

Poetry of Lost Loss: a Study of the Modern Anti-Consolatory Elegy

by

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Abstract

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Bypassing the current theory that attributes the absence of consolation in modern elegies to melancholic mourning and skepticism about elegiac conventions, this dissertation interprets such disconsolation through the phenomenon of “lost loss”: a feeling that a specific loss is either absent, ineffectual, or itself lost, or has become a stand-in or screen for something else. Poetry of lost loss simulates a mood more aptly described as one of a subdued, causeless, chronic “dysthymia”: when the loss is itself lost and is felt only as a dysthymic trace, the notion of mourning becomes obsolete, since there is nothing left to be mourned for except a faint echo of undefined dispossession.

To investigate the origin of this obsolescence, Chapter 1 studies how William Wordsworth’s later poems and *Essays upon Epitaphs* regard elegies as necessary fictions. Chapter 2 hypothesizes that Wallace Stevens’s creation of the fictive “mythology” in his allegorical elegies unveils the loss of loss, and suggests that the function of elegy is less to mourn and console than to attempt to locate an unplaced feeling of equivocal loss through its exploratory utterances. Using these core concepts—how the loss of loss leads to a creation of a fictive, makeshift expressive medium similar to what Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok call a “phantom” in *The Shell and the Kernel*—Chapter 3 surveys various forms of lost loss in Theodore Roethke’s generic elegies, John Berryman’s *Dream Songs*, and Sylvia Plath’s poems of 1963. Chapter 4 reads Elizabeth Bishop’s *Geography III* as a case of an anxiety over the prospect of lost loss.

In conclusion, the dissertation observes that, in the dysthymia of lost loss, a loss would be left unrecognized until the elegy constructs the fact of the loss and adds a linguistic shape to it. To capture such elusive traces of privation, elegists create phantoms—like Stevens’s sarcophagus allegory or Roethke’s imaginary Aunt Tilly—to forge figurations for vague dejections. In the dismal catastrophe of reality, one finds a way to live in the world of imagination: the poetic forgery of loss is a product of this dysthymic lost loss.

## Introduction

Near the conclusion of H. Anno's apocalyptic film, "Evangelion," a scientist destroys her lifework project amidst the losses that continue to mount as the world heads toward its demise. In one of the climactic scenes, the scientist is asked why she did what she did. She answers:

My cats died. I had left them at my grandmother's. I hadn't seen them in a long time. All of a sudden, I won't be able to see them again.

While pet loss can devastate some pet-owners, the death of her cats is not the cause of the overwhelming sense of loss that prompts the scientist to sabotage the project on which she had devoted her lifetime; if that were the case, the magnitude of the action would seem disproportionate to the cause. The cats had already been in some sense "lost" to the scientist before their actual death; she "hadn't seen them in a long time." For this reason, the death of her cats becomes a partial metonym for the larger whole of an underlying sense of loss in which all smaller, individual losses are subsumed and obliterated. The scientist, not possessing the language to capture the depth of loss that is too overwhelming to be made into words, uses the more visible, proximate death of the cats as a makeshift figure to represent the overarching loss, which has been lost or made inaccessible to her psyche, either through incomprehension or inexpression.

In this dissertation, I collect and investigate instances of such elusive feelings of semi-, half-, sub-, or un-conscious losses and their resistance to verbalization, which are

at the heart of many of the nineteenth and twentieth century anti-consolatory elegies. Such equivocal losses take many different forms: subtle losses hidden beneath more apparent and visible losses; proleptic losses, a kind that has not yet come to actuality; losses in the long-gone past that have left the surface, but continue to remain in the recesses of our consciousness; distant or imagined losses; or losses too overwhelming to be conceptualized, like the sun too blinding for us to see with our own eyes. These vague or figurative losses differentiate themselves from those of the expressly lamentative elegies—a target of much of the previous elegy scholarship—in that they express themselves as a sense of dysthymia: a type of less acute but chronic melancholia that persistently remains in the background of one’s psyche. In the chronicity of dysthymia, the losses express themselves so faintly, as mere traces, as to elude our linguistic and cognitive apparatus and resist facile closures; the ambiguity or disappearance of the lost object makes the cognitions or resolutions of the loss problematic. This phenomenon is what this dissertation calls the “loss of loss.”

This elusive dysthymia of equivocal loss surfaces most frequently in the anti-consolatory elegy, or what elegy scholars customarily refer to as the “anti-elegy”—a subset of elegies that do not conform to the conventional loss-consolation paradigm in traditional elegies, either by flouting the paradigm or foregoing it altogether. The present dissertation examines specifically the dysthymic workings of elegiac disconsolation: namely, how the disconsolation of many of the modern anti-elegies can be traced to the dysthymic sense of “loss of loss”—a feeling that a specific loss is either absent, ineffective, itself lost, or has become a stand-in or screen for something else. This “loss



of loss” lurks behind the modern anti-elegies’ undertone of persistent melancholia and their inability to bring themselves to consolatory closures.

Since Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning* (1994), anti-elegies have largely been associated with the eruptive violence and emotional surges seen in such instances as John Berryman’s radical denunciation of his dead father—“I spit upon this dreadful banker’s grave / who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn”—or Sylvia Plath’s no less bitter rant on her dead father in “Daddy,” which concludes, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” The strain of anti-elegy that this dissertation will study, however, revolves around a more subdued, veiled feeling of lost loss: the elegies in this dissertation do not so much attack the loss-consolation paradigm of the traditional elegies but rather present a paradigm in which feelings of dispossession continue to haunt in the absence or obfuscation of visible object-loss. And those faint senses of loss cannot be easily exorcised because they are masked by more immediate afflictions. Such vague, dysthymic loss of loss may be best exemplified in a poem titled “Cellars and Attics” by Malka Heifetz-Tussman. In the poem, the speaker’s friend tells her about his elderly parents’ old house with attics and cellars that represent one’s family history. After describing how his children take joy in opening the trunks full of “Great-great possessions” that are likely mementos of their great or great-great grandparents, the friend asks a question that the speaker can only answer with a question of her own:

“So much history, tradition  
In old attics!  
Children should know where  
They come from...”

And Teddy asks,  
“Where is your old house—  
Your cellar and your attic?”

And I answer in a Jewish way—  
A question with a question,  
“Indeed, where is  
My grandfather’s old house?” (63-66, 109-115)<sup>1</sup>

This poem is about a child of the Holocaust survivors—the “second generation,” for whom “everything earlier exists only in memory” because “there are no things before [their] parents emigrated.”<sup>2</sup> The speaker, having lost her ancestors, does not, consequently, have the “cellar and attic” that are symbolic of family history and tradition. Nonetheless, the acute trauma of the Holocaust itself is expunged out of the poem’s consciousness altogether: all that remains here is the unexplainable melancholy of answering a question with a question, an irresolvable question after an unanswerable question. An old house, history, tradition, cellar, attic—those represent the traces, records, or reminders of what has been lost, and, as such, are reified embodiments of loss. The speaker tries to express a feeling of having lost such traces of loss, by creating a phantom ideation of cellars and attics and querying where her grandfather’s old house is. A loss of loss is signaled by the indeterminate feeling of loss expressed in the speaker’s open-ended question that concludes the poem—is the speaker lamenting the loss of her grandfather, his old house, the fact that she has none of those, or something else?

The feeling of dejection arising from such loss of loss remains irresolute, keeps echoing persistently and pervasively in the background, and is difficult to locate; even when this faint echo of loss is registered, its expressive tropes diffuse the sense of dispossession. The sentiment is akin to that of looking at the cashbox-skyline of present-day Chicago full of modern skyscrapers, a city that chose to make itself new, rather than restore itself, after a devastating fire: there’s a faint feeling that something else was once there, and that this “something else” has been lost, but that the present scene betrays no

sign of what has been lost, and, as a result, it leaves little to be mourned for, since no history of loss is found there. Likewise, “not having an old house with a cellar and attic” evokes only a dull kind of semi-, half-, sub- or un-conscious loss that detaches itself from the object of loss, prolonging its melancholy without closure.

Whether as the death of cats that metonymizes a larger, more overwhelming loss or as nonexistent cellars and attics that symbolize the loss of ancestors, lost losses manifest themselves as phantasmal hauntings, as suggested in the idea of “phantom” loss theorized by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994). The present dissertation hypothesizes that the dysthymia of lost loss constitutes one of the major, and yet understudied, sources of the anti-consolatory undertones of modern anti-consolatory elegies. In proposing this hypothesis, the dissertation examines the variant, phantom-like manifestations of lost loss in the works of William Wordsworth (Chapter 1), Wallace Stevens (Chapter 2), the Confessional poets including Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath (Chapter 3), and Elizabeth Bishop (Chapter 4). In these poets’ anti-consolatory elegies, the unplaceable “lost loss” enacts the poetics of the ongoing, whereby each elegy’s ideation becomes a provisional expedient, a temporary artifact, which destroys itself in its self-perpetuating, self-consuming search for truer resolutions it cannot find. And between this ongoing cognitive motion necessitated by the lack of closure and the ruminative stasis induced by prolonged melancholia, we find a space for life after loss.

## I. Critical Tradition and the Intervention of this Dissertation

Traditionally, elegy has been read as a poem of mourning that “frequently includes a movement from expressed sorrow toward consolation.”<sup>3</sup> Earlier scholarship of elegiac poetry tends to focus precisely on this consolatory potential. For instance, in *Placing Sorrow* (1976), Ellen Zetzell Lambert highlights the relation between elegiac consolation and pastoral landscape by commenting that some form of regeneration, such as is found in nature, can also be at work in human losses.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Peter Sacks’s well-known book, *The English Elegy* (1985), examines elegies as works of mourning that guide the grieving mourner toward a compensatory consolation for the loss.

Sacks’s “work-of-mourning” model, particularly influential in elegy studies,<sup>5</sup> derives from several of Sigmund Freud’s writings, most prominently from his essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” and from the *fort-da* episode in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.<sup>6</sup> One of the major contributions to elegy studies by “Mourning and Melancholia” is its distinction between “successful” and “failed” types of mourning.<sup>7</sup> As a model of this “successful” mourning, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* presents the game of *fort-da*, which Freud sees as a mental exercise for the child conditioning himself to the process of loss, detachment, and rediscovery. In *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks adapts Freud’s theories to formulate a model of mourning that begins with a loss of the object, then proceeds to a renunciation of the object, and culminates in the mourner’s acceptance of the compensatory substitute as well as the very practice of compensatory substitution.<sup>8</sup>

If Sacks’s *The English Elegy* studies the successful or normative mourning of traditional elegies, Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning* examines the ambivalence and irresolution of the failed or “melancholic” mourning of the modern elegies, which evince the astringency of modern death and bereavement. For Ramazani, melancholia, or a

general resistance to the normative “work of mourning,” is what defines the modern poetic elegy.<sup>9</sup> In Ramazani’s work, this “failed” mourning constitutes a challenge to the consolatory promise of the compensatory substitution studied in Sacks’s book; it subverts the therapeutic function of the genre of elegy and, instead, brings about “not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings.”<sup>10</sup>

In the 1990’s and 2000’s, the “work of mourning” model has, however, met its share of challenges for its neglect of various concerns.<sup>11</sup> And Freud’s model of mourning itself has been reviewed and re-interpreted in light of his own later work, including his concession in a 1929 letter to his friend Ludwig Binswanger that there really are no substitutes for the lost object:

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap... it nevertheless remains something else. And actually, this is how it should be; it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.<sup>12</sup>

As exemplified in this letter, Freud began to question both the possibility and desirability of the “successful” severing of all ties with the lost beloved.<sup>13</sup> Based on these reinterpretations of Freud’s earlier work, some of the more recent scholarship on elegy studies, such as Patricia Rae’s *Modernism and Mourning*, propose to view mourning through the lens of the new critiques of “Mourning and Melancholia,” particularly in terms of the ethics of the aforementioned possibility and desirability of freeing oneself emotionally from the lost beloved. As the omission in the title suggests, Rae’s collection works to eschew melancholia, preferring to use, instead, the term “resistant mourning” in what it characterizes as “progressive response to death” that “encourages work for positive social change.”<sup>14</sup> Others, such as Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* or Esther

Schor's *Bearing the Dead*, have left the field of poetic elegies altogether, focusing on the social and communal function of mourning, possibly because the study of an acute and immediate pain of loss is seen to have made sufficient advancement in recent years, aided in part by the theorization of loss and progress of trauma studies, which has taken literature as one of its primary objects of research for the past few decades. In the recent climate of the field, it has in some sense become unfashionable to speak of individual pain, subjective disconsolation, or personal melancholia.

The present dissertation addresses precisely this gap of scholarship—a hollow left between Ramazani's work on obstreperous anti-elegies and the recent scholarly preoccupation with social and communal ethics of mourning: the focus of this dissertation is the tentative vocalization of the quiet, undefined dejection of dysthymia in the modern elegy as a sign or expression of "lost loss." In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva defines melancholia as a failure of signification and a resultant loss of meaning.<sup>15</sup> The present dissertation regards the failure as being itself a type of communication, regardless of its senselessness—in other words, the dysthymic melancholia of the modern elegy is a type of speech, an expression of something yet to be identified or recognized. That is to say, while the previous elegy scholarship focused on the aspect of melancholia as a resistance to normative mourning or as a "bleak and joyless" state of being,<sup>16</sup> this dissertation views melancholia first and foremost as a linguistic phenomenon, an expression: a manifestation of something lurking so far beneath the speech cognition as to surface merely as a "failure" of signification.

In defining melancholia as thus, the present dissertation does not intend to find a cure for the condition or promote a positive social or ethical change: it neither attempts

to rehabilitate melancholia nor celebrates it, for any evaluative or prescriptive appraisal is outside of the domain of this dissertation.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the aim is to collect and salvage such equivocal murmurings of dysthymic melancholia as a sign of lost loss—to excavate further the layers of loss beneath the veils of allegories, fictions, proximate object-losses, and other screens—and, by doing so, to create a shape for the amorphous, illusory feeling of dispossession that those murmurings emit, as though to be on the receiving end of the communication line tended by a lone signal soldier in the jungle.<sup>18</sup>

## II. Elegy as a Fictive Narrative: Elegiac Cognitive Dissonance

In order to be on the receiving end of the tentative expressions of the lost loss in modern elegies, a reader must first discern the strata of their obfuscation: elegy is primarily a veiled speech, for the fact that, regardless of whether it is traditional, modern, or experimental, elegy often says what it does not mean. Most reductively speaking, elegy deals with life and death, possibly the most famous pair of the opposites; as W. David Shaw claims in *Elegy & Paradox*, to “commemorate death rightly is also to magnify the life and love that make death terrible.”<sup>19</sup> As a genre entwined with the task of expressing or attempting to reconcile antitheses—such as wishing for some form of revival or life in death, or finding consolation in disconsolation—elegy constructs various forms of fiction that are rife with contradictory elements, triggering cognitive dissonance.

By exposing their own fictive constructions, anti-consolatory elegies merely make the cognitive dissonance more explicit than traditional elegies do; while anti-elegy has gained visibility in the twentieth century, the anti-elegiac thrust in elegy is hardly new. The present dissertation views the modern anti-elegy as an evolution or foregrounding of

a specific undercurrent within conventional elegies. An instance of this phenomenon can be observed in the major elegies of earlier periods, including John Milton's "Lycidas." Aside from explicit diatribes like the bitter invective against nature that "slits the thin-spun life" (75),<sup>20</sup> "Lycidas" reveals glimpses of non-conventional, anti-elegiac skepticism, even in a supposedly consolatory passage:

Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies...  
And every flower that sad embroidery wears:  
Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,  
And daffodillies fill their cups with tears,  
To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.  
For so to interpose a little ease,  
Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.       (142, 148-153)

In addition to the descriptive ambivalence of this passage,<sup>21</sup> line 153 in particular highlights the poem's feeling of disconsolation by reminding us that this scene of consolation is based on "false surmise": since Lycidas's body has been lost to the sea and is not here to receive the floral tributes, the scene simultaneously becomes an intimation of the loss of the evidence of loss—a double-loss similar to the loss of cellar and attic in the Tussman poem. Milton's use of the verb, "dally"—in favor of other more comforting verbs like "embrace" or "trust"—most certainly carries a tone of irony, and further underscores his ambivalence over this consolation. The phrase "false surmise" too foreshadows Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs* and its premise that epitaphic writings are primarily fictions, a subject that will be discussed in more length in Chapter One. The line, in other words, is convincing in its lack of conviction. It reveals that, beneath the "false surmise," there lies so many losses that the elegy cannot retrieve or salvage—such as memories unrecorded by the poem, or facets of the deceased's



character that are left unmentioned in the poem, which are all metonymically represented by the unreturned body of Lycidas, the idealized figure of Milton's friend, Edward King.

The purpose in citing this particular passage of "Lycidas" is to note that elegiac poetry has historically betrayed the ambivalence between an adherence to and skepticism of the belief that a loss can be offset by a substitutive consolation; it is a genre beset with contradictory elements, such as one's professed attachment to the deceased and eventual, necessary detachment from it, or one's desire for consolation and one's susceptibility to disconsolation. Canonical elegies contain within them as much heterogeneity and resistance to oppressive normalization as modern elegies do; their embedded countertexts not only anticipate modern elegy but constitute a resource on which modern elegists draw.<sup>22</sup> The main difference between the older elegies and the modern ones, then, is not so much the absence of elegiac skepticism in the former, but rather the degree to which the problems of elegies—such as the deployment of fictive narratives, cognitive dissonance triggered by fictive narratives, the various degrees of the cognition of dysthymic melancholia or the awareness of the "lost-ness" of loss—are foregrounded.<sup>23</sup>

Elegy is, by its nature, a cognitively dissonant field where belief and doubt coexist, where speculations aim to become truths and truth lies. In that sense, modern anti-elegy is an inheritance, or a specific evolution, of a particular strain of traditional elegy, which has adapted itself to the age where existent belief systems have outlived their efficacy and one has to make one's own systems of elegiac beliefs and premises. The increased visibility of anti-elegy in the twentieth century merely testifies in part to the advancement of psychological and psychoanalytic theories that have created the

language to study and speak of disconsolation, and in another part to the modern impatience with the custom of euphemisms and indirection.

As a genre that attempts to reconcile antithetical desires and cognitions, or meditates on and must persuasively speak of something we don't know—namely, death, or the “undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns,” to borrow Hamlet's phrase<sup>24</sup>—elegy entails cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is a psychological tension arising from a state of incompatibility between two cognitions, which results from one's concurrent adherence to contradictory attitudes, emotions, beliefs or behavior.<sup>25</sup> In elegy, speaking knowingly about what we don't know—or “dallying,” in the face of disconsolation, with consolatory speculations that we will never know for sure is true—necessitates a suppression of skepticism, stirring up the tension of cognitive dissonance in the elegist and readers alike.

Although first proposed as a social psychology theory, cognitive dissonance theory has since converged with self-perception theory;<sup>26</sup> as such, the theory has become useful in literary studies, where our object of study is the psychology of an individual, whether it is an actual person, a character in the text, or the text itself.<sup>27</sup> Cognitive dissonance offers a theoretical framework to account for the linguistic peculiarities within the target text.<sup>28</sup> Psychic dissonance often compels cognitive moves or restructuring in one's mind, and since language gives shape to cognitions, cognitive moves are necessarily accompanied by linguistic maneuvers. In modern elegy, one of the significant manifestations of the symptoms of cognitive dissonance—the cognitive-linguistic move that emerges from its psychological struggles—is the romantic irony of one's simultaneous belief in and skepticism toward the fictive narratives that the elegy

constructs. As an expression of contradiction without resolution, elegies exhibiting cognitive dissonance necessarily become irresolute, and such lack of closure signals disconsolation or non-consolation.<sup>29</sup> In other words, romantic irony is an expressive sign of cognitive dissonance that, because of its inclination toward inconclusion, make elegies anti-elegiac. Hence, the theory of cognitive dissonance—and its linguistic symptom, romantic irony—provides a method of examining the impetus behind the fictive narratives that the elegies of lost loss construct.

Elegiac fiction-making results in cognitive dissonance, a double-consciousness caught between skepticism and a desire for conviction. But perhaps the most dissonance-inducing aspect of the elegy is that, no matter how powerful its lament may be, it has no power to raise or revive the dead: they are written for the dead but they do nothing for the dead. The dead remain dead, and the only thing that has the possibility of being changed is the way the living interpret the dead. And elegists are left with no other pursuits than to continue weaving out the interpretive creations.

### III. Theorization of How a Loss of Loss Surfaces as a “Phantom”

As an expression of contradictions and paradox within elegiac fictions, cognitive dissonance accounts for the presence of anti-elegiac sensibilities in elegies of all periods, but it does not, by itself, explain the proliferation of such thrust in modern elegy, or answer the question of what it is that the elegists of the modern era find to be inconsolable. Experts and non-experts have popularly and exhaustively discussed a number of potential culprits that are seen to have contributed to the modern elegiac disconsolation: our anxiety over the psychic and social threat of contemporary life-

threatening diseases, which, by virtue of the advancement of medicine, we have come to identify as specifically and scientifically as we have ever done in our history; the pervasiveness of cultural melancholia over the century that has repeatedly witnessed unimaginable loss of life, from World War I up to 9/11 and Iraq; the dying of death in modern life;<sup>30</sup> and the resultant changes in mortuary practices.<sup>31</sup> As illuminating as these explanations are, however, these social and exterior accounts of loss largely remain unverifiable generalizations. The interest of this present dissertation is the interior and solipsistic dimension, the literary explorations of individual psychology—namely, how an individual’s cognition of lost loss, as a peculiarly modern phenomenon, accounts for the undercurrent of modern anti-elegies.<sup>32</sup>

The theory of lost loss in the present dissertation draws primarily from the idea of inexpressible or cryptic mourning within Nicolas Abraham’s and Maria Torok’s theory of secrets in their work, *The Shell and the Kernel*. In their refashioning of Freudian psychoanalysis, Abraham and Torok designate a “secret” as a trauma that is entombed and consigned to internal silence, albeit unwittingly, by the sufferers themselves.<sup>33</sup> The secret, in short, is an intrapsychic enclave of denied or excluded reality, which triggers such psychic malaises as the illness of mourning, melancholia, and failed introjection.

In brief, there are two ways in which this theory of the secret becomes useful for elegy studies: first, it offers us a model of reading the mood—such as that of anti-consolatory melancholia—of anti-elegy as an expressive trace of the denied or excluded reality, a returner or reminder of the secret, or, in Abraham’s and Torok’s term, a “phantom”; and secondly, it also provides us with a model of reading the language—such as that of allegory, or other ambiguous code-like expressions—of anti-elegy as a kind of

cryptonymy that reveals the presence of shut-away objects through its layers of obfuscation and equivocation.<sup>34</sup> That is to say, equivocation is itself viewed as a type of communication. This dissertation also assumes that a denied reality can be produced not only in traumatic cases of overwhelming grief, like those in Abraham's and Torok's case studies, but also in less dramatic scenarios, such as the loss of the attic and cellar in the Tussman poem. Given the role of the consciousness as a mechanism to protect us against stimuli by screening and blocking out their excess,<sup>35</sup> a blander, dysthymic strain of melancholia could well signal the presence of excluded psychic enclaves.<sup>36</sup> Abraham's and Torok's theory of phantom, in other words, affords us with one apparatus through which we may give a tentative shape to the vague expression of lost loss.

One of the primary applications of this theory of the secret loss is to read an elegy as a symptom of a "phantom": namely, a loss of loss expresses itself in the elegy as some form of a "phantom." According to Abraham and Torok, the "phantom" is a type of sealed-off sorrow in inaccessible mental "graves." It is, in a way, a wraith coming out of the psychic crypt, which reveals itself through linguistic unintelligibility or concealment, often entailing inventions of particular forms of obfuscation, which they call "cryptonymy."<sup>37</sup> Abraham and Torok explicate that a "phantom,"

...points to... a memory... buried *without legal burial place*. The memory is of an idyll, experienced with a valued object and yet for some reason unspeakable.... Between the idyllic moment and its subsequent forgetting..., there was the metapsychological traumatism of a loss.... This leads to the establishment of a sealed-off psychic place, a crypt in the ego. Created by a self-governing mechanism we call *inclusion*, the crypt... is a form of anti-introjection, a mechanism whereby the assimilation of both the illegitimate idyll and its loss is precluded.<sup>38</sup>

Here, the loss is two-fold: first, the unspeakable memory is turned into an idealized, pastoral context of "idyll"; then it is sealed off outside of the "legal burial ground." The

“illegitimate idyll” is orphaned, along with the fact of its loss, secluded in a psychic “crypt” that had been created by the mechanism of repression. In effect, memories are forgotten twice—first, the idyll is forgotten, and then the fact of forgetting is itself forgotten. Because it cannot be integrated into our conscious memory, the unassimilated, isolated memory becomes a phantom, which returns to haunt us upon instigation.

As Abraham and Torok acknowledge, the “phantom” is a human invention—a necessary contrivance intended to help us conceptualize what eludes conceptualization:

It is a fact that the “phantom,” whatever its form, is nothing but an invention of the living. Yes, an invention in the sense that the phantom is meant to objectify, even if under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life. The phantom is therefore also a metapsychological fact: what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.<sup>39</sup>

The “phantom” is not so much the “dead” themselves but rather the “gaps” left within us; the dead aren’t actually coming back from the grave to haunt us, but the “gaps” left in our cognitive reality after a loss do. It is an expressive medium of the left-behind memory.

An analogy sometimes helps clarify abstruse concepts; the idea of “phantom” as embedded memories of “gaps” passed on from the dead is, in some ways, similar to one of the hypotheses of the cause of the physical “phantom pain”—the pain that an amputee often feels in the limb he or she has lost. While modern medicine has yet to identify the definitive cause of phantom pain, one theory suggests that all pain is actually a memory of pain collected inside the spinal cord ever since humans became a vertebrate; for this reason, pain—because it is a memory of pain—persists in a part of one’s body even if it has long been lost. Since the spine is the storage place of the spinal cord—a part of the vertebrate nervous system consisting of nerve cells—the theory that the pain

we feel is in fact a residual memory of pain accumulated in the spine is not necessarily absurd. Like its physical counterpart, the psychic “phantom pain” can also be seen as a memory of pain banished inside one’s psychic spinal cord. Also, given the nature of elegy as a highly intertextual and tradition-conscious genre, one may hypothesize that an elegist may, too, inherit, through conventions and intertextuality in the language of elegy, the sorrow and pain that previous elegists had written about—or had shut away.

The fundamental premise in this mode of reading poetry is that poetry is a way of giving a voice to something that doesn’t have a voice—and in the case of dysthymic, disconsolate strains of elegy, what it gives a voice to is one’s sealed-off enclave, things left out and shut away as one readjusts or reorganizes one’s self and reality after a loss disturbs them. The following chapter-outline will detail how this “loss of loss” manifests itself in individual works: as a kind of a “third” voice between consolation and desolation; as a screen for or obfuscation of other unsayables, like the eventual loss of one’s own life or selfhood; as a resistance toward itself, among other incarnations.

#### IV. The Lost Loss in Individual Works (Chapter Outline)

Based on the conjecture that the equivocal verbalization of a lost loss is less an authorial design than a textual symptom, this dissertation has become more centered around individual poems or texts that exhibit such “symptoms” than around individual authors, schools of poetry, or specific time periods. That is, even if the chapters follow the conventional organization around individual authors whose texts display a greater frequency of exhibiting the symptom of lost loss, the chapters do more to excavate a certain facet of those authors’ oeuvres than to make an overarching claim to be an

exhaustive study of them. In other words, the following authors—Wordsworth, Stevens, Roethke, Berryman, Plath, and Bishop—are chosen more because there are clusters of their work that are indicative of the symptoms of lost loss than because they can be generally and globally labeled as “poets of lost loss.” In fact, their elegiac oeuvre includes plenty of texts that remain in the conventional domain; the unearthing of the “lost loss” aspect of their works merely unveils the depth, complexity, and variety within their elegiac oeuvres.

### 1. Wordsworth and Theory of Consolatory Fiction

Since the ambivalence toward compensatory consolation is age-old and the modern anti-elegy is an inheritance of a particular strain of the traditional elegy as the earlier discussion of Milton’s “Lycidas” suggests, it would be appropriate to consider modern and contemporary elegiac writings in conjunction with older examples. For this reason, the dissertation begins with a discussion of William Wordsworth’s work as an exemplary case of cognitive dissonance that emerges in anti-consolatory writings, such as seen, in particular, in his major epitaphic writings such as *Essays upon Epitaphs* and Book V of *The Prelude*. While these texts are not, by strict definitions, elegies proper, they nonetheless engage intensively with the theme of unspecified loss, and constitute some of the earlier, definitive manifestations of the ambivalence that occurs when one tests one’s philosophy against the apparatus of elegiac consolation. As such, the Wordsworth texts offer a suggestive source of one of the general thrusts in modern anti-elegy that this present dissertation will highlight: namely, they point out the ways in



which the notion of consolation becomes reflective of a facet of romantic irony, a philosophic stance that encompasses both belief and skepticism at the same time.<sup>40</sup>

In the construction of the present dissertation, the first two chapters, on Wordsworth and on Stevens, lay out the underlying concepts, while the latter two chapters, on the Confessional poets and on Bishop, delve into various individual cases of those core concepts. The underlying concept discussed in the Wordsworth chapter is the theory of elegiac fiction: elegiac “consolation” is a self-consciously fictive philosophy, which, as a dissonant construct born out of the double-consciousness of romantic irony, bears within it the seed of its own destruction. The Wordsworth chapter delves into the connection among the fictive elegiac consolation, the cognitive dissonance it triggers, and the romantic irony as a linguistic symptom of cognitive dissonance. As a coda, the function of fiction as a makeshift figure for lost loss—like the phantom of cellar and attic—is examined as a bridge to the next chapter on Stevens, in which the “creation of loss” in the face of the loss of loss becomes a critical work of allegorical elegy.

The chapter begins by unearthing from *Essays upon Epitaphs* Wordsworth’s awareness that consolatory philosophies are fictions, and analyzes the mechanism through which fiction-makers attempt to convert “fictions” into “substantial realities.” Generally, fiction, when it becomes an object of belief or consolation, is necessarily accompanied by skepticism, or sometimes even sarcasm. That we are skeptical about believing in a falsity is commonsensical enough, but the main idea here is that this belief in fiction—the contradictory act of believing in something one knows or suspects to be false or doubtful—is at the heart of the elegiac cognitive dissonance. Wordsworth’s contribution, in the context of this dissertation, is his elucidation of the following three

points: the nature of consolation is primarily one of fiction-belief; cognitive dissonance inheres in the act of fiction-belief; and in the instances of poetic cognitive dissonance, romantic irony often emerges as a linguistic maneuver to allow for the coexistence of contradicting belief systems, as a kind of both-and-neither voice that mediates warring elements within the fiction-believing mechanism of consolation.

The chapter further explores the double-consciousness of romantic irony in elegiac fictions and argues that consolatory philosophies themselves become cognitive artifacts that keep being destroyed and then remade. Through romantic irony, Wordsworth opens up a third philosophical space, a dialectical synthesis born out of the vexation of the conflict between thesis and antithesis, the believing and disbelieving of a fiction; in this space, consolation takes on the character of a transitional phase of a mind, and gains its sublimity precisely from its temporary and provisional nature.<sup>41</sup> Many critical analyses of modern elegy note the “ironic” tendency in the twentieth century elegies. The contention here is that, in essence, the “irony” of the twentieth century is not so different from that of a “romantic” kind—in the sense that it is still rooted in the contradictory attitude of romantic irony.

In the final section, the “Peele Castle” elegy is presented as an instance in which an elegiac fiction fills the void left by the loss of loss. By supplying a provisional shape to the undefined feeling of dejection, an elegiac fiction enables the “phantom”-like loss of loss—one that has come to be felt lost to the mourner—to surface and to be perceived. The section examines how the “Peele Castle” painting provides Wordsworth with a form of such fiction that functions as a container for the unresolved feelings over the loss of his brother’s death. In the “Peele Castle” elegy, the painting stands for the fictive narrative

of artistic interpretation of the painting; this fiction fills the expressive void and creates a shape for the sense of lost loss. This mechanism foreshadows that of Stevens's allegorical elegies, in which an allegory, representing the fictive narrative of allegoresis, fills the expressive void left by occlusion, abstraction, or anonymity of the object-loss.

## 2. Stevens and Unspecified Loss

The second chapter studies the poetical work of Wallace Stevens, particularly the facet of his elegiac writings in which the allegorical, impersonalized losses in his elegies become expressions of the traces of lost loss. One of the noticeable features of Stevens's work is that, while the elegiac sensibilities of Wallace Stevens's poetry have received much critical attention, his oeuvre includes only a handful of formal elegies.<sup>42</sup> That is to say, many of his "elegies" or "elegiac" poems, from his early milestone, "Sunday Morning," and onward, treat the theme of loss as either an abstraction or allegory, often employing the funeral-director-like detachment, such as in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," in doing so. Beyond the survey of the sense of ironic detachment in his earlier works and the guilt-ridden war elegies of the middle period, the acutest interest of this present dissertation lies in Stevens's preoccupation with abstract and unspecified loss in his later works, such as "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," "As You Leave the Room," and other poems in *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*.

One of the main features of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" is that the poem hardly mentions the deceased and, instead, channels its energy toward allegoresis of the "mythology of modern death." The chapter examines "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" as an elegy of equivocation, and suggests that it constitutes a fuller expression of the

unvoiced (unvoiceable), the unsaid (unsayable), or, in the words of Abraham and Torok, the “crypt”—unintelligibility, or psychically motivated disturbances of meaning sometimes beyond recognition, as instances of aphasia and signs pointing toward the source of suffering—that the more conventionally oriented elegies would recognize only obliquely, or speak only cryptonymically. Through the examination of this “crypt,” the chapter contends that allegorical poems such as “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” reveal in their dismemberment of the “mythology of modern death” a suspicion that the real loss expressed in the poem is that of the illusory fiction of loss. By exposing our narrative of loss as a kind of fictive “mythology,” the poem suggests that the concept of “loss” itself may as well be a fiction that we construct in our attempt to evade the loss of a loss.

Just as Wordsworth’s painting-interpretation in the “Peele Castle” elegy looks forward to Stevens’s allegoresis in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” Stevens’s “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” looks backward to Wordsworth’s idea of elegy as a fiction-making, the contradiction of which is crystallized in *Essays upon Epitaphs* as one of romantic irony. Although “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” has often been read as being a more conventional elegy than “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” a closer look at the poem reveals that it betrays as much double-consciousness and heterogeneity as the latter. The proleptic eulogy constitutes a fiction of celebratory death, and the poem espouses within it the oscillation between its romantically lofty panegyric and the ironic awareness of the fictiveness of it by opening the provisional, “third” philosophical space of transitionality.

Such fiction-making becomes the template for Stevens’s later elegies. And because the dissonance innate in the romantically ironic act of fiction-making makes the fiction a fragile artifice, such fragility requires the elegist to keep producing one artifice

after another, as temporary artifacts in transitional phases of one's psyche, which one keeps dismantling and then continues remaking.

### 3. Confessional Poetry and Various Forms of Lost Loss

Having established the core concepts—1) elegiac fiction entails cognitive dissonance and resolves it through romantic irony and its capacity to contain antitheses, and 2) elegies construct the fictive narratives of loss in an effort to fill the void left by the loss of loss—the dissertation proceeds to the third chapter, which surveys a variety of ways in which “loss of loss” emerges in a group of mid-twentieth-century poets that are particularly known for their anti-consolatory elegies: the Confessional poets. With a specific and narrower focus on a group of poems by Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman, this chapter will study three different manifestations of the dysthymia of unplaceable or unidentifiable losses: the distant or phantom loss as a type of “lost loss” in Roethke's generic elegies; a pervasive sense of loss in Plath's poems of 1963 as a kind of all-engulfing loss in which specific losses are lost; and the loss of the self as an ultimate “loss of loss” in Berryman's “Op. posth.” sequence.

The Roethke section begins with a reinterpretation of “Elegy for Jane” as a poem of distant loss: the poem is interpreted not so much an expression of a universal grief that transcends the occasion,<sup>43</sup> of a “greater *individualizing* of human relations,”<sup>44</sup> of a Catullian love,<sup>45</sup> or of “a pure and delicate emotional appreciation of an older man for a young girl,”<sup>46</sup> but rather as an expression of one's loss of an opportunity to know the deceased well enough to “lose” her. This particular type of lost loss—the loss of an opportunity to lose someone, a type of a distant or imagined loss—has resulted in the

receptive difficulty of the poem. In addition to the critical disagreement that has accompanied the poem's reception as seen above, Sandra M. Gilbert in *Inventions of Farewell* classifies the poem as a poem of friendship by placing it in the section entitled "Mourning the Deaths of Friends" when clearly the poem doesn't talk of friendship.<sup>47</sup> The chapter notes that this receptive difficulty stems from the fact that the language to express the "loss of loss" is sorely lacking in the current elegiac discourse.

If "Elegy for Jane" is an attempt to create a fiction of loss—one of an imagined loss—based on an actual, existing person, the second "Elegy" is an instance in which Roethke creates the narrative of loss where there is no object-loss. The third "Elegy" for Aunt Tilly develops the same theme even further, by creating a narrative of loss, in the absence of actual object-loss, through a creation of an imagined person. The chapter examines how, in such a state of lack, elegies begin to speak in cryponymies of their own in building their imaginative communications with the imagined dead.

And "cryponymies" are precisely what Plath's work is known for—particularly the poems in *Ariel*, which are known for their private vocabulary and code-like language. In the last part of *Ariel* are poems written in 1963, which largely hover around the theme of death, of mostly unspecified or unspecific kind. In the Plath scholarship, these poems have generally been read as poems written from beyond rage, by someone who no longer blames anyone and reconciles herself to death, as though to imply that Plath's suicide was inevitable.<sup>48</sup> Instead of regarding them as mere suicidal musings, the dissertation sees these poems as testimonies or meditations on unplaced or unplaceable losses: a ubiquitous, all-engulfing sense of loss that swallows up specific losses and creates, as their stand-in, a blander but persistent melancholia. The Plath section of this chapter,

therefore, will discuss her anti-elegy not so much as a revolt against the conventional, consolatory tradition of elegy but rather as a cryptonymic attempt to give shape to the loss of loss, which, shut away in the illegal burial grounds of psychic enclaves, will not be given a voice it needs if not for the expressive traces of literary dysthymia.

One type of all-engulfing loss that erases all other losses, if we are to consider that the dead are not really “lost” because they live in our memory, is the loss of our own life. For this reason, anti-elegy and self-elegy often overlap with one another—possibly because it is arguably most intellectually difficult to find any consolation in the loss of the subject that has to function as an agent to construct a psychic consolation. Berryman’s “Op. posth.” sequence is preoccupied precisely with this conundrum: what would happen to the loss if the subject who perceives the loss is himself lost, when the Berkeley-ian premise of “*Esse est percipi*”<sup>49</sup> is challenged by the loss of the subject? The sequence begins with the death of the speaker, the main character in *The Dream Songs* who speaks through the persona of “Henry,”<sup>50</sup> and the chapter examines how self-elegy copes with the prospect of self-erasure, the prospect of losing the subject who would experience and chronicle losses.

When one finds oneself surrounded with many losses, one recoils and turns to oneself as the only thing that stands for presence—as the thing that one knows is present. But with the advent of neuroscience, we’ve come to view ourselves, at least partially, as chemical beings—in a sense that what we call ourselves, our minds, attitudes, mood and personality are things that are merely “seeping through serotonin”<sup>51</sup>—and we’ve discovered that what we know to be ourselves today can easily disappear tomorrow, at the mercy of chemical fluctuations inside our brain. When one’s self itself stands for

mutability, something that is soon to be lost, one scrambles for something else that gives a voice to that soon-to-be-lost thing. What the Confessionals, in their intensive self-reflections, suggest through their elegies is that all elegies have the characteristics of self-elegy. While that idea is hardly new, it suggests, more importantly, through a reversible logic, that self-elegies can also become elegies for all other non-self things, especially for those of us with solipsistic or phenomenologist dispositions.

#### 4. Bishop and Anxiety of Lost Loss

The most famous elegiac work among Elizabeth Bishop's oeuvre is probably "One Art," a modified villanelle that catalogs things one can lose and then declares in its repeating line, "The art of losing isn't hard to master." There are many ways to interpret the renunciatory assertion of the poem: some interpret it as an instance of melancholic mourning, in which the speaker states her willingness to embrace and immerse herself in loss; others regard it as an instance of one's successful detachment from an object-loss, accomplished through the act of turning the experience of loss into an art form. One potential, alternative, and perhaps perverse, interpretation is to view it as neither an art of embracing loss nor an art of successfully detaching the self from lost objects, but instead as a fear of not being able to know or recognize any losses: a desire to hold onto the constructed narrative of loss—a desire rooted in an anxiety over losing a loss. That is, in the mind of the speaker, the scariest thing for us may be to lose a loss, and compared to it, gaining the capacity to perceive the fact or fiction that one has things one has lost or will lose constitutes a philosophy that "isn't hard to master," at least in comparison to the amnesiac condition in which one cannot recall or retain one's losses.



This anxiety over the prospect of losing a loss—similar to what we see in Stevens’s construction of a “fiction” of loss as a means to safeguard us against loss of loss—underlies Bishop’s sublimatory elegiacs, which can be observed in both her earlier works and later works such as “Crusoe in England” and other poems in *Questions of Travel and Geography III*. For instance, in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” the child-speaker relates her first experience of loss by describing the surroundings, the funeral parlor. In a poem where the contradictory attitudes—acceptance of loss and resistant incomprehension of it—struggle against one another, the speaker’s willful description of the surroundings feels almost like a refusal of the poem to delve into her interiority. As a result, the exteriority absorbs the weight of the experience, relieving the fragile interiority of the child-speaker from such weight. It is all too easy for the child-speaker to “lose” this experience of loss to her infanthood incomprehension, or, inversely, for the child-speaker to be overburdened by the weight of such experience that she may not be psychically equipped to process and cognize.

The poem’s attempt to imbue the exteriority with the weight of loss expresses its misgivings over a potential loss of such experience to childhood amnesia. The function of poetry here becomes similar to that of memorializing: construction of memorial sites often facilitates a short-term forgetting,<sup>52</sup> as though to suggest that the act of externalizing one’s memory relieves the pressure on the internal memory to retain the item all by itself. As Harald Weinrich points out, “the verb ‘forget’ is composed of the verb ‘get’ and the prefix ‘for,’” and “one might paraphrase the meaning of ‘forget’ as ‘to get rid (of something).”<sup>53</sup> The act of memorializing allows for “getting rid of” the item in the internal memory but, at the same time, resists its loss by creating an external site where

such a loss can be recalled. The descriptivism of the poem, hence, signals a desire to lose the experience but also to retain the loss, to avoid losing the experience to the loss of loss. It is, in a sense, a system of backup, where a computer-user purchases an external hard drive to store and preserve critical memories in cases of internal hard-drive crash.

In this manner, this chapter examines how this anxiety over lost loss in Bishop's work often results in the act of externalization of loss, the creation of a space where the loss is neither completely retained nor lost. Likewise, the chapter discusses the function of the elegy as a construct that not only externalizes and exorcizes the experience of loss but also retains it, albeit outside of the mourner's subjectivity, whereby the subject neither retains the object of loss nor loses the experience of loss: a process similar to one of chemical sublimation, in which the substance changes form, such as from a solid to gas, without losing itself. Using the Benjaminian collector as an analogy, the chapter delineates how Bishop's sublimational poetics preserve the lost object by extracting it out of its original form and rearranging it in another. In this sense, elegy becomes a method of putting into a new meaning system an object whose original meanings have expired.

## V. Anti-Elegy as Transitional Object

Whereas elegy has often been discussed in terms of consolation or disconsolation, my interest is to interpret it as a kind of neither-and-both "third voice" coming out of the provisional philosophical space of romantic irony. One way of conceptualizing this third voice is to view it as a kind of "transitional" phase of a mind caught between the belief in the consolatory fiction and the skepticism of it. That is, a loss that an elegy speaks of is a loss of a portion of the psychic reality of the mourner, and, in his or her attempt to

cognitively reorganize his or her world, the mourner constructs a “transitional” object, to be put into the place of the old world until the new one is to be built in its place.

This conceptualization of transitionality is inspired by the theory of what D.W. Winnicott calls a “transitional object”—an object that is designed to be destroyed, as a part of our making and remaking of the reality, which entails our placing of the object outside ourselves. Just as an infant, after the mother detaches herself from his world, takes up a “transitional object”—such as, in Winnicott’s case studies, a blanket or a toy—and then destroys it in his process of remaking or reorganizing his cognitive reality, the suspicion here is that an elegy—or, to be more specific, the consolatory or non-consolatory fiction ideated by the elegy—becomes this “transitional object,” a fill-in construct in one’s process of remaking or reorganizing one’s cognitive reality after a loss disturbs it. As a “transitional object,” an elegy becomes a self-consuming artifact, the destruction of which is to take place at some point in the future, as a part of one’s process of making and remaking one’s cognitive world. In other words, the function of elegy is not to offer consolation but to create a fiction, the destruction of which at some point in the future becomes a consolatory act.

This Winnicott model proposes a creation of a provisional or temporary philosophical space that is neither yes nor no, since a singular commitment to either of the two propositions would not suffice intellectually—a kind of suspension of thoughts, a deferral of conclusive thinking. And when philosophy cannot conclude itself, it enters the territory of art, for only the art’s makeshift expressions can give provisional shape to what eludes conclusion. It is through this provisionality, its inconclusion and chiasmic

indecision that the present dissertation attempts to define the poetics of the ongoing, and make sense of the anti-elegiac thrust in the works of poets listed in the chapter outline.

## VI. Preliminary Conclusion

The fundamental premise of the theme of lost loss is that, in our history or in our daily lives, many things are lost all the time, without being recorded or remembered.<sup>54</sup> Unrecorded or unrecognized losses turn into lost losses, which, for the most part, remain outside, or on the periphery, of our consciousness, except as occasional, vague, phantom-like realizations that we may have lost something. In elegy, there's always a desire to catalog, record, and save the things that have been lost, and this desire fuels an anxiety that the elegy may have left out something it wishes it had salvaged, as implied by the obsessive expansiveness and cataloging habits seen in many major elegies like Tennyson's *In Memoriam* or Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." The irresolution and resistance to conclusion seen in anti-consolatory elegy is a magnification of this anxiety—that we may have lost something without realizing it, that there may be more we may have lost than what we know to have lost, and that we would somehow like to restore those things, but that we are unable to do so. This feeling of inadequacy—a mixture of regret, guilt, powerlessness—remains shut away in a psychic enclave but returns to us when some event or trigger shakes it out of the depths of our semi-conscious memory. The inference here that this shut-away feeling of incapability shows up as modern anti-elegiac melancholia that resists consolatory closure, for our recognition of our inability to record and salvage all the losses makes closures impossible.

In the medical world, symptoms have meanings. If we are to consider literary works to be arrested forms of psycho-lingual symptoms—as Freud and other psychoanalysts do—then the meaning of the modern elegy’s anti-consolatory, inconclusive dysthymia may be that it functions as an unconscious reminder of our latent desire to salvage from oblivion, non-remembrance, or other forms of loss of loss all the things—not just the specific, overt, and significant losses from which our minds cannot escape—that have been, or are being, lost without our knowledge or awareness, or left outside of our chronicling capacity. Poetry of lost loss, then, mourns, in addition to specific losses—and often in place of specific losses—for the memory, trace, or unconscious knowledge of all other unmentioned, unremembered losses that have not yet been given a shape or expression. The literary dysthymia of lost loss constitutes a formless whisper that is there to be heard, interpreted, and given a shape.

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<sup>1</sup> Malka Heifetz Tussman, “Cellars and Attics,” in *American Yiddish Poetry: a Bilingual Anthology*, Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 607-611. The quotation marks are in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Lori Hope Lefkowitz, “Inherited Memories and the Ethics of Ventriloquism,” in *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 20012), 20.

<sup>3</sup> T.V.F. Brogan, *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 66.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Zetzell Lambert, *Placing Sorrow: A Study of the Pastoral Elegy Convention from Theocritus to Milton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Sacks’s “compensatory consolation” model and Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” model represent the two most dominant conceptual models in the recent discussion of elegy. In a nutshell, the “anxiety of influence” model conceives elegy as a rivalrous attack on a dead but still overwhelming precursor figure. The “anxiety of influence” model, however, is mostly outside of the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> The game of “*fort-da*” refers to the one played by Freud’s grandson, recorded in Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 11–16: it is a game in which the child, who had lost his mother, throws away (“*fort*,” or “away”) and then retrieves a wooden spool in order to rehearse the disappearances of his mother.

<sup>7</sup> A “successful” mourning, for Freud, allows for one’s recovery from loss, prompted by one’s libidinal detachment from the lost object and compensatory reattachment of one’s libido to a new object. On the other hand, a “failed” or “melancholic” mourning refers to cases in which one remains in a prolonged state of dejection because of one’s failure to renounce one’s libidinal position. Hence, in the context of elegy studies, the word “melancholia”—in addition to the more general use of the word as something akin to clinical depression—also refers to a state of prolonged despondency after a loss, triggered by an “unsuccessful” mourning that does not lead to a consolatory resolution.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 4-10. Sacks illustrates this theoretical model by referring to the instance of Apollo and Daphne in Greek mythology, in which Apollo’s loss of Daphne is followed by his renunciation of Daphne the person and his acceptance of the substitute, Daphne the tree, in the form of the laurel wreath as a projected founding of her sign.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Rae, *Modernism and Mourning* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), ix.

<sup>11</sup> Aside from a mischievous query over the term “lost love” as applied to Apollo’s feeling for Daphne—for one thing, how can Apollo “lose” Daphne when she didn’t exist for him and wasn’t his “possession” in the first place?—critiques of the compensatory model of understanding elegiac consolation include the following: a tendency of the modern elegy to react against compensatory consolation, as noted by Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 3-8; a criticism of the model as normalizing a male-centered perspective, in Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 4-7; and the issue of normalization in the model’s problematic tendency to classify mourning as “healthful” or “unhealthful,” as pointed out by Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 2-4. R. Clifton Spargo also asserts that there is, in elegy, an insistence on the “other’s uncancellable and unassimilable value” as the basis of one’s refusal of the substitutive valuation of the dead, and suggests that melancholic mourning, for its valuation of the singular over the collective, is more “ethical” (Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004], 13). Others question the premise of consolation itself: Judith Butler reminds us that loss makes “a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” and that the function of grief is to bring “to the fore the relational ties” (Butler, *Prearious*

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*Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* [London: Verso, 2004], 20, 22); following that, Max Cavitch claims that “the telos of American elegy is not consolation for the deaths of others, but fulfillment of a specifically political, shared happiness that ‘loss’ misnames” (Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 24). Elegy studies of the 00’s tend to spotlight the ethical and social implication of elegiac literature, as in the aforementioned works of Butler, Cavitch, as well as William Watkin’s *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, Ernest L. Freud, ed., Tania and James Stern, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 386. The relevant passage from the letter is as follows:

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap... it nevertheless remains something else. And actually, this is how it should be; it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.

<sup>13</sup> For further studies on Freud’s changing views on successful mourning, one may refer to Kathleen Woodward, “Late Theory, Late Style: Loss and Renewal in Freud and Barthes” in *Aging & Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*, Anne Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 84-89 and John E. Baker, “Mourning and the Transformation of Object Relationships: Evidence for the Persistence of Internal Attachments” in *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 18:1 (Winter 2001), 58-59.

<sup>14</sup> Rae, 22-23.

<sup>15</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 189.

<sup>16</sup> Rae, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, neither the claim that melancholic mourning is more ethical (Spargo) nor the argument against such embrace of melancholia as “shading into a celebration” of what is in reality a “bleak and joyless” state of being (Greg Forter, “Against Melancholia” in Rae, 242) is of interest to the present dissertation, for its aim is not evaluative, but descriptive: not progressive politics, but an active listening, to be on the receiving end of the tentative expression.

<sup>18</sup> This metaphor is taken from a poem titled “A Signal Soldier’s Quiet War” in *Willow Review* 33 (Spring 2006), 39.

<sup>19</sup> W. David Shaw, *Elegy & Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>20</sup> By Milton’s time, these questionings had actually developed into a part of elegiac convention, in that moments of doubts had become necessary stepping stones in the mourner’s process of working toward a conclusive, triumphant consolation.

<sup>21</sup> The passage, which portrays the consolatory flowery rewards Lycidas is to receive, remains rather ambivalent. The fragility of the “rather primrose that forsaken dies” refers primarily to the preciousness of early primrose—in economics, the rarity of an object increases its value—but hints, secondarily, at the overtone of the frailty of consolation it symbolizes. And while the undying, unfading “amaranthus” shedding “his beauty” as a reward for Lycidas feels like an ultimate sacrifice that attests to Lycidas’s worthiness, one need not be particularly perverse to detect a certain ominous tone in this dying of a flower of immortality. The poetic technique here is similar to a photographic technique of semi-backlighting shot: a half-negative framing that adumbrates the object and adds, through the shadowy contrast, a sense of depths to the portraiture.

<sup>22</sup> Zeiger, 168: “contemporary elegies provide a way of locating and reading earlier elegiac counterdiscourses.” In other words, a reading of modern elegies can also function as a way of uncovering elements of heterogeneity in the earlier elegies that have been dismissed as normative.

<sup>23</sup> In older elegies, consolatory philosophy has the tendency to triumph ultimately over skepticism, while in modern elegies, the reverse is the trend.

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<sup>24</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 3.1.81-82.

<sup>25</sup> This definition of cognitive dissonance theory is culled from the following: Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 131; Festinger, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance" in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58 (1959), 203-210; Jack W. Brehm, *Explorations in Cognitive Dissonance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1962), 3-7; and Sadaomi Oshikawa, "Theory of Cognitive Dissonance and Experimental Research" in *Journal of Marketing Research* 5 (November 1968), 429-430. To explain the term further in simpler terms: everyday actions, such as lying, can induce a state of cognitive dissonance, in that knowing one thing and telling another often require simultaneous adherence to contradictory belief systems and, therefore, are potentially incompatible with one another.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony G. Greenwald and David L. Ronis, "Twenty Years of Cognitive Dissonance: Case Study of the Evolution of a Theory" in *Psychological Review* 85 (1978: 1), 53-57.

<sup>27</sup> There are previous studies that have used cognitive dissonance theory to offer possible explanations for "real-life" situations, such as they occur in literary examples. For instance, M.R. Rosenzweig's "Cognitive Dissonance" counters the doubts that have been raised "as to whether cognitive dissonance can be observed outside the laboratory" by citing examples like anecdotes from Benjamin Franklin's life or scenes from Steinbeck's novel, *In Dubious Battle*. Following up on Rosenzweig's findings, Barry Schlenker confirms that "there are a plethora of examples, literary and otherwise, which could be explained by one or another version of cognitive dissonance theory" (Schlenker, "Impression Management Revisited" in *American Psychologist* [1973: April], 360).

<sup>28</sup> Although previous psychoanalytic criticisms, as many critics have observed, tended to target the author, the reader, or the fictive characters in the text as their object of analysis, the aim of this application of the theory to literary criticism here is intended more in line with the proposition Peter Brooks makes in his essay, "The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism" (in *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis*, Françoise Meltzer, ed. [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988]): a use of the text as the primary object of analysis. In that essay, Brooks argues that, since "the structure of literature is in some sense the structure of mind" (Brooks 4), the most suitable target for psychoanalytic literary criticism is the language of the text itself, rather than the author, the reader, or the character. The premise of this use of the text as the primary target of psychoanalysis is that symptoms of psychological struggles often surface as linguistic phenomena, as suggested by Freud's essay "Constructions in Analysis" and attested by Kristeva's *Black Sun*. Freud's "Constructions in Analysis" as a whole paints a view of psychoanalytic interpretation and construction that resemble the active role of the reader in making sense of a text. And Kristeva's *Black Sun* has a chapter, titled "Life and Death of Speech," devoted to a linguistic analysis of the speech of the melancholic (Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 33-68).

<sup>29</sup> Such as that of the triumvirate relation among cognitive dissonance, romantic irony, and the practice of anti-consolatory elegy, discussed later in the section on the Wordsworth chapter.

<sup>30</sup> Some of the accounts of the modern phenomenon of "dying of death" are as follows. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Joseph Jacobs writes in his article, "The Dying of Death," in *The Fortnightly Review* 66 (1899): "Perhaps the most distinctive note of the modern spirit is the practical disappearance of the thought of death as an influence directly bearing upon practical life.... The fear of death is being replaced by the joy of life.... Death is disappearing from our thoughts.... The hurry-scurry of modern life leaves no one time to meditate among the tombs" (264). Also, in *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), Philippe Ariès notes that in "industrialized, urbanized, and technologically advanced areas of the Western world, except for the death of statesmen, society has banished death" (560).



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<sup>31</sup> Such as the increase of cremation in England, which Geoffrey Gorer explains in *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965) as follows: “cremation is chosen because it is felt to get rid of the dead more completely and finally than does burial” (128).

<sup>32</sup> That is, while cognitive dissonance is present in anti-elegies of almost all periods, what adds a “modern” flavor to the anti-elegies of the past century or so is the cognition of lost loss as the source of elegiac melancholia. As for why “lost loss” is a particularly modern phenomenon, a short answer would be that it coincides with the advancement of psychology and psychoanalysis; meaning, just as the late nineteenth century armchair anthropology led to the fad of orientalism of the early twentieth century, the twentieth century psychology and psychoanalysis have contributed to adding this new layer of “lost loss” to the anti-elegiac thrust of the elegy of the same era, by allowing us to recognize the phenomenon and to create a language to conceptualize it. A long answer would be of interest for a future research project.

<sup>33</sup> Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, Vol. 1., Nicholas Rand ed., trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 99-100.

<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, part of Abraham’s and Torok’s theory that this dissertation will not particularly make use of is their premise that the secret is an unconscious phenomenon; the present dissertation will not be fastidious about the strict distinctions between terms such as sub-, semi-, half, or un-conscious, for its main concern is merely that the loss of loss is not readily available to the conscious.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Walter Benjamin: The Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, Michael Jennings, ed. (Cambridge: Belknap, 2003), 317, 319.

<sup>36</sup> In addition to this notion of psychic enclave, what Abraham’s and Torok’s theory of secret contributes to the reading of elegiac poetry is their view of language: their treatment of speech as cryptonymy, a concealment in language. Abraham and Torok follow Freud in regarding language as a product of psychic processes, and consider disruptions of language as an expressive medium that reveals the fact of its obfuscations. The view of the language as symptoms that have meanings to be unpacked can prove to be instructive especially when we analyze poems that have the air of “resistance”—a “poet’s desire to sequester herself” as James Longenbach describes in *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 8—or that engage in a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek, or allusive, allegorical, or equivocating indirections, as many works that deal with unspeakable subjects, such as death and loss, do.

<sup>37</sup> Abraham and Torok, 17-19.

<sup>38</sup> Abraham and Torok, 140-141.

<sup>39</sup> Abraham and Torok, 171.

