidman writes, must "be placed within the context of the known details of a life (of

[2] While writing this introduction in February 2008, I discovered Jared Stark's essay "The Price of Authenticity: Modernism and Suicide in Baudelaire's 'La Corde,'" which led me to his 1998 dissertation and forthcoming book, *Beyond Words: Suicide and Modern Narrative*. Although our dissertations begin with similar premises – namely, to understand suicide is always to interpret it, and suicide has the power to disrupt meaning and interpretation – his historical reach and primary interests differ from mine. Stark analyzes the works of modern French and American writers – Charles Baudelaire, Edith Wharton, Albert Camus, and Toni Morrison – in order to explore the relationship between suicide, art, and modern culture. Employing Maurice Blanchot's vocabulary, he writes, "[s]tories, images, and figures of suicide come to be involved in the very attempt to describe 'the space of literature,' and to discover literature's place in representing, thinking, knowing, and unknowing the histories and cultures of modernity" (*Beyond Words* 8). I, on the other hand, am interested in showing how modern*ist* authors break with the West's history of knowing and judging self-killing, and how they respond to the crisis of representing twentieth-century death by investing the representational space of suicide in their novels with the power to unsettle thematic, aesthetic, and character issues, and thereby to disrupt interpretation.

which that note is a penultimate part) – *then* words and phrases in the note can take on special meanings, bearing as they do a special freight within that context" (*Autopsy* 8).[3] While a self-destroyer relinquishes narrative power, the living obtain and exercise narrative power; choosing which signs to assemble, they construct and control a suicide's meaning, which they disseminate for others to read and which the departed can never validate, modify, or refute. "Suicide becomes a bloody signature on the bottom of a ragged page," Anne Nesbet writes, "the final and incontrovertible assertion of authorial control over one's own life. At the same time, however, the suicide relinquishes all future control over everything, including future interpretations of his or her life-as-text…. Witnesses and analysts rush in to provide interpretation and theory" (827). Not only witnesses and analysts rush in; so do theologians, philosophers, politicians, sociologists, psychologists, natural scientists, artists, and literary critics, all of whom use their analytical powers to explain and judge suicide, perpetuating the imbalance over narrative power that frequently follows self-destruction.

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[3] Shneidman, along with Norman L. Farberow, is credited with initiating the field of suicidology in 1957, with an analysis of suicide notes (Shneidman, *Autopsy* 7). For their findings, see Shneidman and Farberow, "Clues to Suicide," "The Logic of Suicide" and "Some Comparisons." The authors estimate that about one-third of suicides write notes, and Shneidman, in a later essay, hypothesizes "that suicide notes cannot be the insightful documents which suicidologists would hope that they would be, mainly because they are written during a special psychological state, a state of focused purpose and narrow perception and psychodynamic denial. It is a state which, by its nature, precludes the individual's having access to the full ambivalent details of his own self-destructive drama and thus diminishes the possibility of his sharing with others (in a suicide note) what is truly going on in his mind" ("Suicide Notes Reconsidered" 384-85). For more of Shneidman's reflections on suicide notes, including a survey of prior studies of notes, see *Suicide as Psychache* 93-113, and for his own bibliography of suicide notes, see "A Bibliography of Suicide Notes."

As a concept and as a form of human behavior, therefore, suicide provides a unique space in which we can explore the production of meaning as well as the struggle over it, both of which occur on a cultural and social as much as it does on an individual level. Indeed, suicide is a fluid, conflicted space rather than a stable concept or easily definable event. To the best of my knowledge, the sociologist Jack D. Douglas, in his aptly titled classic book, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (1967), was the first modern researcher to dispense with the scientific assumption that suicide can be known objectively, arguing that it is a socially imputed category dependant, for its characteristics and recognition, on culturally and historically specific human judgment. It does not have a given, agreed upon meaning, nor, within a particular society, will everyone assume that self-killing has occurred; sociologists have as much trouble defining suicide,[4] and coroners have as much trouble identifying whether or not an act of self-killing has occurred, as does the general public. For Douglas, to study suicide is not to uncover its causes and define it, morally as well as conceptually, but to study the multiplicity of meanings that any given society accords it.

[4] See Douglas, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* 350-83 for a critique of six different "dimensions of meaning" usually associated with suicide: "(1) the *initiation* of an act that leads to the death of the initiator; (2) the willing of an *act* that leads to the death of the willer; (3) the willing of self-destruction; (4) the loss of will; (5) the *motivation to be dead (or to die)* which leads to the initiation of an act that leads to the death of the initiator; (6) the *knowledge* of an actor that actions he initiates tend to produce the objective state of death" (351). For a philosopher's take on the impossibility of identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for suicide, see Windt, "The Concept of Suicide." Despite their divergent approaches, both Douglas and Windt conclude that there is no stable definition for suicide, only "open-ended" (Douglas 383) or "open-textured" (Windt 39) concepts associated with it. Shneidman's *Defining Suicide* offers the best extended analysis of the subject that I know.

Although sociologists have critiqued Douglas's methodology,[5] his thesis, which I consider to be sound, informs my own approach to studying suicide, one that has led me to appreciate the irreconcilable views of self-destruction that have proliferated and perished in the West over the course of nearly two and a half millennia, without wondering why humans kill themselves or would want to kill themselves, and without evaluating the pros and cons of moral positions on self-killing.[6] Despite the diversity of these views, I have found two common, interconnected trends: although certain forms of suicide have been praised, for the most part, the act has almost invariably been condemned as sinful at worst or aberrant at best, and at stake in judging it is maintaining

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[5] Arguing against Émile Durkheim's positivistic approach to the sociological study of suicide, Douglas, a sociologist, is nevertheless invested in examining suicide from a scientific standpoint. He writes, "the only way one can go about scientifically studying the meanings of suicidal phenomena… is by studying the specific meanings of real-world phenomena of this socially-defined type as the individuals involved construct them: we must work from the clearly observable, concrete phenomena upward to abstractions about meanings in any culture… and the abstractions must be the results of comparisons made by sociologists of the concrete meanings of these phenomena defined as *similar* by the members of the culture" (253-54). J. Maxwell Atkinson, among others, has attacked Douglas for fashioning a vague methodology, claiming, quite rightly, "he is not clear about what one is supposed to do with the social meanings once they have been located" (80). For Atkinson's extended critique, see *Discovering Suicide* 76-83.

[6] A number of studies, most notably Georges Minois' *History of Suicide*, have shaped my understanding of the West's attitudes toward suicide. In addition to Minois, I am indebted to Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*; Colt, *The Enigma of Suicide* 129-205; Daube, "The Linguistics of Suicide"; Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*; Fedden, *Suicide*; Gates, *Victorian Suicide*; Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide*; Kushner, *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land*; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*; McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment* 409-37; Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* Vol. II; and Outram, *The Body and The French Revolution* 90-105. I have found a fascinating account of non-Western suicide in Pinguet, *Voluntary Death in Japan* and in Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* 2.532-98, which covers East Africa; Ancient and Medieval India; Medieval Islam; the early Germans; and Pharaonic, Ptolemaic, and Christian Egypt.

or asserting power: the church's or state's power over the individual and, in opposition, the individual's struggle to assert personal freedom. Both sides of the conflict, however, refuse to see suicide as an inexplicable, morally neutral act.

The vocabulary of suicide illustrates that self-killing is generally understood as an anomalous if not aberrant form of behavior. According to David Daube, in almost every language the words denoting it "are always qualifications of others, mostly either of 'to die' or to 'kill.' Suicide, that is, is exhibited as a dying or a killing, with a twist" (390). (In English, the word "suicide" is a Latinate composite of "sui" ["self"] and "caedere" ["to kill"].) Daube links this linguistic habit to "the relative normality in human thinking of involuntary dying or of killing someone else as opposed to the abnormality of suicide," and he points out that, in the West, the words based on "to kill" precede those based on "to die," which first appeared in Greece during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C – a progression he links to our cognition of self-killing: first we see the obvious, material fact that suicides have killed themselves, and only subsequently, when reconsidering the deed, do we consider that they have died in subjective ways experienced by them alone, ways we can contemplate but never fully know (391). Even if Daube's explanation for the progression of suicide terminology seems overly simplistic, tying historical development to questionable mental processes, his explanation suggests a valuable metaphor for understanding why the West has mainly condemned suicide and why attempts to challenge this condemnation are uncommon. Those who denounce suicide view it from the "outside," as a type of killing or murder, and those who defend it view it, through a sympathetic imaginative leap, from the "inside," as a type of dying.

A rich vocabulary of suicide flourished during Greek and Roman antiquity, differentiating active and passive modes of self-killing, but no single word or phrase encompassed all these terms.[7] One could, for instance, do violence to oneself (*biazesthai heauton*), fall by one's own hand (*sui manu cadere*), die voluntarily (*hekousios apothneisko*), or procure one's own death (*sibi mortem consciercere*), but one could not commit suicide: a comprehensive noun, English's "suicide," did not arise until the late seventeenth century. Accompanying this proliferation of terminology was a proliferation of perspectives and legislation. In Greece, the Pythagoreans categorically opposed suicide, viewing it as an offence against the natural course of life as well as the harmonic relationship between body and soul; the Cynics, Epicureans and Stoics, on the other hand, welcomed it as a way to preserve the dignity of a life no longer worth living. It was Plato and Aristotle, however, who fashioned the attitudes that defined the West's view of self-killing, particularly its disapproval. Although Plato, in *The Laws*, found suicide acceptable in extenuating circumstances – as a form of capital punishment, when one is terminally ill, and when one is experiencing unassailable misery – he nevertheless concluded, in the *Phaedo* and through a condemned Socrates, that only God, who has given humans life, can take life away; consequently, death at one's own hands is justified only when God provides the compulsion to kill oneself. Socrates tells a curious Cebes, "the gods are our keepers, and we men are one of their possessions.... So if you look at it this way I suppose it is not unreasonable to say that we must not put an end to ourselves

[7] Daube discusses this vocabulary at length, but see Hooff, *From Autothanasia* 243-50 for a compact list of words used to designate suicide in Ancient Greece and Rome.

until God sends some compulsion like the one which we are facing now" (45).[8] If, for Plato, suicide is a crime against God, for Aristotle it is a crime against the state. When citizens take their own lives, they renounce their allegiance and duty to the body politic, robbing it of their services:

> [H]e who through anger voluntarily stabs himself does this contrary to the right rule of life, and this the law does not allow; therefore he is acting unjustly. But towards whom? Surely towards the state, not towards himself. For he suffers voluntarily, but no one is voluntarily treated unjustly. This is also the reason why the state punishes; a certain loss of civil rights attaches to the man who destroys himself, on the ground that he is treating the state unjustly. (*Ethica Nichomachea* 1021)

Both philosophers' arguments went widely unrecognized until the Middle Ages, when Sts. Augustine and Aquinas invoked them to condemn suicide theologically, from within the Catholic Church. In Plato's and Aristotle's own time, while cities such as Athens, Sparta, and Thebes legislated against self-killing, often prescribing mutilation of the body as a form of punishment – in Athens, the right hands of suicides were cut off to prevent them from committing further crimes after death – colonies such as Ceos and Massilia (modern-day Marseilles) tolerated it, often providing hemlock to those who wanted to kill themselves.

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[8] Despite Socrates' disapproval of self-killing, his death is controversial; some view him as a suicide who could have chosen not to drink the hemlock, others as a victim of capital punishment who had no other choice. For a brief overview of this controversy, see Friedman, *Fictional Death* 58.

Rome, like Greece, did not embrace a monolithic attitude toward suicide. Because of Stoicism's popularity among the Roman elites, thinkers such as Epictetus and Seneca defended *mors voluntaria* ("voluntary death") as a reasonable way to end a life not worth living, but others such as Cicero and Virgil were more ambivalent: according to how they perceived suicidal motivation, they censured some self-killers and praised others. Roman law was also ambivalent. Although neither the Twelve Tables of early Republican Rome nor Imperial Roman law contains comprehensive legislation against suicide, it was condemned (or not condemned) in special circumstances. Elites were free to do with their lives as they wished, but for those accused of a crime in both Republican and Imperial Rome, killing oneself during trial amounted to a confession, frequently resulting in the confiscation of the suicide's goods; killing oneself before trial, however, saved the goods from being confiscated, for the law did not try the dead.[9] Even slaves were permitted to kill themselves, although failed attempts would lessen their value (presumably so would successful ones) because they were deemed harmful not to themselves but to others, and, in many cases, soldiers who tried but failed to kill themselves were treated contrary to the convention that suicide by members of the armed forces amounted to desertion and carried a penalty of death: they were sometimes

[9] As Rome progressed under Republican and Imperial rule, the laws regarding suicide and confiscation of goods were narrowed, so that only in special cases was self-killing seen as a confession of guilt and were goods seized. For a discussion of these laws, see Hoof, *From Autothanasia* 169-71. For a comprehensive analysis of Roman law and suicide, see Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* 152-88.

executed for having *failed* to kill themselves; at other times, they were merely dismissed or demoted.[10]

Rome did not condemn all forms of suicide until it accepted Christianity, and it did not do so until after its decline, and in reaction to various historical pressures. "Ties of dependency multiplied in the late Roman Empire," Minois writes,

> and God's interests reflected those of the property owners: Taking one's own life was an offense against the rights of both God and the master. Civil and religious authorities carried on a parallel combat against suicide using complementary dissuasive measures – confiscation of earthly possessions and promise of eternal damnation. In both domains the prohibition of suicide entailed a loss of human freedom. Stripping people of their essential right to dispose of their own persons worked to the benefit of the Church, which directed all aspects of their lives and drew its strength from the numbers of the faithful, and to the benefit of the lords (some of whom were churchmen), who needed to maintain and increase their labor supply in an underpopulated world where exploitation of the domain was regularly compromised by famine and epidemic disease. (31)

Even the Church's prohibition of suicide was, as Minois suggests, initially more political than religious; it stemmed from the Church's push to consolidate its power, not from Biblical injunction against self-destruction. For although the Old Testament contains

[10] For more on the different penalties faced by soldiers who failed to kill themselves, see Hoff, *From Autothanasia* 172. See also Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* 177-81.

seven suicides – Abimelech, Samson, Achitophel, Zimry, Saul, Ptolemy Macron, and Razis – and the New Testament one – Judas – neither condemns suicide. As Daube illustrates, when mentioning its self-killers, the Old Testament describes the specificity of the suicidal act without deploying an inclusive term for it: "Saul took a sword and fell upon it" (I Samuel 31:4); "Achithophel strangled himself" (II Samuel 17:23) (qtd. in Daube 394). Its neutrality toward suicide is reflected in the neutrality of its language; similarly, in the New Testament, Judas' death is described as a hanging (Matthew 27:5), not as a self-killing. Because of the Bible's neutrality, early Church fathers held conflicting stances toward suicide, especially because of Christ's example, which posed the greatest moral challenge: whether or not it was right for Christians actively to seek a martyr's death. Christians commonly view Christ as committing necessary self-sacrifice instead of avoidable suicide – a convenient rhetorical distinction that conceives self-sacrifice as a noble deed against suicide as an ignoble one, obfuscating the common neutral fact of knowingly and willingly taking one's own life[11] (or acting in a way that knowingly leads to it) – but he speaks as if he will intentionally and willingly commit suicide. In the Gospel According to John, he says, "I lay down my life for the sheep" and "No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself" (*King James Bible,* John 10.15 and 10.18). St. John reports that Christ's teachings were vague to the Jews, who often thought he was declaring his intention to commit suicide: "Then said Jesus again unto

[11] For a philosopher's evaluation of the rhetorical differences between martyrdom and suicide, see Stern-Gillet, "The Rhetoric of Suicide." For a philosopher's critique of attempts to distinguish morally permissible from morally impermissible acts of self-killing, see Martin, "Suicide and Self-Sacrifice."

them, I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins: whither I go, ye cannot come. Then said the Jews, Will he kill himself? because he saith, Whither I go, ye cannot come" (*King James Bible,* John 8.21-22).[12] Following Christ's example of freely renouncing life, Christians throughout the first few centuries A.D. actively sought to place themselves in situations where they could kill themselves (or be killed) for their religion, causing Church fathers to debate the subject of martyrdom. To provide a few examples, Origen, who considered Christ a suicide and did not condemn self-destruction, thought that martyrdom was a duty; St. Clement of Alexandria reproved all voluntary deaths, arguing that Christians who killed themselves misunderstood martyrdom, which is valid only if it was achieved in accordance with God's will; St. Jerome censured most acts of self-killing, extolling only those women who committed suicide to preserve their chastity.[13]

St. Augustine solved the problem of martyrdom by providing Christian thinkers with a justification for condemning suicide. Augustine's disapproval stemmed from his reaction to the Donatists, a heretical sect active in Africa during the fourth century. Convinced they were members of the true church, many Donatists enthusiastically sought martyrdom to prove their faith precisely because they faced and tested themselves against persecution. In *Against Gaudentius*, Augustine distinguished martyrs from suicides by arguing that martyrs gave their lives for the glory of God and that suicides such as the

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[12] I am indebted to Minois for drawing my attention to these passages in the Gospel According to John.

[13] For more on Origen and St. Clement of Alexandria, see Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death* 149-52 and 141-44. For more on St. Jerome, see Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* 99-100.

Donatists merely sought to die voluntarily, either by killing themselves or by provoking their own deaths; martyrdom is a matter not of action but of principles and motives. In the same work, Augustine posited a cause and punishment for the Donatists' suicidal zeal, both of which subsequently prevailed for all suicides throughout the Middle Ages: the Donatists were driven by diabolical madness and would end up in Hell.[14]

Augustine did not formulate his injunction against suicide until he wrote *City of God* (c. 416-23), a defense of Christianity against those pagans who blamed the Goth invasion on the Christians: in their eyes, the Christians caused the invasion by not worshipping the traditional gods. The Goths raped a large number of Roman women, and some women killed themselves either to avoid rape or out of shame for having been raped. The Church, holding up chastity as an ideal, and under the influence of Stoicism despite having deemed it a pagan philosophy, recognized as saints some of the women who committed suicide to preserve their sexual purity. Such recognition disturbed Augustine, who, in *Against Gaudentius*, argued against so-called martyrs, and so in *City of God* he concluded that the women who killed themselves to avoid violation were misguided. This conclusion informed his general prescription against suicide. Adopting the Platonic notion that only God can take away life, Augustine wrote,

> no one ought deliberately to bring about his own death by way of escaping from temporal troubles, for fear that he may fall into eternal afflictions; it is wrong to commit suicide because of the sins of others, for this is to

[14] For more on Augustine, see Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death* 167-83, and Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* 101-21.

> bring upon oneself a heavy burden of sin, whereas another's sin could not defile one; or because of one's past sins, for one has more need of this life on their account, so that those sins may be healed by repentance; or through longing for a better life, hoped for after death, for those guilty of their own death are not received after death into that better life. (37-38; bk.1, ch. 26)

If Augustine, in *Against Gaudentius*, condemned suicide in order to support the Church's persecution of a heretical sect, in *City of God* he did so in order to strengthen Christianity.

Augustine profoundly influenced his fellow Christians' moral views of suicide, but the Church was slow to condemn self-killing officially, and for a long time it did so only in special cases. Although the Second Council of Arles (c. 455 A.D.) dealt with suicide, its acts, according to Murray, were not studied by medieval canonists; the council's authority was doubted, and its pronouncement on suicide was indirect: a slave's suicide cannot be blamed on his master (182). The Council of Orleans (533 A.D.) denied oblations to suspected criminals who, sentenced to death, killed themselves before execution. The Councils of Braga (561 A.D.) and Auxerre (c. 551-605 A.D.) produced the same verdict but specified the methods of suicide that were to be condemned and forbade prayers at a suicide's funeral. Finally, The Council of Toledo (693 A.D.), significant to the history of suicide in that it offered a psychological explanation for self-killing, considered that despair drove people to attempt suicide and judged that failed self-killers must be excommunicated from the Church for two months; only penance would deliver unsuccessful suicides from sin and restore their hope. Despair was seen as

a particularly egregious sin: it was both a failure of faith – those in despair denied God's mercy – and a rejection of confession, which, theologically, was seen as a manifestation of God's mercy, and politically, was one of the Church's ways of exercising its authority. Those who killed themselves out of despair committed the most blameworthy type of suicide. Like Judas, who was seen as the paragon of despairing self-killers, they maintained that God would never forgive their sins when, in fact, suicide was the one unpardonable sin because it precludes repentance.

Along with suicide from despair, suicide from diabolical instigation was, during the Middle Ages, the most common rationale for self-killing, but in spite of both widely held beliefs, the systematic opposition to suicide within civil and canon law did not emerge until the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. The Church and civil leaders who constructed this legal framework found their justification mainly in *Summa Theologica* (c. 1272), in which St. Thomas Aquinas synthesized the Platonic and Aristotelian, theological and civic attitudes toward suicide, and added to them a conclusion derived from natural law. In addition to being an offense against God, who gave us life, and against civil society, of which we are a part and in which we have civic duties to fulfill, suicide was an offense against nature: we have a natural inclination to preserve our own lives.[15] The legal framework influenced by Aquinas and constructed during the High to Late Middle Ages shaped the West's legal prohibition of suicide until the twentieth

[15] Murray reports that Aquinas' doctrinal authority was only cemented in the fourteenth century, after his canonization in 1323. Members of the Dominican order read him, however, and through their evangelism, they spread his thoughts on suicide (231-35).

century.[16] Authorities denied suicides a Christian burial – a throwback to the Council of Braga, which, according to Murray, set the precedent (186) – frequently mutilated their corpses, and confiscated their goods;[17] and while the French National Assembly's retraction in 1790 of France's suicide laws promoted other continental countries to do the same,[18] Britain was the last nation to rescind its laws, abolishing highway burials in 1823, ceasing confiscating goods in 1870, and finally decriminalizing both suicide and attempted suicide in 1961.

During the Renaissance, despair and diabolical temptation remained the main reasons for suicide within the Catholic and Protestant worlds; Martin Luther added possession as a possible cause. The spread of written culture, however, rekindled an interest in Classical authors and sparked a humanistic interest in self-killing. Petrarch, in *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* (*Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*; 1366), singled out these authors to condemn suicide, repeating Augustine's and Aquinas' arguments against it; Thomas More, in *Utopia* (1516), thought the perfect society should accept voluntary death committed to end suffering;[19] and Shakespeare portrayed heroic, Classical self-destroyers (for example, Antony and Cleopatra) along with pitiable

[16] For a compact discussion of suicide in Western law, see Silving, "Suicide and Law."

[17] The United States was the exception. Silving points out that the U.S. never accepted English common law's injunction to deny suicides a Christian burial and confiscate their goods (82). Currently, only Texas and Oklahoma have (unenforced) laws against attempted suicide.

[18] Penalties against suicide were nevertheless reimposed from 10 March 1793 to 1795, after two generals killed themselves (Outram 91). Moreover, after Napoleon rose to power, he did not include an injunction against suicide in his code of laws.

[19] While imprisoned in the Tower of London, however, he wrote *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (1535), in which he argued that all suicide is caused by the devil (Minois 67).

suicides (for example, Romeo and Juliet). Of all Renaissance authors, John Donne went the furthest, writing the first book-long defense of self-killing: *Biathanatos* ("dying by violence"), a treatise completed in 1607-8 and published posthumously in 1647 that introduced to the English language "self-preservation" and "self-homicide," a neutral term for what was, in England, known as a type of murder, destruction, and slaughter.[20] Arguing within a Christian framework against the belief that suicide violates natural and divine law as well as the law of reason, Donne insisted that suicide was not inherently sinful, was sometimes reasonable, and, in certain cases, should not be punished. Suicide is not inherently sinful because it is not always committed out of despair, nor does it necessarily preclude repentance, which Donne believed was immediate. Furthermore, the desire to die accords with natural law and cannot be corrupt, for it is a desire not to terminate existence but to transform earthly life into spiritual afterlife, as was the case with early Christian martyrs: "the desire of martyrdom, though the body perish, is a self-preservation, because thereby, out of our election, our best part is advanced. For heaven, which we gain so, is certainly good; life, but probably and possibly" (*Biathanatos* 63;

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[20] For a discussion of the various English compound nouns that arose during the seventeenth century, see Daube, "Linguistics of Suicide" 418-29. As Daube attests, this century also saw the coining of "self-killing," "self-death," and "suicide," which was introduced by Walter Charleton, a physician and author. Although Charleton used it in 1651 or 1652, in a work of fiction titled *The Ephesian Matron*, it was neglected in the English-speaking world until the 1760's. Charleton spelled the term with a hyphen – "sui-cide" – and after the *The Ephesian Matron* was published, the French Jesuit Abbé Pierre François Guyot Desfontaines adopted it as "suicide." It was Voltaire, however, who popularized the term in France, writing in 1739 an essay entitled "Suicide ou homicide de soi-même" ("Suicide or Self-homicide") and later using the term frequently in his works. After variants of "suicide" became popular throughout the continent, England re-adopted it.

I.ii.2.1786-88). When suicide is committed to preserve the "best part" of life, it also does not contravene reason, the natural faculty exclusive to humankind; one can rationally perceive the benefits of ending life in order to enter the spiritual afterlife. But not all suicides are rational and forgivable. Each case results from unique circumstances and must be judged accordingly. When evaluating a particular self-killing, what mattered for Donne was the intention behind it. Published only after Donne's death, *Biathanatos*, despite being the work of a Royal Chaplain and the Dean of St. Paul's, had little effect on religious and civil authorities who, according to Minois, held that suicide threatened public order and indicted both church and state by accusing them of failing to look after the populace's wellbeing (115). What is more, as MacDonald and Murphy illustrate, the aristocracy wished to retain their right to confiscate the goods of self-destroyers, a highly profitable form of patronage that extended all the way to the crown (83-86). For them, suicide was good business.

Before Donne, an earlier, subtler break occurred, one that influenced what MacDonald and Murphy call the "secularization of suicide,"[21] which commenced in Early Modern England but, in terms of fostering a non-religious, scientific view of self-killing, climaxed in the twentieth century. This rupture found its best expression in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Although he accepted the possibility of diabolical temptation, Burton set forth a physiological cause for suicide. Some people killed themselves, he asserted, because melancholy, which was triggered by black bile,

[21] See MacDonald's and Murphy's section entitled "The Secularization of Suicide," *Sleepless Souls* 109-75.

deprived them of reason and self-control. Hence his suggestion that religious and legal authorities suspend condemnation of such self-killers:

> [I]n some cases those hard censures of such as offer violence to their own persons, or in some desperate fit to others, which sometimes they do, by stabbing, slashing, &c. are to be mitigated, as in such as are mad, beside themselves for the time, or found to have been long melancholy, and that in extremity; they know not what they do, deprived of reason, judgment, all, as a ship that is void of a pilot must needs impinge upon the next rock or sands, and suffer shipwreck. (504)

The medical establishment in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries picked up where Burton left off, separating morality from medicine and claiming mental derangement as the general cause, attributable to "climate, the change of seasons, heredity, cerebral injuries, physical suffering, liver disease, melancholia, hypochondriasis, insanity, suppressed secretions, intoxication, gastritis, unnatural vices, and derangement of the *primae viea*, among others" (Colt 184).[22] Thus were the religious explanations overturned, but even if physicians refrained from moralizing overtly, refusing to see the devil behind suicide, they nevertheless viewed self-killing as aberrant and recommended various remedies to prevent it: drinking cold water, plunge

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[22] In nineteenth-century America, religious enthusiasm was also considered to cause derangement and suicide. Millerism, an apocalyptic movement, was singled out as the most egregious offender. For a discussion of Millerism and views of suicide in late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century America, see Kushner *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land* 35-61. See also "Millerism," a psychiatric journal article on the subject.

baths, bleeding, opium, induced vomiting, travel, reading "light" literature.[23] In addition to medical explanations and cures, suicide notes, written with greater frequency in the eighteenth century than they were in preceding centuries and, in England, published in newspapers along with descriptions of self-killing, contributed to the secularization of suicide, explaining the deed in quotidian, non-religious terms and presenting it as a commonplace event rather than as a crime or an instance of diabolical temptation.[24]

Another rupture occurred during the Enlightenment, but philosophers of the period focused not on insanity but on whether suicide could be committed rationally. While still insisting on madness as a cause for some suicides, Montesquieu, Voltaire and others deemed rational self-killing a non-offensive act of self-preservation and a matter of individual liberty. David Hume wrote the most famous treatise on philosophical suicide, "On Suicide" (1777; first published in France in 1770), which attacked the standard theological, civic, and natural law arguments against self-imposed death. First, suicide is not a crime against God because He has given humans the power to change nature in order to guarantee their happiness and welfare; killing oneself does not alter natural processes any more than any other act, and "[w]ere the disposal of human life so much reserved as the peculiar province of the Almighty, that it were an encroachment on his

[23] For more on recommended cures and the medical view of suicide, see Colt, *The Enigma of Suicide* 183-88.

[24] But the press, in addition to fiction writers, represented suicide as sensational and rash. See Gates, *Victorian Suicide* 38-60 and Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* 196-214. Minois, in *History of Suicide* 287-94, discusses suicide notes and newspaper coverage in England. Minois also points out that monarchial France, unlike England, silenced suicide, prohibiting publication of written defenses of self-killing and forbidding newspapers to cover the act. In the latter half of the century, despite any official injunction against publishing accounts of suicide, the press still remained silent.

right for men to dispose of their own lives, it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction" (319). Second, suicide is not a crime against the state; those who kill themselves because they are a burden to society commit an admirable deed and promote rather than hinder its interests. Last, suicide is not a crime against the self, for it is a cure for a life not worth living due to sickness or misfortune; killing oneself when life becomes unmanageable "is the only way that we can then be useful to society, by setting an example, which, if imitated, would preserve to every one his chance for happiness in life, and would effectually free him from all danger or misery" (324).

Under the sway of Enlightenment and Classical philosophers, the French Revolutionary elite embraced heroic suicide, seeing it as an act of freedom and virtue, frequently committing it publicly, in Outram's estimation, "to create an illusory impression of solidarity among such in fact very disparate individuals as the Jacobin rump known as the 'martyrs of Prairial', or of those remaining around Robespierre" (96) – that is, to personify true Revolutionary values among shifting power allegiances and against political persecution.[25] This brief flurry of suicidal activity, along with the revival of noble suicide by Enlightenment thinkers, did little to influence popular opinion on voluntary death. Published defenses of suicide were promptly suppressed, and despite overturning legislation against the deed over the next hundred years, the West, assisted by medicine, psychiatry, and, in the twentieth-century, sociology and psychology, still

[25] For more on suicide and the Enlightenment, see Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution* 90-105 and McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment* 409-37.

considered it aberrant – in many cases, immoral. Victorian England, for example, often saw suicide as the province not only of the temporarily or permanently insane but also of those who lacked willpower and self-discipline.[26] The collapse of a legal and religious framework for dealing with suicide meant that civil and religious authorities could no longer coerce the public into perceiving self-killing as a great wrong, so it was up to social commentators, doctors, sociologists, and psychologists to do so. In place of declaring suicide an offense against the state and God, these professionals deemed it either a byproduct of failed social organization or an individual moral failure; for this reason, the dawn of sociology and psychology, despite both disciplines' claim to moral neutrality, did not herald a complete break with the West's tradition of condemning suicide.

Jean Baechler puts it best:

> Because, except for certain exceptional cases, suicide is universally considered as unnatural, aberrant, and, in the end, inhuman, the first tendency necessarily consists in interpreting it as the result of a 'power' exercised over the unfortunate individual that pushes him to his death. Scientific thought changes none of this. Simply, instead of placing this force in the gods or in fate, one seeks it in forces either *external* or *internal* to the subject. This is why one may find but two broad types of theories on suicide: (1) *Sociological* theories, which place this suicidal power

[26] For more on suicide, willpower, and self-discipline in Victorian England, see Gates, *Victorian Suicide* 26-32.

> outside the individual in the social conditions under which he lives; (2) *Psychological* (or psychoanalytic or psychiatric) theories that see it in the innermost reaches of the psyche. (6)

The discipline of sociology produced its first great achievement in 1897, when Emile Durkheim published *Le Suicide*, a work important for initiating the modern study of suicide. Durkheim was influenced by moral statisticians such as Henry Morselli, who since the eighteenth century had gathered data and used statistical methods to measure social ills (e.g., crime, divorce, and suicide), with the goal of determining which factors – age, sex, class, race, climate, and topography, to name a few – contributed to deviant social behavior. After studying suicide statistics from the second half of the nineteenth century, Durkheim found that the suicide rate remained constant over time within each country, but that the rate varied among different countries. He also discovered that the suicide rate differed among social groups within the same country and that race, heredity, climate, seasonal temperature, and imitation have no impact on the suicide rates within social groups. Both findings led him, famously, to declare, "for each social group there is a specific tendency to suicide explained neither by the organic-psychic constitution of individuals nor the nature of the physical environment. Consequently, by elimination, it must necessarily depend upon social causes and be in itself a collective phenomena" (145). Individual motivations and reasons ascribed for suicide are mere "apparent causes" devoid of any explanatory power; the sociologist must "seek directly the states of the various social environments (religious confessions, family, political society, occupational groups, etc.), in terms of which the variations of suicide occur" (151). Only

after sociologists have determined the social causes of suicide can they explain why individuals kill themselves.

Durkheim classified suicide into three distinct categories: egoistic, altruistic, and anomic. Egoistic suicide results from a lack of social cohesion, when individuals, who depend on social integration for their wellbeing, are estranged from collective life. Altruistic suicide occurs when social cohesion is too extreme, when individuals are so integrated into collective life that they forfeit their personal identities in order to act in conformity with their group's dictates. Anomic suicide, the most prevalent type in modern society, occurs when individuals are unable to deal with sudden changes in their lives, such as going bankrupt, or even obtaining unanticipated wealth. More important for Durkheim, in the modern era, as in earlier eras, sudden and drastic social changes also cause anomic suicide: they throw into turmoil social institutions and regulations, thereby depriving the populace of basic needs, including security. Despite relying on empirical analysis and statistical proof – that is, on ostensible moral impartiality – when constructing his classificatory system, and despite formulating a neutral definition for self-killing – "*all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result*" (44) – Durkheim retained, in his thinking, traces of traditional moralizing: however one looks at it, suicide is deviant, and society is to blame.[27]

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[27] Durkheim's paradigm influenced sociological studies of suicide for the greater part of the twentieth-century, informing the work of the Chicago School, particularly that of Ruth Cavan, who in *Suicide* (1928) contended that within the city of Chicago a link existed between weak social cohesion and self-killing. It also informed Maurice

Sigmund Freud also employed negative judgment in his thinking. For him, suicides are victims of abnormal psychological processes and therefore commit aberrant acts. Freud did not write much on the subject, but most psychoanalytic theories of suicide derive from his work, particularly "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in which he contended that suicides are victims of aggressive impulses initially directed outward but turned inward and aimed against the self. For suicide to occur, the ego, after wishing to kill a love object that has abandoned or rejected it, has to create and fail to integrate fully into itself an image of the object. Incomplete integration causes the ego to split into two portions, and the part not associated with the lost love object condemns and torments the part that is. Such torment may lead to suicide, which is a way for the ego to murder the loved one, by killing its internalized image. Three years later, in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), Freud developed his theory of the opposition between what he called the sexual instinct (Eros) and the death instinct (Thanatos). While the former seeks to preserve life and enable its development, the latter, "*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things* which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces" (36), seeks to end life. The struggle between the two instincts shapes much of human behavior, Freud believed, and he later postulated that suicides allow Thanatos to overwhelm Eros.[28]

Halbwachs' *Causes du Suicide* (1930), in which Halbwach, discounting altruistic and anomic suicide, argued that egoistic suicide is all.

[28] After Freud, Karl Menninger produced the most famous psychoanalytic explanation for self-killing. In "Psychoanalytic Aspects of Suicide" (1933), he expanded Freud's argument that suicide results when violence is turned inward, adding to the aggressive component of self-killing – in Menninger's terminology, the wish to kill – the submissive

Durkheim's and Freud's explanations, or variants of them, held sway throughout much of the twentieth century, and in recent years, biological and bio-chemical explanations for suicide have complemented if not overshadowed sociological and psychological accounts; depression is currently the main culprit, turning suicide into a mental health issue. It is not my intent to give a detailed description of the current research on self-killing, but I want to stress that, after Christianity's ascendancy, even thinkers who refrained from denouncing suicide either retained the conception that it is aberrant if not entirely immoral, a point I have already discussed at length, or reinforced this conception by singling out for approval only a special type of self-killing. Apologists of voluntary death, who struggle to carve out a legal and ethical space in which people can kill themselves without repercussion, are indebted to, and leave intact, explicitly or implicitly, the moral structure they critique: although some suicides are spiritual, rational, or necessary, the rest, usually the majority, are sinful, irrational, or pointless; none is neutral. Beyond this moral absolutism, proponents share a deeper assumption with their adversaries, one indebted to natural law arguments: life is intrinsically preferable to death, which can improve or preserve life's dignity but should never be sought as an end in itself. The value of life must be safeguarded, and suicides committed in defiance of this idea are reprehensible. Of course, as Donne was the first to argue, one cannot judge a particular suicide without first having determined its motivation; the same holds true for all moral verdicts. But what if it is impossible to

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wish to be killed and the wish to die, all of which desires he explored further, along with Freud's life and death instincts, in *Man Against Himself* (1938).

know motive, intention, rationale? What if no motive exists, or if one does, what happens when the veil separating cause from effect is immovable? What then?

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The Dadaists and Surrealists present a possible approach to thinking about suicide that discards motive and morality. Published in December 1924, the first issue of *Lá Révolution Surréaliste*, the official journal of the Surrealist Movement, included the following questionnaire: "On vit, on muert. Quelle est la part de la volonté en tout cela? Il semble qu'on se tue comme on rêve. Ce n'est pas une question morale que nous posons: Le suicide est-il une solution?" ("Enquête" 2). ("You live, you die. What is the role of the will in all this? It seems that one kills oneself like one dreams. This is not a moral question that we pose: Is suicide a solution?") The survey provoked a range of answers, from reactionary – M. André Lebey's "Avancer qu'on se tue comme on rêve est stupide" ("Enquête" Jan. 1925, 9; "Proposing that one kills oneself like one dreams is stupid.") – to cryptic: M. Pierre De Massot's "Monsieur, je me permets de répondre à votre question en recopiant le placard apposé sur le mur de ma chamber: 'On entre sans frapper mais on est prié de se suicider afin de sortir'" ("Enquête" Jan. 1925, 9; "Sir, allow me to reply to your question by copying out the notice on my bedroom wall: 'Enter without knocking but you are requested to commit suicide before leaving.'"). But, as Leonard Livak points out, "[m]any responses to this questionnaire confirmed the theoretical equivalency of automatic writing, dream, and suicide in surrealist thought"

(250). Antonin Artaud, for example, replied, "[J]e suis mort depuis longtemps, je suis déjà suicidé. *On* m'a suicidé, c'est-à-dire" ("Enquête" Jan. 1925**,** 12; "I have been dead for a long time, I am already suicided. I have been suicided, so to speak."). André Breton quoted the philosopher Théodore Jouffroy: "Le suicide est un mot mal fait: ce qui tue n'est pas identique à ce qui est tué" ("Enquête" Jan. 1925, 12; "Suicide is a badly made word: what kills is not identical to what is killed."). "Artaud's word-play and Breton's performance put in relief what is most original in the surrealist preoccupation with suicide," writes Jared Stark,

> namely the discovery of an element of strangeness or "otherness" within an act traditionally conceived either as proof of an absolute loss of self (madness) or an act of pure autonomy (heroism)…. In Artaud's "on," in Breton/Jouffroy's "ce qui," suicide becomes a paradoxically *impersonal* act – not the expression of a self-identical personality nor of the alienating determinisms of scientific discourse, but the sign, even the celebration, of a dissolution of the self. (*Beyond Words* 142)

Responses such as Artaud's and Breton's confirmed what *Lá Révolution Surréaliste*'s questionnaire already assumed: like dreams (and automatic writing), self-killing is an inexplicable act that bypasses the will and intention, unfetters the self from reason, and produces illogical yet deeply evocative results. Suicide is a matter of theoretical speculation rather than moral debate, of seeing it as a sign or stance rather than as a mere act caused by external or internal forces, and determining if it can serve as a neutral, viable solution not to a life deprived of dignity but to Life (and Art) considered as an

abstract problem. Abandoning intention, causality, and morality for dream-like incoherence, and replacing religious, philosophical, and scientific discourse with an artistic agenda, the editors proffered an entirely new way of thinking about self-killing.

Indeed, the Surrealists, along with the Dadaists, considered suicide a means for promoting their artistic objectives, creating, as Livak shows, "a myth of suicide that served as an interpretive paradigm informing acts of self-destruction with meaning. In light of this paradigm, suicide became an artistic text that could be 'read' just like a written text, provided one was well versed in the avant-garde cultural mythology" (248). Both movements created this myth through their theoretical and artistic writings, and by the end of the 1920s, it "acquired a practical application as a meaning-generating mechanism, triggered by a series of suicides among avant-garde artists" (248), including Jacques Vaché, André Breton's close friend and one of Surrealism's primary inspirations; Jacques Rigaut, a member of the Paris Dadaists; and Arthur Cravan, who was considered a Dadaist precursor and a suicide despite his uncertain fate.[29] According to Livak, the meanings this myth enabled posited suicide as "as a figure of evasion from reality, from social and moral conventions, and from the 'bourgeois' concepts of talent, ambition, and remuneration associated with literature" (245). Suicide was seen "as an ultimate artistic statement, a 'lived poem' far superior to a 'written poem' by virtue of its 'realism' and 'sincerity,'" and in the novels of the French avant-garde, the myth of self-destruction

[29] Of particular interest is *Four Dadaist Suicides*, a compilation of writings by Vaché, Rigaut, and Cravan, as well as by Julien Torma, who disappeared in the Tyrol Mountains but, like Cravan, was thought to have killed himself. Published in 1995, his compilation best perpetuates the myth of Dadaist suicide to a late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century audience.

hardened into a cliché, complete with predictable rhetorical maneuvers and conventional representations of self-destruction, both of which conformed to Dadaist and Surrealist doctrine (245, 254).

The Dadaists and Surrealists rejected the West's mode of knowing suicide, therefore, only to replace it with their own. Emptying suicide of traditional causal and moral content, they invested it with dogmatic theoretical and artistic value; in so doing, both movements reduced it to an aesthetic posture, which Jacques Rigaut summed up when he famously declared, "[s]uicide should be a vocation" (*Four Dada Suicides* 120).[30] Their writings exemplify the risk of thinking about self-destruction in terms that dispense with purpose and morality: the risk that one will abandon the search for intrinsic significance only to impose extrinsic significance, by turning suicide into a sign of something else.[31] In other words, if suicide is incomprehensible, if, more specifically, a particular act of self-killing does not possess identifiable motive or moral import, then perceiving it as an embodiment of theoretical and aesthetic positions on evasion and authenticity, to name the possibilities the Dadaists and Surrealists raise, means that it is

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[30] See also Rigaut's claim that, although he killed himself at least three times, "[t]he important thing was not whether I died or not but that I had taken the decision to die" (*Four Dadaist Suicides* 123). That is, suicide was, for Rigaut, an attitude rather than an act.

[31] Of course, for a medieval priest and a Durkheimian sociologist, suicide is a sign of moral failure and social malfunction, respectively. This is to say that suicide can be understood only within a symbolic framework. The difference lies, however, in how the sign is understood. For a sociologist, suicide may be a sign of social failure, but it is also a physical event caused by social failure; it has a real-world cause and referent. For a Dadaist, on the other hand, suicide is a sign of evasion and sincerity but is not necessarily caused by the desire to escape reality and create an authentic artistic statement; instead, it is a representation that replaces its referent and corresponds to other representations only. In Jean Baudrillard's terminology, it is a type of simulacra.

easily decipherable. Suicide becomes pure symbol, an abstraction lacking singularity, an axiom devoid of contingency.