<sup>40</sup> As the name suggests, “romantic irony” is an oxymoronic concept characterizing a philosophical perception of the universe and an artistic program to portray it: one that is “ironic” in the sense that it entails a skeptical analysis of the universe, but that is also “romantic” in the sense that it is fundamentally an enthusiasm toward the universe. Romantic ironists therefore “ironically acknowledge the fictiveness of his own patternings of human experience” and “romantically engage in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths” whereby “these new fictions and self-concepts bear with them the seeds of their own destruction”: it is, in other words, a form or structure that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself (Anne Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980], 5-6). It is also characterized as a “temporary triumph of mind”: a “triumph” because it demonstrates the capability of the mind to conceptualize our universe, and “temporary” because any conceptualization or realization will then be questioned and invalidated (Frederick Garber, *Romantic Irony* [Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1988], 365). In short, romantic irony is a philosophical attitude that, precisely because of its temporary and provisional nature, is capable of containing warring elements, such as belief and doubt, creation and deconstruction, a concept and its critique, or a hypothesis and its skepticism.

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. discussion of D.W. Winnicott's theory of transitional object in the "Anti-Elegy as Transitional Object" section of this introduction.

<sup>42</sup> The exact number of elegies in Stevens's oeuvre depends on one's definition of what an "elegy" is, but from a survey of Stevens criticisms, it appears to be the consensus that there's a relative scarcity of formal elegies in his work. For instance, Jahan Ramazani counts only two of Stevens' poems, "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" and "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" as "formal elegies" (Ramazani 87), as does Charles Berger in his essay, "The Mythology of Modern Death" (in *Wallace Stevens: Modern Critical Views*, Harold Bloom, ed. [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985], 166).

<sup>43</sup> Jay Parini, *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 138.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Burke, "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke" in *Theodore Roethke*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 36.

<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, "The Background of Theodore Roethke's 'Elegy for Jane,'" in *Resources for American Literary Study* 15:2 (Autumn 1985), 139.

<sup>46</sup> Laurence Perrine, *100 American Poems of the 20th Century* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966), 205.

<sup>47</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *Inventions of Farewell: A Book of Elegies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 288.

<sup>48</sup> In *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), chapter 9, Marjorie Perloff sums up the previous scholarship on the last poems of *Ariel* as such. The present dissertation takes into account Perloff's argument about the "real" *Ariel*, and her championing of the version Plath intended (the restored version of 2004) as opposed to the version Ted Hughes edited; however, the dissertation is interested solely in examining the work of Plath as a thinker on the theme of "lost loss," and hardly concerned with deciding whether Plath was suicidal or not.

<sup>49</sup> "To be is to be perceived."

<sup>50</sup> On the relationship between the speaker, Henry, and other characters in *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), the author's note states:

The poem then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr. Bones and variants thereof.

Requiescant in pace [*sic*]. (*The Dream Songs*, vi)

In nearly all of poems in the "Op. posth." sequence ("Dream Songs" #78 to #91), the speaker, Henry, refers to himself in the third person.

<sup>51</sup> Lauren Slater, "Black Swans," in *The Best American Essays, College Edition*, 5th ed., Robert Atwan, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 152.

<sup>52</sup> Adrian Forty, *The Art of Forgetting* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 1-16.

<sup>53</sup> Harald Weinrich, *Lethé: the Art and Critique of Forgetting*, Steven Rendall, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Such as our hair, which are daily lost without our knowledge, and about which we are rarely conscious, except when occasionally noticing, while looking at the mirror, how far our hairline has receded. Or our brain cells, which we rarely think about, except maybe on those occasions when we have difficulty remembering the titles of books we just read days ago. Or, on a less trivial scale, losses unreported by the media, or left out of our historical accounts.

## Chapter 1

### Consolatory Fiction as a Transitional Object

#### In William Wordsworth's Epitaphic Writing

William Wordsworth wrote a large body of elegiac poetry—the Lucy poems, epitaphic pieces, the Immortality Ode, several poems for John Wordsworth, the graveyard section of *The Excursion*, “Laodamia,” and the James Hogg elegy, as well as *Home at Grasmere*, in which Wordsworth’s revisitation in search of a home in that vale results in a foundation narrative of how “death and grief promise to sanctify dwelling and inclusion in Grasmere.”<sup>1</sup> The discourse of loss, in many ways, is pervasive in Wordsworth’s oeuvre and his biography, as though it is the “home” in which Wordsworth survives. The purpose of this chapter, however, is less to survey Wordsworth’s elegies at large than to highlight aspects of his elegiac work that foreshadow the traits and trends of modern anti-consolatory elegiac poetry: namely, the theme of recurrence and revisitation; revisions in his internal narratives that result from such repetition of occurrences and visitations; the awareness that such internal narratives are fictions, the constructs of one’s imagination; and the romantic irony of one’s simultaneous belief in and skepticism toward such fictive narratives, including that of elegiac consolation.

In this chapter, these traces of elegiac disconsolation, which surface as ambivalent irresolution in spite of Wordsworth’s proclivity toward writing some form of consolation,

are examined in conjunction with three of Wordsworth's major elegiac writings: *Essays upon Epitaphs*, Book V of *The Prelude*, and the "Peele Castle" elegy. A reading of *Essays upon Epitaphs*, aided by David Hume's theory of fiction, forms a foundation of a theory of fiction-belief. Then, based on the premise that elegiac consolation is a fictive construct, Book V of *The Prelude* is examined as a type of romantic irony as it delineates a theory of consolation. Lastly, the "Peele Castle" elegy is analyzed as an exemplification of the aforesaid theories of fiction and consolation—one that becomes a forerunner of oblique modern elegies, which will be discussed in later chapters as expressions of lost loss. These works reveal that elegiac disconsolation is a byproduct of Wordsworth's attempt at elegiac consolation. Because consolations are fictions constructed through the romantic yet ironic sensibilities of elegists' imaginative capacities, consolatory narratives contain within them an inherent fragility and a potential disconsolation: namely, the seeds of both belief and disbelief that undo the fiction and facilitate a formation of new fictions. In other words, consolatory fictions become reflective of the transitional phases of the fiction-maker's psyche in its process of self-reorganization, in which fictions are continuously formulated and then destroyed.

The present dissertation may be expected to justify why it starts the examination of modern anti-consolatory elegies with Wordsworth. As any of the previous elegy scholarship—as well as the Introductory chapter, using the example of Milton's *Lycidas*—has shown, elegiac protest, namely, profession of disbelief over the consolatory apparatus of elegy, exists in just about every classical or modern elegy that is compelling enough to warrant scholarly attention. For this reason, the ability to surmount an obstacle,

such as one's skeptical mind, in an effort to reach and accept a consolatory belief is one of the main features of conventional elegy: an elegy that does not take into account or address the human skepticism over consolatory philosophy in the face of irreversible loss would be too shallow to move anyone in any time period.

One common view of what separates the elegiac disconsolation of the Romantic period from that of earlier periods would be the Romantic preoccupation with identity and the self. R. Clifton Spargo asserts in *The Ethics of Mourning* that the anti-elegy has at its core an insistence on the individual's "uncancellable and unassimilable value" as the basis of one's refusal of the substitutive valuation of the dead;<sup>2</sup> given the amount of attention that the notion of the individual and individualism garnered during the Romantic period,<sup>3</sup> one may reasonably connect the Romantic fascination with individual identity with a fiercer rejection of substitutive compensation as consolation for a loss. That is to say, the Romantic obsession with individual identity makes the individual seem irreplaceable and its loss irreversible, and it constitutes one of the reasons why the roots of anti-elegiac disconsolation became more acutely visible from Romanticism onward.

In the context of this particular dissertation, however, what separates Wordsworth's elegiac disconsolation from those of the earlier periods is the characteristic of Wordsworth elegy as a fiction aware of its own fictiveness. As a reading of *Essays upon Epitaphs* will show, Wordsworth's elegiac works present themselves as self-conscious, fictive constructions—even if they aim to be intense enough in their passion to become the "truth... acknowledged by the human heart."<sup>4</sup> This self-consciously fictive elegiac narrative is precisely what the modern elegists, discussed in later chapters of the dissertation, inherit from Wordsworth elegies. When confronted with a sense of loss that

goes beyond a specific object-loss—as in cases like “Peele Castle”—such fictive narrative of loss is all that an elegist is left to construct, as a stand-in to fill the psychic landscape where loss itself feels lost. And being so fragile, the fictions of consolation keep breaking down and then being reconstructed, like transitional objects one clings to as one moves from one phase of one’s life-after-loss to the next.

### I. *Essays upon Epitaphs* and a Theory of Fiction-Belief

Wordsworth’s *Essays upon Epitaphs*, even though it contains three essays, is essentially a two-part treatise in which the first half, Essay I and parts of Essay II, expounds the thesis of Wordsworth’s idea of epitaphic or elegiac writings, while the second half, the remaining parts of Essay II and Essay III, critiques the examples of past elegiac writings based upon the principles laid out in the first half.<sup>5</sup> The interest of this present chapter lies mostly in this first half, where Wordsworth formulates what qualities make for ideal epitaphic writing.<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth’s conceptualization of ideal elegiac writing hinges largely on the distinction of “truth and sincerity” from “falsehood and affectation.”<sup>7</sup> By “truth,” however, Wordsworth does not mean “a faithful image” of all accounts of the deceased or the laws of the universe; rather, he refers to a fiction—a word that means here more a product of the imaginative mind than a manner of falsehood or duplicity—which is passionate and intense enough to be acknowledged as “truth” by the human heart. That is to say, the essays reveal Wordsworth’s premise that the notion of “truth and sincerity” that elevates elegiac writing is itself a mode of fiction, albeit a fiction that is more powerful than a factual truth to formulate itself as a superior truth in the human heart.

Throughout the essays, Wordsworth refers to facets of elegiac consolation as “tender fiction.”<sup>8</sup> One may discern this notion of fiction as the foundation of “truth and sincerity” from Wordsworth’s discussion of the “general sympathy” toward the subject of death in Essay I:

The character of a deceased friend or beloved kinsman is not seen, no—nor ought to be seen, otherwise than as a tree through a tender haze or a luminous mist, that spiritualises and beautifies it; that takes away, indeed, but only to the end that the parts which are not abstracted may appear more dignified and lovely; may impress and affect the more. Shall we say, then, that this is not truth, not a faithful image...?—It *is* truth, and of the highest order; for, though doubtless things are not apparent which did exist; yet, the object being looked through this medium, parts and proportions are brought into distinct view which before had been only imperfectly or unconsciously seen: it is truth hallowed by love—the joint offspring of the worth of the dead and the affections of the living!<sup>9</sup>

The above is Wordsworth’s explanation of why a deceased person becomes idealized in elegiac writing. A straightforward reading of the above passage would be that, in Wordsworth’s mind, idealization and beautification of the deceased are the truth “of the highest order”; we merely fail to see the dead in such idealized, beautified forms while they were still alive because this truth, this way of seeing the deceased, is “hallowed by love” and is born of the retrospective realization of the importance of the deceased and the affection that the living feels toward them. What this passage also reveals to us is Wordsworth’s awareness that there exists a history of skepticism toward the ways in which elegiac writing falsely idealizes the dead. *Essays upon Epitaphs* shows that the ironic consciousness like that of “The dead, / in print, are always graceful”<sup>10</sup> is not a modern invention, but rather a long-standing cynicism that generations of elegies have had to respond to. Wordsworth believes that the thoughtful and empathic fiction of

elegiac writing is more truthful than the seeming truth of how the deceased in reality falls short of the ideal.

In Essay II, Wordsworth continues to respond to this skepticism, by posing himself a question, “Where are all the *bad* People buried?”<sup>11</sup> The question leads him to make an authoritative distinction between false affectation and truthful fiction:

For the occasion of writing an Epitaph is matter of fact in its intensity, and forbids more authoritatively than any other species of composition all modes of fiction, except those which the very strength of passion has created; which have been acknowledged by the human heart, and have become so familiar that they are converted into substantial realities.<sup>12</sup>

Even though the passage, on first reading, may seem as though Wordsworth is denying “all modes of fiction” in epitaphic writing—it “forbids more authoritatively... all modes of fiction”—a closer look should allow any reader to see that Wordsworth acknowledges that an epitaphic writing is still a mode of fiction, which the elegists, through intense passion and affection, “create.” The word choice here suggests that the fiction Wordsworth speaks of is not a “truth” that is already existent, hidden, to be uncovered or discovered, but rather something that is to be “created” by the imagination of the elegist. What separates this truthful fiction, a product of elegiac imagination, from falsity or cliché is, in Wordsworth’s mind, the degree of the “strength of passion.” And that is what converts “fictions” we create into “substantial realities” for us.

This attempt to convert “fictions” into “substantial realities” mirrors the crux of the function of what is in modern psychology called narrative therapy: a method of therapy that assumes that humans understand their lives by interpreting them like stories and involves as its chief element a “re-authoring” or “re-storying” of one’s life story.<sup>13</sup> According to psychologist Jerome Bruner, there are two modes of cognition that humans



use to construct what they conceive as realities: “paradigmatic,” or logico-scientific mode, which “attempts to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation”; and “narrative” mode, which is a way of ordering experience and constructing reality through “verisimilitude” or “likeness”<sup>14</sup> or, to put it in a more familiar term, a fiction or story. This latter mode, the “narrative” mode of cognition, and the ideas that reality- or self-making “is a narrative art”<sup>15</sup> and that “all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement”<sup>16</sup> form the basis of personal construct theory that is at the core of narrative therapy.

Whether in elegiac fiction or narrative therapy, the key is how exactly one may go about converting the “fiction” into “substantial reality.” Narrative therapy conceives events as dots and stories as lines that connect the dots; stories are revised as events, or dots, are reconnected to form a different line. The actual method of therapy is less important in the context of this dissertation chapter than the consideration of what exactly makes a fiction persuasive enough to be converted into a “reality”<sup>17</sup>: how the “reconnecting of the dots” actually occurs at the level of human cognition. In the narrative mode of cognition, “it is the *meaningfulness*” of the stories, “rather than their factual *truthfulness*, that gives them their credibility.”<sup>18</sup> As for what produces this “meaningfulness,” Paul Ricoeur indicates that it is the power of language he identifies with the word “poetry”<sup>19</sup>—for the task of poetry is “to make words mean as much as they can... to make it meaningful, powerful, and therefore to bring back to language all its capacity of meaningfulness.”<sup>20</sup> Meaningfulness, hence, is a product of the power of language, such as captured in poetry.

It is precisely to articulate what renders certain poetry more powerful than others that Wordsworth critiques the examples of past elegiac writings in Essays II and III of *Essays upon Epitaphs*. That is to say, Wordsworth may not so much be criticizing Pope's and other poets' stale elegies for the sake of assassinating in the "anxiety of influence" manner his poetic predecessors, or as a way to define or advance his elegy-poetics, but rather as an effort to explore and deliberate what would create this "power of language" that produces meaningful and persuasive elegy by pointing at the counterexamples that fall short of it. For Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs* is his search for a way to construct a powerful enough "fiction" that is converted in our mind into a "substantial reality." For this fiction-making, its narrative-reconfiguration and re-authoring of our cognition of the reality of loss, is, in many ways, his—and possibly all elegists'—personal "narrative therapy" that makes our life possible in the world of epitaphs.

As laudable as Wordsworth's intentions may be, the critical language of *Essays upon Epitaphs* does not seem adequate enough to clarify what makes some elegies' fictions more powerful than others: his language stays largely intuitive, and appears more concerned with making evaluative judgments rather than analytical statements, employing such phrasings as, "in the epitaphs of this Writer, the true impulse is wanting" or "his motions must of necessity be feeble" or "they are little better than a tissue of false thoughts, languid and vague expressions."<sup>21</sup> In other words, readers—including this present one—looking for any thematic secrets behind what makes an elegy powerful enough to turn a fiction into a truth would likely be left disappointed.

The present dissertation attempts to clarify what Wordsworth seemingly struggles to express in *Epitaphs*—namely, the source of the “power” of elegiac fictions—with the aid of two theoretical apparatuses: first, David Hume’s theory of fiction, which helps explain the source of the power of fiction; and secondly, the theory of cognitive dissonance, which elucidates how the double-bind inherent in the act of fiction-belief surfaces as irony in a text. Where *Essays upon Epitaphs* falls short, an examination of another, near-contemporary Romanticist who also expounds on his theory of fiction, appears helpful in shedding more light on Wordsworth’s theory of elegiac fictions. Hume’s interpretation of the workings of fiction untangles, in a sense, what exactly of a fiction makes it compelling enough to become a reality—something Wordsworth strains to articulate with vague platitudes such as “passion” or “love”:

This *state of nature*, therefore, is to be regarded as a mere fiction, not unlike that of the *golden age*, which poets have invented; only with this difference, that the former is describ’d as full of war, violence, and injustice; whereas the latter is painted out to us, as the most charming and most peaceable condition, that can possibly be imagin’d. The seasons, in that first age of nature, were so temperate, if we may believe the poets, that there was no necessity for men to provide themselves with cloaths and houses as a security against the violence of heat and cold. The rivers flow’d with wine and milk: The oaks yielded honey; and nature spontaneously produc’d her greatest delicacies. The storms and tempests were not alone remov’d from nature; but those more furious tempests were unknown to human breasts, which now cause such uproar, and engender such confusion. Avarice, ambition, cruelty, selfishness, were never heard of: Cordial affection, compassion, sympathy, were the only movements, with which the human mind was yet acquainted. Even the distinction of *mine* and *thine* was banish’d from that happy race of mortals, and carry’d with them the very notions of property and obligation, justice and injustice.<sup>22</sup>

In this passage, excerpted from a section on the origin of justice and property in Book III of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume demystifies the notion of “fiction” by delimiting its two vectors: one that undervalues the past as the savage “*state of nature*,” in an

attempt to make the present fiction more palatable; and the other that idealizes the past as the “*golden age*,” in order to create an origin of, or original need for, the fiction.

Undervaluing and overvaluing that occur in fiction-making let us know that fiction is a certain exaggerated or distorted narrative. And from this knowledge of the duplicitous character of fiction—and still more from the knowledge of the human necessity for such fiction—arises the irony, as well as sarcasm, which is hard to miss in the above excerpt, such as from the intensifier in “mere fiction” or the subjunctive in “if we may believe the poets,” whom Hume ironically depicts as epitomes of “liars.”<sup>23</sup> Irony points to double-consciousness; Hume theorizes that fiction-making entails the simultaneous believing and disbelieving induced by the skeptical mind.

For Hume, who “is... troubled by the difficulty of distinguishing between fact and fiction,”<sup>24</sup> this skepticism raises the same question Wordsworth grapples with, however more sentimentally and less adroitly, in *Essays upon Epitaphs*: how we form our beliefs, and how we can distinguish fact from fiction. Hume examines the first of those two inquiries, the origin of belief, in the section titled “Of scepticism with regard to senses”:

*From whence arises such a belief? ... belief in general consists in nothing, but the vivacity of an idea; and that an idea may acquire its vivacity by its relation to some present impression. Impressions are naturally the most vivid perceptions of the mind; and this quality is in part convey'd by the relation to every connected idea. The relation causes a smooth passage from the impression to the idea, and even gives a propensity to that passage. The mind falls so easily from the one perception to the other, that it scarce perceives the change, but retains in the second a considerable share of the vivacity of the first. It is excited by the lively impression; and this vivacity is convey'd to the related idea, without any great diminution in the passage, by reason of the smooth transition and the propensity of the imagination.*<sup>25</sup>

Hume claims that “belief in general consists in nothing, but the vivacity of an idea”; as habitually watchful readers, we certainly query the comma between “nothing” and “but,”

which is there almost as though to suggest that “belief in general consists in nothing” period, although, this excerpt being prose, the line-break in the passage that further separates “nothing” and its qualifier “but” is purely accidental.<sup>26</sup> This “vivacity” is relative to “impressions” that are the most vivid perceptions of the mind. To rephrase: the mind has the tendency to “fall” for the most vivid, the most flamboyant idea, like a houseguest who feels most attracted to a house with the brightest lights—or like a moth in dark woods, which, lured by the brightest light, flies into the forest fire in its moments of entomological irrationality. Hume, in other words, adds—on top of “meaningfulness,” “passion,” or “intensity,” which are used in *Essays upon Epitaphs* and modern personal construct theory—another useful word, “vivacity,” to conceptualize how a fiction can turn into a “substantial reality” in our cognition.

That is to say, while certainly logic and reason—the phrase “by reason of the smooth transition” points to logical or rational development of an idea—can partially render an idea believable, there is, too, something unreasonable about belief: an element driven by the “propensity of the imagination,” the irrationality of the “lively impression.” In a sense, Hume’s argument in 1.4.1 titled “Of scepticism with regard to reason”—the main thrust of which is generally interpreted to be a claim that reason cannot give grounds for belief and is “considered to be fallacious”<sup>27</sup>—must be examined in conjunction with this argument in 1.4.2; sections 1.4.1 “Of scepticism with regards to reason” and 1.4.2 “Of scepticism with regards to senses” are companion sections, and together, they argue that an idea requires both rational and imaginative grounds to pass muster for a belief, and that neither reason nor imagination alone suffices.

What separates fact from fiction, for Hume, is the intensity or degree of the “vivacity of the idea”—that appears to be what Wordsworth means by “strength of passion” that makes an elegiac fiction a psychic reality. In a sense, fact is only a type of fiction that is more believable than other types of fiction; they both are, in their essence, fictions. Hume views all “ideas” as fictions, and those fictions that garner sufficient rational and imaginative grounds to be credible become “facts” while those that fail to do so turn into “lies.” An earlier passage in section 1.3.10 titled “Of the influence of belief” corroborates this distinction between different types of fictions:

The conversation of those, who have acquir'd a habit of lying, tho' in affairs of no moment, never gives any satisfaction; and that because those ideas they present to us, not being attended with belief, make no impression upon the mind. Poets themselves, tho' liars by profession, always endeavour to give an air of truth to their fictions; and where that is totally neglected, their performances, however ingenious, will never be able to afford much pleasure. In short, we may observe, that... truth and reality are still requisite, in order to make them entertaining to the imagination.<sup>28</sup>

The “lies” of poets differ from those of the habitual liars in that the poets “endeavour to give an air of truth” to their “lies”; in order for the poet’s fiction to have an influence on the audience—that is, for an idea to be powerful or flamboyant enough to be believed—it must combine elements of the imaginative with those of reason, its truth and reality principle. In a sense, what we customarily call an “artistic truth”—the insight or knowledge that literature and other art forms provide us with—becomes a “truth” to us because it garners through imagination and reason an added “air of truth.” As Gilles Deleuze points out in his reading of Hume, fiction draws its origin and force primarily from the imagination,<sup>29</sup> but fiction with only the imaginative element, without the rational persuasion, is a lie of the habitual liar, not the poet’s equivalent.

Ideas that draw their force from both the imaginative and rational elements are not, however, exempt from skepticism; regardless of how powerful or persuasive an idea is, all ideas are susceptible to skeptical doubt for Hume, since, for him, skepticism, “both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady which can never be radically cur’d”:

[skeptical doubts] must return upon us every moment, however we may chase it away, and sometimes may seem entirely free from it. 'Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always encreases, the farther we carry our reflections.... Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy.<sup>30</sup>

By an “idea... attended with belief,” Hume hardly means something along the line of “an idea so powerful that it negates all skepticism”; it merely means that an idea, when corroborated with the imaginative and rational elements, becomes just powerful enough to allow us a moment of “carelessness and in-attention” that relieves us from skeptical doubts. As Hume expounds in the conclusion of Book I, “If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, 'tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise.”<sup>31</sup> The more powerful the idea, the more pain it takes to undo our belief in it. Hence, the relation between our belief and skepticism is one of hydraulics. When the force of skepticism’s transistasis<sup>32</sup> outweighs that of the belief’s homeostasis, the belief is contested by skepticism, but in a case of the reverse, skepticism is put to rest; at a certain point of pain threshold, we allow carelessness or inattention to salvage our sanity. For Hume, the world may be “an outright fiction of the imagination” in which fiction “*becomes a principle of human nature.*”<sup>33</sup> But fiction, while hardly exempted from—or rather, continually targeted by—skepticism, is in some sense a necessity, without which we wouldn’t even be able to claim that fire is hot and water is cold. Hume’s argument in the

*Treatise*, however, should not be confused with the absolute skepticism akin to Pyrrhonism, and neither should Wordsworth's notion of "fiction becomes truth when hallowed by love." This view of all facts as fiction, however, underlies Wordsworth's belief that an idealized fiction of the dead can be turned into a supreme truth through its intensity of flamboyance that speaks to both the logical and imaginative faculties of the human psyche. "Where are all the *bad* People buried?"

In addition to formulating a hypothesis of how we form our beliefs and how we can distinguish fact from fiction, the *Treatise* illuminates one more facet of fiction-belief that appears useful in an analysis of Wordsworth's theory of epitaphic writing: the source of the ironic consciousness in epitaphic writings. The sense of irony in *Essays upon Epitaphs* is detectable enough—such as the bemusement of the initial question, "Where are all the *bad* People buried?"—but the text sheds little light on why it employs a tone of such ilk. The *Treatise*, however, demonstrates that irony surfaces in Hume's prose whenever the text performs a tightrope act of the simultaneous believing and disbelieving. An instance of that is his conclusion to the skeptical enterprise of Book I:

'Tis easier to forbear all examination and enquiry, than to check ourselves in so natural a propensity, and guard against that assurance, which always arises from an exact and full survey of an object. On such an occasion we are apt not only to forget our scepticism, but even our modesty, too; and make use of such terms as these, '*tis evident, 'tis certain, 'tis undeniable*; which a due deference to the public ought, perhaps, to prevent. I may have fallen into this fault after the example of others; but I here enter a *caveat* against any objections, which may be offer'd on that head; and declare that such expressions were extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other.<sup>34</sup>

This long protest—this caveat, for the seeming discrepancy between his stringent skepticism that subjects any ideas to rigorous examination and the scholarly necessity



that forces one to ascertain one's ideas conclusively in such a manner as to claim "'tis evident, 'tis certain, 'tis undeniable"—is hardly an isolated phenomenon in the *Treatise*; we find similar moments of such self-doubt, self-justification, and discomfort thereof throughout the text, whether it's the famous "reverie" passage on his unease with skeptic solipsism earlier in the same chapter, or his sardonic statement that "the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous."<sup>35</sup> As with the "golden age" passage in 3.2.2. cited earlier in this section, irony emerges in Hume's prose whenever he makes the tightrope move: the double-bind between his belief in fiction and his distrust of it, between his devotion to skepticism and the scholarly desire for certitude, or between his solipsism and his inquiry into the external world. In a sense, irony enables one to believe in fiction without deluding oneself; irony and its double-consciousness constitute a kind of intersubjective contract, between a fiction-maker and a fiction-recipient, that allows them to meet the needs of their ordinary existence while still leaving them enough room to revise and renew their fictions.<sup>36</sup> Belief is a hazardous material; double-consciousness must be bargained for in a pact with fiction-belief.

That is the third element in the theory of fiction that the *Treatise* reveals: irony, inherent in any belief in fiction as an intersubjective contract, is a linguistic symptom of double-bind, or, to be more scholarly and accurate, cognitive dissonance.<sup>37</sup> The hypothesis one may reach from one's reading of the language of the text of the *Treatise* is that its ironic expressions are symptomatic of the inherently cognitively dissonant nature of the act of fiction-making, of the linguistic and rhetorical function of fiction as a bidirectional screen. And Wordsworth's ironic voice in *Essays upon Epitaphs* can similarly be viewed as an expression of cognitive dissonance, as exemplified by the

double-bind between his desire to preserve the fictive idealization of the dead and his ironic awareness that there must be some dead people that are “*bad*.”

To be clear, irony is not a part of the conventional discourse of cognitive dissonance theory,<sup>38</sup> even if it is central to virtually all discussion of romantic poetry. The hypothesis here is that, in the absence of facile dissonance reduction methods—such as when the dissonant elements are neither changeable nor erasable, or when the subject is or must be committed, with equal passion, to both of the dissonant cognitions, such as in the case of fiction-belief—irony, as an expression that betrays one’s recognition of the incongruities and contradictions within one’s claim or perception,<sup>39</sup> surfaces as a linguistic incarnation of cognitive dissonance. And that, precisely, is what happens to Hume’s *Treatise*, its double-bind between its equal commitments to skepticism about and the validity of the external world, or between the necessity of fiction and its disbelief.

Similarly, irony as a linguistic symptom of cognitive dissonance emerges in Wordsworth’s *Essays upon Epitaphs* as well. The subterfuge of irony in Wordsworth’s *Essays*, however, is a quieter and less explicit one than that of Hume’s *Treatise*. In concluding the third *Essay*, Wordsworth steps back from his review of the “transgressions” of bad elegiac writings and presents what he characterizes as “favourable specimens such as are ordinarily found in our country church-yards at this day”:<sup>40</sup>

In an obscure corner of a country church-yard I once espied, half overgrown with hemlock and nettles, a very small stone laid upon the ground, bearing nothing more than the name of the deceased with the date of birth and death, importing that it was an infant which had been born one day and died the following. I know not how far the Reader may be in sympathy with me; but more awful thoughts of rights conferred, of hopes awakened, of remembrances stealing away or vanishing, were imparted to

my mind by that inscription there before my eyes than by any other that it has ever been my lot to meet with upon a tomb-stone.

The most numerous class of sepulchral inscriptions do indeed record nothing else but the name of the buried person; but that he was born upon one day and died upon another. Addison in the *Spectator* making this observation says, “that he cannot look upon those registers of existence, whether of brass or marble, but as a kind of satire upon the departed persons who had left no other memorial of them than that they were born and that they died.” In certain moods of mind this is a natural reflection; yet not perhaps the most salutary which the appearance might give birth to. As in these registers the name is mostly associated with others of the same family, this is a prolonged companionship, however shadowy: even a tomb like this is a shrine to which the fancies of a scattered family may return in pilgrimage; the thousands of the individuals without any communication with each other must oftentimes meet here. Such a frail memorial then is not without its tendency to keep families together.<sup>41</sup>

Aside from the obvious irony that Wordsworth views the poetic melliflence of Pope’s and other poets’ elegies as inferior to a mere inscription of a name and dates, the passage communicates an active reification of a consolatory fiction belied by a certain cognition of its fictiveness, which surfaces in the text as a diffident irony. The epitaph referred to here indicates that the infant lived just one day, leaving no other memorial of him than that he was born and then dead. It is, in a sense, a kind of lost loss, for the sheer transience of the existence undermines any sense of dispossession.

In the void left by this subverted loss, Wordsworth constructs a fiction: because the name on the grave is generally shared within the same family, the existence so brief as to be almost nonexistent is actually not brief at all but rather a part of “prolonged companionship,” which functions to strengthen family ties. On first reading, this fiction sounds preposterous enough that it may as well have been a concoction by Kafka of *Goodbye Mr. Despair*.<sup>42</sup> The tone is most certainly ambivalent, indicating the concurrence of belief and unbelief: this “prolonged companionship” is qualified with

“however shadowy”; the hope that a tomb like this would become a shrine for family pilgrimage is modified as “fancies”; and Wordsworth admits that this memorial is “frail.” The fiction certainly makes logical sense—yes, the family name on the grave does indicate that the dead is a part of the family—and is surely rooted in imagination, since it is a pure conjecture to say that “the thousands of the individuals without any communication with each other must oftentimes meet” at such a tomb. The sheer visibility of the logical and imaginative effort it takes to construct this fiction makes it compelling, in a manner opposite to that of sprezzatura.<sup>43</sup> The irony of this passage demonstrates that, much in the same way that a hope can be a spice that intensifies the taste of despair, doubt can also fortify our fiction-belief by making it more “vivacious,” like a half-backlit photograph: precisely because of its frailty, we are left wishing to believe this consolatory, even as we are aware of the depth of desolation it illuminates.

## II. Romantic Irony and a Theory of Consolation as a Transitional Object in *The Prelude*

For Wordsworth, a poet preoccupied with the theme of loss, the notion of consolation, conventionally understood as restitution for or redress of loss, remains one of the central concerns of his poetry. Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, which has often been characterized as “an extended elegy,”<sup>44</sup> is hardly an exception in this regard. Within *The Prelude*, there are three instances where the word “consolation” is used<sup>45</sup>—in the dream of an Arab in Book V, in his reflection on England’s declaration of war against France in Book X, and in the conclusion in Book XIII.<sup>46</sup> In particular, the Arab dream episode in Book V—which one may interpret to be an elegy for books as a metonym of one’s cultural and humanistic life—elucidates Wordsworth’s formulation and critique of what

he refers to, and means by, the term “consolation.” The episode reveals that, to Wordsworth, “consolation” is often a site of vexation, a mixture of, or compromise between, hope and disturbance: a kind of fiction-believing, in which faith coexists with self-reflexive doubts and which leads to a conflict of attitudes akin to the cognitive dissonance.

In this section of *The Prelude*, the dissonant cognitions form an ironic consciousness, which surfaces in the text as a linguistic symptom of romantic irony—namely, an oxymoronic view of the universe in which one’s attitude becomes “ironic” and skeptical but at the same time “romantic” and earnest. As the name suggests, “romantic irony” is an oxymoronic concept in which one’s attitude is “ironic” in the sense that it entails a skeptical analysis of the universe, but is also “romantic” in the sense that it is fundamentally an affirmative view of human harmony with nature and the universe. Romantic ironists therefore “ironically acknowledge the fictiveness of his own patternings of human experience” and “romantically engage in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths” whereby “these new fictions and self-concepts bear with them the seeds of their own destruction”: it is, in other words, a form or structure that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself.<sup>47</sup> It is also characterized as a “temporary triumph of mind”: a “triumph” because it demonstrates the capability of the mind to conceptualize life, and “temporary” because any conceptualization or realization will then be questioned and invalidated.<sup>48</sup> In short, romantic irony is a philosophical attitude that, precisely because of its temporary and provisional nature, is capable of containing warring elements, such as belief and doubt, creation and deconstruction, a concept and its critique, or a hypothesis and its skepticism.

Romantic irony emerges in the text as a means of dissonance reduction, a temporary halt to reconcile the conflict that the fiction-believing entails. To rephrase, Wordsworth's portrayal of consolation in *The Prelude* corroborates the view of the mechanism of consolation as fiction-belief, an act of simultaneous believing and disbelieving, where the linguistic symptom of its cognitive dissonance shows up in the form of a romantic irony in an attempt at dissonance reduction. The aim of this present section of the dissertation is to show that, through romantic irony, Wordsworth opens up a third philosophical space, a dialectical synthesis born out of the vexation of the conflict between the believing and disbelieving of a fiction. In this space, consolation takes on the character of a transitional object, and gains its sublimity precisely from its temporary and provisional nature.

Wordsworth presents this vexation over conflicting beliefs—between fiction-believing and fiction-disbelieving—at the beginning of Book V. As an introduction to the allegorical dream of an Arab holding two books, the passage vacillates between the hope for immortality and the awareness of the actual frailty of books. Characterized by various critics as a lament over the perishable nature of books<sup>49</sup> or sadness over the precariousness of human intellect to destructive forces,<sup>50</sup> the section also constitutes, according to Andrew Bennett, “Wordsworth’s most considered critiques of the redemptive comforts” of books as a means of authorial survival after death.<sup>51</sup> It begins with a sense of despondency over the recognition of the skepticism toward such survival:

... Thou also, man, has wrought,  
For commerce of thy nature with itself,  
Things worthy of unconquerable life;  
And yet we feel—we cannot chuse but feel—

That these must perish. Tremblings of the heart  
It gives, to think that the immortal being  
No more shall need such garments; and yet man,  
As long as he shall be the child of earth,  
Might also 'weep to have' what he may lose—  
Nor be himself extinguished, but survive  
Abject, depressed, forlorn, disconsolate. (V. 17-27)

The passage immediately conveys a sense of conflict between incompatible beliefs—between the hope for the immortality of books that are “worthy of unconquerable life” and the acknowledgement that they too “must perish.” This conflict occurs on two levels: first, as an undoing of what Leo Bersani calls the “culture of redemption,” a culture in which the loss of one’s physical life is to be offset or redeemed by one’s authorial survival, one’s survival in the form of a book;<sup>52</sup> and secondly, as a critique not only of the text but also of the intertext as a medium of authorial survival.

On the first of these two critiques of the immortality of books, Bennett observes that Wordsworth’s poetry presents us with a disturbing paradox of how “the fantasy of survival is... bound up with the possibility of non-survival.”<sup>53</sup> Scholars have noted that, in the Romantic period, a desire for the textual afterlife was an important impulse for the production of poetry; in other words, there was, in the act of writing, an underlying belief, or hope, that one could survive one’s death by writing, and preserving one’s identity through, poetry.<sup>54</sup> For that reason, the bibliocidal acknowledgement of this passage indicates, precisely, the aforementioned paradox of Wordsworth’s poetry: what enables the fantasy of survival is, at the same time, a reminder of its failure. As the passage concedes, a genuinely “immortal being” would have no need for such “garments” as books. The peculiarly tangible depiction of books as “garments” suggests that only mortals need the materiality of books for their survival, and as such, they are as much a

medium of immortality as a reminder of human mortality. Here, want and lack become synonyms; want is an indication of a lack. In this sense, as Wordsworth relates later in the same section, books are mere “shrines”—a site of memorializing, an attempted survival in memory—that are too “frail” to fulfill their objective (48).

If the passage, on one level, questions the possibility of textual survival—owing to such factors as the physical frailty of books and the nature of books as a reminder of human mortality—it also vacillates, on another level, in its belief in the intertextual survival, as suggested by Wordsworth’s allusion to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 64 in lines 20 and 25. Intertextuality is a staple of poetic writing; there are hardly any poems free of intertextual echoes, if only by virtue of the fact that our language acquisition is a result of our immersion in the previous instances of language use by other people.<sup>55</sup> In that regard, it isn’t noteworthy that Wordsworth echoes Shakespeare in his poem; what is noteworthy, however, is that he uses a quotation mark to draw attention to his use of the Shakespearean lines. And such conspicuousness demands an explanation.

Generally speaking, poets are pretentious; unless there’s a definitive intent, such as in an outlandish parody, poets tend to refrain from artificially highlighting allusions by putting quotation marks around them, for they would rather assume that educated readers—and they do demand that their readers be educated—can catch allusions without any extra help from the poets.<sup>56</sup> The art of allusion is like a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek, the spirit of which D.W. Winnicott describes as follows: “it is a joy to be hidden” and “disaster not to be found.”<sup>57</sup> Emily Dickinson too proclaims, “Best Things dwell out of Sight.”<sup>58</sup> That is the essence of the air of “resistance”—a “poet’s desire to



sequester herself”—that lies at the heart of poetry.<sup>59</sup> Conspicuity, therefore, is a riddle in itself.

Furthermore, if poetry is a way of preserving one’s identity in one’s writing as suggested by the Romantic preoccupation with posterity, intertextual allusions become a poetic battleground on which the egotistical poet attempts to vanquish the previous poets, and sometimes even future ones, to turn them into his or her own.<sup>60</sup> This need to conquer other poets originates from the latent threat of intertextuality, similar to that of prosopopoeia Paul de Man describes in “Autobiography as De-facement,”<sup>61</sup> namely that “by making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death”.<sup>62</sup> In using allusions, the alluding poet risks being effaced or silenced by the alluded poet. To draw attention to an allusion by using it in such an undigested manner as Wordsworth does in this instance—and we do not fail to notice that Wordsworth strains syntax in lines 23-27 to accommodate the Shakespearean line—poses a risk for the alluding poet, and that begs a question: why does he do it?

We may find a clue for an answer to this question in Shakespeare’s Sonnet #64:

When I have seen by time’s fell hand defaced  
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;  
When sometime-lofty towers I see down razed,  
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;  
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,  
And the firm soil win of the wat’ry main,  
Increasing store with loss and loss with store;  
When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Or state itself confounded to decay,  
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat:  
That time will come and take my love away.  
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose  
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.<sup>63</sup>

Wordsworth's allusion comes from the concluding couplet of Sonnet #64. Shakespeare's sonnet describes the ruin in the first ten lines, and, based on this evidence of unavoidable loss, the speaker reaches the conclusion in lines 11-12 that "time will come and take" his "love away": the future declarative tense, "will," certainly communicates the speaker's acknowledgement of, and resignation to, the inevitability of this occurrence. This realization is essentially like a death to the speaker, in that "having" something becomes synonymous with "losing" it, and loss, in this instance, is, to the speaker, synonymous with death; he has little choice but to weep at "having" that results in "losing." The sentiment is one of double-bind, similar to the one echoed in the preventive stoicism of "missing all would keep me from missing minor things": not having is a death, but having and losing is also a death.

By quoting this sonnet, Wordsworth reveals that the belief in textual survival is in the same circular entrapment of loss: not surviving in books is a death, but since books inevitably "perish," surviving in books will also inevitably end in death. The same also applies for intertextual survival: not having an intertextual survival is a death, but having and losing oneself in that intertextual survival is also a death. In this manner, this tenet of loss in Sonnet #64 presents an added layer in Wordsworth's ambivalence with the culture of redemptive posterity: the allusion points simultaneously to the possibility of intertextual survival, as evidenced by the seeming survival of Shakespeare within Wordsworth's verse, and to the prospect of self-dissolution, a disappearance of one in the other's language or their coexistence in a form that is neither of the two, as inferred from the blurred identity of the line. Wordsworth's explicit reference to Sonnet #64, then, expresses this reversibility in intertextual practice, which, without the awkwardness of its

undigested and explicit rendering, he wouldn't otherwise be able to convey. In sum, the allusive quotation stands as both an acquiescence and resistance to the tenet of loss expressed in Shakespeare's sonnet: acquiescence in a sense that he echoes Shakespeare's sentiment about loss, and resistance in a sense that, in the willful act of intertextual revival of Shakespeare, it shows a hope to disprove the sonnet's death-or-death proposal. It adds, in other words, an intertextual dimension to Wordsworth's wavering, his simultaneous edification and skepticism of textual immortality.<sup>64</sup>

As shown, the beginning of Book V presents itself as a site of ongoing, unresolved discord, a psychic effect of which one can sense from the closing line of the excerpted passage; the line is perhaps one of the more abject, depressed, forlorn, disconsolate blank-verse lines in the English poetry, caesurae-ridden, with their feet disjointed and confined in each adjective—"Abject, depressed, forlorn, disconsolate" (27). In order to examine how this ongoing discord becomes the undercurrent of the dream of the Arab episode, we may profitably examine this unresolved conflict in the beginning of Book V as a type of cognitive dissonance manifesting itself linguistically as romantic irony, which provides us with a theoretical framework to account for the linguistic move in this section of Book V. A reading of Book V formulates two hypotheses: the first hypothesis is that, in the absence of facile dissonance reduction methods as in the case of elegiac fiction-making—where the dissonant elements are neither changeable nor erasable and the subject must be committed, with equal passion, to both of the dissonant cognitions—romantic irony, as an attitudinal move that betrays one's recognition of the incongruities and contradictions within one's claim or perception, surfaces as a linguistic symptom in one's attempted reduction of cognitive dissonance; the second hypothesis is

that romantic irony emerges as the undercurrent of the Arab dream episode in Book V, in which the previously-discussed discord of cognitive dissonance in the beginning of Book V continues to lurk in the background.

As a catalyst that allows two dissonant beliefs to coexist without privileging one or the other, romantic irony is one of the philosophic stances that can effect a psychic reorganization in the subject and allow him or her to tolerate cognitive dissonance. While Wordsworth's version of romantic irony lacks the explicit self-mockery or absurdity of texts like *Don Juan* or *Don Quixote*, which have generally been championed as the model cases of romantic irony,<sup>65</sup> it nonetheless demonstrates the similar kind of self-reflexivity, the tightrope act of containing both belief and skepticism, creation and its critique. In the case of the introductory section of Book V of *The Prelude*, the ongoing cognitive dissonance takes place between the fundamental belief in the bookish immortality and the skepticism toward it, on both the textual and intertextual levels. And this dissonance reaches its resolution in the Wordsworthian version of romantic irony in the episode of the dream of an Arab with two books.

Psychoanalytically speaking, dream is itself one form of a manifestation of dissonance. Freud views dreams as disguised fulfillments of conflictual wishes, a site of compromise between the force that propels the wish into consciousness and the force that blocks access to consciousness, in which the wish ends up appearing in the dream only in a disguised form.<sup>66</sup> Post-Freudian psychoanalysts, such as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, extend the Freudian conception of dream by claiming that dreams, with the patient's aid, can become readable entities; dreams pave the way to the free verbalization of desires, affects, or conflicts that, without their mediation, would have remained

inaccessible and unexpressed.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, Wordsworth's introduction of the friend's dream—which, in the 1850 version, becomes his own dream<sup>68</sup>—is itself a romantic ironist move, since it turns the speaker's conflictual desires into a readable and interpretable entity by giving it a dramatic expression.<sup>69</sup> After all, dreams innately contain several elements of romantic irony: their bidirectional nature as a part-real, part-fantastical entity, their function as a playground of conflicting feelings, their availability for interpretations as a site of self-interpretive self-reflexivity, and their manifestation as a kind of meta-fiction, a fiction aware of its own fictiveness. By virtue of these characteristics of dreams, the dream of the friend, who professes to share the same preoccupations and anxieties as the speaker (V.53-55), makes itself available to be a provisional place that contains and resolves the speaker's cognitive dissonance.

Against this backdrop—of cognitive dissonance, romantic irony as its linguistic symptom, and the dream as a psychoanalytic site for those two elements—Wordsworth narrates the dream:

He saw before him an Arabian waste,  
A desert, and he fancied that himself  
Was sitting there in the wide wilderness  
Alone upon the sands. Distress of mind  
Was growing in him when, behold, at once  
To his great joy a man was at his side,  
Upon a dromedary mounted high.  
He seemed an arab of the Bedouin tribes;  
A lance he bore, and underneath one arm  
A stone, and in the opposite hand a shell  
Of a surpassing brightness. (V. 71-81)

One of the immediately noticeable features of the dream passage is that Wordsworth narrates it in the past tense. Critics have observed that, in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth tends to use present tense to enhance the dramatic illusion of immediacy and

authenticity.<sup>70</sup> If present tense underscores immediacy that demands the reader's involvement and immersion into the story, past tense suggests detachment that professes its need to be read and interpreted, prompting an oneiric allegoresis. Often narrated in the past tense, as something recounted, recognized, and interpreted when we are awake, dreams share the same traits with allegories as a site of interpretive retrospection. In particular, this dream presents itself as a type of allegory: fragmentary images, such as the desert, the Arab on the dromedary, the lance, a stone, a shell, are put together in a fanciful, seemingly arbitrary narrative—going from Cervantes to the Arabian desert—that is ripe with representational meanings, as would be a case with an allegory.<sup>71</sup>

Given that the pervasive mood of Book V is that of melancholy—as expressed by the “sadness” (V.10) or “Distress of mind”—this allegorical dream-narrative recalls Walter Benjamin's theory of melancholia in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which links melancholia with allegory: it defines melancholia as a gaze, a way of seeing the world through fragmented subjectivity that perceives objects as allegories.<sup>72</sup> Benjamin hypothesizes that the melancholic, who perceives his or her world as a fallen one reduced to a mass of devalued, meaningless fragments, assigns through allegory arbitrary meanings to the otherwise meaningless fragments; through this subjective assignation of meanings, the melancholic reconstructs his or her experience of the original world, a process that culminates in the redemptive restoration of his or her cognitive capacity.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, this dream takes place in the wasteland—“waste / A desert”—an archetypal “fallen” place without the blessings of nature and life forms, a theme Wordsworth emphasizes by repeating the synonym as an apposition, in two places that receive the most prosodic emphasis, the ending and beginning strong stress of the lines. In this

setting, the speaker synthesizes fragmentary images into an interpretable narrative. An allegorical dream of Book V, then, is akin to this arbitrary meaning-reconstruction, a redemptive step in the wishful Benjaminian dialectic, which goes through the stages of wholeness, fragmentation, and restoration: it is a remedial sorting-out of the melancholic state of mind that is caught between the conflictual elements.

In other words, the desert is both a physical and metaphysical landscape—a place seemingly lacking both physical life forms and metaphysical wholeness or meanings—which, in the sense of Benjamin’s melancholic dialectic, becomes a site of meaning-reconstruction. To put this Benjaminian interpretation in the context of the theme of Book V—that is, the theme of survival in the afterlife—the desert can be viewed as a site of displacement, where concerns over one’s survival in the desert and one’s survival in the afterlife come to overlap with each another. Left in a place generally considered to be devoid of living things—namely, desert and afterlife—the speaker must try to find a way to survive. And as a lone figure left in desolation,<sup>74</sup> the speaker hopes that the Arab is a “guide / To lead him through” the fragmentary meaninglessness of the “desart” (V.82-83); he looks to the Arab sage for an aid to his sorting-out of the melancholic state.

The critical redemptive images in the speaker’s sorting-out are the two books that the Arab possesses, in the form of the stone and shell, which stand, respectively, for scientific knowledge—as inferred from its depiction as “*Euclid’s Elements*” (V. 88)—and for poetic knowledge—as metonymized by its characterization as an “ode” (V.97). The two books offer different kinds of guidance, and judging from the manner in which the poem speaks of the two—that is, the habitual use of the comparative in characterizing the two books, such as in the line, “this book / Is something of more worth” (V.89-90)—

Wordsworth's mode of defining the two is compare and contrast. For this reason, it would be instructive to consider first what guidance the scientific knowledge is supposed to provide, before examining what poetic knowledge entails, in the elaboration of which the speaker uses the word "consolation" (V.109), the central theme of the present section.

Wordsworth goes on to describe "Euclid's Elements" as follows: "The one that held acquaintance with the stars, / And wedded man to man by purest bond / Of nature, undisturbed by space or time" (V.104-106). There are several attributes that can be extracted from this description, such as that scientific knowledge establishes connection among humans through sharing of that knowledge, but perhaps the most pertinent depictions here are that it is acquainted "with the stars" and it is "undisturbed by space or time." On the former, Nicholas Roe indicates that, for Wordsworth, the image of stars "was associated with a Miltonic consistency," such as is seen in poems like "An Evening Walk."<sup>75</sup> The theme of monolithic consistency is further reinforced by the portrayal of its temporally and spatially "undisturbed" nature; to rephrase it into our common register, it would translate into something akin to "eternal truth." In his essay, "The Painter of Modern Life," Charles Baudelaire portrays the essence of art as consisting of two things: "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent" on the one hand and "the eternal and the immutable" on the other.<sup>76</sup> To appropriate this Baudelairean distinction, the essence of the scientific knowledge Wordsworth emphasizes here is "the eternal and the immutable"—its monolithic singularity, its consistency, its eternity.<sup>77</sup> These attributes, of course, are certainly in keeping with the depiction of scientific knowledge as a "stone," a simulacrum of immutability.<sup>78</sup>

In contrast, Wordsworth portrays the shell, the poetic knowledge, as follows:



“This other,” pointing to the shell, “this book  
 Is something of more worth.” “And, at the word,  
 The stranger,” said my friend continuing,  
 “Stretched forth the shell towards me, with command  
 That I should hold it to my ear. I did so  
 And heard that instant in an unknown tongue,  
 Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,  
 A loud prophetic blast of harmony,  
 An ode in passion uttered, which foretold  
 Destruction to the children of the earth  
 By deluge now at hand. No sooner ceased  
 The song, but with calm look the arab said  
 That all was true, that it was even so  
 As had been spoken, and that he himself  
 Was going then to bury those two books...  
 Th’ other that was a god, yea many gods,  
 Had voices more than all the winds, and was  
 A joy, a consolation, and a hope.” (V. 89-103, 107-109)

If scientific knowledge is portrayed as monolithic singularity, poetic knowledge is defined by its multiplicity: the book consists of not only “a god” but also “many gods” (107). The multiplicity here is also plurality, one where many warring elements come to mesh with each other, as evidenced by the abundance of oxymoronic descriptions in this passage: the phrase “an unknown tongue, / Which yet I understood, articulate sounds” attests to the duplicity of poetic knowledge as both an unfamiliar equivocation and an intelligible articulation, similar to the aforementioned depiction of poetry by Winnicott as a double-bind that simultaneously hides and shows itself; the line “A loud prophetic blast of harmony” is an oxymoron in itself, since the violent incongruity of a “blast” is almost an antonym of the pleasing congruity of “harmony”; and prosodically, too, the “blast” of the destructive prophecy is narrated against the harmonious blank verse, meticulously regular throughout the passage and disrupted only periodically by irregular placements of caesurae. If the depiction of scientific knowledge points to its monolithic consistency

and invariability, the depiction of poetic knowledge is distinguished by a sense of plurality, ambivalence, and flexibility.

And if the passage casts scientific knowledge as eternity,<sup>79</sup> it identifies the poetic knowledge as one of temporality and impermanence, characterized by such fleeting images as that of the wind (V.108). As opposed to the teachings by the stone, the shell relays its teachings to the speaker by means of sound—the “articulate sound” of the “tongue” that the speaker holds his ear on the shell to listen, or the “voices” compared superlatively to “all the winds.” It almost goes without saying that wind and sound are classical metaphors of time and its transience.<sup>80</sup> According to the Baudelairean classification of the two essences of art, Wordsworth’s portrayal of poetic knowledge leans decisively toward “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent.” Poetic knowledge is of the moment, a transitory thing like the lute-sound.

It is this temporal nature of poetic knowledge that is critical in Wordsworth’s proclamation that the knowledge brought about by the shell is “a joy, a consolation, and a hope” (V.109). The mode here is, in one sense, appositive; that is, all these three are actually one and the same thing, as though its true name is joy-consolation-hope, since each contains the elements of the other two. In other words, the definition of the broader “consolation”—a word that I will substitute for the lengthy “joy-consolation-hope,”<sup>81</sup> if only by virtue of the fact that the word grabs the center stage in that line by taking up two feet right in the middle of the line—offered here is that it’s something that contains all elements of joy, consolation, and hope.

In addition to being appositive, “joy-consolation-hope” is also cumulative, not selective. In this light, two questions arise in the reader: first, what distinguishes those

three from one another—that is, if it’s cumulative, what does each of those three offer that the others don’t?—and secondly, why must it be all three and not just one or the other? On the first question, one may consider “joy” to be a sense of delight or happiness arising from what is happening or has just happened, the narrower “consolation” to be a restitution for what has been lost, and “hope” to be a sense of anticipating or looking forward to what has yet to happen; that is, roughly speaking, joy, consolation, and hope correspond to things concerning the present, past, and future. On the second question, the answer is likely that the accumulation of the present, past, and future amounts to something that covers the span of all time, something that approximates timelessness.<sup>82</sup>

In other words, the essence of the “consolation” that poetry offers for Wordsworth is that poetry collects the particles of transience and accumulates them into timelessness. Just as a stream of water<sup>83</sup> consists of individual water molecules, themselves made of each chemical element of hydrogen and oxygen with atomic numbers 1 and 8 respectively, eternity is composed of temporalities, and immortality conceived from each moment of mortalities. This merging of the opposites as part of one another is the thrust of Wordsworthian romantic irony, its binding-together of belief and skepticism—one that offers a temporary halt to the conflictual state of cognitive dissonance, between the belief in textual immortality and the recognition of the mortality of books.

This definition of “consolation”—the idea of eternity and immortality as a continuum of transience and mortality—is not complete, however, without noting two more things that make Wordsworthian consolation what it is: first, the idea that the source of the sublimity of consolation lies in its transience; and secondly, the transitory nature of romantic irony, which effects simultaneous creation and de-creation of its

constructs. On the first point, we recall that the unmistakable emphasis in Wordsworth's description of poetic consolation is its rendition as a sound or wind: something fleeting, ephemeral. In other words, what Wordsworth proposes is not a facile mathematical equivalence in the mold of "lots of transient moments equal eternity." Rather, the said emphasis on transience suggests that there is a definitive sublimity in and of the transience itself, as is the case with the Immortality Ode. This idea is further supported by the evidence of Wordsworth's repeated use of such temporality-conscious motifs like "spots of time" throughout *The Prelude*.<sup>84</sup> In Wordsworth's mind, sublimity of consolation does not come from immortality or timelessness: it comes from his steadfast gaze on the transient—from the interplay between what can be made to seem timeless and what is known to be transient.<sup>85</sup>

On the second of the two aforementioned addenda to the definition of "consolation," we recall the depiction of romantic irony as a "temporary triumph of the mind"—how, in romantic irony, whatever is created from the imaginative side of the mind is always provisional, susceptible to future destruction by the skeptic side of the mind; if we are to extend the view of consolation as a cognitive artifact, romantic irony makes it specifically a self-destructing or self-consuming artifact. Similarly, critics have remarked that there is, in much of Wordsworth's philosophic poetry, this self-undermining or self-skeptical tendency, a kind that "requires you to ask whether or not [what the poem says] is true."<sup>86</sup> In short, there are two sides to Wordsworth's poetry, one that seems to believe what it says to be true and one that seems to counter what it says as false. The same applies for Wordsworth's creation of the notion of "consolation": what

he creates, he de-creates. In this romantic ironist view, transience as a source of the sublimity of consolation becomes a transitory idea.

The transitory nature of the notion of Wordsworthian “consolation”—one that entails its own destruction—recalls the fate of what Winnicott refers to as the “transitional object”; by associating Wordsworthian “consolation” with Winnicottian “transitional object,” one may claim that the transient, which is transitory, is in fact transitional. In *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott describes the “transitional object” as an object that the subject destroys in his or her developmental transition from object-relating to object-use; that is, a transitional object is an object destroyed at an intermediate stage in the process of the “subject’s placing of the object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control.”<sup>87</sup> Winnicott narrates the process of object-destruction as follows:

... he will find that after ‘subject relates to object’ comes ‘subject destroys object’ (as it becomes external); and then may come ‘*object survives* destruction by the subject.’ But there may or may not be survival. A new feature thus arrives in the theory of object-relating. The subject says to the object: ‘I destroyed you,’ and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: ‘Hullo object!’ ‘I destroyed you.’ ‘I love you.’ ‘You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.’ ‘While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*.’ ... In other words, because of the survival of the object, the subject may now have started to live a life in the world of objects, and so the subject stands to gain immeasurably; but the price has to be paid in acceptance of the ongoing destruction in unconscious fantasy relative to object-relating. (Winnicott 1971, 90)

Winnicott adds that “the destruction plays its part in making the reality, placing the object outside the self.”<sup>88</sup> In Winnicott’s case, a transitional object is destroyed in the process of the infant’s development from object-relating—that is, seeing the object as a part of the self—to object-using—that is, recognizing the object as something outside of the self, outside of the control of the self. In Wordsworth’s romantic ironist work, consolatory

fiction becomes this “transitional object,” a kind of a self-consuming artifact, the destruction of which takes place as a part of the cognitive making or remaking of one’s “reality.” To rephrase: if consolation is an illusion—a part of the subject’s “projective mental mechanism,” to appropriate Winnicott’s phrase—irony signals disillusion, triggering a destruction of the illusion of the “projective mental mechanisms.” Romantic irony points to the writer’s dissatisfaction with his or her consolatory fiction, which must then be destroyed if the writer were to search for a more genuine, stringent consolation. The transience of the sublimity of consolation comes from its essence as a transitional object. Consolation, in other words, will become consolatory when it ceases to be an illusory “projective mental mechanism”—when its destruction sustains the continuation of one’s cognitive re-sorting.

In a way, the sense of apocalypse in the dream necessarily makes any consolation a provisional one. In the face of an impending doom, a preservation of the books is more a hope than a certainty, whereby the wish to preserve the books clashes against the realization that it may not be possible to do so; in such a precarious world, consolation is less a certainty than a construct. The dreamer chasing the Arab rider reflects a sense of desperation: the impossibility of preserving the books precisely fuels the dreamer’s desire, prompting him to beg the Arab rider “to share his errand” with him (117). The dream conveys a sense of desperation in the form of an impending deluge:

Upon a dromedary, lance in rest,  
He rode, I keeping pace with him; and now  
I fancied that he was the very knight  
Whose tale Cervantes tells, yet not the knight,  
But was an arab of the desart, too,  
Of these was neither, and was both at once.

His countenance meanwhile grew more disturbed,  
And looking backwards when he looked I saw  
A glittering light, and asked him whence it came.  
“It is,” said he, “the waters of the deep  
Gathering upon us.” Quickening then his pace  
He left me; I called after him aloud;  
He heeded not, but with his twofold charge  
Beneath his arm—before me full in view—  
I saw him riding o’er the desert sands  
With the fleet waters of the drowning world  
In chace of him; whereat I waked in terror,  
And saw the sea before me, and the book  
In which I had been reading at my side. (V. 121-140)

In an ending, drowning world, any knowledge, any thoughts, or any consolations cannot be but temporary. It brings us back to the motif of book as a trope for authorial afterlife, and Wordsworth’s hesitance to embrace it wholeheartedly, for, in his poetry, the fantasy of survival suggests precisely the likelihood of non-survival: the interplay of “want” and “lack.” The severe sense of impending loss in this passage—the obliteration of all learning and therefore of all consciousness—defeats such hope as that of Shakespeare’s lines, “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”: in a reverse corollary, if a flood destroys all of humanity, no books will survive, and the non-survival of books means there will be no textual afterlife. The massive destruction metonymized by the flood points to the fear—and an acknowledgement of the possibility—of an all-engulfing loss that subsumes, and makes irrelevant, all individual instances of losses and, along with them, any elegies written about those losses. Any elegiac consolations that fail to account for this full-scale loss—whether brought about by an actual extinction of the human species or by a failure to achieve textual survival—would not withstand the test of skepticism. The Arab dream, then, indicates Wordsworth’s attempt to form his own consolation in the face of this challenge.

Given the evanescence of all things in this world, consolation can gain its sublimity only through its provisional, temporary, transitional nature. Our life, experience, or memories aren't the only fleeting things; consolation itself is a fleeting object, and precisely for its transience, it becomes consolatory. The essence of consolation, therefore, does not reside in one's arrival at some sort of soothing conclusions. From a secularist point of view, when we hear, for instance, that we can live on forever by writing a book—that we can achieve a textual or intertextual immortality if we're any good as a writer—our typical reaction wouldn't be one of an unsuspecting embrace of this soothing fiction, but rather one of “Maybe—probably not—but let's hope so—and that suffices, for now—so I will keep writing onward.” Where we find a consolation is in our skepticism that destroys the consolatory fiction and allows us to go beyond the facile conclusion, to move onward with our projects, our writing and thinking. The third philosophical space Wordsworth opens up, beyond the thesis of believing and the antithesis of disbelieving, is this dialectical synthesis of the ongoing—which, on a cursory look, may seem like a deferral, or a De-Manian “aporia,” but which, in truth is more like a Kierkegaardian “going beyond.”<sup>89</sup>

Curiously enough, except in this theorization of “consolation” in Book V, all other uses of the word “consolation” in *The Prelude* that the present author has been able to find, such as in Book X and Book XIII, are plural. That itself is suggestive of this present hypothesis, of the nature of consolation as one of multiplicity, a plural ambivalence that marks the temporary, provisional phase in one's cognitive movements. In sum, *The Prelude* paints the mechanism of consolation as a destruction of consolatory fictions, in which romantic irony emerges to process, as a form of dissonance reduction,



cognitive dissonance taking place within the believing self and the skeptic self. On a simplest level, what Wordsworth celebrates is the cognitive working of the human mind, as the concluding passage of *The Prelude* testifies, after it speaks of the “consolations” of “this gift” that is *The Prelude* (XIII. 426, 411):

... we shall still  
Find solace in the knowledge which we have,  
Blessed with true happiness if we may be  
United helpers forward of a day  
Of firmer trust, joint labourers in the work...  
Of their redemption, surely yet to come.  
Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak  
A lasting inspiration, sanctified  
By reason and by truth; what we have loved  
Others will love, and we may teach them how:  
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes  
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
On which he dwells, above this frame of things  
(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes  
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)  
In beauty exalted, as it is itself  
Of substance and of fabric more divine. (XIII. 435-452)

The didacticism of the stanza suggests precisely the force of skepticism that the stanza must overcome. But suspending our skepticism for a moment, we note that the passage extols not so much the truth or reason, but rather the cognitive capacity of the human mind that is capable of aspiring for those—that it can contain oppositional elements, such as hopes and fears, and that it can, at times, transcend them both. The sentiment is certainly familiar, and for those of us who are acutely aware of the limitations and failings of human minds, a statement of this ilk rings fanciful, hollow and painfully naïve. If, in the stringency of our skepticism, it retains any sublimity of consolation, it is only because it—a deictic that could refer to the passage above, the human mind, cognitive capabilities of human mind, or something other—remains transient, and transitional.

### III: The “Peele Castle” Elegy – Oblique Elegy as a Trace of Lost Loss

There is a curious phenomenon in English elegy that surfaces when one surveys some of the major canonical elegies: there seem to be many elegies where, whether it’s *Lycidas*, *Adonais*, or “Ave Atque Vale,” the readers know—or assume—who the deceased person is, but the poems themselves never actually say. There are, of course, many other elegies that actually do name the dead—Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” just to name a few. But given that the function of the memorial is to remember the dead, elegiac omissions of the name—the primary metonym of individuality that distinguishes one person from another—seem counter-intuitive and strange. There can be many explanations for this phenomenon: it may be a claim of universality through anonymity, in a sense that, as Peter Sacks asserts, “each loss recapitulates a prior loss”<sup>90</sup> and the suppression of the name is a statement that the poem is about all losses, not just an individual one; and along the same logic of opening up a single loss into a larger one, it may be the case of an old adage that any elegy is also an implicit self-elegy; or it may be a demarcation of the private and public life, where the poet makes a distinction between a private and personal loss and the public, elegiac loss. Another facile answer is that it is the “denial” stage of the famous Kübler-Ross model, commonly known as the “five stages of grief.” Yet another explanation could be that, just as the sun is too bright to behold directly, some losses are too overwhelming to regard unswervingly—similar in spirit to that of Emily Dickinson’s “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant”—and can only be talked about indirectly, as a metaphor, metonym, synecdoche, or the like.

Or, conversely, the more overwhelming the emotion, the more suppressed it becomes, and the weight of the suppressed emotion can only be available as filtered through the defense mechanism of a slant screen. As a result, it may be that the loss itself feels lost to the elegist, and the elegist can only recall the loss as an oblique trace. The writing of “lost loss” anticipates the later oblique elegies of the modern period such as Wallace Stevens’s “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” Theodore Roethke’s generic elegies, or Sylvia Plath’s later elegiac works. That is the hypothesis of this present chapter: Wordsworth’s “Peele Castle” is a trace of a loss that is lost sealed off in a psychic enclave, the cryptonymic expression of which is inchoate yet and awaits its full development in the works of the twentieth century elegists.

“Elegiac Stanzas, suggested by a picture of Peele Castle, in a storm, painted by Sir George Beaumont”—commonly referred to as the “Peele Castle” elegy—is one of such cases of elegy where the identity of the loss is suppressed. Like “Lines” in the case of Tintern Abbey,” “Elegiac Stanzas” is a generic title that offers no insight except that the poem is elegiac in some unspecified sense. The fact that the poem is an ekphrasis itself creates an additional layer of indirection between the poem and the object it portrays. Also, although it is widely known that the elegy is about Wordsworth’s brother, John Wordsworth, the poem refers to him only once; and that sole reference occurs merely as a pronoun “Him” in line 42, in a stark contrast to his friend and the painter of the picture, Sir George Beaumont, who is mentioned by name both in the title and in line 41 of the poem; without a knowledge of the Wordsworth biography, one would be hard-pressed to figure out, from the poem itself, that the poem is about John Wordsworth.<sup>91</sup> In fact, the name of George Beaumont, when placed side-by-side with the suppression of

John Wordsworth, adumbrates the unspecified and the absented loss, evoking a feeling of discomfort in the reader as though there should be something there in a place where nothing is.

In fact, there is a considerable critical disagreement over what exactly the lost object in the “Peele Castle” elegy is. In the words of one critic: “For many years the accepted view was that what has been lost is Wordsworth’s faith in Nature.”<sup>92</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, however, argues that the loss was “definitely not his faith in nature” but rather a “capacity for generous error and noble illusion.”<sup>93</sup> For Peter Sacks, it is “the irrevocable loss of his own power... to a previously unrecognized control.”<sup>94</sup> In Marjorie Levinson’s view, “the subject of Wordsworth’s lament is neither John Wordsworth nor a Nature experienced as a constant and nurturing... [nor] his former ‘capacity for generous error and noble illusion.’ The subject of this elegy—the loss deplored—is that binary apparatus whereby Mind redeems itself,”<sup>95</sup> which is to say, Napoleon and the hope and promise he had inspired. Another critic chimes in with a view that the “loss represented in ‘Elegiac Stanzas’” is the collection of all prior losses, which are “not only the death of John and the deaths of Wordsworth’s parents but also, one could argue, the experience of being orphaned, the separation from Dorothy, the loss of Nature as a maternal substitute, and the loss of Nature, in Hartman’s phrase, as a noble illusion.”<sup>96</sup> Other critics have also commented on how John Wordsworth’s death “was shattering not only in its own right but as a confirmation and reawakening of the losses of his father, and especially of his mother, in his childhood.”<sup>97</sup>

Critical disagreement or bafflement often surfaces as a sign when a writer attempts to express something we don’t yet have the language for, since critics won’t

keep writing about—and hence won't disagree over, or reveal their bafflement of—mere opacity or obscurity of a text that they don't consider to be worthy of attention. In that sense, we may regard ongoing critical debates over a text as a sign or symptom of its linguistic and expressive pioneering. In other words—the suspicion of the present dissertation is thus—might Wordsworth be writing about a different kind of loss than a death of one's beloved or its larger implications—namely, the feeling that a loss has itself been lost? In *Ruins and Empire*, Laurence Goldstein investigates Wordsworth's fascination with “monumental ‘Piles’ in country areas,” which, like epitaphs, are “symbolic structures which bind together past and present, death and life.”<sup>98</sup> In the “Peele Castle” elegy, the castle is the epitaph. As a structure that binds together the binaries like “past and present, death and life,” an epitaph represents a liminal space, which, because it resists facile comprehension, opens itself up to interpretations. Epitaphs, therefore, become a site of transference for readers with their own thoughts and preoccupations. In youth groups, they often say, “life is what you make of it.” In elegy studies, we say, “death is what you make of it.” As an old saying goes, “the dead has no mouth” to speak back to us.

In a sense, it is not hard to imagine that Wordsworth must have felt as such in the aftermath of John Wordsworth's death. We know from biographical evidence that there were various newspaper or pamphlet accounts offering inconsistent and even inaccurate reports of the shipwreck that “tended to throw discredit on [John Wordsworth's] conduct and personal firmness,”<sup>99</sup> and that those prompted Wordsworth to write “many letters to various people seeking information” and “defending John's behavior.”<sup>100</sup> In the silence of death, there are no truths to be uncovered, as the dead becomes a manipulatable object,

subjected to projections and transferences of the living who take the liberty to become its mouthpiece. That is to say, in death, there are only interpretations.

In this regard, the castle—a ruin that is a silent receptacle of transferred emotions and thoughts—must have seemed like a perfect epitome of the dead John Wordsworth. The belief of this present dissertation is that authorial intentions are matters of pure speculations. But diverging, for a moment, from such scholarly discipline, one might imagine: there is a gap of more than a year between John Wordsworth’s death and the composition of the poem. A typical biographical account of Wordsworth’s composition of the poem would read as follows: for two months after John Wordsworth’s death, Wordsworth wrote nothing at all; it wasn’t until the next year before he felt equal to the task of memorializing his brother in verse; Wordsworth saw the picture of Peele Castle in Sir George Beaumont’s home during a visit to London in 1806; and the poem was written soon afterward.<sup>101</sup> That is to say, the poem, which did not come to him for over a year, leaped onto the page shortly after he saw the Beaumont painting, as though the bottled feelings finally found a suitable container.

On Wordsworth’s inability to write an elegy for John, Dorothy Wordsworth writes in her letter as follows: “I can turn to no object that does not remind me of our loss.”<sup>102</sup> Assuming that Wordsworth himself was in a similar state of mind, it is not difficult to conjecture that the poem would not have been written in this state, for, in this state, the trigger of his rumination could be just about anything, and does not need to be the Beaumont painting. But one year passes. One year is an eternity for a mind under melancholia. As Gerard Manley Hopkins tells us in one of his “terrible sonnets”—“where I say / Hours I mean years, mean life”—when one is in dejection, an hour feels

like a year, and a year feels like lifetime. And as Fyodor Dostoevsky reminds us in *The House of the Dead*, humans have the capacity to adapt to or become accustomed to the worst of conditions. In the eternity of melancholy, the living has a way of getting accustomed to a life without the lost object. And that, combined with the second point—that the Beaumont painting was the trigger that prompted Wordsworth’s poetic memorializing of his brother—leads to a question: in the eternity of melancholia in which the sheer length of time must have had him accustomed to the life without his brother, what is it about the Beaumont painting that prompted Wordsworth’s elegy—what in the painting made Wordsworth remember his brother?

Richard Matlak, in “Captain John Wordsworth’s Death at Sea,” points out that there is a discrepancy between Beaumont’s representation of the sinking vessel and that of the actual event, which “transforms accident and human frailty... into destiny.”<sup>103</sup> That has led some critics to interpret the function of “Peele Castle” as a means of historical denial.<sup>104</sup> But one has to wonder: the painting shows no people—the boat is unmanned, and the castle is uninhabited. It is probably art-scholastically correct to interpret the lack of human beings in the painting as an artistic transformation of a human accident into a divine destiny, but the person writing about the painting is not an art critic but rather a kinsman of someone who was supposed to be in charge of that unmanned boat. What would he think of the absence of the beloved in the picture? One possible reaction is discomfort, and Wordsworth does express a proximate feeling by imagining himself redoing the painting—“if mine had been the Painter’s hand / To express what then I saw” (13-14)—as well as by the implicit need he feels to commend the painting—“This Work of thine I blame not, but commend” (43)—as though to suggest that the

normal feeling is to blame the painter, where the negation of that feeling precisely indicates a presence of it. If Wordsworth's feeling is in fact that of discomfort, it is certainly possible that the poet's motivation in writing the elegy is to salvage his brother from historical effacement.

But the one-year hiatus becomes, again, an intriguing spice in Wordsworth's cooking of the poem: in one year, the thoughts of the deceased would be less constant than they were in the immediacy of loss, when every object would turn into a reminder of the loss.<sup>105</sup> In some cultures, people are said to die twice: the first time, they physically die, and the second time, they die as people forget about the dead. Wordsworth, in a sense, may have been trying to salvage his brother not only from historical effacement but also from his own personal-historical effacement, his oblivion. That is, when he saw the painting, he thought of his brother because, for one thing, the castle was, like his brother, a site of transference where there are only interpretations, and for another, the landscape of the unmanned boat and uninhabited castle is like a landscape of effacement, reminiscent of John Wordsworth who was probably likely forgotten by the writers of newspapers and pamphlets, and was possibly also outside of Wordsworth's daily thoughts: like the way the loss of the passengers on the boat is expunged and "lost" in the painting, the loss of his brother may have been beginning to feel "lost" to Wordsworth. In this sense, the unpopulated painting must have seemed like a congruous vehicle that captured the tenor of his brother's life after death: an allegory of a second death—a loss of a loss.

That is the background against which I read the "Peele Castle" elegy, as well as the explanation for the critical disagreement over the "lost" object of the poem. Marjorie



Levinson characterizes the poem's narrator as being "as anxious as we are to find the body, or to locate the subject of his elegy and name the authentic occasion of his 'deep distress.'"<sup>106</sup> Anxiety signals the lack of the fulfillment of one's desire. That is to say, the fact that the narrator is "anxious" suggests that he neither finds the body nor is able to locate the occasion of his "deep distress." In this poem, the loss itself is lost. And the poem's feeling of loss can only be expressed through the traces of its left-behind—the trace Wordsworth finds in the unmanned boat and a ruin of a castle.

In the absence of restitution—in the absence of the lost object to be redeemed or substituted for—there is no remedy for the feeling of loss: while the loss of his brother may with time gradually fade—as Dorothy writes, "the time will come when the light of the setting Sun upon these mountain tops will be as heretofore a pure joy"<sup>107</sup>—the vague and pervasive feeling that something has been lost will remain to haunt, and for that reason, the "feelings of my loss will ne'er be old" (39). This feeling Wordsworth speaks of is not the acutest pain of loss—here, the narrator speaks "with mind serene" (40)—but rather the dull kind of semi-, half-, sub- or un-conscious loss that detaches itself from the object of loss, a haunting or an echo irresolute and without closure, like the feeling of "not having an old house with a cellar and attic" in Tussman's "Cellars and Attics."

If there is no compensatory remedy for the lost loss, what would the consolation of the poem be—or is there any? The concluding stanzas of the poem are the obvious place to focus on as one attempts to answer the question:

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,  
I love to see the look with which it braves,  
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,  
The light'ning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.

Farewell, farewell the Heart that lives alone,

Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!  
Such happiness, wherever it be known,  
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,  
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!  
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.—  
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn. (49-60)

As the following samplings of Wordsworth criticisms show, the dominant reading of the poem's conclusion has been that the Wordsworth narrator here accepts his loss, and acquiesces to maintain his stoic fortitude: in the words of one critic, the poet's desire here is to make this "and all other loss to come endurable";<sup>108</sup> in the words of another critic, the poet wants "to brave mutability by becoming protectively encased like a knight in *'unfeeling armour,'*" in a "centripetal withdrawal into himself, away from the mutable world,"<sup>109</sup> the self-protective act of which Freud likens to a kind of scabbing.<sup>110</sup> That is to say, even if "Wordsworth will not engage imaginatively in" the kind of "transcendent consolation" like the redemption of *Lycidas*,<sup>111</sup> a poetic statement of heroic renunciation remains the consolation of the poem.

The specialty of the present dissertation, however, is less in a dominant reading than in a recessive reading of the poem.<sup>112</sup> In the previous pages, the dissertation makes a case that the castle is the epitaph, and is a representation of John Wordsworth.<sup>113</sup> The first stanza of the above excerpt, then, can be read less as the poet's envy of the castle's fortitude than as a description of the dead John Wordsworth; despite the "light'ning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves" of libelous criticisms blowing about in the world of the living, the castle, the epitaph, the dead John Wordsworth remains unaffected, "cased in" the coffin that is like an "unfeeling armour" of death, "old [father] time"; the hidden pun on "old father time" suggests that, beneath the dominant mood of elegiac solemnity,

there is a recessive strain of joking self-mockery. What prompts this self-mockery is the realization that the angst that led Wordsworth to protect his brother's reputation was his own angst, not his brother's. In death, the dead is definitely unfeeling, and such utter disconnection from the commotions of the living world makes it in some ways sublime.

For a bereft survivor who must live among its "Kind" and must live with the angst, suffering and mourning life brings, this cold, distant sublimity of the dead can come to seem as breathtaking as the untrampled stratosphere. But as much as the Wordsworth narrator "loves" such a look of sanctity, that is not what he desires. The second stanza portrays not so much the narrator's envy of the castle's fortitude, but rather a moment of the breakdown of the previous consolatory fiction. In the earlier pages, the dissertation argues that consolatory fictions are fragile and transitory constructs that entail a seed of their own destruction. This stanza is the moment of such destruction. In stanza eight, the Wordsworth narrator looks back upon "the fond delusion" of his "heart" (29). The wording, "delusion," itself suggests the irony of retrospection, from a former believer of the fiction who no longer believes; no longer what he had been in the past—the lines "Not for a moment could I now behold / A smiling sea and be what I have been" (37-38) suggest that the narrator had undergone an internal change—the narrator witnesses the consolatory fiction turn into a mere "delusion." The happiness that the consolatory fiction once used to bring now only symbolizes to him his own blindness.

The final stanza depicts the birth of a new consolatory fiction in the aftermath of the destruction of an old one. "Fortitude" and "patience" have received much critical attention, but the inference here is that it reveals less of Wordsworth's original thoughts than the cultural inheritance of heroic renunciation as a fixture of masculine

sentimentality: that is to say, a banality, which creeps up occasionally even in the best of our writing when we let our guard of creativity down. Hence, the most important element that the narrator “welcomes” is the last of the three things listed here: “frequent sights of what is to be borne.” As mentioned in the dominant reading, the line “frequent sights of what is to be borne” has been read by some to refer to all other loss that will come in the future; such reading would inevitably emphasize “fortitude” that would reinforce one’s perseverance. The recessive reading, however, watches the word “borne.” Would an elegist mix metaphors and use the word “borne” to refer to death, or does it refer to something else other than “all other loss to come”? One may certainly conceptualize death as a process that starts at the moment of birth, and in that sense, birth is a kind of death; the two may be viewed less as antitheses than as complements. But given that the poem has so far depicted a process of the breakdown of consolatory fiction, the line “frequent sights of what is to be borne” may as well refer to what we’ve witnessed in the course of this poem: namely, the process through which a once-consolatory fiction has come to be destroyed like a transitional, transient object. What is to come is the “frequent sights” of old transient fictions disintegrating and giving way to new transient fictions. This poetic of the ongoing, as captured in *The Prelude*, is the new consolation.

The poetic of the ongoing might as well be the essence of the statement, “Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.” Even if humans are enslaved to a path of suffering and mourning, the speed or the process with which they travel through that path—the number and types of fragile consolatory fictions they construct and dismantle—is free from enslavement, and “hope” can be generated for as long as this

process remains in motion as transitional phases. And this transient fragility of the living can be as sublime as the unfeeling armor of the dead. Therein lies the attenuated, “not without” of the hope, even if suffering and mourning are certitudes in life. That is the fiction created, here in the absence of the poet, through a recessive reexamination of the dots reconnected into a line.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Fosso, *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 164.

<sup>2</sup> Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the term, “individualism,” only came into the English language in 1840, from the 1840 translation by H. Reeve of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, originally published in French in 1835 (Gregory Claeys, “‘Individualism,’ ‘Socialism,’ and ‘Social Science’: Further Notes on a Process of Conceptual Formation, 1800-1850.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47:1 [1986], 81).

<sup>4</sup> This corny phrase was culled from Wordsworth, *Essay upon Epitaphs* (in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Vol. 2, W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974]), 58 and 76.

<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth wrote the first of *Essays upon Epitaphs* in 1810, after translating a number of epitaphs composed by the Italian poet, Chiabrera, and under pressure from Coleridge to generate material for his journal, *The Friend*. The second and the third essays followed shortly after (Michele Turner Sharp, “Re-membering the Real, Dis(re)membering the Dead: Wordsworth’s ‘Essays Upon Epitaphs,’” *Studies in Romanticism*, 34:2 [1995], 273). Although *Essays upon Epitaphs* ended up being Wordsworth’s longest, most sustained theoretical work, that does not appear to be the design at the time of its composition. The audience, such as Charles Lamb, wrote approvingly of the essays, however, commenting upon seeing the second part of the Essays, “I was much pleased with your continuation of the Essay on Epitaphs. It is the only sensible thing which has been written on the subject & it goes to the Bottom” (*The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, E. V. Lucas, ed. [New Haven, 1935], II, 104). For a survey of epitaphic predecessors, one may refer to Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch’s “The Epitaph and the Romantic Poets: A Survey,” *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 30:2 (1967), 113-146.

<sup>6</sup> Rather than the second half, where Wordsworth has some of the most scathing reviews of Pope’s elegies by claiming that if his “notions are right, the Epitaphs of Pope cannot well be too severely condemned: for not only are they almost wholly destitute of those universal feelings... but they are little better than a tissue of false thoughts, languid and vague expression” (80). Wordsworth’s chief concern is to discern “truth and sincerity” of fictive narratives of elegiac consolation from mere “falsehood and affectation” (82). The present chapter’s chief concern is to untangle and detect the awareness of fictive elements in Wordsworth’s construction of such epitaphic “truth and sincerity.”

<sup>7</sup> Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs*, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> This phrase is taken from a poem titled “An Alumni Magazine Idyll.”

<sup>11</sup> Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs*, 76.

<sup>13</sup> This definition is formulated with the aid of Alice Morgan, *What Is Narrative Therapy?* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000), 2-11 and Alan Parry and Robert Doan, *Story Re-Visions: Narrative Therapy in the Postmodern World* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994), 1-11.

<sup>14</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Creation of Self” in *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy*, Lynne E. Angus, ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004), 4.

<sup>16</sup> G.A. Kelly, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (New York: Norton, 1955), 15. The quotation defines the central philosophical assumption underlying personal construct theory called “constructive alternativism.”

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- <sup>17</sup> Because one might say that such understanding of human psyche and affect is more of a domain of literature or philosophy than the scientifically-minded modern psychology.
- <sup>18</sup> Parry and Doan, *Story Re-Visions*, 4. The emphasis is in the original.
- <sup>19</sup> Ricoeur defines “poetry” as follows: “. . . in the sense that the plot of a narrative is a creation of productive imagination which projects a world of its own [and] the stories are no less poetry than versified literature” (Paul Ricoeur, “Poetry and Possibility” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, M.J. Valdés, ed. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991], 452).
- <sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, “Poetry and Possibility,” 449.
- <sup>21</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Vol. 2., William Knight, ed. (London: McMillan, 1896), 163, 171.
- <sup>22</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Fate Norton, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.2.2.
- <sup>23</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 1.3.10.
- <sup>24</sup> Ian Ross, “Philosophy and Fiction: The Challenge of David Hume,” *Hume and the Enlightenment: Essays Presented to Earnest Campbell Mossner*, William B. Todd, ed. (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1974), 70.
- <sup>25</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.2.
- <sup>26</sup> Poets such as Anne Sexton would claim that even typos have meanings and that nothing is “accidental.” And in music theory, “accidental” in fact refers to a sharp or flat that signals a purposeful alteration of a note by one or two semitones. That is to say, even a line-break in prose may be as suggestive as Freudian slip of tongue; one may say it’s a Freudian slip of line-break.
- <sup>27</sup> Harold Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 12.
- <sup>28</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 1.3.10.
- <sup>29</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume’s Theory of Human Nature*, Constantin Boundas, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 80.
- <sup>30</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.3
- <sup>31</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.7.
- <sup>32</sup> “Transistasis” is an antonym of “homeostasis,” and refers to the coercive tendency of a thing or circumstance to keep changing or challenging itself. The term is a coinage from the prefix, “trans” (suggesting a thorough change or a motion across or beyond) and the word, “stasis.” It does not appear to be an actual scientific concept, but serves its function here as a philosophical concept.
- <sup>33</sup> Deleuze, 80.
- <sup>34</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.7.
- <sup>35</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.7.
- <sup>36</sup> Based on the work of Oliver Brunet, *Philosophie et esthétique chez David Hume* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1965), 445, Ian Ross formulates the threefold role of Hume’s notion of imagination as follows: with respect to consciousness, causation, and self-identity, fictions meet the needs of ordinary existence; at the level of the speculations of scientists and philosophers, fictions meet the need of explaining and ordering the world; at the level of the creations of artists and poets, fictions give us aesthetic pleasure through the discovery of significant forms that present an understanding of the world and reflect the deeper needs of our emotional lives (Ross 70). I find this formulation unsatisfying for my own purpose; its classification is too limiting and artificial—for instance, reductive assignation of poets and artists to “aesthetic pleasure” feels a little too much like a work of philosophers—and it omits the intersubjective, contractual aspect of fiction-giving and fiction-receiving. What I presently have in the body of the paper is the compromise.
- <sup>37</sup> Cf. Introductory Chapter for the discussion of Elegiac Cognitive Dissonance.
- <sup>38</sup> To the best of my knowledge, I have not yet encountered a study in psychology that links cognitive dissonance with the use of irony; that does not mean such a study does not exist, but one can safely say either that, if it exists at all, it has not yet been thoroughly canonized, or that it

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is too commonsensical to need to be studied. Either way, it is merely a literary scholar's hypothesis that irony is a symptom of cognitive dissonance and a method of dissonance reduction.

<sup>39</sup> This—"an expression that betrays one's recognition of the incongruities and contradictions within one's claim or perception"—is the definition of what I mean by "irony" in this paper. I am, hence, not referring to what we in literary jargon call "dramatic irony," which refers to the contrast, such as in a play, between what a character thinks the truth is, as revealed in his or her speech or action, and what an audience knows the truth to be. There can be instances where "dramatic irony" and the present "irony" overlap with one another, but the distinction needs to be made here.

<sup>40</sup> Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1896), 186.

<sup>41</sup> Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1896), 186-187.

<sup>42</sup> "Kafka" is an unrealistically optimistic student and a polar opposite of Mr. Despair.

<sup>43</sup> The term is defined as "certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it" (Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation*, Daniel Javitch, ed. [New York: Norton, 2002], 32). If sprezzatura is a type of defensive irony—as characterized in Harry Berger Jr., "Sprezzatura and the Absence of Grace", *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation*, Daniel Javitch, ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), 297—then romantic fiction-belief would be a type of offensive or proactive irony.

<sup>44</sup> Abbie Findlay Potts, *The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 164.

<sup>45</sup> As far as the present author was able to track, by consulting multiple concordances (Lane Cooper, *A Concordance to the Poems of William Wordsworth* [London: Smith, Elder, 1911], and Mitsuharu Matsuoka, *The Victorian Literary Studies Archive: Hyper-Concordance*. <http://victorian.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/concordance> [April, 2007]), by keyword-searching the online text (William Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, <http://www.bartleby.com/145/index.html>), by reading *The Prelude* on his own, and by consulting others who have.

<sup>46</sup> The present chapter generally refers to the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>47</sup> Anne Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 5-6.

<sup>48</sup> Frederick Garber, ed., *Romantic Irony* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1988), 365.

<sup>49</sup> Russell Noyes and John O. Hayden, *William Wordsworth: Updated Edition* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 70.

<sup>50</sup> Ted Holt John Gilroy, *A Commentary on Wordsworth's Prelude Books I-V* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 99.

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 101.

<sup>52</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Also, Leo Braudy in *The Frenzy of Renown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) notes that by "the end of the seventeenth century the book was defining itself as a prime new place of fame," where "one is free to be what one really is, one's true, unchanging essence" (361, 6). Books, in other words, became a trope for fame, where fame was seen as an essence of one's individual identity.

<sup>53</sup> Bennett, 95.

<sup>54</sup> Aside from Bennett, 1-2, others have also discussed this phenomena, such as Samantha Matthews in *Poetical Remains Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), who examines it from the perspective of the readers in that period—their sensibility that "interpreted the book as the



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embodied medium of the dead poet's spirit" (4). The Romantics, however, do not necessarily have a patent for this desire for textual afterlife. Shakespeare's line, "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" is famous enough. And the impulse for poetic survival persists in the twentieth century and beyond, in the works of such notable poets as Yeats, Auden, Stevens, among others—particularly in the many self-elegies they produced, which often constitute their attempts at self-memorialization and its critique. The effort can be visualized as an image of a book left in the desert—an image that seems to make a claim that one can survive in one's poetic afterlife even on the barren earth after a nuclear holocaust had wiped out all of the humankind, as long as the book remains there and as long as there's a possibility that, in some distant future, a new species of humans might evolve again from a new strain of coacervate and might, eventually, attain the language and intelligence to read it. Nonetheless, the scholarly opinion is that the desire for poetic survival seems to surface most keenly in the Romantics first.

<sup>55</sup> That is, since we learn languages by hearing or reading how others use it or have used it in the past, past language uses are indelibly ingrained in our own language use.

<sup>56</sup> There are of course always exceptions to generalizations. There are instances of poets drawing attention to their own allusions; famous examples include T. S. Eliot supplying footnotes for his own poem, *The Waste Land*, or Ezra Pound using in his opening passage of Canto I of *The Cantos* a translation of a Latin version of Homer's *Odyssey*. Still, actually putting quotation marks around allusions is rare.

<sup>57</sup> Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites," in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), 179-92.

<sup>58</sup> Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, R. W. Franklin, ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 418.

<sup>59</sup> James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Similar to the way Harold Bloom describes in *The Anxiety of Influence*.

<sup>61</sup> One may claim that intertextuality is a type of prosopopoeia, in that the alluding poet speaks through the mask of the alluded poet.

<sup>62</sup> Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," in *Modern Language Notes* 94 (1979), 928.

<sup>63</sup> Shakespeare, "Sonnet #64" in *The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 1944.

<sup>64</sup> Geoffrey Hartman argues that *The Prelude* as a whole narrates a "vacillation between doubt and faith" (Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964], 218). One may say that Book V is a localized version—focused upon the theme of textual and intertextual survival—in which this same "vacillation between doubt and faith" takes place.

<sup>65</sup> And likely for this reason, Wordsworthian romantic irony has, it seems, been often overlooked and under-studied in the previous and current scholarship on romantic irony.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Mitchell and Margaret Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 8.

<sup>67</sup> Abraham and Torok, 25.

<sup>68</sup> In her essay, "Wordsworth's Dream of Poetry and Science: The Prelude, Book V" (*PMLA* 71: 1 [March 1956]), Jane Worthington Smyser offers two explanations on why Wordsworth made the friend's dream into his in the 1850 version. First, Wordsworth made the revision possibly because, by 1839 when this revision took place, the dream had become his dream; after all, "it was he who had made the dream of Descartes into something new and strange" (274). And the second explanation, which Smyser thinks is more likely, is that Wordsworth was prompted to make the change for artistic reasons—that is, to reinforce the dramatic credibility of the dream. On another note, Mary E. Burton believes that the change was made to avoid the "explanatory 'he

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said’,” and the awkwardness of Wordsworth’s telling what his friend thought (Burton, *The One Wordsworth* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942], 192-193); I would agree with that view, rather than the claim that the 1850 version has a stronger dramatic credibility and that, hence, the 1850 version is better overall. Even if the dream isn’t a first-hand experience, it is clear enough from the context that the speaker identifies with the dream—almost as though it were his own. By underscoring the multi-layering, shared nature of the dream—Descartes, the friend, the speaker all “share” this dream—Wordsworth creates a fantasy that this image of books on the barren desert is a collective anxiety. This fantasy of collectivity would be lost if the speaker claims the dream to be his own, unless an alternate version, namely, the 1805 version, is presented side-by-side as it’s done in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850* edited by Jonathan Wordsworth. One may hypothesize that in old age and himself nearing his own extinction, Wordsworth may have come to identify even more closely with the dream than he did as a youth; for this reason, it may have felt less impersonal and more natural to claim the dream as his in the 1850 version—personally urgent enough to forgo the fantasy of collectivity.

<sup>69</sup> It is also highly suggestive that, prior to falling asleep and having the dream, the friend is reading *Don Quixote*—a book that, by this time, Friedrich Schlegel had made famous as one of the representative cases of romantic irony. While it is uncertain if Wordsworth was familiar with Schlegel’s work, critics have determined that Coleridge had in fact read Schlegel, and that he even expounded on *Don Quixote* in his posthumously published Lectures of 1818 (Lowry Nelson, Jr., “Romantic Irony and Cervantes” in *Romantic Irony*, Frederick Garber, ed. [Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1988], 28). Had Wordsworth been in conversation with Coleridge about the connection between romantic irony and *Don Quixote*, it would be tempting for us to speculate that he might have planted “the famous history of the errant knight / Recorded by Cervantes” (V. 59-60) in this dream episode in Book V to signal his intentional usage of romantic irony. Regardless of his intentionality, however, we can safely say that this dream episode contains enough elements of romantic irony, such as its self-reflexivity, its meta-fictional nature, and so on. On an additional note, it has been known that this dream was first recorded by Descartes, which suggests either that 1) Wordsworth meant this unnamed friend to be Descartes, since it isn’t out of the ordinary that an avid reader forms a certain friendship with the author, or that 2) Wordsworth learned about this dream through a friend who read about Descartes’ dream, in which case another layer of meta-fiction is added to this narration of the dream.

<sup>70</sup> Leon Waldoff, *Wordsworth in His Major Lyrics: The Art and Psychology of Self-Representation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 155.

<sup>71</sup> Allegory is commonly defined as a manner of composing or interpreting a work as if there is an “other” sense to its apparent reference, cf. T.V.F. Brogan, *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, John Osborne, trans. (New York: Verso, 1998), 183. Although the theoretical model that I rely on here is Benjamin’s, other critics have also commented on the relation between melancholy and imagination, cf. Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 141.

<sup>73</sup> This formulation of the Benjaminian template of melancholia owes to Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 142-235 and Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), chapters 1-3.

<sup>74</sup> David Bromwich characterizes the speaker as a wanderer, a half-guardian, half-accomplice that is an unsettling presence that doesn’t believe to be a blessing to others, and argues that it mirrors Wordsworth’s “doubtful opinion of himself” (Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth’s Poetry of the 1790s* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998], 3). While I’d agree with the assumption that the speaker becomes a kind of a stand-in for Wordsworth—and one can make a case for it with many first-person narratives—I’d question if Wordsworth envisions the speaker

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as having as active a role as Bromwich suggests; judging from the speaker's solitariness and his "great joy" when seeing the Arab who might guide him out of it, the speaker appears like someone in a more passive role, someone in need, looking to be saved: a follower, or a bystander who relegates himself to the background, rather than someone who takes on a semi-active role of a "half-guardian" or "half-accomplice."

<sup>75</sup> Nicholas Roe, "'Bright Star, Sweet Unrest': Image and Consolation in Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats" in *History & Myth: Essays on English Romantic Literature*, Stephen Behrendt, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1990), 147.

<sup>76</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Jonathan Mayne, trans. (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>77</sup> Curiously enough, these—eternality, monolithic trans-historicity—are generally the attributes ascribed, erroneously or not, to lyric poetry, particularly in the Arnoldian tradition of the valorization of one specific form of lyric poetry, namely Romantic lyric (Jeffreys, *New Definitions of Lyric, Theory, Technology, and Culture* [New York: Garland Pub., 1998], ix). That Wordsworth contrasts his portrayal of poetic knowledge against these attributes—and characterizes, instead, poetic knowledge as multiple and, in some ways, fleeting—may be a sign of how our notion of "Romantic lyric" is itself a retrospective fiction.

<sup>78</sup> To be scientifically accurate, stones too decay over time, but as inorganic objects, they are generally considered to be more stable and lasting than the organicity of flesh or papers.

<sup>79</sup> Again, in factuality, scientific knowledge is neither an "eternal truth" nor monolith; we won't have to be reminded of Ptolemy to know that our science is a series of nuanced, however thoroughly tested, hypotheses.

<sup>80</sup> The use of wind and sound as metaphors of transience was propagated most prominently by Aristotle and used in many subsequent literary or artistic works since, including the image of a youth playing a lute in Valentin de Boulogne's famous painting, "The Four Ages of Man," an ekphrastic allusion to which is found in the following poem:

.... Like a lute whose sound  
fades as quickly as it's played, the scenery  
fleets. Memories  
look for a cache... (*The Evansville Review* 16 [Spring 2006], 43)

<sup>81</sup> And it appears Wordsworth uses the word "consolation" in this sense of "joy-consolation-hope" from this point on in *The Prelude*; the later usages of the word in Book X and XIII are the plural "consolations," and that intimates that "consolations" are always plural and multiple, conglomerates of smaller constituents.

<sup>82</sup> This sense of all-inclusiveness is also suggested in the 1850 revision: "The other... / Had voices more than all the winds, with power / To exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe / Through every clime, the heart of human kind" (1850, V.106-109). While the 1850 version averts the terminology and its definitional move by substituting "joy, consolation, hope" with the prosaic "To exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe... the heart of human kind," it underscores the sense of expansiveness and inclusiveness by adding phrases that connote collectiveness, like "Through every clime."

<sup>83</sup> And one may recall that a stream of water is a classical image of time and timelessness.

<sup>84</sup> There has been a long scholarly discussion on the famous phrase, "spots of time," and it is outside the scope of this chapter to enter that discussion. For the purpose here, I will merely introduce one of the more commonly used definitions of that phrase: "the 'spot' is the record of a concrete past event used to illustrate some more general statements about the past" (Herbert Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963], 144).

<sup>85</sup> This interpretation of sublimity in transience was inspired in part by Benjamin's "aura" theory. In the seminal essay, "Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility" (in *Walter Benjamin: The Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, Michael Jennings, ed. [Cambridge: Belknap, 2003]), Benjamin defines

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“aura” as the essential element in the work of art that gets eliminated in the process of its technical reproduction. And this eliminated element, Benjamin describes as follows:

In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject...

The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity. Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help to establish its authenticity, just as the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages came from an archive of the fifteenth century helps to establish its authenticity. *The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and, of course, not only technological—reproducibility.*

(253; emphasis in original)

This passage outlines two elements in the original work of art that give it a sense of authenticity: the “here and now” of the work of art, its “unique existence in a particular place”; and the “mark of history,” which this “unique existence in a particular place” embosses in the work of art. In a sense, what Benjamin calls the “authenticity” is the aura, the source of the sublimity of an original art work, and this “aura” is comprised of the two elements, here-and-now and historicity, the latter coming from the former.

This temporally expansive characterization of “aura” is eerily similar to that of the previously discussed, time-encompassing nature of consolation as “joy-consolation-hope”; if we are to consider consolation as a cognitive construct, a kind of an artifact, it gains, in the Benjaminian term, its “aura” or authenticity through its “here and now” and the historicity it evokes. The word choice, “here and now,” is a peculiar one, too. Its dictionary definition is something like “immediate present” or “present moment,” but the word connotes an unmistakable sense of transience, for many of us know that it becomes, when rearranged, “now-here” or “nowhere”; it suggests the nowhere-ness of the present, its fleetingness.<sup>85</sup> What creates a sense of authentic existence in a fleeting object is its historicity, the mark of how it has arrived at its present moment. And that is the answer to the question of why “transience” is the source of the sublimity of consolation: just as the here-and-now creates an aura or sense of authenticity in the original work of art by garnering historicity through its nowhere-ness, the consolation, a human cognitive artifact, gains its sublimity through its provisional transience backed by its historicity.

As an addendum, I may note that it is hardly misguided to take the notion of “aura” outside of the realm of artwork and to apply it to the realm of human experience or human cognition; Benjamin himself notes in the essay that the process of the loss of aura is “symptomatic” and that it “extends far beyond the realm of art” (Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 254). In fact, the “aura” theory as applied to artwork has been creditably disputed by Theodor Adorno and subsequent critics, and, for the most part, the theory is discredited by the seeming continuation of auratic experience into our present age of the proliferation of reproduced works of art—an idea advocated by many critical works, such as Lutz Koepnick’s “Aura Reconsidered: Benjamin and Contemporary Visual Culture” (in *Benjamin’s Ghosts*, Gerhard Richter, ed. [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002]) and others. My position is that the “aura” theory is better utilized not for art, where reproduced works are known to create an aura albeit different kinds from that of the original, but for the realm of human experience or cognition, where no creditable methods of reproduction have yet been invented.

<sup>86</sup> Stephen Gill, “The Philosophic Poet” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, Stephen Gill, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 157.

<sup>87</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), 89.

<sup>88</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 91.

<sup>89</sup> “Going beyond” is the famous slogan in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard is one of the later theorists of romantic irony (cf. Garber, 8 and elsewhere). As one of the proto-

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existentialists along with Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, Kierkegaard formulates a version of romantic irony that anticipates the development of existentialism. As such, he may be viewed as a bridge between romantic irony and existentialism, the latter emerging from the philosophical current of the former.

<sup>90</sup> Sacks, *English Elegy*, 23.

<sup>91</sup> One critic characterizes that the oblique naming of John Wordsworth as being a part of Wordsworth's evasion "of dark truths" (Shaw, *Elegy & Paradox*, 118). The claim of this present chapter is that, if it is an evasion, it is a less conscious act than an unconscious mechanism of anti-introjection.

<sup>92</sup> Waldoff, 147.

<sup>93</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 284-85.

<sup>94</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 144.

<sup>95</sup> Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 113.

<sup>96</sup> Waldoff, 148.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 161.

<sup>98</sup> Laurence Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 178.

<sup>99</sup> Wordsworth, *The Early Years, 1787-1805*, Vol. I of *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, Ernest de Selincourt, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 557. Among the various accounts were charges such as that John Wordsworth "had failed to have the ship's boats hoisted out, thus causing unnecessary loss of life" and "that he made no effort to save his own life" (Waldoff 132).

<sup>100</sup> Waldoff, 132.

<sup>101</sup> Noyes, 117.

<sup>102</sup> Wordsworth, *Letters*, I.559.

<sup>103</sup> Richard E. Matlak, "Captain John Wordsworth's Death at Sea" in *The Wordsworth Circle* 31 (2000), 132.

<sup>104</sup> Fosso, 261.

<sup>105</sup> In many ways, this section is speculative; Wordsworth's letters in 1805 are less expressive about John's death than Dorothy's letters are, and there are many possible theories to account for this phenomenon. But the task of this dissertation is not to reconstruct an accurate or exhaustive account of Wordsworth's life or psyche; the former should be left in better hands, and the latter is impossibility, for the subjective experience of another human being is an inaccessible black-box. In the absence of the real, our work enters the realm of fantasy. The aim here is to construct a provisional, possibly fictive, interpretation and suggest the feasibility that the "Peele Castle" elegy may be read as a poem of "lost loss."

<sup>106</sup> Levinson, 128.

<sup>107</sup> Wordsworth, *Letters*, I.559.

<sup>108</sup> Noyes, 119.

<sup>109</sup> Fosso, 202, emphasis in the original. Also, other critics claim that the last line of the poem is an echo from St Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians, 4:13 and that it suggests the Christian consolation of life after death (Wilson, "An Echo of St Paul and Words of Consolation in Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas'" in *The Review of English Studies, New Series* 43: 169 [February 1992], 75).

<sup>110</sup> Freud, *Standard Edition*, Vol. 18, 26-28.

<sup>111</sup> Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, 287.

<sup>112</sup> The wording here borrows from classical genetics and its principle of dominance, also known as Mendel's First Law, which defines the relationship between different forms (allele) of genes.

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In brief, the allele that masks the other is said to be dominant to the latter, and the alternative allele is said to be recessive to the former.

<sup>113</sup> That, by the way, is how Wordsworth avoids the awkwardness of the apostrophe to the castle in the opening lines. In that apostrophe, the Wordsworth narrator isn't hailing some inanimate object; he is in effect imaginatively speaking to his brother.

Chapter 2  
The Fiction and Creation of Loss:  
Wallace Stevens's "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" and Later Elegies

As the previous chapter establishes, elegy is a genre of elaborate fiction-making in which the elegist constructs a consolatory—or anti-consolatory, in the case of anti-elegies—fiction despite the awareness of its fictiveness. This act of fiction-making results in an attitude akin to that of romantic irony, in which dissonant cognitions—one's awareness of the fictiveness of consolatory narratives and one's desire to believe in them—are allowed to coexist. If Wordsworth is the most visible of the nineteenth-century elegists whose works embody this practice of fiction-making, Wallace Stevens would be the twentieth-century counterpart, in that few other poets' oeuvres of the period are as self-conscious of this fiction-making practice as Stevens's is.

As critics have pointed out, one of the guiding obsessions in Stevens's works is that of the concept of fiction.<sup>1</sup> Professing to be a poet who "lives in the world of Darwin and not in the world of Plato,"<sup>2</sup> Stevens appears to have sought for, or held a desire to create, a "supreme fiction" that takes the place of the now-defunct grand narratives.<sup>3</sup> One may trace Stevens's preoccupation with the concept of "fiction" from poems as early as those in *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*—such as "The Comedian as the Letter C" and its "introspective voyager" trying to recover a "mythology of self"<sup>4</sup> or "The Idea of Order

at Key West” and its protagonist as the “artificer of the world” making a narrative of her self through her song<sup>5</sup>—to what appears to be its culmination in two major poems in *Transport to Summer*, “Esthétique du Mal” and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” which are often read as a part of “Stevens’s lifelong attempt to give art the position of religion.”<sup>6</sup>

No poems, however, appear to state Stevens’s concept of fiction more succinctly and forcefully than this declaration in *Adagia*:

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.<sup>7</sup>

The statement sounds precisely like the notion of romantic irony discussed in the previous chapter: an ironic acknowledgement of the fictiveness of one’s cognitions and beliefs that is combined with a romantic enthusiasm for creating and embracing such fictive constructs. The influence of romanticism on Stevens’s work has been much discussed, but such evidence of romantic irony as this *Adagia* statement adds another layer to Stevens’s indebtedness to romanticism, for his recurring theme of fiction and fiction-making mirrors that of romantic irony,<sup>8</sup> where the ironist romantically engages in the constructive process by eagerly constructing new forms and new myths as products of creative imagination. In this conceptualization, Stevens’s fiction is seen as an experience akin to that of simultaneously beholding a fiction that is not fictive and the fiction that is.<sup>9</sup>

Generally, “Esthétique du Mal” and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” are often pointed to as the best expressions of the theses of Stevens’s concept of fiction. In the specific context of Stevens’s elegiac works and the concept of loss as a fictive construct, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” occupies a similar status as the poem in which he



constructs the guiding fiction. "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" is in many ways a departure from Stevens's earlier, more epitaphic elegies such as "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" or "The Death of a Soldier" in that it is a longer, more sustained allegorical narrative resembling a type of mythology itself. To be sure, there are common elements between those earlier elegies and "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." The anti-elegiac skepticism of compensatory consolation found in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" is present in poems like "The Death of a Soldier" and "The Men That Are Falling," as the brunt of the lines like "Death is absolute and without memorial" (CPP 81) or "death is stone. / This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die" (CPP 174) demonstrate; also, critics such as Jahan Ramazani have identified Stevens's attacks on funeral practices and elegiac consolation in mock-elegies like "Cortège for Rosenbloom" and "The Worm at Heaven's Gate."<sup>10</sup> In fact, one may say that Stevens's elegiac sensibilities remain fundamentally anti-elegiac, in the sense that their embrace of consolatory philosophy is almost always undercut by the cognition of disconsolation.<sup>11</sup> And that is not necessarily surprising, given his professed creed that "poetry is a form of melancholia"<sup>12</sup> and the close affinity between melancholia and anti-elegies or anti-elegiac moments in elegies. The self-consciously constructed fiction of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," however, is a new element in his work, and that becomes, along with the aforementioned anti-elegiac streak, the fiction-intertext that guides and governs Stevens's later works.

Another element that is new in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" is one that Anne Mellor counts as one of the critical elements of romantic irony: that is, fictions and self-conceptions bear with them the seeds of their own destruction, since those are forms or structures that simultaneously create and de-create themselves.<sup>13</sup> It is in this respect that

the consolatory fiction of elegies becomes analogous to what D.W. Winnicott calls a “transitional object.” In Winnicott’s theory, infants utilize “transitional objects” as objects that are between oneself and the world outside of oneself, and destroy those objects in the process of their reality-making; similarly, consolatory fictions become “transitional” philosophies, which the elegists create and then continuously reexamine in the process of their cognitive reality-making after their cognitive world is disturbed by a loss. This chapter explores two aspects of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus”: first, the poem views the concept of loss as a construct; and secondly, the poem recognizes its elegiac fiction as a transitional philosophy that is meant to be created and destroyed in its poetics of the ongoing—something that keeps being made and remade, leaving no trace of clear starting or stopping, just as for the self, there is no starting or stopping.<sup>14</sup> In this poetics of the ongoing, the consolatory fiction is re-created and re-destroyed, as in later poems of Stevens. And the fiction that Stevens’s later elegies, starting with and after “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” keep propounding and de-creating is the idea that loss is a construct—that, just as a construct comes into being only as its previous forms are destroyed, the mourned are made into meaningful existences only as they are lost.

#### I. Creation of Loss in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus”

Although the elegiac sensibilities of Wallace Stevens’s poetry have received much critical attention, his oeuvre includes only a handful of formal elegies.<sup>15</sup> Generally considered to be a formal elegy, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” may, however, be best described as an anti-elegy or self-elegy; the poem, without any mention or hint of the death of the person who occasioned the poem, allegorizes the speaker’s descent into a

vision of death, in which the speaker realizes the fiction of elegy and universalizes it as the “mythology of modern death.”<sup>16</sup> The previous chapters of the dissertation describe how critics have noted such anti-elegiac trends in modern elegy that sometimes constitute “an assault on elegiac conventions” or a “denial of loss and grief”<sup>17</sup> and how anti-elegies particularly refuse to embrace the loss-compensation model of understanding elegiac consolation, derived most notably from Sigmund Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” in which the mourner receives consolation from a redemptive transformation of the lost object into a compensatory, substitutive form.<sup>18</sup> And in a case of an anti-elegiac or self-elegiac elegy like “The Owl in the Sarcophagus”—one that hardly mentions the deceased, one that foregrounds the poet-speaker’s own vision of death, and one that communicates the futility of consolation with its pervasive sense of loss—the same questions persist: what consolation does such an elegy bring about, or intend to bring about, if any? And if the poem is more about fictions of mourning than about any consolation it brings, is it even useful to consider such a poem an elegy?

The hypothesis of this chapter is that “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” brings about a different type of consolation than that of conventional elegies through its insistence on constructing a fiction of loss: just as Wordsworth’s consolations differ from the conventional counterpart through their insistence on transience, Stevens’s elegies too paradoxically generate their consolations through their emphasis on fictiveness. In investigating this consolatory potential in the seeming disconsolation such as expressed by Stevens’s “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” one must reexamine two of the seminal assumptions regarding elegy and its nature of consolation: that an elegy generally entails a specific object-loss as its occasion; and that the nature of elegiac consolation is

primarily compensatory. When we reexamine these assumptions, we find that elegies often communicate the unplaceable nature of the feeling of sorrow they attempt to express, in addition to, or sometimes in place of, the feeling of sorrow arising from a specific loss. The allegorical impersonality of elegies such as “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” exemplifies not so much the modern skepticism of elegiac convention or the excision of occasional details necessitated by the depths of one’s feelings for the dead,<sup>19</sup> but rather a cognition of this unplaceability of the feeling of sorrow or a diffidence in claiming one’s loss. This inability to trace the pain of loss to a definitive source necessitates a rethinking of the nature of elegiac consolation as, instead, a construct deriving less from a compensation for the lost object than from a creation, through elegy, of the deceased whom one did not feel one could claim to have had, or who felt somehow lost to one even while they were alive.<sup>20</sup> D.W. Winnicott’s theory of reality-making suggests that an object comes into existence only as it is lost; just as, in Winnicott’s case study, the child at first destroys the transitional object in his fantasy in order for the object to come into actual existence, Stevens’s elegy shatters a phantom of loss in order to create an object in which one’s unplaced feeling of loss can find its place.

“The Owl in the Sarcophagus” has been read, despite its impersonal, allegorical presentation, as an elegy for Henry Church. One of the preliminary points that this present reading of the poem diverges from the previous readings is that it proposes less to read the poem as an elegy for Church than to examine the element of its impersonality and allegoresis more closely. And in closely wading through the poem’s allegory and unintelligibility from thereon, the present section expounds the following theses: that the

poem's allegorical obfuscation is itself one form of expression that is indicative of a sense of dysthymia; that, through such unintelligibility, the poem unveils how the notion of loss is a type of fiction; and that the poem attempts to excavate what lies beneath such fictive obfuscation.

Many creditable readings of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" have been written on the premise that the poem is an elegy for Church.<sup>21</sup> While it is hardly debatable that the loss of Church was likely what triggered Stevens's composition of the poem, the letter that is often referred to as the basis for this reading benefits from a closer examination:

["The Owl in the Sarcophagus"] was written in the frame of mind that followed Mr. Church's death. While it is not personal, I had thought of inscribing it somehow, below the title, as, for example, Goodbye H.C., but it was hardly written before I received HORIZON's letter and as it would not have been easy to talk to you about it at the time I omitted the inscription.<sup>22</sup>

The poem was written "in the frame of mind" after Henry Church's death, but at the same time, it was not meant to be "personal," and the equivocation, or at least a sense of bashfulness, in that sentence—"somehow, below the title, as, for example"—is telling.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of whether or not Stevens actually meant the elegy to be dedicated to Church, however, the poem, even in the apparent presence of a specific object-loss that prompted its composition, conspicuously stays clear of any mention of him; it instead turns the object-loss into a kind of a personal unsaid or even a potential unsayable, in which the feeling of sorrow remains unplaced, unarticulated, or unspecified.

Since such unplaced, unexpressed feelings have a way of manifesting themselves as a code or obfuscation, close attention should be paid to the poem's highly allegorical setting, which, if we are to assume a view of the elegy as a personal address, seems, on first glance, like a conundrum:

Two forms move among the dead, high sleep  
Who by his highness quiets them, high peace  
Upon whose shoulders even the heavens rest,

Two brothers. And a third form, she that says  
Good-by in the darkness, speaking quietly there,  
To those that cannot say Good-by themselves. (I. 1-6)

Composed in six sections, the first section of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” introduces the three principal figures of this allegory of death: two forms, sleep and peace, and the third form, a female figure. Walter Benjamin theorizes that, for a melancholic mind that perceives the world as one reduced to a state of incomprehension, allegory signifies an act of assignation of subjective meanings in an attempt to reconstruct or restore one’s perceptual experience.<sup>24</sup> In elegiac literature where allegories often accompany their undertone of melancholia, Benjamin’s theory allows us to interpret allegory as symptom of the hypertrophied subjectivity of melancholia in which the mourner attempts to work through a cognitive mechanism of naming the unnamed. In other words, the allegorical nature of the poem signifies the poem’s attempt to conceptualize death, the epitome of the unimaginable. Critics have written in abstraction about how “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” constitutes an “attempt to contain death within the modern imagination,”<sup>25</sup> but it is precisely through allegory—its subjective meaning-constructions and restoration of one’s cognitive world—that the poem aims to capture the elusive sense of lost loss.

Like the oscillation of the melancholic mind coping with the unimaginable as expressed in Benjamin’s theory of allegory, the opening passage of the poem immediately evinces the dialectic between meaning and incomprehension, between the order that contains and the disorder that resists containment; the poem’s broken syntax signals unintelligibility, while poetic refrains attempt to give it a frame of order and

meaning. The clash between order and disorder manifests itself in the poem's prosody as well; the first two lines start with decapitation, or initial truncation.<sup>26</sup> The truncation creates a sense of poetic irregularity and even highlights it through strong stresses on the first syllables of the lines, while the ends of those lines attempt to reclaim a sense of order through assonantal rhyme, "high sleep" and "high peace."<sup>27</sup> In fact, the incantatory repetition of words—such as "two" and "high"—appears to be the primary organizing principle in the first six lines, for the poem does not establish metrical regularity of iambic pentameter until line 6. The poem's prosodic irregularity reaches its height in line 4, which contains an assortment of spondaic and pyrrhic substitutions, in addition to abrupt caesurae. The metrical brokenness in a line that introduces the pivotal "third form," the most obscure figure among the three allegorical characters, recalls Susan Stewart's claim about the function of an unanticipated caesura, which "is not simply an alternation of a rhythmic pattern, but is as well a gesture of breaking or hesitating that opens the text to the excentric positions of unintelligibility and death."<sup>28</sup> In this manner, the poem vacillates between unintelligibility and the attempted restoration of meanings, out of which the poem's allegory emerges as a kind of stand-in for the inexpressible.