The Dadaists' and Surrealists' admiration for Arthur Cravan best illustrates my point. A poet, forger, and boxer who was widely considered a forerunner of Dadaism and who disappeared off the Gulf of Mexico while sailing to Buenos Aires to meet his wife, Mina Loy, Cravan was generally thought not to have drowned, the only reasonable conclusion given the evidence, or lack thereof. Nor was his fate deemed indeterminate. Instead, many assumed that he killed himself and that his suicide anticipated Dadaism's aesthetic ambitions; he would not have been a potent avant-garde avatar if he had merely died or disappeared. For the Dadaists and Surrealists, the myth of self-destruction superseded any possible reason for Cravan's purported suicide and, more important, the circumstances surrounding his disappearance. The question of what really happened to him was replaced not with, why would he want to kill himself, but with, what does his suicide tell us about his life as a Dada forerunner? Hans Richter, an early Dadaist, demonstrates this mode of thinking, in his history of the group: "Cravan… deserves special mention as a kind of adoptive forebear of the American (and the French) Dada movement, because he pursued the destructive urge inherent in Dada to its ultimate conclusion: the destruction of himself" (85). He adds:

> the hero-worship inspired by Cravan's anarchistic career led a certain intellectual '*élite*' to take him as their model. Rightly or wrongly, most books on Dada have cited Cravan as a 'precursor' of Dadaism. I mention him… because his short span of activity, as an artist and as a human being,

illustrates one tendency in Dada taken to its extreme: final nothingness, suicide. (86)

Embracing the Dadaist myth of suicide even if he refuses to revere Cravan openly, Richter explains away the ambiguity of Cravan's disappearance – or, rather, ignores it altogether – and anachronistically injects it with Dadaist aesthetic significance. Cravan did not destroy himself in order to make an artistic statement, yet Richter sees his suicide as an artistic statement *par excellence*, as a sign signifying Dadaism's inclination to pursue oblivion, one informed by, and to be read alongside, Dadaist writings, artworks, and antics, including his own.[32]

Had Man Ray carried out his plan to kill himself, he too would have performed a suicide for others to read in conjunction with another artwork, in this case his 1917 aerograph "Suicide," which portrays two ovals hanging from what looks to be a mobile suspended in space. Initially entitled "The Theatre of the Soul," the abstract image was an homage to an eighteen-second play of the same name written by the Russian playwright and director Nikolai Everinof. Before the play begins, a professor takes the stage; diagrams, in the shape of a heart, lungs, and nerves, the dramatic action that will

[32] Roger Lloyd Conover, in his introduction to the section of *Four Dadaist Suicides* devoted to Cravan, presents a more nuanced portrait of the Dadaist precursor. Conover summarizes one theory regarding Cravan's fate: he survived his failed voyage to Buenos Aires, and later he forged and sold manuscripts ostensibly written by his uncle, Oscar Wilde. Although Conover dismisses this theory and also fights the temptation to place Cravan "into a larger pathological tradition" that includes suicide, he nevertheless introduces "the most extended instalment of his [Cravan's] texts yet to appear in English," texts that, within the context of the anthology's scope, solidify Cravan's position as the harbinger of Dadaist suicide (*Four Dadaist Suicides* 30, 31). For Conover's introduction, see *Four Dadaist Suicides* 15-31.

follow; and, in his monologue, divides the soul into three selves: the Rational, the Emotional, and the Unconscious. Once the play begins, these selves are played by three actors who, collectively, portray the struggle occurring in the body of a man torn between staying with his wife and leaving her for his mistress, a dancer. While the Unconscious Self sleeps, the other two argue over what the man should do: the Rational Self argues that he should stay with his wife; the Emotional Self maintains that he should choose the dancer. During this argument, the wife and mistress also fight on stage (representing the man's warring thoughts). After the mistress wins, the Emotional Entity shoots the Rational Entity, only to discover that the mistress does not love him. Anguished, he orders the man to kill himself.[33]

Quoting Man Ray's claim that "Suicide" represents "the dramatic situation on the professor's blackboard" (qtd. in Stavitsky 185), Gail Stavitsky concludes that the ovals signify "the lungs mentioned in the professor's description, while the triangular configuration of lines in the upper center was probably meant to illustrate the system of nerves"; she suggests that the ovals represent the play's Rational and Emotional Entities (185-86). According to Arturo Schwarz, "[t]he ovals stand for the face of [the] two women. By metaphorically hanging the two women Man Ray was punishing them" (38). Whatever the aerograph portrays, Man Ray wished to eradicate its iconography, for after wrestling with professional and personal failures, he intended to destroy it while simultaneously destroying himself. He planned to shoot himself through "Suicide" by

[33] My summary of "The Theatre of the Soul" is based on Katherine Cockin's, which appears in her essay "The Pioneer Players: Plays of/with Identity" 147. For my summary of the professor's prologue, I am indebted to Stavitsky, *Conversion to Modernism* 184-85.

aiming a pistol at the image while standing behind it and pulling a string attached to the pistol's trigger. Regardless of his motive, by destroying artist and object with the same gunshot, he would have blurred the distinction between the two entities, and instead of pondering only Man Ray's self-killing, survivors and art critics would have pondered suicide and "Suicide" together. Both "texts" would have comprised a transcendent artistic statement with "The Theater of the Soul" as its distant footnote. The incoherence of the self, portrayed in Everinof's play and possibly in Man Ray's aerograph; the pursuit of oblivion, the ultimate conclusion of Dadaist life and art; the destruction of art in order to reveal its inadequacy; the annihilation of the self in order to finally create something legitimate – survivors and critics would likely have read these meanings into Man Ray's suicide.

Rationalizing his decision not to shoot himself, Man Ray stated, "I'd be accused of committing suicide with a mechanical instrument. You know, when I began painting with the airbrush I had already been accused of debasing art by painting with a mechanical instrument" (qtd. in A. Schwarz 38). The justification for his inaction is not moral, philosophical, or existential; it is aesthetic. Man Ray claims to fear that he would be criticized for committing suicide unsophisticatedly, for producing a degraded artistic statement just as he created degraded, airbrushed art, including "Suicide." The editors of *Lá Révolution Surréaliste* later included "Suicide" among the responses to their questionnaire, offering it as a statement unto itself, securing it a place among the pantheon of avant-garde suicide texts.

I offer this foray into the Dadaists and Surrealists because their rupture with the West's history of knowing suicide, one nevertheless troubled by the desire to invest self-killing with meaning, contrasts sharply with the modernist novelists', which rejects meaning altogether. The strategies employed by the avant-garde artists on the one hand, and Hemingway, Conrad, Woolf, and Faulkner on the other, represent divergent methods for coping aesthetically not merely with the experience of twentieth-century suicide, a subject that has received little attention,[34] but more generally with the experience of twentieth-century death, a topic that critics have explored in great detail. Following the line of preceding philosophers, historians, artists, and war survivors, these critics stress that violence in the twentieth-century – warfare, genocide, atrocities of all kinds, the threat of mass extinction – deprived death of meaning and dignity, and they add that novelists adopted various strategies for dealing with this crisis. Arguing that "[t]he basic mode of adjustment to the phenomena of modern dying is that of the search for a new

[34] Critics have discussed twentieth-century art and suicide mainly in works with broader historical scopes. A. Alvarez, for example, devotes part of *The Savage God* to exploring, from a cultural and existential perspective if not from the perspective of art-analysis, the suicidal impulse among twentieth-century artists and within twentieth-century artistic production. One of the ways that artists responded to destruction and "unnatural, premature death," Alvarez argues, was by creating "Extremist Art": "the destruction is all turned inward and the artist deliberately explores in himself that narrow, violent area between the viable and the impossible, the tolerable and the intolerable" (246, 255). See Alvarez, *The Savage God* 214-62. Ron. M Brown, in his historical survey of suicide in the visual arts, also includes a section on the twentieth-century. He concludes, "suicide became art, and art suicide…. The 'art of suicide' now formulated a critique of society, while art itself waged war against art and attempted to destroy 'itself.' In a peculiar sense art shows signs of self-destruction and its forthcoming voluntary or assisted death" (195). See Brown, *The Art of Suicide* 194-214. Neither Alvarez's nor Brown's approaches to art and suicide in the twentieth-century speak to my concerns. As I mentioned earlier, I do not maintain that the novels I discuss offer insight into the artist's psyche, nor do I think that the representations of suicide contained in them critique society and/or art.

basis of self-definition" (Hoffman 15), Frederick J. Hoffman, in *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination* (1964), examines how twentieth-century novelists redefined the self: extolling self-reliance, avowing Catholicism, or embracing existentialism. Rather than focusing on modes of overcoming what he calls "death as atrocity" (Langer xii), Lawrence L. Langer, in *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature* (1978), analyzes immediate responses to it. He is "primarily concerned with the gradual erosion of the human image," and when reading the novels he discusses, "we encounter the dilemma of a culture imaginatively unequipped to respond to the reality in which it is enmeshed" (xii, xiii). Alan Warren Friedman has written the most recent study of death and twentieth-century literature, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (1995), which, as its title suggests, focuses primarily on modernist fiction. For Friedman, in addition to violence – primarily the Great War – the increasing medicalization of the dying process, along with advances in technology, dehumanized death, made it "unknowable," "unnameable," and "dirty" (*Fictional Death* 21). Simultaneously, the epistemological and religious incertitude of the twentieth century heralded by Marx, Darwin, Einstein, and Freud, among others, "explain modernism's turn from stable rituals associated with Victorian dying. Modern novels are replete with characters of uncertain mortal (and moral) status…. No longer natural and culturally acceptable, fictional death became attenuated, denied, or horrific: initiatory or evaded rather than climactic"; moreover, many modernists "elide the dying process" (18).[35]

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[35] Also of interest is the chapter in Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* entitled "Oh What a Literary War" (155-90), in which Fussell discusses language's inadequacy to describe trench warfare. Everyone who wrote about the First World War

Hoffman, Langer, and Friedman say very little about fictional representations of suicide, although Friedman includes a discussion of voluntary death in his chapter on the *ars moriendi*, "[t]he ideal text of dying" (47).[36] "All instances of death foreseen may lend themselves to an *ars moriendi*," Friedman writes, "[t]he performer seeks to accept and to craft an appropriate death even when it is externally imposed" (52). The *ars moriendi* helps explain the Dadaist and Surrealist obsession with suicide, an obsession that relates, in Hoffman's formulation, to the search for a new type of self-definition in an era of meaningless, random death. Born from the ashes of the Great War and its destruction of European culture, Dadaism, and later Surrealism, took, as the starting point for their aesthetic explorations, chaos, chance, ephemerality, futility. While the Dadaists embraced and reflected these conditions within their lives and art, the Surrealists tried to transcend them, as Robert Short points out, by rejuvenating the mind's associative faculty, which would allow the mind "to sustain itself in the midst of chaos, to swim in the waters of discontinuity like some *poisson soluble* (soluble fish) as if they were its natural element" (302). Despite the Dadaists' and Surrealists' ideological differences,

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faced this crisis of language, he argues; consequently, when describing their experiences, soldiers employed euphemism and familiar literary language, which they knew failed to capture the reality of the war. Although Fussell examines mainly non-fiction writing – journalism, memoirs, documentary narratives – his chapter addresses the core issue that Hoffman, Langer, and Friedman commonly explore: how to represent the awfulness and awesomeness of twentieth-century death. See also Fussell's claim that the literature of World War One utilized "demonic" imagery to describe the horrors of mass death (312).

[36] For this discussion, see Friedman, *Fictional Death* 47-58. Moreover, Friedman references, but does not explore in depth, suicidal themes and allusions in the lives and works of Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, and Lawrence Durrell. Hoffman and Langer mention suicide mainly in connection with Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus.* See Hoffman, *The Mortal No* 456 and Langer, *The Age of Atrocity* 133-36.

their suicide myth allowed them to assert control over death, as well as over the chaotic aftermath of the Great War: to endow pointless, bewildered, dirty death and experience with meaning and aesthetic potency. If death is insignificant, then self-killing, welcomed and represented as a type of lived poem or artistic statement, practiced as a vocation, and accomplished correctly, allowed the Dadaists and Surrealists to counteract this insignificance no matter their suicidal intent and to fashion noteworthy, apposite deaths, turning the self, as they turned Arthur Cravan, into a type of mythical hero. For the avant-garde, suicide was perhaps the only significant death one could attain.

Modernist novelists, also responding to the aftermath of the Great War, as well as to those additional forces that Friedman argues rendered death empty and uncertain, abdicated control, produced no *ars moriendi*. As Langer and Friedman suggest, they could only represent "[t]he symbolic gap between meaningful life and insignificant death" (Langer 19), attenuating and eliding death in order to reflect that gap. Some modernists even mocked the *ars moriendi*: by satirizing Socrates' decision to drink hemlock (Friedman, *Fictional Death* 59-60). But while modernist novelists attenuated or elided death and dying rituals, leaving them representationally impotent, and while their characters never attain ideal deaths, self-imposed or otherwise, they brought suicide to the forefront and invested it with the power to resist meaning and interpretation – that is, to resist symbolic violence. For if violence and atrocity in the early twentieth-century caused innumerable casualties, turned human beings into statistics, and deprived death of meaning, then for the modernists, at least suicide, a special type of death that always occurs on the level of the individual, can, through its fictional representation, serve not as

a way to reinvest death with significance, but as a way to protect death and the individual from further intrusion: in this case, interpretive intrusion. Suicide, for the modernist novelist, is not a sign that embodies a theoretical or aesthetic statement; nor is it a way to reassert control over death. Instead, suicide is a permanently unknowable deed that wields great power, disarming readers of interpretive command precisely because of its impenetrability, and thereby preventing readers from judging, perhaps insensitively, the characters who commit it.

Like representations of death generally, representations of self-killing in the modernist novel are often attenuated or elided, but they are never completely empty and powerless, never a mark of death's dehumanization and insignificance. Rather, their attenuations and elisions result from suicide's inherent inscrutability, which extends far beyond representation, into plot, theme, and the thoughts of characters determined to die. Nevertheless, critics often attempt to overcome suicide's resistance to interpretation. In my individual chapters, I discuss the limitations of specific readings of modernist suicide, but I want to note that, for the most part, critics posit a cause for, and concomitantly moralize about, self-killing, reconciling tension and ambiguity according to their interpretive needs, which are directed toward explicating issues that frequently have little to do with suicide. They are concerned more with generating interpretive statements about a novel – a totalizing maneuver that attempts to fit self-killing into the "grand scheme" of a character's life and of a novel's thematic machinery – than they are with analyzing how modernist suicides are represented and, more important, with determining what these representations entail. They view suicide along the lines of Walter

Benjamin's claim, in "The Storyteller," that characters' deaths reveal their essences and impart authoritative meaning to their lives (94) – and, I would add, to the novels in which they occur. Conversely stated, character motive and thematic concern define the meaning of self-killing.

To offer a couple examples, critics commonly see Robert Jordan's impending self-initiated death at the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as a heroic self-sacrifice that fulfills the idea of brotherhood posited by the novel's John Donne inspired title; in some readings of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus Smith's self-defenestration is an act of self-preservation, a repudiation of his tyrannical doctors that embodies the novel's critique of post World War I British society in general and the postwar medical establishment in particular. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, along with *Victory* and *The Sound and the Fury*, undoubtedly explore, on the level of plot, the connections observed by critics between character, theme, and suicide; on the level of representation, however, through their conflicted and attenuated portrayals of self-killing, these novels suspend or dissolve such connections, exposing them as tenuous possibilities rather than established certainties; forestalling climax, resolution, and closure; and ultimately counteracting our desire to exert interpretive power. Indeed, suicide in the modernist novel occupies a unique representational space, one free of meaning – causal, moral, theoretical, or thematic – but imbued with the power to disrupt psychological conjecture, moral judgment, theoretical and political speculation, and thematic unity; it also has the power to disrupt a novel's aesthetic principles, as my chapter on *Victory* argues.

In each of this dissertation's chapters, with the aim of illuminating a subject that critics of twentieth-century fictional death have largely overlooked and demonstrating the modernist break with knowing suicide, I examine the power of suicide's representational space. I show how authors construct this space and how it unsettles both text and reader, who is often modeled in the novel as a character trying to comprehend another's self-killing or his own self-destructive desire. The readings generated by these characters are predominantly unsympathetic, occasionally compassionate, and, when measured against the suicide in question, always unconvincing. (Captain Davidson's non-reading at the end of *Victory* is the sole exception.) Alert to the barrenness of these readings, I try to account for as much textual and formal detail as possible without supposing that it expresses a unified meaning, speaks to an overarching theoretical or political concern, or defines a moral position. To suppose any of these possibilities is to produce yet another insensitive reading that, no matter how compassionate, rejects suicide's resistance to interpretation, forces meaning where none resides.

The arrangement of my chapters reflects the increasing complexity and impenetrability of modernist representations of suicide. They progress from discussing self-killings that, occurring at the ends of their respective plot-driven novels, unsettle thematic and aesthetic closure (*For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Victory*, respectively), to discussing self-killings that occur before the finales of relatively plotless novels, drawing more attention to their conflicted representations than to their plot and thematic importance, which is negligible (*Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Sound and the Fury*). In my first chapter, "Repression, Solidarity, and Suicide in Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the*

Bell Tolls," I exhume *The Undiscovered Country*, Hemingway's favorite working title for his Spanish Civil War novel, in order to challenge the traditional contention that Robert Jordan either achieves or forsakes heroic unity at the novel's end. Critics who polarize Jordan's fate into such absolute terms measure his death against John Donne's "Devotion XVII," which inspired Hemingway to change the name of his novel before publication, and they perceive Jordan's death as a self-sacrificial act that fulfills Donne's ideal of human involvement and interconnectedness, or as an isolating act that does not. In either case, Donne's poem structures their interpretations. Echoing Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Hemingway's working title emphasizes isolating, despairing suicide rather than brotherhood and self-sacrifice, but I argue that it too should not structure interpretation. Instead, by considering Hemingway's working title alongside his published one, we can, despite Jordan's overt belief in the nobility of his death, illuminate his death's ambiguity. This ambiguity not only invalidates any attempt to deem his fate an heroic self-sacrifice or a self-centered suicide, it also fails to resolve three interrelated, friction-generating thematic concerns: whether or not Jordan finally represses undesirable thoughts and emotions, enables social cohesion, and satisfies his conflicting commitments to the abstract Republican cause and to the partisans, whom he considers family.

In Chapter Two, "Imbalance, Purification, and Suicide in Joseph Conrad's *Victory*," I briefly survey the range of attitudes toward suicide in Conrad's fiction to show that an irresolvable thematic tension is common among his major novels despite the absence of a prevailing moral view throughout his *oeuvre*: the tension between

acceptance and repudiation, between testing oneself against the world or fleeing it, informs but does not always explain the self-destructions of Conrad's most important characters. *Victory,* I argue, best explores this tension, and therefore portrays Axel Heyst's suicide with the greatest degree of uncertainty. But beyond disrupting theme, character, and moral judgment, Heyst's self-immolation or, more accurately, Captain Davidson's refusal to speculate about it along with his refusal to speculate about Heyst in general, collapses *Victory*'s main aesthetic principle: its aesthetics of imbalance. Imbalance drives the novel's plot and competing narrative modes, and it also informs the representational distortions – the gossip, rumor, and allegorical inflation – that characters and narrators fashion in order to know, judge, and ensnare the reclusive Heyst, physically as well as representationally. Davidson, a model of the reader who relinquishes interpretive power, terminates imbalance not simply by remaining reticent when the anonymous Excellency asks him to gossip about Heyst, but more specifically by refusing to replace prior modes of knowing Heyst with yet another one, and by refusing to judge his suicide.

In "The Aesthetics, Narration, and Interpretation of Suicide in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*," my third chapter, I argue that diverse biographical and representational anxieties trouble Woolf's representation of Septimus Smith's self-defenestration: the suicide of an old friend, who threw herself over a banister; Woolf's first attempt at suicide when she jumped out of a window; and Victorian representations of women leaping to their deaths. Through the narrator's free indirect reporting of Septimus' thoughts, Woolf tried to manage these anxieties by ridiculing the dramatic code she

employed to write Septimus' self-defenestration: Victorian melodrama, which conceived suicide as a desperate deed that only the immoral or temporarily insane commit. Such derision allowed her to avoid assigning a negative moral meaning to Septimus' self-annihilation, an achievement that meshes with *Mrs. Dalloway*'s overall aesthetic drive to abandon meaning, purpose, and depth. This avoidance of meaning, combined with the inexplicability of Septimus' suicidal intent, weakens all available readings of his self-killing, whether they are the unsympathetic readings produced by his doctors or the predominantly compassionate ones produced by critics of the novel, who model their understandings after Mrs. Dalloway's, which, I argue, is both admirable for its humanity and yet inauthoritative.

Finally, in Chapter Four, "Silencing Suicide in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*," I trace the multiple ways that Faulkner's novel elides, mutes, and obscures Quentin's self-killing, thereby rendering it more unknowable than the other suicides I consider in this dissertation. Although Quentin, on his final day, ponders his approaching suicide, he fails to articulate suicidal intent, creating a narrative dense with possibility but ultimately bereft of a specific reason for his self-drowning. This failure to provide intent precedes the novel's failure to represent Quentin's suicide, and the rest of *The Sound and the Fury* threatens to amplify the obscurity of an already vague (non)event. The surviving Compsons, who also receive no explanation, and who project their personal obsessions onto Quentin's self-killing as a result of their ignorance, rarely remember or talk about his suicide. When they do, often while judging it negatively, they refer to it obliquely: an evasion that exposes the Compsons' failure to mourn their dead son and

brother, and that culminates in Mrs. Compson's inability to see Miss Quentin's disappearance as anything other than a tragic repetition of Quentin's suicide.

Chapter One:
Repression, Solidarity, and Suicide in Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

Titles are tyrannical. Attached to people, they define and dictate job or social rank, expectations and behaviors. Attached to property, whether a plot of land or the throne of England, titles ordain private ownership, separating the populace into groups of haves and have-nots, the privileged and the deprived. Perhaps titles are most imperious when appended to works of art. They are tools of authorial power, prods that poke us into interpretive corrals. Attached to paintings or novels, titles shape our struggles with meaning and comprehension.

Although titles of artworks are tyrannical, they are gifts from enlightened despots and benevolent dictators. Just as Mussolini made Italy's trains run on time, or so the myth goes, artists often bequeath to their publics efficient vehicles that help them navigate the complexity of a work. The title of Joyce's *Ulysses* declares the novel to be a retelling (or parody) of *The Odyssey*, thereby determining entire clusters of meaning and significance. More than navigational technology, though, titles are still points in turning worlds, stable platforms for the shifting grounds of meaning in a work of art, anchors for our observations and interpretations.[37]

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[37] Even titles that seem empty or neutral – e.g., "Untitled" or "No. 65" – designate an interpretive approach. As Jerrold Levinson argues, they "insist on the abstractness of what is presented on the canvas. They signify a stance opposed to readings, symbolism, emotional appropriation – they are, in Susan Sontag's phrase, against interpretation" (37). For a discussion of titles and how they affect the interpretive process, see Levinson, "Titles," and Fisher, "Entitling."

When we learn that an author changed the title of a work during its creation, we tend to wonder what such a change implies, what effect the alteration has on how we view the work. Published and working titles frequently coexist without conflict, producing rich, harmonious perceptions, like the red and blue lenses on glasses that children use to read 3-D comic books: shut one eye and the page looks red, shut the other and the page looks blue; open both eyes and the superheroes and villains leap out of their monochromatic two-dimensional existences and into a startling three-dimensionality with a richer color palate. The title of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates an analogous effect, focusing our interpretive gaze on *Macbeth* and on the chaos, despair, and nihilism that pervade the novel. Moreover, the title directs our ears to the novel's aural qualities, to the sonic texture of Benjy's incessant laments and howling, Quentin's quiet and articulate despondency, Jason's irate complaints, and the detached narrator's calm reporting of events. Faulkner's working title, *Twilight*, asks us to notice liminality, to notice, for example, Quentin's curious borderline existence between past and present and life and death as well as "the half-world of Benjy himself, held in a state of timeless suspension between the light and the dark, comprehension and incomprehension, between the human and the animal," as Michael Millgate writes in his essay on the novel's composition (86). And as *The Sound and the Fury* awakens our ears, *Twilight* awakens our eyes: Quentin's agonized remembrances of Caddy often take on a striking visual form when he describes seeing her at twilight, and Benjy's ever-shifting prose reveals the suspended state of his mind. Taken together, the titles enrich our awareness of the novel's complex and harmonious tapestry; our recognition of liminality in the novel and

of the anxieties that accompany moments of indefiniteness and suspension, deepens our recognition of its chaos and despair.

Not every change in title produces concord. Some changes, once we learn of them, create contradiction and tension. Instead of congruence, we notice conflict, as is the case with Ernest Hemingway's Spanish Civil War novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the subject of this chapter. As Carlos Baker notes in his biography of the author, before Hemingway named his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, his favorite working title among twenty-six possibilities was *The Undiscovered Country* (*Ernest Hemingway* 348).[38] Taken from Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, *The Undiscovered Country* highlights the individual's crippling fear of death and what lies beyond:

> [...] Who would these fardels bear,
>
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
>
> But that the dread of something after death,
>
> The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
>
> No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
>
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
>
> Than fly to others that we know not of? (3.1.77-83)

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[38] Hemingway, in fact, goes further than Baker; in a letter to Maxwell Perkins, dated 21 April 1940, he wrote that he "had thirty some titles and they were all possible but this [*For Whom the Bell Tolls*] is the first one that has made the bell toll for me" (*Selected Letters* 504). Ever conscious of his novels' commercial appeal, Hemingway wonders in his letter if "people think only of tolls as long distance charges and of Bell as the Bell telephone system" (504). He continues: "If so it is out. The Tolling of the Bell. No. That's not right. If there is no modern connotation of telephone to throw it off For Whom The Bell Tolls can be a good title I think" (504).

Fear of the unknown baffles the will and prevents the weary from killing themselves, Hamlet suggests, and he continues his soliloquy by commenting on thought's role in stifling action:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
>
> And thus the native hue of resolution
>
> Is sickled o'er with the pale cast of thought,
>
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
>
> With this regard their currents turn away
>
> And lose the name of action. (3.1.84-89)

The action that Hamlet obsesses over in his soliloquy is suicide, the ultimate deed, for it is final and irrevocable, obliterating the subject and precluding all future action. It is also, in the traditional Christian view, the one unforgivable sin since it precludes the possibility of repentance.

The question of suicide is also a source of mental tension and conflict for Robert Jordan, the protagonist of *For Whom the Bell Tolls.*[39] In severe pain and facing either torture or execution at the hands of advancing Fascist troops, Jordan, at the novel's climax, wrestles with his desire to kill himself. For Jordan, however, the problem is not "the dread of something after death" but the ethics and honor of self-annihilation. "I

[39] William Adair also notices that Hemingway's favorite working title echoes Hamlet's suicide soliloquy. He equates Jordan with Hamlet and remarks, "he [Hamlet] rushes to a kind of suicide, which stabilizing the kingdom as it does, is sacrificial" (336). Like his progenitor, Jordan dies selflessly: he is a "sacrificial vegetation god" (336). Adair's comparison between Jordan and Hamlet is too simple. As I will argue, the novel prohibits us from conclusively viewing Jordan as either a suicidal Hamlet figure or a self-sacrificial hero.

don't want to do that business that my father did," Jordan thinks (469). "I will do it all right but I'd much prefer not to have to. I'm against that" (469). Jordan feels ashamed of his father, a "coward" (339) who "misused the gun" (338) with which Jordan's grandfather fought heroically in the Civil War, committing, in Jordan's eyes, a dishonorable and selfish deed with an honorable, "serious weapon" (336): "You have to be awfully occupied with yourself to do a thing like that" (338). From fear of being a coward, Jordan avoids suicide and decides instead to fire at the Fascists, choosing what he considers an admirable, selfless death at the hands of the enemy over a disgraceful, selfish one. He suppresses his desire and fear, silences his conscience, and purges his mind of all thought. "[C]ompletely integrated" (471), he heroically *acts*.

In the scope of this chapter I intend to challenge the reading of Jordan's death that I have just given, a reading that seems to be supported by Hemingway's eventual decision to reference John Donne instead of Shakespeare in his novel's title. Donne's emphasis on human engagement and death as collectively felt experience in "Devotion XVII" of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, which Hemingway read a fragment of in *The Oxford Book of English Prose* and drew from when changing the name of the novel and writing its epigraph, stands in stark contrast to Hamlet's melancholic meditation:

> No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man
> is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine;* if a
> *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea, Europe* is the lesse,
> as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor*
> of thy *friends* or of *thine owne* were; any mans *death*

> diminishes *me,* because I am involved in *Mankinde;* And
> therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls;
> It tolls for *thee.* ("The Bell" 171-72)

Donne emphasizes human involvement and interconnectedness, both powerful antidotes to the isolation and despair that pervade much of Hemingway's earlier fiction. Following Harry Morgan's maxim in Hemingway's previous novel *To Have and Have Not* that "'No matter how a man alone ain't got no bloody fucking chance'" (225), Jordan's professional and emotional commitment to the partisan fighters separates him from Nick Adams, Jake Barnes, and Frederic Henry, who all struggle alone to seek moments of transcendence for themselves in the debased modern world. Regardless of his certainty that the day's attack will fail, Jordan, according to most critics, demonstrates his devotion to his lover Maria and the other partisan fighters, and ultimately to the Republican cause, when he decides to live long enough to confront the Fascists. "No you must not expect victory here, not for several years maybe," Jordan thinks while waiting to blow up the bridge (432). "Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today" (432). Acknowledging the attack's immediate futility, Jordan nonetheless believes that his actions will ultimately have great effects: stalling the Fascists will, Jordan thinks, allow the partisans to escape and continue their fight for the Republic. What matters for Jordan is acting on behalf of a country and a people that he knows and cares for intimately, not consigning himself to "an undiscovered country."

Although they both entail self-annihilation, suicide and heroic self-sacrifice are rhetorically distinct and carry different meanings and moral appraisals; suicides are often pitied or condemned for their helplessness, cowardice, or selfishness, while self-sacrificial heroes are usually celebrated for their bravery and selflessness.[40] As in all cases of moral evaluation, what matters for judging a voluntary death is not *that* a person chooses to die but *why* a person does so; what matters is intention. By naming his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* instead of *The Undiscovered Country*, Hemingway radically altered the meaning of Jordan's death and shifted the rhetorical terms by which the novel asks readers to judge it.[41] Hemingway's decision was masterful: it is impossible to

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[40] The self-sacrificial hero's status is rarely indisputable. Palestinians who blow themselves up in Israeli marketplaces illustrate how one person's self-sacrificial hero is another person's morally reprehensible suicide. Islamic militants, who have inherited a tradition that condemns acts of self-killing yet praises self-sacrifice in defense of Islam, label those who blow themselves up in the name of Islam "martyrs." Judeo-Christian Westerners, who have also inherited a tradition that condemns acts of self-killing yet praises certain acts of martyrdom, but who view so-called Islamic martyrs as terrorists, label such people "suicide bombers." "Suicide" is a derogatory term in the West, and as Margaret Pabst Battin argues, calling someone a "suicide bomber" reveals both a heightened moral repugnance that extends far beyond revulsion to murder and the attitude that a "suicide bomber" is doubly immoral for taking his life in addition to innocent lives. See Battin, *Ending Life* 240-47.

[41] Both *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Undiscovered Country* are, in Levinson's terminology, "focussing titles." A focussing title "select[s] from among the main elements of core content one theme to stand as the leading one of the work. In order for a title to count as focussing… there has to be a certain richness of core content so that two or more elements within could plausibly be regarded as of major importance. What a focussing title does then is suggest which of the contending themes should be given center place in interpreting the work and organizing one's appreciation of it" (35). Focussing titles tend to dilute thematic complexity and limit our interpretive processes from the outset. If copies of *The Undiscovered Country* existed, then we would read *The Undiscovered Country* in a slightly different manner than we would *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. With the aim of recovering the thematic richness of Hemingway's novel as it relates to death and suicide, I read the novel with both titles in mind.

speculate what types of readings critics would have produced had Hemingway chosen *The Undiscovered Country*, but critics have largely hinged their (mostly favorable) readings of Jordan's death on issues central to Donne's "Devotion XVII." Critics who read Jordan's death sympathetically usually laud Jordan unequivocally as a modern hero who eschews suicide and achieves heroic or spiritual triumph.[42] Even Lionel Trilling and Lawrence Broer, both of whom avoid idealizing Jordan's death, frame their detracting readings in Donne's terms. For Trilling, Hemingway's sentimentality prohibited him from realizing Donne's vision of community and impelled him to celebrate "the isolation of the individual ego in its search for experience" in a novel "that announces as its theme the community of men" (644). For Broer, disconnection and isolation ultimately trump unity and brotherhood: Jordan learns "the futility of achieving any kind of lasting and meaningful connection with his fellow man…. Far from realizing the ideal embodied in John Donne's contention that "No man is an Island," Jordan's friends are all islands within themselves, destined to live and die alone in corrosive solitude" (Broer 94).

[42] Most critics who have written on *For Whom the Bell Tolls* praise Jordan's heroism. For Wirt Williams, Jordan "wins an unambiguous, spiritual triumph in his terminal catastrophe by a specific act of volition" (137). Philip Young agrees with the notion that Jordan achieves spiritual triumph at the moment of his death. He also argues, "[T]his time the hero has won. He was won over his incapacitating nightmares; he has held off the giants, grasped the code, worked his way out of his long bitterness and blown the bridge, which was his job to do" (114). Richard B. Hovey considers Jordan "heroically representative…. a hero who is not an anarchical individualist but one among several persons who feel and think and act with unselfish dedication to something outside their own lives" (172). For Delbert E. Wylder, Jordan "has become totally involved in mankind and is willing to sacrifice everything for it" (163). For a discussion of Jordan as a self-sacrificial, Christ-like hero, see Cheney, "Hemingway and Christian Epic." For a discussion of him as an intellectual hero, see Nakjavani, "Knowledge as Power."

As a result of critics' reliance on Donne for interpretive insight into the novel's thematic preoccupations, much of the discussion of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has been constricted to debating whether or not Jordan achieves unity, whether or not his life and death successfully realize Donne's ideal of human involvement and interconnectedness. The critics who enter into this discussion tend to produce absolute answers – either Jordan transcends his isolation and becomes involved with mankind or he does not – in spite of the novel's ambiguous and irresolvable treatment of Jordan's death.[43] Regardless of the self-sacrificial overtones of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the novel displays anxiety over judging death in general and voluntary death in particular, an anxiety that we can bring into focus if we exhume *The Undiscovered Country* from the graveyard of discarded titles, juxtapose it with *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and accept this juxtaposition as one that illuminates the coexistence of contrary, irreconcilable readings: Jordan as self-sacrificial hero or isolated suicide. My task, then, is not to choose one view of Jordan's death and reject another, as Hemingway did when he selected his Donne-inspired title

[43] Robert W. Lewis, Jr. and Arthur Waldhorn offer more nuanced readings of Jordan's death than most. Both perceive loneliness and isolation accompanying Jordan's death and challenge the notion that Jordan achieves heroic integration with humankind. Yet both ultimately argue that Jordan achieves heroic triumph. For Lewis, "Jordan's eminent death is a solitary one…. In the guerilla's cave he finds both a wife and a family. For their safety, he resists unconsciousness and the urge to commit suicide as easy ways out. Yet he is still lonely" (154). Regardless of his isolation and loneliness at the moment of his death, which Lewis writes is a "death of hate and more destruction" (154), Jordan dies a "fisher-king, a sacrificial hero" (165). Waldhorn argues that, although "Jordan's death is an honorable death, fitting and proper for an apprentice hero" (177), it fails to enact the philosophical import that Hemingway, in the manner of Donne, intends for it: "To share selflessly the common fate of man holds for Jordan less appeal than to die as bravely as the best among men. Hemingway's bell tolls for all men, but its deepest, most sonorous resonance honors them separately, each man alone, stranded on the island of his own lonely consciousness" (177).

over his Shakespeare-inspired one and as critics have done in concentrating their gaze on the novel's published title so intensely. Instead, my task is to show how the novel blurs the contradictory views of Jordan's death; in accomplishing this task, I hope to revive a critical discussion that over the past couple decades has been superseded mainly by examinations of the novel's textual, ideological, and gender politics.[44]

"It's much better to be sure," Jordan remarks after he is momentarily uncertain whether Golz will call off the bridge attack, "It's always much better to be sure" (340). Later, in order to approach his demolition work with a clear mind, he tells himself, "Quit thinking like a schizophrenic" (394). Jordan's desire to suppress ambiguity and tension and attain mental clarity is analogous to critics' desires to ignore or deny uncertainty in the novel and achieve certitude about the nature of Jordan's death. In order to read the novel accurately, however, we must resist this critical urge and embrace incertitude.

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[44] For discussions of the novel's textual and ideological politics, see Kastley, "Toward a Politically Responsible Ethical Criticism"; San Juan, Jr., "Ideological Form, Symbolic Exchange, Textual Production"; Van Gunten, "The Polemics of Narrative and Difference in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*"; Fleming, "Communism"; and Nakjavani, "Nostalgia." Writing mainly from a feminist perspective, the majority of recent critics examine the novel's representations of gender. See, for example, Eby, "Rabbit Stew and Blowing Dorothy's Bridges"; Gajdusek, "Pilar's Tale"; Hewson, "A Matter of Love or Death"; Romesburg, "Shifting Orders"; Rudar, "The Other War in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*"; Sinclair, "Revisiting the Code"; Tyler, "Dead Rabbits, Bad Milk, and Lost Eggs"; and Brenner, "Once a Rabbit."

A novel about civil war, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is replete with death. Death, actual or possible, drives the novel's plot, shapes its dénouement, provokes much of its conversation, and acts as metaphysical equalizer: "Your nationality and your politics did not show when you were dead" (238). Apart from a few scenes that depict death directly, however, death in the novel is mainly discussed and reported by various characters. As reports are subjectively constructed narratives, and as discussions are subjectively manipulated activities, a gap often exists between, to borrow a distinction from narratology, story and discourse, content and expression. This manipulation may be involuntary, the result of faulty memory or skewed perception, but it may also be deliberate, as occurs when Jordan talks about death. On two occasions early in the novel, Jordan discusses with the newly befriended partisan fighters the suicide of his father and the death of Kashkin, a Russian demolitions expert whom Jordan uncannily resembles in appearance and habit. On both occasions, he offers partial truths about the deaths. When recounting his father's suicide to Maria and Pilar after Maria reveals that her father, a Republican, was executed, Jordan claims that his Republican father shot himself to avoid torture. Unaware that Jordan views his father as a coward who killed himself to escape emotional torture at the hands of his emasculating mother, who he later calls a "bully" (339), Maria interprets Jordan's remarks regarding his father's suicide in terms of her own experience with her father's courageous death and the Republican struggle in Spain. Deeply sympathetic, she attempts to point out his father's valor: "'My father,'" Maria says, "'could not obtain a weapon. Oh, I am very glad that your father had the good fortune to obtain a weapon'" (67). Clearly uncomfortable with the implications of

Maria's statement, Jordan requests that they change the subject: "'Yes. It was pretty lucky…. Should we talk about something else?'" (67). When Pablo inquires into Kashkin's death, Jordan tells him and Anselmo that Kashkin was captured by the Fascists and killed himself because "'[h]e was wounded and he did not wish to be a prisoner'" (21). Jordan's half-truth becomes obvious later in the novel when he tells Pilar and El Sordo that the Russian was "'too badly wounded to travel…. He was unwilling to be left behind and I shot him'" (149).

Paul Smith interprets Jordan's half-truths regarding Kashkin's and his father's deaths within the context of the partisans' desire for Jordan to shoot Pablo, their pusillanimous, pessimistic leader. Smith claims that Jordan declines to kill Pablo "for some strategic reasons but more so in obedience to the drama of his own life" (214-15). That is, Jordan refuses to act out a psychodrama in which he participates in yet another death of an ally and becomes complicit in yet another death of a cowardly father-figure. Smith's reading ignores, however, the particularities of Jordan's anxieties within his particular conversations. Jordan's refusal to speak honestly about his father's suicide stems from his deep-seated sense of shame, which, like all unpleasant thoughts and emotions, he attempts to evade or repress, especially when he confronts his own death and considers suicide. Throughout the novel, Jordan stifles musings and moods that threaten to upset his mental control. "'In this you have to have very much head and be very cold in the head'" (21), he tells Rafael while criticizing Kashkin for his inability to contain his fear. When Pablo asks Jordan for the details of Kashkin's death, he claims ignorance. The narrator comments, "He knew the details very well and he knew they

would not make good talking now" (21). Jordan is anxious to reveal the details and discuss the truth of Kashkin's death because, having just entered the partisans' cave and desiring to ingratiate himself to his new allies – he curries favor with the gypsy Rafael by offering to help him catch a tank and then gives Rafael and Anselmo a generous supply of cigarettes – he does not wish to infect the congenial atmosphere with talk of mercy killing.

One of the central enigmas of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is why Jordan decides that his father's suicide is an appropriate subject of conversation within the confines of the cave, but not mercy killing, which is often looked upon favorably. I choose the term "mercy killing" carefully because it has two variants – voluntary and involuntary – which relate to another of the novel's central enigmas: did Jordan kill Kashkin because the wounded bridge-blower asked him to do so, or did Jordan kill him because he was dead weight and Jordan did not wish to carry him or suffer from guilt over allowing his friend to be captured, which would have occurred had he been left behind? Is Jordan's mercy killing committed with Kashkin's consent, which would render it voluntary mercy killing, or is it committed without his consent, which would render it involuntary mercy killing? Is it assisted suicide or is it selfishness masquerading as charity? During the conversation in the cave, Pablo says that Kashkin "'made us promise to shoot him in case he were wounded at the business of the train and should be unable to get away,'" for he "'had a prejudice against killing himself'" and "'a great fear of being tortured'" (21). Later, when Jordan tells El Sordo the truth about Kashkin's death – "'I shot him… He was too badly wounded to travel and I shot him'" (149) – Pilar says that Kashkin was

"'always talking of such a necessity…. It was his obsession'" (149).[45] Taken on their own, these comments indicate that Kashkin asked his comrade to kill him, but Jordan concludes with a curious, highly ambiguous statement that challenges that supposition: "'He traveled quite a long way, but with the wound was unable to travel more. He was unwilling to be left behind and I shot him'" (149). This comment lends itself to two contradictory interpretations: either Kashkin knew that he could no longer continue his escape and that he would face capture if Jordan were to leave him, so he took the only course of action open to him – assisted suicide – or Jordan alone determined that Kashkin was incapable of continuing and, traveling with someone who was impeding his own escape and who refused to stay behind, killed his injured companion to rid himself of his encumbrance, ensure a successful getaway, and absolve himself of the guilt of leaving a fellow fighter to the Fascists. Why does Jordan say that Kashkin was unwilling to be left behind, which is ambiguous, rather than that Kashkin was unwilling to become a prisoner, which is unequivocal? With what tone of voice and demeanor does Jordan utter, "'He was unwilling to be left behind and I shot him'" (149)?[46] Perhaps the answer

[45] Jordan is completely willing, while discussing military matters, to speak candidly of Kashkin's death; the subject of pragmatic mercy killing is appropriate conversational fodder when discussing the expediencies of war. Still, the question remains as to why Jordan manipulates the truth while talking with the partisans.

[46] Two chapters later, the narrator comments on Jordan's lack of emotion over killing Kashkin: "It was very strange because he had experienced absolutely no emotion about the shooting of Kashkin. He expected that at some time he might have it. But so far there had been absolutely none" (171). Like Jordan's remarks regarding Kashkin's death, the narrator's remarks regarding Jordan's reaction (or lack thereof) to his mercy killing are ambiguous. What emotion does Jordan expect to feel: sorrow or guilt?

to this question lies with the clairvoyant Pilar, who, sensing psychic turbulence, asks Jordan, "'Are you sure your nerves are all right?'" (149).

Pilar again demonstrates her clairvoyance and unsettles all pretense when Jordan tells Maria that Kashkin "'was a good friend and comrade of mine… I cared for him very much'" (249). In order to deflate Jordan's claim to comradeship or at the very least challenge the sincerity of his affection for his fallen friend, she quickly replies, "'Sure… But you shot him'" (249). Pilar's challenge is evident to the other partisans, who are playing cards: they cease their game and stare at Jordan in silence until Rafael asks him if what Pilar says is true. Jordan's reaction is ambiguous: "'Yes,' Robert Jordan said. He wished Pilar had not brought this up and he wished he had not told it at El Sordo's. 'At his request. He was badly wounded'" (249). Jordan displays his characteristic anxiety. It is uncertain whether his wish to keep his participation in Kashkin's death concealed results from his concern for conversational propriety or from a desire to evade responsibility and guilt. Similarly, what is the purpose of his qualification that Kashkin died at his request and suffered from severe wounds? Does Jordan, regardless of his anxiety, want to reveal the full truth or does he lie in order to dispel the partisans' burgeoning suspicion that the act of shooting his so-called friend was ignoble? Content with Jordan's explanation, the partisans discuss Kashkin's unceasing vocalization of the possibility that one of his comrades would have to shoot him if he were badly wounded and in danger of capture as well as his solicitation of promises that someone would, in fact, shoot him if such a scenario were to occur. The conversation rapidly shifts to the

subject of foreseeing one's own death; nevertheless, the implications of Pilar's remark reverberate and disturb the veneer of closure that coats the fighters' friendly chat.

Jordan's prevarications display his refusal throughout to render in transparent narrative form the deaths/suicides of those he had known intimately. This refusal, along with the epistemological and moral incertitude it engenders, is mirrored within the narrator's account of the dying process of its intimate subject, Jordan. The narrator's treatment of Jordan's final moments also mirrors Jordan's narrative of Kashkin's: its equivocations present a blurred perspective that precludes us from understanding and judging a death. The terms describing Jordan's fate shift, however, from voluntary versus involuntary mercy killing (to qualify Kashkin's case, from assisted suicide versus a perverse form of mercy killing) to suicide in its most pernicious sense versus heroic self-sacrifice. It is appropriate that Kashkin and Jordan, as doppelgangers, receive the same narrative treatment: their deaths are shrouded in the same cloud of obscurity.

Apart from Kashkin's and Jordan's suicides, the novel treats the subject in a straightforward manner. Many discussions concerning self-annihilation occur or are remembered during Jordan's three days with the partisans, focusing mainly on suicide as an appropriate alternative to falling into the enemy's hands. As many of the novel's characters know, suicide is "a definitely accepted and properly organized possibility" (171). Robert E. Fleming has mapped out the suicide theme in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Along with the novel's references to Jordan's father's and Kashkin's suicides – for Fleming, shooting oneself and asking another to shoot one amount to the same act – Fleming discusses Pilar's, Maria's, and Karkov's comments on the necessity of self-

killing in the face of capture and the suicides of El Sordo and a Fascist officer stationed at the first Guardia Civil barracks that Pablo captured. Fleming argues that the references to self-killing "explore the various circumstances, attitudes, and results connected with suicide, actual or contemplated. They contribute, some casually and others in an extremely intricate manner, to a distinct minor theme which is closely related to the main theme of the novel" (131). Like most critics, Fleming sees the novel's main theme deriving from Donne:

> If any man's death diminishes the rest of mankind, death by suicide seems to have an especially adverse effect on those who are left alive. Although Robert Jordan has rejected his father and his selfish, wasteful death, Jordan's life has nevertheless been profoundly influenced by him. Jordan frequently wonders if he has been tainted by his father's cowardice, and he is very much aware of the possibilities of committing suicide, an awareness that is heightened by his experience with Kashkin…. By exchanging his life for the time his friends need to escape, Jordan shows that he has finally come to terms with his father's death. He does not refuse suicide simply to put himself in opposition to his father; instead, he makes a positive choice for a positive reason and allies himself with those who, like El Sordo, sell their lives dearly. (131)

Fleming rightly argues that suicide is one of the novels' distinct themes, but like many critics, he invests his critical energy in attempting to show how the novel's tensions boil down to a singular thematic statement inherited from John Donne. Whereas Fleming

contends that all the circumstances surrounding self-killing in the novel serve to influence Jordan's final decision to refuse suicide and help his friends, a reading that embraces rather than reduces the novel's tensions would view the discussions and remembrances of suicide as narratives that serve to counterbalance the unfavorable narrative Jordan has constructed around his father's suicide, introducing the notion that self-killing can be just given the appropriate context. Such a reading emphasizes the novel's dialogic treatment of suicide over suicide as plot mechanism, the novel's rich symbolic texture over the causal chains that comprise its design. During his final moments, Jordan internalizes the novel's suicide dialogue in the form of an agonized conversation that occurs between the part of him wishing to end his suffering at the pull of a trigger, the part that declares, "[d]ying is only bad when it takes a long time and hurts so much that it humiliates you" (468), and the part struggling to silence his death wish so as to avoid the shame of self-killing and ultimately slow the Fascists' progress. The moral terms of Jordan's internal dialogue cast the former act as a selfish one that sunders the suicide from the human community – Jordan yearns for his grandfather's presence during trying moments, symbolically eliminating his father from his lineage – and the latter as a heroic one that serves humanity.

These moral appraisals of Jordan's death exist in a state of suspended conflict, and the irresolvable tension they create acts as a type of gravitational force that draws in the novel's other thematic tensions. These tensions, along with the competing understandings of Jordan's demise, are by no means discrete and easy to separate; instead, they are interrelated, entangled frictions that leave us, in the end, with an

imbroglio of uncertainty. I have already introduced the first tension: Jordan's incessant struggle to repress undesirable thoughts and emotions, especially those that relate to death and threaten to destabilize his mental equilibrium. The second, which I alluded to in my discussion of Jordan's desire to inhibit the conversation he has with the partisans about Kashkin's death and which is introduced in the novel's epigraph, is Jordan's concern for social cohesion. Jordan's decision to conceal the details of his friend's death because "they would not make good talking now" (21) exposes his investment in maintaining social harmony. In order to maintain this harmony, he must repress the truth; as we have seen, his repression of the truth is wedded to his need to repress his (unarticulated) feelings regarding his mercy killing. The third is Jordan's commitment to the Republican cause, which conflicts with his commitment to the partisans, particularly when he fears that carrying through with his mission will jeopardize the lives of his loved ones.

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Jordan's anxiety to talk unequivocally about Kashkin's and his father's deaths is closely linked to his unwillingness to confront, fully and directly, the subject of death as incessant possibility and pervasive occurrence, a subject that looms large in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Indeed, after drafting his manuscript, Hemingway determined to draw further attention to, and intensify, death's presence in his narrative. As Thomas Gould relates, Hemingway expanded and increased his descriptions and discussions of death

during the revision process, an undertaking that contrasted with his practice of cutting back on death and killing in his earlier novels (241). "One effect of these revisions," Gould writes, "is to illustrate the cruelty and the necessity of death and man's need to shut out all emotional attachment during the revolution" (241). Jordan will form close emotional bonds with the partisan fighters, especially with Maria, as the novel progresses – on the morning of his bridge-blowing mission, he silently calls Anselmo his "oldest friend," Agustín his "brother," and Maria his "true love," "wife," and "sister" (381) – but he remains emotionally detached from (and self-protectively myopic to) the war's dead. Jordan's detachment is apparent at the end of the novel's opening chapter, in which he meditates on past deaths and the present absence of "gay" Republican fighters: "No, there were not many of the gay ones left. There were very damned few of them left" (17). For Jordan, this meditation is life threatening, as if dwelling too long on the war's dead will mark him for death: "And if you keep on thinking like that, my boy, you won't be left either" (17). Jordan then tells himself to "[t]urn off the thinking now, old timer, old comrade. You're a bridge-blower now. Not a thinker" (17). Repression of undesirable thought and emotion is, for Jordan, literally a matter of survival. Embracing action, whether the action is blowing bridges or having sex with Maria – an activity that makes his head "properly clear" (161) – is his main survival strategy.

Jordan's myopia toward the war's dead in specific and death in general is sharply evident in his reaction to a story told to him by Joaquín, a partisan, and to Pilar's insistence that she, along with Kashkin, foresaw Kashkin's death. On their journey to El Sordo's camp, Jordan, Pilar, and Maria meet Joaquín, who recounts the murder of his

parents by Fascist troops. After listening to Joaquín's story, Jordan thinks about the uncountable number of times that he has heard similar tales. Instead of considering each storyteller (and death) individually, however, he erases all difference and blurs them into a single archetype: "He could not remember how many times he had heard them mention their dead in this way. Nearly always they spoke as this boy did now" (134). Jordan views death and suffering abstractly, as devoid of existential uniqueness. As a result, he maintains a cool distance from the bereaved, obviating the need to express compassion: "always you said, 'What barbarians'" (134). *What barbarians*. Not only does Jordan's stock response lack sympathy; it lacks any mention of the deceased. Highly aware of the enemy, Jordan is profoundly blind to the allied dead.

Jordan displays similar blindness when he observes:

> You only heard the statement of the loss. You did not see the father fall as Pilar made him see the fascists die in that story she had told by the stream. You knew the father died in some courtyard, or against some wall, or in some field or orchard, or at night, in the lights of a truck, beside some road. You had seen the lights of the car from the hills and heard the shooting and afterwards you had come down to the road and found the bodies. You did not see the mother shot, nor the sister, nor the brother. You heard about it; you heard the shots; and you saw the bodies. (134)

Jordan seems unable to imagine and empathize with another's death.[47] He repeatedly listens to the laments of suffering survivors, knows all the places of execution, has heard death-dealing shots, and has seen the shots' aftermath, but absent from his understanding of death is the instant at which a sentient human becomes an insentient corpse. The actual, visceral moment of death is a blind spot for Jordan, who lacks the emotional imagination to bring these spots into focus. Even his shrewdly clinical reflection on his blindness lacks any gesture toward sympathy and understanding: it reads like a scientist's catalog of observations rather than the thoughts of a concerned human. Distant, rational calculation, not engaged, sympathetic comprehension, pervades Jordan's mental climate.

In addition to vocalizing his rational detachment from thanatotic issues, Jordan, during a conversation about foreseeing one's own demise, articulates his suspicion of an empathetic, more precisely, telepathic understanding of death. Andrés asks him if "'there is such a thing as a man knowing in advance what will befall him'" (250), to which Jordan replies, "'No… That is ignorance and superstition…. I believe that fear produces evil visions…. Seeing bad signs, one, with fear, imagines an end for himself and one thinks that imagining comes by divination… I believe there is nothing more to it than that. I do not believe in ogres, nor soothsayers, nor in the supernatural things'" (250). Jordan continues to express disbelief when the conversation turns to Kashkin foreseeing his fate. Kashkin, according to Jordan, "'had a fear of such a possibility and it became an obsession. No one can tell me that he saw anything'" (250). Jordan's fixation on the

[47] Since Jordan is emotionally calloused to Kashkin's death, it is no wonder that he has little empathetic connection to the deaths of strangers.

sense of sight as the primary bearer of knowledge is at least as old as Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, and, like Plato, he emphasizes liberating sight from the shackles of ignorance. Rational illumination dictates that Kashkin's "foreknowledge" was produced by an over-stimulated sensibility and over-active imagination, by emotional and mental disarray.

After listening to Jordan's cocksure declarations, Pilar antagonizes the young naysayer with her own brand of anti-Platonic epistemology, a way of knowing that accentuates the extra-rational senses of hearing and smell. Pilar abrasively tells Jordan that he could not presage Kashkin's death despite the obvious portents because he is "'a miracle of deafness'" (251). "'It is not that thou art stupid,'" Pilar continues, thereby stressing that foreknowing someone's death is not a matter of rational analysis (251). Nor is it a matter of supernatural aptitude: "'Thou art simply deaf. One who is deaf cannot hear music. Neither can he hear the radio. So he might say, never having heard them, that such things do not exist…. I saw death there as plainly as though it were sitting on his shoulder. And what is more he smelt of death'" (251). Pilar's diagnosis of deafness and anosmia points to Jordan's affliction: his insensitivity to extra-rational faculties makes him ignorant of hints, signals, and nuances that lie within the realm of the observable but that are not immediately perceivable, especially to our primary sense organ, the eye.

Hemingway devotes a lengthy passage to Jordan's eyes and act of seeing in the third chapter of the novel, when Jordan observes for the first time the bridge he is to obliterate. The bridge, as Carlos Baker remarks, "continues to stand unforgettably as the

focal point in the middle of an ever widening series of circles" (*Hemingway* 246) that make up the structural form of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. "The great concentration which Hemingway achieves," Baker writes, "is partly dependent on his skill in keeping attention focused on the bridge while projecting the reader far beyond that center of operations" (245-46). The circles around the central task of blowing the bridge extend, according to Baker, from General Golz's attack preparations to the entire civil war and on out to the whole human race. The bridge therefore provides Jordan with a focal point on which he can concentrate his calculating gaze and devote his attention to his work, which for the bridge-blower is a rational, systematic activity. Jordan's capacity for blowing bridges, as General Golz tells him, is "[v]ery scientific" (7). Focusing on the bridge also allows Jordan to extend his vision, metaphorically speaking, to the preservation of the Spanish people and ultimately of humanity. The bridge as physical and symbolic presence conjoins Jordan's obsession with work as a way to achieve willful blindness (or deafness) and his passion for social concord.

Hemingway presents the bridge initially as an object that remains unobserved, something that is passively shown but not actively noticed: "The late afternoon sun that still came over the brown shoulder of the mountain showed the bridge dark against the steep emptiness of the gorge" (35). It rapidly transforms from an inconsequential object into a significant presence as soon as it comes under Jordan's gaze. At first, the bridge passively appears in his visual field: "The sun was in Robert Jordan's eyes and the bridge showed only in outline" (35). Once the sun's intensity lessens, Jordan can see the bridge clearly, study it, and project upon it his obsessions; his actively watching the bridge fills

in its original, passively perceived outline with substantive meaning. And for Jordan, the bridge is a problem that he must deal with practically and scientifically:

> Then he was watching the bridge again in the sudden short trueness of the little light that would be left, and studying its construction. The problem of its demolition was not difficult. As he watched he took out a notebook from his breast pocket and made several quick line sketches. As he made the drawings he did not figure the charges. He would do that later. Now he was noting the points where the explosive should be placed in order to cut the support of the span and drop a section of it into the gorge. It could be done unhurriedly, scientifically and correctly with a half dozen charges laid and braced to explode simultaneously; or it could be done roughly with two big ones. They would need to be very big ones, on opposite sides and should go at the same time. He sketched quickly and happily; glad at last to have the problem under his hand. (35)

Jordan finds pleasure in the fact that, while surveilling and sketching the bridge, he is working toward a well-defined end that will serve the Republican cause. He is glad, as Hemingway writes, "to have the problem under his hand" (35). Hemingway's use of this adage, however, has a less axiomatic and more literal meaning. Jordan's visit to the bridge occurs two pages after Pilar has read his hand and foreseen his death. After Pilar informs Jordan that she has seen "'nothing in it,'" Jordan implores her to tell him the truth: "'Yes you did. I am only curious. I do not believe in such things'" (35). Pilar then asks Jordan what he believes in, and he replies, "'In my work'" (35). Regardless of his

claim that he does not believe in palm-reading, the very idea that he will die while carrying out his mission disturbs him – Jordan has disquieting thoughts about his mission in the novel's opening chapter, and later he will wonder if Pilar has in fact seen foreboding signs in his palm – and so he suppresses his apprehension and seeks comfort in his work. Jordan is glad to have the problem of confronting his death literally under his hand, out of sight and out of mind; his hand's posture while gripping his pencil and sketching conceals his palm from his gaze, allowing Jordan to remain willfully blind to his imminent death.

Jordan's refusal to acknowledge his impending death places him in structural opposition to Kashkin. As I have already discussed, whereas Jordan, who believes that "if you allow yourself the luxury of normal fear that fear will infect those who must work with you" (335), represses and silences, Kashkin obsesses and avows. And according to Jordan, Kashkin's perpetual death-centered declarations negatively affected the partisan fighters: "'He must have been doing more harm than good around here…. You can't have people around doing this sort of work and talking like that. That is no way to talk. Even if they accomplish their mission they are doing more harm than good, talking that sort of stuff'" (21). Jordan's estimation of his predecessor reveals his own obsession with maintaining social harmony and morale, an obsession that impels him to make assumptions regarding Kashkin's presence among the partisans which do not stand up to scrutiny: none of the partisan fighters criticize Kashkin, even when Jordan opens up a space in the conversation for them to do so. Pablo offers the only statement that approximates criticism, and it is a weak approximation, when he says that Kashkin

"'spoke in a very rare manner'" (21). He quickly follows his remark, however, with praise: "'But he was very brave'" (21). After Jordan exclaims that the Russian "'was a little strange… I think he was a little crazy'" (21), Pablo again extols him: "'But very dexterous at producing explosions… And very brave'" (21). Jordan replies by repeating his belief in Kashkin's lunacy.

Jordan's criticism of Kashkin inadvertently exposes his conviction that, to achieve social concord, one must often police one's thoughts and desires, especially as they relate to death. This conviction is an extension of his more fundamental belief that the self has no place in war: late in the novel Jordan contemplates "the always ridding of self that you had to do in war. Where there could be no self. Where yourself is only to be lost" (447). Self-policing during conversation, however, is perhaps a minor example of inhibiting oneself in favor of preserving communal relations. Jordan realizes that, in addition to maintaining polite conversation and observing "the rules for getting on well with people that speak Spanish" (24), he must also ensure the partisans' allegiance to him, his mission and, by extension, the Republican cause; he must gain the partisans' trust in him as a capable leader and solidify them into an obedient band of fighters, even if that means agonizing over the appropriateness of, and possibly eliminating, unreliable members.

Jordan faces a crisis of leadership during his first night with the partisans. After initially securing all the partisans' allegiances save Pablo's, he prepares to shoot the volatile detractor but refrains from doing so for fear of retaliation and, ultimately, because he realizes that Pablo's presence does not threaten the group's loyalty to him:

> Robert Jordan watched Pablo and as he watched, letting his right hand hang lower and lower, ready if it should be necessary, half hoping it would be (feeling perhaps that were the simplest and easiest yet not wishing to spoil what had gone so well, knowing how quickly all of a family, all of a clan, all of a band, can turn against a stranger in a quarrel, yet thinking what could be done with the hand were the simplest and best and surgically the most sound now that this had happened), saw also the wife of Pablo standing there and watched her blush proudly and soundly and healthily as the allegiances were given. (53)

Soon after, Rafael informs Jordan that the partisans expected him to kill Pablo, and he implores him to kill Pablo as soon as possible. Rafael's entreaty induces Jordan to reflect on his failure to act. Pablo had indeed attempted to erode social order in the cave and jeopardize the mission by disputing Pilar's authority, threatening to shoot Pilar and Jordan, and challenging Jordan's presence among the partisans: Pablo calls Jordan a "'foreigner [who] comes here to do a thing for the good of the foreigners. For his good we must be sacrificed. I am for the good and the safety of all'" (54). Jordan tells himself that he was tempted to kill Pablo at the dinner table, especially since shooting the detractor would have been an easy way to eliminate him, but that he refrained from doing so for three reasons. First, he was unsure if the partisans expected him to kill Pablo. Second, he believes that "[f]or a stranger to kill where he must work with the people afterwards is very bad" (63). And, third, he was unsure how Pilar would have reacted.

This last reason is particularly significant, for, as Jordan thinks, "[w]ithout the woman there is no organization nor any discipline" (63).

What is striking about Jordan's reasons for not shooting Pablo is the absence of any moral debate. Jordan assumes, or at least neglects to question, the moral permissibility of murdering a recalcitrant comrade; he also fails to question the nature of his temptation and whether acting on it would have been the best course to take. This absence seems especially glaring in light of Jordan's deep-rooted revulsion to killing. Later in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, after shooting a Fascist cavalryman and questioning his "right to kill any one" (304), he tells himself, "no man has a right to take another man's life unless it is to prevent something worse happening to other people" (304). Had Jordan followed this principle while in the cave the first evening, he could have justified killing Pablo in the name of preventing him from jeopardizing the mission and hence the course of the war, the results of which would have been far worse than the death of one person. More glaring than the absence of moral debate post-confrontation, then, is the fact that wartime pragmatism eclipses Jordan's moral awareness: his decision not to kill Pablo is based on his concern for presenting himself to the partisans as a capable leader. Acting according to group expectations in this instance is more important to Jordan than acting on personal desire or moral principle; he behaves as a Republican agent beholden to the whims of a group rather than as a moral individual bound by the dictates of his own conscience, and to great success: "Anselmo…. already trusts me and believes in me as a representative of what he believes in. Only he and the woman really believe in the Republic as far as I can see" (63).

As a Republican representative, Jordan must remain devoted to his guerilla fighters and to his Republican superiors; he must simultaneously act in solidarity with a group of people and with an amorphous network of people, orders, and ideology – with a cause. This twofold allegiance – to a particular community and to a national movement – creates tension and conflicting responsibilities for Jordan throughout the novel. He feels "compelled to use these people whom he liked as you should use troops toward whom you have no feeling at all if you were to be successful" (162), and he wonders if it is "not a betrayal of them all" (163) to have them participate in a mission that he knows from the outset is doomed to fail. "Perhaps it was," he answers (163), thus emphasizing his view of the partisan fighters as self-determining individuals rather than as usable, expendable soldiers. Jordan's concern for the wellbeing of his friends may lead him to question General Golz's orders, but he nevertheless decides to comply with Golz, who is, as Jordan remarks, "the party as well as the army" (162). At this point in the novel, devotion to the cause trumps devotion to the partisans, and the narrator, in free indirect style, cynically remarks: "he would carry out the orders and it was bad luck that you liked the people you must do it with" (162). He cannot synchronize his conflicting loyalties; their opposition complicates his understanding of his role in the war and renders him divided, dedicated to both a concrete social group and an idealized political one. Jordan sums up this opposition and his concomitant feelings of divisiveness during the third day: "Two days ago I never knew that Pilar, Pablo nor the rest existed…. There was no such thing as Maria in the world. It was simply a much simpler world. I had instructions from

Golz that were perfectly clear and seemed perfectly possible to carry out although they presented certain difficulties and involved certain consequences" (228).

James L. Kastley rightly argues that Jordan's conflicting interests in community and cause – in his ethical concern for a group of people and in his political commitment to a movement, to invoke Kastley's terms – eventually allows him to recognize his humanity, for "in some situations conflicts in value are not resolved through a hierarchical placing of values but by acknowledging an irreducible tension between them" (202). Indeed, when faced with difficult decisions, we often acknowledge and accept that our various values and obligations, all of which are equally vital to our ethical being, conflict. Rather than torment ourselves with the thought that, by acting according to one value or by fulfilling one obligation, we violate other deeply held values and obligations, we do act, and often without any unifying theory as to how we *should* act. We encounter in our daily, practical lives what the philosopher Thomas Nagel calls "a disparity between the fragmentation of value and the singleness of decision" (128). And as Nagel argues, even though we cannot give rational justification for why a specific decision is the right one, what makes deciding and acting without total justification, but also without irrationality, possible, is "*judgment* – essentially the faculty Aristotle described as practical wisdom, which reveals itself over time in individual decisions rather than in the enunciation of general principles" (135).

Jordan maintains his sense of brotherhood with the partisans and with the Republican cause despite the conflict of obligations he experiences. He does so precisely because of the practical wisdom he develops as a result of his deepening attachment to

the band of fighters; part of the "smallest beginnings of an education" (381) he receives over the three days spent with the partisans derives from his ability to make decisions within complex situations regardless of conflicting responsibilities to his community and cause. His determination at the end of the novel to blow up the bridge despite his belief that the mission is doomed to fail and that his companions will likely die, along with his attendant feeling of anger, exemplifies his newly developed wisdom. Whereas Jordan early in the novel simply likes the partisans, "these people whom he liked" (162), and expresses cynicism over possibly sending the fighters to their deaths – "he would carry out the orders and it was bad luck that you liked the people you must do it with" (162) – by the end he is angry that his family might die: "You will kill them all off and not even get your bridge blown if you have nothing better than what you have now. You will kill off Pilar, Aneslmo, Agustín, Primitivo, this jumpy Eladio, the worthless gypsy and old Fernando, and you won't get your bridge blown…. you are going to kill them all off with those orders. Maria too. You'll kill her too with those orders" (385). Because "these people" have become kin, Jordan's anger stems from his knowledge that carrying out Golz's orders is right in spite of the likelihood that those he loves will perish. In order to execute his political commitment to the Republican cause, he will suppress his ethical commitment to his family members, but he will do so without disavowing it. Such is the nature of sacrifice, and such is the nature of acting on practical instead of theoretical wisdom: Jordan's cognizance of the complex nature of his historical moment, not an abstract principle, impels him to proceed with his mission regardless of his trepidation. To place one of Kastley's observations in a slightly different context, "if the Fascists win,

the world that Jordan and Hemingway value will be impossible and the people they love will suffer horribly" (201). Jordan's care for the partisans and his desire to secure for them a world devoid of suffering necessitate that he blow the bridge and contribute to a war which aims to end Fascist oppression even if, paradoxically, acting on his care and desire results in their deaths.

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Kastley writes, "If *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is the story of a man in history coming to grips with reality through a concern with constructing a narrative adequate to the complexity of the ethical-political situation, then Jordan's death as an end gives a retrospective structure to the narrative of his life in the Spanish civil war" (203). I would add that, in addition to narrating the complexity of Jordan's struggle to remain in solidarity with a group of people and with a political cause, Hemingway's novel also effectively relates the complexity of Jordan's psychological struggle to keep thoughts of death at bay so he can focus on his mission and to act sensitively so he can win over and retain the partisans' devotion. In addition to its ethical and political dimensions, therefore, the novel has an inseparable psychological dimension. For this reason, Kastley's focus is too narrow when he argues that the retrospective structure created by Jordan's death

> is the opening for the political criticism of the narrative. The scene of Jordan's death is structured to highlight both his individuality and the social and historical nature of the situation…. The narrative's ending

> argues for a historical understanding of Jordan's death by displaying a pattern of heroism in the defiant deaths of the lovers of freedom who will continue to oppose Fascism even when their own deaths make such oppositions personally seem to be futile. (203)

On the contrary, Jordan's death focuses the psychological, ethical, and political tensions that have provoked him throughout the novel. Hemingway structures Jordan's death scene to emphasize, above all else, how these constituting tensions influence Jordan's decision-making processes in death as well as in life. The social and historical natures of Jordan's situation certainly affect his final moments, but the horizon of an individual existence eclipses, at the novel's end, social and historical horizons; the final image is of Jordan feeling his heart beat against the forest floor. Rather than argue for a historical understanding of Jordan's fate, the narrative argues for an existential one.

We can read Jordan's death as a successful completion of the projects or, more precisely, integration of the tensions that have influenced and enabled him to act over the three days leading up to his mission. When he decides, with italicized fervor, to "*wait and hold*" the approaching Fascists "*up even a little while or just get the officer*" (470) right after he has given himself moral approval to commit suicide, he successfully represses his suicidal desire for the sake of saving his family and contributing, with one final pull of the trigger, to the Republican cause. Moreover, Jordan finally harmonizes his ethical and political commitments: killing a few Fascists will allow the partisans to escape and continue fighting for the Republicans. He avoids what he considers the selfishness, cowardice, and shame of suicide and achieves, in the words of Delbert E. Wylder, "a full

acceptance of and a total involvement with mankind" (136). Death gives Jordan closure and integration: "He was completely integrated now" (471).

Such a reading, however, ignores, to cite the title of Creath S. Thorne's insightful essay on the ambivalence that saturates the novel, "The Shape of Equivocation in Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls.*" Thorne points out a contradiction in Jordan's attitude toward his own death that challenges any notion we may have regarding Jordan's achievement of closure, integration, unity, or transcendence. He draws our attention to the following two passages: "Now, finally and at last, there was no problem. However all of it had been and however all of it would ever be now, for him, no longer was there any problem" (466), which occurs shortly after the partisans leave Jordan behind, and "I wish that I were going to live a long time instead of going to die today…. If I die on this day it is a waste because I know a few things now" (380-81), which occurs on the morning of the mission. Thorne writes that the first passage renders the second one an untruth and that the reader senses in the former "a world-weary mind – one that has thought too much, confronted the 'problems' too long. Jordan seems more than half in love with easeful death" (530). The foundation of Thorne's argument is shaky: instead of drawing out Jordan's world-weariness, the process of dying possibly gives Jordan a sense of peace and acceptance, which elides his former wish to remain alive. Its overall shape, however, is valid, for one page after feeling peaceful resignation, Jordan expresses bitterness over having to die: "I hate to leave it, is all. I hate to leave it very much" (467). Within the dying process, Jordan vacillates between a Keatsian desire for "easeful death" and a Thomasian "rage against the dying of the light."

This Keats-Thomas dialectic determines the final moments of Jordan's life. He knows that an easeful death is a trigger's pull away, but he fights against what he considers the selfishness of an easeful, suicidal death and for a deferred, valiant death from the Fascists' gun-barrels. The structure of his final, warring thoughts exhibits this dialectic:

> I think it would be all right to do it now? Don't you? *No, it isn't.* Because there is something you can do yet. As long as you know what it is you have to do it. As long as you remember what it is you have to wait for that.... Do it now. It's all right to do it now. Go on and do it now. *No, you have to wait.* What for? You know all right. *Then wait.* I can't wait any longer now, he said. If I wait any longer I'll pass out.... It would be all right to do it now. Really, I'm telling you that it would be all right. *And if you wait and hold them up even a little while or just get the officer that may make all the difference. One thing well done can make* – (470)

Do it now; no, wait; do it; no, you must wait – Jordan flits between suicide and sacrifice, and while he successfully represses his desire to shoot himself, the novel's closing paragraphs, suspending Jordan's fate, do not unambiguously support the notion that he becomes integrated and dies heroically. We are left with an equivocal image of waiting, deferment, and avoidance, not of integration, of Jordan wishing for, and anticipating, death, but holding on to life indefinitely. We witness him "waiting until the officer reached the sunlit place where the first trees of the pine forest joined the green slope of the meadow" (471). Just as Jordan struggled while alive to keep death at bay from the

center of his awareness, and just as he has succeeded in remaining blind to his own imminent death although his fate is written on his palm, the novel keeps his death at bay even though it looms before his eyes. The novel extends, on a structural level, Jordan's psychological unwillingness to confront death. We are left with the self and its psychic resistances.

The novel's final image further forestalls any sense of integration and heroism: "He could feel his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest" (471). This is an image of contrast and forcible contact, not of integration, transcendence, or spiritual triumph; it portrays the self experiencing itself through difference from, and violent opposition to, an external presence. Jordan feels his heart beat *against* the forest floor; an insurmountable barrier divides self and nature, a barrier that his heart can hammer at but never breach. The novel opens with Jordan lying on the forest floor – "He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees" (1) – and it ends with the same image of the isolated self. Jordan may remove himself from the "merry-go-round" on which Pablo twice antagonizes him, the "vast wheel" of their relationship that "goes around and then is back to where it starts" (225), but the conjunction of the novel's initial and ultimate images suggests that Jordan cannot leap off the wheel of fate, which throws him back on himself despite his attempts to repress his self. If the end implies a dying soldier who avoids suicide and isolation in order to embrace a death that will bind him to humanity, that death remains nebulous and postponed.

Still, Jordan does not shoot himself, and his actions will stall the Fascists' advance. His death, when it comes, will serve his community and his cause. But will it be heroic, honorable, or spiritually triumphant? Will it involve him in all mankind? Thorne writes that when Jordan prepares to shoot the approaching Fascists, "[h]e knows what he must do, but the significance and meaning of that action have never been more diffuse" (533). This diffusion of meaning occurs as Lieutenant Berrendo, one of the many Fascists whom Hemingway portrays sympathetically, draws near. A "very devout Catholic" (318) who hates war, its barbarities, and its belligerents, whom he calls "pistol brandishers" (318), Berrendo is not a malevolent character who has relinquished his right to remain a member of humankind and must therefore be exterminated. His involvement with the Fascists is contingent, based on the caprices of history. Involvement with any of the factions fighting during the civil war is a matter of contingency. As Andrés thinks, "If our father had not been a Republican both Eladio and I would be soldiers now with the fascists" (367). The lieutenant is a piece of the continent, a part of the main: he comes from Navarre, a region for which Jordan shows deep affection. His death will certainly diminish humanity. Shooting Berrendo will help the partisans escape, but it will also obscure Jordan's supposed heroism. Thorne rightly observes that the question "'For whom does the bell toll?' emerges with new force to cloud the conclusion of the book with new moral questioning. For Robert Jordan such problems may have come to an end; for us, the readers, they have not" (533).

As readers, we have privileged access to the novel's sympathetic depiction of Lieutenant Berrendo. Trapped in his own contingent situation, Jordan cannot share the

novel's, and our, compassion for his victim. We must therefore be careful not to confuse *our* moral understanding of Jordan's imminent and Berrendo's probable death with Jordan's. As we have seen, Jordan struggles to refuse suicidal self-isolation so he can eliminate one more Fascist, "make a difference," and die with self-approval. In these terms, he successfully performs the "hero's or martyr's end" that he wished to abandon "gladly" (164) early in the novel. These terms, however, become thorny in the context of the novel's closing images. What, then, are we to make of the discrepancy between the meaning that Jordan ascribes to his death and the highly ambiguous one that we, with our broader perspective, ascribe? Is ours more accurate or valid than Jordan's?

Our struggle over the meaning of Jordan's fate amounts to a struggle over the meaning of, to use morally neutral phrasing, a self-desired, self-initiated death – a type of death that has conjured over two millennia's worth of irresolvable debate, philosophizing, and moralizing. We call self-initiated death "suicide" when it involves self-centered motives and "heroic self-sacrifice" when it involves altruistic ones, and both terms carry with them rhetorical and moral baggage; we have only to keep in mind the paradigmatic examples of Judas and Jesus to remind ourselves of the moralizing that surrounds voluntary death. What remains constant during Jordan's final moments is his wish to die, initially because he suffers from severe pain and finally because he fears that he will pass out, which will then allow the Fascists to capture, torture, and interrogate him. His quietus is self-initiated: despite Jordan's fatalism, his wounds (a fractured leg and

smashed nerve) are not lethal; his death at the hands of the Fascists is fully voluntary.[48] Jordan's desire to die is self-centered, but his method of initiation is not; a thin, porous line separates egotism from selflessness, suicide from self-sacrifice.

But when we delineate desire and deed, we are simply articulating facts. However one judges Jordan's death depends on how much weight one accords to motivation versus how much one accords to action. Jordan sets his eyes on the side of sacrifice – one of the words that, in *A Farewell to Arms*, embarrasses Frederic Henry. I have been arguing for the impossibility of attaining clear vision or judgment, yet judgment is precisely what is involved when we call someone a "suicide," "hero," or "martyr." The facts alone explain little. As the suicidologist Jack D. Douglas argues, suicide (as well as heroic self-sacrifice) is a socially constructed category that depends on human appraisal, attitude, and belief; it does not designate an objective, unmediated

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[48] Gerry Brenner writes, "Having been sure all along that his mission will be fatal to him, Jordan's leg injury propitiously and honorably gratifies his secret suicide wish, a wish that allies him with his father" (*Concealments* 146). In other words, Jordan's injury, immobility, and decision to forestall the fascists' advance place him in a situation in which he can successfully fulfill his desire to annihilate himself while gaining a measure of glory; the heroic occasion for self-sacrifice serves as an excuse for suicide, allowing Jordan to die with a favorable self-image. As I have shown, Jordan does struggle with the meaning of his death and attempts to avoid what is in his eyes the shame of suicide, but viewing Jordan's situation at the novels' end as one that allows Jordan to fulfill a secret suicide wish while avoiding the stigma of suicide, as Brenner does, is at best speculative and at worst groundless. Fatalistic feelings do not necessarily entail suicidal wishes; Jordan may think that his mission will cost him his life, but his thinking so does not necessarily mean that he desires a self-initiated death. As I have argued, Jordan struggles throughout the novel to maintain a willful blindness to his own death. Nowhere is there evidence of a secret suicide wish. Self-sacrifice does not mask suicide for Jordan; both judgments coexist in suspension during the novel's closing moments, and Jordan's end remains uncertain.

reality.[49] If the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* fails to define the "true" meaning of Jordan's death, it does so because an unequivocal, "true" meaning does not exist. The question of accuracy in meaning, along with the question of what we should do with difference in meaning, is irrelevant. We can only acknowledge that there are discrepant assessments of Jordan's death. Our and Jordan's judgments shape themselves to the available facts, and only one unequivocal fact presents itself both to Jordan and to us: the fact that he chooses to die.

Jordan's morally ambiguous, deferred death completes a novel in which moral incertitude abounds: supposed honorable Republican fighters commit atrocities and supposed barbaric Fascist fighters demonstrate virtue, thereby blurring the moral divide between both sides and collapsing the distance between righteousness and iniquity. And like Jordan's death, the impact of his mission on the course and ultimate fate of the war remain, in the novel, deferred and uncertain. Although Hemingway wrote and published *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940, one year after the Nationalists' triumph, he chose in his narrative not to highlight victory and defeat, not to separate the winners from the losers. Rather than a study of tragic loss, the novel is, in Carlos Baker's words, "a study of the betrayal of the Spanish people – both by what lay within them and what had been thrust upon them" (*Hemingway* 241). Hemingway chose to underscore how the war in Spain, as a *civil* war (the war of a country at war with itself), represented, in part, the self-destruction of a country. He chose to represent the suicide of a nation by focusing on the

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[49] See Douglas, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* 155-58 and 178-90.

opacity and incertitude that often shrouds individual suicide.[50] And as Hemingway knew when writing the novel, Spain's self-destruction, its collective venture into "the undiscovered country," ultimately diminished Europe, for the tolling of its bell foreshadowed the Second World War.

[50] Writing for *Esquire* magazine in September 1935, Hemingway anticipated the Second World War and expressed his disdain for modern combat: "No one wins a modern war because it is fought to such a point that everyone must lose. The troops that are fighting at the end are incapable of winning. It is only a question of which government rots first or which side can get in a new ally with fresh troops.... In a modern war there is no Victory" ("Notes" 211). Hemingway's scorn certainly influenced his perception of the Spanish Civil War even though he supported the Republican cause. It gives *For Whom the Bell Tolls* its deadlocked feel and contributes to the impasse over the meaning of Jordan's postponed death. For a discussion of Hemingway's perspective on the war in Spain and his approach to writing his novel about the war, see Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* 223-41. For a detailed discussion of Hemingway's involvement in the war, see Watson, "Joris Ivens."

Chapter Two:
Imbalance, Purification, and Suicide in Joseph Conrad's *Victory*

Of all the authors considered in this dissertation, Conrad wrote about suicide most frequently and with the greatest variety of judgment. C.B. Cox and Jeffrey Berman have shown that, based on the number of Conradian characters who kill themselves, suicide was central to the author's literary imagination.[51] Cox counts a total of fifteen suicides in Conrad's fiction (4), and Berman, who includes ambiguous suicides in his calculation, notices that Conrad's *oeuvre* contains the highest rate of self-destruction of any major English novelist (24).[52] Both critics omit potential suicides in their counts, but they acknowledge numerous other characters who, like *Chance*'s Flora de Barral, discuss or contemplate killing themselves but do not. Moreover, Cox notices that many of Conrad's robust male characters suffer periodical bouts of mental paralysis, rendering them potential self-destroyers (4). He cites Nostromo as a primary example of this male type.

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[51] Both Cox and Berman provide useful and enlightening discussions on self-destruction in Conrad's fiction. In *Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination*, Cox titles his first chapter "The Question of Suicide," which describes Conrad's own failed suicide attempt, his lifelong experience with depressive breakdown, and his approach to writing fictional self-destruction. Berman goes further. In *Joseph Conrad: Writing as Rescue*, a book devoted entirely to exploring Conrad's fictional suicides, Berman argues that the author's self-destroyers are surrogate selves onto whom he displaced his own death wish. The purpose of Berman's inquiry is "to show that to an extent previously unrecognized, the moral psychological, and dramatic complexity of each Conrad novel derives from the embattled confrontation with self-destruction" (25).

[52] Cox's list includes Peyrol (*The Rover*), Lord Jim, Kayerts ("An Outpost of Progress"), Decoud (*Nostromo*), Captain Whalley ("The End of the Tether"), Renouard ("The Planter of Malta"), Heyst (*Victory*), Susan ("The Idiots"), Brierly (*Lord Jim*), Winnie Verloc (*The Secret Agent*), Erminia ("Gaspar Ruiz"), Sevrin ("The Informer"), Ziemianitch (*Under Western Eyes*), De Barral (*Chance*) and Jörgenson (*The Rescue*) (4).

Upon seeing the new Great Isabel lighthouse, which lies close to his buried silver, Nostomo almost throws himself overboard from his schooner. "That man, subjective almost to insanity, looked suicide deliberately in the face," the narrator remarks (*Nostromo* 434). In Conrad's universe, therefore, both ordinary and extraordinary individuals harbor suicidal impulses – and many act on them.

Because of the range of Conrad's actual and near suicides, his fiction contains, not surprisingly, a mix of sympathetic, negative, and neutral attitudes toward self-destruction; no prevailing judgment exists. Utilizing a Durkheimian sociological framework, Todd G. Willy argues that Conrad's early narrators posit an antithesis between morally healthy, altruistic suicides sought by stereotypical Noble Savages such as Arsat ("The Lagoon") and Karain ("Karain") and morally degenerate suicides committed by white colonials such as Kayerts ("An Outpost of Progress") and Kurtz ("Heart of Darkness") (190). While Arsat and Karain wish to express their nobility and conform to their group's dictates by forfeiting their lives, Kayerts and Kurtz become self-destructive because they interact with "primitive" non-whites and lose their self-composure; for these colonials, morally justified suicide becomes "a deadly and loathsome sociological disease" (Willy 191). Although Willy articulates a compelling account of colonial suicide in Conrad's early fiction, he is only partially correct, for he disregards the non-sociological causes behind, and judgments on, self-destruction, all of which operate alongside the sociological ones. For instance, Kurtz may have succumbed to the "spell of the wilderness," but he does so because he "knew no restraint" (*Heart*

132, 133). Marlow's estimation is clear: "hollow at the core" (*Heart* 121), that is, inherently immoral, Kurtz courts his own destruction.

Sharing Marlow's concern for the moral nature of suicide, the rest of Conrad's narrators and characters fail to invoke any systematic framework when explaining self-killing. *Nostromo*'s narrator scathingly comments that Martin Decoud, who kills himself after protracted isolation on one of the Golfo Placido's islands, "had died from solitude and want of faith in himself and others"; he is a "victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity" (412, 416). The Marlow of *Chance* views self-killing similarly, but from a more neutral standpoint: "For in truth we who are creatures of impulse are not creatures of despair. Suicide, I suspect, is very often the outcome of mere mental weariness – not an act of savage energy but the final symptom of complete collapse" (157). Later, however, Marlow takes a less detached tone and defends Flora de Barral's suicidal desire as justifiable considering her anguish:

> But why she, that girl who existed on sufferance, so to speak – why she should writhe inwardly with remorse because she had once thought of getting rid of a life which was nothing in every respect but a curse – that I could not understand. I thought it was very likely some obscure influence of common forms of speech, some traditional or inherited feeling – a vague notion that suicide is a legal crime; words of old moralists and preachers which remain in the air and help to form all the authorized moral conventions. (182)

It is precisely the "authorized moral conventions" of Christianity that Stephen adheres to in *The Sisters*, an early novel that Conrad abandoned: for Stephen, suicide is "the unpardonable crime" (53), a mortal sin that precludes the possibility of repentance. *Lord Jim*'s Mr. Jones also follows the "authorized moral conventions" when characterizing Captain Brierly's suicide as "the rash act" (90). For Jones, however, the conventions stem from Victorian sensationalism and melodrama, not from Christian doctrine: self-killing is an irrational, desperate deed, not a sinful one. Conrad invokes these conventions in *The Secret Agent* as well, for there, the newspaper article that reports Winnie Verloc's self-drowning sensationally dubs her suicide "*an act of madness or despair*" (224).

Despite the lack in Conrad's *oeuvre* of a prevalent judgment of suicide, his major novels provide a ubiquitous thematic treatment of the deed as well as of self-destructive dispositions and actions. In *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory*, self-destruction serves as a focal point for exploring the irresolvable Conradian tension between acceptance and repudiation. Whether to "immerse" oneself in the "destructive element," as Stein puts it in *Lord Jim* (200), and test one's ideals and abilities against the maculate world, or whether to flee and remain detached: this question haunts Lord Jim, Martin Decoud, Kirylo Sidorovitch Razumov, and especially Axel Heyst, who, unlike the others, embraces world-renunciation as a philosophical principle. In response to the "problem" of acceptance or repudiation, these protagonists either commit suicide or initiate their own destructions. Decoud's suicide stems from his skeptical detachment, which causes him to repudiate the world decisively. In contrast, Jim's accepting death at

the hands of the grieving Doramin, Razumov's embracing the harmful consequences of revealing to the Russian revolutionaries his betrayal of Victor Haldin, and Heyst's self-immolation, are far more equivocal. They can be read as acts of reconciliation with the world after lifetimes of evasion, as further avoidances, as mixtures of both, or, as I would argue, as informed by both but ultimately indefinable. As decisive and climactic, but impalpable occurrences, they magnify the irresolvable tension between acceptance and repudiation by prohibiting cathartic closure and holding out for inspection a series of lingering, open-ended questions about suicidal intent that are essentially questions about assent and refusal.[53] Consequently, *Lord Jim*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Victory* suspend judgment altogether.