James Longenbach characterizes this allegory as the "geography of the afterlife" and identifies the three figures as "sleep, peace, and the mother of the dead."<sup>29</sup> Among those three, the third figure remains the most cryptic despite the fact that section I devotes more lines to delineate this figure than it does for the first two:

### I

These forms are visible to the eye that needs,  
Needs out of the whole necessity of sight.  
This third form speaks, because the ear repeats,

Without a voice, inventions of farewell...  
... And she that in the syllable between life

And death cries quickly, in a flash of voice,  
Keep you, keep you, I am gone, oh keep you as  
My memory, is the mother of us all,

The earthly mother and the mother of  
The dead. Only the thought of those dark three  
Is dark, thought of the forms of dark desire. (I. 7-10, 18-24)

The third figure is the “earthly mother and the mother of / The dead” that makes utterances in “a syllable between life / And death”; her depiction—one of mixture, of life and death, of earthly and nether-worldly—appears more complex than “the mother of the dead,” since her role is that of a multitudinous “mother of us all.” In order for us to untangle the complexity of this third figure, the first notable feature we discern from the description of these allegorical figures is their familial, archetypal nature.<sup>30</sup> But more importantly, the poem indicates that the tenor of the mother allegory—what the mother figure allegorizes—is language; the third form is metonymically linked to language, in that the main action verbs of the third form are “says” and “speaks” (I. 4, 9), and its expressive medium comes in a “syllable,” a constituent of language (I. 18).

If the third form, the “mother of us all,” is a linguistic function, then its cryptic, contradictory character makes sense, for language too is similarly mixed, ambivalent, and multifarious in its nature. Paul de Man suggests that language, as trope, is always privative and that death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament.<sup>31</sup> By a reversible logic, language too becomes a displaced name for death, since language, as a system of representation, signals the absence of the represented; it is a presence—a representation, a signifier—that stands for absence—the absence of its referent, or death. In other words, just as language produces representation that indicates the absence of the



represented, “mother” gives birth to life that is another name for death: death, after all, is a process that starts at the moment of birth. And in the sense that language gives shape to thoughts that make us humans, language is the “mother of us all.” The way language includes both the representation and its absence, the third figure encompasses both the living and the dead: in this sense, the third figure becomes the “earthly mother” and the “mother of / The dead.” As such, the third figure, the mother figure, becomes an all-encompassing allegorical figure that is aware of its own allegorical nature—a figure of allegory that at once embodies and exposes its own allegorical construction.

In Stevens’s poetry, there is always a sense of fragile consolation, of the acute self-awareness of the fiction of whatever consolation it attempts to reach; as fallacious as it may be to believe in fiction, such belief in the fictive nonetheless remains something one cannot live without. In “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” the opening section communicates this awareness of fiction and its necessity through its emphatic repetition of the word “needs”: the allegorical forms are “visible to the eye that needs / Needs out of the whole necessity of sight.” The sentiment is akin to that of “necessity is the mother of invention” where fiction is invented out of that necessity, but what is needed here is not only a fiction but also the language that creates the fiction; the assonantal rhyme of “needs” and “repeats” underscores that the “ear” too “repeats” out of necessity, and this necessitated repetition leads to the utterance by the third figure, who is aware of the privative nature of language used in allegory to reconstruct the broken world of the melancholic. The depiction of the speech without a voice recalls the image of the privative realm in which the language resides; Stevens’s use of synesthesia in “the ear repeats / Without a voice” erases the speaker from the repetitive speech, and this

repetition without a voice turns into an echo that has lost its speaker or the initial voice—like Nietzsche’s shadow inside the cavern.<sup>32</sup> Even as these images are constructed to fill the void, the speaker remains aware of the fact of their fictitiousness: they are “inventions,” and those figures are “dark” only because our thoughts of them are dark—our constructions of them make them dark.

In this urgency to conceptualize the elusive notion called death, the allegorist “reifies” an allegory but only to “mock... mythological imagination” in the end.<sup>33</sup> In fact, later in section VI, the poem’s anti-elegiac turn debunks the very allegorical reconstruction that the poem enacts. But before we investigate the deconstruction of mythology, we need to examine the mythology itself—the speaker’s underground journey and the visions of death he encounters there. After the introduction of the three allegorical figures in section I, the poem proceeds to the narration of what has commonly been read as the speaker’s underworld descent in section II and narrates his vision of the underworld in sections III to V, before undoing the vision in section VI. In a genre that is as hyperconscious of tradition as elegy, an underground descent is a highly conventional development, as exemplified by such mythological narratives as Orpheus’s descent to Hades to rescue Eurydice.<sup>34</sup> Elegy tends to invoke tradition because tradition signifies continuation; the sense of continuity fostered by literary tradition becomes a substitutive redemption that offsets the disruption of continuity effected by death. As though to sustain this sense of tradition, Stevens portrays the start of the underground journey in section II with primal imagery and archetypal abstraction without details:

There came a day, there was a day—one day  
A man walked living among the forms of thought  
To see their luster truly as it is

And in harmonious prodigy to be,  
A while, conceiving his passage as into a time  
That of itself stood still, perennial,

Less time than place, less place than thought of place  
And, if of substance, a likeness of the earth,  
That by resemblance twanged him through and through,

Releasing an abysmal melody,  
A meeting an emerging in the light  
A dazzle of remembrance and of sight. (II. 1-12)

The “forms of thought” seem to refer to the triadic figures of death, which, in the preceding section, are metonymically turned into “thought of the forms of dark desire”; likely for this reason, this place where the “man walked living” has been largely interpreted as the netherworld.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, we can also read this scene as a site of one’s interiority: the depth of one’s interior selfhood, made of the “forms of thought” that comprise oneself. In other words, we can think of this underworld journey as an allegory that stands for one’s experience of intense introspection, a melancholic introspection of the hypertrophied subjectivity in response to one’s grief, occasioned by the death of one’s friend. In these stanzas, Stevens portrays a collapse of the temporal into the spatial into the conceptual—a “perennial” that is less “time than place, less place than thought of place”—whereby the place enters the realm of the timeless like that of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s terrible sonnet, “I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day” where hours are years, which are a lifetime<sup>36</sup>: a sense of introspection that seems to go on without an end. Furthermore, the entire section II is written in one sentence as though to avoid a closure of a period, suggesting the same sense of timelessness, stream of consciousness, as well as an avoidance of determinacy or finality that is a metonymy of death. Then, inside his mind, the speaker sees a meeting between light, remembrance,

and sight. In literary tradition, light routinely symbolizes knowledge, and it combines with memory and sight—the “eye” that is the “I”—to make up the interior of a self, a stage on which the self meets the self.

The visions of death in sections III to V proceed in the order of Sleep in section III, Peace in section IV, and the mother figure in section V. In section III, Stevens narrates the first vision, the speaker’s encounter with Sleep:

There he saw well the foldings in the height  
Of sleep, the whiteness...

... Sleep realized  
Was the whiteness that is the ultimate intellect,  
A diamond jubilation beyond the fire,

That gives its power to the wild-ringed eye.  
Then he breathed deeply the deep atmosphere  
Of sleep, the accomplished, the fulfilling air. (III. 1-2, 13-18)

The speaker’s vision is that of hypnotic whiteness that is “the ultimate intellect.”

Stevens’s debt to Romantic poets has been thoroughly documented, and in this section, one hears distinct echoes of William Wordsworth.<sup>37</sup> The “wild-ringed eye” recalls not only the image of an owl but also the “wild eyes” of Dorothy in “Tintern Abbey,” and in conjunction with it, the “ultimate intellect” evokes the image of the child in the *Intimations Ode* as the “best Philosopher” with an “eternal mind.”<sup>38</sup> The impulse of the vision in section III is regressive: a rediscovery of one’s origin and original wisdom, the Wordsworthian “whiteness” and innocence of childhood, which constitute the “deep atmosphere” and the “accomplished, the fulfilling air” of one’s innate self: the child as the father of the man.<sup>39</sup> In a sense, this regressive vision in section III, in which the speaker finds his ultimate intellect in the depths of his interiority, anticipates the image of the child in section VI; this scene of origin, the primal landscape of whiteness, is seen as

the best wisdom that the speaker resorts to in the time of need. The image is, in a sense, a language beyond language; it's a language that leads each of these death-phases into a place where words no longer apply and can no longer reach.

If the first vision of sleep is that of one's origin and native purity and whiteness, the second vision—of peace, the “brother of sleep” (IV. 7)—in section IV is that of estrangement, the presence of the unrecognizable, foreign other within the self:

There peace, the godolphin and fellow, estranged, estranged,  
Hewn in their middle as the beam of leaves,  
The prince of shither-shade and tinsel lights,

Stood flourishing the world...

This was peace after death, the brother of sleep,  
The inhuman brother so much like, so near,  
Yet vested in a foreign absolute,

Adorned with cryptic stones and sliding shines  
An immaculate personage in nothingness,  
With the whole spirit sparkling in its cloth... (IV. 1-4, 7-12)

Starting with the repetition of the word “estranged,” section IV continuously tweaks the familiar into the unfamiliar, by setting one thing next to its antithetical variation. In stanza 3, the fraternal likeness comes to be seen as “inhuman” and “foreign” at the same time; “peace” gets coupled with its grotesque variant, “death,” unveiling the euphemistic meaning of the word “peace” as “death.”<sup>40</sup> And in stanza 4, the image of “nothingness” is set against the “wholeness” of the spirit as though to suggest that homogeneity or purity of “whole spirit” is another word for “nothingness.” Then in stanza 5, an oblique allusion to the figure of a nightingale sets the image of the celebratory, melodious song-bird against the owl, the less heralded nocturnal bird in the poem's title:

Generations of the imagination piled  
In the manner of its stitchings, of its thread,

In the weaving round the wonder of its need,

And the first flowers upon it, an alphabet  
By which to spell out holy doom and end,  
A bee for the remembering of happiness.

... This is the figure stationed at our end,  
Always, in brilliance, fatal, final, formed  
Out of our lives to keep us in our death... (IV. 13-18, 22-24)

The stanza evokes the image of Philomela's tapestry mellifluously through lavish uses of sound devices, including slant rhyme—"thread," "need"—alliteration—"weaving," "wonder"—and assonance—"weaving," "need"—that are framed within an incantatory anaphoric syntax. It reads like a song of a nightingale: the bird Philomela was turned into, and the bird that sings of summer with full-throated ease in Keats's melodious ode. As alluring as the nightingale may be, however, the poem is of the owl—the bird that, in the words of one critic, "speaks in a hieratic voice and is more a chorister of divine love than a siren singer of sensuality."<sup>41</sup> The poem becomes, in a sense, the other, less celebrated night-bird masquerading as a nightingale, like Aesop's crow and its peacock-like self-presentation: a kind of disfigured Romantic poetry, the melodiousness of which always remains "abysmal" (I. 10). The harmonious music of this poem retains indelible signs of Philomela's severed tongue within it.

The sense of estrangement in section IV manifests not only in its incongruous imagery and disfigured music but also in the brokenness of its sense. Harold Bloom has famously stated that "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" is "uninterpretable," and passages like stanza 6 seem to corroborate the claim.<sup>42</sup> For a poem that attempts to restore meaning to unintelligibility, there certainly are noticeable numbers of passages that border on pure nonsense, especially if the poem is seen as a representation of an utterance,

as in Northrop Frye's view of the lyric as "preeminently the utterance that is overheard."<sup>43</sup> But if one were to be attentive to "aspects of babble, doodle, and riddle" of lyric poetry as Jonathan Culler suggests,<sup>44</sup> the stanza presents itself as a kind of sound association, in which the mundane—the first flowers, alphabet, and a bee—undergoes a strange deformation and becomes an apocalyptic image of "holy doom and end" (IV. 17). These sound associations, along with the linguistic means of "alphabet," simultaneously spell out a restorative image—one's remembrance of happiness, of a Wordsworthian childhood consisting of learning the alphabet and seeing natural landscapes of flowers and bees—as well as the end of such bucolic bliss. And these two visions—of doom and of happiness—are placed side-by-side, as if they were a multiple choice, in which one faces either an A) alphabet to spell out holy doom and end or a B) bee for the remembering of happiness. In these instances, auditory associations and sound plays—almost as if to suggest that the "a" of the "alphabet" stands for choice A, "b" of the "bee" stands for choice B—might as well become the organizing principle Stevens employs to embody, and give meaning to, the sense of estrangement and its unintelligibility.<sup>45</sup>

This oscillation between meaning and unintelligibility in the language of lyric poetry—the tension between the lyric's proclivity toward becoming both a meaningful, overheard utterance and a puzzling babble—mirrors the same characteristics of the language of mourning; in grief, speech attempts to reach out to others, to gain intelligibility and communicability, while, at the same time, there is also always so much that cannot be said, or that remains, and in a sense must remain, a babble. If lyric poetry were an expression of powerful overflow of emotion, an expression of grief, considered to be one of the acuter kinds of emotion, would provide a stage where characteristics of

lyric poetry can be observed in a particularly emphasized or exaggerated form, the way an allegory creates a space where the features of the actual existences it allegorizes are hyperbolized.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, theories of lyric come hand in hand with theories of elegy, in which the former is seen in the latter in an acuter, more visible form.<sup>47</sup> If “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” seems “uninterpretable,” it is because the poem reveals, in a manner of excess, the seed of uninterpretability—or the feeling of estrangement arising out of the lyric’s simultaneous impulse to make sense of what eludes sense and to underscore precisely this elusiveness of sense—that is at the heart of lyric poetry.

After the visions of sleep and peace—sleep’s archetypal familiarity and peace’s strange, familiar unfamiliarity—section V presents the vision of the third figure:

But she that says good-by losing in self  
The sense of self, rosed out of prestiges  
Of rose, stood tall in self not symbols, quick

And potent, an influence felt instead of seen.  
She spoke with backward gestures of her hand.  
She held men closely with discovery,

Almost as speed discovers, in the way  
Invisible change discovers what is changed,  
In the way what was has ceased to be what is. (V. 1-9)

As discussed earlier, the third figure is the multitudinous “mother of us all,” whose selfhood, like Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” seemingly contains all. The conflation of the self with the other—the inclusion of the other in the self, or the fusion between the two—erases the boundary of selfhood, for a self defines itself through its detection of differences from the other: inside her self where no distinction between the self and the other exists, she “loses... [the] sense of self.” The strange coined word, “rosed,” is itself an expression of inclusiveness: commonly a noun for a flower, the word “rose” is turned



into a verb, containing within it both properties of a noun as well as those of a verb, in addition to its resemblances to a past participle of the verb, “rise.”

The third figure’s multitude, however, differs from that of Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in one critical sense: while Whitman’s egotism is one of celebration—of expansive inclusion of the elements of the foreign other into one’s selfhood—the third figure’s solipsism is that of melancholia, an erasure or disappearance of the foreign other in light of one’s full immersion in one’s subjectivity.<sup>48</sup> The stanza’s insistent repetition of the word “self”—“losing in self,” “sense of self,” “stood tall in self”—is indicative of melancholic self-immersion (V. 1, 2, 3). While the term “melancholia” may refer to a number of various conditions, the critical consensus is that it has a major influence on one’s way of seeing, whether it signifies the looking-glass of the classical “darkness visible” in which everything in sight comes to possess a tinge of darkness,<sup>49</sup> or a less optimistic but more perceptive eye to access the truth.<sup>50</sup> Of particular interest here is the condition of melancholia as “a maximum of consciousness”—an inflation of subjectivity that swells and swallows exteriority.<sup>51</sup> In a sense, the poem’s allegorical descent into the depth of one’s interiority itself can be seen as the work of elegiac melancholia, in which the lyric speaker’s action turns inward and his subjectivity envelops the whole of the external world. And the all-encompassing “mother of us all” becomes emblematic of this inclusive melancholia, an “inner thing” obsessively immersed in its interiority—one who won’t give birth, who won’t let go of the other inside her, who contains the other when she should be letting out—which nevertheless possesses what Freud would call a keener eye to the truth characteristic of a “self that knew” (V. 11).

As mentioned earlier, in the absence of the other—in the self’s hypertrophied, solipsistic imprisonment—one loses a sense of oneself, and the self becomes the object of loss. Considering the consolatory function of elegy as one of finding, in the face of a disruption in the aftermath of a loss of one’s life, a sense of presence or continuity in other lives or substitutive forms of lives including that of the poet-speaker, elegiac melancholia and its self-enclosure enact that which it had determinedly set out to counter: the prospect of self-erasure, the lyric speaker’s own dissolution. The first half of section V, therefore, ends with images of privation: its discovery is the fact that “the way what was has ceased to be what is” (V. 9). It is a discovery of loss, of the change and strange.

Perhaps frightened by the prospect of his own mortality in the depths of his interiority, the poet-speaker attempts a “motion outward” in the latter half of section V:

It was not her look but a knowledge that she had.  
She was a self that knew, an inner thing,  
Subtler than look’s declaiming, although she moved

With a sad splendor, beyond artifice,  
Impassioned by the knowledge that she had,  
There on the edges of oblivion.

O exhalation, O fling without a sleeve  
And motion outward, reddened and resolved  
From sight, in the silence that follows her last word— (V. 10-18)

Breaking out of the repetitive stillness of anaphora in the first half, the second half of section V scurries along, through the predominance of weak stresses in frequent dactylic, anapestic or pyrrhic substitutions, all of which speed up the movement of the lines. The frenzied pace reaches its height in the apostrophes—“O exhalation, O fling without a sleeve”—which are further hastened onward by the sentence fragments that look for syntactic closure. The apostrophe is also the moment when the poem sounds

overwrought and is forced to become aware of its own artifice; as William Waters comments on the matter of address to the nonhuman, “All that hailing of abstractions, objects, and people can look like so much empty rhetorical flourishing, address cut off from any possible efficacy,”<sup>52</sup> and an artificial gesture of this ilk points to a moment in which the poem becomes self-conscious of its own contrivance. Along with the self-consciously “poetic” moments of apostrophes, stanza 6 also flaunts poetic diction, peppered with poetic sound devices—alliterations such as “reddened,” “resolved” and “sight,” “silence,” as well as internal rhymes like “outward,” “word.” Stanza 6 becomes a moment of tension in which the poem’s self-awareness undoes the fiction it has forged.

But if self-awareness destroys fiction, it also simultaneously restores it; the outward movement of Stanza 6 is artificial, but the knowledge of one’s own artificiality allows one to act “beyond artifice” (V. 13). The poem’s self-awareness mirrors the mother figure’s self-awareness, and this self-knowledge—which is itself a motion outward, for a self cannot know or define what a self is without knowing what isn’t a self—redeems the speaker from his self-dissolution. A “self that knew” her “inner thing” is, in other words, a self that has learned what isn’t herself. As such, it is precisely through her own self-knowledge that the third figure turns her inward reflection into something that reaches outward, since knowing what is oneself simultaneously makes one aware of what is the Other; in this sense, the “knowledge that she had” of herself in Stanza 5 ultimately “impassions” and guides her into the outward movement of Stanza 6.

Descending into the depths of oneself to find a core of humanity that one shares with others, or finding the other within the self whereby the move inward becomes the move outward, is the Romantic ideal of intersubjectivity: Whitmanesque interweaving of

subjectivities, through the projection—“In all people I see myself”—and introjection—“I am large, I contain multitudes.”<sup>53</sup> Intersubjectivity is a state of interrelation among subjectivities—unlike the state of self-erasure in hypertrophied solipsism—and in this change of the “inner thing” from a self that’s aware of oneself to a self that’s aware of what isn’t oneself and then to a self that regains an outward knowledge, the poem salvages the third figure from the prospect of self-erasure. The consolatory allegory of the three figures reaches its conclusion here: a “motion outward” resolutely arises from the “silence” that is the figure of death (V. 17, 18). In other words, the deceased may be forever lost, but out of his death, out of the depths of our interiority, the prospect of intersubjective connection between the self and the other emerges. The deceased, then, is not really lost because he lives inside of us for as long as we live. In exchange for the loss of the deceased, we gain a piece of the deceased inside of us, just as Apollo, having lost Daphne, gains a substitutive sign of her in the laurel wreath.

Or so it seems. The dash at the end of the last line of section V overtly indicates that the sentence is not completed; the speaker’s thought doesn’t end there. The sentence elides the section break and the speaker’s thought is completed in section VI. What follows the rosy sublime of intersubjectivity is a statement of bathos that undercuts it:

This is the mythology of modern death  
And these, in their mufflings, monsters of elegy,  
Of their own marvel made, of pity made,  
  
Compounded and compounded, life by life,  
These are death’s own supremest images,  
The pure perfections of parental space... (VI. 1-6)

As Charles Berger points out, “mythology” is not one of Stevens’ favored words.<sup>54</sup>

Stevens once again returns to the self-awareness that the allegory of the three forms and

the visions the speaker encounters in section III to V are all constructions: a self-taught consolation of heroic renunciations that are mythologized as a discovery of intersubjectivity in the depths of one's interiority. In other words, the promise of intersubjectivity in the allegory of three forms is an illusory fiction. The stanza's lavish uses of alliterations link the word "mythology" to the repetition of the word "made," as if to underscore this awareness of fictiveness—the product of which are the Frankenstein-like "monsters" of elegy. The fiction is an invention by the "marvel" of human minds, as well as "pity" of human hearts—invented, that is, out of necessity, just like the three forms that had become "visible to the eye" because the eye "needs" them "out of the whole necessity of sight" (l. 7, 8). It's a fragile piece of artifice, like a piece of pottery of sorts, delicately made inside the "mufflings" so as to be fired without being exposed to direct flame. As Joan Didion writes, we "interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices... by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience."<sup>55</sup> Allegory, in other words, is a manifestation of human cognitive practice that imposes an arbitrary narrative on unassimilated or inassimilable experiences, such as the loss of the beloved in the case of elegy, and threads together a meaning out of their disparate images; it is a defensive mechanism of human cognition.

But when one is aware of the falsity of the narrative of compensatory consolation, one makes a choice: one could disregard its falsity and force oneself to be consoled by the fictive narrative, or one may abandon the consolatory fiction—a response that can take any number of forms, whether it's disillusionment, skepticism, irony, anger, or rejection of the old and determination to find a new, genuine consolation. This disbelief

in compensatory consolation has often been spotlighted as the reason for modern elegists' "transgeneric attack on... the psychological propensity of the [elegy] to translate grief into consolation."<sup>56</sup> Seen in this regard, the closing stanza of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" seems anti-consolatory, or at least non-consolatory:

The children of a desire that is the will,  
Even of death, the beings of the mind  
In the light-bound space of the mind, the floreate flare...

It is a child that sings itself to sleep,  
The mind, among the creatures that it makes,  
The people, those by which it lives and dies. (VI. 7-12)

Instead of basking in the fictive comfort of the "pure perfections of parental space" (VI. 6), the child "sings itself to sleep"; there is no parent, the mythical "mother of us all" or anyone who would lullaby the child into sleep. The ambiguous image is that of solitude. The child is left alone, with the knowledge that the consolatory narrative is a myth but that it is the only thing he's left with.

The "consolation" of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" seemingly ends in the desolation of the forlorn child: upon the death of a friend, the speaker reconstructs through allegory the disrupted, inassimilable experience of loss, in a way that, when one experiences a loss, one begins to ask oneself, "did this person actually exist, or was there nothing to begin with?" and then, to efface the uncertainty, builds a narrative of "loss" to stand in the place of this uncertainty. As such, the poem can be recapitulated as follows: first, in his allegorical reconstruction, the speaker meets himself and the foreign other in himself. Then, through his realization that the self contains the self and the other in the depths of its interiority, the speaker arises out of the abyss of his hypertrophied melancholic subjectivity to discover a possibility of reaching redemptive intersubjectivity.

Upon realizing the fictiveness of the allegory and its visions, however, the speaker retreats into himself, left on his own to sing himself to sleep. Critics have often noted that modern elegies tend to enact the work of unresolved “melancholic” mourning, not the “normative” mourning that leads to resolution.<sup>57</sup> Given that the compensatory consolation fails, because of its fictitiousness, to console the speaker, this poem appears to be no exception to this trend.

The above summary of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” however, misses a critical undercurrent of the poem: the poem’s abstractions, its lack of occasional details. The poem leaves much unsaid. There are various ways to interpret this rather glaring omission for an elegy: it could be a preference for impersonality; it could be the indication of the depth of sorrow, as previously mentioned;<sup>58</sup> it could be a matter of reticence, coming out of the phenomenon of “disappearance of death” in modern society, in which death is hidden away from our view in everyday social practices.<sup>59</sup> Or it could be a repression or a sense of something unspeakable, the kind of feeling we have when we use euphemisms like “passing away” to mean “dying”; it could also be a result of allegoresis, which represents the personal details with impersonal substitutes; and other possibilities abound. But setting aside the authorial intent, which is always a matter of speculation,<sup>60</sup> one may instead examine how the poem is presented and what the poem is made of. The obvious answer is that “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is constructed as an allegory. Allegory, of course, is a kind of cryptonymy—a code language. And from the poem’s discordant imagery, cacophonous voices, its “babble, doodle and riddle,” we deduce the poet-speaker’s struggle to express what eludes language, thoughts, figures of representation—the inadequacy of the language, the unspeakable, the unsayable that lurks

within us and yet escapes us. Since meanings are contextual, things with meanings lose their meanings when the context—such as the details of the occasion—is lost, but things without meanings remain as they are, where the “code” language that doesn’t depend on the context becomes a barricade against this loss of meaning. The allegorical language is, in a sense, a makeshift expedient to grope blindly through the incomprehension of the loss, where meanings and contexts are absent.

One may wonder about the obstinate opacity of the poem, and hypothesize that its code language—its allegory, which, in Benjamin’s dialectic, is symptomatic of melancholia in that it signifies a melancholic’s attempts to reconstruct the system of signification through arbitrary designation of meanings—may also be symptomatic of something else: the previously referenced notion of what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok call a “phantom.”<sup>61</sup> To recapitulate, a phantom is a type of sealed-off sorrow in inaccessible mental graves, which reveals itself through linguistic unintelligibility or concealment, often entailing inventions of particular forms of obfuscation, which Abraham and Torok call “cryptonymy.”<sup>62</sup> To review the relevant passage, a “phantom”:

...points to... a memory... buried *without legal burial place*. The memory is of an idyll, experienced with a valued object and yet for some reason unspeakable. It is memory entombed in a fast and secure place, awaiting resurrection. Between the idyllic moment and its subsequent forgetting (we have called the latter preservative repression), there was the metapsychological traumatism of a loss or, more precisely, the “loss” that resulted from a traumatism. This segment of an ever so painfully lived Reality—untellable and therefore inaccessible to the gradual, assimilative work of mourning—causes a genuinely covert shift in the entire psyche. The shift itself is covert, since both the fact that the idyll was real and that it was later lost must be disguised and denied.<sup>63</sup>

Although Abraham’s and Torok’s “phantom” refers to a memory of loss secluded somewhere because of a traumatism, the keywords in this passage that are relevant to this



poem are “unspeakable” and “concealed”: “unspeakable,” “untellable,” “inaccessible,” “disguised” and so on. It is certainly common enough for us to describe our pain or loss as somehow beyond expression, as in “I can’t describe it in words” or “words can’t express my pain.” Generally speaking, our feeling of linguistic insufficiency results from the gap between what we want to express and what we end up expressing: the gap between the target of expression and the expression of the target object. And in expressions of loss, we are accustomed to thinking that linguistic expressions are insufficient because, somehow, either the actual pain is quantifiably larger than the linguistic expression of it—despite the fact that we have no way of quantifying actual or linguistic pain—or the empirical pain is qualitatively so different from the linguistic expression of it that the latter cannot match the former—despite the fact that we have no way of measuring this qualitative difference.

But what if the real reason for the seeming insufficiency of linguistic expressions to capture an empirical loss is not simply a matter of the qualitative or quantitative difference between the empirical and linguistic? That is to say, could it be possible that the insufficiency we think of as linguistic may be, instead, cognitive—or both cognitive and linguistic, where the linguistic reflects the cognitive? Conceivably, linguistic insufficiency results not so much from the limitation of the language itself but rather from our erroneous cognition of the nature of our experience of loss, whereby this error leads us to misdirect our linguistic expression, which ends up capturing a proximate object instead of something else that it’s supposed to, and meant to, capture. For instance, in the case of a loss of someone, we are accustomed to thinking that the sadness we feel is for the loss of that person who’s passed away. But if we consider the person who’s passed

away to be a kind of a proximate object, and think of the sorrow we feel for the loss of that person as what Freud calls a screen memory<sup>64</sup>—or, to be more accurate in this case, a “screen sorrow”—then there would be something else that should be the real target of our sorrow, from which the screen sorrow is instituted to safeguard us. Fiction-making is a symptom, which constitutes an attempt to hide something one might not want to be cognizant of. In that case, linguistic insufficiency or unintelligibility, such as symptomized as an allegory or code language, would be a sign of concealment, an indication that the proximate object of the expressed sorrow—that is, the immediate and readily visible loss of a specific person—is at once a real object of loss and a false screen: while we do mourn for the lost person, that mourning is also a screen for something else. This process of screen-concealment suggests that our mind is not wholly settled with its placement of our sorrow, and that our mind is still struggling in its attempt to reach for something beneath the screen: it is a sign of sorrow in an unplaced or unplaceable state.

In other words, the opacity of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is an indication that the real loss portrayed in the poem may not be so much the loss of Henry Church but rather some other loss that the loss of Church reveals: some other unconscious loss that a loss of a friend rattles the speaker out of his cocoon to confront. For one thing, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is a poem of discovery; the poem moves from the witnessing or discovering—the first three sections highlight an unspecified character’s act of “seeing” his inner landscape—to the summarizing of the discoveries in the last section. In short, the poem chronicles a journey to discover something, and the fact that one must discover something is itself suggestive enough of the possibility that the poem’s real subject, the

real loss that the poem wants to capture and express, lies beyond the readily available detail in the poet's biography.

The clues for the readers to discover and identify this real loss behind the "screen loss" may lie in the destination of the speaker's journey: his inner world. The self-reflexivity points to a potential self-mourning, and more than a few critics have noted that self-mourning is ubiquitously found in canonical elegies.<sup>65</sup> In that sense, the facile conclusion would be that the real loss one fears or mourns for when one experiences someone else's death is one's anticipation of one's own death: as Hopkins writes, "It is the blight man was born for, / It is Margaret you mourn for"—the collective experience of the humankind is intertwined with the singular identity, "Margaret." That, of course, is intuitive enough, but precisely the ease with which we draw such conclusion should make us skeptical of it.

In order for us to investigate and uncover the real loss behind the screen, the passage we must return to is stanzas 3 through 5 in section V, the climax of the introspective journey before the outward escape takes place in stanza 6, and before the bathos undercuts the vision in section VI:

She held men closely with discovery,  
Almost as speed discovers, in the way  
Invisible change discovers what is changed,  
In the way what was has ceased to be what is.

It was not her look but a knowledge that she had.  
She was a self that knew, an inner thing,  
Subtler than look's declaiming, although she moved

With a sad splendor, beyond artifice,  
Impassioned by the knowledge she had,  
There on the edges of oblivion.

O exhalation, O fling without a sleeve... (V. 6-16)

Earlier, I noted a poetic self-consciousness in stanza 6 that pushes the speaker outside of his interiority. The sudden shift in tone from stanza 5 to stanza 6—from the somber, weak-stressed lyric to an apostrophe—is conspicuous, and the word that precedes the shift is “oblivion”; the speaker comes to the “edges” of oblivion and then turns back. In the pivotal third stanza, which manifests the speaker’s acute awareness of inwardness through the repetition of the sound, “in,” the poem suggests, through the repetition of the word “discover” and its variant, that a discovery is made.

If Stanza 3 acknowledges the fact of discovery, Stanza 4 portrays the content of this discovery: what was discovered was “not her look” but a “knowledge she had.” And this knowledge that the poem discovers is of a “self that knew,” the “inner thing,” one that is characterized by its “sad splendor” and its nature “beyond artifice”: a self-knowledge of an introspective self, one that can see through, like Freudian melancholic’s keener eye to the truth, the “sad splendor” of a brutal truth beyond the artificial, self-made, fictive consolation. As previously discussed, elegiac melancholia enacts what it fears the most: in the depth of the self’s introspection, the self enters a solipsistic imprisonment, and in this solipsism, without any nonself objects to orient the self, the self loses a sense of self, inducing a state of self-erasure. The expansive melancholic selfhood of the “maximum of consciousness” points to the self’s essential solitude, a space where any efforts at introjection—an effort to take in external, nonself objects—would fail, and the solitariness of the self’s existence ends up dissolving the self itself. What the “inner thing”—the “self that knew”—reveals is this expanse of selfhood, in which neither the self nor any nonself objects would come into existence.

These clues indicate that the discovery, the brutal truth behind the fictive consolation, is the fact of self's essential solitude—the essential isolation of the “self that knew” the fact of its solitariness. In this universe where only the self exists, the real loss that the poem mourns is the illusion of loss—an illusion that one had something and could, and did, lose it, an illusion like that of Apollo who'd thought he had Daphne and thought he had lost her when she turned into a laurel tree, even if, in reality, Daphne had never been his possession and he could not have “lost” her. As the stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius inquires, “How could you lose what you don't have?”<sup>66</sup> That is to say, a claim that we “lost” something presupposes that we previously had it, but in the state of essential solitude that is self-erasure, one encounters no prospect of loss. The disappearance of the prospect of loss is the profoundest loss, against which one guards oneself by creating a fiction that one has lost something—by inventing an illusion of loss: the “inventions of farewell.”

This—invention of farewell, creation of loss—is the consolation of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” The consolation of this poem is not compensatory; if nothing is lost, then there is nothing left to be recovered or compensated for. The consolation is that of creation.<sup>67</sup> Stevens once remarked that “the history of belief will show that it has always been in a fiction,”<sup>68</sup> as though to suggest that a fiction, if we are desperate enough, can be made into a belief.<sup>69</sup> Even as the “mythology” of the illusory intersubjective may have proved to be an unpersuasive fiction, this fiction, this creation of loss, is a fiction that, as fallacious as it may be, one cannot live without a belief in.

For creation of loss is the only way to give existence to the object that the subject is able to relate to. In *Playing and Reality*, D. W. Winnicott remarks on this aspect of destructive creation in the reality-making of object-relations as follows:

... he will find that after 'subject relates to object' comes 'subject destroys object' (as it becomes external); and then may come '*object survives* destruction by the subject.' But there may or may not be survival. A new feature thus arrives in the theory of object-relating. The subject says to the object: 'I destroyed you,' and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: 'Hullo object!' 'I destroyed you.' 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.' 'While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*.' ... In other words, because of the survival of the object, the subject may now have started to live a life in the world of objects, and so the subject stands to gain immeasurably; but the price has to be paid in acceptance of the ongoing destruction in unconscious fantasy relative to object-relating.<sup>70</sup>

Winnicott adds that "the destruction plays its part in making the reality, placing the object outside the self."<sup>71</sup> Just as the child makes the transition from the oneness with the mother that is another name for the other—a state in which all objects are within one's own world—to the true object-relationship—a state in which objects exist outside of oneself—through the destruction of objects, loss is a construct that is a precondition for our relationship to the object-world. The object, in other words, comes into being only as it is destroyed. Or, to be more accurate, this destruction places the object outside of the subject's fantasy, and only then can the object actually exist for the subject; while the object stays inside of the subject, it does not exist meaningfully for the subject, as something independent of the subject, as objects should be. In the case of elegy, the mourned comes to exist only as he or she is lost to the mourner. Having realized the illusory fiction of loss, the subject creates a loss through the act of writing an elegy, and, in that process, comes to know the deceased whom he or she previously had not

meaningfully known and could not have claimed to have lost; elegy creates the deceased by enacting his or her destruction.

Read in this regard, the ambiguous image of the lone child singing himself to sleep in the closing stanza becomes not only desolate but also heroic. The “pure perfections of parental space” (VI. 6) may be an unpersuasive fiction, but the song the child sings to himself, the song he creates, becomes a fiction that is real, worthy of turning itself into a belief. The image of the child in solitude becomes a “sad splendor,” like that of the “self that knew” its critical aloneness (V. 13, 11). The child knows his solitary existence, does not resort to the facile mythology of “parental space” or an illusion of the intersubjective communion inside the solipsistic enclosure; instead, he creates in the void a loss so as to create the lost object.

In its allegory of the three figures, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” chronicles the mourner’s intense introspection that attempts to explore and excavate the real “crypt” underneath the fictive narrative of “loss”: the things erased out of our sight, hidden under the fantastic veil of human relations and their losses. Through the three visions of sleep, peace, and mother—one’s origin, one’s estrangement within the self, and one’s motherly, all-encompassing selfhood that contains the self and the other in the self—one discovers that the “crypt” beneath the fiction of loss is the fact of solipsistic imprisonment as a human condition: the solitude in the self and its feeling of emptiness, a state in which loss is effectively lost as one encounters no prospect of loss, where the self is the only thing reflected back in the two mirrors facing one another reflecting further and further into each other with no end. By investigating alongside the poet-speaker’s interior journey, we find that what lies beneath the cryptonymy of allegory is the unplaced sorrow

that awaits to find its place, and that the consolation of elegy is not meant to be compensatory but rather creative—that elegy is an act of bringing to existence that which had not previously existed for us. And it will remain so, insofar as elegies insist on speaking in cryptonymies and allegories as much as, or to a larger or lesser extent than, Stevens’s “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” does, and hide the real object of loss that is the illusory fiction of loss. Elegy’s property as one of creation is precisely the reason we keep writing elegies, despite our keen awareness that a song would never compensate, that it would never “make up” for the void: we do it because it creates something anew. And after this knowledge, the solitude of the child singing to itself becomes an unforgiving reminder of all the cunning passages, contrived corridors, and vain deceptions of the “mythology of modern death” we are led to believe,<sup>72</sup> even as its song adumbrates a path of privation that is the sole presence. That is the real fiction that this poem proposes, for, if not for such narrative of loss, living becomes a task too cruel.

## II. Fiction of Loss as a Screen for a Loss of Loss

Stevens’s elegies after “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” adopt its fictive beliefs as their intertext. His next major elegy, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” has often been read as being a more conventional elegy than “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” and some critics have gone as far as to characterize “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” as the orthodox elegy while branding “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” and its harsh visions as more of a heretical version of Stevens’s beliefs.<sup>73</sup> “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” was actually written some months before the actual death of George Santayana, for whom this elegy is commonly known to be written.<sup>74</sup> In this regard, the poem is a type of premature



elegy, in the mold of Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “Ave atque Vale.” And in some sense, the parallel does not stop there: although “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” is primarily a “celebration of the dying Santayana” that “at times verges on” becoming “a eulogy”<sup>75</sup>—while, on the other hand, the spirit of Swinburne’s “Ave atque Vale” is decidedly that of a skeptic,<sup>76</sup> as the telling rhyme in the concluding stanza, “womb” and “tomb” (191, 192), symbolizes a denial of the common rebirth and renewal motif that is used as a consolatory philosophy in pastoral elegies—Stevens’s poem reveals enough signs that suggest the elegist-eulogists’ awareness that the eulogy is fictive in its nature, just as the Swinburne poem does. Through this awareness, the poem subverts its design to be a straightforward panegyric and instead betrays the romantic irony that accompanies its elegiac act of fiction-making.

A touch of such subversion seeps through even from the opening stanza, which presents images of perspectival diminishment:

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street  
 Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement  
 Of men growing small in the distances of space,  
 Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,  
 Unintelligible absolution and an end— (1-5)

Harold Bloom accounts for this image of diminishment as a “deliberate swerve away from Whitmanian enlargements” even as Stevens writes in the American elegiac mode inherited from Whitman,<sup>77</sup> and that is certainly one way of reading the stanza. But the clash between the form and the content makes an alternative reading possible: because of their formal and tonal features, the lines sound too artificially lofty. Especially when combined with a feeling of diminution that the lines convey—such as the emphasis on the words “Unintelligible” and “end” through a shortened line—the stanza leaves just enough

room for a suspicion that the poem may not have as much conviction as it seems, even if it is primarily meant to be a eulogy. Formally, the stanza has the structure of an alliterative verse, where mid-line caesurae create a majestic balance, but as the alliteration becomes more and more visible—going from a subtle enough “majestic movement” in Line 2 and “small... space” in Line 3 to Line 4 where all stressed words alliterate, culminating in Line 5, in which all of the words, including unstressed ones, vowel-alliterate—the magnificence of the form comes to seem contrived.

If—like apostrophe, the contrivance of which has been read as a sign of fiction aware of its own fictive and optative imperative<sup>78</sup>—visible artifices in lyric poetry are seen as indications of a fiction aware of its own fictiveness, the excessively artificial lyric moment creates, beneath its superficially sonorous euphony, a subversive realization that whatever moving sentiment the lyricism conveys is an illusion: that is, lyric inflation makes the poem susceptible to be read as a fictive construct. Adding that to the depiction of how “men” grow “small” relative to the vastness of space called heaven namely death—and how, as one comes close to one’s end, the songs of “absolution” becomes unintelligible and, by extension, turn into unconsoling gibberish—it isn’t entirely outrageous to suggest that, in crude language, the stanza could carry as its undercurrent an undertone of bathos, which may be summarized thus: “When you have one leg inside your casket, many things just seem small and irrelevant.” And that, precisely, is the crux of the poem: all that is lovely in the poem is contrived, as is a philosopher’s self-aware life, but this contrivance precisely is what this poem wants to celebrate—in a manner of romantic irony—as a skeptical belief in creative imagination. The result is that the poem

simulates a kind of orchestra, where the violins and lutes of beautification blend with the bass bathos and drowned drums to form a euphonic elegy.

Therefore, it would be a gross misreading to dismiss entirely the celebratory message of the poem; Stevens's admiration for Santayana is unmistakable, not only in the poem itself but also in other writings such as an essay, "Imagination as Value," in which he extols Santayana's life as one where "the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters."<sup>79</sup> Rather, the above suggestion of an anti-elegiac thrust in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" is to show that the poem exhibits the double-consciousness of romantic irony, where the warring elements of a lofty panegyric and its subtle sabotages coexist to express an understanding that the poem is constructing a fictive consolation. That is to say, instead of viewing "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" as the orthodox and "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" as the heresy, one may hypothesize that the creation of a fictive narrative of loss as seen in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" becomes the intertextual mold upon which Stevens writes his later elegies including "To an Old Philosopher in Rome."

If the allegory of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" is an explicit fiction-making to construct a narrative of loss, the eulogy of "To an Old Philosopher" makes the fictive construction implicit, while still retaining the same double-consciousness of the simultaneous belief in and skepticism of a mere artifice. From such double-facetedness of the poem, it would be facile and reductive to conclude that Stevens is contradictory, but it would be more fruitful if we are to investigate the source of Stevens's contradictions. In his elegies, their contradiction is one of someone who knows the fictionality of consolation but who still nevertheless has to act as though he believes in it,

in a hope that a fiction may turn into a belief—a “substantial reality,” as Wordsworth phrases it in his *Essays upon Epitaphs*—an attitude similar to that of romantic irony.

“To a Philosopher in Rome” is in many ways filled with moments of lyricism, and while that is one of the reasons why many readers come to view it as a moving poem, the excess of artifice throughout—such as the use of apostrophe, insistent alliterations, and conspicuous abundance of repetitions like “The loftiest syllables among loftiest things” (57), “In choruses and choirs of choruses” (66), or “Total grandeur of a total edifice” (76)—adds credence as a symptom of fiction aware of its own fictitiousness.<sup>80</sup> One queries why, in the 1950’s when the poetic trend was moving toward one of affected naturalness and Stevens’s own poems too were shifting toward more conversational modes, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” stands like a case of lyrical atavism, similar in spirit to that of “Sunday Morning” and its whimsical experiments. That the poem is a formal elegy and formal elegies tend to be more traditionally inclined is one plausible explanation. That a sonorous euphony is an appropriate tone for a tribute to a respected philosopher would likely qualify as another adequate answer. And the hypothesis proposed here, as yet another possibility, is that the affected lyricism is a case of fiction aware of its own artifice.

That makes us wonder what the “fiction” this poem wants to convey is. In the same essay, “Imagination as Value,” Stevens extols Santayana because Santayana is an example of lives that “exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them” when most people’s “lives are thrust upon them.”<sup>81</sup> The reason that those who “exist by the deliberate choice” they make in their lives are praised is because those are uncommon, and Santayana is praised because he is seen as one of such rare species; the artifice of the

poem, in its extravagance and its unusual difference from ordinary life, is the formal analogue of Santayana's "deliberate" life-choice. That is to say, Santayana is being idealized precisely because the reality is that most of us fall into the category of those whose "lives are thrust upon them"—and the idealized Santayana is a necessary ideal because, if not for those, our lives would feel too hopeless:

... O half-asleep,  
Of the pity that is the memorial of this room,  
  
So that we feel, in this illumined large,  
The veritable small, so that each of us  
Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice  
In yours, master and commiserable man,  
Intent on your particles of nether-do... (34-40)

Following the apostrophe—and it is interesting to note that Stevens has a tendency to use apostrophes to address non-humans, whether it's the "half-sleep" here or "exhalation" and "fling without a sleeve" in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," which points itself to a subversion of apostrophic convention and is also indicative of self-aware contrivance—the poem narrates, through the stylistic anaphora of "so that..." our desire, and the germ of that desire is this: we want to see ourselves in Santayana, hear our voice in his, because, when we die, we want to be like the man who is deservedly dying in the "total grandeur of a total edifice" (76). The idealized Santayana offers an example of what we want to be like when we die—an exemplar of how we want to prepare for our own death.

But just as "want" is a synonym for "lack," desire is an indication of deficiency; we "want" it precisely because we don't—and perhaps won't—have it. The illumined grandeur of vision is undercut by the veritable smallness of our actual existence. One critic characterizes the poem as one that is preoccupied with the theme of "how to live, how to shed anxiety or desperation in the urgency with which the states of 'mere being'

and death converge,”<sup>82</sup> and the important point here is that Santayana’s example offers us an insight into the “how to.” An analogy would be useful: the reason we buy “how to” books is that we don’t know “how to” do those things, for the desire to investigate and know “how to” do something reveals precisely that, in actuality, we don’t know how to do them. Nonetheless, by a reversible logic, the smallness of our actual existence can only be remedied or forgotten, even if temporarily, by the grandeur of the ideal; the “how to” books sell because they make us feel as though we can actually learn to do those things, or at least give us a glimpse into what it would feel like if we knew how to do them, even if we can’t. Santayana needs to be upheld as an ideal—he needs to remain true to the “dignity and... distinction” with which he is portrayed, as well as the “readiness and grace with which he lived up to a classical role”<sup>83</sup>—because the ideal is the fiction we need in our survival; we need the ideal we idolize in order to remain an ideal.

Such is a subversive, and perhaps heretical, reading of Stevens’s elegiac homage to the respected philosopher, which may seem like blasphemy to those who steadfastly read the poem as a moving eulogy. Sometimes, however, it takes the keener eye of a melancholic outsider to know the truth of the interiority, and this subversion is how the poem is reflected back in the eye of one saboteur. And the reflection in the eye of a saboteur is the premise that “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” and its motif of the “child singing itself to sleep”—that is, of an elegist’s making of a fictive consolation with an awareness that it is merely his own artifice—are the intertext that shapes and informs Stevens’s later elegiac poems. What this reading—namely, the use of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” as a key to the cipher of his later elegies such as “To an Old Philosopher in

Rome”—allows us for us to make sense of Stevens’s later works, and perhaps even his biographical life, as a text in which the poet-speaker relentlessly searches for one’s willpower to turn fiction into belief, whether the preoccupation surfaces visibly as titles like “Two Illustrations that the World is What You Make of It” or “What We See Is What We Think” or as a late conversion to Roman Catholicism in an optative practice of turning a fictive narrative of religion into a belief in spite of one’s knowledge that the belief is a fiction and the desire is wishful.

This practice of turning fiction into belief—of believing that the mind, the maker of fictions, is the world itself, even as it operates within the awareness of its fictive and wishful nature—repeatedly surfaces in Stevens’s last poems. While that idea itself may not be new, the contention is that, in Stevens’s elegies, fiction-making masks the real object of loss that the poem seems most reluctant to be cognizant of: that the narrative of loss is itself an illusion to conceal the prospect of the loss of loss; that the fact of solipsistic imprisonment turns the death of one’s own subjectivity into an apocalyptic end, akin to the total obliteration by the flood in Wordsworth’s Arab dream. Stevens, however, is more preoccupied with constructing layers of illusory losses than expressing his anxiety over the loss of loss that would surface when those illusions fail; in that sense, the prospect of lost loss is more an undercurrent in Stevens’s elegiac poetry than an explicit theme. For a more sustained expressive attempt to capture the anxiety over a loss of loss, we must wait for the later twentieth-century poets such as Elizabeth Bishop.

And Stevens continues to write poems that insist on the supremacy of the fiction-making imaginative mind over the prospect of lost loss, whereby the fiction itself simulates a phantom that stands for both a makeshift presence and a signifier of an

irremediable loss. The intense investigations of one's interiority in a self-summative and self-elegiac "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" exemplifies an assertion of a romantic union between the mind's imagination and the world itself: the central claim of the poem is that the "world imagined is the ultimate good" (3). In the "intensest rendezvous" of the two,

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.  
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,  
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,  
  
Within its vital boundary, in the mind.  
We say God and the imagination are one...  
How high that highest candle lights the dark. (10-15)

The line, "We say God and the imagination are one," has received many critical commentaries as evidence of the ascendancy of imagination,<sup>84</sup> for such a statement is provocative enough in the predominantly religious society in which we reside. But given the context of this dissertation chapter—the premise of which is that religion or God are one manifestation of fictive narratives, and that the coexistence of the fiction aware of itself and a desire to believe in a fiction despite its falsity is of central importance in the study of Stevens's anti-elegiac elegies—that particular line is irrelevant. More important is the theme of the union between the mind and the world: Stevens adopts the language of love, the most intense moment of adulation where the two merge into one another, forgetting the boundary between the two. The disappearance of the selves—like one that occurs in the fervor of religious devotion—follows the disappearance of the boundary, as one would feel in a perfect union. And in this intense love, the moment freezes in the present—"Here, now" or the here and now—creating an effect of timelessness.



The view of this union, however, is being narrated with an intimation of skepticism. Although “here and now” can certainly create a feeling of immediate palpability as well as of timelessness, it is also a fleeting sensation that borders on being nonexistent, as it can be rephrased as “now here” or “nowhere.” And even as it has been made into an “obscurity” in the heat of the moment, this union is arranged by an “order,” which, though its primary meaning here is likely that of “structure,” can read as a “command” or “imperative.” And the imperative is that of the “knowledge” of the fictive and wishful belief. The idea that the mind and the world are, or can be, one is, however passionate the union is, a wish:

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,  
We make a dwelling in the evening air,  
In which being there together is enough. (16-18)

Despite the knowledge of its wishfulness, the poem ends with a tone of contentment: “being there together is enough.” But “enough” is a curious sort of contentment; it is adequate and sufficient for the purpose, even if there are things that remain wanting. Even if the belief that one can will one’s mind into an equivalent of the world itself is, in actuality, less a belief than a wishful desire, such tenuous half-belief is “enough,” in a sense that anything more cannot be hoped for, like the union of illicit lovers who can’t hope for anything more than a union in a fleeting here-and-now that is nowhere. It is a fiction whose purpose is to obscure, and protect us from, the harsher worldview in which the mind and the imagination have no power and we are left in utter deprivation.

The poem, “The Rock,” famously states in its aphoristic first line: “It is an illusion that we were ever alive.”<sup>85</sup> But we construct such illusions because they are necessary, even if the fictions are so fragile as to hold within them a potential to undo

themselves. In “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” and “Final Soliloquy of an Interior Paramour,” the theme of the fiction aware of its own artifice is present as an undercurrent; in “As You Leave the Room,” the same theme becomes the point of explicit inquiry. “As You Leave the Room” can be classified as a self-elegy; adopting a gesture similar to Yeats’s “The Circus Animal’s Desertion” and its reflections on his previous characters and motifs, an older poet-speaker in “As You Leave the Room” reviews, as somewhat of a final glance upon one’s footprints, the course of his oeuvre up to the present, in light of his imminent departure. Given that the poem has generally been characterized as a reworking of an unpublished poem of 1947 titled “First Warmth,” much has been made of the revision and changes between the two versions,<sup>86</sup> but a comparison of the two versions would be of less purpose in the present examination of the poem, since the intent here is to explore the poem’s function as a self-elegy, which “First Warmth” clearly isn’t.<sup>87</sup>

Employing a structure analogous to the Petrarchean sonnet where the octave states the premise or inquiry and the sestet meditates on the subject of the octave, the poem presents in its first nine lines a condition and a question, and then, in the last seven lines, ruminates over the question the first part poses:

*You speak. You say: Today’s character is not  
A skeleton out of its cabinet. Nor am I.*

*That poem about the pineapple, the one  
About the mind as never satisfied,*

*The one about the credible hero, the one  
About summer, are not what skeletons think about.*

*I wonder, have I lived a skeleton’s life,  
As a disbeliever in reality,*

A countryman of all the bones in the world?

(1-9)

In these first nine lines, the poem splits the poet-speaker into “you” and “I,” constructing an exchange between the two. Some critics have characterized “you” as speaking for the poet-speaker’s younger life and “I” as his present self,<sup>88</sup> but while it may make sense for the poem about the pineapple, the one about the mind as never satisfied, the one about the credible hero, or the one about summer,<sup>89</sup> it wouldn’t account for the first line, “Today’s character.” It seems logical to consider that those references are a survey listing of characters the poet-speaker has used all the way up to the one he just used today, rather than a metonym of his past, younger self; the survey listing ends up including the past characters merely because none of us can write all these poems in just one day, or in the moment we call “present.” In that sense, the split selves are less a matter of a temporal gap than of the gap between a speaking self and a spoken self, indicating the way in which self-referentiality “opens a gap, between the enunciating *I* and the *I* of the statement.”<sup>90</sup> This latter interpretation gains more credence especially because of the combination of the following two elements: the italicized emphases on “speak” and “say,” which point to the importance of a speaking self; and the way the negation casts “I” as the object of the statement about not being a “skeleton out of its cabinet” that “you” speak of.

This negation—that “I” am not a skeleton out of its cabinet—is hard to take at face value, however. “Since these poems I’ve written are not what skeletons would think about, I am not a skeleton” is the apparent logic here, but there are ways in which repressed thoughts come to surface only through a negation of such ideas.<sup>91</sup> While Freudian negation is a contestable idea,<sup>92</sup> there are two legitimate reasons to apply the

theory and wonder if the use of it may be productive in this particular instance: first, a question wouldn't be raised unless such thought crosses one's mind; and secondly, despite the conclusion that those poems are "not what skeletons think about" (6) and that therefore the poet-speaker is not a skeleton, he then poses the question in the very next line, "I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life" (7). Particularly given that "a skeleton out of its cabinet" is likely a play on the common expression, "a skeleton in the closet,"<sup>93</sup> the question, "am I a skeleton," would gain a semi-playful yet self-reproachful, sardonic undertone: "Am I my own hidden, shameful self?" And a sardonic humor can often be a symptom of a wayward admission of an unwelcome thought. In that sense, the section might as well be saying, "Am I a skeleton? I don't think so, but I'm not sure."

And the question becomes an even more loaded one when we consider the poem as a self-elegy of a noted elegist. Elegists, by writing about the dead, form a certain affinity with them; in "Autobiography as De-facement," de Man suggests that the act of making the dead speak and come to life can, by a reversible logic, silence and deaden the living.<sup>94</sup> In that sense, the act of speaking with and speaking as the dead by writing elegies or elegiac poems can figuratively turn the elegist into a resident of the netherworld, a "countryman of all the bones in the world" (9), who, yes, has in fact lived a simulative skeleton's life. And the elegiac engagement with all the finessing-out of consolatory—or anti-consolatory, in the case of anti-elegies—beliefs and visions, which is essentially an act of fiction-making, can label or delimit the elegist as "a disbeliever in reality." In other words, when viewed as a self-elegy, "As You Leave the Room" becomes very much a self-conscious poem about what it means to be an elegist and what

it means to weave out fiction-beliefs that seem more like contrivances apart from what appears to a living human being like a “reality” of the world.

The second section of the poem begins by presenting an example of what appears to be a part of a “reality”:

Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes

Part of a major reality, part of  
An appreciation of a reality

And thus an elevation, as if I left  
With something I could touch, touch every way.

And yet nothing has been changed except what is  
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all. (10-16)

The poet-speaker situates himself in the fleeting present, a moment in the “here and now,” and sees snow that seems like a part of the object-world, which he had forgotten while he was preoccupied with the fictive-narrative of loss and consolation. That the poet-speaker chooses “snow” as a token of the real may be construed as a gesture of defiance against the pastoral tradition, since wintry desolation would be the opposite of the regenerative motif of spring vegetations that are commonly used in elegies; Stevens’s fundamental anti-elegiac distrust of elegiac conventions surfaces even in a small detail of this ilk. But in more ways than one, the poem conveys plenty of skepticism about this vision of snow becoming a “major reality”; “Now, here” invokes the word “nowhere”—namely, a suspicion that this vision too is a utopian nonexistence, is itself an illusion—more strongly than the reversed word-order, “Here, now” in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.” And it is almost needless to point out that what’s in front of the word “reality” is an indefinite article, which communicates a sense of tentativeness—a sign of misgivings that, perhaps, this “reality” is merely an interpretation of the reality rather

than the reality itself—as opposed to a definite article, which would be more suggestive of the speaker’s conviction. This lack of conviction is the reason that an access to a part of an objective “major reality” is scaled back to a subjective “appreciation of a reality” in the next line, and that the sensation of something “I could touch, touch every way” is qualified with a subjunctive “as if.”

True to this skepticism, the poet-speaker discovers that “nothing has been changed” despite such vision and sensation of accessing a reality of the object-world—that is, nothing except “what is / Unreal,” namely, our subjective and fictive interpretations, which are residents of the realm of the unreal, of the objective world of reality. But a change in our subjective, fictive narratives does change the way we view and understand an object-reality, and since views and interpretations are all we have of the object-reality, purely from a phenomenological point of view, it does change our object-reality, even if the object-reality doesn’t actually change. That is the equivocation captured in the subjunctive phrase, “as if nothing had been changed at all”: the subjunctive implies a feeling that something has actually changed, but the phrasing adds more weight to the explicit declaration in the preceding line that nothing has changed. And that is the tenuous territory which interpretations inhabit; interpretations have no power to change the world, but they can change the way we view it, which is the only access we have of the world and can, in some minds, be argued as almost like an equivalent of the world itself, even though nothing is actually changed in the process, except our interpretations, as if nothing had been changed at all.

The same principle applies to elegies: elegies, no matter how many times they call the name of the dead,<sup>95</sup> have no power to raise or revive the dead. Regardless of

whether they actually existed or only our interpretations of them actually existed, the dead remain unchanged, and the only thing that is changed or can be changed is the way the living interpret the dead or death; elegies are hence written purely for the sake of the living, for they do nothing for the dead. Nonetheless, fictive, interpretive narratives of loss are the only thing left to the living. And elegists are left to make a mythology out of those interpretive creations.

The poem is curiously titled, “As You Leave the Room.” If, as hypothesized earlier, “you” refers to the speaking self and “I” refers to the spoken self, the title turns “you” around into a spoken object-self; as the poet-speaker’s speaking self itself turns into an object and leaves, leaving himself as an elegiac object of a left-behind, these wonderings—about how fictive narratives, the narratives of loss, our creative interpretations of an objective reality of the bones and stones of the dead themselves that itself is adamantly unchanging, are the only things that have been changed, and can change—are what the poem leaves the readers with.