Victory, however, examines the vital thematic tension I have been describing with the greatest degree of intensity and portrays self-destruction with the greatest degree of ambiguity. As I have already mentioned, Heyst's world-renunciation is not a mood or an impulse, but a conscious, methodical stance. Of philosophical, not merely dramatic,

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[53] I will outline a more detailed thematic reading of Heyst's suicide shortly. With regard to *Lord Jim* and *Under Western Eyes*, both Jim and Razumov evade or wish to evade their respective destructive elements, and they consider and consciously reject suicide as an acceptable mode of escape from their predicaments. They will their own destructions, however, when, apparently hoping to redeem themselves, they decide to cease their evasiveness and confront the forces that have undermined, or sought to undermine, their welfares. Jim's and Razumov's suicidal acts thus seem morally justified since both characters are not merely courting their destructions, but are doing so in order to reaffirm their self-worth, which has, in their eyes, been diminished by their transgressions. And yet, by choosing not to flee, and by inviting their destructions, both protagonists embrace, paradoxically, yet another mode of escape: Jim dies, which precludes the possibility that he will again fail to act courageously; Razumov is deafened, which precludes his ever receiving another's unwanted confidence that he could betray.

proportions, *Victory*'s tension is more immediate and self-aware than those of Conrad's previous novels. Moreover, reported briefly by an acquaintance, Heyst's suicide is less dramatized than Jim's and Razumov's self-destructive acts. Harder to grasp, it requires the critic to take a greater leap of interpretive faith when articulating its meaning and goes furthest in underscoring the shortcomings of a thematic interpretation.

Victory's opening obliquely announces the importance of self-destruction to the novel's unfolding. In the second paragraph, the narrator describes the "unnatural physics" of the Tropical Belt Coal Company's dissolution and asserts, "[t]he world of finance is a mysterious world in which… evaporation precedes liquidation" (57); he thus prefiguratively contrasts, as Jeffrey Berman writes, "Heyst's ascension through self-immolation with Jones's dissolution through self-drowning" (175). From its outset, the novel seems to extol Heyst for his ostensible redemptive conversion from world-repudiator to world-accepter and condemn Gentleman Jones for his possible self-killing. (It is unclear whether Jones drowns himself or whether he "tumbled into the water by accident" [384]). The ending, however, fails to support this moralizing antithesis. Absent from the text's unfolding, both deaths exist in a representational void. We learn of them only through Captain Davidson, who gives to the anonymous Excellency a brief, mainly fact-based report bereft of reliable explanatory detail and insight into character motivation. The only non-subjective aspect of Davidson's account that provides an anchor for interpreting suicidal intent is Heyst's vague complaint, "Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love – and to put its trust in life!" (383). Is this an expression of sorrow, remorse, cynicism, or resignation?

Davidson provides little context for understating Heyst's utterance; he precedes his report of Heyst's complaint only with the remark, "He talked to me. His father seems to have been a crank, and to have upset his head when he was young. He was a queer chap" (383). The captain's summary of his conversation with Heyst omits any detail – any specific expression, gesture, inflection, or thought – that would help elucidate the suicide's mindset. While Jones certainly dies disreputably despite the uncertainty over the cause of his drowning, the meaning of Heyst's self-immolation remains murky and therefore subject to critical debate (Berman 175).

Not surprisingly, critics have discussed Heyst's suicide in terms of the thematic tension between acceptance and repudiation. While they disagree over the meaning of Heyst's complaint, they tend to conclude that his self-immolation indicates, in their formulation of the tension, either his victory over, or absolute capitulation to, his father's nihilistic directive to "'Look on – make no sound'" (194); either Heyst redemptively embraces the world after a lifetime of detachment or he despairingly rejects it.[54] Both

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[54] F.R. Leavis, Walter E. Wright, Leo Gurko, and Bruce Johnson maintain that acceptance motivates Heyst's suicide. According to Leavis, Heyst achieves "a victory over skepticism, a victory of life. The tragic irony that makes it come too late and identifies it with death doesn't make it less a victory; it is unequivocal" (202). He interprets Heyst's last words as signifying his achievement of "self-discovery through relations with others" (202) as well as his newfound "trust in life" (208). For Wright, "To live would mean reverting to familiar patterns of conduct, to the setting himself off once more, even in the enduring of remorse. In suicide Heyst achieves victory in the meaning it had for Lena. Having experienced reality, he refuses to exist without it" (106). Gurko maintains that Lena exacts "from Heyst at least a posthumous expression of his love. This is victory, indeed…. She shakes Heyst out of his accustomed mold and almost reconciles him to the world" (214-15). Johnson disagrees, but he nevertheless views Heyst's self-killing as a type of acceptance: Heyst's suicidal guilt develops from

groups provide compelling, yet narrow, arguments. In attempting to articulate the significance of Heyst's complaint and suicide, they imbue Davidson's report with context and meaning without considering fully the nature of its mediatory status, without taking into account *how* it mediates Heyst's words and self-destruction. For, containing only a few bare facts, Davidson's report deliberately empties itself of "objective" context and meaning. The captain's final utterance – *Victory*'s final word – is, after all, a purging, "'Nothing!'" (385). To use one of Davidson's formulations, the report "purifies everything" (384). Conrad has Davidson extract the narrative "impurities" generated by the novel's two narrators, impurities that "contaminate" the living Heyst with an excess

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his acknowledgment that "despite Lena's sacrifice and example he still cannot simply love her" (173-74).

Conversely, Jeffrey Berman, Suresh Raval, Daniel R. Schwarz, Kingsley Widmer, and Arnold E. Davidson maintain that repudiation motivates Heyst's suicide. Although, for Berman, *Victory* seems to support Davidson's verdict that Heyst's self-immolation is a victorious purification, he nevertheless hears in Heyst's final words "a continuation of the old reality of oppressive guilt, acute failure, and a deep resentment against life" (175). Berman goes on to argue that it is impossible to conclude "that Heyst's suicide in *Victory* repudiates his father's philosophy of negation" (176). For Raval, "Heyst's words reveal a despair and bitterness that are powerful psychological adjuncts of his deep-seated skepticism.... Heyst's final act is therefore a rejection of the world" (416). While Schwarz views Heyst's suicide as a nihilistic, defiled "continuation of his search to separate the strand of his life from a cosmos he despises" (78), Widmer views it as rejecting "'trust in life.' The ironic and demonic self, as it fully intends, cancels itself" (129). Agreeing with Widmer, Davidson adds, Heyst "obviously comprehends his own failure much more clearly that he understands her [Lena's] sacrifice. But whatever he comes to see, it is not the optimistic affirmation that an out-of-context reading of his final words can imply…. Heyst remains allied with Mr. Jones, and both go to self-inflicted deaths…. Heyst and Jones… both make, with their suicides… devastating self-condemnations, yet nothing is thereby redeemed" (100-1).

of anecdotal and allegorical significance, in order to act sympathetically toward, and withhold assessment of, the dead Heyst. Negation of life inspires negation of judgment.

A sensitive analysis of Heyst's suicide needs to avoid fetishizing his complaint as a revelatory wellspring that discloses intention, determines meaning, and helps resolve the novel's thematic tension. Such a fetishization imputes false significance to the protagonist's self-killing. Yet a thematic interpretation attuned to the nuances of Davidson's report can only highlight the irresolvable tension between acceptance and repudiation. Rather than read Heyst's self-immolation thematically, we would do better to read it aesthetically, as an integral part of *Victory*'s overall design. Heyst's suicide is inseparable from the novel's own self-destructive impulse; it is inseparable from Davidson's report, which, in an instance of form mirroring content, functions more like a self-destruct button than it does a conclusion that restrains the novel from additional unfolding. Davidson's report not only rids *Victory* of Heyst's anecdotal and allegorical impurities; it ultimately implodes the aesthetic principle that informs them: *Victory*'s aesthetic of imbalance, which operates on all the novel's levels, from its form to its plot.[55]

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[55] While "imbalance" denotes "a lack of proper proportion or relation between corresponding things" ("Imbalance"), I deploy the term to refer generally to the disproportions, asymmetries, incongruities, and dissonances that structure *Victory*'s form and comprise its content. Overall, imbalance best characterizes the family resemblance that draws these concepts together.

In his introductory author's notes to *Victory*, as in many of his author's notes, Conrad articulates the concerns that guided his writing and shaped the novel's content, providing not an x-ray of his tale's "hidden meaning," but a topographical map for navigating its contours. At first glance, his more extensive 1920 "Author's Note" seems to offer a philosophical lesson on the importance of proportion. Shortly after initiating his elucidation of the novel's subject matter by evaluating Heyst's detachment and eventual loss of "mental self-possession," Conrad concludes, "It is only when the catastrophe matches the natural obscurity of our fate that even the best representative of the race is liable to lose his detachment…. It is all a matter of proportion" (48). And yet the "Author's Note" is an extended reflection on the many *dis*proportions and imbalances that informed Conrad's writing and publication of *Victory*. Conrad begins his note with a quick sketch of the novel's composition and publication, and he underscores the emotional turbulence he felt over *Victory*'s appearance in an England suffering from the throes of the Great War:

> [M]y conscience was troubled by the awful *incongruity* of throwing this bit of imagined drama into the welter of reality, tragic enough in all its conscience but even more cruel than tragic and more inspiring than cruel. It seemed awfully presumptuous to think there would be eyes to spare for those pages in a community which in the crash of the big guns and in the din of brave words expressing truth of an indomitable faith could not but feel the edge of a sharp knife at its throat. (47; italics mine)

Conrad feared that his imaginative work would be inconsonant with the harsh realities of its time, that its very presence would clash with the historical moment or the British public. Conrad's uneasiness over the novel's publication and his attendant recognition of incongruity echoes his anxieties in his 1914 "Note to the First Edition." There, he worries that, in terms of its connotations, the title *Victory* is disproportionate to the novel's comparative insignificance: "Now that the moment of publication approaches I have been considering the discretion of altering the title-page. The word Victory, the shining and tragic goal of noble effort, appeared too great, too august, to stand at the head of a mere novel" (45). He then immediately registers his concern that, upon reading *Victory*, the public might suspect foul play: "There was also the possibility of falling under the suspicion of commercial astuteness deceiving the public into belief that the book had something to do with war" (45). In other words, Conrad feared an asymmetry between belief and reality.

If Conrad articulates anxiety over the various imbalances that he worried would accompany *Victory*'s publication, the rest of his "Author's Note" placidly registers the various imbalances animating his tale. Heyst may lose his stoic self-possession when the natural obscurity of his fate jibes with the catastrophe of Mr. Jones', Ricardo's, and Pedro's arrival – one of the few accordances in the novel – but he was previously able to maintain his aloofness precisely because the machinations of his fate exceeded his emotional and cognitive faculties: "The unchanging Man of history is wonderfully adaptable both by his power of endurance and in his capacity for detachment. The fact seems to be that the play of his destiny is too great for his fears and too mysterious for his

understanding" (47). Conrad then universalizes Heyst's predicament, arguing that if the trumpet of the Last Judgment were to sound, we too would continue our daily business as if nothing had happened. "For what are we to let ourselves be disturbed by an angel's vengeful music too mighty for our ears and too awful for our terrors?," he asks (48).

The play of Heyst's destiny supersedes his fear and understanding; the sound and the fury of Judgment Day will supersede the range of our auditory and emotional capabilities. In his remarks on Heyst and humanity, Conrad establishes his interest in imbalanced relationships and their attendant excesses, which he threads throughout the rest of his "Author's Note" as well as throughout the novel. The model for Heyst, Conrad informs us, carried his detachment "to excess" (49), implying that one who wishes to cultivate detachment should be careful to maintain the right balance between disconnection and engagement. The orchestra on which Conrad based the Zangiacomo band "was rather smaller than the one that performed at Schomberg's hotel, had the air more of a family party than of an enlisted band, and, I must confess, seemed rather more respectable than the Zangiacomo musical enterprise" (52). Conrad here reveals something integral to *Victory* and his other novels: they are based, in part, on his own experience, but are augmentations of that experience. Just as the Zangiacomo band amplifies the size of its model, Conrad's fiction amplifies the facts of his life. Finally, after describing the proto-Zangiacomo band and detailing his fascination with the proto-Lena, Conrad wonders if the orchestra left town the day after he witnessed its performance or if it merely moved to the next café. "I did not go across to find out," he writes, "It was my perfect idleness that had invested the girl with a peculiar charm, and I

did not want to destroy it by any superfluous exertion" (53). Had Conrad excessively exerted himself, he would have destroyed the young woman's allure – a product, we must add, of Conrad's possessing the right amount of indolence, which "made the impression [of her] so permanent" (53) – and perhaps she would eventually have slipped from his memory, never to appear in *Victory*.

If Conrad's preliminary notes survey *Victory*'s landscape of imbalance, then in addition to initiating a pattern of doubling, portraying a Lockean view of the physical world, and commenting on proto-postmodernist textuality, the novel's opening orients us toward Conrad's general, as well as *Victory*'s particular, aesthetic of imbalance.[56]

> There is, as every schoolboy knows in this scientific age, a very close chemical relation between coal and diamonds. It is the reason, I believe, why some people allude to coal as 'black diamonds.' Both these

[56] See Kahele and German, "Conrad's *Victory*" and Deurbergue, "The Opening of *Victory*" for discussions of doubling in the opening paragraph and its relationship to character doubling in the novel. See Laskwosky, "*Esse Est Percipi*" for a discussion of Locke and the opening paragraph. Laskowsky argues that the narrator's comments on coal and diamonds "support a Lockean view of the physical world; that is, the secondary qualities of both coal and diamonds (those properties which affect our senses) inhere in a particle which cannot be directly perceived (the carbon atom)" (276). Conrad's novel, Laskwosy asserts, "is not concerned with diamonds, but with coal which appears in a number of forms, each containing a different proportion of carbon in relation to various other elements. Thus, by analogy, we may have to be content with a character whose 'real self' is never explicitly revealed" (277). Finally, see Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad* for a discussion of the novel's opening in terms of textual representation. Erdinst-Vulcan maintains that because humans have arbitrarily endowed diamonds with value, "[t]he relation of the substance to the represented quality… in the case of diamonds… is clearly semiotic, i.e., arbitrary and entirely artificial" (173). She sees this semiotic relationship as expressing a "view of reality as a construct, or – as the post-modernists would have it – a text" and concludes that "[t]his view, as reflected in Heyst's relativistic, textual sensibility… is ultimately rejected in *Victory*, at least on the level of the author's conscious and explicit message, on moral grounds" (173, 174).

> commodities represent wealth: but coal is a much less portable form of property. There is, from that point of view, a deplorable lack of concentration in coal. Now, if a coalmine could be put into one's waistcoat pocket – but it can't! At the same time, there is a fascination in coal, the supreme commodity of the age in which we are camped like bewildered travelers in a garish, unrestful hotel. And I suppose those two considerations, the practical and the mystical, prevented Heyst – Axel Heyst – from going away. (57)

The narrator focuses explicitly on market value when relating coal to diamonds, but an implicit understanding of aesthetic value and artistic labor underlies the contrast between the ways that both substances "represent wealth." Coal's commercial value lies in its utility; it has zero aesthetic worth. In contrast, diamonds are commercially prized not simply because of their utilitarian potential (i.e., as indestructible drill bits) or even their rarity, but because they can be shaped into scintillating jewels – because of their latent aesthetic value. Diamond cutters actualize a rough, mined diamond's aesthetic potential by following ideal cuts (or benchmarks) when cutting. Based on precise mathematical calculations, these benchmarks prescribe the proportions that maximize a diamond's inherent refractive and reflective capabilities. Thus, in the world of diamond dealing, proportion ultimately establishes aesthetic and, consequently, commercial value.[57]

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[57] I am indebted to Victor Argenzio's *The Fascination of Diamonds* for my summary of diamond cutting.

The opening's unspoken assumption regarding value, labor, and proportion recalls Conrad's authorial project and aesthetic doctrine. The opening itself can be read as Conrad's late meditation on his artistic career and hope for success. Conrad, we might say, yearned to write diamonds, to shape and cut words and sentences into works that were commercially *and* aesthetically successful. Throughout his career, particularly in his later years, he was obsessed with book sales, having received, by 1908 and at the age of 51, less than five pounds in royalties from the thirteen works he published up to *Under Western Eyes* (Harpham, "Abroad" 79). Conrad was especially concerned with financial success when writing *Victory*, which he originally conceived as a novella with the appropriate working title "Dollars." Moreover, *Victory*'s Captain Davidson appeared in "Because of the Dollars," another suitably titled story that Conrad wrote when penning his novel.[58]

But Conrad was also obsessed with the aesthetic merits of his fiction, with finding, to borrow his own formulation from *A Personal Record*, "the right word and the right accent" with which he could "move the world" (2); or as he declared of his artistic ambition in his "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*" (147). In the same "Preface," Conrad remarks that writers who seek to raise fiction to the level of art must cultivate an eye (or ear) for proportion,

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[58] *Victory* proved to be a great commercial success: royalties from book sales allowed Conrad to pay off his massive debts. Not only did it go through numerous printings in England and America; it was also translated into numerous languages, including Dutch, French, German, Italian, Polish, Spanish, and possibly Croatian. For a discussion of the novel's triumph and its affect on Conrad, see Mallios, "Declaring *Victory*" 148-49.

for only then can they shape language into works that will appeal to the senses and stir emotion. "[I]t is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences" (146) that fiction will attain the stature of the visual arts. In order to "make you see," Conrad's ideal writer, like a diamond cutter, must deftly exploit his material's latent qualities, must measure perfect linguistic proportions and carve well-shaped sentences and tales.

And yet an imbalance characterizes the relationship between Conrad's aesthetic theory and writerly practice. Despite his devotion to proportion, Conrad was a master of disproportion, asymmetrical relationships, and incongruous shifts in, and juxtapositions of, scale, all of which pervade his fictional works and structure their forms as well as their content. Following Frederic Jameson, we can read *Lord Jim* as an imbalanced novel in that it forces its initial, intricate, circumambulatory narrative style and its eventual, romance-inflected, simple narrative style into an asymmetrical relationship; by refusing to combine and balance the modernist with the popular, and by abandoning one to take up the other, the novel renders itself formally and generically uneven.[59] *Nostromo*, as Aaron Fogel remarks, is an "oxymoron of scale," a "small big novel" that gestures toward the scope of the grand historical novel while simultaneously contracting it (107). For Fogel, moreover, Conrad's works are grounded in disproportion: Conradian storytelling "is apprehended as a forced, disproportioning reuse of the person represented," and "disproportional and coercive dialogue scenes" – in short, "coercion to speak" –

[59] See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 206-07.

accumulate in and structure Conrad's tales (3,7). Whereas Fogel sees imbalance in Conrad's storytelling and dialogue, Geoffrey Galt Harpham sees it in Conrad's style. For Harpham, "[t]he most unmistakably Conradian passages in Conrad's work are those in which the function of reference is disturbed, in which language seems to point towards some supercharged dimension of being where vulgar discord (possibly) becomes sublime concord" (*One of Us* 163). Harpham calls the "conceptual-stylistic feature" that characterizes Conrad's most distinctive passages "oxymoron, in which unlikenesses are stapled together"; it "often suggests both a fantastic linguistic mastery *and* a failure to achieve even mere reference or coherence" (*One of Us* 163). Conrad's irony, especially when he directs it toward his characters, also relies on imbalance for its dramatic effect. For instance, *The End of the Tether*'s Captain Whalley dies believing in his daughter's filial dependency. We quickly witness, however, Ivy's impassivity when she receives news of her father's death and ingratitude when she receives his savings; her name ironically accentuates her detachment from her father. This asymmetry between belief and reality – or, to borrow Laurence Davies' terminology, between expectation and outcome (225) – animates Conrad's works, especially *Nostromo*, within which expectation-outcome asymmetries propel action and create history.

These types of Conradian imbalance comprise *Victory*'s narrative fabric, and once again the novel's introductory paragraph offers a starting point for discussing them.[60] An

[60] The exception is Conradian oxymoron. *Victory*'s language is less inscrutable, far more accessible, and consequently less masterful than, for instance, that of *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim*. For the most part, Conrad describes action and setting lucidly without relying on adjectival bombardment and circumlocution, his usual stylistic traits, as we

imbalance of commercial value and degree characterizes the narrator's many implicit comparisons between coal and diamonds. As allotropes of carbon, both minerals are chemically similar, but because an individual piece of coal is much less valuable than a diamond, coal is much less "portable." As the narrator suggests, it takes an entire coalmine worth of the combustible rock to equal the amount of wealth concentrated in a single diamond. To put it conversely, a diamond's commercial value far exceeds a lump of coal's. Nevertheless, coal has commercial value and, due to its abundance, it is more of a presence in the marketplace than its rare chemical counterpart. "Black diamonds" refers obviously to the fossil fuel's status as "the supreme commodity of the age," but the appellation also tethers together coal and diamond, forcing into relation, in addition to everything I have just articulated, their material compositions and potentials: although the former is frail, dull, and incapable of being shaped into a perfectly proportioned object, the latter, the hardest known natural substance, is often proportioned and polished into a shiny jewel. We can therefore characterize "black diamonds" as a synoeciosis, a rhetorical figure that exploits imbalance by conjoining, according to the *OED*, "contrasted or heterogeneous things" ("Synoeciosis").

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can see in the following passage: "Heyst had been sitting among the bones [of the Tropical Belt Coal Company] buried so kindly in the grass of two wet seasons' growth. The silence of his surroundings, broken only by such sounds as a distant roll of thunder, the lash of rain through the foliage of some big trees, the noise of the wind tossing the leaves of the forest, and of the short seas breaking against the shore, favoured rather than hindered his solitary meditation" (193). Conrad revisits many of his favorite subjects – death, silence, storms, the jungle, the ocean – but he does so succinctly and in definite, linear clauses, a far cry from *Heart of Darnkess*' densely written jungle scenes. For a fascinating (computer) analysis of Conrad's adjectival and stylistic peculiarities, see Lucas, "Conrad's Adjectival Eccentricity."

The rhetorical imbalance of "black diamonds" applies also to Black Diamond Bay or, simply, Diamond Bay, the main place of travel in the novel. As a site of rhetorical imbalance, the bay serves as a gateway into an important site of representational and narrative imbalance: the island of Samburan. While we drift textually through Black Diamond Bay, Heyst, Lena, and the others drift through it physically before entering the novel's geographic center of action whose scale, similar to Sulaco's scale in *Nostromo*, shifts back and forth between the minute and the vast.[61] Whereas Suluaco's dimensional oscillations mesh into *Nostromo*'s expansion and contraction of the historical, Samburan's mesh into *Victory*'s expansion and contraction of the allegorical. On the one hand, Samburan is a "little island" (57) that exists nowhere; looking at the ocean's "blinding infinity," a dizzy Lena observes that the island inhabits a quasi "empty space… the abomination of desolation" (208). On the other hand, it is an allegorical Garden of Eden that, at least in the collective unconscious, exists everywhere. A large scale/small scale representational asymmetry characterizes Samburan, and once

[61] The primary mode of transportation between the mainland and Samburan is, suitably, an incongruously named vehicle: Davidson's steamer *Sissie* ("sissy"). This semiotic imbalance was a late addition to the novel: Conrad originally named the steamer *Celestial* (MS 87), a designation that both equals the power of its bearer and appositely connotes maritime navigation. Moreover, *Victory* hints at another imbalance concerning Davidson and his vessel. The first-person narrator refers to Davidson's "fat features" and his "small steamer" (87, 97). A striking imbalance between captain and ship emerges when we consider these descriptions concurrently: Davidson is perhaps too large for his steamer. "Because of the Dollars," a short story that Conrad penned when writing *Victory* and that features Davidson as its protagonist, furthers this imbalance, exploiting its comic potential: "'He has never commanded anything else but the '*Sissie* – Glasgow,' only it wasn't always the same *Sissie*. The first he had was about half the length of this one, and we used to tell poor Davidson that she was a size too small for him. Even at that time Davidson had bulk. We warned him he would get callosities on his shoulders and elbows because of the tight fight of that command'" (270).

the island becomes the narrative's geographical focal point, it precipitates *Victory*'s realistic/allegorical formal and generic asymmetry.

Critics have exhaustively delineated *Victory*'s allegorical aspects, so I will not rehearse them here other than to mention that Heyst is commonly associated with Adam; Lena with Eve, Mary Magdalen, and/or a love- and life-giving force; Mr. Jones with Satan; and Pedro and Ricardo with bestial minions.[62] What interests me more is the novel's generic shift from its initial realistic mode to its dominant allegorical mode as well as the critical response to it. This shift, which occurs after Part I, renders *Victory*, like *Lord Jim*, formally and generically asymmetric. But whereas *Lord Jim* has been generally praised despite the incongruity between its modernist and adventure-romance styles, *Victory* has been both excoriated and praised with equal fervor precisely because of its disproportionate, some critics claim excessive, reliance on allegory. Its own imbalance has generated an imbalance of critical opinion unknown to Conrad's earlier work.

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[62] See, e.g., Palmer, *Joseph Conrad's Fiction* 166-97 and Watts, *The Deceptive Text* 99-110. Both critics also scrutinize *Victory*'s evolutionary allegory. Whereas Palmer sees "an evolutionary continuum among the three villains of the novel" (192), Watts sees Heyst and Jones as "evolution carried respectively to decadently destructive and introspective extremes" (*Deceptive Text* 105). Furthermore, as many critics have pointed out, *Victory* is also indebted to a number of literary antecedents, from which it borrows and to which it alludes. They include Shakespeare's *The Tempest, Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Troilus and Cressida*; Maupassant's *Les Soeurs Rondolis*, *Forte comme la Mort,* and *L'Inutile Beauté*; and Virgil's *Aenid*. See Lodge, "Conrad's *Victory* and *The Tempest*"; Dike, "The Tempest of Axel Heyst," Gillon, "Joseph Conrad and Shakespeare"; Kirschner, *Conrad* 191-229; and Watts, "Reflections on Victory."

On the one hand, the achievement-and-decline critics – Douglas Hewitt, Thomas Moser, and Albert Guerard – view *Victory* "as a realistic work that fails partly because of the insistent allegorical dimension which precludes realistic psychological characterization" (Erdinast-Vulcan 181). Hewitt criticizes the novel for its "flaws of vague rhetoric… [and] sentimentality" as well as its clichéd presentation of good and evil (103, 110). Moser finds objectionable its "clumsy application of the Garden of Eden myth," which "serves only to label and not to give meaning to the characters," and he asks of *Victory* and Conrad's late work, "How can a writer as complex and profound as Conrad have written these stories? Their stock characters belong in the romantic melodramas of inferior magazines, as do their conventional love-trysts, and their pernicious, sentimental 'message.' Can a writer suddenly stop writing serious books and begin to turn out work indistinguishable from popular trash?" (124, 106-7). Like Moser, Guerard disparages *Victory*'s popular appeal, arguing that the novel "is Conrad for the high schools and motion pictures, the easiest and generically the most popular of the novels…. [I]t is one of the worst novels for which high claims have ever been made by critics of standing: an awkward popular romance built around certain imperfectly dramatized reflections on skepticism, withdrawal, isolation" (255, 272). Although he is not usually identified with the achievement-and-decline critics, Cedric Watts shares their scorn. For him, the novel "is cumbrously, heavy-handedly, and at times ludicrously allegoric" ("Reflections" 76).[63]

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[63] Even Virginia Woolf, Conrad's contemporary and admirer, disliked *Victory*. As Quentin Bell relates, Woolf thought that the novel was "below his [Conrad's] best

On the other hand, Paul Wiley, John A. Palmer, and William Bonney praise the novel for what they consider its allegorical complexities. For Wiley, Conrad achieved in *Victory* "the most successful balance in his later work between realism and allegory" (158). Palmer maintains that the novel "is the culmination of Conrad's creative growth" and "is probably the only kind of allegory that *could* be written for a sophisticated modern audience: sufficiently congruent with its skeptical assumptions to be regarded as intellectually respectable" (192, 172). He sees in it a "process of gradual penetration" similar to Marlow's movement toward the interior of Congo; the novel "progresses away from the outer facts of Heyst's situation toward its moral core, away from mere realism toward the symbolic projection of more general truths" (186, 185). For Bonney, the novel, like much of Conrad's fiction, "is involved with subverting inherited forms that in the past were particularly used as means of embodying optimistic Western philosophical contents"; Conrad employs the "iconography, role models, and symbolic situations that have been traditionally associated with Christian and secular transcendentalism" only to annul them (175).[64]

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level…perhaps Conrad was going out, perhaps the moment had come to disparage him" (2:50).

[64] Other critics, who refrain from scrutinizing *Victory*'s allegorical qualities, have found different reasons to praise the novel. One of the earliest encomiums comes from F. R. Leavis, who avers that it is one of Conrad's best: it is "among those of Conrad's works which deserve to be current as representing his claim to classical standing; and of the novels [...] in that class it is the one that answers most nearly to the stock notion of his genius" (209). See Leavis, *The Great Tradition*. See also Mallios, "Declaring *Victory*" for the most recent critical acclamation of the novel. Published in *Conradiana* in 2003, Mallios's essay, which argues for the novel's democratic style and aesthetics, is also the introduction to the 2003 Modern Library edition of *Victory*.

Although critical opinion on *Victory* tends to be polarized along a fissure separating those who view the novel as popular trash from those who view it as nuanced art, a common foundation underlies both judgments. As Peter Mallios points out, *Victory*'s detractors and enthusiasts mutually estimate its artistic worth ("Declaring *Victory*" 153). Either allegory's sheer presence renders the novel simplistic and melodramatic, and therefore popular, or Conrad's skilful handling of allegory contributes to the novel's seriousness and aesthetic power, which in turn save *Victory* from the charge of popular sentimentalism and elevate it to the level of art. Perhaps there is no way to skirt this either/or logic other than to acknowledge the novel's popular appeal *and* its literary greatness. The two do not have to be mutually exclusive. Rather than simply accept and judge Conrad's use of allegory, though, we can attempt to justify it by showing how the novel's generic shift, in tandem with its *narrative* shift, "reflect[s] the basic dynamism of the novel" (Erdinast-Vulcan 182).[65] This dynamism, I will argue, springs from *Victory*'s intentional aesthetic of imbalance. In light of the narrative transition from the anonymous first-person voice of Part I to the omniscient third-person

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[65] For Erdinast-Vulcan, *Victory*'s generic shift and concomitant "narrative discontinuity" are "'aesthetic' ruptures" that "should be viewed in a Bakhtinian light, as the projections of the protagonist's frame of mind, the fault lines with his consciousness" (182). The novel's allegorical section is "an attempt to suspend the radical, essentially modern skepticism of the first-person narrator which is but a reflection of the Heysitan frame of mind. In Part II Heyst is given the opportunity to cast himself into the allegory, or into the Eden myth: he may be able to redeem himself by suspending his disbelief and acting out his part in the allegory…. [I]t is Heyst himself who posits the allegory in his search for a textual or literary model to his reality" (182-83). Erdinast-Vulcan borrows the term "narrative discontinuity" from Bonney, who offers his own account of *Victory*'s narrative shift. See Bonney, *Thorns & Arabesques* 188. For yet another reading of the novel's narrative transition that, like Erdinast-Vulcan's, seeks also to explain the generic transition, see Geddes, *Conrad's Later Novels* 59-67.

voice of Parts II-IV, the novel's concomitant transition from a realistic to an allegorical mode must be viewed as a deliberate aesthetic choice.[66]

As *Victory*'s *vox populi*, Part I's narrator introduces us to the "spirit of the age," to Heyst's activities on Samburan, and to the public's opinion of Heyst. Through his opening discussion on coal and diamonds, he relates the modern world's scientific and materialistic concerns as well as its general confusion and exhaustion: the era, he states,

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[66] Conrad's revisions also provide insight into his authorial control over *Victory*'s allegorical aspects and overall imbalance. In his study of the novel's development, Frederick R. Karl notes that the manuscript version contains more realistic writing than the published work and is about one-sixth longer (175,000 words, which approaches the length of *Nostromo*) ("Victory" 45). After an exhaustive comparison of the manuscript to the book, Karl concludes, "Without massive deletions, it [the manuscript] would have given the reader fuller explanations of Heyst's background, more material on Lena's past, further insights into Holmes and Ricardo as well as into the Heyst-Lena relationship, even further description of the bestial Pedro…. Although the materials of *Victory* are not so vast as those of *Nostromo*, Conrad had to funnel several extremely difficult elements into a narrative line. The manuscript shows how inexorably he moved along with his basic idea, while at the same time it demonstrates how refinement, indeed purification, of his material was also never far from his mind" ("Victory" 45).

Conrad may have cut back on the novel's realistic description, but his elisions in no way constitute a refinement or purification of his material, if by refinement and purification Karl means a making more subtle and precise. Rather, they further inflate the novel's allegorical excesses, contributing to what R.W.B. Lewis calls *Victory*'s "allegorical swelling" (qtd. in Erdinast-Vulcan 182) of Part II and the subsequent sections. By removing descriptive minutiae and biographical contingencies, Conrad intensified his presentation of the principal characters as contextless, symbolic types. As David Lodge notices, "Conrad is not interested, or not only interested, in creating a humanly realistic love-drama; he is concerned to create a drama of conflicting ideologies or value-systems…. [T]he characters must therefore be 'larger than life,' free to adopt postures that would be extravagantly histrionic within the conventions of naturalistic prose fiction" (199). Of course, Heyst is a partial exception, for the allegorical section of the published novel still contains a great deal of detail about his past and insight into his psychology. Regardless of his individuality and psychological nuance, though, he remains a self-described "original Adam" (193). Moreover, Dwight H. Purdy points out in his aptly titled *Joseph Conrad's Bible* that Conrad intensified his allusions to Biblical scripture when revising *Victory* for publication (38). Such intensifications also demonstrate Conrad's conscious decision to swell the allegorical aspects of his novel.

is one “in which we are camped like bewildered travelers in a garish, unrestful hotel” (57). In his ensuing discussion of the liquidated Tropical Belt Coal Company, he employs the language of finance and colonialism when discussing Heyst’s psychology. The narrator first explains that the Company’s economic ruin has rendered Heyst “inert,” but he later qualifies his assertion, doubting whether Heyst desired wealth and acknowledging, “[w]hat he [Heyst] seemed mostly concerned for was the ‘stride forward,’ as he expressed it, in the general organization of the universe, apparently” (57, 59). Once *Victory*’s omniscient narrator takes over and elucidates the deeper philosophical mechanisms behind Heyst’s disillusionment, it becomes clear that the initial narrator understands Heyst only partially and cannot explain his motivation without invoking the normative materialistic values of the age. As Robert Secor points out, the narrator’s opening “finally tells us less about Axel Heyst than it does about how such an age perceives, judges, and victimizes a man like Heyst…. Unable to comprehend the philosophical basis of Heyst’s withdrawal, an age which finds central value in materialism… will over-rate the hold the island has on Heyst financially” (12).

While *Victory*’s opening reveals more about the modern era and its power over the narrator’s worldview than it does about Heyst, the rest of Part I reveals more about the narrator’s consciousness than it does about the subject of his narration. William Bonney has written that the narrator’s reliance on secondhand information exemplifies his unwillingness (or inability) to involve himself with the people and events he describes; he is detached from the world at large, committing himself only to listening to others’ stories and, at times, elaborating received details (188-89). Indeed, the

anonymous voice receives most of his information from other island dwellers; they impart to him fragmentary intelligence clouded by conjecture, misunderstanding, and prejudice. Consequently, the narrator devotes most of Part I to chronicling the rumors and gossip that surround his subject: Heyst is rumored to have located most of the coal outcrops in the Malay Archipeligo and written to his European friends about his exploits; he is falsely rumored to have sponged off his partner Morrison and sucked him dry; he is also falsely rumored to be a "Swedish baron"; he has run off with a "casual orchestra girl"; and he is defined by a multitude of often incongruous nicknames, from "Enchanted Heyst" to "Hard Facts" (59, 69, 73, 88, 60). Relating these speculations and exaggerations permits the narrator to further disengage himself from the subject of his narration: he offers no unmediated information and very little of his own thoughts on Heyst; instead, he mostly arranges the islanders' impressions of him into a conflicted composite portrait. As a result, the Heyst of Part I remains obscured by his multifarious representations.

Along with the rumor- and gossipmongers, the narrator complies with a peculiar epistemological practice. By perpetuating hearsay, he sustains a type of knowledge generation and circulation that depends not on discovery or construction, but on confused and opinionated invention. Schomberg, an hotelier who views people either as paying customers or "the objects of scandalous gossip," invents most of this hearsay (135). If the age is one "in which we are camped like bewildered travelers in a garish, unrestful hotel" (57), then Schomberg manages its hospitality and defines the rules of conduct for its inhabitants. Perversely, he is munificent only with his slander against Heyst, which

the narrator fails to counteract. Instead, the anonymous voice merely tolerates its inevitability and, in one instance, offers an apology for its acceptance and perpetuation. Schomberg originates a "rumor… that Heyst, having obtained some mysterious hold on Morrison, had fastened himself on him and was sucking him dry," and "[t]hose who had traced these matters back to their origin were very careful not to believe them" (69). "Human nature being what it is," however, "having a silly side to it as well as a mean side, there were not a few who pretended to be indignant on no better authority than a general propensity to believe every evil report; and a good many others who found it simply funny to call Heyst the Spider" (71). Furthermore, in rare moments the narrator unwittingly participates in Schomberg's name-calling when he christens the protagonist a "[q]ueer chap" (58) and, later, "Naïve Heyst!" (72). If the narrator participates at all in island life, he does so through his passive and unconscious complicity with Schomberg and the other scuttlebutt peddlers. Paradoxically, his detachment turns out to be a kind of unapologetic involvement.

Through his impenitent gabbiness, therefore, *Victory*'s initial narrator establishes a recognizable modern world from which Heyst tries, but fails, to secede. The limits of the narrator's consciousness are the limits of this world. Capitalistic and imperialistic, he believes that material interests motivate human behavior. Bewildered, he abandons intellectual certitude for a relativistic acceptance of varied speculation. Disengaged, he avoids intimate knowledge of others and, instead, consumes distorted representations propagated by rumor- and gossipmongers. Unconcerned, he remains unconscious of the world's slanderer-defined standards. In this world, no one is ever immune from hearsay,

a point that *Victory* makes clear only when, in its allegorical section, the world comes crashing down on Samburan and disrupts Heyst's seclusion.

Heyst isolates himself on Samburan not simply because of his presumed inertia following the Tropical Belt Coal Company's liquidation, but due to a graver existential failure in which the company's ruin plays only a minor role:

> Heyst was disenchanted with life as a whole. His scornful temperament, beguiled into action, suffered from failure in a subtle way unknown to men accustomed to grapple with the realities of common human enterprise. It was like the gnawing pain of useless apostasy, a sort of shame before his own betrayed nature; and, in addition, he also suffered from plain, downright remorse. He deemed himself guilty of Morrison's death…. He was no longer enchanted, though he was still a captive of the islands. He had no intention to leave them ever. Where could he have gone to, after all these years? Not a single soul belonging to him lived anywhere on earth. Of this fact – not such a remote one, after all – he had only lately become aware; for it is failure that makes a man enter into himself and reckon up his resources… [H]e had made up his mind to retire from the world in hermit fashion. (109-110)

This detailed account of Heyst's psychology signals *Victory*'s shift, at the beginning of Part II, to an omniscient narrator who depends not on rumor and gossip for its narration, but on its own unmediated access to Heyst's mind. This narrator continues to probe Heyst's psyche, revealing a soul under the sway of a dead, nihilistic father, "the silenced

destroyer of systems, of hopes, of beliefs" (194). Heyst Sr.'s actions and teachings – the "cold blasts" of his "analysis," his advice to "'cultivate that form of contempt which is called pity,'" and his directive to "'Look on – make no sound'" – mold Heyst into a skeptical world-repudiator who ultimately withdraws to Samburan (129, 194). The tyranny of the father, not the vicissitudes of the marketplace, pressures him into immobility. Replacing the first-person narrator's external explanation with an internal one, the omniscient narrator erases all traces of the former's materialistic, relativistic, and gossipy consciousness.

Through anatomizing Heyst's psyche, the omniscient narrator also reveals "a set of filial metaphors which gradually take on Adamic overtones, in ironic opposition to the teachings of the father" (Palmer 188). For instance, while Heyst contemplates his involvement with Morrison and the Tropical Belt Coal Company, the narrator reports,

> The oldest voice in the world is just the one that never ceases to speak. If anybody could have silenced its imperative echoes, it should have been Heyst's father, with his contemptuous, inflexible negation of all effort; but apparently he could not. There was in the son a lot of that first ancestor who, as soon as he could uplift his muddy frame from the celestial mould, started inspecting and naming the animals of that paradise which he was so soon to lose. (193)

The narrator's comments follow Heyst's reflection that "'There must be a lot of the original Adam in me, after all'" (193) and refer, of course, to the Old Testament creation story in Genesis (2:18-20). Heyst, it seems, is conscious of his allegorical stature, which

the narrator appears merely to gloss. That is, the narrator ostensibly recounts what Heyst alone initiates; *Victory*'s allegorical transition presumably occurs because the contents of Heyst's allegorizing mind are finally revealed. Lest we agree, however, with Erdinast-Vulcan's assertion that Heyst posits the allegorical mode of Parts II-IV in order to suspend his skepticism, act out his newfound allegorical role, and ultimately redeem himself (183), we have only to observe the other characters' allegorizing tendencies to demonstrate what is actually a collective transformation. Mr. Jones, who first appears in Part II, likewise peppers his speech with Biblical allusion, presenting himself as Lucifer to Heyst's Adam and Lena's Eve. First, he perversely compares himself to God when he tells Heyst, "'"I am he who is"'" (309), a reference to Exodus 3:14: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM" (*King James Bible*). Jones then compares himself to Satan, asserting that "'he was a rebel now, and was coming and going up and down the earth'" (310), a paraphrase of Job 1:7: "And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking down in it" (*King James Bible*). Lena also declares her allegorical role, quoting Corinthians and Genesis, as I will show later, when declaring her victory over death.

The characters' multiple allusions to scripture amount to the recognition that Heyst alone does not, cannot, initiate *Victory*'s shift to allegory. It would be equally specious to claim that the characters concurrently and inexplicably begin to see themselves and each other symbolically, as types acting out an ageless Biblical struggle. Both contentions posit the omniscient narrator as a passive observer who acquiesces to either Heyst's or the other characters' collective desire to transform the realist narrative

into an allegorical one. The novel offers no inherent framework, metaphysical or otherwise, to help explain such a peculiar, proto-postmodernist phenomenon. *Victory* does, however, provide an aesthetic justification for its transition: the omniscient narrator discards the relativistic account of Heyst's story and adopts an authoritative allegorical one so as to replace one type of imbalance with another, thereby initiating the novel's formal and generic asymmetry. An exceedingly relativistic narrative based on mutable, individual perception gives way to its opposite: an excessively absolutist narrative based on unwavering omniscience and unambiguous, publicly available symbolism. To put it slightly differently, a narrative pieced together from contingency and private vision gives way to one that is, underneath its secular unfolding, archetypically Christian, impervious to the vicissitudes of both personal and communal perception. The omniscient narrator's *modus operandi* is to ensure certainty and universality by wedding the authority of its all-seeing eye to the moral and metaphysical certainties of allegory.[67]

An active transformer of Heyst's story, not an inert spectator, the omniscient narrator, through its merging of boundless sight and moral certitude, inflates *Victory*'s characters into symbolically distinct types and imbues them with its allegorical outlook. Thus, although *Victory*'s transition allows Heyst to elude the mainlanders' gossipy representations of him and assume symbolic stature, the omniscient narrator in no way reveals Heyst's "true" or even ideal self. Rather, like the first-person narrator, the omniscient narrator posits its own version of Heyst. The so-called man of universal

[67] See Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad* 182 and Palmer, *Joseph Conrad's Fiction* 172 for similar discussions of omniscience and allegory.

detachment escapes from one attempt to define him only to confront another; he can never dodge the invasive and distorting effects of representation. Heyst is therefore the victim of multiple heists; both narrators appropriate his identity, tuning it into an object of their own creation and fascination. Whereas the first-person narrator, along with the mainlanders, confers on him numerous names, the omniscient narrator bestows on him a singular, allegorical identity. A common proclivity for excess underlies both narrators' differing representational practices, a surfeit of number yielding to a surfeit of degree.