Stevens’s later elegies adumbrate how the narrative of “loss” is a fiction constructed to camouflage, or shield oneself against the knowledge of, its own fictiveness and the prospect of the loss of loss. But as a fiction aware of its own artificiality, it is a fragile fiction that holds within it a seed of its own destruction: rather, its power becomes manifest precisely at the moment when we realize that it knows it is always on the verge of unraveling. While Stevens’s elegies convey sufficiently that their narratives are fictions, it is highly debatable whether or not the poet, the poet-speaker, or the readers “believe in it willingly,” as mandated by his “exquisite truth” in *Adagia*. Like the transience of Wordsworth’s fictions, this fragility of artifice, the results of which are our

brittle half-beliefs, appears to be the coercive reason that repeatedly, almost obsessively, compels the Stevens elegist to create and recreate, in elegies after “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” the fictive elegiac narratives in changed and changing forms, as though they are transitional objects in our puerile, unending transitional phase—as though they are alchemical homunculi that keep on failing, in one resurrection after another.



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<sup>1</sup> For instance, B.J. Leggett points out in *Late Stevens: The Final Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005) that “fiction” is the concept with which Stevens was preoccupied particularly in his later poems, where his own fictions became “the most pervasive intertext” (Leggett xi). Janet McCann and Joseph Carroll are among others who have interpreted Stevens’s late poems in the context of the supreme fiction (Leggett 3-4). Furthermore, Stevens states in providing his own brief bio that his “work suggests the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment.... There are many poems relating to the interactions between reality and the imagination, which are to be regarded as marginal to this central theme” (Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 820), as though to suggest that the concept of fiction is the most important and central theme in his poetry.

<sup>2</sup> From his speech, “On Receiving the National Book Award for Poetry” (*Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 878).

<sup>3</sup> Some critics have interpreted this search for fiction in the age without master narratives as a “search for God in the secular age in which we live” (Murphy, *Wallace Stevens*, 1), but given the recurring theme of the death of religion in Stevens’s oeuvre—even a cursory survey finds plenty of evidence ranging from such declarations as “Divinity must live within [oneself]” in the paganistic ideal of “Sunday Morning” and “The heaven of Europe is empty” in “Owl’s Clover” to motifs of “empty heaven” in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the theme of emptiness repeated with regard to religion in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” as “spirit of the holy temples/Empty and grandiose”—it feels rather too limiting to define Stevens’s search as one specifically for a Christian God or even for a religious god. Rather than debating whether or not “Stevens’s much-assumed anti-Christianity is really a form of anti-anti-Christianity” (Filreis 251), we may find it more fruitful to expand our scope and consider that Stevens’s search was for a guiding fiction, of which religion is one manifestation.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 22, 23 (abbreviated from here onward as *CPP*, with *Collected Poems* as *CP* and *Opus Posthumous* as *OP*). And “mythology,” as we may glean from Stevens’s statement in *Adagia*, “The greatest piece of fiction: Greek mythology,” is a type of fiction for Stevens (Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, 178).

<sup>5</sup> Stevens, *CPP*, 106.

<sup>6</sup> Janet McCann, *Wallace Stevens Revisited: “The Celestial Possible”* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Stevens, *CPP*, 903. In *Adagia*, there is also a proclamation that poetry “creates a fictitious existence on an exquisite plane” (*OP* 180). Aside from noting that “exquisite” seems to be Stevens’s favored word, declarations like these add credence to the critical claim that, for Stevens, poetry is seen as one means toward the supreme fiction he sought, regardless of whether or not the poetry can only gesture toward the supreme fiction, as several critics including David Jarraway in *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief* claim (as summarized in Leggett 3), or can become the supreme fiction itself. As a side note, the “the final belief” quote reads in *Opus Posthumous* as “The exquisite truth is to know that it is a *friction* and that you believe in it willingly” (*OP* 163, emphasis mine), but I would assume that it is merely a case of an erratum, since it is corrected as “fiction” in the later-published *Collected Poetry and Prose*.

<sup>8</sup> While the ironic consciousness of Stevens has been well-studied, there is a relative scarcity of critical works that explicitly examine Stevens’s irony as romantic irony, such as Anthony Whiting’s *The Never-Resting Mind: Wallace Stevens’s Romantic Irony* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> For the Romantic, the fiction was a product of the creative imagination and does not have the suggestion of a “falsehood.”

<sup>10</sup> Ramazani, 94-97.

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<sup>11</sup> R. Clifton Spargo sums up in *The Ethics of Mourning* that even when Stevens invokes “pastoral scenes, almost perhaps as a poetic reflex,” it is “with perceptibly diminished expectations about the consolations they will offer” (Spargo 225).

<sup>12</sup> Stevens, *OP*, 160.

<sup>13</sup> Mellor, 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> This phrase was appropriated from Edward Said, *Beginnings* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 229.

<sup>15</sup> The exact number of elegies in Stevens’s oeuvre depends on one’s definition of what an “elegy” is, but from a survey of the Stevens criticism, it appears to be the consensus that there’s a relative scarcity of formal elegies in his work. For instance, Jahan Ramazani counts only two of Stevens’s poems, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” and “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” as “formal elegies” (Ramazani 87), as does Charles Berger (Berger, “The Mythology of Modern Death” in *Wallace Stevens: Modern Critical Views*, Harold Bloom, ed. [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985], 166). Berger, however, states in *Forms of Farewell* that “Stevens wrote so frequently in the elegiac mode... that any attempt to isolate pure elegy in his poetry would be pointless” (Berger, *Forms of Farewell: the Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985], 111). That is to say, in the context of the study of Stevens’s elegies, the number of his formal elegies is less important than the fact that his oeuvre carries elegiac sensibilities, for that is the primary source of his reputation as an elegist.

<sup>16</sup> Stevens, *CP*, 435.

<sup>17</sup> The quotes are respectively from Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 1, 3; and Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 245.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Introductory Chapter for the influential “work-of-mourning” model and Peter Sacks’s idea of compensatory consolation in *The English Elegy*.

<sup>19</sup> Such as asserted by Berger, *Forms of Farewell*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> As described by Jacques Derrida in “*Fors: The Anguish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok*,” all our relationships are imbued with a sense of impending loss, a kind of proleptic mourning, stamped with “the signature of *memoirs-from-beyond-the-grave*” and imbued with the “remembrance of the future” (29).

<sup>21</sup> The numerous examples include Joan Melville’s “‘Inventions of Farewell’: Wallace Stevens’ ‘The Owl in the Sarcophagus,’” as well as the aforementioned Ramazani and Berger texts.

<sup>22</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, Holly Stevens, ed. (New York: Knopf, 1966), 566.

<sup>23</sup> Some critics argue that Stevens “was prevented by lack of time from inscribing... his chosen dedication: ‘Goodbye H.C.’” at the time of its publication in *Horizon* (Joan Melville, “‘Inventions of Farewell’: Wallace Stevens’ ‘The Owl in the Sarcophagus’” in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 16:1 [1992], 4). But if that were the case, Stevens could have added the dedication by the time of the publication of *The Collected Poems*. That is to say, the biographical evidence is highly inconclusive.

<sup>24</sup> In the Benjaminian melancholia, the melancholic, who perceives his world as a fallen one reduced to a mass of devalued, meaningless fragments, assigns through allegory arbitrary meanings to the otherwise meaningless fragments; this subjective assignation of meanings reconstructs the experience of the original world, culminating in the redemptive restoration. This formulation of the Benjaminian template of melancholia comes from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 142-235, with the aid of Max Pensky’s *Melancholy Dialectics*, chapters 1-3.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Sukenick, *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscurity* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 224.

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<sup>26</sup> Some prosody scholars seem to object to the gruesome image of the word “decapitation” and favor “anacrusis” as a term for initial truncation (Robert Wallace, *Writing Poems*, 6th ed. [New York: Longman, 2004], 60).

<sup>27</sup> One of the prominent features in elegy, repetition has been conventionally interpreted as 1) a way to create a sense of continuity through unbroken pattern, 2) a method of reality testing, or 3) an attempt to raise the spirit of the dead from the grave through the act of chanting. For a more detailed discussion of the function of repetition in elegy, Sacks pp.23-26 may be a useful reference. Although, in this poem, what is repeated is not the name of the dead but rather of the allegorical figures of death, Sleep and Peace, Margaret Alexiou’s commentary on the particular custom of repeating the name of the dead may be relevant: “one element of the primitive lament which was never forgotten or ignored... was the refrain calling the dying man or god by name.... Its function was to raise the spirit of the dead from the grave” (Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974], 109). It is as though, by repeating the allegorical names of death, the poem attempts to raise its spirit from the grave of unintelligibility, to turn it into something more familiar and intelligible, and hence more manageable, containable.

<sup>28</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 66.

<sup>29</sup> Longenbach, “The World After Poetry: Revelation in Late Stevens,” 189.

<sup>30</sup> On the theme of ancestral imagery, Joseph Carroll comments that, in “order to create a supreme fiction, Stevens has had to effect an integration of the archetypal, ancestral memory and ‘The abstract’” (Carroll, *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1987], 312). That is to say, Stevens uses the familial naming of the allegorical figures because it is one template to which the melancholic mind can resort in its attempt to reconstruct its broken world through an allegory. Also, as Stevens writes in “Sunday Morning,” “Death is the mother of beauty”: the “mother” figure in Stevens can at times be an all-encompassing figure that espouses all expressions and apprehensions of “beauty,” consisting of art and nature. The suspicion here is that language, as an all-inclusive medium that captures artistic moments and nature, becomes the tenor of the “mother” allegory.

<sup>31</sup> De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 930.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 167. The image refers to the death of God, and Friedrich Nietzsche asserts that, “given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown” (167). The “shadow” signifies an absence-presence, a kind of possession in the state of dispossession that is like a privative realm of linguistic predicament. Coincidentally, Milton Bates reports that it was a correspondence between Stevens and Henry Church that rekindled Stevens’s interest in Nietzsche, who was, for Stevens at the time, “but a dim memory from his earlier reading” (Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], 252–253). As inconclusive as the biographical evidence is, it is suggestive enough that Stevens may have had Nietzsche at the back of his mind when he composed “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.”

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 240.

<sup>34</sup> In *Beyond Consolation*, Melissa Zeiger points to the centrality of the story of Orpheus in elegy: “Since classical times, elegiac poetry has been shaped or informed by the narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice” (Zeiger 2).

<sup>35</sup> Critics disagree on the identity of the “man” who walks “living among the forms of thought.” Harold Bloom suggests that the man refers to Henry Church, while others, such as Charles Berger, assert that it is the poet himself. My interpretation is that it is the lyric-speaker who goes to the underworldly interiority of himself.

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<sup>36</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Sonnet #44 in Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), lines 2, 6: “What hours, O what black hours we have spent... / Hours I mean years, mean life.”

<sup>37</sup> There’s no scarcity of evidence for Stevens’s indebtedness to the Romantics. A cursory survey finds mentions of how the “romantics, Wordsworth especially, are evoked, probably deliberately” in such poems as “Sunday Morning” (McCann 7) or how “The Comedian” traces, like Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, the “Growth of a Poet’s Mind” (Walton A. Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1972], 120), and so on. And aside from Wordsworth, one may also hear echoes of Keats’s odes and “The Fall of Hyperion.”

<sup>38</sup> The quotes are respectively from Wordsworth, “Lines: Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798,” line 148, and Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” lines 101 and 104.

<sup>39</sup> Wordsworth, “My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold,” line 7.

<sup>40</sup> As in “rest in peace.”

<sup>41</sup> Melville, 8. The title has also been linked to the elaborate burial rituals of ancient Egypt, in which the writing of the poem enacts the ritual placement of gifts in the sarcophagus to make the deceased’s trip through the underworld more comfortable (Veronica Ions, *Egyptian Mythology* [New York: Hamlyn, 1965], 116–18, 127–38). Melville argues that, by connecting the owl, the figure of wisdom, with elaborate ancient rites and conventions of death, the title indicates that the poem offers wisdom in the face of death (Melville 6).

<sup>42</sup> Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 292.

<sup>43</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 249. The phrase, of course, refers to J. S. Mill’s famous statement in his essay “What Is Poetry?” In the essay, Mill states that the voice of the lyric “I” is “overheard” and distinguished “by the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener” (Mill 12).

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Changes in the Study of the Lyric” in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, Patricia Parker, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 43.

<sup>45</sup> As mindful as I am of the school of poetic teaching that tells us “poems are not riddles” (Jarman 13)—and I myself have preached the same when I was teaching creative writing classes, especially those at the introductory level—some poems are in fact “riddles, babbles and doodles.” For instance, Dylan Thomas is famous for following sound more often than sense, as is Theodore Roethke; according to the words of one of his students, “for all his playfulness in poems, it was in poems and poetry that Roethke was playing a profound and dangerous game” (Hugo, *The Triggering Town* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1979], 29). That is to say, puns and plays are part of poetry writing, and the suspicion here is that Stevens too played the “profound and dangerous game” more often than not.

<sup>46</sup> That is, if we assume lyric poetry to be a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion recollected in tranquility, as Wordsworth does.

<sup>47</sup> And that partly explains why recent criticism on textual mourning has focused on elegiac lyrics, as critics rightly complain (Schor 3). That is, any textual mourning contains, to an extent, an element of lyric poetry, in that they both attempt to restore meaning to something beyond our understanding while, at the same time, leaving so much that remains inexpressible or unintelligible.

<sup>48</sup> One may argue, perhaps even successfully, that the egotism of Whitman’s “Song of Myself” too is that of melancholic solipsism; after all, Whitman is himself a noted elegist who composed such influential elegies as “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” in which critics see the ancestry of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” (Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*,

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283-284). Although investigation of such possibilities may be of future scholarly interest, I am limiting myself here to a conventional reading of Whitman.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. William Styron, *Darkness Visible: a Memoir of Madness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). The title of the book is reportedly taken from John Milton's description of Hell in *Paradise Lost*:

No light; but rather darkness visible  
Served only to discover sights of woe,  
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
That comes to all, but torture without end  
Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed  
With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed. (I. 63-69)

<sup>50</sup> Freud observes that melancholic patients often have a "keener eye for the truth than others who are not melancholic," which enables them to "come very near to self-knowledge" (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 167). As other examples of how melancholia has been theorized as a way of seeing, Julia Kristeva considers it to be a failure of perception, loss of meaning (Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 189). And as mentioned earlier, Benjamin defines it as a way of seeing the world through fragmented subjectivity that perceives objects as allegories (Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 183).

<sup>51</sup> Georges Poulet, "Exploding Poetry: Baudelaire" in *Charles Baudelaire*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 70.

<sup>52</sup> William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 206, 246.

<sup>54</sup> Berger, "The Mythology of Modern Death," 177.

<sup>55</sup> Joan Didion, *The White Album* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1979), 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ramazani, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ramazani, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. footnote #19 on Berger, *Forms of Farewell*.

<sup>59</sup> Ramazani discusses this phenomenon in *Poetry of Mourning*, introduction, touching on Joseph Jacobs's observation in "The Dying of Death" from *The Fortnightly Review* 66 (1899): "Perhaps the most distinctive note of the modern spirit is the practical disappearance of the thought of death as an influence directly bearing upon practical life.... The fear of death is being replaced by the joy of life.... Death is disappearing from our thoughts" (264).

<sup>60</sup> For the only thing we can know with any certainty is not the psyche of the author, or even the psyche of the character, but our own psyche reading things the way it reads. In many ways, literary analysis more often than not ends up being an analyzing of ourselves—a self-analysis.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Introductory Chapter.

<sup>62</sup> Abraham and Torok, 17, 19.

<sup>63</sup> Abraham and Torok, 140-141.

<sup>64</sup> In clinical psychoanalysis, screen memory is generally defined as follows: "A childhood memory characterised both by its unusual sharpness and by the apparent insignificance of its content. The analysis of such memories leads back to indelible childhood experiences and to unconscious phantasies. Like the symptom, the screen memory is a formation produced by a compromise between repressed elements and defence" (Laplanche, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 410-411). The analogy applicable to this present context that a certain memory, unusually sharp and disturbing like a specific individual's death (though, in this case, certainly not "insignificant"), acts as a "screen" that represses or blocks an even more significant, unconscious memory or feeling.

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<sup>65</sup> On the frequency of self-mourning in elegies, Ramazani states: “For all their differences, the elegy and the self-elegy cannot be neatly compartmentalized. We have... seen that in Stevens’s war elegies the anticipation of [his own] death is a central concern, his soldier-poets often enlarged by their encounters with death. Moreover, canonical poets had often mourned themselves in elegies while at the same time mourning others: Milton, for example, had turned in “Lycidas” to glance at his own fated shroud, and in *Adonais* Shelley had ecstatically foreseen his demise” (Ramazani 119).

<sup>66</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Gregory Hays, trans. (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 21.

<sup>67</sup> Certainly, much depends on the nature of the bond that existed between the living and the deceased; it would be easier to allegorize an anonymous loss than that of a beloved. That is to say, this “consolation” may not be particularly consoling depending on the nature of the loss. Still, it remains true that, in many ways, any human relationship is a construction, and some may find it consoling to know that such a process of construction can continue even after the loss of one party.

<sup>68</sup> Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 370.

<sup>69</sup> As well as to point that all our beliefs are, when we strip down its façades, fictions, in which we merely happen to come to believe.

<sup>70</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 90.

<sup>71</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 91.

<sup>72</sup> The phrase, the “mythology of modern death,” raises the question why Stevens would trouble to qualify the poem’s mourning mythology as one of “modern” death, and how a “modern” death would differ from, say, a pre-modern one. A “modern” death experience can be characterized in any number of ways: secular and scientific, as compared to a more religious one before the advent of modern medicine and hospitals; hidden and closed-off, as compared to a more visible one before the aforesaid phenomenon of the “dying of death”; or en masse and more anonymous, as compared to a more personal one prior to the weapons-of-mass-destruction era; and so on, just to name a few possibilities. But one modern perspective on death that may be particularly pertinent here is that, in the twentieth century since Freud, mourning has become a psychological work that involves interpretive activities. As Alessia Ricciardi points out, “For Freud, mourning is not simply an emotion but the performance of a *Trauerarbeit*, or ‘sorrow work’: mourning, like interpretation, is an activity” (Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], 6). In “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” this interpretive activity of modern mourning, the working-through of the reactive emotions like melancholia, occurs in the form of allegory, for, in the words of Olga Taxidou, the “literary mode in and by which melancholia manifests itself is allegory” (Olga Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004], 91). In other words, the allegoresis of this poem—or, to be more specific, the interpretive “work” that an allegory necessitates—makes this poem a mythologization of a “modern” death experience, for the fact that modernity has made death an “interpretive” activity. And from his use of the word, “mythology”—which, as mentioned earlier, is not one of Stevens’s favored words—we can sense Stevens’s ambivalence over this interpretive nature of the work of mourning, as well as over the fictive construct of death that this poem’s “mythology” creates: even if this interpretive and constructive work of our mind may help us find a place for the unplaced feeling of melancholic sorrow such as “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” expresses, that in and of itself hardly feels like a consolation, and yet, that is all we are left with.

<sup>73</sup> Berger, *Forms of Farewell*, 134. The view of this present dissertation chapter, needless to say, is to claim that “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is the orthodoxy of Stevensianity, which informs Stevens’s later works as their guiding fiction.

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<sup>74</sup> As previously referenced (cf. Footnote #15), elegy scholars have traditionally viewed “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” as an elegy despite the fact that the figure in the poem and its real-life referent are not dead. In the elegy studies, this type of elegy is commonly classified as “proleptic” elegy, and has its precedence in such examples as Swinburne’s “Ave atque Vale.”

<sup>75</sup> Bloom, *Wallace Stevens*, 360 and Berger, *Forms of Farewell*, 133.

<sup>76</sup> Margot Kathleen Louis characterizes in *Swinburne and His Gods* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990) that Swinburne was a skeptic of the English pastoral elegy—despite writing one in “Ave atque Vale”—offering no possibility of a transcendental union with the Eternal in the poem (Louis 151, 152).

<sup>77</sup> Bloom, *Wallace Stevens*, 361

<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe” in *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 7:4 (1977 Winter), 65.

<sup>79</sup> Stevens, *CPP*, 734.

<sup>80</sup> While “fiction aware of its fictitiousness” been a hallmark of Stevens’s work since the very beginning, the suspicion here is that the theme sees its maturation in these later works, and we, in the present, now see his earlier works through that lens of his mature, later works.

<sup>81</sup> Stevens, *CPP*, 733-734.

<sup>82</sup> Lea Baechler, “Pre-Elegiac Affirmation in ‘To an Old Philosopher in Rome’” in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 14:2 (Fall 1990), 145.

<sup>83</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Santayana at the Convent of the Blue Nuns,” *New Yorker*, April 6, 1946, 60, 61. Critics have asserted that this Wilson essay, which is an account of a visit to the aged George Santayana in Rome, provided the occasion and the context for “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” (Baechler, “Pre-Elegiac Affirmation,” 142).

<sup>84</sup> Readers have largely interpreted the poem as another instance of Stevens’s glorifications of the imagination, the notion of the human imagination as God, whether as a reaffirmation of “the power of the imagination to create the ‘supreme fictions,’ the fictive constructs that are the world in which we dwell” (Whiting 166) or as a sign that Stevens’s “faith is a faith in himself” (Edward Kessler, *Images of Wallace Stevens* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972], 86). Other critics have reversed the formula and claimed that “God is the imaginer, the agent and not the object of the imagination” and that it is the “assumption of many of the last poems” (Leggett 49). Although the present dissertation chapter has no intent to choose sides between these two views, insofar as it sees Stevens’s divinity as a manifestation of one’s fictive narrative, it may be classified into the category of the former. But the claim here is that even this notion of the “ascendancy of the imagination” is itself a fictive narrative that the poet-speaker wants to turn into a belief, but that ultimately remains a fiction aware of its own fictive construct. As far as whether God is the imagined or the imaginer, only God knows.

<sup>85</sup> Stevens, *CPP*, 445.

<sup>86</sup> As one critic remarks, “most accounts of the poem have centered on the differences between the two versions, deducing Stevens’s intentions in ‘As You Leave the Room’ from the changes he made in the earlier, shorter version” (Leggett 134). One of such accounts argues that the revision “reverses the entire argument of ‘First Warmth’” (John Dolan, “‘The warmth I had forgotten’: Stevens’ Revision of ‘First Warmth’ and the Dramatization of the Interpersonal” in *Wallace Stevens Journal* 21 [1997], 162), while another appears to believe that the first version is superior to the second, claiming that “each revision of ‘First Warmth’ is also a retreat from the candour of ‘First Warmth’” (Lee M. Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* [Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2000], 128-129).

<sup>87</sup> Also, the present author queries the characterization that “As You Leave the Room” is a revision of “First Warmth,” since the thrust and conclusion of the two poems seem to differ to a large extent; “As You Leave the Room” is a self-elegiac poem presenting itself as a finale of sort, which is decidedly different from the reality-inquiring, non-elegiac thrust of “First Warmth.”

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Especially given the eight-year hiatus, it would be reasonable to assume that the initial impetus had been lost in that time span, and the outcome would be a new poem, rather than a revision of an old poem; one may even go as far as to consider “As You Leave the Room” to be an entirely separate poem that happens to use some portions of an old poem, which was left unpublished and was available for the poet to recycle. Quite frankly, poets often harvest their own previous poems and pick up usable portions of those in making a new poem out of their own “scrap heap”; in that sense, even if a poem is a reworking of another poem in another title, we can’t assume, at least from the standpoint of the authorial intent, that it’s a revision of the same poem.

<sup>88</sup> Leggett, 139.

<sup>89</sup> One critic identifies the four poems as “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,” “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” and “Credences of Summer” (Leggett 138). Given that these poems cover a wide range of timeframe, from *Parts of a World* (1942), *Transport to Summer* (1947), to *Necessary Angel* (1942-51), which comes fairly close to 1955 or so that is considered to be the date of composition of “As You Leave the Room”—the official date of the poem is “1947-55?” (*CPP* 598)—what the poem presents seems more like a compilation of all the characters up to “Today’s character” where the self-split occurs between a speaking self and a spoken-about self, rather than between a younger self and the present self.

<sup>90</sup> Culler, “Changes in the Study of the Lyric,” 52.

<sup>91</sup> Freud, “Negation” in *General Psychological Theory*, 213-217.

<sup>92</sup> Freud himself comments on the potential unfalsifiability of the condition, and poses a question in “Constructions in Analysis” whether such a hypothesis does not run the risk of claiming infallibility for the analyst on the grounds that “if the patient agrees with us, then the interpretation is right; but if he contradicts us, that is only a sign of his resistance, which again shows that we are right” (*Standard Edition*, XXIII, 257).

<sup>93</sup> Or “skeleton in the cupboard” in the British version.

<sup>94</sup> De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 928.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. footnote #27: “one element of the primitive lament which was never forgotten or ignored... was the refrain calling the dying man or god by name.... Its function was to raise the spirit of the dead from the grave” (Alexiou 109).



## Chapter 3

Confessionals and Their Narratives of Lost Loss:  
Distant Loss in Theodore Roethke's Generic Elegies  
Self-Loss in John Berryman's "Opus Posthumous"  
Profound Loss in Sylvia Plath's Poems of 1963

Based on the premise of the previous chapter—that the narrative of “loss” is a fiction instituted to safeguard oneself against the prospect of the loss of loss—the present chapter examines various manifestations of this fictive construction of loss, highlighting, in particular, the works of three mid-century poets that are often classified as confessional:<sup>1</sup> Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath. The term “confessional,” however, is in a sense a misnomer when applied to these poets’ specific elegies of lost loss that this chapter examines: given that the symptoms of lost loss surface as expressions of losses or their constructions of which the lyric-speakers themselves are often unaware, this discovery of the elements of lost loss in these poets’ elegies transports them out of the bracket of the “confessional” as defined by M. L. Rosenthal’s famous definition of it as a kind of poetry in which its “speaker is unequivocally himself.”<sup>2</sup> In a sense, this chapter has two aims: first, to uncover the unconfessional elements in these three poets’ works; and secondly, to examine their dysthymic elegies as evolving out of Stevens’s system of constructing a fiction of loss to conceal a loss of loss.

In the first part of the chapter, the narrative of “loss” is one of a distant or phantom loss in Roethke’s generic elegies. As elegies for people whom the poet hardly knew or who remain unidentified, Roethke’s generic elegies are particularly self-conscious exemplars of the fictive nature of the narrative of loss that Stevens’s elegies reveal: the Roethke elegies make elements of fiction explicit by constructing the dead through their creative imaginations. In those elegies, the lost object is already lost, absent or nonexistent even prior to its actual loss. Although Roethke’s retrieval of the language of the pastoral—which had outlived its efficacy as an elegiac trope long before the twentieth century<sup>3</sup>—may, from one standpoint, indicate a lack of invention on the part of the poet, it suggests on another level—that is, when seen in the context of distant or phantom loss—that a pain of loss not only comes from a specific loss but also results from an inheritance of a collective history of all prior losses, of which a specific loss is a reminder. In this sense, the generic elegies construct a narrative that an instance of loss, however distant or phantasmal it seems, is a part of the history of losses; through this recognition of historical inheritance, Roethke’s generic elegies help identify and place a feeling of loss over something that has not yet meaningfully existed for the mourner. In other words, Roethke’s elegies attest that, in the instance of such distant or phantom loss, it is through the narrative of loss that the lost object comes into being; that is to say, loss precedes the existence of the lost object.

In the second part of the chapter that will discuss Berryman’s “Op. Posth.” self-elegy sequence, the lost loss to be safeguarded by the fiction of loss is one triggered by the loss of self. Self-erasure creates a state in which one does not have oneself, and in that state, one encounters no prospect of loss. Like Roethke’s, Berryman’s self-elegies

employ allusions to retrieve the history of language in order to put together a language of self-loss, which effects, simultaneously, a self-erasure and a self-preservation, akin to the way in which Aesop's crow uses the various birds' feathers to make and unmake itself. This borrowed language of self-loss splits a self into a fictive lost-self and a fictionalizing agent-self, and by maintaining the separation between the two, Berryman's self-elegies both obfuscate and acknowledge the state of lost loss.

The third portion of the chapter examines Plath's poems of 1963. The poems of 1963 are generally characterized as a "cycle of death poems"<sup>4</sup> or "poems read as epitaphs"<sup>5</sup> because of the occasional self-elegiac tone they employ in their expression of acute desolation and because Plath's suicide occurs in February of that year. The present chapter proposes a reading of the poems of 1963 as elegies about all-engulfing loss in which one cannot even tell what precisely is being lost. Diverging from Plath's earlier anti-elegies that speak in a voice of melancholic crises, the poems of 1963 function as a mechanism to give name to, as well as find the sources of, the nameless, shifty, vague, uncertain losses of quieter dysthymia. Unlike the pastoral language of Roethke's elegies, the allusive language of Berryman's self-elegies or even the mythological language of her own earlier, convention-conscious elegies of *The Colossus*, Plath's poems of 1963 invent their own coded language to speak to one another, and, in so doing, give shape to this profound loss.

In examining these three different types of the narrative of loss, the present chapter contends that, despite the variation of linguistic tropes, all three types of these elegies—Roethke's phantom loss, Berryman's self-loss, and Plath's profound loss—have a common aim: to construct a narrative of loss that is meant to conceal or preempt the

loss of loss, even as such an attempt would reveal it precisely through that act of concealment. In their attempt to fill the void with a linguistic construction, these elegies show that the consolation to be gained—if there were to be any consolation—comes less from the conventional compensatory apparatus that professes to recoup the lost object than from a construction of the fiction of loss that gives birth to the lost object. And these three distinct manifestations of self-conscious narrative of loss are elegiac forms developed out of the kind of supreme fiction Stevens constructs in his covert elegies.

#### I. Roethke's Phantom Loss and Abraham's and Torok's Theorization of Lost Loss

Among the numerous elegies in Theodore Roethke's oeuvre, three poems that conspicuously bear the title "Elegy"—"Elegy for Jane" in *The Waking*, an undedicated "Elegy" in *Words for the Wind*, and "Elegy" for Aunt Tilly in *The Far Field*—diverge from his other elegies in that the people whose deaths presumably occasioned the poems are either someone the poet hardly knew, or someone who remains unspecified and perhaps does not exist. As lamentation over the loss of people the poet neither knew nor had in his life—the people who, for the poet, were absent from the beginning—these elegies encounter the same problem that surfaces in Stevens's allegorical elegies: the problem of the compensatory consolation derived from Sigmund Freud's work-of-mourning model.<sup>6</sup> If Stevens's elegy were a case in which the mentions of the deceased are suppressed in favor of allegoresis, Roethke's generic elegies would be a case in which the feeling of loss haunts the speaker despite the fact that there is no loss—either because the speaker did not know the deceased well enough, or because there is only an

imagination of loss and no actual death. Collectively, Roethke's generic elegies pose this question: can there be any consolation when the loss is itself lost or absent?

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok investigate this problem of "lost loss" in *The Shell and the Kernel*, using the concept of "phantom pain" as a type of double-loss: an internal, sealed-off loss, unfelt, unexplained or unrecognized. This theory of phantom as "lost loss" elucidates the pervasive sense of resistance to, or futility of, consolatory devices in modern elegies, including Roethke's three generic elegies: the theory suggests that the melancholia<sup>7</sup> of these elegies originates less from the modern skepticism about substitutive consolation or from their masks of irony than from the unplaceability of the feelings of sorrow they express. Elegies about a phantom loss, then, constitute the mourning lyric speaker's inconclusive effort to construct a makeshift expedience that names or places this otherwise hard-to-locate feeling of loss.

In "Elegy for Jane," the loss of loss, which the poem attempts to preempt, results from the loss of someone the speaker hardly knew; while it is widely known that the occasion of this elegy is the death of one of Roethke's students, Jane Bannick, his biographer claims that Roethke "had not known her" well, since she was in his class "for only one quarter," and characterizes the poem as "more a formal elegy than a lyric expression of grief."<sup>8</sup> Critics have long debated whether this poem expresses a universal grief or a personal one,<sup>9</sup> but the biographer's claim—that the poet did not know the student well—is worth heeding. And a closer look at the poem's highly metaphorical language, its shiftiness and indeterminacy, can be read as a corroboration of that claim:

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;  
And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;  
And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,  
And she balanced in the delight of her thought,

A wren, happy, tail into the wind,  
Her song trembling the twigs and branches.  
The shade sang with her;  
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing;  
And the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose. (98: 1-9)

At once, the first stanza—a collage of the images of keenly self-conscious recollections starting with the opening proclamation, “I remember”—reveals a heavily figurative portrayal of the student, whose “neckcurls” are like “tendrils,” whose “quick look” is like a “pickerel smile,” and who is then likened to a “wren,” next a “sparrow” that waits like a “fern” (14, 15), transformed into a “pigeon” (19) and, in the end, subsumed by the image of a “grave” (20). The excess of metaphor can certainly be interpreted as an act of universalization, but when coupled with a conspicuous absence of individualizing details, it also points to a possibility that the poet did not know the student well as an individual: the excess of poetic language reveals the latent loss of loss in that the poet, having lost the opportunity to know the deceased well enough to be able to lament her loss, must resort to pastoral poeticisms to fill the void.

In addition to symptomizing a “lost loss”—a loss of an opportunity to know the deceased well enough to feel one has lost her—the abundance of metaphors serves another function in the poetic context. Broadly speaking, the function of metaphor is to revitalize language; language is an approximation that expresses one thing by using something else as its representation, and metaphor, through its arbitrary association, aims to expand human capacity to associate an object with a new representation, to imbue the object with a new meaning—a new life. Seen in this regard, the discernibly lavish use of metaphors in this stanza, the vehicles of which are all living things, mimics the speaker’s effort to resuscitate the dead, the metaphorical tenor, by finding new representations for

her. The word “metaphor” itself etymologically implies motion—*phora*—that is also change—*meta*:<sup>10</sup> a movement toward change, a new meaning—a new life.

At the same time as it tries to revitalize the dead, this protean succession of metaphors in the poet-speaker’s utterance also blurs the poem’s imagery, and such haziness underscores the inadequacy of signification, its failure to capture the dead. The poem’s incantatory anaphoric structure, constituted by insistent metaphors and stylistic repetitions that start the lines with the word “And,” also confirms this failure of signification by signaling the speaker’s compulsion to repeat the same thing because the previous expressions do not suffice.<sup>11</sup> In short, the poem’s metaphorical language reveals the two divergent impulses in this first stanza: an attempt to revive the dead through successive metaphors and a confirmation of the essential failure of such attempt. Barbara Johnson points out that the defect of language resides in the fact that it is just as impossible to say the same thing as to say something different;<sup>12</sup> saying the exact same thing with two different representations is a linguistic impossibility. Hence, there is, in metaphor, always a gap between the tenor and vehicle; no vehicle represents exactly the same thing as the tenor. The inadequacy of language as a system of approximate representation—its essential failure to capture the exact thing it tries to represent—leads to an unending sequence of expressive attempts, proliferating repetitions of failed expressions that simultaneously generate both similarities and differences, and exposes language as a kind of homunculus, a diminutive version of the thing that falls short of the thing itself.<sup>13</sup>

This condition of metaphorical language—metaphors both create a new life and expose the irretrievability of the lost life, since they never re-produce the exact same

thing—also applies to nature, and the elegy’s pastoral setting, in which Roethke situates this poem with such descriptions as “twigs,” “branches,” “leaves,” “valleys,” and “shade,” reveals how nature too fails to console the speaker in stanza 3:

My sparrow, you are not here,  
Waiting like a fern, making a spiny shadow.  
The sides of wet stones cannot console me,  
Nor the moss, wound with the last light. (14-17)

The theme of nature’s cycle and fertility is central to the pastoral language in elegy, since the “basic thrust of the pastoral elegy is to affirm continuity; life, albeit in new forms, go on... within [the] annual cycle of decay and generation” (Lambert xxv). Nature and its recurrent fertility become the objective correlative of consolatory immortality through regeneration, which elegists try to enact by using pastoral language. Eulogized as the “Garden Master,”<sup>14</sup> Roethke is well-known for his use of this convention;<sup>15</sup> in this instance, he subverts the convention by highlighting its failure to console, which mirrors, instead, the inadequacy of the language.

One can sense this failure of pastoral consolation from the speaker’s admission in line 14 that the dead is “not here”; from that line onward, the poem shifts its tone from a subdued remembrance of the dead to an expressive lamentation. In the instances of loss, memory becomes the surrogate for the lost object; elegiac tropes such as repetition, metaphorization and recollection function precisely as means to solidify and amalgamate disparate memories into a linguistic surrogate that replaces the lost object. Therefore, the disappearance of the tenor of the metaphor—that is, the statement that the “sparrow,” which is equated appositionally to “you,” is no longer “here”—indicates the poet-speaker’s feeling that pastoral language is inadequate as a surrogate object to which to redirect his lingering attachment to the deceased object. The inadequacy of the surrogate



object undermines compensatory consolation; if, as Sacks argues, the work of mourning hinges on the dialectical movement of one's affection from its initial attachment to an object, detachment upon the loss of the object, to construction of and reattachment to a surrogate object, one's refusal or inability to accept the surrogate signals the essential failure of this consolatory mechanism of renunciation-reattachment.

Generally speaking, rejection of compensatory consolation in modern elegy originates in its accentuated awareness of—or rather, its bluntness in revealing—the falsity of the compensatory mechanism:<sup>16</sup> nature may regenerate, and language may create a metaphorical substitute, but the thing that is lost is lost, and the surrogate reconstructed by nature or language is merely a surrogate that fails either to be the original or to persuade the mourner to accept it as a substitute.<sup>17</sup> In “Elegy for Jane,” such finality of death is revealed not only through the failure of metaphorical regeneration<sup>18</sup> but also through the prosodic consciousness of the thwarted intertextual regeneration. Like many poets, Roethke thrives on intertextual practice, and especially as an elegy, a genre in which convention and continuity assume greater significance as antidotes to the finality and disruption caused by loss, “Elegy for Jane” brims with intertextual echoes.<sup>19</sup> If this third stanza sounds more familiar and more archaic than other stanzas of the poem, it's likely because it simulates the oldest English rhythm, that of the Old English alliterative verse, which, with its symmetrical organization, employs caesurae to divide the lines in the middle and alliteration to keep the lines together—“spiny shadow,” “sides... stones,” “cannot console,” “last light.”<sup>20</sup> The images of stones and moss also conjure up the theme of history, time and its passage, not to mention the echoes of Wordsworth; it's an irony that Roethke chooses precisely those images as

things that “cannot console.” The word, “wound,” is obviously a past participle of the verb, “wind,” but it is hardly hallucinatory to see in it the pun with the noun, “wound” as a synonym of “injury.” The wound of the moss—history showing a sign of pain it has endured but has long hid under the veil of renunciation-consolation tradition—is laid bare in the brutal honesty of line 17, in which pyrrhic and spondee alternate to create a kind of a “meta-iamb” to convey with a tone of emphatic finality the failure of consolation.

The irretrievability of the lost object and the resultant failure of the renunciation-substitution consolation fails have been observed in prior elegy scholarship, but what is different here is that Roethke’s elegy does not end there: although the notion of a loss of an object presupposes the prior possession of that object, in the case of this elegy, the object had already been lost prior to any prospect of such possession. The absence of the lost object further queries the possibility of its recovery and subsequent consolation:

If only I could nudge you from this sleep,  
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.  
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:  
I, with no rights in this matter,  
Neither father nor lover. (18-22)<sup>21</sup>

By introducing the traditional figures of personal proximity—father, lover—as negations, the stanza creates a clash between the figures of speech and the content of the speech: even as the poet-speaker insistently uses the possessive for the lost object—such as “My maimed darling,” “my skittery pigeon,” “my love,” starting in the third stanza with “My sparrow,” in a deliberate shift from the initial use of indefinite articles like “a wren”—he abnegates any claims of “rights” or possession, as a father or lover, of the lost object.

Furthermore, the poem’s use of possessive coincides with its shift to the direct second-person addresses in a turn away from the subdued third-person address of the

earlier stanzas. As William Waters points out, “for a poem to say *you* is in every case a complex act.”<sup>22</sup> A direct, second-person address is laden with interpretive difficulties, since, in lyric poetry, it holds two divergent impulses within it: that of fostering a sense of closed-off intimacy, and that of opening the poem up for universal conflation. If, as J.S. Mill famously states, the voice of the lyric “I” is “overheard” and distinguished “by the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener,”<sup>23</sup> then the direct address would create a feeling of secrecy or intimacy in the exchange between the addresser and addressee, into which the reader is let in as an unwitting witness. But on the other hand, if, as Helen Vendler argues, the “lyric is a script written for performance by the reader—who, as soon as he enters the lyric, is no longer a reader but rather an utterer, saying the words of the poem in *propria persona*, internally and with proprietary feeling,”<sup>24</sup> then the lyric “I” becomes a kind of negative capability, the thing that “is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character”:<sup>25</sup> an empty container to be filled by each and every reader, which is the very definition of universality. This dual tendency of the second-person addresses—one that encompasses both intimacy and selfless conflation—mirrors as well the poetic oscillation between the possessive impulse and its abnegation.

Figure and content, intimacy and emptiness are hardly the only warring elements in this stanza. For instance, calling “death” a “sleep” is a conventional metonymic understatement, but here, it also has an unconventional double-allusion to both deathbed and wedlock or child-nursing, the bedside manners of “nudging” a person from sleep; such double-allusion suggests that, in this poem, an oppositional tension arises even within a metonymy, a rhetorical device that supposedly slides one thing into another through their contiguity. And if this double-meaning carries any overtone of intimacy,

such feelings are quickly denied by the aforementioned renunciatory statement. Moreover, the gesture of “speaking” in line 20 is also immediately offset by speechlessness, enacted by the truncated sentence with only “I” and its qualifiers, ending without any predicate that would complete the sentence; even though the use of the colon suggests an appositional relationship between “words of love” and the content after the colon, what follows is merely “I”—the rest left unspoken.<sup>26</sup> In addition, even the very image of the dead person—“maimed darling” and “skittery pigeon”—becomes jarringly contradictory, since a “maimed” thing would generally be imagined as lifeless, likely stationary, and hardly energetic or restless as the word “skittery” implies.<sup>27</sup>

From the discordance of these lines, we discern the poet-speaker’s struggle to express what he tries to express and fails; the words elude the thoughts, and thoughts themselves elude thinking. The sensation is almost like a writer’s block—the inadequacy of the language, the unspeakable, the unsayable that lurks within and eludes us.<sup>28</sup> The highly conflicted language becomes, in a sense, a makeshift expedient to grope blindly through the incomprehension of this unplaceable loss, the loss of an object that is itself already lost, one for which the poet-speaker does not know how to speak. Tropes such as metaphors, pastoral convention, the Catullian motif of grieving love, or the direct lyric address all fail to capture what the poet-speaker feels compelled to express. The result is an anxiety-ridden speech of cognitive dissonance that approximates unintelligibility.

Such discordance signals the difficulty of elegiac expression; with mixed, conflicting metaphors, placed as appositions that repeat and revise one another, Roethke reveals the poet-speaker’s continuous, failing attempts to find that expression. But precisely by displaying this failure, the final stanza communicates not so much by sense

but rather by sound and mood. In “Elegy for Jane,” the organizing principle of its unmetrical verse is largely line length. Here, the deliberate, successive shortening of the closing lines creates a kind of decrescendo, a gradual descent into silence, against which this very poem exists to resist; the rhythm simulates the mood.<sup>29</sup> Trochees dominate the closing couplet, ending with a despondent tone of the unaccented feminine rhyme—a cadence of fall, which, nonetheless, avoids the emphatic conclusiveness of a strong-accented rhyme. Silence, after all, is the state from which the first words spring out.

Seen in this light, “Elegy for Jane” presents itself not so much as a smaller claim of reduced circumstances, a mere formalistic elegy, a lament for an attractive student, or a vague universal grief, but rather as an attempt to speak of a sorrow that one does not know how or where to place, and one does not have the language to speak of—an endeavor in which the poet-speaker makes an utterance in the face of silence, by employing all conceivable resources of his language, and by betraying the failures of them all. If there is anything consolatory in this poem, it is that the poem creates, through those failures, a language to speak of the thing for which we previously had no language—an expression of sorrow that we are yet to locate firmly, as the ongoing interpretive bafflement over this poem suggests. The name, Jane, is an archetypal female name, as in “Jane Doe,” a name given to someone unidentified or unidentifiable, someone who remains nameless; Roethke’s purposeful exclusion of the surname associatively turns this poem into an act of giving a name to the unknown or unspeakable.<sup>30</sup> In this elegy—occasioned by someone the poet-speaker did not know and can only describe figuratively as a montage of metaphors—the poet-speaker, through the creation of language to speak of the loss of the already lost, comes to know the person he

hadn't known, in a way that isn't compensatory, for the object had not previously existed. The object comes into being only as it is lost; it is more a creation than compensation.

The loss felt or unfelt upon the death of someone we neither knew nor had in our life may not be the acutest pain we could suffer, but it nonetheless remains unsettling and uncomfortable. This particular type of lost loss—the loss of an opportunity to lose someone—is where the poem's receptive difficulty stems from; critical disagreement or bafflement such as seen in the previous pages or in Sandra M. Gilbert's *Inventions of Farewell*—which classifies the poem as a poem of friendship by placing it in the section entitled “Mourning the Deaths of Friends” when clearly the poem doesn't talk of friendship<sup>31</sup>—is a sign that the language to express the “loss of loss” is still in its incipiency as an elegiac discourse. And in such a state of inadequacy, elegies begin to speak in cryptonymies of their own, materializing, in that process, as an expressive reminder of the melancholic “phantom pain” that Abraham and Torok describe in *The Shell and the Kernel*.<sup>32</sup> Critics have often noted that modern elegies tend to enact the work of “melancholic” mourning, not the “normative” mourning that leads to resolution.<sup>33</sup> One may hypothesize that the melancholia of modern elegies is rooted in part in “phantom pain”; even in the cases of specific deaths, not to mention in the instances of vague or unconscious loss, it has become, in modernity, increasingly more difficult to locate the source of pain, or to name the object of loss.<sup>34</sup> This difficulty turns the pain of such unplaceable loss into “phantom”—the shut-away, secluded memories of loss—which creeps out of the preservative repression to disrupt the present and triggers the unresolved, ambivalent, “melancholic” mourning.

As Abraham and Torok suggest, a “phantom” is a human invention necessary to conceptualize what eludes conceptualization—not the “dead” themselves but rather the “gaps” left within us. For an origin of this “gap,” Abraham and Torok theorize that:

... [the] phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason. It passes—in a way yet to be determined—from the patient’s unconscious into the child’s... The phantom’s periodic and compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom-formation in the sense of a return of the repressed; it works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject’s own mental topography.<sup>35</sup>

That is to say, the “phantom” is someone else’s grave inside oneself, a “ventriloquist”; the “phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other.”<sup>36</sup> The idea of “phantom” as embedded memories passed on from the dead has its parallel in one of the hypotheses of the cause of the physical “phantom pain”—the pain an amputee often feels in the limb he or she has lost. While modern medicine has yet to identify the definitive cause of phantom pain, the following theory of the physical phantom pain may apply to the psychic phantom pain as well, as it suggests that all pains:

are in the spine, in the memory  
of slug-like beings humans used to be;  
lancelots reflexively curl up  
when poked, and the trigger

of such reaction is  
the incipience of pain, its remnants  
still embedded in [the] spine...<sup>37</sup>

Since the spine is the storage of spinal cords—a part of vertebrate nervous system consisting of nerve cells—it would be entirely plausible that the pain we feel is in fact a residual memory of pain stored inside the spine ever since the time humans became vertebrates. Like its physical counterpart, the psychic “phantom pain” can also be seen as

a memory of pain stored inside one's psychic spinal cord. Also, given the nature of elegy as a highly intertextual and tradition-conscious genre, one may hypothesize that an elegist may, too, inherit, through conventions and intertextuality in the language of elegy, the sorrow and pain that previous elegists had written about—or had shut away. In this context, one may claim that what pains us isn't merely the fact of a specific loss but the history of losses that a specific loss reminds us, similar to the way in which any given elegy can potentially become a trigger that unearths the history of elegies.

In this regard, the theory of phantom pain provides an interpretation for the feeling of unease or discomfort, if not sorrow, that we feel when witnessing a stranger's or near-stranger's death: the personal sorrow we're not expected to feel disturbs the cumulative "crypt" of the memories of past losses, shaking the phantom out of its sealed-off cocoon. Unlike the loss of the beloved, this phantasmal unsettlement is not the acutest of the pain, but because it is a stranger within the self, it alienates and disorients oneself. In that sense, "Elegy for Jane" constitutes, consciously or unconsciously, the poet-speaker's attempt to reintegrate the unassimilated parts of himself into his consciousness, by naming the nameless, by finding the language that captures the elusive sorrow of the "crypt" and fills the "gap" left within him—a gap that has surfaced as a result of the death of a distant acquaintance.

If "Elegy for Jane" presents in the guise of Catullian love this "cryptic" sorrow over the loss of someone who had already been lost to the poet-speaker, the second generic elegy, "Elegy" in *Words for the Wind*, expresses it more overtly as a phantom: in "Elegy for Jane," the elegy creates an imagined "loss" based on an actual person, but in this "Elegy," the imagined "loss" is constructed where there was none. The speaker of



the poem hardly mentions anything of the lost person, and the importance of the lost person to the speaker—if one exists at all, which is itself suspicious—remains uncertain; the imagined loss is felt solely through the poet-speaker’s description of his acute immersion in his “inner weight of woe.” Regardless of what the lost object is, or whether there is one or not, the poem, through its villanelle-like repetitions, simulates the manner in which an elusive, unidentified “phantom pain” keeps haunting the speaker:

Should every creature be as I have been,  
There would be reason for essential sin;  
I have myself an inner weight of woe  
That God himself can scarcely bear.

Each wills his death: I am convinced of that;  
You were too lonely for another fate.  
I have myself an inner weight of woe  
That Christ, securely bound, could bear. (138: 1-8)

Critics disagree to whom Roethke intended to dedicate this elegy,<sup>38</sup> but what is perhaps more notable than who Roethke had in mind when he wrote this poem is the fact that he kept changing the supposed occasion of this elegy; it suggests that Roethke had the poem first and foremost, and the identity of the person who occasioned the poem, if there actually was one, was more of an afterthought.<sup>39</sup> The suspicion that the identity of the occasion was of lesser importance is corroborated by the poem’s unmistakable emphasis on the words “inner woe” and “God,” both of which appear in the repeating lines of this poem, in contrast with “you,” which the poem mentions just twice and not in the repeating lines. This indeterminacy of the addressee, left nameless, turns him or her into a phantom-like absence-presence: rather than an effusive lament over the loss of a definitive person, the poem instead becomes a melancholic utterance of an unplaced or unplaceable sorrow.

If the addressee is indeterminate, the source of the addresser's suffering also remains elusive. In the first stanza, the speaker traces the source of this "inner woe" to "essential sin." In a poem that speaks of God and human suffering, the phrase "essential sin" inevitably evokes the sound-echo of "original sin," especially since "essential" is a thesaurus-synonym of "original." But the Original Sin, with capital letters, is not what the poet-speaker has in mind; he seems to refer more to a kind of sin or "woe" that is inherent within himself from birth, as though it was passed down to him from his ancestors over some untraceable period of time and has, over time, become the "essence" of the self. In the next line, the most common grammatical interpretation of the cryptic refrain of "I have myself an inner weight of woe" would be to read "I" and its emphatic qualifier "myself" as the subject, "have" as the verb, and "an inner weight of woe" as the object—meaning, it can be rephrased as "I myself have an inner weight of woe." But the sentence can also be read in such a way that "myself" becomes the object of the sentence, which is equated with "inner weight of woe" as its appositive—as in "I have myself, an inner weight of woe." In other words, the speaker's "self" syntactically undergoes metonymic fusion and becomes the woe itself; the internal "woe" is one's "essence" that has been stored inside oneself, like memories of pain in the spine.

But if there is any hint of collective suffering in the phrase, "essential sin," the poem is quick to deny it. The first of the two interpretations of the refrained line—"I have myself an inner weight of woe" as "I myself have an inner weight of woe"—itself stresses the separate and distinct nature of one's selfhood by placing an emphasis on the singular "myself." Moreover, in the second stanza, the poet-speaker insists that each "wills his death" and he's "convinced of that," since one is "too lonely for another fate";

the word “lonely,” with its two layers of connotations as the “fact of being alone” and “dejection of being alone,” further amplifies the essential solitude of a human being. If:

... at first, in the ocean,  
we were all one, getting out of it, we went  
our separate ways. We learned to speak,

then I became I and others the others.  
Even the desire to return to old unity  
was itself a new discovery,

for, without a separation,  
there'd be no desire to return...<sup>40</sup>

In other words, this “Elegy” is unconcerned, if not outright skeptical, of finding within one’s “inner woe” the kind of “oceanic feeling,” which Freud describes as a “feeling as of something limitless, unbounded” and a type of “oneness with the universe” that often becomes the source of religious energy;<sup>41</sup> even if the seed of the “inner woe” may be traced back to the “essential sin,” its present manifestation is an individualized, “lonely” one. The slight modification in the repeated line of the poem—from “God himself can scarcely bear” to “Christ, securely bound, could bear”—elucidates this difference: Christ, a solitary human form, can bear this “inner woe” if “securely bound” to the earth, but God, the omnipresent, omnipotent, and hence “oceanic” kind of entity, “can scarcely bear” it because he has none of such inner strife. Here, the word “bear” means two things; “to persevere” may be the primary meaning, but it also means “to carry” or “to wear,” and this secondary meaning of the word “bear” as “to carry” hints that only humans carry this weight of “inner woe.” And aside from the image of being shackled to the earth, the word “bound,” too, inevitably brings up the associative image of Christ bound to the cross on his way to Calvary. The “weight” of inner woe becomes conflated with the

weight of an individualized cross, something foreign to God but innate in humans—  
inherited from the ancestors, but personalized within the self.

The poet-speaker's awareness of historical pain comes to the forefront in the final stanza, when he talks of "the Heat, / Scars, Tempests, Floods, the Motion of Man's Fate" and claims to believe that the unnamed addressee had suffered and survived them:

Thus I; and should these reasons fly apart,  
I know myself, my seasons, and I KNOW.  
I have myself one crumbling skin to show;  
God could believe: I am here to fear.

What you survived I shall believe: the Heat,  
Scars, Tempests, Floods, the Motion of Man's Fate;  
I have myself, and bear its weight of woe  
That God that God leans down His heart to hear. (138: 9-16)

The semicolon at the end of line 14 grammatically links the larger suffering of "Heat / Scars, Tempests, Floods and the Motion of Man's Fate" with the refrain of "I have myself, and bear its weight of woe"; it suggests that the poet-speaker feels that there is some mysterious connection between the various plights "you" have survived and the "weight of woe" he possesses within him, and that, because of this connection between the plights of "you" and his own "woe," he is able to believe what "you" have suffered. Unlike a conjunction or subordinate conjunction, however, the semicolon leaves the causal relationship between the two unstated. Although the speaker is not consciously aware of the exact nature of the relationship between the historical suffering and his own inner suffering, he nonetheless feels there is some sort of relation between them that is censored, a link that is absent and yet to be filled—a gap.

The "gap" unveils itself through expressive traces of the language of the poem, such as in line 15, in which the speaker makes a strange use of the third-person

possessive, “its,” to modify his “inner weight,” instead of some other deictic that makes more sense, such as “my” or “the,” as in “my weight of woe” or “the weight of woe.” This third-person possessive reflects the speaker’s self-distancing, which is simultaneously a recognition of an incomprehension within himself and an effort toward self-understanding. In other words, there is, in this use of third-person, an element of self-separation and self-objectification, or what Paul de Man calls “dedoublement”—one’s capacity to observe oneself as if it were an other, without necessarily effecting a synthesis of the self or unifying the self.<sup>42</sup> The phenomenon of dedoublement entails self-alienation; much in the way our immune system uses antibodies to differentiate self from nonself and foreignizes elements that it does not understand to be a part of the self, our consciousness too foreignizes our incomprehensions as nonself, and this incomprehension of the self is the precondition that prompts the self to observe oneself as though it were another. Therefore, when the speaker refers to his inner suffering as “its” inner suffering of his self, it signals self-incomprehension, a sign of otherness found within the self that the self cannot account for. This tentative self-distancing through which the poet-speaker attempts to sort out his otherness simulates a kind of linguistic oddity that betrays the cryptic sorrow of “phantom.” Even if the poet-speaker may or may not be aware, the language of the poem reveals within his own suffering the marks of the heat, tempests, flood, and other historical sorrows—the accumulative collection of past sufferings that, in leaving the ocean and going separate ways, each of us has shut away.

Following the recognition of the traces of historical sufferings in one’s individual suffering, the poem ends with the cryptic image of God leaning down to hear the “weight

of woe”—“That God that God leans down His heart to hear.” Some readers see in this poem God’s sympathy to human conditions<sup>43</sup>, but as Rosemary Sullivan points out, it is often “difficult to determine exactly what Roethke means when he speaks of God” because of “his refusal to accept preconceived notions of divinity..., [his] rejection of dogmatism and an abhorrence of self-delusion.”<sup>44</sup> Even without recourse to Roethke’s personal theology, the cryptic repetition—“That God that God”—resists any facile interpretation of this poem as either consolation or desolation. A grammatical conundrum, this repetition can be more than a semantically vacuous phrasal recurrence that mimics a stuttering voice; the first “That God” can be read as the object noun modified by a relative clause that starts with the second “that God,” while “weight of woe” and “That God” become appositives<sup>45</sup>—effectively turning “God” into the “woe” found in oneself. That “God” tries to hear this “God” within the self creates a circuitous image of the speaker’s interiority leaning down its heart to listen to its own heartbeat in which his God resides—an infinite self-search to uncover traces of accumulative others within the self. This repetition also fills the prosodic gap left by the preceding stanzas; in each of the first three quatrains, the last line is a foot shorter than the pentameter of the other lines, but in the final quatrain, the last line, with the addition of the repetition of “that God,” too becomes a full pentameter—almost as though to suggest that only through sustaining this tortuous self-reflection can one “fill” the cryptic “gap” within us.

If others can be found in the self as a part of the cumulative crypt of one’s memories, then the self can plausibly be found in others as a part of their crypts as well. In the last of Roethke’s three generic elegies, “Elegy” for one Aunt Tilly in *The Far Field*, the elegy becomes a space for transference, through which one sees oneself in the other’s

crypt. If “Elegy for Jane” is an attempt to construct an imagined loss based on an actual person and the second “Elegy” is an effort to create an imagined loss where there is none, the third “Elegy” advances the thesis further by creating an imagined loss where there is none and shaping it into a form of an imaginary individual. Seen in this light, the function of these generic elegies appears very much to be an attempt to give shape to the elusive feeling of lost loss by constructing an Abraham-Torokian phantom, whether in the form of someone the poet hardly knew, of an inner turmoil as a sign of some unknown loss, or of an imaginary person.

Portrayed as someone the poet-speaker once knew in his childhood, “Aunt Tilly” is, like Jane Doe, an archetypal name for aunts. The fact that Roethke changes the title from “Elegy for My Aunt Tilly” to “Elegy” in its final version accentuates the simultaneous impulse to generalize and personalize the occasion—that is, giving it a name to individualize but a generic one that would generalize—just like the archetypal name of “Aunt Tilly” itself.<sup>46</sup> In his elegiac remembrance of this particular and universal Aunt Tilly, the speaker finds the dead reflecting his own image: the loss of an imaginary person constructs the stage for transference.

Prior to the transference vision in the final stanza, the poem first narrates the speaker’s recollection of the aunt, starting with her funeral:

Her face like a rain-beaten stone on the day she rolled off  
With the dark hearse, and enough flowers for an alderman,—  
And so she was, in her way, Aunt Tilly. (215: 1-3)

The sluggish heptameter of the first two lines mimics the speaker’s desire for deferment in sending Aunt Tilly off, but a shorter closing line, albeit with caesurae-filled hesitance and subdued trochaic closure, brings the speaker back into the present reality of the past

tense that needs to accompany any mention of Aunt Tilly now that she is dead. Elegiac conventions are very much alive in this poem as well, including the practice of intertextuality. As critics have pointed out, the image of the “face like a rain-beaten stone” echoes Yeats’ same image in “The Magi”<sup>47</sup>—“their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones.”<sup>48</sup> Much in the way the pastoral context of elegy asserts the continuity of life through natural cycle, intertextuality promotes the same thrust by highlighting the literary continuity in which the past lives on in new forms.

In addition to intertextuality and its implication of continuity, the magi image further complicates the poet-speaker’s mixed feelings—his desire for deferment and awareness of reality—by overlaying onto them the Magi’s mixed feeling of the analogous nature. The central conflict of this “Elegy” lies in the irony that even though Aunt Tilly was completely “selfless,” she died in agony:<sup>49</sup> the poet-speaker, having seen the altruistic and virtuous Aunt Tilly sent off with “enough flowers for an alderman,” had hoped for something more sublime, something consolatory in her passing, but feels let down and unsatisfied because he finds, instead, pain and bathos in her “tongue, at the last, thick, black as an ox’s” (17). This dissatisfaction, arising from the frustrated transcendence, mirrors that of the magi in the Yeats poem.<sup>50</sup> A common reading of Yeats’s “The Magi” is that, through the “mind’s eye,” the “poet’s dissatisfaction and the anticipation of a new beginning find expression in the vision of ‘the pale unsatisfied ones’ still seeking ‘the uncontrollable mystery’ even after ‘Calvary’s turbulence.’”<sup>51</sup> While critics must remain judicious in ascribing any authorial intention to intertextuality—after all, a poet could borrow another poet’s line just because it sounds



good—readers inevitably hear in Roethke’s “Elegy” the echo of Yeats’ “Magi,” its theme of transcendence and the poet’s disappointment with his failure to find it.

In the Yeats poem, the magi’s disappointed look is a projection of the poet-speaker’s own frustration, as implied in the “I-eye” pun of the opening line: “Now at all times I can see in the mind’s eye.” Likewise, in the Roethke poem, the sense of injustice and befuddlement shown through the “rain-beaten stone” face of Aunt Tilly is the projection of the poet-speaker’s feelings: it is the speaker who feels frustrated, not Aunt Tilly, since she “never knew” the “war” between “the spirit and the flesh” (5, 6) and apparently hadn’t concerned herself with the philosophical questions, such as why she had to suffer like Job. The images of Aunt Tilly that the poet-speaker sees, in other words, are his own; the elegy becomes a prosopopoeia, in which the speaker speaks through the mask of the dead.

What unsettles the poet-speaker is that his own images he sees in Aunt Tilly through prosopopoeia are foreign and unrecognizable. Returning to the image of the ox-like thick, black tongue (17), the word “tongue” conjures up its associative connection to language, and the poem presents Aunt Tilly’s tongue, her language, as animal-like: a broken, incomprehensible gibberish, as the abundance of rupturing caesurae packed into a standard five-foot line suggests. Although Roethke portrays Aunt Tilly in the preceding stanzas as a caring, strong, motherly person who assumed the role of a traditional woman figure when she was alive, her language, once she’s dead, is not an aunty, motherly tongue but instead a foreign, cryptic, broken tongue that the speaker cannot comprehend, interpret, or cognitively organize.

Self-disintegration is one of the dangers of prosopopoeia; in “Autobiography as a De-facement,” Paul de Man observes “the latent threat that inhabits prosopopoeia, namely that by making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death.”<sup>52</sup> Just as prosopopoeia reanimates the dead, it also has the potentiality to deaden the living. With its reversibility of the living and the dead, prosopopoeia unearths death in the living as well as life in the dead—elements that one shuts away in order to maintain one’s internal integrity, one’s identity and classifiability as the living or as the dead. In other words, the problem of prosopopoeia lies in its border-crossing, its threat to system integrity—its discovery of the foreign other in one’s self. And this discovery is precisely the reason behind the sense of bewilderment, a shock, in this two-line stanza that portrays Aunt Tilly’s ox-like tongue—the briefest and the most reticent stanza of this poem, surrounded by the blank spatial silence of the stanza breaks. The stranger within, the historical losses and sufferings, the dead, the memories of pain—all these elements, which had been sealed off in the “illegal burial ground” of the psychic tomb, return as phantoms in the poet-speaker’s transferential prosopopoeia, as he witnesses the death of someone he knew as a child but was not close to at the time of her death.

In the final stanza, the speaker ostensibly recovers from his preceding bewilderment, in a manner that has prompted some critics to see it as a comic relief or a “conclusion that almost frivolously suggests death has not triumphed after all.”<sup>53</sup> After the jarring fragmentary images of “cops, bill collectors, betrayers of the poor” in the first line, the speaker takes the poem into an imaginary flight to heaven:

I see you in some celestial supermarket,  
Moving serenely among the leeks and cabbages,

Probing the squash,  
Bearing down, with two steady eyes,  
On the quaking butcher. (19-23)

The speaker hardly conceals his awareness that this celestial vision is his construction, starting the scene with an explicit qualification: “I see” (19). The repetition of the present participle phrases divulges the poet-speaker’s attempt to use refrain as a way to find something familiar—something to orient or calm himself—and to freeze the action in the present: an effort to eternalize the consolatory vision. The trochee, the dominant rhythm in these lines, enacts the quieting tone, and its soft, falling cadence of diminuendo fosters the “serenity” of this scene that takes place “in some celestial supermarket.”

The speaker’s choice of a supermarket as the scene of his imaginary flight could be based on any number of reasons—such as the poem’s preceding portrayal of Aunt Tilly as a traditional woman figure—and the locale’s familiarity, or mundanity, is one of them; as Philippe Ariés observes in *The Hour of Our Death*, “familiar simplicity” is one of the essential characteristics that would tame the death.<sup>54</sup> In this stanza, the foreign—“celestial”—converges with the familiar—“supermarket”—to make the scene both familiarly strange and strangely familiar. The process is similar to assimilation, or acquisition of a foreign language, an act of turning strange sounds into something familiar and intelligible: the speaker attempts to integrate and domesticate the stranger within the self by constructing this strangely familiar place.

But in this poem, the speaker’s effort to place the unplaceable, cryptic sorrow through a mastery of its strange language also merges with his escapism from the reality of death—the illusory consolation of the dead as alive in some other world—as well as from his own transference image reflected back by the dead: the celestial supermarket is

an in-between space that avoids conclusion and returns chiasmically to the ambiguous and unsatisfying sight of the “rain-beaten stone.” In other words, the imaginary flight leaves the poem in suspension, between the acute self-awareness of the fact of death and the fictive vision as a solace, between the encounter with the self in the dead other and an evasion from it. If the poem’s ending remains aporetic and unsatisfactory, it attests to the problem of consolation in an era in which the loss of loss has rendered powerless the conventional consolatory mechanism of loss and recovery. Although a recovery of or compensation for a loss can often bring the mourning to closure, the absence of the loss to be recovered or compensated impugns the very prospect of conclusion, which, if it comes about at all, will likely be another “illegal burial”—a further addition to the crypt of previous sealed-off losses. After such knowledge, what an elegist can do, it seems, is merely to think how one may continue to attempt naming the nameless stranger within the self, not turn away from its difficulties and complexities or settle for a contrived or deceptive consolation, and sustain the work of mourning, waiting, like Yeats’s *Magi*, with “their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more” the elusive mystery that is consolation.

In the current discussion of elegies, critics have variously portrayed modern elegy as conjoined with anti-elegiac assaults on elegiac conventions,<sup>55</sup> largely in denial of loss and grief,<sup>56</sup> or hiding behind masks of irony,<sup>57</sup> and classical elegy as holding onto the problematic mechanism of loss and compensation, the “self-taught consolations [in] heroic male narrative of renunciation”:<sup>58</sup> most reductively speaking, modern elegies remain “melancholic” without consolation,<sup>59</sup> while classical elegies seek a “normative” mourning with some sense of resolution. Although Roethke’s work is often seen as

“romantic” in its sensibilities and sometimes even outmoded,<sup>60</sup> these three elegies—“Elegy for Jane,” “Elegy” in *Words for the Wind*, and “Elegy” for Aunt Tilly—prompt a reassessment of such perception of Roethke’s work in that they seem to explore a third route, outside of the classical or modern elegiacs: a mourning that is neither melancholic nor normative, neither consolatory nor accusatory, but more like a construction of a fictive loss in place of the lost loss, which, in Roethke’s elegies, come to seem like a tentative act of investigative grave-excavation. Whether or not Roethke goes far enough in his investigative excavation can be debated—and one may, as Randall Jarrell did, fault him for the occasional “impressive ‘positive’ endings of a certain rhetorical insincerity” in his poems<sup>61</sup>—but by delving into the three elegies, we find that the deaths of strangers or near-strangers unsettle us because they expose the unrecognizable, the lost loss within us. The phenomenon of “disappearance of death” in modern society, in which death is hidden away from our view in everyday social practices, except perhaps as accidental tragedies or as political expediency, has been a much-discussed topic,<sup>62</sup> and in many ways, the idea of death seems, in modern consciousness, to have become itself a phantasmal “crypt” that Abraham and Torok theorize. But the real “crypt”—the things erased out of our sight, hidden under the fantastic veil of human relations and their losses—that the elegiac address to the dead reveals through its prosopopoeial transference and decryption of the cryptonymy is less the “dying of death” but more the fact of solipsistic imprisonment as a human condition: the feeling of emptiness and the vertigo one feels in the endless looping in the transferential mirrorings of the subject turned object turned subject, the unrecognizable self reflected in the other in the self that is the other—a solitude in the self. A consolation that modern elegy offers, then, is that

literature still functions as a mechanism to give voice to what eludes voice—a mechanism to unsettle, to bring out what is shut away, and to sustain the process of working through—for, without first realizing the depths of one’s self-imprisonment, one has no hope of reaching outside of its walls, into the realm of the intersubjective.

## II. Berryman’s “Op. posth.”: Self-Loss as a Form of Lost Loss

If Roethke’s generic Aunt-Tilly elegy and its transferential prosopopoeia can be seen to possess a hint of self-elegy—in a sense that the blandness of the lost object triggers a transference where the lyric speaker simulates his own death as he speaks from the mask of the dead—John Berryman’s “Op. posth.” sequence<sup>63</sup> is an actual self-elegy. A collection of elegiac “songs” that “are meant to terrify & comfort,”<sup>64</sup> Berryman’s *The Dream Songs* certainly does not fail as a mechanism to unsettle its readers. In its disquieting presentation, the collection as a whole explores the relationship between language and comforting—consolation, healing, or restoration—as one of its core undertakings, and such an undertaking is particularly visible in the “Op. posth.” sequence, in which the speaking persona is dead. The sequence constitutes a prosopopoeial self-elegy that investigates the consolatory function of language in the instance of one’s own death.

Although elegies have conventionally looked to linguistic or cognitive compensation in their search for consolation, self-elegy poses yet another conundrum for this compensatory mechanism of consolation: if, as in loss-compensation model, consolation derives from the hydraulics of emotion, namely the redemptive transformation of the lost object into a substitutive linguistic or cognitive form,<sup>65</sup> the

irretrievability of the lost object or insufficiency of its substitutive form would jeopardize any prospect of consolation. And if the self, the agent in whose consciousness this redemptive process is to be cognitively worked out, were to be the lost object, what would happen to that process? Self-elegy signifies a prospect of lost loss: as a lamentation over a potential or actual loss of the self, the agent through which all other losses are registered, self-elegy exemplifies a case where the compensatory mechanism is rendered problematic or even undesirable. Through the death of the speaker and his mock-epic journey through the Underworld, Berryman's "Op. posth." sequence attempts to transcend the hydraulic paradigm and its imposition of loss in exchange for any gain. The sequence as a whole investigates the possibility of releasing oneself from the loss-compensation mechanism, even if, in the end, the undertaking results in what one may describe as a terrible comfort: a disconsolate consolation of one's immersion in loss.

In the "Op. posth." sequence, the speaker "imagines himself to be dead... and then, like Lazarus, he is brought back to life."<sup>66</sup> As critics have pointed out, the sequence carries an overtone of the epic visit to the Underworld in preparation for future action.<sup>67</sup> The narrative arc of the sequence starts with the speaker's death and his descent into the Underworld in the first poem of the sequence, "#78 Op. posth. no.1," which reveals the hydraulics at work in compensatory consolation. Then, the second poem, "#79 Op. posth. no.2" narrates the speaker's epic exploration of the Underworld and uncovers the privative property of language, which poses a potential problem for the hydraulic compensation. And the last poem of the sequence, "#91 Op. posth. no.14" portrays the speaker's return to the world of the living, along with his supposed solution, or non-solution, for the problem.

In #78, the theme of privation, a precondition for the consolatory process of compensation, is foregrounded in the first stanza. The stanza portrays the death of the speaker—the main character in *The Dream Songs* who speaks through the persona of “Henry” and refers to himself by that name<sup>68</sup>—and describes his debilitated state of malnourishment, dimmed vision, mental incapacity, cheerlessness, and disintegration:

Darkened his eye, his wild smile disappeared,  
inapprehensible his studies grew,  
nourished he less & less  
his subject body with good food & rest,  
something bizarre about Henry, slowly sheared  
off, unlike you & you (DS 78: 1-6)

The repetition of stylistic construction enacts the staccato-rhythm that some readers may characterize as “early stages of grief—denial, rage, bitterness”<sup>69</sup>—and the use of chiasmus and stylistic inversion in the opening lines make the stanza sound distinctly archaic, effecting a kind of dead language. What is rendered dead through malnourishment in this stanza is the speaker’s “subject body”; the prosopopoeial speech, in which the speaker creates a split self named Henry and speaks through the mask of Henry, imperils the speaker’s status as a “subject.” Here, the particular aspect of loss that the speaker appears most concerned about is that of the speaker’s subject position, the singularity or individuality of his existence—the thing that makes him “bizarre,” or different from other people. The ambiguous stylistics in lines 5 and 6 make it possible to read the object of the participle “sheared / off” as either Henry himself or “something bizarre” about Henry; the latter case would highlight his bizarreness—or rather, his distinctness, or his individual characteristics that make him a unique existence—as the particular element of Henry that is being sheared off, effectively turning him into



someone with no distinct features, someone un-Henry-like. Death, for Henry, is a process of self-erasure.

This loss of the speaker's subjective individual self is further mirrored in his use of the third-person address to refer to himself—his self-splitting, between the speaking self and the self referred to as Henry. As Jonathan Culler points out, any act of self-reference “opens up a gap, between the enunciating *I* and the *I* of the statement.”<sup>70</sup> A third-person self-reference makes that “gap” more visible and explicit, in the form of self-separation and self-objectification; it indicates a case of the aforementioned “dedoublement.”<sup>71</sup> Dedoublement signals the transformation of the self into a nonself: in the state of dedoublement, the self takes on the quality of the other. Almost as though to mirror the loss of his subject status and the resultant vacuity in his selfhood, the missed rhyme in lines 3 and 4 of the middle stanza creates a prosodic “hole” at the poem's center, simulating the subjective “gap” at the heart of the speaker's selfhood that the third-person self-reference opens up.<sup>72</sup>

After the loss of his “subject body,” all that is left of Henry are “his eyeteeth, and one block of memories” (8); in exchange for this loss, Henry receives “commands from upstairs & from down” (10), and in this line, the word “command” itself suggests the speaker's passivity and abnegation of his subject position. Nonetheless, this inheritance from literary ancestors gives him the voice to sing his prosopopoeial song:

... commands from upstairs & from down,  
Walt's 'orbic flex,' triads of Hegel would  
incorporate, if you please,

into the know-how of the American bard  
embarrassed Henry heard himself a-being,  
and the younger Stephen Crane  
of a powerful memory, of pain,

these stood the ancestors, relaxed & hard,  
whilst Henry's parts were fleeing. (10-18)

In place of the lost self, Henry dives into the literary tradition and, as a result, gains the allusive language to compose his self-elegy: intertextuality is effected at the price of self-erasure. The intertextual language is central to the objective of elegy as a metonym of linguistic convention that asserts the continuity of life; much in the same way the conventional theme of nature's cycle and fertility epitomizes the basic thrust of the pastoral elegy to affirm continuity of lives in the natural world,<sup>73</sup> intertextuality manifests the same thrust by highlighting the literary continuity in which the past work lives on in new forms. Walt Whitman's "orbic flex," a phrase from his "Song of Myself," Hegel's "triads" of his dialectics and system of knowledge, and Stephen Crane's uncompromising realism and psychological portrayal of fear in his novels—all these pieces of literary heritage coalesce into the "know-how of the American bard" for Henry to learn and follow: intertextuality enables the dead to live on as allusions or influences, so long as present writers learn, appropriate, or quote from them.

The poem, however, hardly ends on a high note of such assertion of literary continuity and immortality; all the while these "ancestors" come back to life in the intertextuality of literary heritage as a command that allows him to speak, Henry himself disintegrates into "parts" that flee away. Although intertextuality brings the dead back to life and can make up for the loss of the self, by the reversible logic, self-erasure also becomes a possibility in the intertextual conjuration of the dead; as Roland Barthes would phrase it, "the voice loses its origin" and "the author enters into his own death" when such "writing begins."<sup>74</sup> In fact, strong influences of past writers can often oppress and suppress a writer from gaining his or her own voice, and that was true in the case of

Berryman, who struggled to find his own voice under the stifling influences of Yeats, Auden, Hopkins, S. Crane and Pound, among others; Berryman knew firsthand what it would be like for a writer to be drowned by other writers' voices, and hence it is no coincidence that the aforementioned word "command" is a synonym for the word "influence." Intertextuality epitomizes the paradox of losing one's existence to gain a language that signifies one's existence, and #78 exposes this paradox inherent within the hydraulics of loss and compensation at work in the composition of self-elegy: it is an open-ended self-framing, like "the paradox of the barber who shaves all the men in the regiment who do not shave themselves, or Epimenides' paradox, better known as the paradox of the Cretan liar."<sup>75</sup>

This transformative process in which the loss of an object is translated into a linguistic gain of its signification is integral to the aforementioned Freudian model of "work-of-mourning." The central problem of the compensatory model is that mourners all too often fail to invent or accept an adequate substitute for what they have lost. As Sacks himself points out, in the *Metamorphoses*, many grievors, such as Cycnus, Pyramus and Thisbe, Egeria, Niobe, and Orpheus, are "unsuccessful" ones who stumble at the substitute-acceptance stage, and the "successful" mourners like Apollo and Pan are all gods, which Sacks interprets as a sign of Ovid's pessimism regarding the difficulty of this task.<sup>76</sup> If this process of renunciation-compensation is difficult enough in the loss of other people, self-elegy and the loss of self create even more complication: how does one "renounce" oneself or find an adequate compensation for oneself, while still remaining oneself enough to be able to write one's own death? Self-renunciation is hardly an easy task, and in #78, too, even as the poem depicts Henry's disintegration into pieces in the

act of intertextual conjuration, the last image of the poem still focuses on Henry, showing the speaker's inability to renounce and erase Henry altogether.

The difficulty of accepting a substitutive linguistic sign as a compensation for the lost object lies in the other of the two faces of language: at the same time as language is compensatory, it is also privative. In the prosopopoeia of self-elegy, this privative nature of language becomes even more prominent, since the act of speaking through the mask entails self-erasure as its necessary condition. As seen in the instance of Roethke's elegy for Aunt Tilly, prosopopoeia reanimates the dead as much as it deadens the living, owing to its essence as an act of border-crossing. It is precisely this discovery of the foreign other in oneself that effects self-erasure: the lack of a clear border between the self and nonself effectively erases the self.<sup>77</sup> A fuller citation of de Man's "Autobiography as Defacement" states as follows:

As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopoeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopoeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.<sup>78</sup>

Language, then, is essentially privative, and its compensatory function "veils" the loss that underlies its usage. The restoration of mortality through self-elegy "deprives and disfigures" the self as much as it restores. As suggested by the very language of hydraulics de Man uses in describing the language of autobiography, the hydraulics is inherently at work in language's dualistic nature as both compensatory and privative; language as a system of signification makes up for the absence of the object by filling the

void with a sign, at the same time as it signifies precisely the absence of that object. In other words, the self-elegy's attempt to preserve oneself in the linguistic substitutive form of the self erases the self as much as it preserves. In #78, death becomes a necessary step for the speaker to access the language of self-elegy, but because of his wariness over this privative nature of language, the speaker stops short of taking the final step, and the poem ends without effecting a complete self-annihilation—even prosodically avoiding a sense of definitive closure by leaving an extra, weak-stressed syllable at the end of the final line, almost as though to suggest that the poem will continue, since there has to be at least another syllable to form a foot before the poem could reach its conclusion. The speaker's self-disintegration, not self-annihilation, is as far as the poem is willing to go.

In #79, Henry's epic exploration of the Underworld continues to uncover this privative nature of language. In the language of privation, commemoration becomes synonymous with banishment.

Whence flew the litter whereon he was laid?  
Of what heroic stuff was warlock Henry made?  
and question of that sort  
perplexed the bulging cosmos, O in short  
was sandalwood in good supply when he  
flared out of history

& the obituary in *The New York Times*  
into the world of generosity  
creating the air where are  
& can be, only heroes? (DS 79: 1-10)

Along with the archaic language, #79 inherits Henry's self-disintegration from #78, and as the poem ironically adopts the convention of self-elegy that regards old age or death as a fresh beginning<sup>79</sup>, Henry's death and his resultant disintegration propel him to inquire into his origin: where did these parts of Henry, made of some "heroic stuff" of "litter,"

come from? The investigation of one's origin signals one's attempt at self-comprehension, and if self-incomprehension is a symptom of a foreign element within the self, making sense of that incomprehension by finding its origin would domesticate and reintegrate that foreign element back into the self by turning it into something familiar, restoring, in the process, the wholeness of the self. As Julia Kristeva remarks, a foreigner is one who "has lost his mother"—an "orphan" of sorts,<sup>80</sup> and that description is highly applicable to this "foreign element" within the self in the state of self-split; finding the mother, or origin, can potentially turn the foreign element into something un-foreign, something that one can recognize as a part of oneself.

Henry's inquiries into his origin remain unanswered, and his search for the answer takes him outside of history and news, into the world of magic and intertextuality. As Melissa Zeiger points out, magic "and violence combine wittily in the persona's new title as 'warlock Henry,' and the terrible returns, celestial disturbances, stormy waters recall the threatening upheavals of 'Lycidas' as well as the reappearance of Orpheus as the Christ-Lycidas amalgam of Milton's poem."<sup>81</sup> The intertextual echoes of Orpheus, Christ, Lycidas, through their language of classical epic and elegy, reconfigure the speaker's lost self into something like a magician or an epic hero:

... Statues & rhymes  
signal his fiery Passage, a mountainous sea,  
the occlusion of a star:

anything afterward, of high lament,  
let too his giant faults appear, as sent  
together with his virtues down  
and let this day be his, throughout the town,  
region & cosmos, lest he freeze our blood  
with terrible returns.

(10-18)

Henry's "Passage" through the "mountainous sea" portrays the epic journey through this magic Underworld of intertextuality in search of the hero's home, with statues and rhymes commemorating his feat. But the act of commemoration recalls the dual nature of language in autobiography as both restorative and privative: restoration of the loss in the linguistic form signifies the fact of such loss. The loss is irreversible, and after that knowledge, anything of "high lament" that chronicles Henry's journey would fail to promote the project of restoration; instead, it would merely reveal "giant faults" of the dead. Faulting the dead is Berryman's elegiac operative mode,<sup>82</sup> and blame—one of the main characteristics of the "melancholic" mourning, one manifestation of the mourner's inability to detach his or her attachment to the lost object—maintains one's attachment to the lost object, which, in self-elegy, indicates one's incapacity to detach entirely from oneself. In self-elegy, self-renunciation will inevitably remain partial and inconclusive; even if the speaker enacts self-splitting by separating the mourning, speaking self from the mourned, dead self, and renounces the dead side of the self, the speaking self nevertheless continues to be alive.<sup>83</sup> And even if a complete self-renunciation were possible, it would likely be undesirable; if Henry were to reverse the irreversible by rewriting his originating narrative, he must also will his own destruction,<sup>84</sup> and at that point, he won't be able to return to tell his tale. If the prosodic "hole" in #78 were in the middle to signify internal vacuity as a result of prosopopoeial self-erasure, the prosodic "hole" in #79 occurs at the end with the lone unrhymed couplet of lines 17 and 18, as if to suggest the speaker's avoidance of the closure of "rhyme" (10), which, along with "statues," would otherwise commemorate and end the epic journey.

The search for the origin stalls, along with any hope for self-reintegration or a paradigmatic shift to regard death as a new beginning, and the poem ends with the same internal split that it starts out with; in line 17, the speaker still refers to himself in two different pronouns, “he” of the dead Henry and “our” of the speaking Henry. The speaking Henry attempts a restorative and privative commemoration to ward off the dead by letting “this day be his... lest he freeze our blood / with terrible returns.” As John Haffenden points out, Berryman associates the word “freeze” with death, such as is used in #145.<sup>85</sup> Henry fears that burying the dead without a legal burial place might induce its phantasmal return,<sup>86</sup> and by dedicating “this day” to the dead Henry—namely, by properly commemorating him—the speaking Henry hopes to placate the dead and to keep it from coming back to haunt him. In other words, this commemoration is synonymous with banishment: an attempt to avoid the denouement in which “living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” through the prosopopoeia of self-elegy, by banishing the dead part of the self into the realm of privative language. Here, language has no compensatory function; it is used primarily as a privative device, to cement the fact of loss. *The Dream Songs* is a personal epic in the tradition of Wordsworth and Whitman; the epic journey into the Underworld starts with the inquiries into Henry’s origin and intent to reintegrate the fragmented selves—recovery of Henry’s origin, or knowledge of his origin, that would restore the unity of the self. The poem, however, completes neither processes of reintegration nor self-annihilation. Henry’s self-elegy requires the split to be maintained between the mourned self and the mourning self, since such unification would imply that the “living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death.” The commemoration in this self-



elegy is not restoration but banishment of the dead part of the split self, in order to keep away the encroachment of death.

Henry's self-elegy demands an unenviable choice: either live in despair of self-alienation or be sucked into death by unifying the mourned and mourning selves. Helen Vendler remarks that Berryman derives his theory of anguish from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*, and notes that self-alienation is one form of his despair.<sup>87</sup> In particular, Berryman highlights the following passage of Kierkegaard about despair:

The form of despair is: in despair at not willing to be oneself; or still lower, in despair at not willing to be a self; or lowest of all, in despair at willing to be another than himself.... Now when the self with a certain degree of self-reflection wills to accept itself, it stumbles perhaps upon one difficulty or another in the composition of the self. For as no human body is perfection, so neither is any self. This difficulty be it what it may, frightens the man away shudderingly.<sup>88</sup>

Vendler argues that Berryman "did not want to be the person he found himself to be, which fell far short of his perfectionist compulsions.... Willing to be another than himself, John Berryman willed to be Henry."<sup>89</sup> Conflating the author with a character is always a tenuous proposition that critics should be careful in pursuing, but aside from the question of whether Berryman willed to be Henry or not, his idea of despair, which apparently derives from the Kierkegaard text, reveals two things: first, Henry, split in the mourning and mourned selves and refusing or unable to synthesize the two, experiences despair of self-alienation; and secondly, when given the choice between the despair of self-alienation and that of self-annihilation, Henry chooses the former—he chooses to maintain the split so as to avoid the prospect of self-annihilation. In the final poem of the sequence, #91, when Henry is dug up from the grave, he attempts to go back to the

Underworld: in order to avoid the conclusive self-synthesis, one part of Henry has to be in the Underworld while the other stays in the world of the living to self-elegize.

Henry's solution to the hydraulics, which the final poem of the "Op. posth." sequence posits, is the non-compensatory immersion in the state of loss and of self-split. Unlike conventional epic journeys into the Underworld—which the hero is typically propelled to undertake upon an actual or anticipated loss of something, and from which he reemerges into the world of the living, having made some gains in preparation for his future action—Henry is dug up from the grave and returned to this world against his will, apparently without any gain, only with the desire to go back to the Underworld:

Noises from underground made gibber some  
others collected & dug Henry up  
saying "You *are* a sight."  
Chilly, he muttered for a double rum  
waving the mikes away, putting a stop  
to rumours, pushing his fright

off with the now accumulated taxes  
accustomed in his way to solitude  
and no bills.

(DS 91: 1-9)

The phrase "Noises from underground" sounds eerily similar to "Notes from Underground"; in some readers' minds, the cantankerous Henry may merge with the image of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, his attachment to the grave mirroring Underground Man's adherence to the underground.<sup>90</sup> Just as Underground Man keeps writing his notes from the underground, Henry-Berryman, too, composes nearly 300 more Dream Songs after this "Op. posth." sequence. The disturbing noises made by the speaker's underground writing force people to collect and dig Henry out of his grave. But Henry is "accustomed" to the "solitude" of the underground, and now that he's been brought back to life, he has to deal with the "accumulated taxes" and other

responsibilities of the living person that he'd rather eschew; apparently, the "grave is not without its consolations,"<sup>91</sup> since, at the very least, the loss of oneself disencumbers one from matters of legal and social responsibilities.

In order to return to the state of loss of self—to be released from the burden of living once again—Henry attempts to dig his way back into the Underworld:

A fortnight later, sense a single man  
upon the trampled scene at 2 a.m.  
insomnia-plagued, with a shovel  
digging like mad, Lazarus with a plan  
to get his own back, a plan, a stratagem  
no newsman will unravel. (13-18)

Although the speaker refers to himself in the third-person address of "Henry" throughout the "Op. posth." sequence, he refers to himself as a "single man" in this stanza—without a name and with an indefinite article. If, in the first stanza, the poem effects the third-person limited perspective by referring to Henry by name—that is, the speaker closely aligns himself with Henry's perspective—the last stanza, which refers to Henry as an unnamed "single man," employs more of a third-person omniscient narrative, one that is further removed from Henry than the third-person limited. Moreover, calling the dead by his or her name is one of the crucial elements of mourning.<sup>92</sup> By referring to Henry without using his name as he shovels his way back to the grave, the stanza creates further self-separation between the mourning, speaking self of the speaker and the mourned, dead self of Henry. In other words, even when he's dug up and his parts are collected—that is, even when he's given, essentially, an opportunity for him to synthesize his split selves into one living self—Henry declines to do so. Henry's desire to return to the grave signals his desire to remain in the fiction of loss—his rejection of the compensation—so

that even if one of his selves dies, the other remains to tell the story of the other, in an effort to preempt the final, irrevocable loss where even the notion or fiction of loss is lost.

The refusal to synthesize oneself—the refusal to be oneself, in the words of Kierkegaard—means that one stays in the state of despair: the “despair at not willing to be oneself.” And it is this state of despair that Henry chooses to put himself in. More specifically, what he desires is the partial self-erasure of self-split; being “out of sight” is his plan. In this stanza, the word “plan” is repeated, in addition to its appositive, “stratagem.” When the synonyms are repeated, it signals the attempt to highlight an emphasis on a facet of an idea that one of those words cannot quite express.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, in the uses of repetitions and synonyms, there is bound to be a shift of meaning from one word to the next. In the case of “plan” and “stratagem,” the difference of nuance, aside from the latter’s military-related usage, is mainly the latter’s covert, underhanded nature. Also, the last line, “no newsman will unravel” recalls the image of “flaring out” of *The New York Times* in #79; Henry prefers not to be on the pages of news. Adding Henry’s preference for “solitude,” the stanza adumbrates his desire to be “out of sight.”

A complete self-disappearance, however, remains an impossibility; the first word Henry hears when he is dug up is “You *are* a sight,” which suggests that, even when what he wants is to be out of sight, he becomes a sight. Self-disappearance is, nonetheless, a way out of the impossible hydraulics of compensatory mechanism. In a way, Henry’s method of synthesizing an unconsoling consolation is not the heroic renunciation of one’s attachment to the lost object but rather a stoic renunciation of the lost object—that is, the act of self-erasure through his prosopopoeial utterance—even if it merely obliterates, albeit unsuccessfully and incompletely, only the split half of his speaking persona. As

the stoic philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius puts it, “how could you lose what you don’t have?”<sup>94</sup> Self-erasure creates a state in which one does not have oneself, and in that state, one encounters no prospect of loss. The disappearance of the prospect of loss attenuates compensatory consolation along with its problems, since, if nothing is lost, then there is nothing left to be recovered.

As mentioned earlier, the problem of loss-compensation mechanism lies in its dialectic: the process of possession, loss of the object, and synthesis of a substitutive gain out of that loss. The success of this dialectic hinges on the acceptance of both the product and process of the compensatory substitution as a gain that arises out of the loss. It is precisely this substitution that mourners encounter difficulties in elegy; as Ramazani points out, the utmost target of antipathy in modern elegy is the “psychological propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation.”<sup>95</sup> That is, modern elegy flouts the process in which one’s renunciation of the grief over the lost object is translated into the consolation of a successful, “normative” mourning, and, instead, shows its proclivity toward a lingering attachment to the lost object, which, in turn, leads to the failed, “melancholic” mourning. The dialectic depends on the cognitive movement between two poles, object-presence and object-loss, or grief over an object-loss and consolation of a newly instituted object-presence. But if there is only one pole—if the state of loss or absence is the only condition that exists—the dialectic will not be effected, and the issues of “successful” and “unsuccessful” mourning, of “heroic” renunciation or “antiheroic” attachment, will no longer matter. That is the condition portrayed by *The Dream Songs*: a state in which neither Sacks’s “successful” mourning nor Ramazani’s “melancholic” mourning exists, since there can only be an immersion in the totalizing self-loss.

In its recommendation of this stoic renunciation, #91 brings up the image of Lazarus as a counter-figure to repudiate the loss-compensation model. Lazarus is a poignant choice of figure in an elegy; after Lazarus was raised from the dead, he was promptly put to death again.<sup>96</sup> The parable almost seems to suggest: as long as a thing is a presence, it will be lost, no matter how many times or in what different forms it is brought back to life. Seen in this light, Henry's enterprise of self-disappearance carries an overtone of stoicism; although the impulsive, heavy-drinking Henry may seem on surface to be at the furthest opposite end of the spectrum from Stoics, the two are, along with Emily Dickinson, connected through their apparently shared philosophy: "missing All, prevented Me / From missing minor Things."<sup>97</sup>

The consequence of missing oneself is the Kierkegaardian despair, but for Henry, it appears more comforting than the hydraulic of compensatory consolation, since, in the compensatory mechanism, the mourner is encumbered with two problems: the issue of equivalency between the lost object and the substitutive object; and the issue of the eventual loss of that substitutive object. Henry's self-elegy functions by means of self-splitting through prosopopoeia, which engenders a separation between the mourning self and the mourned self; in an effort to bypass the loss-recovery dialectic that a reintegration of the two would entail, Henry keeps the two selves separated throughout the "Op. posth." sequence. This artificial loss anchors the narrative of loss in the "Op. posth." sequence, and in this state of immersion in loss, Henry finds his own Stoic comfort, of "missing all" that would keep him from "missing minor things."

Although Berryman's work is seen as a representative case of the "melancholic" mourning in which the mourner wallows in misery and despair, one may also view his

elegies as replacing the heroic renunciation with a stoic one.<sup>98</sup> If that solution feels—similar, once again, to the case of the Roethke elegies—too incomplete to be satisfactory, it attests to the difficulty of finding consolation amidst the prospect or condition of the lost loss: even if a recovery of or compensation for a lost object is seen to bring the mourning to closure, it does not mean that the mourner no longer feels any loss, or that the mourner is immunized against future prospects of losses, of any and all things including the compensatory object. Even a fact of loss can be lost at any moment, such as, in the case of self-elegy, through the disappearance of the speaking half of the self.

Although *The Dream Songs* very much remain in the state of Kierkegaardian despair throughout, there is, to be sure, something comforting, something consoling about its particular language of despair—something akin to the Aristotelian catharsis that one experiences when witnessing a tragedy. According to psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, there are three ingredients in the feeling of relief in catharsis: a depiction of the world as rational, where the individual character bears the burden of his or her wrongs and the world as a whole is absolved; a recognition that even when people are responsible for their misfortunes, they remain capable of conducting themselves with dignity and nobility; and a realization that one has experienced the worst and that there is nothing further to fear.<sup>99</sup> Henry's world is certainly not rational, and he shirks responsibilities if at all possible; he hardly conducts himself with any dignity or nobility, and is rather a shameless figure; and his state of despair is a chronic undertone, not a catastrophic one that induces a feeling of conclusion or the sense of having experienced the worst—if anything, Henry lives in the constant anxiety and anticipation over the prospect of the worst that is yet to come.

One part of Lear's explication of catharsis that rings true with Berryman's *Dream Songs* is that catharsis can come from an "experience of the tragic emotions in an appropriately inappropriate environment"—an experience through which we "imaginatively live life to the full" without a risk, in a safe environment.<sup>100</sup> The speaking persona's split into two selves appears precisely to create this experience of "living life to the full without a risk"; Henry, after all, is a "fictive" construct—a character with a flexible identity, who, at times, is "a kind of twentieth-century Everyman, at times only Henry, at times... dead," at times assuming different roles.<sup>101</sup> And this self-conscious split creates an explicitly fictive, safe environment in which the character, and by extension, the reader, lives in despair, where we may take comfort in learning the worst that can be claimed about life and death—a comfort that derives from the feeling that we have not been lied to, and that the truths have not been concealed from us. In a genuinely hopeless condition, self-elegies do not exist, for both the speaking self and the spoken-about self would disappear in that scenario. Regardless, it is hard to deny that there is something consoling in the language of *The Dream Songs*, in Henry's continuation of his Dream Song utterances—just as we feel the same of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who, despite the pain and despair of living in the underground, continues to write his notes that unsettle us and, by doing so, somehow comfort us. Berryman's *The Dream Songs* has often been read as an extended elegy for his father, who committed suicide when Berryman was twelve. While the self-elegiac "Op. posth." does not directly comment on his father's death, it is worth noting that a form of lost loss, self-loss, is investigated as a part of a volume hovering around the theme of a loss that had been lost through the chasm of time, like a screen that adumbrates itself and what is behind it.



### III. Plath's Poems of 1963: a Hypothetical Third Book as a Fictive Construct

If Berryman's Henry attempts to effect an all-encompassing loss of self-dissolution and yet, perhaps purposefully, fails to do so by leaving intact the speaking self, Sylvia Plath's poems of 1963 simulate precisely this state of all-encompassing loss, in which the feeling of loss is so pervasive that, in a language-space where all things, including the self, seem to be effaced, one cannot even tell what is being lost.<sup>102</sup> To encapsulate this disorienting and fragmentary null language-space, the poems of 1963 employ a mode of writing that has been generally characterized as that "of surrealism,"<sup>103</sup> which resists linear narrative and tends to remain coded, effecting a kind of "exclusion" of readers.<sup>104</sup> Here are two more samplings of the ways in which readers have described the interpretive difficulties of these last poems:

They are poems written out of... a state of being in which the speaker... has abandoned the sense of audience and cares nothing about—indeed, is hardly aware of—the presence of anyone but herself. [Plath] writes with a hallucinatory, self-contained fervor. She addresses herself to the air, to the walls.... There is something utterly monolithic, fixated about the voice that emerges in these poems, a voice unmodulated and asocial.... It is as if we are overhearing the rasps of a mind that has found its own habitation and need not measure its distance from... other minds.<sup>105</sup>

... the repetitions of mimicry... which lead nowhere, that is, which lead solely to the poem they echo.<sup>106</sup>

Aside from the obvious reference to J. S. Mill's model of lyric voice as one of being overheard, the first excerpt attributes the interpretive difficulties of the poems to the speaker's disregard of the readers. The latter excerpt characterizes the disconnection or dislocation, or the absence of telos, in the utterance of the language in those poems. The proposition of the present chapter is to inquire if the poems' interpretive difficulties

derive less from their exclusion of readers or the lack of linear narrative than from the possibility that these poems are taking readers to a place they have never become conscious of, a place to which no other poems, not even Plath's poems before 1963, have brought the readers; like the case of Roethke's "Elegy for Jane," critical disagreement or bafflement often surfaces as a sign when a writer attempts to express something we don't yet have the language for.<sup>107</sup> And the assumption here is that Plath's poems of 1963 aim for the same linguistic and cognitive pioneering as the Roethke elegy. The difference, however, of this all-encompassing, profound loss from the other types of losses—the loss of self in Berryman's *Dream Songs* or the phantom loss in Roethke's generic elegies—is that it derails us from a conventional reading, since loss of all things, including things like speaker, agent, addressee, the fact of loss, among others, would disorient and disrupt our readerly senses and, hence, is prone to appear as a symptom of exclusivity or solipsism, for its expressive tropes are not as readily recognizable.

The above hypothesis is merely a speculative diagnosis of the symptom of interpretive disorientation over Plath's later work, as expressed in the samplings of the Plath criticism in the preceding page. But this speculation becomes more supportable when we examine the progression of Plath's work from its beginning *Colossus* phase. In the *Colossus* poems, Plath's anti-elegies are more or less "conventional" in terms of the convention of anti-elegies, if we are to base our definition of "anti-elegy" on its "transgeneric attack"<sup>108</sup> on the conventions of traditional elegies that are dependent on their loss-compensation model—that is to say, Plath's anti-elegies of the *Colossus* period operate within the paradigm of the loss-compensation model in that they generally defy, or lament the failure of, the said model.<sup>109</sup> The two main features of the *Colossus* poems

that are relevant in the present discussion of her anti-elegies are, one, their allusiveness—that is, their steep immersion in the literary tradition, the evidence of which is ubiquitous enough to prompt critics’ characterization of those poems as being almost “too derivative”<sup>110</sup>—and, two, the presence and specificity of the object-loss. Many of her *Colossus* elegies—such as its title poem, “The Colossus,” or others like “Electra on Azalea Path” and “Full Fathom Five”—lament how impossible it is to compensate for the loss of the cherished object, as crystallized by the resigned utterance in the opening line of “The Colossus”: “I shall never get you put together entirely.”<sup>111</sup> In this respect, those elegies satisfy both of the two conditions above. And others, whether it’s the tradition-conscious “Lorelei” or “The Eye-Mote,” or the object-specific “All the Dead Dears,” satisfy either one of the two conditions, with detectable enough lament or outrage over the impossibility of recouping the lost object. Even in defiance, the *Colossus* elegies stay within the realm of loss-specific mourning, defined by Lacan as follows: “The work of mourning is first of all performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of the signifying elements to cope with the hole that has been created in existence, for it is the system of signifiers in their totality which is impeached by the least instance of mourning.”<sup>112</sup> In many ways, the *Colossus* elegies retain a sense of a specific “disorder” or “hole,” and they chronicle the elegiac speaker’s effort to find remedies, which generally ends in a realization of the inadequacy of the signifying elements to cope with such a void.

Then, in the next phase, for most of the *Ariel* poems prior to 1963, Plath’s elegies become shiftier in both their allusiveness and their object-specificity, even as they continue to express the similar lament or angst over the powerless or duplicitous

consolatory apparatus of the loss-compensation. In the all-too-famous “Daddy”—arguably the most well-known anti-elegy among Plath’s oeuvre—the object-loss begins as a father figure and then, in its continuous metaphorical slide, merges into a new “vampire” figure as the speaker acknowledges, “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two” (71). And then in the last stanza, the poem, using four straight emphatic end-rhymes, exclaims that the speaker is “through” trying to recover the lost object even if such proclamation proves precisely that she is not through. While the mode of lamentation is similar to the *Colossus* phase, where the *Ariel* elegies differ from those of the *Colossus* phase—in which the object-loss remains that of a father even if it takes on an allusive identity of Agamemnon—is that the elegies of *Ariel* allow for multiplicity or blurriness in their object-loss, or for an equivocation in identifying an object-loss, as can be seen in “Daddy” and its father figure’s convergence into some other figure, whether it is of a Nazi or of a vampire “who said he was” the father figure.<sup>113</sup> In another famous self-elegy, “Lady Lazarus,” the figure of the lost object not only takes on the allusive identity of the female version of Lazarus, but also conflates and confuses the primary object-loss with one of a suicidal woman-speaker with that of a Jew in a concentration camp. In “Cut,” the blood shed in a kitchen accident where the speaker cuts her thumb instead of an onion merges with the history of bloodshed—ranging from Revolutionary War, World War II, to hate crimes—to form an elegy for historical losses.

For all its blurriness, multiplicity, confusion and conflation, however, the *Ariel* poems prior to 1963 still retain some sense of object-loss, and hence work within the loss-compensation paradigm; whether it’s “Lady Lazarus” or “Fever 103°,” for all the identities the speaker takes on, there usually is a speaking “I” to which the poem can

return, and there is some object, whether it's the self, the father, the blood from a cut thumb, or some other figure, that the poem claims had been lost. Where the poems of 1963 differ is precisely this point. The speaking "I" of the poems of 1963 increasingly comes to resemble an object going through a process of effacement, and there remains little of the sense of a specific object-loss; the poems do not talk about loss but merely express or embody it, much like the way an abstract painting expresses something without actually showing the specific-object-"something" on the canvas. The allusiveness and tradition-consciousness also retreat into the backstage, creating an impression that the poems are self-contained and solipsistic, as their voices "lead nowhere" and speak "only to the poem they echo." The sense of any object-loss is itself lost, even if the poems register enough faint echoes of a sense of dispossession to sound elegiac.

The desolate language-space that the poems of 1963 paint has left impressions that they express a "strangely elevated and resigned despair"<sup>114</sup> in which "any semblance of struggle has been abandoned,"<sup>115</sup> and has prompted such psycho-biographical interpretations as "poems, as it were, written from beyond rage, by someone who no longer blames anyone for her condition and reconciles herself to death," with an implication that, when used as the closing of *Ariel*, the poems make Plath's suicide seem inevitable.<sup>116</sup> But if we are, for a moment, to inveigle ourselves into believing Ted Hughes's assertion that the poems of 1963 are ones that Plath "herself, recognizing the different inspirations of these new pieces, regarded... as the beginnings of a third book,"<sup>117</sup> it would allow us to bypass, along with the controversy over the manipulation of the *Ariel* manuscript by Hughes, the above biographical reading and the oft-repeated

claim that Plath-the-writer's suicide was the destination of her poetic work.<sup>118</sup> That is, the poems of 1963 constitute not so much a desire for death but rather a scholarship on the feeling of loss beyond death.

Furthermore, the perception of the poems of 1963 as a start of a third book enables two more changes in our reading of the poems. First, it would unshackle us from the superimposed assumption of "confessionalism" in Plath's work, and would permit us to recognize the un-confessional elements of her poems, such as the above-discussed lack of a definitive speaker, of object-losses, or of the sense of overt dispossession. Secondly, it would also allow us to ponder instead the possibility that there was a steady progression in Plath's anti-elegy: starting with a fixation on a definitive object-loss in *The Colossus*, her elegies then develop into ones with occlusive object-loss in *Ariel*, and finally arrive at the attempts, or experiments, to express the state of loss of such object-loss, in the beginning of the hypothetical third book. Especially given the publication of the restored edition of *Ariel* in 2004—which is said to follow "the arrangement of [Plath's] last manuscript as she left it"<sup>119</sup>—and its exclusion of all of the poems of 1963, the possibility of the third book, along with a critically observable progression in the modes and motifs of Plath's elegies from *The Colossus*, *Ariel*, to the third book, no longer appears too fanciful.<sup>120</sup>

To support such hypotheses—one, that the poems of 1963 may be viewed as the beginning of Plath's third book that is written from inspirations and designs different from those of her previous books, and two, that there is a progression in her elegies from the first book to the third book, where her elegies shift from those about specific object-loss to those about loss of loss, with the latter being the cause and symptom of the

interpretive opacity, somber tonality, and the disjunctive and hallucinatory tropes of the third book—an actual discussion of the poems of 1963 would be instructive from here on. It has been said often enough that Plath's *Ariel* poems resist linear narratives,<sup>121</sup> and the mode of operation in the poems of 1963—as exemplified by “Totem,” which, in Plath's own words, is made of “a pile of interconnected images, like a totem pole”<sup>122</sup>—is a non-narrative collage of images and fragments. Nonetheless, the task of a critic is to invent a thread that constitutes such “interconnection” in those disparate images: to construct and reconstruct the previously nonexistent narrative, a story line, a fiction, if you will, from the fragments of images and sounds that are left on the pages, in a manner similar to that of a viewer of an abstract painting imagining a story behind the abstraction, of an archeologist constructing a historical landscape of a long-lost past, or of a stargazer seeing stars in constellations and conceiving myths. If a good criticism reads like a good detective novel, it is precisely because the tasks of literary scholars are to string together disparate elements into a storyline, to present it in a credible enough manner, and to provide a useful fiction that gives sufficient semblance of a form of knowledge or understanding.

The first poem of the hypothetical third book, “Sheep in Fog” was, technically speaking, written first in December of 1962 and then revised on January 28, 1963, but given its exclusion from the restored *Ariel*, it's safe to say that the poem belongs to the third book. The scene of the poem, as Plath herself explains, is as follows: “In this poem, the speaker's horse is proceeding at a slow, cold walk down a hill of macadam to the stable at the bottom. It is December. It is foggy. In the fog there are sheep.”<sup>123</sup> The setting is, however, not as important as the shape of the poem: written in tercets, with

lines of varied lengths and frequent punctuations. The form is reminiscent of the first poem of *Ariel*, “Morning Song.” The comparison between the opening stanzas of the two poems is as follows:

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.  
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry  
Took its place among the elements. (CP 156, 1-3)

The hills step off into whiteness.  
People or stars  
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them. (CP 262, 1-3)

Both tercets feature curious syntactic similarities: two sentences, one a simple sentence ending in one line, and the other a compound sentence covering two lines.<sup>124</sup> The first and the third lines are relatively similar in length, while the middle line is either markedly longer or shorter than the other two. In addition to the similarity of their shape, both poems portray a scene dominated by one color: gold or white, a tone of pure color consumes the canvas, like light reflection. The difference between gold and white is that the former depicts a world that has a color beyond a scene of monochrome, whereas the latter presents an achromatic, lifeless world.

This monochrome factor is further underscored by the “morning-mourning” pun, which shows up in both “Morning Song” and “Sheep in Fog.” In “Morning Song,” the pun is used to hint at the speaker’s ambivalence over child-rearing.<sup>125</sup> In “Sheep in Fog,” the pun is emphasized with a curious repetition—“All morning the / Morning has been blackening” (8-9)—and the increasing blackness of the morning introduces the opponent process color, namely black and white, which, in conjunction with the whiteness of line 1, constructs a scene of monochrome: a black-and-white landscape—a colorless landscape. In fact, whether it’s the snow in “The Munich Mannequins,”<sup>126</sup> the white skull in



“Words,” the pearl-like skin of the body in “Contusion,” or the “blacks” of the moon in “Edge,” poems of 1963 are often colored in either white or black, or both.

That is to say, “Sheep in Fog” presents a colorless world. Unlike the way “Morning Song” is built around a presence of another human object, “Sheep in Fog” offers a landscape of privation: it is not only colorless but also “Starless and fatherless”—the suffix “less” defines the poem. In particular, “fatherless” is a curious word choice, given how Plath’s earlier elegies are preoccupied with the lost father. There is a definite difference between a statement, “one has lost one’s father,” and a statement, “one is fatherless”; the former indicates a past possession and a subsequent loss of it, while the latter merely states the present state of dispossession, with no conclusive implication of any past possession or its subsequent loss. That the poem chooses the word “fatherless” foreshadows a loss of the loss of the father—a loss of the object-loss, which is the feature that differentiates the poems of 1963 from *Ariel* and *Colossus*.

The point here is that there are enough similarities, and enough differences, between “Morning Song” and “Sheep in Fog” to suggest that the latter may be read as a response of the hypothetical third book to the second book.<sup>127</sup> It isn’t unusual for a poet to imitate or plagiarize one’s own work; sometimes, the practice has no meaning beyond just that the poet wants to write two poems in a similar form or that the poet runs out of inspiration and resorts to an old crutch, but in this particular instance, this narrative—that the third book starts polemically against the second book, almost as an act of revising the second book, or of going beyond where the second book had reached—is too tempting to disregard. The first poem of a book often sets the tone of the entire book. Whereas *Ariel*

starts with a presence and then explores the prospect or fact of loss that inevitably follows an object-presence, the hypothetical third book begins with a loss of such loss.

If the first poem of 1963 posits the state of fatherlessness and starlessness, the subsequent poems narrate more losses of things to lose; the poems move further and further into the state of increasing privation. In “The Munich Mannequins,” the snow is turned into a voiceless entity—“The snow has no voice” (25). Since the dictum of the pathetic fallacy is that a lyric anthropomorphization of landscape is a projection of the inner world of the speaking self, the snow’s dispossession of its voice mirrors a projection of the speaker’s voiceless state. The loss of one’s voice—one of the identifiers of an individual human being—suggests a condition of self-dissolution, much in the same way mannequins have no face or voice that differentiates one from another; and the poem expresses this self-dissolution without an enunciating or enunciated “I.” And here again, the snow doesn’t lose its voice—rather, it has no voice, where the past possession and its subsequent loss are left unstated and made irrelevant. By the second poem of the sequence, the poetic landscape turns into one of fatherlessness, starlessness, and voicelessness.

Then, “Paralytic” effaces sensation, touch, and movement. The presumably paralytic speaker feels no “fingers to grip, no tongue” (3), where the tonguelessness indicates the inheritance of voicelessness from the previous poem.<sup>128</sup> The speaker’s lungs also turn inorganic like dust bags, which are artificially kept functioning by the heart-lung machine, which the speaker sarcastically reveres as “My god the iron lung” (4): it is almost as if the speaker’s body is being superseded by machines—the way human

fates are seen to be superseded by divine machinations—and as if the speaker, hence, is turning bodiless. In the penultimate stanza, further effacement occurs:

I smile, a buddha, all  
Wants, desire  
Falling from me like rings  
Hugging their lights. (33-36)

Disjunctive appositives are the syntactic maneuver Plath uses to define the speaker in this poem. The previous apposition, “Dead egg” in line 17 is straightforward enough, since it does make sense as an image of immobility: a paralytic is likened to the eternal immobility of a dead egg, as opposed to a live egg, the immobile appearance of which is temporary and will soon be broken open by a birth of a living object. But a “buddha” as an apposition for the paralytic seems to require more detailed explanation.

Assuming that Plath’s understanding of Buddhism was rudimentary—an assumption not contestable by her biographies—the most well-known facet of Buddhism is its asceticism, its teachings of renunciation. That is, suffering is caused by the gap between craving for or attachments to worldly matters—such as wants, desires, selfhood, and so on—and human inability to appease all such cravings and attachments; therefore, one’s freedom from such wants and desires becomes one’s salvation. Phrased in this manner, buddhist teachings strike a similar chord to those of stoicism, or to the sentiment of the aforementioned Emily Dickinson line—“missing All, prevented Me / From missing minor Things”<sup>129</sup>—or perhaps even to the New England puritan traditions and sensibilities into which Plath was born, as expressed in her early poems like “Mayflower”:

Throughout black winter the red haws withstood  
Assault of snow-flawed winds from the dour skies  
And, bright as blood-drops, proved no brave branch dies  
If root’s firm-fixed and resolution good.  
Now, as green sap ascends the steeped wood,

Each hedge with such white bloom astounds our eyes  
As sprang from Joseph's rod, and testifies  
How best beauty's born of hardihood. (CP 60)

In "Paralytic," the best beauty is born of the "hardihood," the fortitude, of renunciation—however involuntary and imposed such renunciation may be by the condition of paralysis—where the speaker, like a buddha, experiences freedom from wants and desires, which fall off from the speaker "like rings / Hugging their lights." In other words, by the end of "Paralytic," the inner poetic landscape becomes one of a fatherless, starless, voiceless, motionless, touchless, wantless and desireless state of being.

After the words turn "riderless" and desiccant in "Words,"<sup>130</sup> "Contusion" portrays how the heart—which, previously in "Mystic," the speaker indicates "has not stopped" yet<sup>131</sup>—now "shuts" and stops.<sup>132</sup> The poem is generally read in relation to its dominant metaphors of "waning and cessation,"<sup>133</sup> and it concludes with a funereal image of a sheeted mirror:<sup>134</sup>

Color floods to the spot, dull purple.  
The rest of the body is all washed out,  
The color of pearl.

In a pit of rock  
The sea sucks obsessively,  
One hollow the whole sea's pivot.

The size of a fly,  
The doom mark  
Crawls down the wall.

The heart shuts,  
The sea slides back,  
The mirror is sheeted. (CP 271)

The poem is noticeably monosyllabic, especially when compared to her earlier work, like "Mayflower" above; if one considers the stereotypical notion of the equation between

ornate, Latinate polysyllables and the power of one's intellectual potency, the minimalist monosyllables—as well as the successive shortening of line lengths, reminiscent of the reticence in Roethke's "Elegy for Jane"—would suggest a state of its waning. The poem is also notably free of personal deictic, and the body parts come to resemble mere objects; the "body" is not "my" body or "your" body but an unidentified "the body," and the same goes for the "heart" and "mirror." The absence of personal pronouns or possessives in the poem is expressive of the poem's freedom from any definitive speaker or his or her selfhood, and the objects are rendered nameless. And if we are to take for granted Steven Gould Axelrod's interpretation of the sheeted mirror as a funereal image, then lifeless, selfless, nameless and brainlessness are the four more additions to the list of words with the suffix "-less" which characterize the progression within the inner landscape of the poems of 1963.

It is in this progressively privative inner landscape in which the last poem, "Edge," is presented. Susan Van Dyne reports that this poem was titled as "Nun in Snow" in its draft stage,<sup>135</sup> although the title was ultimately pared down to one word, in keeping with the abstract, minimalist thrust of the rest of the poems of 1963, most of which have a one-word title.<sup>136</sup> From that standpoint, though "Nun in Snow" would certainly refer us back to the motif of self-dissolution in the whiteness of snow in "The Munich Mannequins," such a title would perhaps be too explanatory for a set of poems that are progressively becoming devoid of explanations and authorial imposition of narrative-meaning construction. The poem begins thus:

Edge

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:  
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,  
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.  
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals  
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed  
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,  
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.  
Her blacks cackle and drag. (CP 272-273)

A poem presented in the state of privation is written in the most privative, minimalist verse form with the least number of lines per stanza—couplets. The fact that the poem has generally been read as the speaking self's imagination of her own death<sup>137</sup> owes to the common assumption that the speaker is a woman and is a remnant of the habit of biographical reading, but even if we are to inherit such reading and assume that the speaker is the third-person-referenced woman in this poem,<sup>138</sup> the third-person address leaves no remnant of self-reference, which suggests the woman's abnegation or renunciation of, or freedom from, her selfhood, a condition that the buddha-appositioned speaker in "Paralytic" achieves. That is, even though the personal possessive returns in

this poem—as opposed to the impersonal, unidentified definite articles of “Contusion” that point to nowhere—there is little of the sense of personal selfhood in the poem, and the inner landscape retains the selflessness of “Contusion.”