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Heyst is a victim not only of naming but also of plot. Physical as well as representational encroachment agitates him; both lead to his downfall. Additionally, the same aesthetic of imbalance that governs the means by which *Victory*'s narrators define Heyst, and by which the novel is given form and generic identification, governs *Victory*'s plot. Imbalance serves as action's generative principle, launching the novel's central sequence of events at the opening of Part II and driving the novel to its corpse-ridden conclusion. Most specifically, dissonance and rumor-mongering at Schomberg's hotel generate calamitous convergences, ominous departures, and malefic schemes, all of which emplot Heyst and the others, setting them on their respective paths to destruction. The terminus of generative imbalance in *Victory* is death and suicide.

Dissonance provokes the coupling of Lena and Heyst at the opening of Part II. After his protracted seclusion on Samburan, Heyst returns to the mainland to conduct a

financial transaction at the Tesmans. He stays at Schomberg's hotel when waiting for Davidson to transport him back to his island, and he spends his evenings alone on the verandah listening to "scraps of tunes more or less plaintive" emanating from one of the hotel's buildings (109). The narrator observes that the "fragmentary and rasping character of these sounds made their intrusion inexpressibly tedious in the long run. Like most dreamers, to whom it is given sometimes to hear the music of the spheres, Heyst… had a taste for silence" (110). According to Pythagoras, who originated the concept of the music of the spheres, one cannot hear the harmonious music produced by the motions of the sun, moon, and planets. Aristotle explains in *On the Heavens* that because the speeds of the celestial bodies,

> judged by their distances, are in the ratios of the musical consonances… the sound of the stars as they revolve is concordant. To meet the difficulty that none of us is aware of this sound, they [Pythagorens] account for it by saying that the sound is with us right from birth and has thus no contrasting silence to show it up. (193)

Yet Heyst can, paradoxically, hear the music of the spheres; or, a dreamer, he imagines it aurally. Either way, his ears are sensitive and vulnerable; he desires soothing acoustic symmetry. But as others in the novel continually disrupt Heyst's solitude, thus demonstrating the impossibility of complete detachment, the dissonance at Schomberg's hotel disrupts his attunement to silence and celestial concord, thus illustrating the impossibility of living completely in a tidy aural environment. *Victory*'s world is

fundamentally noisy, discordant, and intrusive – a fact that Heyst perpetually refuses to recognize.

Heyst is eventually "driven to desperation by the rasped, squeaked, scraped snatches of tunes pursuing him even to his hard couch" (111), and so he decides to behold the source of dissonance. Upon entering the building that serves as Schomberg's concert-hall, he hears an "instrumental uproar, screaming, grunting, whining, sobbing, scraping, squeaking some kind of lively air" (111). "The Zangiacomo band was not making music," the narrator remarks, "it was simply murdering silence with a vulgar, ferocious energy. One felt as if witnessing a deed of violence" (112). We must recall Conrad's description of the model for the Zangiacomo band: "The orchestra was rather smaller than the one that performed at Schomberg's hotel, had the air more of a family party than of an enlisted band" (52). Indeed, hotel bands are usually modestly sized entities that perform relaxed background music over which one can hear one's thoughts as well as another's speech. Not only is the Zangiacomo band an oversized ensemble, more of an "enlisted band" than a lounge act; it is also a pandemonic noise machine that churns out intrusive cacophony. Its uproarious sound exceeds the volume, timbre and function of ambient lounge music, and yet its audience members remain indifferent to its assault, "sitting so quietly on their chairs, drinking so calmly out of their glasses, and giving no signs of distress, anger, or fear" (112). If, in Conrad's "Author's Note," the apocalyptic sounds of the seven angels' trumpets fall on humanity's inadequate ears, here the harsh sounds of the Zangiacomo band fall on the audience's calloused (or damaged?) ears. The "unnatural spectacle" of the audience's "indifference" (112) betrays, for Heyst,

its failure to react commensurately: to leave, hiss, or, at the very least, show emotion. Refusing to accept the audience's passive acceptance of the dissonance, he finds perverse their ability to act with "animation" and "interest" (112) once the band stops playing.

Heyst, on the contrary, is relieved once the noise ceases, but his relief is so excessive that it renders him dizzy and vulnerable. Lena emerges from the Zangiacomo band's cacophony only to seduce a defenseless Heyst with her enchanting voice, a sound more in tune with Heyst's delicate ears than the violent outpourings to which, as a violinist, she contributed. Her voice is "fit to utter the most exquisite things, a voice which would have made silly chatter supportable and the roughest talk fascinating"; it is "charming"; and it includes "all the modulations of pathos, cheerfulness and courage in its compass" as well as "an intonation so just" and an "accent so penetrating" that it causes Heyst "to see the illusion of human fellowship on earth vanish before the naked truth of her [Lena's] existence" (116, 118, 120). The narrator's emphasis on Lena's alluring voice serves a twofold purpose. First, the emphasis helps to justify Heyst's captivation, accentuating the point that it results from his vulnerability in conjunction with the soundscape's sudden change: Lena's voice is all the more appealing after he experiences the band's discomfiting noise, especially since it ameliorates inanity (e.g., "silly chatter" and "roughest talk"). In addition, the narrator's emphasis helps specify Lena's role as cynosure in both senses of the term: she is both a center of attraction (for Schomberg and Ricardo as well as for Heyst) and a guiding force, the novel's life-bestowing center. Lena's dual appeal, as sexual object and spiritual subject, entices Heyst into surrendering his detachment and stealing her away to Samburan, a process that

begins the moment he sees her, while she was still performing with the band: "She had captured Heyst's awakened faculty of observation; he had the sensation of a new experience…. He looked at her anxiously, … and he positively forgot where he was. He had lost touch with his surroundings" (113).[68]

Heyst's and Lena's convergence, along with the Zangiacomo band's dissonance, occurs in a space of representational imbalance, "what Schomberg called grandiloquently 'my concert-hall'" (111). The omniscient narrator continues to place "concert-hall" in scare quotation marks to stress the innkeeper's propensity to misrepresent reality with his inflated speech: Schomberg's "concert-hall" is really, in the narrator's words, a "small, barn-like structure" (111). The hotelier blows things out of proportion. In fact, although the word "proportion" is used twice in the novel to reference physical dimensions – to the "noble proportions" of Heyst's moustache and the "proportions" of Lena's "body which suggested a reduction from a heroic size" – and once to reference Ricardo's "savage talk," which Schomberg says is "out of proportion," it is also used in connection with Schomberg's fostering of *dis*proportion (61, 257, 177). The first-person narrator deploys the word ironically when he elucidates Schomberg's overreactive tendencies:

> The innkeeper was not mercenary. Teutonic temperament seldom is. But he put on a sinister expression to tell us that Heyst had not paid perhaps

[68] Lena's dual nature is inscribed in her name, which Heyst bestows on her. As Tony Tanner points out, it as an amalgamation of fragments from her other names, "Alma," which means "soul" or "spirit" in Italian, and "Magdalen," "the biblical harlot, restored to purity and transmuted to sanctity by repentence, adoration of her saviour, and faith" ("Gentlemen and Gossip" 52). According to Tanner, these names "represent her ambiguity for Heyst who, at times, is not sure whether her effect on him is 'sensuous or spiritual'" ("Gentlemen and Gossip" 52).

> three visits altogether to his 'establishment.' This was Heyst's crime, for which Schomberg wished him nothing less than a long and tormented existence. Observe the Teutonic sense of proportion and nice forgiving temper. (75)

Schomberg's Teutonic sense of disproportion impels him to hate Heyst without substantial cause, a hatred that leads him, as I have already mentioned, to circulate malicious rumors about the blameless recluse. His rumors, like all rumors, are disproportionate to the facts of Heyst's situation; there is an incongruity between what he says and what is true. Although Heyst and Morrison entered into their coal mining partnership as equals, and although Morrison died during a volitional trip to his native Dorsetshire, Schomberg casts Heyst as a parasite who fed off of, and finally killed, his partner for financial gain: "That's what comes of having anything to do with that fellow. He squeezes you dry like a lemon, then chucks you out – sends you home to die" (72). Schomberg inflates this rumor to grander proportions in Part II, after Lena's flight further inflames his ire for his nemesis. When convincing Ricardo to travel to Samburan and prey upon Heyst, he "portray[s] for Ricardo… a Heyst fattened by years of private and public rapines, the murderer of Morrison, the swindler of many shareholders" (179). He tells his avaricious interlocutor that Heyst had recently returned to the mainland to retrieve "'the money he had with the Tesmans. What he has buried or put away on the island, devil only knows. When you think of the lot of hard cash that passed through that man's hands, for wages and stores and all that – and he's just a cunning thief'" (181). The imbalance between Schomberg's remarks and reality is most evident when we learn

that Heyst's *supposed* fortune far exceeds the actual amount of his holdings, which, "'not big enough to require a cavern'" (258), is stored in his writing desk. Heyst's rumored wealth turns out to be modest savings.

Schomberg's denigrating rumor invades Samburan, threatening Heyst's relationship with Lena, eroding his self-possession yet granting him knowledge of the world's machinery, and, finally, instigating the events that culminate in his suicide. Alone with Lena, and still susceptible to her erotic-spiritual power over him, Heyst recounts his past relationship with Morrison. Having previously heard Schomberg's calumnious account of the relationship, and consequently thinking that "some Swede" had "as good as murdered" Morrison (221), Lena is appalled when she hears Heyst speak Morrison's name. After she informs her lover that the islanders have been gossiping about him and his dead business partner, Heyst is initially astonished: "The idea of being talked about was always novel to Heyst's simplified conception of himself. For a moment he was as much surprised as if he had believed himself to be a mere gliding shadow among men. Besides, he had in him a half-unconscious notion that he was above the level of island gossip" (220). Heyst professes his innocence to Lena, and, upset by her initially believing that he had murdered Morrison and hurt by his newfound knowledge of the islanders' gossip, he silently concedes that he has been "as much of a fool as those everybodies who know the story – and no doubt believe it" (222). Shortly thereafter, he expresses self-hatred: "this earth must be the appointed hatching planet of calumny enough to furnish the whole universe! I feel a disgust at my own person, as if I had tumbled into some filthy hole" (226). If the epithet "Naïve Heyst" contains any

truth, it does so because its bearer fails to acknowledge that he can never isolate himself fully from the chattering world and its pernicious misjudgments. He has not "tumbled into some filthy hole"; the world itself is filthy, full of defamatory "verbal mud."[69] Nor does Heyst understand that he cannot simply wash away the calumnious mud, spit out its venom: "The taste of it came on his lips, nauseating and corrosive like some kinds of poison. He was tempted to spit on the floor, naïvely, in sheer unsophisticated disgust of the physical sensation" (229-30).

Despite his many failures to comprehend the world's workings, Heyst eventually does so, albeit much too late: "[t]he outer world had broken upon him" (261) – an insight that induces anxiety. Lured to Samburan by Schomberg's rumor, the outer world's representatives – Mr. Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro – have, at this point in the novel, penetrated Heyst's island seclusion and disrupted his developing relationship with Lena. But while Heyst concedes that the world has intruded despite his best efforts to evade it, he fails to acknowledge that it has done so simply because it is impelled by a self-sufficient logic, because its nature is to invade, disturb, and finally reorganize one's existence. Such ignorance induces Heyst to assign responsibility to himself, the only entity he believes has causal power over his life:

> [H]e did not know what wrong he had done to bring this upon himself, any more than he knew what he had done to provoke the horrible calumny

[69] The phrase "verbal mud" comes from Tony Tanner, who writes that Heyst "succumbs to the slanderous and malicious mal-naming of him by Schomberg's gossip, a kind of verbal 'mud' which sticks to him and drags him back to the old earth of our common origin, from which he can only finally and fully escape by the purifying, terminating fire" ("Joseph Conrad" 111).

> about his treatment of poor Morrison. For he could not forget this. It had reached the ears of one who needed to have the most perfect confidence in the rectitude of his conduct.
>
> 'And she only half disbelieves it,' he thought, with hopeless humiliation. (261)

In addition to his self-blame over the world's intrusion and Schomberg's calumny, Heyst's (mistaken) belief in Lena's suspicion contributes to his corroding self-assurance. He cannot even trust his enchantress, the one worldly agent who could help repair his fractured self-image and restore his certainty.

Through Heyst's escalating guilt, self-persecution, and paranoia, *Victory* depicts, with abundantly vicious detail, the power that Schomberg's malicious rumor – his calumny – continues to exert over Heyst's consciousness. "'Since you have told me of that abominable calumny, it has become immense – it extends even to myself,'" he tells Lena when lamenting his adversaries' persistence on Samburan (319). Heyst's language resembles that of *Heart of Darkness*' Marlow, who repeatedly uses "immense" when describing both benign and malignant presences, and who realizes that the most malicious presence in his world – the all-consuming darkness – extends even to himself. Heyst's internalization of Schomberg's spiteful rumor, however, replaces Marlow's internalization of darkness, and he becomes obsessed with calumny's potential to cripple action and ultimately destroy one's soul. He refuses to kill Mr. Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro because, as he explains to Lena, he fears that the world would say "'that I… after luring my friend and partner to his death from mere greed of money, had murdered these

unoffending shipwrecked strangers from sheer funk'" (345). After Lena asks who would believe such a claim, Heyst retorts, "'Perhaps you wouldn't – not at first, at any rate; but the power of calumny grows with time. It's insidious and penetrating. It can even destroy one's faith in oneself – dry-rot the soul'" (345).

Calumny not only threatens to dry-rot Heyst's soul but also to exterminate it, as Heyst realizes shortly before Lena's death and his subsequent suicide. He finally apprehends the gravity of his predicament: beyond his subjugation to the world's invasion, he is ensnared in a deadly plot over which he has no control and from which he cannot escape. Schomberg had consciously initiated this plot when convincing Ricardo of Heyst's wealth – "'I could put you on the track… On the track of a man!,'" he tells his unwelcome guest – and after Mr. Jones mentions Morrison when alluding to the fortune, Heyst, in a rare premonitory moment, links Schomberg's rumor with his impending death: "'This diabolical calumny will end in actually and literally taking my life from me'" (178, 360). Of course, Heyst's life is not literally taken from him; he intentionally and actively takes it himself. His presentiment contains a seed of truth, however, for Schomberg's rumor acts as an Aristotelian efficient cause by initiating the series of events that culminate in Heyst's suicide: Ricardo persuades Mr. Jones to sail to Samburan with the intent of stealing Heyst's purported treasure; in so doing, he hides from his misogynistic collaborator the fact that Heyst is living with a woman; on the island, Ricardo catches Lena unawares and attempts to rape her; Lena's spirited defiance impresses Ricardo, who then recruits her to help steal Heyst's treasure; she duplicitously agrees so as to derail the plot and protect her lover; later, after much forestalling, Heyst

agrees to speak to Jones, who is still unaware of Lena's presence; Heyst tells Lena to hide in the jungle until she sees a signal, but she ignores his command; while conversing with Mr. Jones, Heyst mentions Lena; stunned by this revelation, Jones surmises that Ricardo has deceived him from the start and is carrying on an affair with the young woman; Heyst believes that Jones' associate is ransacking his bungalow, but on approaching it, he sees Ricardo and Lena together; Lena disarms Ricardo of his dagger just as Heyst and Jones arrive; at that moment, Jones attempts to shoot Ricardo, but his bullet misses and mortally wounds Lena; Heyst realizes that she had been attempting to save him all along, and, soon after, he immolates himself along with her corpse.

But before he kills himself, Heyst has two more moments of clarity. Immediately after Mr. Jones shoots Lena, Heyst, upon entering his bungalow, feels his certainties dissolve: "the books, the gleam of old silver familiar to him from boyhood, the very portrait on the wall – seemed shadowy, unsubstantial, the dumb accomplices of an amazing dream-plot ending in an illusory effect of awakening and the impossibility of ever closing his eyes again" (378). Losing his grip on his education, past, and memory of his imperious father – all those forces that bound him to his sterile dream-plot, his myth of impermeable detachment – Heyst is instantly roused into the maculate life-plot, the "plot of plots" (227) that includes, in addition to emotional dependency and death, vulnerability. "'I have been a disarmed man all my life as I see it now'" (378), Heyst tells Lena, acknowledging that he has always been pervious to outside influence. Shortly thereafter, following Lena's death, Heyst expresses his final insight: "'Ah, Davidson,

woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love – and to put its trust in life!'" (383).

As I argued earlier, given the context (or lack thereof) in which it occurs, Heyst's complaint, indicating bitter defiance, self-pitying resignation, or a mixture of both, invites irreconcilable interpretations. Its ambiguity allows us to easily reproduce the conventional critical debate over Heyst's suicide. Based on my discussion of his evolving perspicacity, Heyst's self-immolation might stem from his growing cognizance of the conniving world and his concomitant self-persecution: both began when Lena reported Schomberg's rumor; intensified after Mr. Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro arrived; and peaked after Lena's death, possibly impelling Heyst to decisively repudiate the very world that enlightened him. Conversely, his suicide might represent his newfound knowledge of, but acquiescence to, the world's machinations. Perhaps Heyst wittingly resolves a plot which he was powerless to disrupt, one which was bound, as he knew, to "end in actually and literally taking" his life (360).

Speculating about the thematic meaning of Heyst's suicide leads only to an interpretive impasse, to the recognition that it cannot be judged. Yet our ability to produce irresolvable understandings of Heyst's suicide becomes significant when we recognize that *Victory* precludes us from producing more than one reading of another suicide: Lena's self-sacrifice, which is unequivocally, symbolically, redemptive and triumphant. The novel contains two logics for representing self-destruction: one that generates interpretive possibility through Davidson's attenuated report of Heyst's self-immolation and one that checks interpretive possibility through the omniscient voice's

allegorical narration of Lena's self-sacrifice. The contrast in representational logics epitomizes not only differing narrative attitudes – seeming ambivalence toward Heyst that, I argue, is really sympathy for him, and exuberant, perhaps excessive, admiration for Lena – but also, more important, a final shift in narrative mode. In the end, *Victory* transitions from allegory to purification and, ultimately, implosion.

The singular reading of Lena's self-sacrifice centers on her determination to conquer death and her concomitant obsession with Ricardo's dagger, an object she invests with weighty symbolic significance, viewing it as the epitome of death. The "blinding, hot glow of passionate purpose" (350) that she felt during a previous encounter with Ricardo solidifies, during their final encounter, into "her purpose of capturing death – savage, sudden, irresponsible death, prowling round the man who possessed her; death embodied in the knife ready to strike into her heart" (371). Lena's resolve is not self-interested, but righteous and supernal, "prompted not by her will, but by a force that was outside of her and more worthy" (371). Accordingly, she feels righteously victorious after seizing Ricardo's knife: "She had done it! The very sting of death was in her hands; the venom of the viper in her paradise, extracted, safe in her possession – and the viper's head all but lying under her heel" (375). Two Biblical passages are conflated in the narrator's free indirect discourse; both confirm Lena's allegorical triumph. Alluding to 1 Corinthians 15:55 – "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (*King James Bible*) – Lena associates herself with the saved on Judgment Day and, by extension, with Christ, their exemplar who defeated death by attaining immortality. Alluding to Genesis 3:14-15 – "And the Lord God said unto the serpent…And I will put

enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and you shalt bruise his heel" (*King James Bible*) – she compares herself to Eve as well as, indirectly, to the Virgin Mary, who provides a path to salvation by bearing Christ.[70] These references to the New and Old Testaments straitjacket the meaning of Lena's achievement, tying it resolutely to pronouncements of conquest and redemption and contextualizing it in the Bible. Moreover, its Biblical allusions complement the scene's ethereal overtones. The interior of Heyst's bungalow is "the only thing immovable in the shuddering universe" (369), and, as Bonney maintains, the eight candles that illuminate the interior signify transcendence, the number eight denoting "that which is beyond seven, that which transcends corporeal existence… [Eight] is associated with the rite of circumcision (eighth day after birth) and with the resurrection (the eighth day of Holy Week)" (187).

After she confiscates Ricardo's dagger, the immediate sadomasochistic imagery associated with the consequences, along with the eventual melodrama of her final moments, further confirms Lena's victory. After placing the knife in her lap, Lena is sexually aroused, not because she has achieved sexual communion with Ricardo, but because, figuratively severing and devouring his phallus – literally disarming death – she

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[70] As Robert Hampson points out in a footnote to the Penguin edition of *Victory*, Christians interpret Genesis 3:14-15 as referring to the Virgin Mary (no.120, 404). As evidence, he cites "The Feast of the Ascent of Mary into Heaven" in the Catholic Church as well as St. Augustine's Sermon 289, 2: "If our first fall took place when the woman received in her heart the venom of the serpent, it is not to be wondered at that our salvation was brought about when a woman conceived the flesh of the Almighty in her womb … Through a woman we were sent to destruction; through a woman salvation was restored to us" (qtd. in Hampson, no. 120, 404-5).

has emasculated him: "She let it slip into the fold of her dress, and laid her forearms with clasped fingers over her knees, which she pressed desperately together. The dreaded thing was out of sight at last. She felt a dampness break out all over her" (375). Responding submissively, although believing that he still holds power over her, Ricardo begs Lena for her foot, which he kisses profusely while "muttering gasping words that were like sobs, making little noises that resembled the sounds of grief and distress" (376). With the viper's head now under Lena's heel, the once potent killer is reduced to a babbling sycophant. Lena soon interrupts Ricardo's erotic lamentations when, like a dominatrix rebuffing her submissive, she kicks him "with a push of such violence into the very hollow of his throat that it swung him back instantly into an upright position on his knees" (376). The moment Lena gains absolute dominance over Ricardo, however, Jones and Heyst interrupt their sadomasochistic play. Ricardo leaps fearfully to his feet, only to hear Jones' gunshot and see Heyst, whom he believes fired the revolver, standing in the doorway. Before dashing out of the bungalow, he searches unsuccessfully for his knife with the intent of killing his presumed aggressor.

Needles to say, Lena receives the bullet meant for Ricardo. But although Jones is technically her murderer, she views her confiscation of Ricardo's knife as a self-sacrificial act that saves Heyst's life. Indeed, Ricardo threatened earlier to stab Heyst and aimed to do so before running away. Jones' lethal bullet replaces Ricardo's potentially fatal dagger, turning Lena's symbolic-self sacrifice into a real one. As Palmer observes, the bullet, like the knife, is a "'sting of death'… one of the many 'wasp' images associating Jones with Ricardo's dagger" (179). If the dagger epitomizes death, and if

Victory's symbolic logic links the revolver (and Jones) with the dagger, then both weapons represent a transcendent death-force that Lena, with her supernal determination and through her self-sacrifice, counteracts. Lena's final moments demonstrate this point melodramatically:

> She looked drowsily about, serene, as if fatigued only be the exertions of her tremendous victory, capturing the very sting of death in the service of love. But her eyes became very wide awake when they caught sight of Ricardo's dagger, the spoil of vanquished death, which Davidson was still holding unconsciously.
>
> 'Give it to me!' she said. 'It's mine.'
>
> Davidson put the symbol of her victory into her feeble hands extended to him with the innocent gesture of a child reaching eagerly for a toy.
>
> …. The spirit of the girl which was passing away from under them clung to her triumph, convinced of the reality of her victory over death.
>
> 'No more,' she muttered. 'There will be no more! Oh, my beloved,' she cried weakly, 'I've saved you!'
>
> …. The flush of rapture flooding her whole being broke out in a smile of innocent, girlish happiness; and with that divine radiance on her lips she breathed her last, triumphant. (380-81)

This is the type of simplistic scene that Moser and Guerard deem fit for magazine melodramas and motion pictures. The histrionics are palpable, the symbolism is once

again heavy-handed, and the meaning of Lena's death, associated with the rapture, innocence, and divine radiance, is, like the meaning of her disarmament of Ricardo, straightforward. Lena's allusion to the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation – "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. 21.4, *King James Bible*) – underscores her self-sacrificial redemption.

Lena's death is undoubtedly fit for popular re-enactment,[71] as Conrad knew when he performed the scene at a lecture and reading of *Victory* on May 10, 1923. Delivered at the home of Arthur Curtiss Jamess in Garden City, NY, it was the only lecture and reading he gave in America while on his sole trip to the country.[72] Of the seven passages that Conrad read, the chapter in which Lena dies (Part IV, Chapter XIII) was, minus two brief elisions, the only one that he performed in its entirety, and in two letters, he mentions the strong emotional impact that his performance had on his audience. In an 11

[71] So too is the entire novel. In 1919, *Victory* was adapted for the stage; in 1950, it was adapted for an NBC radio broadcast; in 1960, it was adapted into a live television production for NBC's *The Art Carney Show;* and it has been adapted for the cinema eleven times since its publication. (It was also turned into a 1970 opera, which premiered at Convent Gardens' Royal Opera House.) Basil MacDonald Hastings wrote the stage dramatization, which was performed at London's Globe Theater March 26-June 6, 1919. Conrad contributed immensely, giving many suggestions and writing new dialogue. Perhaps his greatest contribution was his addition of a new ending in which Heyst and Lena survive to live happily ever after. See Ryf, "Conrad's Stage *Victory*" for a history of the dramatization and Hastings, "Victory" for a reprint of the play. See Hand, "Escape" for a discussion of radio broadcasts of Conrad's works and Moore, "A Conrad filmography" for a list of film adaptations of Conrad's works.

[72] Arthur Curtiss Jamess was a wealthy railroad industrialist. Five days before lecturing and reading at Jamess' home, Conrad gave an informal talk to the staff of Doubleday, Page, his American publisher, during which he rehearsed his lecture notes but did not read from *Victory*. For an account of Conrad's lecture and reading, see Schwab, "Conrad's American Speeches."

May 1923 letter to his wife, Jessie, he writes, "There was a most attentive silence, some laughs at the end, when I read the chapter of Lena's death, audible snuffling" (2: 310). In a similarly dated letter to his friend Richard Curle, Conrad reports: "[l]aughs at the proper places and snuffles at the last when I read the whole chapter of Lena's death" (2:310). Conrad's performance was successful partly because Lena's death speaks the language of melodrama, provoking emotional and visceral reaction, not intellectual scrutiny. Her death circumvents interpretation and reinforces its unequivocal moral significance by inciting a cathartic release of pity. Witnesses are expected to grieve for the loss of the self-sacrificial heroine and commemorate her triumph over evil. Moser and Guerard may disapprove of such an uncomplicated narrative method, but it effectively aligns the reader, listener, or viewer with its intentions.

Author and text are also aligned. Conrad's decision to perform this chapter in its entirety and his epistolary accounts of his audience's reaction suggest that Lena's death occupied a central place in his imagination, specifically informing his conception of *Victory*. Jessie Conrad confirms as much, reporting that, after finishing the scene, her husband frantically announced Lena's death while she was speaking to their gardener: "I stood talking to the old gardner in low tones, when the window above me was thrown violently open and Conrad thrust his head out. His voice was hoarse, and his appearance dishevelled; the gardner lifted a scared face. 'She's dead, Jess!' 'Who?' I asked, suddenly feeling sick. 'Why, Lena of course, and I have got the title: it is "Victory"'" (144). If Jessie's memory is accurate, the heroine's death and the novel's title were, for

her husband, inextricably linked.[73] For Conrad, as for the omniscient narrator and reader, Lena's self-sacrifice is victorious, an exploit to be mourned and celebrated. In his 1920 "Author's Note," Conrad paid homage to Lena six years after composing her death scene: "when it came time for her meeting with Heyst I felt that she would be heroically equal to every demand of the risky and uncertain future. I was so convinced of it that I let her go with Heyst, I won't sat without a pang but certainly without misgivings. And in view of her triumphant end what more could I have done for her rehabilitation and her happiness?" (53).

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Jessie's anecdote refers to the novel's penultimate chapter, yet in his "Note to the First Edition," Conrad claims, "The last word of this novel was written on the 29th of May 1914. And that last word was the single word of the title" (45). The starting and ending dates of *Victory*'s composition, which Conrad appended to the final page, support his assertion: "*October 1912 – May 1914*" (385). These dates are inaccurate. As Purdy observes, Conrad began the novel, then called "Dollars," in April 1912, and finished it on 27 June 1914, a date he inscribed on the last page's left margin (138). According to Purdy, the discrepancy between the completion dates, along with Conrad's insistence on

[73] In a letter to John Galsworthy, Conrad offers the following account of *Victory*'s title: "there seems to be a fashion just now for short titles and apparently I have been unconsciously influenced, for I *could not* think of anything else" (*Collected Letters* V: 406). Conrad's unconscious preference for a short title need not invalidate his wife's account of the novel's naming. After all, he chose a word associated with Lena, not with Heyst or any other character.

the May date, may signify Conrad's dissatisfaction with the ending, which, composed on different paper, appears to be a hastily composed afterthought; tellingly, the final chapter was absent from the corrected type-script that Conrad sent to John Quinn, an American lawyer and patron of the arts who purchased many of his manuscripts (139).[74]

The ending certainly reads as though it were written and affixed without much premeditation: like a detective who elucidates, in the closing minutes of a crime drama, how he solved an apparently unsolvable crime, Davidson perfunctorily explains his uncanny reappearance at Lena's deathbed in the previous chapter, and whereas the realist and allegorical sections develop their own worldviews deliberately, the ending – only three and a half pages in the Penguin edition – flickers in and out of existence like a subatomic particle and ostensibly lacks aesthetic or philosophical import. Consequently, some of the novel's detractors and sympathizers denigrate Captain Davidson's reappearance and report, viewing them as incredible and trivial. In Guerard's estimation, Davidson, a "dullard within a dullard" (259), would have been better left on the mainland, out of sight and out of mind, for he adds only an element of ludicrousness to an already unimpressive novel: his return is "improbable… So far as the reader is concerned, there is no reason at all for Davidson to reappear. The omniscient and certainly

[74] As Purdy points out, whereas Conrad wrote the bulk of the manuscript on faint green, lined, legal-sized paper – a few pages are 8 x 11" – he wrote the final chapter, pages 1129-39, on 7 x 9" white, unlined letter paper (139). The manuscript shows that the material difference between the final chapter and the preceding ones gives the former an addendum-like quality (Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin). Conrad's decision to change the name of his protagonist from Augustus Berg to Axel Heyst also indicates that the final chapter was an afterthought, albeit a transformative one. "Berg" appears up to page 1130, at which point Conrad inexplicably wrote in "Heyst."

uninhibited narrator of the heart of the book could have described the holocaust just as well" (274). Moser also finds Davidson's return "incredible" (108). Karl, one of the novel's greatest admirers, is equally dismissive. Objecting primarily to Davidson's unsophisticated reportage, which ultimately transforms *Victory* "from noble tragedy into trite melodrama," he writes, "The ending of *Victory*, with the loyal Davidson straddling the scene, is surely at variance with the complexity and variety of his [Conrad's] earlier scenes. Conrad's usual 'thickness' of method and his ability to create intricate situations contrast with the thin summary and hasty stage cleaning of his final chapter" (*Reader's Guide* 266, 267).

Other critics overlook the implausibility of Davidson's return and find his simplicity refreshing. According to Palmer, the captain reappears in order "to restore the level of normality and realism with which the novel had begun, by reversing the gradual process of allegorization that had drawn the reader toward Samburan" (183). Geddes agrees: "After the strange events in *Victory*… a normalizing presence, a representative of balanced humanity, seems in order; and Davidson, who has been Heyst's only friend, seems ideally suited to write his obituary" (66-7). Secor similarly maintains that Davidson is "our means of returning to the external world when we awaken" from Heyst's unreal, dream-like world (49). While these critics rightfully refuse to deride Davidson's artlessness, they overemphasize its impact on *Victory*'s ending by assuming that it tips the novel's scale away from fantasy and allegory and back to normality and realism. In so doing, they reproduce the fundamental assumption of the achievement-and-decline critics: *Victory* tries, and fails, to be a realistic novel. But whereas Hewitt,

Moser, and Guerard argue that *Victory* fails because of its allegorizing tendencies, Palmer, Geddes, and Secor argue that it successfully returns to realism despite its allegorical discursion. They miss a crucial point. As Guerard and Moser point out, even Davidson's return is unrealistic. *Victory*'s "unnatural physics" (57) includes the ability of bodies to disappear and reappear suddenly, a strange aptitude that Heyst's servant Wang, who tends to vanish and materialize rather than walk to and fro, best exemplifies. Davidson also performs his own Houdini-like exploit when, after remaining unseen for well over two hundred pages, he inexplicably appears at Lena's deathbed holding Ricardo's dagger. His report may lack the symbolic elements of the novel's bulk, but since it arose from an improbable situation that cannot be reasonably explained away, it in no way indicates realism's homecoming.[75]

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[75] Mallios best articulates the "problem" of Davidson's return: "[G]iven his virtual disappearance during the second half of the novel, one has to wonder why Conrad goes to such great trouble – defying all standards of verisimilitude, all plausible explanations of why and how this should happen – to make the lackluster Davidson miraculously reappear at the crucial moment on Heyst's island at the end. To put the matter this way, however, is to hold *Victory* to the standards of the 'realist' novel, which it is not and never sets out to be" (156). He goes on to argue that to attempt to account for Davidson's return in a realistic fashion "is to attempt to account for the mystery of simple Davidson by looking purely inside the text, when the answers may lie outside, in the relation between Conrad and his imagined reader. For Davidson, I would suggest, is a figure of the common-denominator 'democratic' reader that Conrad has been imagining all along…. [I]n having Davidson appear miraculously at the novel's end, as a kind of witness and reader who is both viscerally drawn to Heyst's story and hopelessly incapable of interpreting the nuances of its meaning, Conrad is expressing, in terms that have nothing to do with 'realism,' the ultimate fantasy of writer-reader relations that underlies all of Conrad's fiction: that even if you have not understood a single word I have said… I may still reach you through the pathos of my experience as a human being" (156-57). Mallios offers a novel and worthy understanding of Davidson, but in arguing for Davidson as a figure of Conrad's ideal democratic *reader*, he overlooks the captain's role as final *reporter*. Mallios' intentional oversight is part of his endeavor to locate

Despite the final chapter's brevity, ostensible simplicity, and perfunctory feel, and, if Purdy is correct, notwithstanding Conrad's apparent dislike for the chapter, it subtly and successfully undercuts the rest of the novel. At first, it shuns realism, at least the realist-defined consciousness of *Victory*'s initial, first-person narrator. The concluding chapter begins with an intimation of a return to this narrator's gossipy reality, but Davidson promptly refuses to participate in the rumor- and gossip-mongering which marked the first part of the novel. He is "summoned to an audience" with an anonymous Excellency "because what was alluded to in conversation as 'the mystery of Samburan' had caused such a sensation in the Archipelago that even those in the highest spheres were anxious to hear something at first hand," and when the Excellency asks Davidson if he knew Heyst well, he proffers an evasive response, refusing to claim familiarity with or perpetuate hearsay about, and invalidating the mainlanders' speculations regarding, his acquaintance: "'The truth is that nobody out here can boast of having known him well… He was a queer chap. I doubt if he himself knew how queer he was'" (382). "Queer" has particular resonance in this context, for it inverts the first-person narrator's use of the word when attempting to explain Heyst to the reader: "He was not mad. Queer chap – yes, that may have been said, and in fact was said; but there is a tremendous difference between the two, you will allow" (58). The narrator deploys the term to single out and gauge Heyst's eccentricity: he was not crazy but peculiar. Davidson, on the other hand,

Davidson's significance outside rather than inside the text. As I have been arguing, though, we can situate his significance solely inside the text without accounting for his return in a realistic fashion or holding *Victory* to the standards of the realist novel. We can explain Davidson's return in terms of the novel's aesthetic progression, not in terms of its plot.

uses it to specify his own inability to describe Heyst, as in: I cannot claim to give you an adequate description of the man because he was strange and indescribable.[76]

By disavowing knowledge of Heyst and refusing to describe him to an "attentive" (382) authority figure that craves gossip about a dead man and is most likely taking mental notes intended for later circulation, Davidson demonstrates profound sympathy for a person who, while alive, resented being talked about and intruded on, physically as well as verbally. For Davidson is the novel's compassionate representative, an unironic, "simple soul," who is "easily sorry for people," "sensitive," "delicate," "humane," and "very abstemious," and who has a large "capacity for sympathy" (88, 86, 89, 97, 102, 89).[77] It is precisely Davidson's sympathy and concern for Heyst that impels him to develop "the affection of a self-appointed protector towards Heyst" (83); patrol Samburan every twenty-three days; and, during his final patrol, twice refrain from disturbing Heyst. He initially refuses to go ashore for feat that "Heyst would look upon

[76] Davidson calls Heyst a "queer chap" one more time in his report (383). Apart from his three uses of "queer," the word is used eight times in various contexts, always to describe characters or events, never to stress the difficulty of doing so. In addition to the first-person narrator, who, as I have already mentioned, dubs Heyst a "Queer chap" (58), the manager of the Oriental Banking Corporation's branch in Malacca also calls Heyst a "'Queer chap'" (60); the first-person narrator reports that an English clerk who witnessed Schomberg's and the conductor of the Zangiacomo band's search for Heyst and Lena "had never seen anything so queer" (94); the omniscient narrator reports that Heyst "was generally considered a 'queer chap'" (129); the same narrator calls attention to "the queer stare" of Pedro's "little bear's eyes" (148) and states that when Heyst approaches his antagonists' boat upon its arrival, his eyes initially fall "on the thin back of a man doubled up over the tiller in a queer, uncomfortable attitude of drooping sorrow" (237); Mr. Jones refers to Ricardo as a "'queer chap'" (245); Ricardo calls Heyst's offer to lodge the trio in one of the empty bungalows a "'Queer start!'" (249); and Ricardo later tells Heyst that he has "'a queer way of putting things'" (346).

[77] In "Because of the Dollars," Davidson is introduced as a "really *good* man" (269; original italics).

his visit as an unwarrantable intrusion," and, after witnessing Lena's death, he returns to the *Sissie* because, in his words, "'I didn't want to intrude on his [Heyst's] grief'" (383, 384). Davidson's refusal to intrude stands in stark contrast to both narrators', as well as almost every other character's, attempt to molest Heyst through language and action, through gossip, rumor, name-calling, and physical invasion. He acts sympathetically and protects Heyst on the latter's terms: via reticence and detachment, non-judgment and distance.

Davidson safeguards Heyst even after he dies, returning as a kind of inverse *deus ex machina*, reporting Heyst's remaining moments but shrouding them in a cloak of silence and non-judgment and therefore resolving nothing. He continues to comply with the Excellency's request for information, yet he speaks sparsely, detachedly, and amorally, trying not to blemish the memory of Heyst with too much talk. Even when Davidson once again calls Heyst a "queer chap" (383), he does so in order to point to the indefinability of Heyst's near-to-last words, which he refrains from evaluating. And even though he proposes a reason for Heyst's suicide – "'I suppose he couldn't stand his thoughts before her dead body – and fire purifies everything'" – he then undercuts his cautious conjecture by suggesting that Heyst is safe from any attempt to delineate his intention and further define him: "'Let Heaven look after what has been purified. The wind and rain will take care of the ashes'" (384). For Davidson, Heyst's essence, soul, or character – the incorporeal aspect that the first-person narrator and mainlanders try to define and the omniscient narrator tries to anatomize allegorically – "continues to exist, but now, divested of its physical impurities, it ascends beyond the range of human

perception, and so for all practical human purposes goes 'out of existence'" (Laskowsky 284). No longer nameable because no longer embodied, his essence ceases to perform in a world that reads action and appearance as the manifestation of soul and meaning. As Heyst sarcastically tells Lena when describing his relationship with Morrison, "'The people in this world went by appearances and called us friends… Appearances – what more, what better can you ask for? In fact you can't have better. You can't have anything else'" (218). Heyst is finally free from further naming and maculation, which is not to say that, in Davidson's estimation, Heyst committed suicide to cast off his body and escape permanently from the phenomenal world, but that Heyst's newfound refuge results from his purifying self-immolation.

Davidson is also a purifying force: he purges *Victory* of the anecdotal and allegorical narrative impurities that contaminate the living Heyst. He not only annuls the first-person narrator's and mainlanders' obsession with naming; he also terminates the omniscient narrator's propensity to allegorize, collapsing the inflated symbolism of Parts II-IV. Purification in this instance occurs by way of deflation. Davidson's "placid" and "tranquil" voice – "Davidson was placidity itself. It was his nature. He did not betray his sentiments," Part I's narrator tells us – indicates his deflationary function: we are no longer listening to an exuberant narrator who imbues detail with allegorical significance, but to an impassive one that speaks "[w]ithout enlarging very much"; declines to embellish detail, leaving fact as fact; and even withholds information from the Excellency (382, 384, 84, 382). Davidson's Heyst has no symbolic resonance, no Adamic qualities or transparent essence; struggles against no archetypal creature or

abstract power; dies without excessive, heavy-handed commentary. Unlike the omniscient narrator, who described Lena's death melodramatically and symbolically, Davidson describes Heyst's death plainly, as an impermanent event instead of a memorable occasion, a service he also extends to Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro. Consequently, Davidson not only deflates the omniscient narrator's allegorization of Heyst but also *Victory*'s allegorical mode: by merely reporting the devastation of life following Lena's self-sacrifice, he nullifies Lena's injunction that there will be no more death.

Far from being a "dullard" (Guerad 259), "hopelessly facile and impercipient" (Maillios 156), or "devoid of abstract insight into the events he witnesses" (Bonney 192), Davidson, all too aware of what the Excellency demands and what the world has been doing to Heyst, consciously and skillfully counteracts their invasiveness with his purifying tactics. If Davidson is a figure of the reader, as Mallios suggests, then he is not one who is "hopelessly incapable" of interpreting Heyst (Mallios 156), but one who, aware of the often distorting and invasive effects of interpretation, especially when directed toward others, sympathetically refrains from committing such a potentially disrespectful act. More "shrewd" than prone to "discover[ing] the fact without the reason," he witnesses and reports without interpreting and judging (85, 196). Davidson's treatment of Heyst's suicide is particularly important to *Victory*'s finale, for although Heyst's bare complaint invites interpretation, tempting us to read his self-immolation in terms of the Conradian tension between acceptance and repudiation, Davidson refuses to assign it meaning, in turn making us painfully conscious of our own invasive interpretive

practices. His refusal once again springs from his sympathy, not from his so-called impercipience or even ambivalence; his amorality is a mark of humanity, not of uncertainty. In the end, *Victory* asks us to follow Davidson's lead and curb our urge to assess Heyst's suicide; we too should allow Heyst to have in death what he could not have in life: immunity from speculation and verdict.