The “perfection” of the woman in line 1 certainly recalls the terrible perfection of “The Munich Mannequins” that “cannot have children.”<sup>139</sup> In fact, “Edge” brims with images, words, and phrases that have been used, or that point to ones formerly used, in Plath’s previous poems: the “Greek” myth motifs in the *Colossus* phase; the “child,” the subject on which many of Plath’s poems, like “Metaphor,” the previously referenced “Morning Song,” “You’re,” and numerous others, are written; the bleeding throat like the one in “Poppies in July”; the moon imagery omnipresent in poems like “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” in lines like “The moon sees nothing of this.... / And the message of the yew tree is blackness”;<sup>140</sup> and the blackness of the moon, which merges with the whiteness of the dead body carried over from “Contusion” and recaptures the monochromatic landscape from “Sheep in Fog.”

Recognizing this parading of the previously used tropes and images, a reader would be tempted to find a similarity between this poem and one of Yeats’s last poems, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.” The Yeats poem, however, has a definitive speaking “I” who stakes previous ownership of those “animals”—namely, characters and themes Yeats uses in his preceding work—and therefore the owner has enough basis to lament his loss as the circus animals leave the owner-poet behind. On the other hand, Plath’s images and motifs float in a null-space without such claim of possession, and therefore the poem declares no loss, even as vague, faint reverberations, echoes and reechoes, of

dispossession are felt and registered in the poem. At this point, the poem not only expresses but becomes a lost loss, embodying its embracive melancholy.

It is all too easy to see lines like “We have come so far, it is over” (8) and conclude that this poem confirms Plath the writer’s suicidal intent or that she had intended this poem to be her last poem like Yeats’s “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” but for readers, her poetic work only starts here: that is, a narrative of lost loss only begins with this poem, just as the blackness of the moon suggests a new moon that will begin its calendar from that phase. Plath’s earlier elegies had more to do with a creation of the fiction of loss—that is, poems like “The Colossus” narrate a construction of a missing object, to forge an illusion that it had existed and has been lost, and a recovery of it must be attempted despite the knowledge that such attempts would never succeed—and the evolution of her elegies has taken us to a landscape where progressive privation and a resultant effacement of specific losses give shape to a pervasive melancholy of lost loss, which had previously eluded linguistic figurations.

One wonders why the work of a poet who produced only two books of poetry has received as much critical attention as it has.<sup>141</sup> Aside from the usual arrays of answers to this question, one hypothesis to account for this phenomenon is to inquire if critics—seeing that the poet could have written more poems and seeing that as a void—construct a narrative of “loss” to fill the space of that void; readers, forever wondering what kind of book the third book would have turned out to be, keep writing their readings and extrapolations of her work precisely to cover up the void of that loss. That may as well be the practice of the readers of the works of writers who kill themselves: filling the void



of the missing “presence” by creating an imagined loss, as Roethke’s generic elegies do. The hypothetical “third book” is the fiction we build on the foundation of lost loss.

Whether it’s the biographical fallacy of how the narratives of death Plath had repeatedly written did not suffice and she had to write her own death for the reason that “expression and extinction [are] indivisible,”<sup>142</sup> or this present narrative of how the poems of 1963 constitute not so much a suicidal musing but rather a start of the third book that finds an expression for a state of privation and melancholy in which one has lost a sense of loss,<sup>143</sup> one may note that all of those are fictive narratives constructed in place of the void left by the loss of Plath, who continues to be lost to us and who, if not for such fictions—as unfortunate as it is that the living has the nefarious habit of imagining words and thoughts of the dead in their absences—would not come into existence for us.

These three instances of the elegiacs of Roethke, Berryman, and Plath, and their expressions of types of losses that elude expressions, demonstrate that elegies are used to give voice to things that do not yet have a voice, and that words are invented to point to things that do not yet exist—things that do not exist but are nonetheless needed. When the word “loss” is constructed, the concept of “possession” comes into being, much in the same way philosophy comes into being as an after-the-fact explanation for a phenomenon. In this sense, loss precedes being: loss precedes the presence of the lost object as much as the reverse. Only through the narrative of loss can one create, find, or access the lost object, which comes into existence merely as a result of the construction of such narrative, whether it is the case of Jane coming into existence in the narrative of phantom loss, of

Henry doing the same in the narrative of self-loss, or of the case of Plath and her narrative of the state of lost loss; such is the authoritarianism inherent in the logic of loss that we all seem to have no choice but to adore. And elegists continue to construct fictions of loss, for the acute pain one endures in the narrative of loss is still more tolerable and somehow more comforting than the vague and pervasive pain one is left with when the loss of such is lost.

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<sup>1</sup> As exemplified by Philip Larkin's query of the term "confessional" as applied to the poetry of Sylvia Plath, there is a debate over the question of what exactly "confessional" means or which poets should be termed "confessional." A fuller treatment of this issue cannot be completed in the space of this dissertation, and here, the present usage of the term is to refer to the conventional classification, which relies on M. L. Rosenthal's famous definition of the term cited below. The stance of this chapter is that Roethke, Berryman, and Plath are chosen for this chapter because their elegiac oeuvres contain higher incidences of "lost losses" and because their "lost loss" elegies transport them outside of the bracket of the "confessional" by displaying multiplicities of voices and subjectivities that go beyond the "speaker as the poet" or the "personal details about the author's life" paradigms in which the term "confessional" has generally been defined.

<sup>2</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession," in *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), 109-112.

<sup>3</sup> As Peter Sacks notes in *The English Elegy*, the tradition of pastoral elegy was already in decline by the time Milton wrote *Lycidas*: "the decline of the pastoral elegy... [is] confirmed by the fact that Milton was conspicuously alone among more than a score of elegists in his choice of what by 1637 was regarded as an unconvincing, even trivial, form for a poem of mourning" (90).

<sup>4</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 187.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1987), 136.

<sup>6</sup> The influential "work-of-mourning" model in elegy studies derives from several of Freud's writings, most prominently from his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (in *General Psychological Theory* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991], 164-179) and from the fort-da episode in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 11-16. To recap, a "successful" mourning, for Freud, entails the subject's libidinal detachment from the lost object, whereas melancholia, or a "failed" mourning, refers to cases in which the subject fails to renounce his or her libido-position; the game of *fort-da* is seen as an enactment of the "successful" mourning, the child conditioning himself to the process of loss, detachment, and rediscovery. In *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks adapts Freud's theory to formulate a model of mourning procedure that proceeds from 1) loss of the object, 2) renunciation of the object, to 3) acceptance of the compensatory substitute as well as the very practice of compensatory substitution. Sacks illustrates this model by referring to the instance of Apollo and Daphne in Greek mythology, in which 1) Apollo's loss of Daphne is followed by 2) his renunciation of Daphne-the-person and 3) his acceptance of the substitutive Daphne-the-tree, in the form of the laurel wreath as a projected founding of her sign (Sacks 4-10). Other scholars have queried "the term 'lost love' as applied to Apollo's feeling for Daphne" (Zeiger 5), on the basis that it is unclear how Apollo can "lose" Daphne when she did not exist for him and he did not possess her in the first place.

<sup>7</sup> A Freudian term from "Mourning and Melancholia" for an "unsuccessful" mourning that does not lead to a consolatory resolution. For the "successful" or "normative" mourning, cf. Footnote #6. As discussed later in the chapter, most reductively speaking, modern elegies tend to enact a "melancholic" mourning without resolution, while classical elegies aim for the "normative" one with some sense of consolatory closure.

<sup>8</sup> Allan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 193.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Jay Parini universalizes the poem's grief by contending that the "girl's death is rather the occasion for a poem calling up a certain emotional state" and that "the poet's feelings of grief and pity transcend the occasion" (Parini 138), while Lynn Ross-Bryant in *Theodore Roethke: Poetry of the Earth, Poet of the Spirit* individualizes the occasion by chiming in with a characterization of the loss as one "expressed in terms of a uniquely human relationship" and underscoring "his feelings for her and his sense of loss at her death" (Ross-Bryant 75). Kenneth

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Burke champions the poem as an instance of Roethke's attempt at "personalization," a "greater individualizing of human relations" (Burke 36). Jeffrey Meyers also interprets the poem as an expression of "the traditional themes of the genre by contrasting the age of the poet to the youth of the dead girl, emphasizing the injustice of death and suggesting a love motif—which goes back to Catullus" (Meyers 139). In *100 American Poems of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, the poem is introduced as "a pure and delicate emotional appreciation of an older man for a young girl" (Perrine 205). These are the samplings of the critical contexts of this poem.

<sup>10</sup> Angelo Philip Bertocci, *From Symbolism to Baudelaire* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 88.

<sup>11</sup> One of the prominent features in elegy, repetition has been conventionally interpreted as 1) a way to create a sense of continuity through unbroken pattern, 2) a method of reality testing, or 3) an attempt to raise the spirit of the dead from the grave through the act of chanting. For a more detailed discussion of the function of repetition in elegy, cf. Sacks, 23-26. Although, in this poem, what is repeated is not the name of the dead but rather the metaphors that name the dead, Margaret Alexiou comments on the particular custom of repeating the name of the dead: "one element of the primitive lament which was never forgotten or ignored... was the refrain calling the dying man or god by name.... Its function was to raise the spirit of the dead from the grave" (Alexiou 109).

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Johnson, "Les Fleurs du mal armé: Some Reflections on Intertextuality" in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, Patricia Parker, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 270.

<sup>13</sup> Various literatures on alchemy describes how an attempt to revive a human being through alchemy results in a creation of a false human being, called a "homunculus," almost as though to suggest that an elegy's linguistic reconstruction of the dead is itself a kind of alchemy that is bound to fail.

<sup>14</sup> See John Berryman's "A Strut for Roethke" (Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, 20). One may say, however, that Berryman's use of that title might be pejorative.

<sup>15</sup> While there are many pastoral elegists, Wordsworth is the most obvious and famous model of this convention in English literature.

<sup>16</sup> As shown in the discussion of *Lycidas* in Introductory Chapter, this rejection of compensation is part of earlier elegies as well; the awareness of the profundity and absolute nature of loss has been with us a long time. The difference, as critics such as Sacks and Ramazani have drawn, is that the conventional elegies seem ultimately to embrace the compensation despite their doubts—meaning, the act of overcoming the doubts is seen as the crux of elegiac writings—whereas the modern elegies end in melancholic inconclusion because their repudiation of such compensation is final, as opposed to being a part of the process toward a psychological conquest of the doubts.

<sup>17</sup> That is, except through the cultural inculcation of renunciation as a heroic and laudatory act.

<sup>18</sup> This failure of linguistic regeneration is in some ways true in all literature, not necessarily just elegy; after all, even a comprehensive biography falls short of the actual life.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, Parini traces Roethke's uses of invocation to Milton's address to Edward King in "Lycidas" and the motif of vegetation goddess to Bion's "Lament for Adonis" and Moschus's "Lament for Bion" (Parini 138-139). Others such as George Wolff in *Theodore Roethke* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981) trace the form to that of a biblical Psalm and its "envelope technique," the shaping of blocks of ideas by grammatical and semantic parallelism at the beginning of lines (Wolff 63). Randall Stiffler in *Theodore Roethke: The Poet and His Critics* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1986) reports Roethke's acknowledgement of the influence of Whitman on the cataloguing technique in "Elegy for Jane" (Stiffler 97).

<sup>20</sup> And in the absence of alliteration, assonance often takes over, like "waiting" and "making."

<sup>21</sup> This stanza appears to be at the root of the aforementioned critics' debate over whether to interpret this poem as an expression of universal grief or of personal love and lament: some read it as the poet being neither father nor lover but claiming to be a little of each, in effect becoming a

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universal mourner (Blessing 174); others see it as an ambiguous romantic-paternal feeling that “many teachers would feel” toward an intelligent and handsome student, and justify “the words of... love” by remarking on Jane Bannick’s striking resemblance to Beatrice O’Connel whom Roethke had married (Meyers 140); and still others suggest the presence of another female student, Lois Lamb, whom Roethke had known well, as the inspiration of the poem (Seager 193). Since the biographical debate is inconclusive, the approach of this present paper is to focus on the critical rhetorical contradiction that occurs in the stanza—the discrepancy between the figure and content of the speech. Also, such critical bafflement in locating the poet-speaker’s sorrow—is this poetic grief a universal one, or is it a love for the student?—further underscores the unplaceable nature of this poem’s feeling of loss, making this poem an ideal study for Abraham’s and Torok’s concept of “phantom pain.”

<sup>22</sup> Waters, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Mill, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), xi.

<sup>25</sup> John Keats, *Selected Poems and Letters*, Douglas Bush, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 279.

<sup>26</sup> A curious possibility has been raised by the fact that “I,” pronounced as “ai,” is a homophone of “ai,” meaning “love” in Japanese. The present writer, however, has not been able to find any conclusive evidence from the Roethke’s biographies that he knew Japanese.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, it depends on the degree of “maiming,” since some wounded creatures become more violent and flighty in their self-preservation efforts. But the word “maim” seems to be more irreversible and severe damage than, say, “injury,” and feels to the present reader as though it implies more lifelessness than skitteriness.

<sup>28</sup> As a further elaboration on what a “writer’s block” feels like, I’ve found that a passage, cited below, from an unrelated novel, W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, offers an exemplary portrayal of this condition. Since I have appropriated some of the language of this passage to capture a sensation of the elegiac inexpressible in this chapter, I will provide the fuller excerpt in this space:

I found writing such hard going that it often took me a whole day to compose a single sentence and no sooner had I thought such a sentence out, with the greatest effort, and written it down, than I saw the awkward falsity of my constructions and the inadequacy of all the words I had employed.... [It] always seemed so fundamentally flawed that I had to destroy it immediately and begin again.... All I could think was that... a sentence only appears to mean something, but in truth is at best a makeshift expedient, a kind of unhealthy growth issuing from our ignorance, something which we use... to grope blindly through the dark enveloping us.... I could see no connections anymore, the sentences resolved themselves into a series of separate words, the words into random sets of letters, the letters disjointed signs, and those signs into a blue-gray trail gleaming silver here and there, excreted and left behind it by some crawling creature, and the sight of it increasingly filled me with feelings of horror and shame. (Sebald 122, 124)

As much self-doubt as we writers have of our own work from time to time—during the bouts of which we may at times characterize our work as insectile, excremental, or both—“horror and shame” were likely not Roethke’s feelings when he wrote the poem. In fact, biographical evidence suggests that he was quite fond of “Elegy for Jane,” and reportedly read it to his students in class immediately following the accident. Regardless, the acute conflict and ambivalence of Roethke’s stanza certainly underscores the kind of linguistic struggle—“the awkward falsity,” “the inadequacy of all the words”—this Sebald excerpt portrays.

<sup>29</sup> Roethke himself remarks on this technique of “successive shortening of the line length” as an effect he has “become inordinately fond of.” In *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2001), Roethke quotes D.H. Lawrence as saying,

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“It all depends on the pause, the natural pause,” which he interprets to mean “the breath unit, the language that is natural to the immediate thing, the particular emotion” (72). In other words, Roethke views this technique as a method of mimicking one’s emotion by varying line lengths.

<sup>30</sup> Especially considering that, conventionally speaking, it is not unusual—as witnessed in examples like John Dryden’s “To The Pious Memory of the Accomplished Young Lady Mrs. Anne Killigrew”—for an elegist to use both the first and last names of the deceased when the elegy is specifically about an individual.

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert, 288. Also, cf. footnote #9 for critical disagreement in the interpretation of this poem.

<sup>32</sup> According to Abraham and Torok, the “phantom” is a type of sealed-off sorrow in inaccessible mental “graves,” which reveals itself through linguistic unintelligibility or concealment, often entailing inventions of particular forms of obfuscation, which they call “cryptonymy” (Abraham and Torok 17, 19).

<sup>33</sup> Ramazani, 4.

<sup>34</sup> The culprits for this condition of modernity can be anything from the sheer population explosion of the modern era, or other factors. Investigation into this arena is outside of the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>35</sup> Abraham and Torok, 173.

<sup>36</sup> Abraham and Torok, 175. Also, Alessia Ricciardi echoes the Otherness and enigmatic nature of mourning in *The Ends of Mourning*: “mourning is mysterious because it confronts us with the ultimate enigma of the Other and thereby perpetuates questions that must be left unsettled” (Ricciardi 4).

<sup>37</sup> Excerpt found in the present writer’s notes. The original source is unknown.

<sup>38</sup> Stages of the drafts reportedly indicate that there were several candidates for this elegy’s occasion, including the poet’s aunt, Julia Roethke, and Dylan Thomas, according to Richard Blessing’s “Theodore Roethke: A Celebration” in *Tulane Studies in English* 20 (1972), 177.

<sup>39</sup> It also suggests the possibility of self-elegy, where the poet himself, or some form of himself, is the subject of the elegy.

<sup>40</sup> Excerpt taken from a nursery-rhyme in *Fafner of the Azure*.

<sup>41</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, James Strachey, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 11, 12.

<sup>42</sup> De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187-228.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Malkoff, *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 146.

<sup>44</sup> Rosemary Sullivan, *Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 138, 139. Sullivan also reports the influence of Meister Eckhart’s theology on Roethke’s idea of God and points out that Roethke often quoted Eckhart with approbation in his notebooks. And his favorite quotes, such as “God must be brought to birth in the soul again, and again,” further underline Roethke’s unconventional idea of divinity; as Eckhart also writes, “Godhead is beyond thinking; god is what I think he is” (Eckhart 225). Sullivan surmises that, for Roethke, God is “relative, a symbolic expression of an overwhelming psychological human experience” that “transcends human understanding” (Sullivan 183). The implication appears to be that Roethke’s idea of “God” is an internal existence, something that can be perceived only within the self. In short, there is a layer of unconventionality and mysticism in Roethke’s “God.”

<sup>45</sup> As in “God leans down to hear that God, which is its weight of woe.”

<sup>46</sup> The change of the title is reported in Roethke’s *Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke*, Ralph J. Mills, Jr. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 237. This poem, placed in the “Mixed Sequence” section of *The Far Field*, is often thought to be about someone from Roethke’s childhood, but the present paper finds it judicious to maintain the distinction between the poet-speaker’s childhood and the poet’s childhood, especially when the biographical

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evidence, barring future discoveries, is inconclusive at present. Critics often bundle “Elegy” with the next two poems in the sequence; for instance, George Wolff claims that the “three poems in the ‘Mixed Sequence’ (“Elegy,” “Otto,” and “The Chums”) deal with family and friends from Roethke’s boyhood” (Wolff 120). Since one of these three poems does bear as its title the name of the poet’s father (“Otto”) and another speaks from the voice of the speaker as someone who is a poet (“The Chums”), one may argue that the biographical thrust of the sequence is strong enough that Roethke indeed had an actual “Aunt Tilly” in his life on whom he’s basing this poem. At the same time, one may counter-argue that “Elegy” in fact has a closer affinity to the poem preceding it, “The Abyss,” than to the poems following it, “Otto” and “The Chums,” since “Elegy” and “The Abyss” share the similar theme of mortality and spiritual transcendence. Also, had Roethke wished to make the biographical connection explicit, he could have written “Aunt Margaret” or “Aunt Julia” (or other names of his aunts) as opposed to the generic “Aunt Tilly.”<sup>47</sup> Jenijoy, La Belle, *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 143.

<sup>48</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, A. Norman Jeffares, ed. (London: Pan Books, 1990), 63.

<sup>49</sup> Parini, 174.

<sup>50</sup> Yeats’s “The Magi,” in full, is as follows:

Now at all times I can see in the mind’s eye,  
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones  
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky  
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,  
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,  
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more  
Being by Calvary’s turbulence unsatisfied,

The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor. (Yeats 63: 1-8)

Aside from the incantatory cadence, Roethke also appropriates Yeats’ phrase, “the mind’s eye,” in “Otto,” the poem in “Mixed Sequence” that immediately follows “Elegy” for Aunt Tilly—“In my mind’s eye I see those fields of glass” (217: 34). Yeats’ Magi, along with their hope for mystic transcendence and their failure to experience it, appear to be very much present in the subconscious of the poems in the “Mixed Sequence” of Roethke’s *The Far Field*.

<sup>51</sup> Richard F. Peterson, *William Butler Yeats* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 98.

<sup>52</sup> De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 928.

<sup>53</sup> Wolff, 120.

<sup>54</sup> Philippe Ariés, *The Hour of Our Death*, Helen Weaver, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 15.

<sup>55</sup> Ramazani, 1, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet*, 245.

<sup>57</sup> Sacks, 299.

<sup>58</sup> Zeiger, 4. Some of the more recent elegy scholarship questions this premise of elegiac consolation itself: Judith Butler reminds us that loss makes “a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” and that the function of grief is to bring “to the fore the relational ties” (Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 20, 22); following that, Max Cavitch claims that “the telos of American elegy is not consolation for the deaths of others, but fulfillment of a specifically political, shared happiness that ‘loss’ misnames” (Cavitch, *American Elegy*, 24). Although elegy studies of the 00’s tend to spotlight the ethical and social implication of elegiac literature, as in the aforementioned works of Butler, Cavitch, as well as William Watkin’s *On Mourning*, the present dissertation is a return to individual psychology—the field from which elegy studies started off but left without sufficiently investigating—with a specific focus on the workings of “loss of loss” and the elegiac disconsolation that results from it.

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<sup>59</sup> While the questions of elegiac ethics are outside of the scope of this particular chapter, R. Clifton Spargo asserts that there is, in elegy, an insistence on the “other’s uncancellable and unassimilable value” as the basis of one’s refusal of the substitutive valuation of the dead, and suggests that melancholic mourning, for its valuation of the singular over the collective, is more “ethical” (Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 13).

<sup>60</sup> Samplings of criticisms leveled against Roethke include: John Wain’s characterization of Roethke’s work as lacking “a sense of total participation in life” (Wain 76); an assertion by Ralph J. Mills Jr. that Roethke is “almost untouched by public happenings or by history” (Mills 8); an anecdotal report, from a literature class, of “a student or two who would venture to say that Roethke is not ‘relevant’” (Blessing 169); M. L. Rosenthal’s criticism that Roethke “has absorbed so little of the concerns of his age into his nerve-ends, in whom there is so little reference direct or remote to the incredible experiences of the age—unless the damaged psyche out of which he spoke be taken as its very embodiment (Rosenthal 118); among others.

<sup>61</sup> Randall Jarrell, *The Third Book of Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1953), 327.

<sup>62</sup> Jahan Ramazani discusses this phenomenon in the Introduction chapter of *Poetry of Mourning*, touching on Joseph Jacobs’ observation in “The Dying of Death”: “Perhaps the most distinctive note of the modern spirit is the practical disappearance of the thought of death as an influence directly bearing upon practical life.... The fear of death is being replaced by the joy of life.... Death is disappearing from our thoughts” (Jacobs 264).

<sup>63</sup> The “Opus posth.” sequence refers to *The Dream Songs* #78-#91 in John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1969.

<sup>64</sup> Berryman, *The Dream Songs* #366, 17.

<sup>65</sup> As suggested by Sigmund Freud’s work-of-mourning model.

<sup>66</sup> J. M. Linebarger, *John Berryman* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 112.

<sup>67</sup> Gary Q. Arpin, *The Poetry of John Berryman* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1978), 74.

<sup>68</sup> On the relationship between the speaker, Henry, and other characters in *The Dream Songs*, the author’s note states:

The poem then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr. Bones and variants thereof.

Requiescant in pace [*sic*]. (*The Dream Songs*, vi)

In nearly all of poems in the “Op. posth.” sequence (*Dream Songs* #78 to #91), the speaker, Henry, refers to himself in the third person.

<sup>69</sup> Lea Baechler, “John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, and the Elegy” in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, Jay Parini, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 602.

<sup>70</sup> Culler, “Changes in the Study of the Lyric,” 52.

<sup>71</sup> That is, one’s capacity to observe oneself as if it were an other, without necessarily effecting a synthesis of the self or unifying the self (De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 187-228).

<sup>72</sup> The formalistic features of the poems in *The Dream Songs* are that they’re composed in three six-line stanzas, with the metrical feet of 5-5-3-5-5-3. The rhyme scheme varies from poem to poem, and in #78, the rhyme is presumably a-b-c-c-a-b. The first and third stanzas follow the rhyme scheme, but in the second stanza, it goes a-b-x-x-a-b, two lines in the middle missing rhymes.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. the reference to Lambert’s *Placing Sorrow* on the page 6 of the Introduction chapter of this present dissertation.

<sup>74</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” in *Authorship: From Plato to The Postmodern*, Sean Burke, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 126.

<sup>75</sup> Culler, “Changes in the Study of the Lyric,” 52.



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<sup>76</sup> Sacks, 6.

<sup>77</sup> By the reversible logic, it is conceivable that the self could erase the other, seeing all others as a part of oneself. Whitman's "Song of Myself" precisely functions through that logic; Whitman's speaker finding properties of his selfhood in all elements of the existing world. I'm afraid, however, that not many of us are as egomaniacal as Whitman to be inclined to see traces of ourselves in all elements of the world; and John Berryman, especially, was a poet who always dealt with the fear of being marginalized and erased, with the anxiety of influence by other writers whose voices might drown his.

<sup>78</sup> De Man "Autobiography as De-facement," 930. The present writer feels the need to make a qualification and state that he is aware of the recent controversy surrounding de Man's claim of the "death of the author"; a suspicion has been raised, in light of de Man's wartime writings, that his claim of autobiographical erasure is, on one hand, autobiographical suppression and, on the other, an elliptical and indirect form of confession (Burke 1-7). But if we are to assume that those who have things to hide in their biographical life would advocate for its suppression, we may say that the reverse could hold true: that is, those who seemingly write their own biographical lives into their poems, as Confessional poets are seen to do, do so because they feel as though there is no biographical life of their own that they can suppress—that is, it is precisely because they feel as though their biographical life is emptied, and feels like a text, that they are prompted to write (and construct as a fiction a version of) their biographical life. Seen in this light, Berryman's, Plath's, other confessionals' or any other writer's interweaving of biographical details into their poems reveals less about their biographical lives than about the tenuousness of their biographical lives. As Emily Dickinson would say, "Best things dwell out of sight"—things kept out of sight, whether it's by suppression of biographical life (as in de Man) or by ostentation of seemingly biographical life (as in the Confessionals), are often closer to truths than things readily in sight. In that regard, literary criticism becomes something akin to a detective novel.

<sup>79</sup> Ramazani, 120.

<sup>80</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Leon Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>81</sup> Zeiger, 86. Also, in Milton's "Lycidas," the drowned and surfacing hero has been ruined by "the occlusion of a star," betrayed by the "perfidious bark, / Built in th' eclipse" (lines 100-101).

<sup>82</sup> Such as seen in *Dream Song* #384: "I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave / who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn."

<sup>83</sup> Or else no one could write that self-elegy.

<sup>84</sup> Ramazani, 247.

<sup>85</sup> John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 108.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. previous discussion of Abraham and Torok and their definition of a phantom as "the spirits of the dead" that "can return to haunt the living," one that consists of some sealed-off, inaccessible loss, "a memory" buried "without legal burial place" (Abraham and Torok 171, 140).

<sup>87</sup> Vendler, *Given and the Made*, 55.

<sup>88</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, Walter Lowrie, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 83, 86.

<sup>89</sup> Vendler, *Given and the Made*, 55.

<sup>90</sup> Especially when considering how Underground Man is equally cantankerous and anti-heroic, as his famous declaration shows: "I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man" (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, Jane Kentish, trans. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], 7).

<sup>91</sup> Edward Mendelson, "How to Read Berryman's Dream Songs" in *John Berryman*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 63.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Footnote #11, Alexiou's remark on the custom of repeating the name of the dead, recapped as follows: "one element of the primitive lament which was never forgotten or ignored... was the

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refrain calling the dying man or god by name.... Its function was to raise the spirit of the dead from the grave” (Alexiou 109).

<sup>93</sup> Cf. the previous discussion of Barbara Johnson’s claim that “the defect of languages resides in the fact that it is just as impossible to say the same thing as to say something different” (270).

<sup>94</sup> Aurelius, 21.

<sup>95</sup> Ramazani, 3.

<sup>96</sup> John 12:9-10.

<sup>97</sup> Dickinson, 995: 1-2.

<sup>98</sup> Although one may say that such “renunciation” is done in a safe place, where one of the split selves, the speaking self, continues to maintain his persona.

<sup>99</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 217-218.

<sup>100</sup> Lear, 217.

<sup>101</sup> Stephen Matterson, *Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 87.

<sup>102</sup> Similar in sense to a phrase in Miyazaki Mei’s “Satirize”: “to lament that I don’t even know what I’m lamenting.”

<sup>103</sup> As compared to the “academic mode” of *The Colossus* (Christina Britzolakis, “Ariel and Other Poems” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, Jo Gill, ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 107).

<sup>104</sup> Ann Keniston, *Overheard Voices: Address and Subjectivity in Postmodern American Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27.

<sup>105</sup> Irving Howe, “The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent” in *Sylvia Plath*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 13.

<sup>106</sup> Louise Glück, “Invitations and Exclusion” in *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (New York: Ecco, 1994), 123.

<sup>107</sup> Since critics won’t keep writing about—and hence won’t disagree over, or reveal their bafflement of—mere opacity or obscurity of a text that they don’t consider to be worthy of their time. Therefore, we may regard ongoing critical debates over a text as a sign or symptom of its linguistic and expressive pioneering.

<sup>108</sup> This definition of the term “anti-elegy” is culled mainly from the Introduction chapter of Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning*.

<sup>109</sup> Christina Britzolakis writes on Plath’s refusal of elegy that it has “certain affinities with the gestures of baroque allegory” where the “rites of mourning, instead of being subordinated to the reaffirmation of the symbolic order, tend to predominate and become an end in themselves” (Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* [New York: Clarendon, 1999], 196). Though Britzolakis reaches this characterization of Plath’s anti-elegy through Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*—its portrayal of a melancholy which “in its tenacious self-absorption... embraces the dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them” (Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 133)—this characterization is essentially similar to what Ramazani identifies as the “melancholic mourning” of anti-elegies.

<sup>110</sup> Harold Bloom, “Introduction” in *Sylvia Plath*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 1.

<sup>111</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 129: 1.

<sup>112</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Desire, and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet” in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise*, Shoshana Felman, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 38.

<sup>113</sup> Critics with a proclivity toward biographical reading commonly associate the Nazi figure with Otto Plath and the vampire figure with Ted Hughes. The point here isn’t so much to give credence to biographical reading but rather to point out that most readers recognize a multiplicity in the identity of the object-loss in this poem.

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<sup>114</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking, 1989), 288.

<sup>115</sup> Bassnett, 136.

<sup>116</sup> Perloff, 181.

<sup>117</sup> Ted Hughes, “Introduction” in *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1981), 15.

<sup>118</sup> Numerous critics—as noted by Jacqueline Rose’s *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 49-63—have affirmed the difficulty of escaping biographical readings, of separating the work from the life, in the case of Sylvia Plath. But one may say that such separation is hardly an impossibility, particularly for younger scholars or apprentices who weren’t alive at the time of Plath’s life and who, in their blissful ignorance—and this may be a rare instance where ignorance can be a bliss in an academic context—also have unread or unlearned, or have been unread or unlearned in, the Plath biographies and biographical criticisms; that, precisely, is the reason that the present dissertation takes into account only one of the three recent discoveries in the Plath scholarship, the restored version of *Ariel*, and stays clear of the two others, namely Ted Hughes’ *Birthday Letters* and the publication of a more complete version of Plath’s journals. Also, for a thorough catalog of various approaches to reading Plath’s work, cf. Keniston, 140, footnote 3.

<sup>119</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: the Restored Edition* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), xi.

<sup>120</sup> In that case, the psycho-biographical question of why someone who’d just started to write a new book would commit suicide would still remain unanswered, but that question should best be left in the hands of biographers. In the context of this dissertation, it suffices to say that, in the great unknowable of human motives, not all things are rational; as Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* would say, 2 + 2 might as well be 5, and as Jacqueline Rose states, “Plath is not consistent” (Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 10). Moreover, it may be worth noting that the psychology of suicide is characterized by unpredictability; there are plenty of case studies where those who seemed perfectly fine one day ended up killing themselves on the next day. Too, there often are, in suicide attempts, times when those who meant to kill themselves remain alive and those who didn’t actually mean to do so end up dead. And lastly, in “On the Melancholic Imaginary,” Julia Kristeva, on the topic of the relation between melancholia and literature, chimes in as follows: “if loss, mourning, absence set the imaginary act in motion and permanently fuel it as much as they menace and undermine it, it is also undeniable that the fetish of the work of art is erected in disavowal of this mobilizing affliction. The artist: Melancholy’s most intimate witness and the most ferocious combatant of the symbolic abdication enveloping him” (Kristeva, “On the Melancholy Imaginary” in *Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature*, Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan, ed. [London: Routledge, 1987], 105). That is, Kristeva claims that if a poet were to surrender to melancholia, there would be no poetry.

<sup>121</sup> “replacing [linear narrative] with the repetitive temporality of trauma” (Britzolakis, “Ariel and Other Poems,” 118).

<sup>122</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 295.

<sup>123</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 295.

<sup>124</sup> Even though the latter omits the coordinating conjunction.

<sup>125</sup> Either that, or the idea that death is a process that starts at the moment of birth.

<sup>126</sup> In *Code Geass*, C.C. claims that the snow is white because it has forgotten what its own color is. And if we are to take the whiteness of the snow as emblematic of the loss or oblivion of one’s own self—and this reading can be supported by the fact that Plath uses a projective pathetic fallacy to indicate that the snow “has no voice,” one of the main characteristics that define an individual self—we may interpret “The Munich Mannequins” as a poem of self-effacement, the way mannequins don’t have the face or voice that distinguish and differentiate one from another.

<sup>127</sup> Perhaps, in a way, to disavow the false hope or optimism laid out in the “original” version of *Ariel*, which ends with the word, “spring”—for a “genuine” hope could only come after the

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knowledge or recognition of the worst of desolation. For an analysis of the narrative arc of the original *Ariel*, cf. Perloff, 181, where Perloff argues as thus: “[the original *Ariel* as Plath left it] ends on a note of hope.”

<sup>128</sup> Plus that it is not only the metaphorical tongue—namely voice—but also the tongue as a physical object—a body part with senses of taste and touch—that is now lost in this poem.

<sup>129</sup> In a sense, one could claim that this Dickinson line crystallizes the attitude of conventional anti-elegy—that is, if the lost object can never be restored no matter how strongly we wish, we might as well stop wishing for such, for desire, when unappeased, becomes more painful than a state of privation.

<sup>130</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 270, 13

<sup>131</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 269.

<sup>132</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 271.

<sup>133</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod, “The Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, Jo Gill, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 88.

<sup>134</sup> Many critics have written on the function of mirror images in Plath’s poems. In particular, Steven Gould Axelrod’s “The Mirror and the Shadow: Plath’s Poetics of Self-Doubt” delves into this topic with a particular emphasis on Plath’s interest in *The Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer, an armchair anthropologist whose works are largely debunked in present anthropology but “has been and continues to be of seminal importance in the forging of the twentieth century literature” (John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973], 135). In the said article, Axelrod cites Frazer’s assertion that when a death occurs in a house, there is a “widespread custom of covering up mirrors” to prevent the ghost of the departed from carrying away a mourner’s soul, projected outward in the shape of his mirror reflection” (James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged ed. [New York: Macmillan, 1943], 192).

<sup>135</sup> Susan Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath’s Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 173. Also, for those scholars who are interested in seeing Plath’s draft but are unable to travel and visit Sylvia Plath Manuscript Collection, Van Dyne’s *Revising Life* contains a copy of the drafts of several of the famous *Ariel* poems, including that of “Edge” on page 173.

<sup>136</sup> The exceptions are “Sheep in Fog” and “The Munich Mannequins,” the first two poems of 1963.

<sup>137</sup> Perloff, 196.

<sup>138</sup> Because, in many ways, our understanding of a literary work is dependent, whether as a rebuttal or as a succession, on the pretext and the subtext of its previous interpretations; as one critic puts it, “our current interpretations of... texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected” (Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 7). While Sylvia Plath’s poems aren’t “ancient” texts, it would be naïve to think that the previous chain of receptions has no effect on our present readings of her work.

<sup>139</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 262: 1. In the context of elegy studies, one may read this renunciation of child-conceiving capability as an antithesis to Tennyson’s epithalamium consolation in *In Memoriam*—that is, Tennyson’s celebration of his sister’s wedding as a compensatory consolation for the loss of Arthur Henry Hallam, for the belief that her future child would be seen as the rebirth of Hallam that makes up for his loss—since inability to have a child would deny the possibility of such consolation as the one Tennyson contrives.

<sup>140</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 173: 27, 28.

<sup>141</sup> Or four, if we count the posthumously assembled *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*, plus a novel.

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<sup>142</sup> Charles Newman, “Candor is the Only Wile: The Art of Sylvia Plath,” *The Art of Sylvia Plath, a Symposium*, Charles Newman, ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 24.

<sup>143</sup> That is, the poems of 1963 are Plath’s experiments in writing elegies without object-loss—in writing elegies from a perspective in which one has moved beyond an object-loss and lost even a sense of loss. In this respect, this cycle of 1963 poems becomes more complex and innovative than the object-loss elegiacs of “Daddy” or “The Colossus.”

## Chapter 4

### Elizabeth Bishop and Anxiety of Lost Loss:

#### Covert-, Non-, Anti- Elegies in Bishop's Later Works

In a curious similarity to the cases of Stevens, Plath, and other twentieth-century elegiac poets, Elizabeth Bishop's oeuvre includes only a handful of "formal" elegies.<sup>1</sup> And yet, although personal losses are rarely explicitly confronted in Bishop's poems, the sense of loss pervades her work, and this pervasive feeling of loss in her covertly elegiac, non-elegiac, or anti-elegiac poems is what constitutes her reputation as an elegiac poet. Biographers have often remarked on how Bishop's life was filled with losses, and critics have long highlighted the reticence and restraint in the descriptive thrust of her work, which some scholars refer to as "objective poetry."<sup>2</sup> The seeming consensus that remains almost so commonsensical as to be left unsaid is that her poetic practice is one of sublimation, in which the raw feelings are transformed into something of a higher order and the end-result reveals little of the feeling of self-pity or the biographical context of such feelings of loss; in short, her work is seen as one that transforms "pain" into "art," as exemplified by her frequently anthologized poems, "One Art" and, to a lesser extent, "North Haven." Although Bishop's work has long been assumed to be a kind of sublimation, an inquiry into the precise nature of this "sublimation" has not been fully undertaken, and this chapter aims to fill this gap in the Bishop scholarship.

The underlying thesis of this chapter is that Bishop's sublimational poetics are rooted in her anxiety of lost loss. There are, in her elegiac poetry, dual misgivings over one's desire to preserve the loss, to keep oneself from losing the loss entirely from one's memory, and one's fear of holding onto that painful experience of loss. In Bishop's poetry, this conflictual condition results in a creation of a third space, where the experience of loss, in a changed, sublimated form, is preserved as well as distanced and forgotten at the same time. For Bishop, elegies are for neither remembering nor forgetting, but for changing—and the act of writing that effects the change operates as a third space between the two poles, remembering and forgetting.

In this endeavor, the function of poetry becomes similar to note-taking: the act of externalizing the memory—such as writing it down in a note—relieves the pressure on the internal memory to retain the item all within one's own memory, and hence facilitates a kind of "safe" forgetting that keeps us from losing the item entirely. As Harald Weinrich points out, "the verb 'forget' is composed of the verb 'get' and the prefix 'for,'" and "one might paraphrase the meaning of 'forget' as 'to get rid (of something).'"<sup>3</sup> The act of writing down, in a sense, is an externalization of one's memory that allows for forgetting, or "getting rid of the item," in the internal memory but that, at the same time, resists it by creating a site where such a loss can be recalled. In that sense, Bishop's objective or descriptive poetics point less to her reticence or aversion of overt confessions<sup>4</sup> than to a desire to lose the experience while still retaining the loss: her objectivism is a way to avoid losing the experience in its entirety to the loss of loss.

This chapter will examine this anxiety of lost loss in Bishop's work, which often manifests itself in the act of externalization of loss, a creation of a space where the loss is

neither completely retained nor lost; the sublimation of “pain” into “art” occurs as a byproduct of this anxiety-driven externalization of loss. In this sense, the function of the elegy is not only to externalize and exorcise the experience of loss but also to create an ambiguous place where losses are simultaneously expunged from and retained, albeit outside of one’s subjectivity. Ultimately, this act of placing one’s subjectivity outside of itself, in a changed, “sublimated” form, is in essence an act of self-spectralization, which turns the self itself into a neither-and-both kind of “third space,” through either incorporation, in which a non-self space is made within the self, or projection, in which a self-space is made within the non-self. In this space, even as the contents—one’s experiences—may remain the same, their containers constantly undergo changes. And if her covertly elegiac, anti-elegiac, or non-elegiac elegies offer us any consolation, it comes not so much from any kind of consolatory philosophy, but rather from the mere fact that the ongoing sublimational changes of the forms of experiences entailed in this self-spectralization keep one’s thoughts in motion and, by doing so, hold off the stasis of self-assaulting melancholia.

#### I. “First Death in Nova Scotia” and the Space Between Remembering and Forgetting

An exemplary case of this self-externalization, which creates the “neither-both” space for a loss to be both preserved and forgotten, is “First Death in Nova Scotia.” Through its emphasis on exteriority, the poem captures a moment of self-spectralization. Despite the first-person narrative, the poem constructs more a “picture of the mind at work”<sup>5</sup> than a story: as Eileen John points out, we “don’t learn how Arthur died, we do not hear what it was like to touch his body, and the poem doesn’t situate the event in a



larger stream of causally related events.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of a subjective story-line, the poem begins with the description of the external objects of the funeral parlor:

In the cold, cold parlor  
my mother laid out Arthur  
beneath the chromographs:  
Edward, Prince of Wales,  
with Princess Alexandra,  
and King George with Queen Mary.  
Below them on the table  
stood a stuffed loon  
shot and stuffed by Uncle  
Arthur, Arthur’s father. (1-10)

The repetition of words within the same line or across line breaks—such as “cold, cold” in line 1, “stuffed” and “stuffed” in lines 8-9, “Arthur” and “Arthur’s” in line 10—creates a syncopated rhythm, which somewhat triflingly and almost comically mimics the apprehensive hesitance in the speaker’s voice. But outside of this affective rhythm, there is little that reveals the speaker’s emotion.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that the word, “First,” in the title suggests a presence of a subjective speaker—this experience is her “first” encounter with death<sup>8</sup>—the stanza itself is remarkably free of first-person subject pronouns; the only first-person pronoun used here is the possessive, in “my mother.” The lack of the “I” suggests two possibilities: either the focus is squarely on the exteriority and the self becomes irrelevant in such a scene, or the passage is transparently colored by the “I” so much that it becomes unnecessary or even redundant to use an explicit “I”—that is, the observant “eye” is so indicative of the “I” that the “I” can be safely left unsaid.<sup>9</sup>

“First Death in Nova Scotia” is a case in which both of these possibilities apply. On the first, the poem offers a genuine focus on the exteriority by painstakingly making Arthur—one of the objects that the stanza focuses on—the object of the sentences; as Robert Dale Parker suggests, the poem, by making Arthur the object of the sentence, puts

more emphasis on the object than on the subject, and highlights that the issue is what gets done to Arthur, not who does it.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the poem spends less time talking about Arthur than about the royal chromographs and the stuffed loon, which, on first looking, seem rather like an irrelevant and digressive attentiveness to the external objects in the parlor scene.<sup>11</sup> In this stanza, objects that seem irrelevant or external claim the main focus by forcing the subject outside of the camera frame.

At the same time, the poem's focus on the exteriority not only highlights its attention to the objects but also reveals the ways in which those objects function as a correlative of self-narrative. Critics have interpreted the poem's descriptive method as a kind of projection, in which the speaker projects herself emotionally into the objects that the child identifies with the cousin;<sup>12</sup> that is, since it is too painful for the speaker to face the reality of her cousin's death, a kind of psychological imperative operates so that the pain can be kept at a distance.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, there are elements of projection in the poem's descriptive mode. For instance, the stuffed loon becomes a kind of an objective correlative for Arthur in a sense that both the loon and Arthur were shot by Uncle Arthur: the loon was "shot and stuffed by Uncle / Arthur" (9-10), and the little Arthur also "hadn't said a word" since "Uncle Arthur fired / a bullet into him" (10-11, 12). One may also say that the makeup and cleaning of the deceased's body in preparation for the funeral can seem like an act of "stuffing" the hunted animal, in that both acts are meant to make the body of the deceased more presentable and viewable. The chromographs of the royal family too are an ironic reminder of what Uncle Arthur severed as a result of his misfire: the bloodline, the shared family lineage, which is the one thing that makes a royal family what it is.<sup>14</sup> That the first thing the speaker observes after the cold parlor

and the body of Arthur is the royal chromograph is suggestive of the speaker's subconscious awareness that the loss of Arthur does not merely signify his death but also a kind of family lineage severance.

In a sense, the speaker's willful description of the surroundings feels almost like a refusal of the poem to delve into her interiority—a refusal that in fact reveals her interiority precisely by its attempt to avoid it. As a result, the exteriority absorbs the weight of the experience, relieving the fragile interiority of the child-speaker from such weight. It is all too easy for the child-speaker to “lose” this experience of loss to her infanthood incomprehension, or, inversely, for the child-speaker to be overburdened by the weight of such experience, which she may not be psychically equipped to process and recognize; after all, this experience is the “first death” for her. C.K. Doreski writes that, for Bishop, childhood is less a matter of what happened and more a concern with perceiving and interpreting occurrences.<sup>15</sup> But here, the poem creates a space between the occurrence and its interpretation; the child-speaker is neither offering a mere reportage of the occurrence nor engaged in an active interpretation. What's happening in the child-speaker's mind is similar to what Walter Benjamin describes as the creation of “isolated experience” in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”; that is, experiences that are not assimilated, processed, interpreted, or fully integrated into our consciousness—or what Benjamin calls “long experience”—remain in us as an “isolated experience.” Memories of the objects like the stuffed loon and the chromographs are “isolated experiences,” ones that lie in between the fully integrated, interpreted “long experience” and discarded or forgotten non-experience: an interface where the occurrence and interpretation, the exteriority and interiority, merge.

Critics, including myself, should not lose sight of the fact that, when we interpret the external images of this poem as a kind of projection, such interpretations are our own projections as well. In other words, the poem itself is equivocal about whether or not these objects mean something more than what they are—whether or not they’re mere descriptions or projections of inner emotions. This equivocation is the reason for the aforementioned critical disagreements over an interpretation of this poem as either an expression of sentimentalism or a pinnacle of emotional restraint.

Shifting back from the issue of critical ambiguity to poetic ambiguity, we see that the poem’s ambiguous distinction between exteriority and interiority stems from the ambiguous distinction between the speaker’s comprehension and incomprehension of the event; that is, we are left unsure as to whether the poem’s description of the exterior is a mere portrayal of the exterior or an objective correlative of interiority precisely because we are unsure whether the poem is portraying the child-speaker’s comprehension or incomprehension of little Arthur’s death. The oscillation between comprehension and incomprehension can be more visibly observed in the following stanza:

“Come,” said my mother,  
“Come and say good-bye  
to your little cousin Arthur.”  
I was lifted up and given  
one lily of the valley  
to put in Arthur’s hand.  
Arthur’s coffin was  
a little frosted cake,  
and the red-eyed loon eyed it  
from his white, frozen lake. (21-30)

The first three lines portray what Helen Vendler describes as the adult’s effort to “conspire in a fantasy of communication still possible, as the child is told ‘say good-bye / to your little cousin Arthur.’”<sup>16</sup> The subsequent seven lines, however, show a child’s

disengagement from such fantasy. The passive voice—"I was lifted up and given one lily of the valley"—clarifies that the fantasy of communication is that of the adult, the speaker's mother, imposed upon but not necessarily shared by the speaker. If the child-speaker is disengaged from this fantasy, the dead himself too is likewise disengaged: Arthur remains an incommunicative still object, a "frosted cake" that does not participate in such fantasy. A fantasy of communication—that is, an imaginative analogy, an act of likening the experience of loss to that of saying good-bye—could have become for the speaker a way of comprehending this experience, but the poem brings up this fantasy, this way of comprehension, only to reject it, keeping the poem in limbo between a comprehension-aiding scenario and its rejection, a state of incomprehension.

The question then remains: what are we to make of this focus on the objects, the oscillation between comprehension and incomprehension that the focus on the objects reveals, and the creation of a space between comprehension and incomprehension that this oscillation brings about? David Kalstone observes that "objects hold radiant interest for [the speaker] precisely because they help her absorb numbing or threatening experiences—the loon in the poem, or the shop window and the blacksmith's in 'In the Village.'"<sup>17</sup> If objects were an aid to one's absorption of one's own experiences, then the objects would become non-selves infused with elements of selfhood, and the self, in turn, would reclaim those self-elements along with those non-selves that contain them.<sup>18</sup> It is, in a sense, a process of indirection, whereby the self-elements are found in non-selves and non-selves are found in the self: a type of poetics Sylvia Plath is known for.<sup>19</sup> And this indirection creates the in-between territory, a third space, between interpretation and recording, between comprehension and incomprehension, between remembered and

forgotten: the focus of this chapter is precisely on this in-between space—a space where the loss is neither completely retained nor lost—and its function in Bishop’s sublimational poetics driven by an anxiety over a loss of loss.

An analogy to an unrelated, anonymous poem may illustrate this point further:

With ashen glow, the moon dreams  
of becoming full: an engraving  
of its dark lost self in the earthshine.  
Such multiple mirrorings—

of the sunlight upon the earth upon the moon—  
are impossible mournings, their loss  
denied by the young crescent’s embrace  
where the new lives in the old that lives in the new.<sup>20</sup>

The poem, titled “The Old Moon in the New Moon’s Arms,” alludes to the very phenomenon in its title: the moon in its waxing gibbous phase where the bright crescent, or the new moon, wraps around and figuratively holds in its arms the dim gibbous part, the old moon. In this phenomenon, the loss of the old moon is both blurred and highlighted by the brightness of the new moon; the multiple indirections—of the sunlight reflected back by the earth upon the moon—obfuscate the loss of the “old moon,” which is denied and embraced simultaneously by the presence of the “new moon.” Objects and subject experience have a similar relationship: indirections blur the loss as much as they highlight it, and the contradiction of multiple mirrorings, the going back-and-forth within the signification system—in which the old moon at times signifies something that’s been lost, and at other times something that continues to live, albeit in the new moon’s arms—result in inconclusion that itself awaits an assignation of a meaning: an “Echo or mirror seeking of itself” that is “Quietly shining to the quiet Moon,” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge would phrase it in “Frost at Midnight.”<sup>21</sup>

That is, the focus on the object, its indirection, the in-between space that it creates, and its resultant inconclusion all collude to highlight the “whiteness” of little Arthur. Many creditable readings of “First Death in Nova Scotia” have discussed the contrast between the primary colors that dominate this poem, “red” and “white.”<sup>22</sup> While we may extract some varying symbolic meanings out of those colors themselves, the most basic and important thing here is what anyone who’s ever done any painting would know: white is a color that can be dyed by any color. And that is one color that the speaker consistently identifies Arthur with:

The gracious royal couples  
were warm in red and ermine;  
their feet were well wrapped up  
in the ladies’ ermine trains.  
They invited Arthur to be  
the smallest page at court.  
But how could Arthur go,  
clutching his tiny lily,  
with his eyes shut up so tight  
and the roads deep in snow? (41-50)

After repeatedly painting Arthur with images of whiteness—such as “Jack Frost had dropped the brush / and left him white, forever” (39-40)—the poem concludes with the sight of Arthur “clutching his tiny lily” and the psychological landscape of “the roads deep in snow,” both of which are symbolic of whiteness. If white is the color of blankness that can be dyed in any color—unlike black, the color that cannot be changed or swayed by other colors<sup>23</sup>—then Arthur is an empty object that can be dyed by any perspective, as if to underline that to be dead is to be dyed, for the dead have no voice, and the only voice they have is through the prosopopoeia of the living subject. Arthur’s whiteness points to the fact that, in death, he has turned into a locus of transference, of the interpretive activity of the viewer.

For the dead to end up becoming a site of transferential meaning-determinations for the mourners isn't a rare phenomenon in elegies, particularly in the melancholic strain of them. Mourners are said to be slave to meaning-assignments—when faced with an experience of loss, we think we can process the loss and move forward if only we can find its meanings—and that's what Georges Poulet refers to as the melancholia's "maximization of consciousness"<sup>24</sup>: the process of finding and assigning "meanings" consumes the mental activity of the mourner, and such domination of the thought processes is the symptom of a "maximized consciousness" of melancholia. Meaning-assignment is a process without any conclusions, any closures—there's only a tiring and giving-up of the process. And what I sense in the whiteness of Bishop's Arthur, its readiness for being colored in any color—its readiness, that is, for being perceived in however manner the viewer transfers himself or herself—as well as from the countless critical interpretations of this poem and its image of whiteness, which in actuality attests to its openness to transferences, is the child's mental exhaustion, a certain sense of weariness over the endless search for meanings—along with her spellbound fascination and a bonding with the past—which can only be conveyed by the indirection, inconclusion, and the in-between space created by the poem's focus on the object. "First Death in Nova Scotia" suggests that this self-spectralization and construction of the third space between remembering and forgetting constitute a part of the apparatus of Bishop's sublimational poetics, and function as a template on which the poems of *Geography III* portray the theme of loss. .

## II. "Crusoe in England" and the Benjaminian Collector



A similar theme—of loss as well as indirection and in-between space in an expression of loss—becomes pervasive in *Geography III*, a volume that follows *Questions of Travel*, in which “First Death in Nova Scotia” is included. In the words of Anne Colwell, “the poems of *Geography III* deal with overwhelming loss the way we all deal with the overwhelming light of the sun—they squint, avoid looking directly at it.... Paradoxically, but perhaps not surprisingly, this evasion makes the sense of loss both more pervasive and more deeply realized.”<sup>25</sup> Just as we detect and view the sunlight only indirectly—through its reflections off objects, windows, and so on—many of Bishop’s elegies express their sense of loss through indirection. And as we saw in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” the result of this indirection is the creation of a space of half-remembrance and half-forgetting.

It almost goes without saying that one of the critical functions of elegy is for the bereaved to remember the dead, just as is the case with gravestones; remembrance is viewed to salvage the dead from a totalizing loss of oblivion,<sup>26</sup> and elegies or gravestones function as material reminders of the loss, to aid us in our remembrance of the dead. But anthropologically speaking, there is another function to gravestones: that is, the purpose of a gravestone is to forget—that, by externalizing one’s memory through the stone, one can safely leave things to oblivion.<sup>27</sup> Memorialization—whether it’s the edifying of a gravestone or of a memorial site, or the writing of an elegy—is simultaneously an act of remembering and forgetting, which creates an equivocal space between the two.

This double-function of memorialization owes in part to our conception of what a “memory” is. Aristotle posited that memory is “like the imprint or drawing in us of things felt,” and that forgetting is a decay of such imprint.<sup>28</sup> Aristotle’s view of memory

is inherited by one of the two conventional theories of forgetting in modern psychology: it argues that the memory trace simply fades or decays, much in the way a signpost that is exposed to sun and rain gradually fades until it becomes illegible,<sup>29</sup> and is supported by Ebbinghaus's classical study of memory retention rate, which finds that the amount of memory lost is proportionate to the lapse of time.<sup>30</sup> As Adrian Forty points out, if objects are made to stand for memory, their decay or destruction implies or symbolizes forgetting.<sup>31</sup> In other words, so long as objects symbolize memory, memorialization does not guarantee the preservation of memory. In a sense that decay or destruction is an inevitable fate for an object, memorizing and forgetting are not only the opposites of one another but also inseparable complements to each other like a Siamese twin—not only in a sense that what one remembers will at some point be forgotten, but also in its opposite sense as well, as in Heidegger's claim that only what has been forgotten can be remembered.<sup>32</sup> Symbolization of memory in object forms, whether by memorializing and elegizing results in this paradox, containing both a fear of forgetting and a desire to forget.

With Bishop, however, there's an added element to this paradox: that of indirection, in which the feelings or moods of loss are extracted and transplanted into some other objects, in a way reminiscent to how one's spirit and memories are transferred from one body to another in such science fiction films as *Ghost in the Shell*.<sup>33</sup> In *Inscrutable Houses*, Colwell claims that poems in *Geography III*, such as "Crusoe in England," "Poem," and "The Moose," examine the paradox of loss and recovery, using the poems as a device for recovering what is lost by re-embodiment that life in a new form.<sup>34</sup> This paradox—of loss and recovery, of remembering and forgetting—isn't itself peculiar to Bishop's elegiac work; any work of elegizing or memorializing is and will be

fraught with those paradoxical elements, and that is why conventional elegies profess their intent to remember and preserve the lost object at the same time as bemoaning their inadequacies to do so, for an elegy or memorial is but a displaced effigy of the lost thing that isn't the lost thing itself. What differentiates Bishop's elegiac work is the added layer of displacement that her indirection creates: an indirection that leads the speaker to focus on the external objects instead of her inner feelings of loss as in the case of "First Death in Nova Scotia"; or, in the case of "Crusoe in England," an indirection that borrows the persona of someone else's story and planting a feeling of dispossession into that story, in which the speaker only obliquely laments a loss when he is removed from the site of loss.

The effect of such indirection is analogous to our feelings when we see a fallen-off scab. Scab is an in-between object: it can be a reminder of a fresh wound, at the same time as a sign of its healing or half-healing. A look at a scab isn't the same as a direct look at the wound, but it nonetheless fills our imagination with thoughts of a wound, and that is the mechanism of the way in which evasion makes the sense of loss both more pervasive and more deeply felt.

In the case of "Crusoe in England," the most prominent method of indirection is interlocution: the use of another writer's story and character for the purpose of retelling. "Crusoe in England" is a story being retold—a kind of translation<sup>35</sup>—and such indirection is indicative of the sense of lost loss, like the old moon in the new moon's arms: a reflection of reflection, losing sight of the original in the process. The biographical debate over the poem is itself indicative of this sense of the loss of the

original: critics have looked for what, or who, the “real” subject of the poem is, and as Kim Fortuny points out, the poem “is generally read as a thinly veiled meditation on the loss of Bishop’s estranged lover, Lota de Macedos Soares.”<sup>36</sup>

The author herself, however, was reportedly horrified by the suggestion that the poem was an autobiographical metaphor for Brazil and Lota.<sup>37</sup> On the motive of writing “Crusoe in England,” Bishop’s reply was:

I don’t know. I reread the book and discovered how really awful Robinson Crusoe was, which I hadn’t realized.... I reread it all in one night. And I had forgotten it was so moral. All that Christianity. So I think I wanted to re-see it with all that left out.<sup>38</sup>

At first glance, the quotation may appear to emphasize Bishop’s reaction against the story’s immersion in “morality” and “Christianity.” This and other pieces of evidence have resulted in the more recent reading of Bishop as a politically and socially engaged poet, and of “Crusoe in England” as a covert literary representation of same-sex relationships,<sup>39</sup> even in spite of the author’s said denial of such intent. Of course, authorial intent is always a matter for speculation—there’s no way for us to know whether Bishop may or may not have been honest in her interviews, and interviewees have occasions where they may say things they may not have actually meant<sup>40</sup>—and then there’s also the question of whether a poetic work is still an author’s even when it has left her hands.<sup>41</sup> At a certain point, whether or not the poem is intended to be about Lota becomes a moot point; when read by readers with certain inclinations and biographical knowledge of Bishop’s life, the poem can be interpreted as being indirectly about Lota’s death, insofar as the practice of reading is always a kind of transference. In a loss of loss where an object-loss itself has undergone a disappearance, its indirect

expressive traces can lead us to many possible directions, and can easily misguide us, especially those who look to be led astray.