Yet despite his humanity, Davidson operates nihilistically: he implodes *Victory*'s aesthetic of imbalance and, more noteworthy, the novel itself, annihilating rather than concluding it. Davidson innocently and compassionately cancels the excess of names and hearsay attached to Heyst, and therefore the imbalance between what people say about Heyst and what kind of person he really is; Davidson likewise cancels the omniscient narrator's allegorical excess, and therefore the imbalance between its inflated symbolic representation of characters and events and their contingent, particular existences. But in so doing, he collapses the novel's generative aesthetic principal, the lifeblood of *Victory*'s representational practice, form, and plot – of its very existence – paradoxically leaving an excess of void in his wake. For Davidson's closing "'Nothing!'" (385), an absolute, all-encompassing utterance, devours *Victory*. Unlike King David's son Solomon, *Victory's* son of David razes rather than erects, departs without establishing anything consequential, not even the prospect of balance and equivalence, of a new world order. "'I went away. There was nothing to be done there,'" he tells the Excellency before uttering his final word (385). Davidson is referring to his

refusal to bury the remaining corpses and exorcise Samburan of the violence committed on its soil, but he may as well be commenting on his refusal to herald a new aesthetic.[78]

What occurs at the end also occurs at the beginning, or, rather, before the beginning. In light of the character, aesthetic, and textual negations that intertwine in Davidson's report, *Victory*'s title loses its splendor and becomes empty, signifies nothing. Whatever Conrad's reason for composing Davidson's section, perhaps his decision, in his "Note to the First Edition," to ignore the novel's last word and commemorate "victory" despite its hollowness reflects his own desire to undercut the novel's concluding nihilism. But considering the creative achievement of this nihilism, and especially of Heyst's suicide, "victory" need not oppose and supplant "nothing"; the two may coexist harmoniously. As I have been arguing, Heyst's suicide helps generate the novel's final aesthetic practice and formal maneuver, simultaneously inspires and meshes with *Victory*'s aesthetic implosion and textual self-cancellation. By allowing Heyst's suicide to function as a type of generative force rather than as a mere focal point for thematic tension or moral verdict, and by interlinking the novel's final negations, Conrad

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[78] At least two other critics have noticed *Victory*'s, if not Davidson's, nihilism. Jean Deurbergue points out that if the novel were to be read as one long sentence, it would read, "there is nothing" (243). And in the last interview that Edward Said granted before his death, he discusses *Victory* in terms of a late style that displays nihilism and tension instead of one that that reflects the artist's "vision of wholeness, of putting everything together, of reconciling conflict" (285). "[E]verything gets torn apart" in this late style (285). At the time of his interview, Said was writing a book on late style, for which he planned a section on *Victory*. He regrettably died before finishing the project, which was posthumously edited and published as *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*. Unfortunately, neither *Victory* nor Conrad appears in the book. See Said, *On Late Style*.

discovered a new way to write about suicide, one that, in its sophistication, surpasses his earlier methods. In *Victory*'s final chapter Conrad achieves a significant literary victory.

Chapter Three:
The Aesthetics, Narration, and Interpretation of Suicide in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

On October 8, 1922 Virginia Woolf read about the death of Kitty Maxse,[79] a friend of her pre-Bloomsbury youth who died on October 4 after falling over a banister:

> the day has been spoilt for me – so strangely – by Kitty Maxse's death; & now I think of her lying in her grave at Gunby…. I read it in the paper. I hadn't seen her since, I guess, 1908 – save at old Davies' funeral,[80] & then I cut her, which now troubles me – unreasonably I suppose. I could not have kept up with her; she never tried to see me. Yet – these old friends dying without any notice on our part always – it begins to happen often – saddens me: makes me feel guilty. I wish I'd met her in the street. My mind has gone back all day to her; in the queer way it does. First thinking out how she died, suddenly at 33 Cromwell Road; she was always afraid of operations. (*Diary* 2:206)

After articulating her feelings of grief and guilt, Woolf dwelled on the unexpected nature of Kitty's death and began to express faintly the idea that her old friend may have

[79] Katherine "Kitty" Lushington Maxse was a regular visitor to Virginia's childhood home at 22 Hyde Park Gate, located in London's Kensington district. After Virginia's mother died in 1895, Kitty devoted herself to rearing Virginia for marriage. After Virginia moved to Bloomsbury in 1904, Kitty became highly critical of her artistic ambitions, thus rupturing their friendship.

[80] The Rev. John Llewellyn Davies was buried on May 22, 1916. He was the father of Margaret Davies, a close friend of both Virginia and Leonard Woolf who served as General Secretary of the Women's Cooperative Guild from 1889 to 1921.

committed suicide to avoid an operation. Woolf quickly dropped her incipient thought, but six days later, on October 14, she was fully suspicious: "now Kitty is buried & mourned by half the grandees in London; & here I am thinking of my book. Kitty fell, very mysteriously, over some bannisters. Shall I ever walk again? she said to Leo. And to the Dr. 'I shall never forgive myself for my carelessness'. How did it happen? Some one presumably knows, & in time I shall hear" (*Diary* 2:207). Woolf's suspicion developed, eight days later, into unverified assurance: "there's Kitty Maxse falling over the banisters and killing herself…. Still it seems a pity that Kitty did kill herself" (*Letters* 2:573).

Woolf's obsession with Kitty's mysterious death and her eventual, unverified conclusion that Kitty committed suicide may have stemmed from her long-standing preoccupation with self-killing. Woolf attempted to end her life twice before 1922, first in 1904 and again in 1913. Moreover, Woolf was concocting a fictional suicide when concluding that Kitty killed herself: she was formulating plans for the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which, as she wrote in her 1928 introduction to the Modern Library edition, Clarissa Dalloway "was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party" (vi). Woolf wrote the short story "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" in August 1922 with the idea that it would eventually be the first chapter of a novel, and by October 6 she intended her short story to initiate a series of vignettes tentatively titled "At

Home" or "The Party."[81] In her manuscript notes for the "Prime Minister" chapter, which she began on October 6, Woolf stated the theme of her new work: "To give 2 points of view at once: authority vs irresponsibility" (Holograph Notebook March 12). The Prime Minister and the conservative Clarissa Dalloway were to represent authority, while the middle class radical Mr. H. Z. Prentice was to represent irresponsibility, and, as Charles G. Hoffmann points out, "[t]he main theme is emphatically and explicitly one of political and social conflict with decided overtones of class consciousness, whereas in the novel this theme became subsidiary and is muted in the personal conflict between Clarissa Dalloway and Doris Kilman" (173). As October progressed, Woolf's plans for the book changed, and on October 14, shortly after she registered her suspicion that Kitty Maxse killed herself by falling "mysteriously, over some banners," Woolf wrote, "Mrs Dalloway has branched into a book; & I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side – something like that. Septimus Smith? – is that a good name?" (*Diary* 2:207). Although Woolf's declaration of her new theme and creation of the novel's suicidal character followed her thoughts on Kitty's death, her decision to use suicide rather than the authority-responsibility opposition as generative idea for the newly conceived work seems to have unfolded parallel to her burgeoning suspicion that Kitty killed herself. Kitty's suicide, I will argue, provided Woolf with the impulse she needed to reconceive the novel and induced her to create Septimus Smith.

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[81] For a thorough account of Woolf's process of transforming her short story into *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as her process of revising the novel, see Hoffmann, "From Short Story to Novel."

Quentin Bell confirms that Kitty Maxse's death influenced Woolf's writing process considerably; he makes the often repeated claim that Woolf based Clarissa Dalloway on her old friend: "To some extent she [Clarissa] may be identified with Kitty Maxse, and Kitty's sudden death in October 1922 – she fell from the top of a flight of stairs and Virginia believed that she had committed suicide – almost certainly helped to transform the stories into a book and to give that book its final character" (2:87). Indeed, Woolf wrote in 1908 that "Lettice" – her original name for Clarissa when writing *The Voyage Out* – "is almost Kitty verbatim" (*Letters* 1:349). That Woolf modeled Clarissa on her old friend as early as 1908 need not prevent us from reading Septimus as either a fictional incarnation or, at the least, a fictional trace of Kitty Maxse. To return to Woolf's October 14 diary entry, the grieved author first focused on what she supposed was a real life suicide and then, after noting a few quotidian concerns, announced her creation of a fictional suicide, a "double" for Clarissa, as Woolf would later call Septimus in her Modern Library introduction (vi), onto whom she would displace Clarissa's originally intended suicide. On October 16, Woolf further delineated her plan to write Septimus into the novel as Clarissa's double: "Suppose it to be connected in this way: Sanity and insanity. Mrs. D. seeing the truth. S.S. seeing the insane truth…. The pace is to be given by the gradual increase of S's insanity on the one side; by the approach of the party on the other" (Holograph Notebook March 12). As Clarissa' s double, rather, as an inverse mirror reflection of Clarissa – one seeing the truth and the other seeing the insane truth – Septimus is a reflection of a reflection of Kitty Maxse. Twice removed from his original source, he is a distorted version of his model, which may explain why Septimus'

suicide fictionally refracts Kitty's own: his lethal fall onto Mrs. Filmer's area *railings* repeats, in modified form, Kitty's fall over a *banister*. To stress the obvious, both suicides involve nearly identical barriers built for protecting rather than harming individuals.

I am not implying that we read Septimus reductively, as a mere fictional stand-in for Kitty Maxse or as a repository of Woolf's feelings toward her friend's suicide.[82] Septimus is a distant version of Kitty, yet he is irreducible to his model. Parallel to her process of trying to understand Kitty's supposed self-initiated death, Woolf was, within the realm of fiction, working out the problem of narrating suicide, which for her included withholding intention and judgment. In her letters and diary, Woolf never reached a definitive conclusion regarding why Kitty killed herself; her suspicion over motive never solidified into conviction over motive. Moreover, apart from her singular and rather neutral expression of pity, Woolf never judged her friend's suicide. Likewise, *Mrs. Dalloway* fails to articulate Septimus' suicide motive or define a definite moral position on his self-quietus. In fact, in the process of revising her novel, Woolf eliminated from her narrative Septimus' declarations concerning his suicidal intentions. In her holograph notebook dated March 12, 1922, Septimus (still H.Z. Prentice) decides to commit suicide

[82] For a nuanced reading of Septimus Smith (and of Clarissa Dalloway) in terms of Woolf's psychological reaction to Kitty's death, see Froula, "*Mrs. Dalloway*'s Postwar Elegy: Women, War, and the Art of Mourning." Reading Woolf's novel as an elegy, and starting from Peter Sacks' observation that "the death the elegy mourns is always the elegist's own," Froula contends that Kitty, and by extension Septimus and Clarissa, are Woolf's doubles: "Kitty stands to Woolf (who had twice tried to kill herself) in much the same specular and sacrificial relation as Septimus stands to Clarissa; 'S.' substitutes for Kitty, Clarissa, and not least, Woolf – the seventh/septimus of eight Duckworth/Stephen children" (131).

out of a desire for martyrdom: "One might give one's body to be [eaten] by the starving & thus, thought Septimus, be a martyr, & then as I am going to die… I shall be immortal, he thought, my name will be in all the placards." In the British Museum manuscript, Septimus intends his suicide to be an offering: "'An offering' he murmured, with some idea of prayer in his mind – the window sill was an altar; & so in the belief that he was giving up to humanity what it asked of him he sprang vigorously, of his own free will, on to Mrs. Filmers area railings" (qtd. in Hoffmann 178).[83] No such admissions appear in the published version of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In keeping with Woolf's decision to mute the socially and politically charged aspects of Septimus' character in favor of turning him into a study of insanity, Septimus thinks of himself as a "scapegoat, the eternal sufferer" (27), instead of as a martyr, and he may also believe that "[h]e had committed an appalling crime and been condemned to death by human nature" (105), but his hallucinatory self-evaluations remain disconnected from his many ruminations on suicide and do not adequately explain why he takes his own life.

Why does Septimus kill himself? An easy answer is that he throws himself out of his flat's window to escape the approaching Dr. Holmes, who, in Septimus' mind, threatens to "get him" (163). Septimus' fear of his doctor's arrival may provide him with an opportunity and an ad hoc justification for self-killing, but it does not illuminate his omnipresent suicidal desire. We should therefore ask a more fertile question: how are we

[83] In the novel's published version, a shriek with uncertain pronominal referents replaces Septimus' original declaration of self-sacrifice: "'I'll give it you!' he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings" (164). The cry's vagueness evades interpretation and therefore precludes us from reading Septimus' suicide as an offering to humanity.

to understand his suicidal desire, the extent and nature of which are uncertain? How are we to explain his thought, right before he throws himself out of his flat's window, that "[h]e did not want to die. Life was good" (164)? Or that in the face of his hallucinated demand, "Kill yourself, kill yourself for our sakes," Septimus thinks, "But why should he kill himself for their sakes? Food was pleasant; the sun hot" (101). If Septimus believes in life's vitality and wishes to live, why does he insist that he and Lucrezia commit joint suicide? Lucrezia remembers early in the novel that Septimus first vocalized his joint suicide wish – it was also the first time that he broached the subject of killing himself – on a day when they were "perfectly happy": "All the little red and yellow flowers were out on the grass, like floating lamps he said, and talked and chattered and laughed. Suddenly he said, 'Now we will kill ourselves'" (72). She then remembers, "going home he was perfectly quiet – perfectly reasonable. He would argue with her about killing themselves" (73). Lucrezia withholds the terms of Septimus' argument, leaving us ignorant of his suicide rationale, however skewed it may have been.

These strange details, particularly Septimus' wish that his wife also commit suicide, unsettle any attempt to elucidate his self-annihilation. Along with their inclination to explain away the ambiguity concerning Septimus' motives and actions, critics tend to overlook these important details when diagnosing and judging his fate. J. Hillis Miller, Karen DeMeester, Christine Froula, Jean Love, Suzette Henke, James Naremore, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar put forth the most popular reading of Septimus' suicide: through it Septimus communicates a vital message to, or achieves communion with, others. Some of these critics go further and add that Septimus is a

scapegoat or martyr.[84] Implicit in these critics' understandings is a moral claim that Septimus' suicidal communication or communion carries with it a righteous message and meaning. Another popular reading, which Reuben Brower, Blanche Gelfant, Sue Thomas, and Elaine Showalter put forth, views Septimus' suicide as a refusal to conform to the dictates of, or an outright rebellion against, his doctors.[85] This type of argument

[84] Miller argues, "Septimus Smith's suicide anticipates Virginia Woolf's own death. Both deaths are a defiance, an attempt to communicate, a recognition that self-annihilation is the only possible way to embrace that center which evades one as long as one is alive" (197). According to DeMeester, Septimus' shell-shock trauma "is perpetuated and its psychological damage aggravated by a culturally prescribed process of postwar reintegration that silences and marginalizes war veterans" (649). Septimus cannot recover from his trauma, DeMeester argues, and so he kills himself in a final, desperate attempt to communicate his pain to society; he dies a martyr. Froula views Septimus as a "scapegoat who…turns victimage into prophecy" (148). She claims that he expects us to read his sacrificial suicide as a gift and asks, "Might recognition of his gift not help refound his civilization on firmer, more lasting ground?" (150). For Love, Septimus' "suicide is a sacrament in which Clarissa partakes. It is a means for preserving life, not destroying it" (159-60). For Henke, "Septimus dies that Clarissa may live. His death is an escape from authoritarian forces that would rape his consciousness, trammel his soul, and imprison him in a madhouse down in Surrey. By 'throwing it all away', Septimus makes of his life an unspoiled, gratuitous offering. He has preserved the chastity of spirit that Clarissa jealously guards in the privacy of her attic room. His visionary idealism remains intact, untouched by the 'world's slow stain' of compromise and defilement" (126). Naremore contends that Septimus' suicide is redemptive because he gives Clarissa an "acute sense of her unity with life" (106). Naremore also views Septimus as a scapegoat insofar as Clarissa "experiences his death vicariously and gains a consolation from it" (106-7). Arguing that Woolf modeled Septimus after T.S. Eliot's Phlebas, the drowned figure in *The Wasteland*, Gilbert and Gubar write, "Septimus is a scapegoat whose self-immolation somehow *works*, for Woolf revises Eliot's suggestion that Phlebas's death may be futile by implying that the waste land of England might be mysteriously revitalized through the mystical communion between this dead soldier… and the woman survivor" (316).

[85] For Brower, Septimus' suicide is a "protest against having his life forcibly remade by others" (74). He defies his doctors in order to retain his "independence of soul" (74). For Gelfant, it "assures that he will never be converted to Sir William's standard of 'proportion'" (94). Although both Thomas and Showalter also argue that Septimus kills

casts Septimus as a victim of the medical establishment, and it contains the implicit moral claim that his self-killing is, as Clarissa believes, heroically defiant.[86] Yet other critics, including T.E. Apter, Lee R. Edwards, Josephine O'Brien Schaefer, and Alex Zwerdling, propose that Septimus' suicide allows him to preserve some aspect of himself, and, again, an inherent moral claim accompanies their reading: paradoxically, self-preservation through self-destruction is intrinsically good or at least desirable when under corrosive, external pressure that threatens self-integrity.[87] Finally, critics such as Mitchell Leaska and Emily Jensen offer the most unsatisfying reading of Septimus' self-killing: it

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himself to escape the tyranny of Bradshaw and Holmes, they go further than Brower and Gelfant insofar as they diagnose Septimus as a victim of shell shock.

[86] Elaine Showalter makes the same point in her introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Mrs. Dalloway*. She writes that this argument collapses in light of a close reading of the novel, citing Septimus' wish that Lucrezia also kill herself as evidence. In addition, it is worth pointing out that Showalter seems to have changed her mind since she wrote *The Female Malady*, in which she argued that Septimus killed himself to escape from Bradshaw and Holmes. (See my previous footnote.) See Showalter, "Introduction" xlii.

[87] For Apter, Septimus commits suicide "to preserve that integrity which the party tends to destroy" (72), an integrity unencumbered by hollow social gesture and shallow performance. Edwards argues that "for one trapped as Septimus is, unable to find either a form which can adequately contain feelings or a mode of action to extend them, pressured by a society which covertly demands denial of both feeling and the necessity for feeling at the same time as it will not allow the admission that this denial has taken place, then death in order to preserve the integrity of feeling may be preferable to a life which offers no such possibility. Death is not, in these circumstances, a solution, but a statement that - for the dead one - solution was impossible" (107-8). According to Schaefer, "Septimus dies to preserve what Clarissa gives. He parts with the one thing every human being has it in his power to give, to fling away: the self. As he flings himself from the window he cries 'I'll give it you!' By giving away all that he is, he preserves his wholeness" (91). Comparing Septimus with Clarissa, Zwerdling writes that Clarissa "realizes that Septimus had managed to rescue in death an inner freedom that her own life is constantly forcing her to barter away" (141). He also views Septimus as a "sacrificial victim or scapegoat who takes upon himself the sins of omission rather than commission" (131).

essentially stems from stifled homosexual desire.[88] Although they differ on whether his suicide is a moral failure or moral success, they nevertheless pass implicit judgment on it. Leaska and Jensen seem to forget or ignore the fact that Septimus' first and perhaps most passionate amorous feelings were for Miss Isabel Pole, the English teacher under whose guidance he became an enthusiastic reader of literature. Leaska's and Jensen's failure to take this detail into consideration renders their arguments unconvincing: suggesting that Septimus is exclusively homosexual is at best overly simplistic and at worst erroneous; insisting that a causal link exists between his supposed homosexuality and his suicide remains dubious. More important, Leaska and Jensen, along with the other critics I have been discussing, forget that Septimus' suicidal desire may not be absolute and that it surpasses, in a complex and ineffable way, an urge to communicate or achieve communion with others, rebel against his doctors, preserve part of his self, or destroy himself as a result of his many failures, since it also includes a desire for his wife to kill herself. Why does Septimus want his wife to kill herself along with him? What would he gain psychologically? What would Lucrezia's suicide achieve? The novel remains silent on these questions.

As well as neglecting key textual evidence when formulating their arguments, *Mrs. Dalloway*'s critics, regardless of their differences, almost invariably couch their

[88] Leaska contends that because Septimus cannot purge his guilt over Evans' death, has not been cured of his love for Evans, and cannot articulate this love to Bradshaw or Holmes, he turns his "impotent rage" (112) inward and kills himself. Jensen gives a more favorable reading of Septimus' suicide: he kills himself "to preserve the 'treasure' of his homosexual feelings" (162) in a heterosexual society that stifles homosexual desire.

readings of Septimus' suicide in terms that Clarissa Dalloway originally deploys when she learns of his death:

> A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (202)

Critics therefore assume that Clarissa's understanding of Septimus' suicide is authorial. I will discuss this assumption in the final section of this chapter, but I want to propose here that it is unsustainable. Rather than depend on Clarissa, we should scrutinize Septimus' self-killing initially without recourse to her consciousness, both on its own terms, that is, according to how it is depicted in the novel, and in terms of Woolf's struggle to narrate her character's suicide. The two methods of scrutiny are inseparable, which is to say that traces of Woolf's struggle are inscribed in Septimus' suicidal process as well as in his reflections on the process. Only after we accomplish our reading can we grasp the implications of Clarissa's.

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"But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Coming down the staircase opposite an old

man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. 'I'll give it you!' he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings" (*Dalloway* 164). The narration of Septimus Warren Smith's suicide underscores one of narrative fiction's central problems: how to represent death.[89] We hear Septimus' final thoughts and words and see Septimus throw himself out of his window, and although we understand that the finality of his words, the physics of his fall, and the mechanics of fence-metal ripping through flesh amount to the cessation of life, we never see Septimus die or imaginatively grasp his death's striking, negating finality. The suicidal event is left representationally incomplete. What, then, do we see and seize in this anticlimactic scene? Septimus "flung himself… down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings" (164): we see an act of flinging and realize that Septimus will die, nothing more. The verb "to fling" – "to throw," "to project," "to send suddenly" – directs our gaze immediately to the precise moment (to use a word that resonates loudly throughout Woolf's fiction) in which a body, by force of muscular contraction, hurls itself into space. Septimus' fall onto the area railings is proleptic: our gaze anticipates, without perceiving directly, the body's

[89] Echoing Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Garret Stewart articulates the problem this way: "In the life outside of novels, death often invites and defies imagination at once, terrifies and refutes our sense of identity and of the mortal language we would use to phrase its finish. What in everyday experience is there to say about – and what words for it – that sudden absence called death where a moment before there was a self? And how does the verbal artifice of fiction help to redeem our speechlessness in the face of such vacancy, to premeditate our sense of an ending? Despite its brutal factuality as the close of life, dying is by nature the one inevitable fictional matter in prose fiction. Death for the self exists only as nonexistence, is not a topic so much as a voiding event, has no vocabulary native to it, would leave us mute before its impenetrable fact" (4-5). J. Hillis Miller puts it more succinctly: "Death is incompatible with language" (198).

plummet and the piercing contact of fence and flesh. We see flinging but not falling, self-defenestration but not penetration. Flinging, anticipated falling and piercing, the speed of the suicide scene's clipped sentences, the urgency of Septimus' last thoughts and words – these signifiers collectively point to, but do not disclose, death, which remains a hazy, half-comprehended signified.

Septimus' suicide scene presents us with further interpretive challenges. Of all the narrative moments in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus' self-annihilation is the most troubling, not because of the nature of the deed, but because of the nature of Woolf's writing. While we read Septimus, it is as if we also read Woolf: we sense that the narrator's free indirect style not only reveals the desperate thoughts of one who is about to kill himself but also reflects the stressed thoughts of an author struggling to manage her own vexed relationship with, and compose a fictional, suicide, for nowhere else in the novel do we encounter writing that is as fractured and uncertain. Nowhere else do we find a scene that is as clearly aware of itself as a literary production – that is as blatantly *written*. An accretion of conspicuous dramatic codes, all of which point to Woolf's difficulty finding an apposite approach to her subject, blurs the seriousness and immediacy of Septimus' situation. Consequently, his suicide lies in a distinct representational space set apart from *Mrs. Dalloway*'s seamless atmosphere, soliciting puzzlement in a novel that through and through invites pathos.

Woolf writes Septimus' suicide in a extremely ironic fashion, undercutting the solemnity of the act with black comedy, forced melodrama, and, above all, self-conscious scrutiny. As Dr. Holmes muscles his way around Lucrezia and walks up the Smith's

stairs, Septimus seeks frantically for a way to kill himself. Whereas he had earlier thought, "this killing oneself, how does one set about it, with a table knife, uglily, with floods of blood, – by sucking a gaspipe?" (101), he now faces having to die by knife or gas. First he "consider[s] Mrs. Filmer's nice clean bread-knife with 'Bread' carved on the handle" (163). Woolf quickly turns Septimus' grave consideration of death-by-knife-wound into an opportunity for black humor by calling attention to the 'Bread' inscription on the blade's handle; this inscription admonishes a desperate Septimus (and reminds us) that "nice clean" bread knives are for slicing bread, not for slitting wrists, stabbing hearts, or cutting jugulars. Septimus gets the message, thinking, "Ah, but one mustn't spoil that" (163). The comic aspects of the knife's rebuke and Septimus' response are amplified when we notice that Septimus' other considered methods of self-killing carry with them no warning labels: gas fires are meant for cooking, not for asphyxiating oneself, and razors are meant for shaving, not for opening veins, but Woolf does not waste ink pointing out these truisms; arbitrarily singling out the bread-knife as if it were a consecrated object adds levity to a profoundly serious situation.

In terms of the novel's plot, Septimus lacks the time to light the gas burner and Lucrezia has packed their razors. Without any other option, he kills himself in the only way he can, by flinging himself out of a window. In terms of writing Septimus' suicide, it is as if an indecisive Woolf, struggling to find the most suitable way to kill her character, exhausted all her options and wrote herself into a corner, with the result that she had no other choice but to make Septimus die by self-defenestration: "There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging-house window; the tiresome,

the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing" (163-64). The tone of disapproval that pervades not the suicidal act itself, but the manner in which Septimus accomplishes it, bespeaks Woolf's self-conscious and sardonic reaction to her use of melodrama, what Peter Brooks calls "the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in the post-sacred era" (15). This mode of expression, narration, and representation was central to much of Victorian England's cultural production and activity. Victorian journalists, popular writers, and artists knew well the "melodramatic business" of committing suicide by throwing oneself out of a window or off high structures: they turned such suicides into melodramatic narratives for a public that prized sensational storytelling.[90] Newspapers, broadsides, and illustrations of women throwing themselves out of windows, off bridges, or off London's Monument circulated widely in nineteenth-century England. These media portrayed the "rash act" as a desperate deed committed by immoral or temporarily insane self-destroyers.[91] The

[90] For discussions of suicide's representation in Victorian media, art, and entertainment, see Anderson, *Suicide* 191-218; Brown, *Art of Suicide* 146-193; and Gates, *Victorian Suicide* 38-60. Along with their commentary, Brown and Gates reproduce in their works illustrations and broadsides of suicide-by-leaping.

[91] Images of males leaping to their deaths also existed in the Victorian era, but their numbers paled in comparison, in part because, as the famous psychologist and social reformer Havelock Ellis pointed out, women were two times more likely than men to throw themselves off lethal heights and fall to their deaths (*Man and Woman* 334). According to Ellis, women chose "passive" methods of suicide such as falling from great elevations, drowning, and self-poisoning because more gruesome forms of self-killing (e.g., shooting or stabbing oneself, which men typically preferred) upset "women's sense of propriety and their intense horror of making a mess" (335). Although it was written

most famous depictions of a woman leaping to her death were those of Margaret Moyes, a young, attractive woman who threw herself off London's Monument and who hit the railing at the Monument's base, which severed her arm. I do not want to suggest that Woolf consciously modeled Septimus Smith's suicide after Margaret Moyes' – although the fact that railings contributed to both deaths strikes a resonating tone that, like Big Ben's tolling of the time in *Mrs. Dalloway*, cannot pass unnoticed. But I do want to propose that, in addition to Kitty Maxse, Woolf had in mind Victorian representations of plummeting women when writing Septimus' self-defenestration. It is appropriate that Septimus, a feminized figure who abandons traditional masculine stoicism for emotional outbursts and tearful exclamations, leaps out of his lodging house's window: killing himself with Mrs. Filmer's bread-knife would have been too masculine.

Another suicidal leap resonates with Septimus': Woolf's. According to Quentin Bell, Woolf first attempted suicide by jumping out of a friend's window in 1904 (1:89-

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three centuries prior to the Victorian age, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which, incidentally, Septimus opens for a moment shortly before he kills himself, provides archetypal male and female suicides: Anthony runs his sword through himself and Cleopatra applies an asp to her breast, dying calmly once the snake's poison saturates her blood. (Moreover, whatever their reasons for preferring "passive" suicidal methods, women to this day consistently choose them over gory, gun and knife centered ones.) Barbara T. Gates offers another, perhaps more significant reason for why images of falling women outnumbered those of men: although female suicide rates were consistently lower than male suicide rates throughout the nineteenth century, women were nevertheless mythologized as suicidal creatures. As Gates argues, the Victorians believed that suicide was, like madness, a "female malady": since women were, in the popular imagination, the weaker sex, both physically and mentally, they were more likely than men to go insane and kill themselves. True accounts of women utilizing "passive" means to kill themselves helped perpetuate and preserve the myth of female suicide, which in turn helped establish the iconography of the falling woman in the popular imagination. See Gates, *Victorian Suicide* 125-50.

90). Woolf, in a letter to Vanessa Bell written during her 1910 confinement, later expressed a desire to defenestrate herself: "I shall soon have to jump out of a window…. My God! What a mercy to be done with it!" (*Letters* 1: 431). Mimicking Woolf's failed, Kitty Maxse's successful, and iconographic Victorian suicide, Septimus' self-annihilation serves as a nodal point at which various biographical and representational anxieties intersect. Moreover, the act of penning the event was, for Woolf, a tiresome and troublesome task. Her difficulty with the scene, which she revised substantially, reflected a greater, ongoing struggle to write Septimus' insanity (Hoffman 178). A June 1923 diary entry suggests that Woolf's frustration stemmed from her own experience with psychosis: "Am I writing The Hours from deep emotion? Of course the mad part tires me so much, makes my mind squint so badly that I can hardly face spending the next weeks at it" (*Diary* 2:248). Woolf recognized that any representation diminishes suicide's momentousness and fails to capture its import.[92] Hence her disappointment after writing Septimus' self-annihilation: "being at a low ebb with my book – the death of Septimus, – I begin to count myself a failure" (*Diary* 2:307-8).[93] Indeed, if we are to take

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[92] For Woolf, as for many modernists, any act of fictional representation necessarily fails. She expressed her belief in fiction's ontological inadequacy, as well as the parturitional anguish of novel-writing, in a letter to V. Sackville-West: "I believe that the main thing in beginning a novel is to feel, not that you can write it, but that it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can't cross: that it is to be pulled through only in a breathless anguish. Now when I sit down to an article, I have a net of words which will come down on the idea certainly in an hour or so. But a novel, as I say, to be good should seem, before one writes it, something unwriteable: but only visible; so that for nine months one lives in despair, and only when one has forgotten what one meant, does the book seem tolerable. I assure you, all my novels were first rate before they were written" (*Letters* 3:529).

[93] Woolf's comments relate to her initial, manuscript version of Septimus' suicide.

Woolf on her own terms when she wrote in 1923 that *The Hours*' "design is so queer… so masterful" and "certainly original," then melodrama's presence in the novel's final form weakens her declaration (*Diary* 2:249).

While writing Septimus' suicide, Woolf tried to manage her representational anxieties by calling attention to, and openly deriding, the dramatic code she finally employed.[94] The result is a distancing effect in the Brechtian sense of the term. Describing Septimus' leap as "tiresome… troublesome… melodramatic business" (163) allowed Woolf to expose her reliance on melodrama and simultaneously avoid

[94] Woolf's mature, modernist narrative strategy contrasts sharply with the thoroughly Victorian one she used twenty-two years earlier, in a journal entry on the suicide of a woman she read about in a newspaper. In this 1903 entry, Woolf, a young, aspiring writer, envisions a maudlin narrative for the woman, who drowned herself in the Serpentine River and attached a suicide note that read, "'No father, no mother, no work'… 'May God forgive me for what I have done tonight'" ("The Serpentine" 212). In Woolf's account, the woman's parents died when she was a child, her husband left her for another woman, and her children either died or deserted her. After this last occurrence, the woman feels a sudden "pang" of loneliness and sorrow; begins to weep, for the first time, for her parents; and seeks solace in work, only to find that no one will give her a job, for "it is very easy to deny a strange woman work, who threatens to kill herself if you refuse" ("The Serpentine" 212, 213). And so, after begging God for mercy, she commits suicide. This type of sentimental suicide narrative is remarkably absent from *Mrs. Dalloway*; what is more, in the novel, Woolf obliquely references the woman who drowned herself in the Serpentine, but this time she refuses to invest the woman's self-killing with sentimentality. Early in the day, Mrs. Dalloway remembers "once throwing a shilling into the Serpentine" (9), and she begins her narrative of Septimus' self-defenestration by reflecting that "[s]he had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away" (202). Septimus throwing himself out of a window mirrors Mrs. Dalloway throwing money into the Serpentine, mirrors the woman drowning herself in the same river. In Mrs. Dalloway's mind, her act – and by extension the woman's – is a paltry, matter of fact occurrence when compared to Septimus' defiant, heroic one.

capitulating to the didactic dictates of its rhetoric.[95] Despite invoking images of insane women falling to their deaths, she evaded assigning a negative moral meaning to

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[95] Septimus' suicide is "tiresome… troublesome… rather melodramatic business" (163) in another way: as an act of (self) defenestration, it falls within the long tradition of throwing persons or objects out of windows, often for histrionic effect. Woolf begs us to read Septimus' death as a critique of this tired ritual, which continues to this day. (Beckett turns the subject of self-defenestration into an opportunity for black comedy when, in *Mercier and Camier*, he has Mercier remark, "I'd throw myself out of the window if I wasn't afraid I might sprain my ankle" [41].) Historically, the word "defenestration," which comes from the Latin "de" ("down from") and "fenestra" ("a window"), referred to the Defenestration of Prague, which, as the *OED* relates, was "the action of the Bohemian insurgents who, on the 21st of May 1618, broke up a meeting of Imperial commissioners and deputies of the States, held in the castle of the Hradshin, and threw two of the commissioners and their secretary out of the window; this formed the prelude to the Thirty Years' War" ("Defenestration"). Just as the Defenestration of Prague served as melodramatic prelude to the Thirty Years' War – the commissioners and their secretary landed on a pile of manure and survived – all acts of defenestration, as rock stars who throw television sets out of hotel windows know, generate melodramatic spectacle. In the *Old Testament*, when Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, hears that Jehu has come to kill her, she applies makeup to her face and fixes her hair before Jehu commands her eunuchs to defenestrate her. Upon hitting the ground, Jezebel's blood splashes on a nearby wall and on Jehu's horses, and as a finishing, insulting touch, Jehu commands his horses to trample Jezebel's dead body. If being thrown out of a window and stomped on by horses were not enough, dogs devour Jezebel's remains, leaving behind her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands, thereby fulfilling one of Elijah's prophecies. Jezebel's self-beautifying, her defenestration, her splattering blood, her trampling, her consumption by a pack of dogs, and the fragments of her remains all contribute to an over-rendered scene; her death is a spectacle of grand proportions. In the modern era, Hollywood has popularized, mythologized, and further spectacularized defenestration. Perhaps the most famous case in popular cinema of death by defenestration occurs at the end of *The Exorcist* (1973) when Father Karras, after transferring the demon Pazuzu from Regan to himself, jumps out Regan's window and "kills" the demon (and himself). (Earlier in the film, Pazuzu throws Burke Dennings out of Regan's window.) Other notable instances of cinematic defenestration occur in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), when Dr. Jones throws a Nazi out of a zeppelin, and in *Braveheart* (1995), when Longshanks throws Philip, his son's friend and confidant, out of a castle window. Most recently, in *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005), Chancellor Palpatine (later the Emperor) uses his dark-side-of-the-Force-lighting to defenestrate the Jedi Master Mace Windu.

Septimus' self-annihilation. Her use of "business," which brings to mind the expression "stage business," heightens the distancing effect, calling attention to Septimus' leap as a type of theatrically contrived, affected action performed for dramatic purpose. Of course, Septimus is aware of the contrived nature of his melodramatic performances, from which he consciously dissociates himself. Shortly before he commits suicide, he realizes that his penultimate self-surrender is histrionic and affected despite his intended earnestness: "At last, with a melodramatic gesture which he assumed mechanically and with complete consciousness of its insincerity, he dropped his head on his hands. Now he had surrendered; now other people must help him. People must be sent for. He gave in" (99). During his suicide scene, Septimus seems to achieve, through some postmodern miracle, full consciousness of his narrative emplotment; unable to elide his melodramatic suicide from the narrative, he can only remain a scripted character and share his author's uneasiness. For someone who spends most of his time hallucinating, he has the remarkably acute, clairvoyant thought that opening his window and jumping to his death is a tiresome, troublesome, and melodramatic affair. He is also perversely aware that his suicide performance is directed toward an audience comprised of Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, residual Victorians through and through who worship proportion and whose idea of tragedy involves suicidal falls from deadly heights. Septimus knows that his "judges" (162) will consider catastrophic the uncontrolled, asymmetrical poses of his body as it falls, hits railing, stumbles upon its final distortion, and rests "horribly mangled" (164). "Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing" (164). The success of Septimus' performance is marked by his audience's reaction. Dr. Holmes' judgment –

"The coward!" (164) – is typically, but not exclusively, Victorian: in his view, the depravity of Septimus' act stems not from the Christian belief that self-killing is the one unforgivable sin, but from the secular view that it is a mental and moral weakness, the result of an anguished mind, a defeated will, and a lack of self-discipline. His further assessment of Septimus' suicide conveys what he believes is the irrational, impetuous nature of the deed and his and his colleagues' lack of blame: "Who could have foretold it? A sudden impulse, no one was in the least to blame… And why the Devil did he did it, Dr. Holmes could not conceive" (164). The doctor's rhetoric is purely Victorian, purely melodramatic; his patient has, in his estimation, committed the "rash act" of self-slaughter.

The tone of Woolf's abandoned black comedy and negated melodrama, along with that of Septimus' self-critical suicide performance, depart from and unsettle *Mrs. Dalloway*'s earnest and urgent mood. Both author and character puncture and punctuate a narration generally steeped in lyrical seriousness: "she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (9); "So, as the solitary traveler advances down the village street where the women stand knitting and the men dig in the garden, the evening seems ominous; the figures still; as if some august fate, known to them, awaited without fear, were about to sweep them into complete annihilation" (63); "Love destroyed too. Everything that was fine, everything that was true went" (139); "What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?" (213) – Woolf's prose tends to surge uninterrupted and to refrain from obliquity and evasiveness. Mundane moments such as reflecting on one's

character, walking down London's streets, ruminating on love, or anticipating the presence of a loved one are seamless and consequential (perhaps, at times, exaggerated), while the gravest, most loaded moment in the novel is splintered, understated, and anticlimactic.

The conflicted nature of Septimus' suicide scene underscores Woolf's struggle to empty her character's self-killing of moral significance, an important task considering *Mrs. Dalloway*'s overall aesthetic: the novel generally abandons meaning, purpose, essence, and depth in favor of registering, through oceanic prose and water imagery, the immediacy of surging surface pattern.[96] This macroscopic aesthetic recurs on a microscopic level when Clarissa plunges into London's chaos at the beginning of the novel and submits to the "ebb and flow of things" (9). Clarissa contentedly rides her world's swells without attempting to break through and bring to the surface their (perhaps nonexistent) underlying significance:

> Bond street fascinated her; Bond Street early in the morning in the season; its flags flying; its shops; no splash; no glitter, one roll of tweed in the shop where her father had bought his suits for fifty years; a few pearls; salmon on an iceblock. 'That is all,' she said, looking at the fishmonger's.
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> 'That is all,' she repeated, pausing for a moment at the window of a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves. (11)

[96] For a finely tuned reading of the novel's water imagery and protean elements, see Garvey, "Difference and Continuity."

Woolf's frenetic prose rushes forward, registering, in short, clipped noun phrases, the rapidity of Clarissa's perceptions as she walks down Bond Street and beholds what Bernard, in *The Waves*, calls "the pageant of existence roaring" (270). Clarissa quickly observes the multifaceted features of protean reality without singling any of them out for contemplation. She is "fascinated" – a simple, almost superficial reaction to her variegated surroundings – and her repeated summation, "'That is all'" (11), implies that nothing lies below or beyond Bond Street's objects: the essences of the mundane flags, shops, tweed, pearls, salmon and iceblock lie in their existences.[97] Things exist, and that is all. Or as Woolf put it a year after *Mrs. Dalloway*'s publication, "[T]he thing is in itself enough: satisfactory; achieved" (*Diary* 3:62). Moreover, the semicolons between Woolf's noun phrases conjoin Bond Street's various objects and qualities ("no splash"; "no glitter") into, and suggest that they share a close relationship within, a totalized image: *the* totalized image or impression of Bond Street.[98] In its widest sense, therefore,

[97] In addition to "that is all," other statements of unqualified existence pervade the novel: "There they are!" (49), which Peter Walsh twice exclaims to himself; "there it is" (60 and 158), which Septimus thinks and Lucrezia states; "there it was" (203), which Clarissa thinks; and, of course, the narrator's closing statement, "For there she was" (213), which echoes Peter Walsh's earlier thought, "there she was, however; there she was" (83), as well as the narrator's comment on Clarissa's ability, during her party, "to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed" (190).

[98] Like Clarissa, Peter observes the "infinite richness" (179) of life without attempting to probe its mystery. His impression of "Bedford Place leading into Russell Square" resembles Clarissa's impression of Bond Street: "It was straightness and emptiness of course; the symmetry of a corridor; but it was also windows lit up, a piano, a gramophone sounding; a sense of pleasure-making hidden, but now and again emerging when, through the uncurtained window, the window left open, one saw parties sitting over tables, young people slowly circling, conversations between men and women, maids idly looking out (a strange comment theirs, when work was done), stockings drying on top ledges, a parrot, a few plants. Absorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life. And in the large square

"that is all" refers to the primacy of the image and its sensory apprehension over its cognition and interpretation.[99]

The narrator later raises Clarissa's summation to a metaphysical level when Clarissa stitches her dress: "So on a summer's day waves collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying 'that is all' more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all" (43). The entire world – the planet Earth and its inhabitants – repeats Clarissa, affirming the ordinariness and givenness of *existence* and *life*, along with their attendant rhythms (the wave's crash and the heart's systole and diastole), without granting them meaning, reason, or God. As a mantra that various voices utter, "that is all" suggests a general atheism in *Mrs. Dalloway* regarding the existence of deep, explanatory significance that lies behind or below the veneer of object, image, sensation, existence, and rhythm. Appropriately, the mantra's originator does not believe in a supersensible beyond or contain an essential core beneath her own

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where the cabs shot and swerved so quick, there were loitering couples, dallying, embracing, shrunk up under the shower of a tree; that was moving; so silent, so absorbed, that one passed, discreetly, timidly, as if in the presence of some sacred ceremony to interrupt which would have been impious. That was interesting. And so on into the flare and glare" (179).

[99] In "The Reality Effect," Roland Barthes characterizes the experience of modernity in terms of the opposition of the image (in his terminology, representation) and its sensory apprehension to interpretation and meaning: "The pure and simple 'representation' of the 'real,' the naked relation of 'what is' (or has been) thus appears as a resistance to meaning; this resistance confirms the great mythic opposition of the *true-to-life* (the lifelike) and the *intelligible*; it suffices to recall that, in the ideology of our time, obsessive reference to the 'concrete' (in what is rhetorically demanded of the human sciences, of literature, of behavior) is always brandished like a weapon against meaning, as if, by some statutory exclusion, what is alive cannot signify – and vice versa" (146). For a noteworthy critique of Barthes, see Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 233-34.

exterior: Clarissa asserts her own atheism – "not for a moment did she believe in God" (31) – and acknowledges that she lacks "something central which permeated" (34).

"By conviction an atheist perhaps, he is taken by surprise with moments of extraordinary exaltation," the narrator remarks as Peter Walsh sits in Regents park (62). The same description applies to Clarissa, who also feels the moment with religious (and sexual) fervor:

> It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thick skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for a moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment. (35)

This passage occurs directly after the narrator first delineates Clarissa's sexual repression. We learn that Clarissa "could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet" and that she has "failed" her husband sexually (34). We also learn, however, that "she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman… of a woman confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly. And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident… she did undoubtedly feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough" (34). The point is not simply that Clarissa possesses lesbian desire and connects more intimately with women (e.g.,

Sally Seton) than with men, which is certainly arguable, but that Clarissa's orgasmic experience of the moment, her erotically charged journey to the verge of meaning, is ultimately carnal, not spiritual.[100] Moreover, the moment's meaning is profane, not divinely ordained; it is a match burning in a crocus – an image of female eroticism – not a divine fire burning in a bush. But the moment's inner meaning is not and can never be, for Clarissa, fully revealed; her union remains non-consummated.[101] Thus, together with

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[100] Miller aptly writes that one of the novel's "movements" is "the rising motion of 'building up,' of constructive action in the moment" (183). His phrase "constructive action" highlights, in a slightly different manner, the experience of the moment as secular. Miller proffers that Clarissa uses the moment as an opportunity for human making: "For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 4); "Clarissa… plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there – the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings,… collecting the whole of her at one point" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 40). Miller's "constructive action in the moment" also applies to *The Waves*, in which Bernard remarks to the others, "'We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments…. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road'" (146).

[101] As Beja argues in *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Woolf's "moments – to which she variously attaches such words as *vision, being*, or *revelation* –" (114) are her own versions of the modern epiphany, an important phenomenon in modernist fiction that James Joyce defined in *Stephen Hero*: "By an epiphany he [Stephen] meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (211). Beja points out that Joyce, despite the theological origins of "epiphany" (and the religious overtones of "spiritual"), used the term not in its religious sense, as a moment of revelation "in which an external divine force reveals the truth," but to define an ordinary, nevertheless uncommon experience in which an insignificant incident imparts a revelation, triggering new awareness (14, 16-17). Since modernist authors do not share a common conception of the modern epiphany – Woolf's characters become aware only of the experience of the "moment" – it is impossible to define definitively; consequently, critics tend to analyze its family resemblances and trace its antecedents, usually locating its origins in the work of William Wordsworth. See, for example, Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 385-90 and 418-27, and Frye, *A Study of*

its general atheism over the existence of deep meaning, the novel also displays doubt over the disclosure of meaning if and when it exists.[102] Even the novel's clouds participate in this doubt: "The clouds… moved themselves freely, as if destined to cross from West to East on a mission of the greatest importance which would never be revealed, and yet certainly so it was – a mission of the greatest importance" (23).

The novel articulates its doubt less metaphysically and more concretely shortly after the narrator describes Clarissa's experience of the moment. When recounting her youthful friendship with Sally Seton, Clarissa dwells on "the most exquisite moment of her whole life" (38): when Sally kissed her on the lips. "The whole world might have turned upside down!" Clarissa thinks, "And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which… she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling! – when old Joseph and Peter faced them" (38-39).

English Romanticism 158. Looking at a variety of nineteenth-century poets, both Romantic and Victorian, Nichols, in *The Poetics of Epiphany*, discusses the modern epiphany's Wordsworthian origins in particular and nineteenth-century origins in general. Along with Beja, who offers the most comprehensive account of the modern epiphany, see also Gillespie, *Proust, Mann, Joyce*.

[102] *To the Lighthouse* contains the same attitudes as *Mrs. Dalloway* toward meaning, the secular experience of the moment, and human making within the moment. The following passage, a glimpse of Lily Briscoe's thoughts written in free indirect style, encapsulates them: "What is the meaning of life? That was all – a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs Ramsay saying, "Life stand still here"; Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation" (161).

Again, the moment is an erotically charged encounter with an illumination that falls short of revealing inner meaning. Either the meaning should not be accessed, and, like an impatient child opening a present despite an injunction not to, Clarissa nevertheless attempts to uncover it, or it burns through with its own force. Woolf's ambiguous syntax allows "the revelation, the religious feeling" both to stand as an object for Clarissa's uncovering and to modify the radiance that burns through. In any case, Clarissa comes close to, but does not attain, full disclosure. "'Oh this horror!' she said to herself, as if she had known all along that something would interrupt, would embitter her moment of happiness" (39).

In contrast to the young, impatient Clarissa who cannot accept Sally's kiss without attempting to discern its meaning, the middle-aged, circumspect Peter Walsh cannot grasp life's meaning despite his having gained "the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly, in the light" (86). While walking out of Regent's Park, he thinks,

> Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it, here, this instant, now, in the sun, in Regent's Park, was enough. Too much indeed. A whole lifetime was too short to bring out, now that one had acquired the power, the full flavour; to extract every ounce of pleasure, every shade of meaning; which both were so much more solid than they used to be, so much less personal. (87)

Peter at first echoes Clarissa's "what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her" (9), but he adds to his meditation a resigned recognition that, being "[t]oo much indeed,"

life's meaning surpasses human comprehension. Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* also ascertains maturity's powerlessness to discover life's meaning; her thoughts provide counterpoint to Peter's: "What is the meaning of life? That was all – a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come" (161). Both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* suggest that the great revelation never arrives not because meaning is necessarily absent, but because life is excess: it is in excess of, and irreducible to, an all-encompassing proposition about its significance and design. Life's meaning may, for Peter, be more solid and less personal – perhaps with age he may be able to feel its "objective" contours more fully – but it remains elusive.

To surpass and to elude: nothing in the novel performs these actions more absolutely, literally, and emblematically than the skywriting airplane. Here is Mr. Bentley admiring the aerial spectacle while tending to his lawn: "Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol… of man's soul; of his determination,… sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory" (30). For Mr. Bentley, the airplane is a metaphor of humanity's endeavor to transcend, through the mind's acrobatics, the body's physical and perceptual limitations. As planes enable the body to defy gravity, science and mathematics enable the mind to defy its incarceration in the body and uncover the fundamental truths of cosmic and biological existence. A secular epistemological model therefore inheres in Bentley's vision: absolute knowledge is obtained through human

effort, not passively received through spiritual or divine revelation. No item in Bentley's list of prepositional phrases captures this model more cogently than "an aspiration… of man's soul": the plane is an emblem of both human ambition and human breath, whose essence lies not in God's life-giving exhalation – Christianity's Holy Spirit – but in technological exertion. The "seedy-looking nondescript man" (30) who stands on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral and wishes to place his bagful of pamphlets "before an altar, a cross, the symbol of something which has soared beyond seeking and questing and knocking of words together and has become all spirit, disembodied, ghostly," hesitates before entering, only to see the plane fly overhead "like something mounting in ecstasy" (31). We never see the anonymous man enter the cathedral. Woolf leaves him hesitating on its steps and staring at the plane as if he has rejected the disembodied spirit for the embodied one, the symbol of the cross for the symbol of the airplane, one absolute for another. It is as if the man vindicates Bentley.

The airplane's actual (non)achievement fails, however, to match Mr. Bentley's veneration; its unintelligible message undercuts his adoration for the absolute. Different Londoners read "KEY," "Glaxo," "Kreemo," and "toffee" in the smoke (22). These indefinite readings, which are essentially projections, amount to a communicative failure. Here we have to ask whether the plane fails to transmit its simple advertisement to the London crowd due to wind currents or lack of skill, whether the Londoners fail to overcome their perceptual limitations and correctly read the skywriting, or whether both plane and crowd participate equally in a collective communication breakdown. Whatever the situation, the plane's writing is impermanent and unstable: its letters remain immobile

"[o]nly for a moment… then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky" (22). Rather than circulate knowledge through technological prowess, the plane and Londoners dwell in a state of epistemological confusion. We as readers also receive no insight into the message, for no textual or interpretive "key" exists that could dispel the Londoner's misunderstandings and unlock the right reading of the advertisement – if it really is an advertisement: we never find out for sure. Just as the identity of the backfiring motor car's passenger eluded collective recognition a few moments before the plane's advent – "But nobody knew whose face had been seen. Was it the Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's? Whose face was it? Nobody knew" (15) – the aerial message eludes comprehension. Again, the clouds hovering over London illustrate the point:

> [A]lthough the clouds were of mountainous white so that one could fancy hacking hard chips off with a hatchet, with broad golden slopes, lawns of celestial pleasure gardens, on their flanks, and had all the appearance of settled habitations assembled for the conference of gods above the world, there was a perpetual movement among them. Signs were interchanged, when, as if to fulfil some scheme arranged already, now a summit dwindled, now a whole block of pyramidal size which had kept its station inalterably advanced into the midst or gravely led the procession to fresh anchorage. Fixed though they seemed at their posts, at rest in perfect unanimity, nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow-white or gold-kindled surface; to change, to go, to

> dismantle the solemn assemblage was immediately possible. (152)

Despite the clouds' apparent solidity and intelligibility, their perpetual shape shifting and sign swapping dislocate their ostensibly fixed shapes, thus exposing their illusion of permanence and objectivity. Like the airplane's message, unstable writing leads to erratic reading, and what seems self-consistent and publicly available results from the self's need to project form onto the nebulous world. Disclosed, secure meaning is absent from such a process.

One Londoner, Septimus Smith, grasps, or, rather, thinks he grasps the airplane message's meaning. Septimus observes the skywriting after Lucrezia, adopting Dr. Holmes' advice to make her husband "take an interest in things outside himself" (23), implores him to look at the plane. He becomes, however, further self-involved, for he believes that the plane flies overhead solely to send him a message, the significance of which lies not in its language, but in its sheer presence:

> So… they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide for him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! (23)

Septimus is certain that the external world signals to him alone. He not only finds the smoke splendorous; he also believes, paradoxically, that the insensate vapor consciously

provides him with, and intends to perpetually give him more, beauty. His reaction is characteristic, for he believes that the world constantly communicates vital, non-linguistic messages to him: “At every moment Nature signified by some laughing hint” (153). Unlike Clarissa and Peter, both of whom accept the multifarious world without distilling it down to an intention, meaning, or purpose, Septimus perceives singular significance everywhere and in everything. Consequently, he overdetermines meaning: as he looks at the motor car, he sees a “gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames” (16); as he sits on a Regent’s Park bench, leaves, branches, acrobatic sparrows, random sounds, the “spaces” between sounds, a crying child, and a tooting horn “all taken together” mean “the birth of a new religion” (24); shortly thereafter, soaring swallows, airborne flies, the sparkling sun, and the sound of a chime “tinkling divinely on the grass stalks” amount to an all-embracing truth: “all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere” (76). Septimus also receives a multitude of revelations, which usually come rapidly: “Men must not cut down trees. There is a God…. Change the world. No one kills from hatred” (26); “trees are alive… there is no crime… love, universal love” (74). The “lord of men” who knows, at one point, “the meaning of the world” (73) and, at another point, “everything” (154), Septimus believes he is “alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning” (74).

Septimus therefore acts as a unique counter-thrust to the novel’s atheistic and skeptical currents; he acquires what the novel tends to deny to its other protagonists and

to us: uncomplicated meaning and effortless revelation. Is he a mentally ill war victim, or is he a modern Tiresias who, despite his psychic wounds, sees what others cannot? Does he access a metaphysical realm of enduring meaning that lies behind language's instability and the world's mutability? Lest we view Septimus as a lone prophet who has a vital message to deliver to the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, the novel's godless *weltanschauung*, or to us, we ought to remember Woolf's description of *Mrs. Dalloway* as "a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side" (*Diary* 2:207). As Christine Froula reminds us, "That he is mad would seem indisputable; even sympathetic discussions cast him as a war victim, not a prophet" (145). While critics are right to suggest that Septimus' madness stands in relation to the novel's central concerns, they overstate when they insist that it is explicable only within the context of a particular affiliation. Alex Zwerdling, for instance, correctly asserts that Septimus "is instantly seen as a threat to governing-class values not only because he insists on remembering the war when everyone else is trying to forget it but also because his feverish intensity of feeling is an implicit criticism of the ideal of stoic passivity" (130-31). As paragons of stoicism, Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw take the brunt of the novel's critique; they are iniquitous in their refusal to empathetically understand Septimus' troubled mind. While Holmes suggests to Lucrezia that her husband eat porridge and "notice real things, go to a music hall, [and] play cricket" (27) – that is, conform to British middle-class masculine standards of deportment – Bradshaw, refusing to speak of madness, calls Septimus' condition "not having a sense of proportion" and recommends bedrest (106). Zwerdling goes too far when he views Septimus as a

“sacrificial victim or scapegoat who takes upon himself the sins of omission rather than commission” and whose “emotional instability is a compensation for his society’s repression and can be understood and judged only in relation to it” (131). Such an exaggerated view runs the risk of both holding responsible Septimus’ post-war society for his madness and idealizing his suicide as a venerable act.

Septimus’ ominous delusions put into perspective his psychosis’ deeply troubling nature and undercut any attempt to romanticize him. He may innocuously hallucinate visions of sublime beauty and naïve revelations regarding God, trees, crime, love, and death’s non-existence, but he also hallucinates phantasmagoric images of decay, nihilistic revelations, and persecutory voices. When he wonders why he can “see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men,” he concludes, “It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock” (74). While reading Shakespeare shortly before he kills himself, he begins to view life with repugnance: “How Shakespeare loathed humanity – the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly! This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair. Dante the same. Aeschylus (translated) the same” (97). Septimus’ conviction that “[h]e had committed an appalling crime and been condemned to death by human nature” damages him the most (105). His crimes are many, his guilt extensive: “He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst; but

all the other crimes raised their heads… how he had married his wife without loving her; had lied to her; seduced her; outraged Miss Isabel Pole, and was so pocked and marked with vice that women shuddered when they saw him in the street" (99-100). Septimus' self-persecution materializes toward the end of his life into an imperative, spoken by the universe, to commit suicide. He hears the "whole world" clamor: "Kill yourself, kill yourself for our sakes" (101).

It might be tempting to think that the novel's so-called narrative consciousness, in the words of Howard Harper, "tries to discover in Septimus' case history some rational explanation for his growing insanity and suicidal impulses" (127). Even if the narrative consciousness attempts such a search (we need not think that it does), it ultimately fails to locate a rationale for Septimus' condition. Like Harper, Roger Poole suggests that Septimus' "emotional anesthesia" has "a particular origin, a definite cause, and a precise moment in time" (186-7). Poole situates the cause of his anesthesia in the War:

> The War had taught him. It was sublime… he became engaged one evening when the panic was on him – that he could not feel.
>
> For now that it was all over, truce signed, and dead buried, he had, especially in the evening, these sudden thunder-claps of fear. He could not feel… but something failed him; he could not feel… beauty was behind a plane of glass. Even taste… had no relish to him… But he could not taste, he could not feel… his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then – that he could not feel. (95-6)

Poole then argues that Septimus' initial trauma engenders in him a belief in the world's

meaninglessness (187). "[I]t might be possible that the world itself is without meaning" (97), Septimus thinks after returning to England. Indeed, the world of *Mrs. Dalloway* lacks meaning in the ways I have been describing, or at least its meaning can be accessed only partially. Septimus is not too far off the mark. And yet he also holds the conviction that the world emanates an abundance of meaning, which he records, along with his other revelations, in his writings. Thinking that some of Septimus' writings "were very beautiful" (162), Reiza, right before his suicide, disobeys his command to burn them; her wish to preserve the papers accentuates their artistic value and ultimately Septimus' role as the novel's artist figure. Moreover, despite Septimus' impassivity, he feels with heightened sensitivity; his guilt, exaltation over the world's beauty, and anguish over life's squalor strike him acutely. He "pass[es] through all extremes of feeling" (Holograph Notebook November 9, 1922 to August 2, 1923). Septimus' emotional anesthesia and subsequent disbelief are therefore integral parts of his more widespread madness. The differences that constitute his psychic turbulence lend him a strangeness and ambiguity that, no matter how hard we try to diagnose his mounting insanity, we cannot dispel. He is truly "on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other" (92). He maintains his liminal status even in death: impaled on Mrs. Filmer's railings, his corpse rests on the boundary separating private from public space. Woolf best summed up Septimus' obscurity (and the nature of psychosis) when she wrote: "S's character… might be left vague – as a mad person is – not so much character as an idea" (Holograph Notebook November 9, 1922 to August 2, 1923).

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In a 1925 letter to Gerald Brenan, Woolf emphasized Septimus' centrality to *Mrs. Dalloway* as well as his vital connection to Clarissa: he is "the most essential part of Mrs D: And this I certainly did mean – that Septimus and Mrs Dalloway should be entirely dependant upon each other – if as you say he 'has no function in the book' then of course it is a failure" (*Letters* 3:189). Woolf not only asked Brenan to read Septimus in relation to Clarissa, which is understandable considering the characters' statuses as doubles; she also singled out Septimus as the novel's core, which is curious given Woolf's decision to name the novel after its party-throwing eponym. The novel's finale helps clarify this peculiar instruction, for it exposes Septimus' "function" and symbolically merges the two doubles at the razor's edge separating life from death. "All must bear finally upon the party at the end; which expresses life, in every variety & full of conviction: while S. dies," Woolf wrote in November 1922, advancing her plan to displace Clarissa's death onto Septimus (Holograph Notebook November 9, 1922 to August 2, 1923).

Acknowledging Septimus' violent end by what Garret Stewart, the most sensitive reader of the novel's finale, calls "empathetic proxy" (269), Clarissa alone attempts to work out the details of Septimus' fatal fall and grant his suicide a positive meaning, thereby infusing with redemptive significance an event that was previously reported as mere fact or dismissed as mere aberration. Stewart writes,

> Woolf the narrator has, as we know, stepped out of Septimus's mind just before the instant of death to render the scene from without – a window, a

> vanishing body, an awful drop – giving us all anyone but the corpse could have known; the sheer fact of his leap. Yet only if Clarissa can reinvest the dying mind with presence will the suicide be rescued from fictional statistic to emotional revelation…. Mrs. Dalloway becomes, in the registrations of her own rushed vision, the authentic reader of the only death scene of Septimus Warren Smith worth having, a felt version, deciphered into significance. (278-79)

Along with Woolf's attenuated, external report, Dr. Holmes' and Sir William Bradshaw's unsympathetic and diluted responses minimize the gravity of Septimus' self-killing. Holmes invokes an expedient moralistic judgment immediately after his patient commits suicide and follows with an equally expedient explanation: Septimus is a "coward" who acted on "sudden impulse" (164). At Clarissa's party, Bradshaw leads a conversation on a parliamentary bill he hopes will provide for shell shock sufferers. He mentions Septimus as a "case" that has "bearing upon what he was saying about the deferred effects of shell shock" (201), thus effacing the particularities of Septimus' suicide and appropriating the departed as a statistic to be deployed for political purposes. Clarissa, in contrast, defers explanation and judgment in favor of recovering (or devising) the details of Septimus' terrifying plummet into nothingness: "Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then suffocation of blackness" (201-2). In envisioning Septimus' plunge from

the inside, as if she were the one falling to her death, Clarissa accomplishes what Woolf's narration and Septimus' doctors do not: an imaginative recounting of the suicidal experience that is both sympathetic performance and phenomenological depiction. She reacts viscerally before she reacts rationally and morally; only after Clarissa imagines the raw specifics of Septimus' suicide does she ask, "But why had he done it?" (202).

Clarissa views her double's self-killing as an attempt to preserve an evasive, ineffable "thing" maculated by "corruption, lies, chatter" (202); defy the defiling world; and achieve communion with the living – all remarkable conclusions considering that she does not know Septimus and receives knowledge of his self-killing only through party chatter. Clarissa seemingly understands his death telepathically. But does she? On what basis do critics view Clarissa as an authoritative reader and borrow her terms when explicating Septimus' suicide? Not surprisingly, critics fail to provide an answer to this question.[103] What underlies their belief in the legitimacy of Clarissa's understanding,

[103] Garrett Stewart alone proffers a possible, although suspect, explanation: Septimus' death is "attached 'somehow' to a woman for whom everything about him is 'unseen'. Her double has somehow gotten through to her, and so reached, through her, to his own perpetuity" (276). Stewart is invoking Clarissa's "transcendental theory" of immortality, "which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 167). These thoughts belong to Peter Walsh, who views Clarissa's theory with incredulity: he sees it not as a valid metaphysical principle, but as a pragmatic illusion that helps Clarissa stave off her fear of death. Moreover, Peter begins his recollection by dismissing Clarissa's hypothesis as a youthful fantasy, thinking that "Clarissa had a theory in those days – they had heaps of theories, always theories, as young people have," and ends with a skeptical, redoubled "perhaps" (167). Although Clarissa earnestly thinks about her transcendental theory

though, is an even deeper assumption that Septimus' suicide has an objective significance. The novel's inherent atheistic and skeptical currents regarding meaning's existence, as well as its disclosure and revelation, render this assumption dubious. Like the Londoners' readings of the skywriter's message, Clarissa's reading of Septimus' suicide is pure subjective projection, the result of her desire to impose moral order on a violent, chaotic event only after she first feels it fully.

The subjective nature of Clarissa's judgment is highlighted by the privacy of her vision and the urgency of her psychological need. Her silent reflections occur in solitude, away from the partygoers' public chatter.[104] The old woman who Clarissa saw through her dressing room window earlier in the day, and who represents, for Clarissa, the "privacy of the soul" (139), reappears; she again underscores her observer's reverence for subjective, hermitical perception. It is precisely Clarissa's personal judgment of Septimus' suicide that allows her to manage her despair and bolster her conviction of life's worth. Filled with a sense of "terror" and "fear" (202, 203), she feels survivor's guilt when others die: "Somehow it was her disaster – her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound

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early in the novel, Peter's disbelief calls it into question. At the very least, quoting Peter's skeptical thoughts weakens Stewart's argument.

[104] Pamela L. Caughie makes a similar point. She writes, "[t]he imposition of some perceived unity on a multiple, fluctuating world seems to be what Woolf points toward but does not supply…. Those rhetorical devices of unity – metaphor, symbol, personification, substitution – are strained and heightened by the narrative: for example… in Clarissa's uncanny identification with the unknown Septimus at a moment when her separation from others is stressed" (75). For Caughie, Clarissa's identification results from "the desire to create meaningful orders, to impose some kind of unity on random life" (75).

darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress" (203). Septimus' suicide, on the other hand, allows Clarissa to view death as an integral part of life and feel renewed:

> she had never been so happy. Nothing could be slow enough… this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank…. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him…. Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them… She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living…. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room. (203-4)

Just as Clarissa plunged into Bond Street's dynamism at the novel's beginning, at the novel's end she plunges back into her party's vivaciousness after connecting empathetically with her double. Septimus fulfills his function only after Clarissa imagines his suicide's details: he unwittingly perpetuates Clarissa's life through his self-killing. Paradoxically, the suicidal war veteran becomes *Mrs. Dalloway*'s life-bestowing center.

These unwitting and paradoxical outcomes foreground a crucial point: despite its inherent meaninglessness, Septimus' suicide is, when filtered through Clarissa's consciousness, ultimately meaningful and consequential. Its significance arises not through revelation, telepathic transference, or some other metaphysical activity, but through sympathetic envisioning and intellection. It arises through a *process* of

subjective understanding in which Clarissa first imagines Septimus' suicide viscerally, then accords his suicide redemptive value, and finally applies that value to her own experiential reality. Clarissa therefore stands not as an authoritative judge, but as a final interpreter whose compassionate assessment offsets Dr. Holmes' impetuous verdict of cowardice and Sir William Bradshaw's insensitive decision to view Septimus as a statistic. While Clarissa's assessment is not "truer" than Septimus' doctors', it is, due to the sheer force of its humanity, far more worthy of our consideration. An objective view of Septimus' suicide may be absent from the novel, but this absence need not obstruct the recognition that Clarissa's assessment is more magnanimous and weighty than Holmes' or Bradshaw's, for it stems from a generous soul and lends pathos to a suicide that otherwise subsists in a bewilderment of narrative anxiety.

Chapter Four:
Silencing Suicide in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

The Sound and the Fury is as much Quentin's story as it is Caddy's. Of all the narrators, he does the most to guide our understanding of the lost Compson sister; when reading his section, we realize that Quentin represents the deepest link to Caddy, has the greatest, most articulate awareness of her character, sexuality, and plight. And as Mrs. Compson knows, he also has the most intimate relationship with Caddy: "'It was always her and Quentin…. When Quentin started to school we had to let her go the next year, so she could be with him,'" she tells Jason (261). Benjy is disturbed by Caddy's absence, but, unaware of time's passing and incapable of interpreting his surroundings, he cannot comprehend her absence or her actions' significances. Faulkner explains Benjy's perspective: "He no longer had Caddy; being an idiot he was not even aware that Caddy was missing. He knew only that something was wrong, which left a vacuum in which he grieved" (*Lion* 246). Jason sees her only as another "bitch," the ur-bitch who has, in his mind, cheated him out of a job, thwarted his ambition, and left him yet another obstacle to his well-being: her daughter, whom, along with Benjy and his sick mother, he must support, although, of course, he makes Caddy support her – and him. Quentin, however, portrays Caddy as the lost, "beautiful and tragic little girl" of Faulkner's imagination ("An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* [II] 77). His distressing memories of Caddy losing her virginity and, afterward, looking at the sky while curled up in a pseudo-foetal position – she leans "back on her arms her hands locked about her knees" (151), a

pose Quentin remembers seven times – do more than any of Benjy's and Jason's memories to capture her heartrending desperation. This is not to say that Quentin is the "key" to understanding Caddy, the closest the novel gets to an "objective" presentation of Caddy without giving her presence, for she is as much a creation of Quentin's obsessiveness as she is of Benjy's and Jason's. Rather, it is to say that Quentin influences how we gauge the other brothers' perceptions of Caddy and how we form our own.[105] The novel's tormented interpreter, he gives her gravity and depth, says what the others are only "trying to say" (53).

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[105] For a similar argument regarding the importance of Quentin's consciousness to *The Sound and the Fury*, see Hunt, "The Disappearance of Quentin Compson." According to Hunt, "Within the novel, each narration works, achieves a complete dramatic statement, although there is truth in Faulkner's repeated claim that he told the story of Caddy four times and never finished it. But key to the sum's being more than its parts is Quentin, not because his section is more true than the others, which it is not, but because his character allows it to be more serious, more resonant across time with meaning and implication about what Caddy's story is – within the novel, in the Yoknapatawpha apocrypha, and for the world of which the apocryphal world is the microcosm" (368-69). More accurately, as Alan Warren Friedman stresses, Faulkner wrote five failed versions of the Compsons' story: sixteen years after completing *The Sound and the Fury*, he wrote the Compson family genealogy for *The Portable Faulkner* (*William Faulkner* 10). Eric Sundquist expands Hunt's insight that Quentin's section is important not only to *The Sound and the Fury* but also to Faulkner's *oeuvre*: "each of Faulkner's major works… from *As I Lay Dying* to *Go Down, Moses*, seems a more complex and powerful reworking of material that would in retrospect appear hidden beneath the surface of Quentin's dilemma, largely unconscious and invisible" (17). Insofar as he compares *The Sound and the Fury* to Faulkner's later novels, Sundquist is correct, but, taking *The Sound and the Fury* on its own terms, quintessential Faulknerian theme is, I would argue, conscious and visible in Quentin's section but largely undeveloped in the rest of the novel; to put it slightly differently, whereas Quentin's section articulates theme, the other sections only present theme obliquely. For instance, it is commonly accepted that the novel portrays the fall of the South. Particularly, it portrays the breakdown of the South's paternalist code of honor, a code that critics discuss in terms of gyneolatry and constructions of aristocratic Southern femininity (e.g., Railey, *Natural Aristocracy* 49-60, and Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* 102-23). Through remembering his father's attitudes toward

Without Quentin, *The Sound and the Fury* would truly be a failure: aesthetically dazzling, perhaps, but without vision. Yet despite his role as primary interpreter, and despite the hundred odd pages of his section – the novel's longest – Quentin's most significant act, his suicide, goes uninterpreted and unrepresented – a strange gap considering the novel's reliance on Quentin for much of its narrative power. Quentin does not know why he wants to commit suicide, spends his final day searching for a justification he fails to find, and finally drowns himself without having articulated the meaning of his suicide to himself or to others. Moreover, like Caddy, who is talked about

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women and his own failure to fend off Caddy's suitors, and, on the day of his suicide, through his abortive brawl with Gerald Bland, Quentin expresses the inability of the South's upper-class males to defend the sexual purity of their women, who, in their eyes, bear the South's soul and ideals and perpetuate the South's familial superiority. Benjy and Jason, for whom the values of the Old South are either non-existent or already long gone, have no awareness of the paternalist code of honor but nevertheless represent its downfall elliptically. Benjy, a castrated idiot incapable of understanding or doing much, let alone defending his sister, cannot comprehend any social value system, paternalist or otherwise. Jason is an avaricious misogynist incapable of treating women as anything other than objects to be manipulated for self-gain, and, like the Snopes family of Faulkner's later fiction, he embraces the capitalist values of the New South without nostalgia for the values of the Old South. He is concerned only with getting, spending, and controlling others, especially Caddy's daughter, whom he does not wish to protect but to use as an instrument of revenge against Caddy and income. Like Benjy and Jason, Quentin is no ideal aristocratic Southern male, but he nevertheless voices, within his section, the collapse of Southern paternalism.

As a final note, although *The Sound and the Fury* does not introduce the topic of miscegenation as a threat to female and family purity, the fear of it, more specifically of black men raping white women, contributed immensely to the post-bellum policing of white female sexuality. See Cash, *Mind of the South* 114-17, and Williamson, *The Crucible of Race* 115-39 and 306-9. Sundquist suggests that the fear of miscegenation is latent in *The Sound and the Fury*. See Sundquist, *The House Divided* 21-25.

but never named or given voice in the novel's present,[106] Quentin's self-drowning is (barely) discussed but never referred to directly or portrayed. The two siblings are therefore inseparable; together, they establish *The Sound and the Fury*'s aesthetics of absence, its dominant aesthetic principle. But while Caddy's absence is generative,[107] producing a series of narratives that fail to tell her story, and while critics explicitly or implicitly recognize this absence when analyzing the novel,[108] the absence of Quentin's suicide from representation and conversation is benign: it neither generates nor razes narrative, is subject to a representational void that has, because of its inactivity and givenness, gone unrecognized. Like Poe's purloined letter, it is overlooked because it is there for everyone to see.

But absence is never merely absence, silence never merely silence, as Quentin, aware of silence's awful tangibility, knows: "'Do you like fishing better than swimming?' I said. The sound of bees diminished, sustained yet, as though instead of sinking into silence, silence merely increased between us, as water rises" (123). For Quentin, silence is an isolating presence; for readers of the novel, it is, I will argue, a

[106] At the Compson household, "'one of they own chillen's name aint never spoke,'" as Roskus says (31), because Mrs. Compson forbids anyone to mention Caddy by name; she doesn't want Caddy's daughter "'to know that she had a mother'" (199).
[107] Caddy's name, however, despite Mrs. Compson's injunction against speaking it, is "pervasive – not only in everyone's memory but also in the continuous cry of 'caddie' emanating from the former Compson pasture that is now a golf course" (Friedman, *William Faulkner* 52).
[108] For the best account of Caddy's generative absence, see Bleikasten, *The Most Splendid Failure* 43-66, especially his provocative thesis that *The Sound and the Fury* "grows out of and refers back to an empty center, a center which one might paradoxically call eccentric… insofar as it represents at once the novel's origin and its *telos*, its generating principle and the ever-receding object of its quest" (51).

marker of both the Compson family's and *The Sound and the Fury*'s failure to acknowledge (and justify) Quentin's suicide, a failure we can trace and accept but not rationalize. *The Sound and the Fury* offers no indications as to why it shrouds Quentin's self-killing in absence and silence; in turn, we can only witness how an already hazy event lapses into further indistinctness and is in danger of being erased from the novel.

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Irving Howe's *William Faulkner: A Critical Study* (1952), one of the earliest book-length treatises of Faulkner's fiction and now a classic, contains a prophetic assessment of scholarship devoted to *The Sound and the Fury*'s Quentin Compson, for despite being written during the dawn of Faulkner studies and aimed at the critics of his time, Howe's assessment anticipates a trend that continues over a half-century after he identified it. Specifically targeting those who read Quentin as a lost soul "searching for standards of conduct and value in a world that has not only lost them but no longer cares about the loss," Howe observes the tendency among his colleagues to put too much "weight" on Quentin, weight that, when it collapses, "forc[es] us to notice the discrepancy between what he is and what he is supposed to signify" (168). Howe's point is simple yet incisive: by burdening Quentin with intentions, desires, and meanings that he, more specifically his narrative, cannot sustain, critics fail to adequately comprehend Quentin's intricate subjectivity and its importance to the novel. When trying to formulate his own understanding of Quentin, Howe answers his initial speculation that Quentin is,

like Benjy, a "case," a casualty of the Compson family tragedy, with another perspicacious remark: "The one character who struggles toward an inclusive view of his family history, Quentin must in some way be seen as a morally aware person, not merely a psychological case" (169). Howe critiques and once again foresees an inclination that continues to be popular not only among critics who practice psychoanalytic literary criticism but also among critics whose methodological and theoretical slants avoid psychoanalysis altogether: the inclination to read Quentin's narrative as if it were a case report detailing the psychological aberrations of a distressed young man determined to die.

One who, as Faulkner puts it, "loved death above all, who loved only death, loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death" ("Appendix" 443), Quentin is undoubtedly troubled and suicidal, but I would argue that the greatest discrepancy between what he is and what he is supposed to signify reveals itself when critics attempt to diagnose rather than simply acknowledge his psychological turmoil. Those who view Quentin as a "patient" and his narrative as a case report, and even those who refrain from doing so overtly but nevertheless resort to psychologizing when conducting their inquiries, put the most unsustainable weight on Quentin, casting him as everything from a classic Freudian melancholic to a neurotic artist-historian suffering from the inability to create a perdurable set of values or meanings.[109] These evaluations serve as legitimate and convenient heuristics when thinking and conversing about

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[109] See, respectively, Bleikasten, *The Most Splendid Failure* 90-120 and Simpson, "Faulkner and the Legend of the Artist."

Quentin, but they nevertheless distill his intricate psychology into a smattering of transparent and often conventional diagnostic statements, none of which rescue Quentin and his disintegrating narrative from their all-pervasive, tenacious indeterminacy. This holds particularly true for assessments of Quentin's self-drowning, which is the most enigmatic, irreducibly complex, and (over)interpreted suicidal act of modernist fiction. The culminating deed of his mental collapse, one that embodies, while terminating, his distress, it inevitably and understandably invites analysis. To assess Quentin's suicide is, ostensibly, to assess his peculiar psychology, but such judgment only expands the incongruity between Quentin and the manifold interpretations he is made to bear.

Explanations for Quentin's self-drowning vary: through it, Quentin satisfies his incestuous desire to unite with Caddy (the most popular understanding), or, more intricately, he simultaneously fulfills and punishes himself for his desire;[110] it allows him

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[110] John T. Irwin and André Bleikasten most famously read Quentin's self-drowning as an attempt to unite with Caddy. Irwin claims that Quentin's suicide is "irreducibly ambiguous," but he nevertheless speculates that it is, in part, a "symbolic incest (a return to the waters of birth, to the womb) that maintains not just Candace's virginity but Quentin's too" (124). Bleikasten goes further, arguing that it "expunges his guilty desire and appeases his need for self-punishment" in addition to achieving "a reunion with the forbidden sister in death: his suicide is incest at last consummated" (118, 119). For other similar arguments regarding Quentin's suicide, see Kinney, *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics* 149; Mortimer, *Faulkner's Rhetoric of Loss* 68; Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* 17-18; Tran, "The Question of Suicide" 52; Matthers, *The Sound and the Fury* 63; Fowler, *Faulkner* 40-41; and Varsamopoulou, "The Crisis of Masculinity and Action" 141. Carvel Collins and Nathaniel A. Miller offer slight variations on the suicide-as-union argument. Collins agrees that Quentin's desire for Caddy influences his suicide, but only insofar as Quentin kills himself because he cannot control this desire: "Quentin has tried to reconcile his difficult conflict between desire and control as a healthy Ego might hope to do… The conflict between his Benjamin-like hunger for Candace and his Jason-like repression of this forbidden feeling proving too much for him, Quentin by the time he begins his monologue has taken over in an extreme fashion the punishing function of

to evade either psychological conflict, nihilism, or the loud, vexing voices that circulate through his psyche, voices that he obliterates, thereby thrusting himself into preferred, permanent silence;[111] it permits him to preserve his intense emotions, especially his despair, before they dissipate;[112] it stems from his devastating passivity;[113] it results from

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the Super-ego and sets out to kill himself" (75). Miller argues that Quentin wants, in a way, to become Caddy: he "attempts to compensate for Caddy's sin (i.e., play her role for her) with his own sacrifice of himself" (46).

[111] James C. Cowan, Karen Ann Butery, and Stephen M. Ross believe that Quentin's suicide is rooted in escape. For Cowan, "because of the Oedipal longings which he has displaced to Caddy, Caddy's subsequent disgrace, and the fall of Compson honor, Quentin must seek to escape the conflicts set up by them by sacrificing himself to the mystery of woman's (mother's, sister's) sex by returning to a pre-natal state of unconsciousness through death by water" (97). According to Butery, "suicide is the only certain escape from nihilism, from the necessity to confront death, and from the claws of self-hate (223). Ross writes, "Quentin's tragedy, which we hear in *his* voice, is that he can never shut out the myriad voices whirling through his mind. He cannot shut them out because they are really all he has…. Only by killing himself does he act wordlessly, seeking silence in death, a soundless void away from his loud world of voices" (112).

[112] Cleanth Brooks, Judith Slater, and Jackson J. Benson deem Quentin's suicide an attempt to preserve his emotions. Brooks speculates, "as the weeks passed after Caddy's marriage, perhaps Quentin did suspect that his anguish was diminishing and might finally become tolerable. Perhaps he killed himself for fear that if he waited longer, the staunchless wound would heal. Perhaps Quentin was really in love with his despair" (333). For Slater, "[h]is emotional needs require a concept of space set off from, and impervious to, the forces of time and sexuality" (4); "Quentin's suicide represents not the breakdown of his defenses, but a logical extension of them, a creative solution within an intensely neurotic system - the achievement of the final fortress, permanently defended" (6). For Benson, Quentin kills himself in order to preserve his "emotional intensity, not allowing it to be dissipated by time so that his father's detachment will at last become his own through the process of aging" (226-27). In contrast to Brooks, Slater, and Benson, Mark Spilka argues that Quentin commits suicide because of his failure at self-preservation, because of "his general disillusionment and… baffled inability to preserve his own integrity of being" (461).

[113] Melvin Backman and William R. Thickstun agree that Quentin's passivity causes his suicide. According to Backman, "Quentin's very withdrawal from life roots not from tragic suffering but from pitiful weakness, a debilitating passivity and a morbid self-centerdness" (106). Thickstun poses Quentin's problem slightly more specifically: "Unable to lead and unwilling to follow, he is repeatedly forced – ultimately in the

an abortive undertaking, either aesthetic (the fictions he creates fail to obscure or help him endure his insufferable reality) or historical (he fails to create a code of family honor, or he gains new knowledge, which dissolves the fundamental principles of his inherited Southern culture and therefore of his worldview, but he cannot create or locate a new framework for this knowledge, losing himself as a result).[114] Like psychological evaluations of Quentin, these explanations are useful when trying to comprehend his suicidal intent, but only insofar as they illuminate irreconcilable possibilities that his narrative hints at vaguely but does not substantiate or refute. It is possible to infer Quentin's supposed belief that self-drowning will allow him to unite with Caddy – the loudest voice of all – from his constant associations of her with water. On the other hand,

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extreme expedient of suicide – to withdraw from the community of shared human experience" (151).

[114] Donald M. Kartiganer, Lewis P. Simpson, and Richard Godden argue that Quentin's suicide results from a failed project. For Kartiganer, Quentin's failure is aesthetic: "Driving words further and further from facts, style from purpose, art from meaning, Quentin is inside his death - the place without life - for much of his monologue. And yet, since the pride of his fiction-making is its admitted distance from the real, Quentin cannot help but acknowledge the agony of what is: that he has not committed incest with Caddy, that she has had several lovers, that she is pregnant with one man's child and is married to another, a 'blackguard.' There is in all this an affront that Quentin's artistry cannot conceal or bear. His only triumph is that he has proved his father wrong at least about one thing: ' no man ever does that [commits suicide] under the first fury of despair or remorse or bereavement" (14). For Simpson, Quentin, a figure of the twentieth-century artist, acknowledges the loss of myth, transcendence and order in the modern era but resists the corrosive forces of historicism. He tries to find meaning by creating for himself a code of family honor, but he fails, killing himself as a result. Ultimately, he is "no dying god (artist as sacrificial redeemer) but a world historical neurotic and self-defeated historian" (93). Godden also sees Quentin as a defeated historian. According to him, Quentin transcends the cultural pathologies instilled in him (e.g., the virgin/whore dichotomy) and opens himself up to the "creative responsibilities of the historian"; however, because Quentin has "no meaningful context in which to place his new information" and is "[a]t a loss for history, not oppressed by it, he kills himself" (128).

it is possible to infer Quentin's supposed desire to flee all voices, Caddy's included, from the curious fact that he increasingly attunes himself to silence as he nears suicide.[115] Both explanations, like the majority of explanations, rely on mapping a series of verbal and imagistic associations equivalent to an interpretable symbolic constellation (a type of objective correlative) that embodies Quentin's decision to kill himself. But, as Hugh Kenner argues, *The Sound and the Fury*, like a Symbolist poem, "elaborates verbal formulae, verbal interactions, creating a world dense with specificity but difficult to specify…. The Symbolist work, avoiding symbols, prolongs what it cannot find a way to state with concision, prolongs it until, ringed and riddled with nuance, it is virtually camouflaged by patterns of circumstance" (205). Rife with suggestion but lacking exactitude, Quentin's section certainly works this way, obscuring a suicidal intent that is ubiquitous yet never articulated, building up, as the novel does with regard to Caddy, a structure of dense language around an absent being it can never reclaim.

Indeed, Quentin's narrative is driven by his intent but does not (re)produce it. Walter J. Slatoff, one of the few critics other than Howe who declines to assess Quentin's suicide, rightfully insists, "[w]e know a great deal about his state of mind after he has decided to die, and we know many of his feelings about Caddy and her wedding, but we never see him moving toward or reaching the decision to take his life" (152). We never see Quentin resolving to kill himself because he has already done so, before the unfolding

[115] Quentin repeats the word "silence" seventeen times, eight times within the last ten pages of his section (88, 115, 123, 124, 125, 149, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 176). In addition, he twice uses the word "silent" (118, 135). Apart from Quentin's section, "silence" appears only once, in the final portion of the novel (272).

of June 2, 1910, on which day he wakes up imagining not his self-drowning but its aftermath: he envisions seeing his bones intermingled with the river's sandy bottom and the flat-irons with which he plans to weigh himself down rising to the surface on Judgment Day. Quentin later ponders his suicide abstractly, wishing he had "something" to "blot" his shadow into the river's water, "holding it until it was drowned"; recounting that "[n]iggers say a drowned man's shadow was watching for him in the water all the time"; struggling to remember Archimedes' buoyancy principle but remembering only that "[t]he displacement of water is equal to the something of something"; expecting Dilsey to consider his suicide a "sinful waste"; and once again imagining Judgment Day, during which, in addition to the flat irons, his "eyes will come floating up too, out of the deep quiet and the sleep, to look on glory" (90, 116). Quentin embraces his decision to drown himself and spends the entire day preparing for his death, but, rather than contemplating the act itself, he anticipates its potential outcomes, calculates the amount of weight he needs to overcome his buoyancy – a mathematical rather than an existential anxiety – and directs his suicidal impulses onto his shadow, as he does throughout the day, whenever he intentionally steps on it – all of which illustrates Quentin's inability to imagine everything but the *experience* of his impending suicide. Like an asymptote, Quentin's morose imagination approaches but never reaches his premeditated death, a proximity equivalent to the one between his narrative and his suicidal intent, with one exception: Quentin may have decided to kill himself before the beginning of his narrative, but this does not entail that he understood his decision; his narrative is, psychologically for him and functionally for the novel, a protracted attempt to zero in on

his intent. Quentin's real or imagined conversation with his father, in the closing pages of his section, represents his last, desperate attempt to justify his suicide, but, against Mr. Compson's lengthy philosophical speculations and objections, he can only reassert his desire to die – his repetitive "i temporary" (177-78) – failing to state an incontrovertible reason for his desire.[116] Quentin's inability to imagine overcoming his father, whose nihilistic presence looms large in his psyche, makes his failure to articulate suicidal intent all the more distressing to him and poignant to us. But, of course, Quentin's endeavor could not have ended up otherwise: it was predestined to fail in a novel that has failure embedded in its genetic code, leaving, to modify Kenner's formulation, a series of verbal interactions dense with specificity but ultimately unable to specify a justification for suicide.

This failure announces itself through Quentin's presumable suicide note, which he writes to Shreve shortly after waking up and, in all probability, mails after his narrative ends. "I'd have to go by the postoffice," Quentin thinks at the end of his section (179), and because he does not want Shreve to receive the note until after he is dead, we can be confident that it is, indeed, a suicide note. Sealed in an envelope and unread by us, it is a structural reminder that Quentin's narrative comes close to, but falls short of, providing an explanation for his self-drowning, a reminder that is amplified when we witness Quentin carrying the note throughout the day, provocatively touching it through his coat, as if it were a closely guarded secret, and feeling it crackle on five occasions. During

[116] Faulkner claimed that the conversations between Quentin and his father never occurred but were imagined. See Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University* 262-63.

these moments, we are made aware of the note's concurrent presence and concealment, of its nearness and inscrutability, which is further intensified when we consider the intelligibility of the second note that Quentin writes to his roommate. The narrative denies us direct access to this note as well but nevertheless illuminates its contents. Quentin gives it to Deacon, asking him to deliver it to Shreve on the following day, and, based on their ensuing conversation, we are to infer that it contains instructions to give Deacon some old clothing that Quentin lays out on the morning of his suicide. Once again, the narrative conveys an effect of Quentin's suicide without envisaging the act directly, and without, in this case, announcing its purpose.

The note functions psychologically as well as structurally, but it does so unintelligibly. Why does Quentin write the suicide note? More pressing, why, in a "slow" narrative driven by the gradual accumulation of obsessive thought and detail, especially as such material relates to Quentin's decision to die, does he write it rapidly, without any deliberation and emotion? "I… wrote the two notes and sealed them" (81), he thinks, the only indication of his act of writing. Has Quentin contrived a hasty explanation for his nebulous suicide? Written a final farewell to Shreve? Provided his roommate with a set of instructions? And why does Quentin, who later develops a keen tactile awareness of his suicide note, initially play down its importance, failing to distinguish it from his second note by lumping both in the same thought? The intensity of Quentin's reflections curiously deflates when he considers his suicide note, leaving intent vague not because of the density but because of the paucity of specificity.

This oddity is superseded by an inexplicable gap in the narrative that invites two unsatisfying explanations. In the final section of *The Sound and the Fury*, Mrs. Compson, believing that Miss Quentin has killed herself, commands Dilsey to "'Find the note… Quentin left a note when he did it'" (283). Quentin's narrative does not contain any reference to a suicide note, so either Quentin has already written one but fails to think about it, or he refuses (or is unable) to write his family a note. Stephen M. Ross and Noel Polk suggest, "Although he does not tell us specifically in his section that he is sending a suicide note home, it is of course possible that he enclosed one with the key to his trunk that he did mail home; perhaps Mrs. Compson is referring to the note he left for Shreve, which Shreve then shared with the family" (180). The former possibility is unconvincing, for Quentin details the contents of the envelope that he mails home, having no reason to omit from his purely descriptive account mention of a suicide note: the envelope contains his trunk key, which he encloses in "a sheet of paper" (81). Moreover, considering his preoccupation, on his final day, with pre-suicide rituals – writing letters, getting rid of possessions, grooming himself – it is highly unlikely that he previously wrote a note to the Compsons. It is more probable that Shreve shares his, but the novel fails to support this explanation. Of course, the novel's inability to account for the note to which Mrs. Compson refers may be attributed to Faulkner's miscalculating the contents of Quentin's section when he wrote the final one. In any case, even if the Compsons read a suicide note, addressed either to them or to Shreve, it did not contain a rationalization for Quentin's self-drowning. "'I don't know. What reason did Quentin have? Under God's heaven what reason did he have? It cant be simply to flout and hurt

me,'" Mrs. Compson laments after Dilsey asks why Miss Quentin would want to kill herself (299-300).

Quentin's failure to justify his suicide to his family and, to a lesser degree, consider at length his letter to Shreve demonstrates his evasiveness regarding explaining his suicide to others. Given Quentin's inability to clarify for himself the nature of his impending self-drowning, this evasiveness is not in itself extraordinary. Its consequences, however, are noteworthy, directing our attention to how others in the novel "read" Quentin's suicide without an explanation for it, or with a potentially unsatisfying one, and how we, as witnesses of Quentin's final thoughts, use our privileged information when observing others read his suicide. Shreve appears only in the June 2, 1910 section, so we never discover what he thinks of his friend's death, but we do observe the Compsons' reactions. Despite her professed ignorance of the reason for her son's suicide, Mrs. Compson, in typical self-persecuting fashion, sees it, along with Caddy's rebelliousness, as one of the many judgments upon her. Jason, who is obsessed with capital, social standing, and the family's squandering of both, believes that his brother's suicide represents a waste of money, property (i.e., Benjy's pasture), and advantage, of everything that a university education requires and represents. "I says no I never had university advantages because at Harvard they teach you how to go for a swim at night without knowing how to swim… I says you might send me to the state University; maybe then I'll learn how to stop my clock with a nose spray" (196), he cynically thinks, asserting that the only lesson Quentin learned at Harvard was how to drown. Not a member of the Compson family but an observer of its downfall, Roskus

insists that Quentin's suicide both embodies and perpetuates the family curse, proving that "'[t]hey aint no luck on this place'" (29). According to him, the bad luck began when the Compsons changed Maurice's name to Benjy, and Quentin's accursed death is second in a sequence of three beginning with Damuddy and ending with Mr. Compson.

Privy to the intricacies of Quentin's mental and emotional turmoil, we deem Mrs. Compson's, Jason's, and Roskus' understandings to be simplistic, dismissive, and, most of all, unsympathetic. Despite their divergent views, they similarly diminish the seriousness of Quentin's suicide, egoistically projecting their personal obsessions and superstitions onto it and, even more insensitively, viewing it merely as one of a series rather than as a single and singular event: it is one more judgment, one more instance of waste, one more mark of misfortune. As Warwick Wadlington contends, it is up to us to supply compassion where none exists:

> Quentin's suicide, an act both momentous and exclusively his, is meant as an adequate public sign of his personal experience. But others take his signal as yet another repetition of the Compson disaster, their 'curse.' Within the novel's setting, this symbol lacks empathetic reading. That we will supply this crucial lack is Faulkner's own gamble on creating tragedy in defiance of its instability. For we can view the passion displayed within the book in a way the characters cannot, and yet the difficulty of the internal monologues necessary for this intimacy challenges our ability to witness. (77)

Wadlington correctly stresses the lack, within *The Sound and the Fury*, of an empathetic reading of Quentin's suicide and our difficulty when trying to get beyond the novel's language in order to provide sympathy, but he erroneously assumes that Quentin intends his self-killing to be a readable, "public sign" of his passion. Wadlington's point is that "Quentin does not want the power of truth acting on language but the empowering recognition elicited by voice. Quentin wants to be heard beyond the words; he wants his *voice speaking* to be heard," a desire that Wadlington connects to "the devastating power, or use, of words" in Faulknerian tragedy "to distract attention from and frustrate the hearing of voice and thus to drown out the silence accompanying the acknowledgement of persons and their experience, quite apart from one's ability to know them" (84, 85). Due to its textual indeterminacies, *The Sound and the Fury* demands that we acknowledge Quentin's pain and suicide without determining the "truth" about them, but it is a stretch to maintain that Quentin kills himself with the aim of eliciting sympathetic acknowledgment from his family. Wadlington's argument rests on locating purpose in a narrative bereft of suicidal intent, a search that is bound, as I have argued, to produce possible but ultimately unsatisfactory answers.

And yet Quentin's suicide is a type of sign. Rather, because Quentin never justifies his self-drowning, leaving only a corpse to his family and his inconclusive thoughts to us, it becomes a sign requiring scrutiny rather than the culmination of pre-established intent and mere means to end a life of turmoil. For the Compsons, the deed is the only satisfactory sign that they can read when coming to terms with Quentin's death, and, as I have shown, they view it as one sign in a series. For us, who must ponder the

deed's importance not only to Quentin's section but also to the entire novel, it is, along with Caddy's (non)representation, the greatest mark of *The Sound and the Fury*'s aesthetics of absence. Despite the protracted lead up to it, Quentin's suicide, unrepresented and shrouded in conversational reticence, remains a barely discernable, muted occurrence.

To demonstrate my point, it is useful to compare Quentin to the other self-killers considered in this dissertation. In terms of representational obscurity, Quentin's suicide parallels but ultimately surpasses Robert Jordan's, Axel Heyst's, and Septimus Smith's. Like Robert Jordan's demise at the hands of the approaching Fascists, Quentin's self-drowning is, within the context of his section, deferred and inferred, unconsummated but certain. More precisely, while it is certain that Quentin will attempt suicide, the outcome of his attempt is unknown. Considering the novel's entire narrative scope, however, Quentin successfully kills himself, but, like Axel Heyst, he does so offstage. We know that he succeeds because the Compsons and their servants subsequently talk about Quentin's suicide. The talk about it is exceptionally oblique and hesitant, though, even more than Captain Morrison's taciturnity when he converses with the Excellency about Heyst's self-immolation, so that if we were to read every section in *The Sound and the Fury* except for Quentin's, we would scarcely grasp that Quentin had killed himself. After reading Benjy's section, we suspect that he is *dead*, a suspicion that would be confirmed when Jason runs into Caddy at Mr. Compson's and Quentin's grave; but we would discover that he had committed *suicide* only when Jason proffers the novel's sole direct reference, which is nonetheless unspecified and easy to overlook, to his self-

drowning: "another one drowned himself" (233). Finally, Quentin's narrative prelude to his suicide, in which his fatal plan is clear, along with the novel's failure to portray and have its characters unambiguously discuss a monumental act that nevertheless occurs, renders Quentin's suicide more anticlimactic and isolated from *The Sound and the Fury*'s representational field than Septimus Smith's self-defenestration in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although *Mrs. Dalloway*'s narrator does not focus on Septimus' fatal impalement, it portrays his leap followed by his impalement's direct aftermath, letting us know immediately that he brings about his own death. In contrast, over the course of roughly one hundred pages, Quentin contemplates but never initiates his self-drowning. After we finish his section, our escalating anticipation of his suicide promptly deflates, and we are left with only a few scattered, obscure references to his fate; his self-drowning, as Alan Warren Friedman writes, "is always about to happen – and then long past" (*William Faulkner* 39-40).

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We first encounter traces of Quentin's suicide before we read his narrative, in Benjy's section. A number of critics maintain that Benjy functions as an unbiased, reliable gateway into the past, introducing, without interpreting or judging, *The Sound and the Fury*'s "plot" and the Compson family's catastrophic history, both of which the remaining narrators distort and develop. Howe, for instance, writes,

> Of all the Compsons, Benjy alone is able to retain the past; he alone has not suffered it in conscious experience. Being an idiot he is exempt from the main course of action and untainted by self-interest. Because he cannot color or shape his memories, his mind serves the novel as an entirely faithful glass…. Benjy does not act or talk or reflect; his only function is to lead directly and without comment into the past. He brings no sharply formulated point of view to his memories. (158-59)

Kartiganer expresses a similar view: "The Benjy section represents extreme objectivity…. In their sections Quentin and Jason are extremely subjective, each imposing a distorted view on experience, in exact contrast to Benjy, who can abstract no order at all…. His monologue is a series of frozen pictures, offered without bias" (7-8). Indeed, Benjy relates, without warping, everything from the novel's generative image of Caddy displaying her muddy drawers while surreptitiously observing Damuddy's funeral to Jason and Miss Quentin's Easter-weekend antagonism. But Benjy offers no immediately recognizable memories of Quentin's suicide. Instead, through fragmented memories of conversations and occurrences, he remembers vague *allusions* to Quentin's *death*, a deed that is categorically different from remembering either his *suicide* or, at the very least, allusions to it; and, surprisingly but tellingly, he does not remember Quentin's funeral (if one was even held; the novel is silent on this issue). Of course, aware only of satisfaction and disturbance, Caddy and not-Caddy, Benjy does not, in any meaningful way, comprehend suicide, death, and bereavement, or, more concretely, that his brother has died; nor does he intentionally disregard or disguise Quentin's self-killing as if he

were ashamed, disgusted, or traumatized. Rather, Benjy relates only what he is exposed to, only what others say or do not say about Quentin, and if he offers a transparent view of the past, then he epitomizes the Compsons' (and *The Sound and the Fury*'s) incapacity to acknowledge Quentin's self-killing.

The first allusion to Quentin's suicide/death appears early in Benjy's narrative when, traveling with Mrs. Compson to the local cemetery, Benjy hears her telling Jason that she would feel safer if he accompanied them. Cynically referring to both Mr. Compson's and Quentin's deaths, Jason replies, "Safe from what… Father and Quentin cant hurt you" (11). The second allusion occurs when Benjy remembers Roskus lamenting to T.P., after Quentin kills himself, "'They been two, now'" – a reaction he later modifies after Mr. Compson dies: "'That's three, thank the Lawd'" (29, 31). In these ambiguous instances, Quentin's suicide is triply muted, first because it is discussed and remembered as a death rather than as a self-killing, second because it is goes undistinguished from Mr. Compson's and Damuddy's deaths, and third because it is treated not as a significant event-in-itself but as a signifier pointing to an unrelated signified: to the absence of a threatening force or, as I have already discussed, to another example of the Compson family curse. Based on Benjy's memories, we would not know that his brother has killed himself, let alone drowned himself, and his muting of Quentin's suicide is further intensified when we consider that he remembers lucidly the deaths of his father and grandmother, thereby freeing them in his narrative from the abovementioned instances of allusion and signification and conveying them instead as remembered events, even if he does not understand the meaning of these events.

Benjy's memories of his father's and grandmother's deaths are inseparable from his recollections of their funerals, recollections that have far-reaching consequences in terms of understanding how and for whom the family mourns. Chronologically, Damuddy's is the first to occur, and it is also the first one that Benjy recalls, setting off a series of tangled memories of Damuddy's, Mr. Compson's, and Roskus' funerals. Although Caddy and Quentin initially believe that their grandmother is sick and argue over whether or not a party is occurring in the house (Jason is silent during the dispute), Frony reveals the truth when she asks, "Is they started the funeral yet" (33). Frony's question prompts Jason to ask what a funeral is; Versh to chastise her for revealing information that, in keeping with Dilsey's command, she should have kept hidden from the children; and Caddy to assert that only "niggers" have funerals, "White folks dont have funerals" (33). Frustrated by Dilsey's order and wishing to enlighten the young Compsons, Frony tells them, "'Your grandmammy dead as any nigger can get,'" to which Caddy replies, "'Dogs are dead… And when Nancy fell in the ditch and Roskus shot her and the buzzards came and undressed her'" (33). Caddy's response exemplifies the children's innocence and ignorance about death and bereavement. At the very least, however, they become conscious of Damuddy's passing and of the existence of funerals, which Frony says are characterized by moaning. Remembering Frony's description of bereavement triggers Benjy to reflect briefly on the moaning at Roskus' funeral – "*They moaned at Dilsey's house. Dilsey was moaning*" (33) – and although he does not recollect, and therefore most likely did not experience, Mr. Compson's death and funeral with the same precision as he did Damuddy's, he nevertheless remembers hearing his

mother crying, smelling his dead father, and seeing, along with the rest of the funeral procession, his father's hearse: "we ran down to the corner of the fence and watched them pass. 'There he go.' T.P. said. 'See that one with the glass in it. Look at him. He laying in there. See him'" (32).

"'Your grandmammy dead as any nigger can get'" (33). "'Look at him. He laying in there. See him'" (32). Frony's and T.P.'s language is candid and succinct; employing directness instead of obliquity and euphemism, they force the siblings to recognize death, to stare it metaphorically and literally in the face. In so doing, both servants violate the Compson adults' wish to keep their departed concealed from their children. "'Let him be unaware of bereavement until he [Benjy] has to'" (197), Uncle Maury says to Caroline when, in his section, Jason recalls his father's funeral – advice that epitomizes the Compsons' approach to thanatotic education. For us, Frony and T.P. unequivocally illuminate deaths and bereavements that, in Benjy's section, would have otherwise remained unknown. They evoke those servants in Victorian fiction who, overhearing and relaying secretive information, and, as a result, betraying their superiors' wish for discretion, serve as narrative collaborators. In light of the blunt and rebellious talk about death, therefore, it is all the more peculiar that none of the Compson servants discuss Quentin's suicide openly or compel Benjy and Jason to consider their deceased brother. The servants' reticence may be attributed to personal reluctance, but it is no different from the Compsons' reticence within Benjy's narrative or within the novel as a whole; moreover, this widespread reserve is accompanied by the Compsons' refusal either to grieve for Quentin or to acknowledge, through speech or memory, that they have

mourned him. In neither Benjy's section nor the rest of *The Sound and the Fury* is an imagined or actual corpse discussed, beheld, or bewailed. No funeral ritual or narrative recounting lays Quentin to rest, memorializes his life, and renders his death meaningful.[117] Only Quentin regards his lifeless body, but even he elides it from his consciousness when doing so, imagining not a complete corpse but his "murmuring bones," which he believes will remain unseen because indistinguishable from "the lonely and inviolate sand. Until on the Day when He says rise only the flat-iron would come floating up" (80); and, later in his section, Quentin imagines his eyes floating to the surface of the St. Charles River along with the irons. His vision of Judgment Day is prescient; it foretells his postmortem fate, his invisibility among the Compsons and within the novel.

And yet Quentin's body was retrieved and buried, since it is, as Jason says to Caddy at the cemetery, "down there" (203); however, his internment does not necessarily entail that he was given a funeral or, if he was, that the Compsons commemorate him. While approaching the graves of his brother and father, at which Caddy stands looking at an estimated "fifty dollars' worth" of flowers, Jason, in his section, is surprised to discover that "[s]omebody" had moved one of the bunches from Mr. Compson's to Quentin's grave (202). That "somebody" is almost certainly Caddy, Quentin's closest family member and, based on everyone else's refusal to acknowledge his suicide, the only person likely to honor his memory. Jason's astonishment over the transfer of the

[117] For a discussion of funerals and narrative reconstruction, how they similarly memorialize the dead, and how they are elided from, or rendered meaningless in, modernist fiction, see Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* 117-40.

bouquet, in conjunction with his identification of the net worth of all the flowers combined (after adjusting for inflation, about six hundred dollars in 2008 currency), demonstrates the extent to which the family ignores Quentin. Although they lovingly adorn Mr. Compson's grave, they decline to ornament Quentin's, to do symbolically what they refuse to do verbally: pay tribute to their dead son and brother. The discrepancy in the quantity of flowers on the graves – a discrepancy that is little different from the one that would have persisted had "somebody" not transferred one bunch – renders Quentin's neglect all the more conspicuous, providing a stark visual for what, in the novel, is usually represented abstractly, through an almost unrecognizable silence to which we must attune ourselves if we are to hear it.

We perceive this silence most fully in Jason's section. Like the quantitative difference between the flowers on Mr. Compson's grave and on Quentin's, the amount of thought Jason devotes to his father's funeral compared to the amount he devotes to his brother's – predictably, zero – accentuates the family's disregard for Quentin. Jason begins to think about Mr. Compson's funeral right before he runs into Caddy at the cemetery. At first, he dwells on its preliminaries: Mrs. Compson crying, lowering her veil, asking Uncle Maury if he is wearing his mourning band, worrying about the "spectacle" (197) Benjy will make if he sees them grieving, and, momentarily forgetting about Jason, complaining that she has no children to support her; Uncle Maury consoling Mrs. Compson, chewing clove stems to mask his alcohol-drenched breath, holding a handkerchief to his mouth and talking away from his sister in order to disguise the smell of cloves, which he fears will inadvertently reveal his drinking. After he momentarily

contemplates Miss Quentin's arrival at the Compson household, Jason again recalls the funeral:

> While we were waiting for them to start she says Thank God if he had to be taken too, it is you left me and not Quentin. Thank God you are a Compson because all I have left now is you and Maury and I says, Well I could spare Uncle Maury myself. Well, he kept on patting her hand with his black glove, talking away from her. He got up near the first, where they were holding the umbrellas over them, stamping every now and then and trying to kick the mud off their feet and sticking to the shovels so they'd have to knock it off, making a hollow sound when it fell on it, and when I stepped back around the hack I could see him behind a tombstone, taking another one out of a bottle…. When they begun to get it filled up toward the top Mother started crying sure enough, so Uncle Maury got in with her and drove off. He says You can come in with somebody; they'll be glad to give you a lift….
>
> Well, I got to thinking about that and watching them throwing dirt into it, slapping it on anyway like they were making mortar or something or building a fence, and I began to feel sort of funny and so I decided to walk around a while. I thought that if I went to town they'd catch up and be trying to make me get in one of them, so I went on back toward the nigger graveyard. I got under some cedars, where the rain didn't come much, only dripping now and then, where I could see when they go

> through and went away. After a while they were all gone and I waited a minute and came out. (200-2)

Mrs. Compson's self-pitying lamentations and Uncle Maury's drinking, along with his desire to hide his bibulousness out of respect for his relatives, foregrounds the surviving family members' anguish, which remains hidden in Benjy's narrative. Jason does not grieve openly, but that he remembers his father's funeral with such nuanced detail shows the degree to which it impacted his psyche. The passage I just quoted is one of the most emotionally subtle passages in Jason's section, revealing his struggle with sorrow, a feeling that, unlike anger, misogyny, jealousy, paranoia, or spite, he has trouble expressing. Disturbed by the hollow sound of dirt hitting casket, Jason hides behind the hack, an evasive, self-preserving act that he repeats at the end of the funeral: dreading the gravediggers' company, he takes cover under a group of cedar trees and waits for them to leave the cemetery in order to avoid accepting a ride from them and thereby displaying his emotional turmoil to others. He describes this turmoil in the only way he can, as a "sort of funny" feeling (202): unnamed, because suppressed, sorrow, which he later displaces into resentment for Uncle Maury. During his run-in with Caddy Jason thinks, "We stood there, looking at the grave, and then I got to thinking about when we were little and one thing and another and I got to feeling funny again, kind of mad or something, thinking about now we'd have Uncle Maury around the house all the time, running things like the way he left me to come home in the rain by myself" (203).

Jason's grief eventually hardens into further resentment, and then into cynicism, over what he considers his father's whiskey-driven self-destruction, and he often

expresses this cynicism in conjunction with ridicule for Quentin's self-drowning. When Mrs. Compson accuses Jason of having "no respect for your father's memory," he retorts, "I dont know why not it sure is preserved well enough to last only if I'm crazy too God knows what I'll do about it just to look at water makes me sick and I'd just as soon swallow gasoline as a glass of whiskey" (233). He also quips about water and whiskey when complaining to himself about his job: "Well, Jason likes work. I says no I never had university advantages because at Harvard they teach you how to go for a swim at night without knowing how to swim and at Sewanee they don't even teach you what water is" (196). (That is, while at college, Mr. Compson learned to drink whiskey straight, without watering it down.) Jason views his father's and brother's deaths similarly, as contemptible, self-induced fatalities, but while his cynicism toward Mr. Compson derives, in part, from his pent-up, unpurged sorrow, his cynicism toward Quentin is unadulterated: anchored in his disgust for the waste that Quentin's suicide represents, untempered by "funny" feelings or memories of collective mourning that would represent an attempt at valuing his brother's life and memory. Moreover, apart from his only direct but nevertheless unidentified and critical reference to Quentin's self-killing – "Like a man would naturally think, one of them is crazy and another one drowned himself" (233) – Jason here alludes to the deed indirectly, mutes what he cannot accept, molds the silence to which Benjy merely points.

While Jason talks about Quentin's suicide obliquely, Mrs. Compson erases it altogether from her mind and from her speech:

> "You don't know what a comfort you are to me," she says. "You have always been my pride and joy, but when you came to me of your own accord and insisted on banking your salary each month in my name, I thanked God it was you left me if they had to be taken."
>
> "They were all right," I says. "They did the best they could, I reckon."
>
> "When you talk that way I know you are thinking bitterly of your father's memory," she says. "You have a right to, I suppose. But it breaks my heart to hear you." (225-26)

Using the plural pronoun "they" when discussing the deaths that have left her dependant on Jason, Mrs. Compson initially has in mind both her husband and Quentin. After Jason tries to speak kindly about them, however, she disregards Quentin, accusing her son of mocking only Mr. Compson's memory, curiously assuming, despite his use of the plural pronoun, one of two possibilities: either Jason bears no animosity for Quentin and therefore feels no need to desecrate his memory or he bears animosity but thinks it not worth desecrating. In any case, Mrs. Compson, overlooking the many occasions in which Jason condemned Quentin's suicide – we are to believe that he repeats his denunciations, as he does his "once a bitch always a bitch" grievance like a refrain (180, 263) – does not, perhaps cannot, believe that he would expend emotional energy on his brother, and by couching Jason's emotions in legal terms, Mrs. Compson doubly draws attention to Quentin's elision from her thoughts. In her estimation, Jason has a "right" to think ill of his dead father, a right that she does not consider applying to Quentin, who Jason

believes did as much as Mr. Compson to destroy the family, squandering irretrievable opportunity, money, and property along the way.

Yet of all *The Sound and the Fury*'s characters, Mrs. Compson comes closest to speaking about Quentin's suicide straightforwardly, to rescuing it from silence, muteness, and obliquity. But even she fails, while talking to Jason, to identify it; hesitating at the final moment, she truncates acknowledgment:

> "When Quentin started to school we had to let her go the next year, so she [Caddy] could be with him. She couldn't bear for any of you to do anything she couldn't. It was vanity in her, vanity and false pride. And then when her troubles began I knew that Quentin would feel that he had to do something just as bad. But I didn't believe that he would have been so selfish as to—— I didn't dream that he——" (261)

Mrs. Compson moves from euphemism – "her troubles"; "something just as bad" – to attempting direct expression, twice lapsing into speechlessness when on the verge of mentioning Quentin's suicide, leaving it shrouded in silence, hinted at but effaced by the text's protracted dashes. Her struggle to articulate what in the novel is virtually unutterable not only intensifies the representational obscurity of Quentin's suicide, promising but ultimately withholding an uncomplicated declaration of its occurrence; it also reveals the consequences of failing to mourn or accept Quentin's suicide. Unable to think about it, Mrs. Compson is unable to discuss it; her dumbness is *The Sound and the Fury*'s most poignant symptom of its refusal to render Quentin's self-killing intelligible. "'Maybe he knew it was going to be a girl,'" Jason sarcastically interjects, referring to

Caddy's daughter, while trying to change the course of conversation, "'And that one more of them would be more than he could stand'" (261). An evasive maneuver, Jason's hollow speculation regarding the cause of Quentin's self-drowning – the only speculation the novel offers, as if to underscore the futility of all conjecture – turns his mother's attention away from the raw fact of suicide and toward its possible justification, jolting her back into articulateness, saving her from further aposiopetic distress.

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Justification for suicide is precisely what Mrs. Compson requests but does not receive in *The Sound and the Fury*'s final section. A farcical repetition rather than a purgative resolution of many of the novel's anxieties, the end, through the disappearance of Caddy's daughter, Miss Quentin, reiterates ironically the obscurity and erasure of Quentin's self-killing, confirming his belief that "[a]gain" is the "[s]addest of all" words (95).[118] According to Mrs. Compson, Miss Quentin reincarnates the worst qualities of

[118] J. Hillis Miller provides an excellent account of repetition in narrative fiction, separating (following Giles Deleuze) repetition into two distinct but nevertheless interdependent categories: Platonic and Nietzschean. Platonic repetition entails an inalterable archetypal model, a principle of similarity, and copies that duplicate the model. Nietzschean repetition entails fundamental difference and "ungrounded doublings which arise from differential interrelations among elements which are all on the same plane"; such repetition produces an eerie effect in which "X repeats Y, but in fact it does not" (6). According to Miller, Nietzschean repetition is not a "negation or opposite" of the Platonic form of repetition, "but its 'counterpart,' in a strange relation whereby the second is the subversive ghost of the first, always already present within it as a possibility which hollows it out" (9). This complementariness is at play in *The Sound and the Fury*'s final section. Mrs. Compson views Miss Quentin as both a Platonic and a Nietzschean repetition of Quentin. As someone who, according to Mrs. Compson,

her dead son (and daughter), qualities that persist as a type of punishment sent to torment her from beyond the grave (and from exile): "'she has inherited all of the headstrong traits. Quentin's too. I thought at the time, with the heritage she would already have, to give her that name, too. I think she is the judgment of both of them upon me'" (260-61). Indeed, the novel analogizes niece and uncle – for example, when Miss Quentin tells Jason that she is "going to hell… I'd rather be in hell" and later pronounces, "I wish I was dead" (189, 260) – but these resemblances are rough analogies rather than exact equivalencies: banal, childish outbursts that echo and attenuate Quentin's unfeigned, urgent desire to escape with Caddy into their own private hell and, in the end, to kill himself. They are meant to establish ironic rather than tragic repetition, which Mrs. Compson presumes is occurring when she concludes that Miss Quentin has, like her namesake, killed herself. She deems this repetition preordained – "'I knew the minute they named her Quentin this would happen'" (283) – and hereditary – "'It's in the blood. Like uncle, like niece'" (299) – demanding that Dilsey look for a suicide note solely because "'Quentin left a note when he did it'" (283). After Dilsey asks why Caddy's daughter would want to kill herself, Mrs. Compson questions Quentin's (nonexistent) motive, as if it would help explain the current, apparent suicide: "'I don't know. What reason did Quentin have? Under God's heaven what reason did he have?'" (299).

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inherits her uncle's traits, most importantly his suicidal impulses, she is a Platonic copy of him. But that Miss Quentin does not kill herself, as Mrs. Compson believes she does, demonstrates Nietzschean repetition, for her disappearance is taken to be a suicide like Quentin's when it is, in fact, not a suicide at all but an escape from the Compson household. For more on repetition, see Miller, *Fiction and Repetition* 1-21.

No justification for Miss Quentin's suicide is offered because it did not occur; rather, as Jason instantly understands, she has run away with the red-tied carnival worker, thereby escaping the succession of tragedies, and the tragic household, to which Mrs. Compson accuses her of contributing. Mrs. Compson's envisioning her disappearance as a suicide, her jumping to conclusions without considering the evidence at hand or, at the very least, other alternatives, derives from her tragic mentality, one that all the Compsons share. Delineating this mentality in his study of *The Sound and the Fury*, Wadlington contends that the Compson's "schismatic, incipiently tragic mental habits," which "are strikingly – though perversely – like a two-value logic," produce repetition in the novel, reducing "compound entities, gradations, and probabilities" into the "Yes or No of tragic dilemma": "the very ubiquity of tragic schism ironically produces the repetitions, inconclusive situation of tragedy's opposite. Instead of catastrophe, there is repeated disaster" (67). Mrs. Compson cannot, when confronting Miss Quentin's disappearance, perceive difference. She fails to accept Miss Quentin as an autonomous agent who acts independently, unconstrained by a supposed inherited impulse to kill herself, beyond the series of judgments to which Mrs. Compson is allegedly victim – and, for Mrs. Compson, the "Yes or No of tragic dilemma" is whether or not one of her family members passes judgment on her by committing an appalling act. To expand Wadlington's observation that she is obsessed with comparing the Compsons' status to the Bascombs' (69), Mrs. Compson polarizes her family into the former and latter groups, dividing it into those who damn her to further dejection (Mr. Compson, Caddy, Benjy, Quentin, and Miss

Quentin), and those who care for her (Jason, whom she calls a Bascomb despite his name [182], and her brother Maury).

Mrs. Compson's tragic mentality may be responsible for her seeing a suicide that does not exist, but something else is responsible for her seeing tragic repetition; that she views Miss Quentin's supposed suicide as a preordained recurrence of Quentin's actual one, and that she acts as if she were reliving the aftermath of Quentin's suicide, shows the extent to which she has failed to mourn her son and, indeed, erased his self-killing from her consciousness. When Miss Quentin disappears, Mrs. Compson experiences something like a Freudian return of the repressed: Quentin's unexorcised, silenced ghost returning in different form to demand recognition from someone who cannot grant it, someone who, failing to accept that her son's suicide lacks motivation, (re)demands a justification she knows does not exist. With Mrs. Compson's reaction to Miss Quentin's disappearance, the novel's final section shows the consequences of failing to mourn the dead; to send newly liberated spirits to the afterlife, symbolic or actual; and to exorcise ghosts, who continue to linger on earth or in the consciousness of survivors because they have not been laid to rest, all of which failures Alan Warren Friedman connects to the often circular structures of modernist novels, novels that, according to him, return "repeatedly and ultimately to terminal events they rarely confront or transcend" (*Fictional Death* 18): in the case of *The Sound and the Fury*, to Quentin's self-killing.[119] The greatest irony of Mrs. Compson's situation is that she will once again fail to confront

[119] See also Friedman's appositely titled chapter, "Funerals and Stories," *Fictional Death* 117-40.

Quentin's suicide and, as a result, lay his spirit to rest, for there is no suicide to come to terms with, no new and equivalent death to mourn; Mrs. Compson is fretting over a non-event.

More ironic repetitions abound. The final section occurs on Easter Sunday, 1928, a day that is itself a repetition, repeating yearly the celebration of Christ's resurrection. Miss Quentin's escape from her room mocks this commemoration as well as the resurrection by ironically reenacting Christ's escape from his tomb. She leaves behind her own wrappings: in this case "a soiled undergarment of cheap silk a little too pink" (282) that signifies flesh rather than a spiritual victory over flesh. Less obvious is the Christ/Quentin/Miss Quentin repetition, which John T. Irwin outlines in his pioneering study of *The Sound and the Fury*. To establish the Christ/Quentin parallel, one he acknowledges is "distorted" (154), Irwin calls attention to Quentin's correlating his suicide and the resurrection on Judgment Day, the liturgical dating of the sections surrounding Quentin's narrative (Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday), and Mr. Compson's description of Quentin's flesh-denying suicidal intent (52-3, 147): "you are not thinking of finitude you are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and of the flesh" (*S&F* 177).[120] To add Miss Quentin to the series, Irwin argues that the novel

[120] Irwin pushes the Christ/Quentin connection too far when he avers that a common sacrificial principle underlies their self-willed deaths: "the principle of sacrifice is the same as that of self-castration – the giving up of a part to save the whole, and in both sacrifice and self-castration the part is given up to save the whole from the wrath of the father. But in Christ's sacrifice and Quentin's suicide, the *son* is the part that is given up, and self-castration is death" (153-54). Despite his admission that Quentin's suicide is

places her escape from the Compson household within the context of Christ's death and resurrection just as it does, to similar effect, Quentin's self-killing.[121] The ironic repetition that Irwin notices triply emphasizes the impenetrability and erasure of Quentin's suicide. Christ's self-willed death had purpose, was intended to redeem mankind; Quentin's lacks intent. Christ's death was mourned and is regularly commemorated; Quentin's goes unforgotten and unspoken. Finally, Christ's resurrection enabled him to transcend human suffering and tragedy; Quentin's death and "resurrection" as Miss Quentin, whose own "resurrection" her surrogate mother/Mary mistakes, contrary to its intended purpose, which is to transcend the repetitious Compson tragedy, as an inexplicable suicide akin to Quentin's, initiates an elaborate circular joke

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"irreducibly ambiguous," Irwin comes dangerously close to establishing intent where none exists, to claiming that Quentin, like Christ, kills himself in order to escape his father's anger and, as he writes earlier, to "satisfy the justice of the father" (124). Unlike Irwin's other comparisons of Quentin to Christ, comparisons that rely on structural similarity rather than common intent to draw ironic correspondences between the two figures, this one cannot be made without assuming on some level that Quentin is like Christ insofar as he kills himself with the same goal in mind.

[121] Citing Matthew 19:12, Irwin points out that Christ encourages his disciples to make themselves eunuchs so they can better enter into the kingdom of heaven, and he goes on to write, "In Quentin's distorted version of Christ's sacrifice, what is transmitted beyond death is not the phallic power but the interruption of that power" (154). That is, Quentin's suicide is a castrating act (aimed at his father) insofar as it ends generation, guaranteeing that the family bloodline will not continue. According to Irwin, Miss Quentin also accomplishes a symbolic revenge-castration. Before she escapes, she steals the money that Jason had embezzled from her, thereby castrating Jason, who bears his father's name and for whom money is akin to power, specifically the power to buy sex from his prostitute girlfriend Lorraine; moreover, it is significant that the agent of castration bears Quentin's name: Miss Quentin is a Quentin substitute enacting revenge on a Mr. Compson (Jason) substitute (155). Again, implicit in Irwin's argument is the dubious assumption that Quentin intends to castrate his father by killing himself; Miss Quentin obviously seeks revenge on Jason, but it is unclear if Quentin seeks revenge on Mr. Compson.

that, as it loops back on itself, further empties Quentin's un-Christlike self-killing of significance. "Christ was not crucified," Mr. Compson was fond of saying, "he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels" (77). As with Mr. Compson's Christ, repetition erodes Quentin, turning what would and should have been his momentous suicide into an inconsequential, vacuous event.

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In addition to its auditory title and nature, *The Sound and the Fury* is an intensely visual novel; replete with mirrors, gazes, and characters – specifically Quentin and Jason – who recurrently and anxiously notice other people watching them, it is the most visually oriented novel considered in this dissertation. The graphic eye that graces the Mottson billboard is *The Sound and the Fury*'s final, most explicit depiction of looking, scrutinizing, and detecting; its electric pupil intensifies its piercing, ominous stare. The representational absence of Quentin's suicide, its invisibility among a profusion of gazes and cross-gazes, discoveries and rediscoveries, is therefore all the more striking. It is the major unseen, unremembered event in a novel that is so much about re-seeing the past, in most cases to a paralyzing degree, through the reconstituting and often transformative powers of memory. Later in his career, Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (*Requiem* 92), an adage often read as his defining artistic statement, but in his first major novel, the past is, with respect to Quentin's suicide, dead and forgotten.

Likewise, since *The Sound and the Fury* is a tapestry of voices and so much of it is propelled by speech and speech's power to elicit further articulation, whether it be admission, denial, complaint, or howl, the scarcity, obliquity, and, at times, elision of talk about Quentin's suicide is all the more noticeable in this, the most aural novel I discuss. Beyond not representing in text or in memory the act of suicide and the family's response to it, what threatens to erase Quentin's self-killing from the novel (and from Compson family history) is not Mr. Compson's beloved reductio ad absurdum but an argumentum e silentio.[122] As it is with respect to Mrs. Compson, who refuses to speak Caddy's name in order to keep Miss Quentin ignorant of her mother's existence, silence in the novel is a mark of rejection and willed ignorance. By muting Quentin's suicide and presenting distorted, barely perceptible references to it, the novel risks displaying ignorance over one of its most consequential events.

This is not to say that, by courting ignorance, the novel hazards undermining its aesthetic and narrative power, its ability to render Quentin's suicide compelling if not entirely knowable; nor, by failing to represent the deed, does it diminish the power and importance that Quentin's suicide, like all suicides, necessarily radiates. On the contrary, through the demands it places on the reader, *The Sound and the Fury*'s treatment of Quentin's self-killing is a remarkable achievement, one of Faulkner's and modernist fiction's greatest. As Quentin, on his final day, feels but does not see or hear the "secret

[122] An "argumentum e silentio," or argument from silence, can be either a type of conclusion or a type of argument: "[a] conclusion based on silence, i.e., on lack of contrary evidence" ("Argumentum e Silentio") or "[t]he deduction from the absence of any known reference to a subject in the extant writings of an author that he was ignorant of it" ("Silence, the Argument From").

places" (136) covered by the St. Charles River, we feel at every turn of the page what the novel hides beneath its oceanic prose and precludes us from seeing or hearing. More than *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Victory*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*, more than any modernist novel in which suicide plays a prominent role, *The Sound and the Fury* requires us to read the closest, think the clearest, and feel the deepest if we are to rescue Quentin from the emptiness and silence it skillfully shapes. Ultimately, *The Sound and the Fury* pushes our imaginations the furthest when impelling us to accept suicide's inscrutability.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I attempted to say something about an unknowable and therefore unsayable subject, to read and interpret carefully with the aim of accentuating suicide's resistance to interpretation, to preserve the tension between self-killing's identifiableness and indefinableness, a tension that renders suicide, in Anne Sexton's terminology, "almost unnamable." My attempt was necessarily oblique, specifically because I refrained from interpreting suicide but interpreted the thematic, aesthetic, historical, and biographical issues that relate to, but do not determine or explain, the self-killings I analyzed. That is, pursuing various directions and indirections, I tried to illuminate the possibility of discussing suicide in the modernist novel without articulating causal, moral, or any other type of significance, and I argued that, when critics interpret self-killing, they act insensitively: not only do they deny the modernists' wish to safeguard suicide from judgment; in many cases, while evaluating a character's suicide, they also appropriate it into an extensive argument that has little to do with voluntary death, thereby diminishing its particularity. I tried to counteract insensitive readings of modernist self-killing, therefore, by providing a model of criticism attentive to the limits of the knowable, attuned to the nuances of individual self-killings, and grounded in interpretive friction and incapacity rather than interpretive consolation.

Attentive versus insensitive reading practices; the discomfort yet necessity of not knowing versus the comfort of knowing: these oppositions speak to an interest that supersedes the realm of the literary. Indeed, this dissertation, along with its principal

concern – as I mentioned in the introduction, to reclaim for modernist suicides their inherent impenetrability and to restore to literature the ambiguities that critics frequently explain away – was not merely aesthetically or critically motivated, not aimed exclusively at spotlighting long-ignored textual subtleties, analyzing complex representational practices, producing novel (non)interpretations of self-killing, and contributing to the critical conversation about fictional death and suicide. My intent was not to generate readings that were aware only of their inability to understand suicide and of their desire to neutralize critical readings that claim to comprehend why characters kill themselves. Instead, the reading methods and arguments I adopted were motivated, first and foremost, by a humanistic objective: to ask us to consider carefully how we understand and talk about self-killing, actual as well as fictional. More precisely, my aim was to urge us to talk about suicide respectfully instead of insensitively, by refraining from reaching too-easy conclusions when coming to terms with it.

Suicide certainly calls for words – for acknowledgment, expressions of mourning, and expressions of sympathy to the bereaved – but it does not call for easy answers or moral judgment, both of which serve only to deny suicide's ineffability and to satisfy our desire for reassuring, conceptual intelligibility. It may be natural, perhaps even necessary, for us to examine whatever traces and pursue whatever avenues we think may help clarify a particular self-imposed death, but we must relinquish our interpretive desire and accept that our wish for clarity always rubs up against suicide's ineradicable opacity, that the only sense we can make of suicide is that it makes no sense, at least not one we can articulate. Such relinquishment may be initially discomforting, but it is essential, for

answers may not exist, or if they do, they are unrecoverable, sealed permanently, along with the self-killer, in an unbreakable silence. In either case, articulating a reason for suicide amounts not only to explaining away its ineffability but also to usurping the narrative authority of the person who has chosen to die: the only person who could provide a reason or maintain that no reason exists. It is to project our own voices into a well of silence and to hear them echoing back to us; listening only to ourselves, we would never hear the silence and consider its implications, and we would never consider that the self-killer's decision to die may have been difficult, never as clearly defined – or morally tidy – as we imagine. What is more, when giving reasons and pronouncing judgment, we also act insensitively toward surviving loved ones, many of whom have, at some point in the grieving process, relinquished, either partially or fully, their need for answers. As one researcher puts it, "'[a]gonizing questions'" usually "interfere with the ability of the survivor of suicide to accomplish grief work," and those who find "a way to accept the death while preserving their own self-worth" express "either a partial understanding of why the suicide had occurred, or some realization that there were no answers to their antagonizing questions" (Van Dongen 32, 35). How do we respect the pain and healing of survivors, then, if not by stifling our urge to seek answers and to evaluate the actions of the departed? How do we show sympathy if not by limiting our words?

I learned to relinquish my own desire for answers and to limit what I say about suicide only after I grew frustrated, over the course of multiple re-readings, with my inability to interpret modernist portrayals of self-killing, only after I finally realized that Hemingway, Conrad, Woolf, and Faulkner aim to frustrate interpretation. My call to

restrict what we know and say about suicide, therefore, echoes the modernists' own. When Hemingway portrays the final thoughts and moments of Robert Jordan ambiguously, when Woolf imbues Septimus Smith's suicide scene with representational anxiety and uncertainty, when Faulkner renders Quentin Compson's narrative vague because excessively suggestive, and when Conrad has Captain Davidson refuse to speculate about Axel Heyst, they show tremendous respect for their fictional self-destroyers, protecting them from analysis and judgment. During these moments, the modernists are not merely reacting against the history of suicide in the West, not merely attempting to "make it new"; instead, they are displaying the tension between saying and not saying, along with the disquieting friction representation produces when it rubs up against the limits of the unrepresentable, that makes suicide both recognizable and ineffable. It is through their careful use of language that the modernists impel us to understand the gravity of their suicidal characters' decisions and deeds, and it is through the same use of language that they ask us to surrender understanding, lest we become like so many of their unsympathetic characters, all those Sir William Bradshaws and Mrs. Compsons, who thoughtlessly judge the self-killers among them and turn the "almost unnamable" act into something fully namable.

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