Rather than focusing on what we can't know, such as the author's intent, the present chapter proposes to focus on what we can: the poem's status as a retelling of a story, of a man who is removed from the site of the remembrance—the poem as a kind of earthshine reflected back as moonlight. And the part of the previous Bishop quote that is critical for my purpose is this phrase: “to re-see it with all that left out.” The present focus, in other words, is on the poem's attempt to salvage things that were “left out.”

Of course, things “left out” of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* are things that Bishop believes are repressed beneath Defoe's emphasis on Christian preaching and moral victories: elements hidden beneath Defoe's account of Crusoe's triumphant return to his island, which has turned into a prosperous colony. Given that an excavation of repression is an interpretive activity susceptible to analyst's transference, Bishop is not so much inheriting the spirit of Defoe's *Crusoe*,<sup>42</sup> but rather transplanting that of her own *Crusoe* into the story. As Bishop's drafts of “*Crusoe in England*” reveal, its initial title was “*Last Days of Crusoe*.”<sup>43</sup> The thrust of the title is decidedly self-elegiac, as if the poem is a story about someone who is himself about to be “left out” of this world—an impending self-loss as a type of double-loss as examined in the *Berryman* section. With a foreseeable self-loss looming in the background, the spirit Bishop infuses into her *Crusoe* is that of someone is far enough removed from a site of loss to be able to articulate his feeling of loss: someone whose feeling of loss is so faint as to be left out of Defoe's original version.

As such, “left out” objects haunt the poem as metonyms. The poem begins precisely with an account of what has been “left out”—a double-exposure of an account of a newly discovered island and a musing on his “old” island that still remains “un-rediscovered.” The double-exposure adumbrates the fact that his “old” island remains to be left off the maps and “books”:

A new volcano has erupted,  
the papers say, and last week I was reading  
where some ship saw an island being born:  
at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;  
and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—  
rose in the mate’s binoculars  
and caught on the horizon like a fly.  
They named it. But my poor old island’s still  
un-rediscovered, un-renamable.  
None of the books has ever got it right. (1-10)

Line 3 equates being discovered to “being born”—the principle appears to be squarely that of the Berkeley-ian premise of “*Esse est percipi*.”<sup>44</sup> The flipside of the principle is that if an object comes to be “born” when it is perceived or discovered, what has not been discovered, perceived, or known would be a nonexistence, something “not yet born,” and what has remained “un-rediscovered” and “un-renamable” is tantamount to something that was once born but now lost—something that is dead. In other words, by equating “discovery” with “birth,” the poem makes a linguistic move in this stanza to signal the speaker’s perception that things “left out” of our accounts of the world are, in essence, dead.

In that sense, the unremembered island functions as a metaphor of the poem’s object-loss that has turned into a mere echo and a trace of loss. And collecting such echoes and traces of loss becomes the mission of the poem. Rather true to the elegiac convention, the poem shifts in the second and third stanzas toward a descriptive

remembrance of the traces of object-loss. In describing them, the poem takes on an obsessive propensity toward cataloging of the details of the island—turtles, lava, beaches, tree snail, berry, among other things—and that has prompted scholars to comment on how the poem “is obsessed with recording and mapping and naming.”<sup>45</sup> Proliferation of details is one of the elegiac techniques that have become noticeable since the nineteenth century, the famous examples of which include Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and its obsessive accretion of the details of personal moments:<sup>46</sup> like residual memories of pain in the spine, Victorian prototypes are collected into the spirit of the poem as a haunting.

Similar to the way in which the voluminous accretion of personal moments is meant to offset the actual loss of Arthur Henry Hallam in *In Memoriam*, the exhaustive specificity with which the speaker recounts the details of the island in this poem is meant to prevent him from losing the island to inaccurate accounts and eventual oblivion; however, the speaker’s obsessive recounting precisely reveals the threat to his recollective efforts. As the speaker’s proclamation in the first stanza—“None of the books has ever got it right”—shows, mistaken accounts can easily render his “poor old island” lost and “un-rediscovered” by repressing it under false accounts. Also, the speaker’s cataloging effort is at times sabotaged by himself—his tendency to summarize his findings by phrases like “The island had one kind of everything” or “There was one kind of berry,” whereby the summaries suppress the individual objects by subsuming them into a category. The speaker’s obsessive desire to “get it right” by collecting and salvaging detailed accounts of the island comes precisely from his anxiety over the totalizing loss of his island through mischaracterization, oblivion, or summarization.

In addition to “getting it right,” this act of collecting and recollecting details of the past has other functions beyond mere preservation. In order to explicate the multi-layered significance of the act of recollecting past and defunct details of life, it may be beneficial to examine a similar, proximate and analogous act of collecting past and defunct objects—an act of what Walter Benjamin calls a “collector.”<sup>47</sup> Benjamin describes the motive of the collector as follows: the collector “takes up the struggle against dispersion.”<sup>48</sup> Dispersion, in the instance of collection, means confusion of the scattering, its meaninglessness, the disorganization void of any “knowledge of [the objects’] origin and their duration in history.”<sup>49</sup> If we are to extrapolate the theory of collection and apply it to the act of recollection, dispersion would mean the disorganization of memory bits to incomprehension and their loss to oblivion. That is to say, if we are to liken our memory to the proverbial drawer, dispersion would be a state in which the objects in the drawers are so randomly scattered that we are unable to find objects we look for.<sup>50</sup>

To say that the function of collecting and recollecting is to prevent us from losing the object merely reinforces our popular and dominant view of the function of the elegy: to preserve the memory of the dead in order to save it from the totalizing loss of oblivion. But Benjamin’s theory helps us in that it elucidates for us the mechanism of such preservation. For Benjamin, what is decisive in collecting is:

that the object is detached from all its original function in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this “completeness”? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection. And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the



epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes. It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired), it turns to stone. Everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious becomes socle,<sup>51</sup> frame, pedestal, seal of his possession.... Collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestation of “nearness” it is the most binding.<sup>52</sup>

The key idea in this passage appears to be that of the object’s detachment from its functional relations and its immediate utility. This detachment is the “foundation... of that ‘disinterested’ contemplation by virtue of which the collector attains to an unequalled view of the object—a view that takes in more, and other, than that of the profane owner and which we would do best to compare to the gaze of the great physiognomist.”<sup>53</sup> By being taken out of their functional utility, the objects are infused with the spirit of a “physiognomist.” Through this mechanism, collecting becomes “a form of practical memory,” and by a reversible logic, memory takes on a character akin to an act of collection, through its extracting of past events from their original context and rearranging of them into a “new, expressly devised historical system” of personal historical narrative called remembrance.

At the same time as the objects are detached from their original context, function, and utility, for the collector, “the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects.”<sup>54</sup> The collected objects then become a peculiar half-space where the objects and their “worlds” are at once defunct and “present.” Memories, like collected objects, are similar half-spaces where their contents are at once defunct—in a sense they are in the past—and present—in a sense that they are still continuously reorganized to produce new meanings in the present arrangements of the subject’s universe. That is the mechanism of

preservation: a storage in a half-space between object-presence and its detachment.

Preservation of an object always comes at the cost of its transformation.

Memory is transformative, and this cruelty of the preservative mechanism is at the heart of the Bishop's Crusoe's "self-pity":

I often gave way to self-pity.  
"Do I deserve this? I suppose I must.  
I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there  
a moment when I actually chose this?  
I don't remember, but there could have been."  
What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?  
With my legs dangling down familiarly  
over a crater's edge, I told myself  
"Pity should begin at home." So the more  
pity I felt, the more I felt at home. (56-65)

While the source of Bishop's Crusoe's self-pity is rather obvious—his loneliness—the phrase, "pity should begin at home," is curious enough to deserve attention. To understand what the phrase means, one may be forced to reassess why Bishop's Crusoe pities himself. The preceding stanza gives us a clue on the reasons behind Crusoe's self-pity: after describing the island, the speaker comments, "Beautiful, yes, but not much company" (55). If the fact that the speaker does not have much company is the source of despondency, then the fact of his isolation on this inhabited island must be the reason he feels self-pity. And judging from the fact that the speaker seems to recall fondly the appearance of Friday—"Just when I thought I couldn't stand it another minute longer, / Friday came" (144-145)—the lack of company and the feeling of isolation seem like the right answer to the source of his self-pity. To say that the speaker felt self-pity because he was lonely seems, however, too simple an answer that prompts us to reexamine what exactly is "it" that the speaker "couldn't stand... another minute longer."

The "it," of course, refers to the nightmare:

... I'd have  
nightmares of other islands  
stretching away from mine, infinities  
of islands, islands spawning islands,  
like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs  
of islands, knowing that I had to live  
on each and every one, eventually,  
for ages, registering their flora,  
their fauna, their geography. (131-143)

As seen in this stanza, what makes this nightmare so nightmarish is the taxonomy that the speaker would have to compile on each and every uninhabited island, had the uninhabited island actually spawned other uninhabited islands as it does in the nightmare. The linguistic emphasis certainly falls on those lines that depict the act of taxonomy, with filler words like “eventually” and “for ages” and their accompanying caesurae functioning as speed-bumps to make the readers stop at the culminating apposition: “their flora, / their fauna, their geography.”<sup>55</sup> To say that he'd have “had to” live on each and every island is rather strange, since, if there's no one around, there's nothing that would force him to carry out the taxonomical task. What makes the speaker carry out the taxonomical task is his collector instinct: the desire to seek completeness, to put together meaningless pieces of the scatter into a meaningful system of properties and relations—to recapture the social structure constructed from scientific knowledge, akin to that of his familiar European homeland.

What fuels the speaker's collector instinct is the fact that he finds himself surrounded on an inhabited island by foreign objects, which, to him, are devoid of any meaningful system of properties and relations. The trick of the exilic consciousness is that, by virtue of the fact that the subject has himself been extracted from his original context, all objects in the surrounding come to seem as though they in turn are extracted

from their original contexts—and those objects must, therefore, be put back together in a “new, expressly devised historical system” of a collection, in which process a collector, like a mourner, becomes a slave to meaning-assignation. One method in which Bishop’s Crusoe rearranges these “foreign” objects of the uninhabited island is by turning them into resources for his “island industries” that manufacture products that he used to use while he was on his “home” island—while he was in his original context:

The island had one kind of everything:  
one tree snail, a bright violet-blue  
with a thin shell, crept over everything,  
over the one variety of tree...  
There was one kind of berry, a dark red.  
I tried it, one by one, and hours apart.  
Sub-acid, and not bad, no ill effects;  
and so I made home-brew. I’d drink  
the awful, fizzy, stinging stuff  
that went straight to my head  
and play my home-made flute  
(I think it had the weirdest scale on earth)  
and, dizzy, whoop and dance among the goats.  
Home-made, home-made! But aren’t we all?  
I felt a deep affection for  
the smallest of my island industries.  
No, not exactly, since the smallest was  
a miserable philosophy. (69-72, 77-91)

The taxonomy continues in this fifth stanza, with the speaker enumerating “one kind of everything” as though the island were his partial Noah’s arc. The stanza portrays how the speaker turns these foreign objects—such as an unfamiliar dark red berry, a flute with an unfamiliar scale—into something he’s able to recognize: a “home-brew” that bears enough resemblance to tea, or a “home-made flute” that bears enough resemblance to flute. This domestication of foreign objects into something vaguely familiar, something with a vague feel of “home,” is what the collector instinct guides Bishop’s Crusoe to do.

In this sense, the poem is not so much an affirmation of creativity emerging from an exile's spinings,<sup>56</sup> but rather an admission of human frailty, which, when faced with an unfamiliar and disorienting circumstance, prompts the speaker to look for any trace of familiar things that may guide him out of his disorientation.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, the "home" Bishop's Crusoe creates with his incessant collecting and domesticating of foreign objects is merely an approximation. And like the way in which, according to the "interference" theory of memory and forgetting, additional memories interfere with one's efforts to recall previous memories, Crusoe's recollected image of "home" becomes corrupted into a mere simulacrum the longer Crusoe is removed from his "home" and the more "home-made" things he produces on this island in approximation of things he knew and used at "home." In this process, the idea of "home" itself becomes blurry, turning into a kind of autonomized idea which Jacques Derrida calls a "ghost":

Once the ghost is produced by the incarnation of spirit (the autonomized idea or thought), when this *first* ghost effect has been operated, it is in turn negated, integrated, and incorporated by the very subject of the operation who, claiming the uniqueness of its *own* human body, then becomes, according to Marx as critic of Stirner, the absolute ghost, in fact the ghost of the ghost of the specter-spirit, simulacrum of simulacra without end.<sup>58</sup>

Once the idea of "home" becomes an autonomized ideation in one's exile, it becomes a ghost and then undergoes an endless interiorization and ghost production, whereby a ghost becomes a ghost of the ghost. In exile, one is removed not only from "home" in a physical sense but also from the idea of "home" as well. And any preservation of it—an attempt to create a collection that approximates the previous system of meaning—only furthers its transformation.

To return to the initial inquiry on the source of Bishop's Crusoe's self-pity, one may interpret his self-pity as originating in this recognition of the totalizing exilic loss: a

loss, in exile, of not only “home” but also the memory of “home,” which, through the interferences of time in exile and false approximations of “home” one makes in one’s exile, erodes into a simulacrum, then endlessly into a simulacrum of simulacra. And for this reason, the transformative and dissolutive nature of the preservative mechanism proves to be unkind to us when we seek to preserve objects as we remember them. The dictum of “Pity should begin at home” expresses a sentiment akin to “Home is where the pity is”—a rephrased version of “Home is where the heart is”<sup>59</sup>—and constitutes a philosophy of someone who recognizes this fact of loss: any effort to reclaim the lost object will only amplify the sense of loss. This philosophy—the speaker refers to it as the “smallest” of the island industries and the only one toward which he does not feel any “deep affection”—is “miserable” because it provides no consolation. All it does is that in its transference of the object of one’s sorrow from one thing—namely, the loss of “home” in this case—to another—namely, the realization of a totalizing loss, for which one can only pity oneself—it moves our thoughts forward and keeps the stagnancy of melancholia at bay, the way the pain of a new injury sometimes takes our mind off that of the old one.

If, in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” indirection and diffusion of sorrow occur through the object’s absorption of one’s experience, in “Crusoe in England,” the same occurs as a result of numerous layers the poem creates between the locus of its occasioning sorrow and the locus of its present narration. There are spatial and temporal removals between the presently narrating Crusoe, now in England, and things he’s lost. First, there’s the temporal distance: what he’s lost—his island, his experiences on the island, his initial feeling of the loss of his “home” upon being stranded on the island—are all in the past tense. And then there’s the spatial remove: Crusoe is no longer on the

island, and is on “another island” that “doesn’t seem like one” (56, 57). By virtue of these spatial and temporal removes, all the objects and memories are extracted from their original contexts, and are collected and stored in changed forms as a Benjaminian collector would do. No object is more symbolic of this fact than the knife Crusoe used while he was on the island:

The knife there on the shelf—  
it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.  
It lived. How many years did I  
beg it, implore it, not to break?  
I knew each nick and scratch by heart,  
the bluish blade, the broken tip,  
the lines of wood-grain on the handle...  
Now it won’t look at me at all.  
The living soul has dribbled away.  
My eyes rest on it and pass on. (164-173)

And removed from its original context, and having lost the meaning it once had, the objects beg to be collected and put into a newly expressed system of meaning—a museum:

The local museum’s asked me to  
leave everything to them:  
the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes,  
my shedding goatskin trousers  
(moths have got in the fur),  
the parasol that took me such a time  
remembering the way the ribs should go.  
It still will work but, folded up,  
looks like a plucked and skinny fowl.  
How can anyone want such things? (174-183)

The flute, the knife, shoes, the goatskin trousers—those are all objects that have been removed from their utility, a kind of things that prompts the question, “How can anyone want such things?”<sup>60</sup> Much in the same way Crusoe first records and names foreign objects on the uninhabited island like a collector, the things he used while he was on the

island are now being collected like foreign objects. This realization—that he, along with his belongings, has now turned into a part of the collection, rather than a collector—can only bring about the ironic musing of “How can anyone want such things?” because this knowledge—that his past selves, his past experiences, of which the knife that “won’t look at” him anymore is symbolic,<sup>61</sup> can also be lost from their original circumstances and need to be rearranged into a new system of meaning if they were to be salvaged from a totalizing loss—is terrifying enough that it has to be deflected with irony. These multiple layers of removes—from the time of their original use, from the places they were being used at, from the meanings and utility they used to have—diffuse and accentuate the sense of dispossession, the way the old moon is both erased and illuminated by the new moon.

In the end, “Crusoe in England” may or may not be an elegy for Lota de Macedo Soares as previous scholars have argued, but regardless, the present chapter reads the poem as an elegy for things that are “left out” of our time, records, consciousnesses, or stories—things that have lost their original meanings and circumstances, things that have disappeared into oblivion, or things whose truths have been overwritten by fictions or falsities—of which Crusoe’s “un-rediscovered,” and hence lost, island is emblematic. Poems such as “Crusoe in England” reveal an anxiety over the loss of loss as an underlying impulse in Bishop’s elegies. This anxiety compels poetic creations that simultaneously retain and release the lost objects, through their adoption of a “collector” character as well as their ambivalence over such character, along with the questionings over the “miserable philosophy” that it represents: the anxiety-driven collection constitutes yet another facet of the mechanism of poetic sublimation in Bishop’s elegies.



And it is an anxiety that can only speak to us through the removes of half-spaces, the endless layers of distances—the distance between the original Crusoe and Bishop’s translation of Crusoe, between Bishop’s rendition of the poem and readers’ interpretations of it, and between the readers’ interpretations and their readers’ interpretations.

### III. “Poem” and Others: Third Space, Collector, and Bishop’s Sublimational Poetics

In the loss-filled *Geography III*, “Poem” and the subsequent poems combine the previously discussed two elements—namely, the creation of in-between space and the adoption of a collector personality—to form Bishop’s sublimational poetics, in which, like the act of note-taking, losses are recorded in changed and estranged forms outside of one’s subjectivity. Like the preceding poems, “Poem” posits a similar premise of removal and distance: the distance between the pictorial of the painting and the linguistic portrayal by the ekphrasis, between the speaker and the speaker’s uncle whom she never met, between art copying life and life itself, and between “life and the memory of it,” as Bishop writes in one of the lines (53). The poem begins by describing the painting, thereby translating the painting’s visual representation into a verbal form of the poem and illuminating, in the process, the distance and difference between the two:

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,  
American or Canadian,  
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays  
—this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)  
has never earned any money in its life.  
Useless and free, it has spent seventy years  
as a minor family relic  
handed along collaterally to owners  
who looked at it sometimes, or didn’t bother to. (1-9)

In removing the painting from its original context and rearranging it in a new system of a verbal construct, the poem takes on the character of a collector, who possesses a keen understanding of the transformative nature of the preservative mechanism of collection. There's a touch of irony—akin to that of Crusoe's musing, "How can anyone want such things?"—in the poem's attempt to collect and salvage this painting from a totalizing loss, which, without the poem giving it a voice, would be the fate of this painting.

This irony originates in the painting's seeming incongruence, between its appearance—that is, its resemblance, in size, to a dollar bill—and its substance—that is, its lack of monetary value as indicated by the fact that it "has never earned any money in its life," not even a dollar bill. In fact, a little biographical detail, as Bishop remarks in one of her interviews, further underscores how worthless this painting really is:

"An uncle of mine. Uncle George. My grandmother owned four of his paintings.... I wrote a new poem about this. It is called 'Poem' and has to do with one of his pictures. I had already written about him once before."  
"In 'Large Bad Picture,' you mean?"  
"Yes."  
"Was he a good painter?"  
"He was a very bad painter."<sup>62</sup>

Given that an artistic survival generally hinges in no small part on the artwork's artistic merit, this painting—not a good one, done by a "very bad painter"—could easily have been lost to oblivion, and almost was, since it was only casually, "collaterally" handed along to owners who "didn't bother to" look at it most of the time; and in a Berkeleyan sense, not being looked at—not being perceived—is akin to nonexistence. The object survives only by virtue of the "Poem," albeit in a different medium and through a process of destruction that a translation of an object into another medium would entail. The incongruence between the "bad" painting and the good poem that salvages the bad

painting adds another layer of irony, which Bishop herself probably didn't intend but which, regardless, puts this poem in the same category of elegy as "Crusoe in England": an elegy for things that were "left out," of record, of memory, of art history—an elegy for things extracted out of their utility—an elegy for useless things. One minor difference is that "Poem" is a comic elegy, and its faint feeling of dispossession is made farcical by the incongruence between the solemn theme of loss and the trifling object-loss.

This uselessness of the painting is underscored by the rhetorical device of redundancy: line 5—the painting "has never earned any money in its life"—and the beginning of line 6—"Useless and free"—essentially repeats the same content. There is, however, another layer of meaning to this redundancy. The word "free" means, on one plane, that the painting has no monetary value. But the fact that the painting has no monetary value or no utility also gives it a certain freedom, in a sense that things that are "free" of value are also "free" to be used in ways that are not originally intended, for those objects have no intended utility to begin with. For instance, canonical works of paintings—which are usually valuable and certainly not "useless and free"—come with inherited meanings that we cannot entirely disregard when writing their ekphrases; if we do, we risk being viewed as unlearned. That is to say, an ekphrasis on something famous like "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by Pieter Breughel would inevitably be read under the overtone of W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" precisely for the fact that language is a historical entity and it always carries echoes of past works that have been integrated as a part of our language acquisition heritage. A useless and "free" painting, however, stipulates no such limitations. In other words, like the whiteness of little Arthur in "First Death in Nova Scotia," the "useless" painting becomes a site of transference

meaning-attributions and extrapolations, where the author of the ekphrasis is “free” to assign new and unintended meanings as if writing on a blank slate.

It is precisely in this freedom to make a leap toward new, unintended meanings that “Poem” becomes something more than an elegy for the painting as a representative of things left out of our mind; it also becomes an elegy for the speaker’s uncle, whom she never knew. As an elegy for someone she previously did not know—an elegy of an imagined loss, like Roethke’s “Elegy for Jane”—the poem forges a connection between the speaker and the deceased, and then recognizes its loss:

I never knew him. We both knew this place,  
apparently, this literal small backwater,  
looked at it long enough to memorize it,  
our years apart. How strange. And it’s still loved,  
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).  
Our visions coincided—“visions” is  
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:  
art “copying from life” and life itself,  
life and the memory of it so compressed  
they’ve turned into each other. Which is which? (45-54)

The poem has sometimes been read as “a sudden recognition... [of] the strangeness and intimacy of meeting the spirit of place in this ‘minor family relic,’”<sup>63</sup> but it seems to me that what the poem recognizes is not so much the meeting with a vague “spirit of place” but rather an encounter, through the shared “look” at the same locale, with a spirit of someone she had not previously known. Line 45 immediately denies any previous link between the speaker and her great-uncle—“I never knew him”—and then takes out the negation in the second sentence to forge a connection: “We both knew this place” (45). The connection is constructed, as a forgery, where it had not existed before, by virtue of the shared word—the word “knew” is used in both sentences—to describe the shared landscape, a landscape the two had looked at, albeit in separate times and through

separate eyes. If the pain of loss in “Crusoe in England” is like that of phantom pain—like a pain in the lost limb, it is a pain in the place in himself that he’s lost, which he only recognizes in the erosion of the memories and keepsakes of his experiences on the uninhabited island—the lamentation of loss in this poem is an almost celebratory one in which the speaker recognizes a newly-forged connection, and this creation—and the recognition of its simultaneous loss—results in the mixture of muted joy and sorrow.

In the preceding chapter, I present a case that Roethke’s “Elegy for Jane” is a poem of distant loss—that it is a type of “lost loss” in that it is an expression of a loss of an opportunity to know the deceased enough to “lose” her, a loss of an opportunity to lose someone. Although Sandra M. Gilbert in *Inventions of Farewell* classifies the poem as a poem of friendship by placing it in the section entitled “Mourning the Deaths of Friends,”<sup>64</sup> it speaks more to the fact that the language to express “lost loss” is sorely lacking in the current elegiac discourse and that the difficulty of categorizing this type of elegies stems from such lack; I’d propose that there probably ought to be a category of elegy called “elegy for people whom we never knew or met (and who weren’t famous),” for, in some ways, this forgery of connection and the ability to celebrate, mourn, or sometimes even vilify the cognition of such connection and its loss are some of the hallmarks of modern elegies that function outside of the dominant “loss-consolation” paradigm of conventional elegies. Though “Poem” focuses less on the lamentation over the loss of an opportunity to know the deceased enough to “lose” him or her than on a visionary experience that almost borders on a wonderment over the discovery of such loss—and the tone of the poem is unmistakably not as sorrowful as that of Roethke’s “Elegy for Jane”—it participates in a project similar to that of the Roethke poem: a

reclamation or salvaging of a “lost loss” that would otherwise be lost to us had the poem not given it a voice and a sublimated, poetic shape.

This visionary experience is a result of self-spectralization, a turning of the self into the other and its reverse: creation of a half-space between the two. The poem dissects this vision as a coinciding of “two looks,” in which the two individuals meet at the intersection between “life and the memory of it.” The experience—the vision, the “look”—is divided into two elements—life and its memory—which are melded into one another to the point where they cannot be distinguished from each other, where we would not know “which is which.” It is almost as if the discovery—of, in this case, an existing connection with someone the speaker never knew and the loss of such connection—results from this process of breaking apart a singular experience into distinct components and putting them back together, akin to the system of logic in which the object is dissected into a thesis and an antithesis and then coalesced into a synthesis. Life and memory are inseparable—memory is a part of what makes up our life, or so we think—but with a closer look, we divide them into two, and reorganize and assemble them back into a synthesis; this motion of thoughts staves off, however fleetingly, the stasis of self-assaulting melancholia, and this motion that disturbs the stillness of the maximized consciousness is what anchors the sublimatory poetics of Bishop’s elegiac work.

Mirroring the sublimatory poetics of the three poems examined in this chapter, other poems of *Geography III* show a similar tendency to leave the lost object unnamed, or to address the lost object only obliquely, or in some translated form—to the point that only scholars or others familiar with Bishop’s life can even take a guess at what the lost object is—or as a concept rather than an actual object. Even aside from the three poems

that this chapter examines, “The Moose” has been described by critics as an “elegy for place,” rather than for “the” or “a” place or the moose, and “The End of March” is read as one of the poems for the end of life,<sup>65</sup> where the “end” becomes a symbolic one that is oxymoronically entangled with the end of death-like winter months of March. In both poems, the feeling of loss is faintly recorded despite the lack of any specific object-loss, like a kite string without a kite: as Bishop phrases it in “The End of March,” “the ghost... / A kite string?—But no kite” (179: 22-23). But as tenuous as the sense of loss may be, this “recording” has to be done, if one hopes to stave off the prospect of lost loss.

A similar point can also be made of Bishop’s most famous elegiac work, “One Art.” Even though the poem is more explicitly about the theme of loss than any other poems of *Geography III* save, perhaps, for “Crusoe in England”—“Crusoe in England,” one may say, does foreground the theme of loss, by beginning with an account of the lost island and by ending with a mention of Friday’s death—the speaker focuses less on the lost object than on her wish to turn the fact of loss into an art form, just as the Crusoe speaker obsessively collects and recollects the lost objects even if remembrance inevitably effaces and transforms them into some other sublimated shapes. And like “Poem,” “One Art” also places itself in the in-between space of irony, the incongruence between its tonal lightness—“the joking voice” (16)—and the weight of the subject: a tragicomic elegy.

It is not hard to wonder if the lost objects named in this poem—lost door keys, the hour badly spent, places, names, mother’s watch, loved houses, two cities—are the traces of losses that have been lost to incomprehension, as in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” to repression, oblivion, or fiction, as in “Crusoe in England,” or to losses of opportunities to

build a connection, as in “Poem.” So much has already been written about “One Art” that it would be a fruitless exercise to rehash all the fine readings of the poem by the previous scholarship. My only other contribution here is to add one more layer of complexity to the phrase in the final line, “*Write it!*” If, as in the earlier discussion of “First Death in Nova Scotia,” the act of “writing” is seen to be the third pole, a creation of a third space between remembering and forgetting, then the transformation effected by “writing” anchors Bishop’s sublimational poetics. That is, by “writing,” the poem means here the acts of self-spectralization and of collection that reorganize the expired, lost objects into new containers: the moving of old wine into a new wineskin whereby the old wine undergoes a transformation by absorbing the smells and textures of the new wineskin.

The underlying thesis of those poems suggests that, if objects are to be inevitably lost, then at least we could, and we would want to, preserve the fact of their losses, the concept of loss, or even just the vague traces of losses. These facts, concepts, and traces surface as external objects infused with self-meanings in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” a collection of meaningless and useless things in “Crusoe in England” or “Poem.” And in “One Art,” those are summarily molded into the form of an “art.” For that is the only form that we can try to preserve—even if, as Wordsworth’s Arab rider dream suggests, art forms themselves may not survive as permanence.

Elegy, ultimately, is an act of putting into a new meaning system an object whose original meanings and original forms have expired. Therefore, an elegist—one who details and recollects the experiences of or surrounding the lost object—takes on a character akin to that of a collector extracting an object out of its original form or



circumstance and rearranging it in another. Changes of forms or contexts do not console—the laurel wreath wouldn't stop Apollo from lamenting the loss of Daphne—but the motion of thoughts that they create can, at times, help assuage, even temporarily, the pain of self-pity. From beyond the layers of multiple removes—that is, the layers created by the changes the object goes through—the anxiety over losing the loss continues to haunt, and this oxymoronic desire to retain the lost object but to facilitate the moving-on is ultimately at the heart of Bishop's sublimational poetics.

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<sup>1</sup> Critics often note that Bishop never felt comfortable as an overt elegist (Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* [Burlington: Ashgate, 2006], 49). The exact number of her published elegies depends on how one defines what a “formal elegy” is, but it’s largely agreed that there’s a relative scarcity of overt elegies in her oeuvre. Poems such as “Cootchie,” “Anaphora,” “The Burglar of Babylon,” “First Death in Nova Scotia,” and “North Haven” qualify as such. Other elegies were never judged complete, and an instance of such is a proposed book-length poem called *Elegy*, which her 1977 application for a Guggenheim fellowship described as being “partly written” but was never finished (Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 538). The present author’s own archival research at Vassar College did unearth a copy of Bishop’s Guggenheim fellowship application (“Statement of Plans” in *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Box 40.7), and it confirms that her Guggenheim application does indeed mention the book-length project called *Elegy*. The present author was, however, not able to find any sustained body of drafts that seem like a part of such project or can corroborate the actual existence of it. There are notes in Box 64.20 that appear to be evidence of a rudimentary planning of such a volume, however, and a snippet of it reads as follows: “The ELEGY poem – make it in sections, some anecdotal, somelyrical [sic] / different length – never more than two short pages.” One may consider the possibility that this absence of Bishop’s elegiac work is itself a form of lost loss—poems about loss lost to self-censorship, or lost to archival labyrinth. A more plausible inference here, however, is that Bishop had enough elegist sensibilities to want to compose such a project but that she ultimately did not undertake it; this finding confirms Bishop’s discomfort with overt elegy in spite of the visible elegiac thrust in her work. The compilation of Bishop’s uncollected poems, drafts, and fragments, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box*, edited by Alice Quinn (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), also shows little evidence of this book-length project; the only overtly elegiac poem in that collection is an unfinished poem titled “Aubade: an elegy.”

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Weinrich, 1.

<sup>4</sup> And Bishop’s distaste for overt confessions is well-known, such as from her oft-quoted critique of confessional poetry: “You just wish they’d keep some of those things to themselves” (Elizabeth Bishop, *The Collected Prose* [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984], xix).

<sup>5</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1988), 296.

<sup>6</sup> Eileen John, “Poetry and Cognition” in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, John Gibson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 226.

<sup>7</sup> Aside from the affective syncopation mentioned here, critics have pointed to other poetic devices that create a sense in the poem which Anne Stevenson describes as “near-sentimentalism” (Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* [New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966], 48). For instance, Bonnie Costello suggests that the trimeter of the poem itself adds a “dirgelike weight” to the lines (Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991], 195), although, considering that trimeters have been historically used for light verse, such as in Middle English poetry, the effect of the trimeter here isn’t limited to that of dirgelike gravity but also includes a certain light-hearted incomprehension of the child who hasn’t yet come to a fuller and firmer grasp of the concept, and the weight, of human life or death.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas writes that the “death of the other” is our “first death”: “The death of the Other affects me in my very identity as a responsible I” (Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps* [Paris: Grasset, 1993], 21, 31). A facile reading of the Levinas quote may be to interpret it as giving credence to the reading that any elegy is a potential self-elegy. But on a closer look, if we are to interpret it to mean that deaths we witness constitute our own first “deaths” that will continue

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until our “final” death that is our own, it confirms Derrida’s claim that it is only “in us” that the dead may speak, and that it is only by speaking of or as the dead that we can keep them alive (Brault and Naas, “Editor’s Introduction” in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001], 9). In that sense, to “keep” the dead “alive, within oneself” becomes “the best sign of fidelity” (Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 36). The death of the others pains not only in and of itself but also in a sense that it marks a death of a part of oneself where the others had existed through introjection; it signals a disintegration of the wholeness of the previous self and necessitates a cognitive reconstruction.

<sup>9</sup> As in the case with literary criticism, where we omit the “I” to pretend that we’re offering an objective, impersonal analysis, even though, in truth, such pretense of “objective” analysis is in fact dripping with so much personal biases that it becomes simply unnecessary to preface our analysis with an explicit “I.”

<sup>10</sup> Robert Dale Parker, *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 103.

<sup>11</sup> In a way that almost feels like a digression, prompting a critic to remark on how the poem “irritatingly” lingers on the “almost irrelevant loon” (Parker 104).

<sup>12</sup> Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop*, 171.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Tomlinson, “Elizabeth Bishop’s New Book,” Review of *Questions of Travel*, *Shenandoah* 17 (Winter 1966), 88-91, 216.

<sup>14</sup> And the fact that the little Arthur has the same first name as Uncle Arthur is suggestive of the namegiver’s own self-consciousness of his bloodline, his desire to maintain a certain family lineage by passing on his own name to his son. As a biographical side note, critics report that Bishop’s uncle was in fact named Arthur (Martha Carlson-Bradley, “Lowell’s ‘My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow’: the Model for Bishop’s ‘First Death in Nova Scotia’” in *Concerning Poetry* 19 [1986], 129).

<sup>15</sup> C. K. Doreski, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 97.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Vendler, “Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly” in *Elizabeth Bishop*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), 86.

<sup>17</sup> David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), 220.

<sup>18</sup> In psychoanalytic jargon, these processes are called “projection” (casting out) and “introjection” (casting in).

<sup>19</sup> And this is one of the reasons that the term “confessional” is problematic. Just as readers are eager to uncover elements of autobiography in the so-called “confessional” poets, such elements may perhaps be suppressed in other “non-confessional” poets, such as Bishop, who is known for her vocal criticism of the “confessional” school of poetry. One can only wonder what Bishop scholarship would be like if she were considered to be a part of the “confessional” poets, given the amount of biographical elements in her poetry—including “First Death in Nova Scotia,” a poem that “locates the setting of the poem clearly in the actual world” (John 226). Particularly since Bishop spent part of her childhood in Nova Scotia, the title would be enough to set up an assumption that the poem is to some extent an autobiographical, nonfictional record.

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous, *Georgetown Review* 10:1 (Spring 2009), 198.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight,” lines 22, 75.

<sup>22</sup> Such as “red” is life and “white” as death, or purity.

<sup>23</sup> Therefore, judges often wear the black robe, to symbolize that they will remain neutral and not swayed by others’ influence. And ermine, a combination of white and black—having the tips of the tails, which are black, arranged at regular intervals throughout the white—often metonymizes the office of a judge, whose robe is emblematic of the neutrality (of the black) and purity (of the white) of its office.

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<sup>24</sup> Poulet, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Colwell, *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 171.

<sup>26</sup> That, of course, is the reason that stone, a conventional metaphor of immutability, is commonly used for graves.

<sup>27</sup> Michizou Toida, *The Structure of Forgetting* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobou, 1984), 176, 180.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, "De Memoria et Reminiscentia" in *Aristotle on Memory*, R. Sorabji, trans. (London: Duckworth, 1972), 51.

<sup>29</sup> Alan D. Baddeley, *Essentials of Human Memory* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1999), 119.

<sup>30</sup> Alan D. Baddeley, *The Psychology of Memory* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Forty, 4.

<sup>32</sup> "Just as expecting is possible only on the basis of awaiting, remembering is possible only on that of forgetting, and not vice versa" (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [London: SCM Press, 1962], 388-9). Memory is dependent upon forgetting, and Heidegger's claim is that forgetfulness has been there first, and memory struggles to retrieve what it can.

<sup>33</sup> *Ghost in the Shell* is a futuristic science fiction film. The characters in the film possess mechanized bodies (shell) in which their spirit and memories (ghost) are transplanted.

<sup>34</sup> Colwell, 202.

<sup>35</sup> Bishop herself has at times defined poetic creation as an act of translation, as Marilyn May Lombardi quotes her as saying, "It's true that many poets don't like the fact that they have to translate everything into words" (Lombardi 140).

<sup>36</sup> Kim Fortuny, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Art of Travel* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003), 110. Also, cf. McCabe, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, 199, Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*, 67-69, Fountain and Brazeau, 265.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, *Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 333. And biographers too note Bishop's discomfort with biographical readings of her work; as Gary Fountain points out, "Bishop would have been uncomfortable with a biographical study of this sort.... She had a ferocious sense of privacy" (Fountain and Brazeau, xi). Bonnie Costello also remarks on Bishop's discomfort with biographical studies as follows: "Her poems do not so much veil or transmute the personal as expose the categories of the 'personal' and 'impersonal' to scrutiny" (Costello, "Bishop's Impersonal Personal," 334).

<sup>38</sup> Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, ed., *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983), 319.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Fortuny, 110. Also, Joanne Feit Diehl in *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) sees the intertextuality of the poem as a screen that permits Bishop to address her personal struggle with public taboo: "In a unisexual and univocal text, Bishop tells a story rich in allusiveness and human suffering while addressing issues of single-sex friendship and the terrors faced by an intense subjectivity that seeks expression in stark isolation" (91-110).

<sup>40</sup> On the matter of the credibility of author's words on their own writings, Walter Benjamin states in one passage of *The Arcades Project*, "Never trust what writers say about their own writings" (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland, trans. [Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999], 203).

<sup>41</sup> Such as suggested in Tanikawa Shuntarou's "On Giving a Poem":

It can't be given to anyone—  
unlike a necktie, a poem  
can't be owned  
from the moment it's written, the words aren't  
mine, or yours, but rather everyone's  
no matter how beautiful a eulogy I placed is

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how personal the memories I strung are  
a poem can't be hidden from other's eyes  
for it's not even the poet's possession,  
a poem can potentially be anyone's  
like the way the world is for everyone  
even though it's not owned by anyone,  
a poem becomes a breeze to circulate among us  
and becomes a lightning that fleetingly lights the truth's face  
even if a poet skillfully hides in an acrostic  
the name of his love,  
his wishes always roam the far end of meanings  
to give you a poem, one that would even refuse  
to imprison itself in its own manuscript,  
is like giving you the air  
if so, I'd wish that air were one  
that brimmed soundlessly from a lover's lips—  
not yet a word, but already no longer a word—  
for such inner-exchange  
is what we've been hoping for  
as we heap words over words, like this

<sup>42</sup> Or “ghost,” to use the term from *Ghost in the Shell*.

<sup>43</sup> *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries. Box 58.16.

<sup>44</sup> “To be is to be perceived.”

<sup>45</sup> Sally Bishop Shigley, *Dazzling Dialectics: Elizabeth Bishop's Resonating Feminist Reality* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 144.

<sup>46</sup> On the proliferating details in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Peter Sacks in *The English Elegy* ties this technique to the similar trend of proliferating furnishings in Victorian funerary practices (167).

<sup>47</sup> Beyond the superficial resemblance of the words, “collecting” and “recollecting” have similar functions in that they both perform an assemblage of scattered elements, whether in physical or psychic arrangements. The main thrust here is that Benjamin equates “collector” with “allegorist”—“in every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 211)—and allegoresis, its act of putting together fragments in a meaningful manner, is a key component in the restoration of one's melancholic, fragmented universe into a whole.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 211.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 211.

<sup>50</sup> This condition is similar to the “interference” theory of forgetting, i.e. we are unable to retrieve a desired memory because there are other memories (interference) obstructing our path to reach that memory.

<sup>51</sup> “Socle” is a low, plain part forming a base for a column, pedestal, or the like, a plinth.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 204-205.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 207.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 207.

<sup>55</sup> And in a volume titled “Geography III,” the word “geography” certainly becomes a watchword, almost as if to say that the volume itself is a taxonomy that, through Crusoe, the speaker expresses her distaste of. And in that sense, the title of the volume itself becomes an irony: a simultaneous need for taxonomy and resentment toward it.

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Susan McCabe, "Bishop's 'Crusoe in England'": "Creativity, this poem affirms, does not emerge from a comfortable acknowledgement of and rooting in past traditions but from an exile's spinings" (59).

<sup>57</sup> And that is a decidedly different persona from that of Defoe's imperialistic, moralistic, always positive and wish-fulfilling Robinson Crusoe. Cf. Steven Hamelman's comparison of Bishop's and Defoe's Crusoes in his "Bishop's 'Crusoe in England.'"

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Peggy Kamuf, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 127.

<sup>59</sup> The phrase may also refer to the saying, "charity should begin at home." In that case, too, the irony remains that pity, like charity, should first be directed to oneself and then disseminated to others.

<sup>60</sup> As the drafts of "Crusoe in England" reveal, the line "How can anyone want such things?" was added over the course of the revision of the poem, and while authorial intents are always a matter of speculation, it can be interpreted that, in the course of Bishop's composition, an initial belief in the power of remembrance was tempered by a reservation over the transformative mechanism of preservative collections (*Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Box 58.16).

<sup>61</sup> And if we are to return to Berkeley's "to be is to be perceived," the knife's imperception of Crusoe feels as though Crusoe no longer exists.

<sup>62</sup> George Monteiro, ed., *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 64-65.

<sup>63</sup> Jamie McKendrick, "Bishop's Birds," in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*, Linda Anderson & Jo Shapcott, ed. (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), 140.

<sup>64</sup> Gilbert, 288.

<sup>65</sup> Parker, 121, 127.

## Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, elegy has been examined as a process of discovering the subtle, unconscious losses: in other words, the elegies in this dissertation are studied not so much as products of definitive object-losses—the results of which have been analyzed in the previous elegy scholarship as a compensatory mourning for the loss, one’s inability to detach oneself from the loss and propensity to rebel against the compensatory convention of mourning, or an occasion for social and communal bonding<sup>1</sup>—but rather as continued, reorganizational workings of the mind, either before, after, or long after any experience of loss, where the loss itself comes to feel lost to us.

To this end, I have attempted to define the stakes of the dissertation as follows. On a primary level, as a study of literature, the purpose of studying poems of lost loss is to salvage and collect their tentative, vague, attenuated expressive traces, for, if not for these expressions that give shape to the elusive loss of loss, they would be left unnoticed and unrecognized. It almost goes without saying that, whether to excavate little-known authors or to spotlight little-studied facets of established authors, the task of literary scholars is first and foremost that of discovery. And the discovery that this dissertation undertakes is that of the traces of losses that are themselves lost, either to incomprehension—like that of the child speaker in “First Death in Nova Scotia”—to irreognition—like “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” and its additional layer of loss hidden

in the sarcophagus—to oblivion—like the forgotten snow that “As You Leave the Room” tries to recollect—or to stupefaction—like the overwhelming privation of “Edge.”

On a secondary level, as a study of elegiac literature, the present dissertation attempts to facilitate an understanding of the “dysthymic” strain of elegy. The earlier elegy scholarship has focused too often on immediate and traumatic losses, and has in some sense neglected the quieter, long-lasting hauntings of dysthymia: the present dissertation aims to integrate the latter into the discourse of elegy studies. The hopes in this endeavor are two-fold. One of the hopes is that the work of this dissertation will help redeem the elegies studied here from previous neglect or dismissals that partly originate in the lack of the language to speak of dysthymic losses. By creating a language for it, the dissertation attempts to liberate the elegies from impressions such as that they are too abstruse—as in the case of Stevens’s allegorical elegy—too romantic—as in the case of Roethke’s generic elegies—or too suicidal—as in the case of Plath’s poems of 1963. To this end, the theme of “lost loss” is presented as a way to interpret or make sense of the disconsolation of the modern elegy. As examined throughout the dissertation, the sense of vagueness around the object of loss, or of disappearance or losing of the object of loss, results in the less acute but chronic disconsolation that is left without clear resolution.

The other of the hopes is that, through a fundamental observation that a loss is itself often lost and its manifestation is merely our fictive construction of it, the reader may learn and recognize that the project of elegies is, whether knowingly or unwittingly, practically that of fiction-making. Such recognition of the artifice can lead to an affirmation of fictive construction; acknowledging that all elegiac constructions are fictions can help normalize fictive constructions, and infuse them with a connotation less



of falsity and more of imaginative creativity. That, in turn, may help bring the elegiac discourses out of the closet called “the disappearance of death,” which has resulted partly from the revelation of the falsities of previous fictive consolations as well as from debunking or deriding of them as mere “false surmises”; when a phenomenon, namely death, is beyond consolation, humans have a way of shutting it out of their mind. While it is unfruitful to try to revive the previously rejected fictive consolatory narratives and to inveigle us into embracing them once again, an acceptance of fictive creations can encourage writers as well as readers to move beyond the modern skeptical rejection of fictions. That is to say, whether reading Seamus Heaney’s fictive conviction that the burden bequeathed by one’s parents can “always be reimagined”<sup>2</sup> or Amy Clampitt’s fancifully sanguine representation of death as one where “the spirit might... walk on air,”<sup>3</sup> one might be able to read it with a straight face, as long as one knows it to be a fiction and a type of romantic irony akin to that of *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Don Juan*, or, on a more solemn note, Wordsworth’s *Essays upon Epitaphs*.

In the dismal catastrophe of reality, one finds a way to live in the world of imagination: the “fiction” of loss is a product of this human mechanism. While the dissertation does not propose a wholehearted “acceptance” or “embracement” of fictions, it recognizes fictions as a necessity; oftentimes, one has no choice but to find room for such fictions, apart from one’s recognition of the reality of irrevocable loss. That is to say, since one knows they are fictions and one may not wholly and blindly believe in them, keeping them away from one’s cognition of the actuality—storing them away and presenting them as fictive or mythological narratives, such as Stevens’s “Owl in the Sarcophagus,” Bishop’s “Crusoe in England” and Roethke’s Aunt Tilly elegy do—one

may be inclined to indulge oneself in that fantasy, if only temporarily. Elegy is a means of survival that deploys each and every imaginative acrobatics available to the human mind—and that includes an ambivalent creation and negative affirmation of fantastical fictions.

On a tertiary level, as a study of individual poets, the dissertation aims to excavate a facet of their oeuvres—namely, their unconscious and tentative expressions of lost loss—that has not been fully explored, such as the elements of romantic irony in Wordsworth, the unromanticism of Roethke, or the unconfessionalism of Plath. On this level, the present project shares as its goal the purpose of the primary level: literary studies as a practice of discovery. The discovery undertaken in the tertiary level of this study is the less-studied facets of individual writers' works.

In a further justification of the present project, I will conclude the dissertation by examining its potential applications and implications beyond this focused study of the nineteenth- and twentieth- century English elegies of lost loss.

#### Beyond Lost Loss: Jacques Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*

In *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of Derrida's writings on dead writers—ranging from letters of condolence addressed to family members to eulogies read at the grave site, from words of tribute first published in newspapers in the hours immediately following a death to memorial essays read at colloquia a few or even many months after the death—Derrida suggests that any relational ties, whether of the beloved, of friendship, of mere acquaintanceship, or of an imagined kind, contains within them an anticipation of their loss. In other words, any loss has an element of lost loss, in that the lost object is

already proleptically lost, prior to its actual death. Derrida expresses this idea as he explains his use of the plural form to address the “deaths” of Roland Barthes:

How to reconcile this plural? ... I can scarcely bear the apparition of a title in this place. The proper name would have sufficed, for it alone and by itself says death, all deaths in one. It says death even while the bearer of it is still living. While so many codes and rites work to take away this privilege, because it is so terrifying, the proper name alone and by itself forcefully declares the unique disappearance of the unique—I mean the singularity of an unqualifiable death (and this word, “unqualifiable” already resonates like a quotation from one of Roland Barthes’s texts I will reread later). Death inscribes itself right in the name....<sup>4</sup>

As Derrida’s editors comment, we “prepare for the death of a friend; we anticipate it; we see ourselves already as survivors, or as having already survived. To have a friend, to call him or her by name and to be called by him or her, is already to know that one of the two of you will go first, that one will be left to speak the name of the other in the other’s absence.”<sup>5</sup> Loss is inscribed at the start of the relationship, right at the moment of learning each other’s name. It would be quite a spectacle, to think that, on the first day of a class, a teacher would go through deaths each time he or she learns and calls his or her students by their names—perhaps that is the loss that Roethke speaks of in his “Elegy for Jane”?—but the implication is clear enough: the name—a learning of which would mark the moment the relation starts—“says death even while the bearer of it is still living.” A person is always proleptically lost, and his or her deaths are performed continually at each encounter, all the way up to the final death: hence, the plurality of deaths.

The Derrida passage generates two implications for the theory of lost loss. The first of the implications lies in this phrase: “so many codes and rites work to take away this privilege [of the living deaths of the name-bearer], because it is so terrifying.” Here, Derrida suggests that the screening mechanism of our mind interferes with our

recognition of the proleptic loss inscribed in the name of the name-bearer. This loss, then, is always “lost” through the interference of the “codes and rites” that obfuscate the “terrifying” anticipation of loss. This phenomenon—that a name signals a loss but that we are unable to recognize that fact—can itself be studied as a form of a lost loss.

The second of the implications is that the plurality of deaths suggests that one’s final death marks the end of one’s ongoing deaths performed at each encounter: the final death—the subject of elegies proper—constitutes a loss of the plurality and the ongoingness of losses. Any loss has an element of lost loss. From this perspective, the theory of lost loss can be applied not only to anti-consolatory elegies expressing elegiac dysthymia but also to proper, conventional, orthodox elegies that have specific object-losses. The theory, in other words, can be used to further our understanding of the heterogeneity and resistance within the canonical elegies.

In this sense, the theory of lost loss may be applied not only to give shape to elegiac dysthymia, but also to further our understanding of the conventional and canonical elegies by uncovering a facet of them where their object-losses come to feel lost, such as done in the reading of *Lycidas* in the Introduction chapter. In other words, this dissertation suggests that a study of elegiac dysthymia and its missing object-loss may be aimed both to function as an aid in reading the modern and future elegies and to assist in rediscovering or reconstructing the older elegies.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond Elegy Studies: Poetry of Witness, of Confession, Cultural Study of Ignored Loss

In “Little Gidding,” T. S. Eliot suggests that “every poem” is an “epitaph”<sup>7</sup>—so far as “it marks an initiatory moment, pronounces an elegy upon a past artistic self, and

announces rebirth of the artist as a poet.”<sup>8</sup> In that sense, it may not be particularly outrageous to suggest that any theory of elegiac literature can be applied to any genre of poetry.<sup>9</sup> In particular, however, three fields seem most ripe for an application of the theories of dysthymia and of lost loss: poetry of witness, cultural study of ignored loss, and confessional or post-confessional poetry.

First, on poetry of witness: in *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler comments on exclusionary consolatory fictions in commemorative practices and rituals, and writes that these acts are predicated upon a distinction between “grievable” and “non-grievable” lives. Death happens equally, both to those whose lives have been deemed meaningful and to those whose lives have never been acknowledged as fully human; but the case of the latter cannot be fully worked through as a loss, since these people “cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never ‘were.’”<sup>10</sup> As a main focus, the present dissertation has examined “loss of loss” as a psychological, often unconscious, phenomenon within an individual psyche, created through such screening mechanisms of the mind as forgetting, repression or what Abraham and Torok call inclusion,<sup>11</sup> or melancholic paralysis of sensory faculties. The Butler passage, however, suggests that a loss of loss can occur at a plainly conscious and social level, through political, cultural, or journalistic manipulations, by design or otherwise.

Writers both in the past and in the present have written to record socially excluded losses.<sup>12</sup> In the contemporary American poetry context, Carolyn Forché’s *The Angel of History* stands as one of the landmarks of this effort. In the Notes to the volume, Forché writes as follows:

*The Angel of History* is not about experiences. It is for me the opening of a wound, the muffling and silence of a decade, and it is also a gathering of

utterances that have lifted away from the earth and wrapped it in a weather of risen words. These utterances issue from my own encounter with the events of this century but do not represent “it.” The first-person, free-verse, lyric-narrative poem of my earlier years has given way to a work which has desired its own bodying forth: polyphonic, broken, haunted, and in ruins, with no possibility of restoration.<sup>13</sup>

Poetry of witness does have its affinity to elegiac poetry in that both are literatures of remembrance; it almost feels natural, then, that *The Angel of History* contains a poem titled “Elegy.” What is particularly striking about the above passage is Forché’s insistent use of words like “muffling” and “silence”: it communicates a sense of conviction that these utterances had been rendered voiceless, and would remain so, if not for her poetry. What she writes of—“the unlit house / with its breathless windows,” the hallucinatory image of a “wooden teahouse / and the corpses of those who slept in it” where “there is no teahouse,” or “the child” who “seems... as if he had not yet crossed into the world”<sup>14</sup>—are phantasmal hauntings of things that are lost before a possibility of loss and are left beyond restoration. The multiplicity of psychic voices, the hauntings, the state of being left beyond compensatory restoration—these elements, which poetry of witness shares with elegiac poetry of lost loss, make it a logical target of the theory application: that is to say, poems of witness can be read as phantoms, whose voices are coming from what Abraham and Torok call the psychic “crypt” where illegal burials have blotted out the facts of loss. In a sense, poetry of witness may be studied through the lens of the anxiety of lost loss, similar to that of Bishop’s sublimational poetics.

Socially excluded losses can be studied not only within literary fields like poetry of witness, but also in cultural studies. As Nicholas Rand asserts, the aspects of the idea of the phantom have the “potential to illuminate the genesis of social institutions and may provide a new perspective for inquiring into the psychological roots of cultural patterns

and political ideology.”<sup>15</sup> As a case in point, Rand cites the instance of neo-Nazi movements of the 1980s and 1990s in Germany and elsewhere, which appeal to adolescents who obviously had no direct contact with wartime Nazi reality. Not only does this phenomenon point to the possibility of the generational inheritance of cultural trauma, but also reveals how the falsification, disregard, or shaming and silencing of the past can become the breeding ground of the phantomatic return of a defunct ideology, on the level of individuals, families, communities, and possibly even entire nations. From a perspective of a literary scholar, one wonders if there would have been any postwar resurfacing of neo-Nazism or right-wingization of other nations, had an institutionalized historical guilt not deprived them of their opportunity to mourn and work through their losses, which have effectively been effaced or excluded as “non-grievable” due to their collective dishonor. That is to say: could we not have allowed them a way to mourn the individual losses, even as the collective body-politic should rightfully have been discredited and censured? After all, any entity on the verge of being put to extinction has a way of fighting for its survival, such as in a form of inter-generational haunting.

Lastly, on poetry of confession: returning to the initial Eliot quote—“every poem” is an “epitaph”—one may be tempted to apply the dictum to confessional poetry, in light of its poetic practice of transforming the past self into a present of the art form. And literary scholarship generally has a way of being amenable to gratification of temptations. In short, confessional poetry is predicated on the death of the biographical self as its place is usurped by the artistic self. As examined in the Berryman section through de Man’s “Autobiography as De-facement,” the act of speaking about the self

opens up a gap between the speaking and the spoken-about Is, and the act is elegiac precisely because it involves a suppression, effacement, or burial of the one by the other.

In post-confessional poetry, where we have come to assume that any “confession” is a fictive narrative—in “Containing Multitudes,” David Graham and Kate Sontag comment on Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* that the “truth is, strictly speaking, both Hughes’s and Plath’s poetic versions of their marital problems are fictions.... Lyrics have always entangled artifice with confession”<sup>16</sup>—the “loss” of the self is two-fold: before even the loss is effected by the artistic self’s dismantling of the biographical self, this loss is itself deprived, because the biographical self had already been supplanted by its fictionalized version—just as the Bishop Crusoe’s island had been left unrenamable, undiscovered and was obliterated by inaccurate accounts. If a loss is inscribed onto confessional poetry through the de-facement of autobiography, a loss of loss is ingrained in post-confessional poetry through the fictionalization of autobiography. And that makes post-confessional poetry yet another fruitful ground for the theories of elegiac dysthymia and of lost loss.

#### Beyond English Elegy: Hagiwara’s “An Undying Octopus”

As illustrated by the portrayal of a scientist under the duress of all-engulfing loss in Anno’s apocalyptic film in the Introduction chapter, further potential applications of the study of the loss of loss may point to the universality of the theme and its possibility for scholarly attention in multiple disciplines beyond English literature. Though hardly an exhaustive list, some of the poets, outside of the English language, whose work may profitably be examined from the perspective of elegiac dysthymia include the following.



Charles Baudelaire's causeless melancholia in his "Spleen" poems is most certainly one of the major precursors of elegiac dysthymia. Murano Shiro's oeuvre offers another possibility, since, in many of his poems, "death" is taken away from living things: they have already lost their individuality and cannot, therefore, be any more "lost."

In addition, the elegiac disappearance of loss portrayed in Hagiwara Sakutarō's poems like "An Undying Octopus" may shed another layer of light on the study of lost loss and vice versa:

### An Undying Octopus

In a fish-tank at an aquarium  
was a starved octopus—  
  
in the shadows of underwater rocks  
wan lights from the pale ceiling  
  
wavered like fogs. The bleak tank  
had been forgotten, and only the stale  
  
seawater was there, reflecting  
dusty sunlight. The octopus  
  
was not dead—just hidden behind stones—  
and when it awoke, it endured  
  
hunger in a forgotten tank.  
When it could no longer bear  
  
it ate one of its own legs,  
then another, and when they're all gone,  
  
it reversed its body and ate parts of its  
innards, bits by bits, till it ate all  
  
of itself, the skin, the spine, the intestines.  
One morning, a guard came and saw  
  
the opaque fish-tank, empty now  
save for some seaweeds wavering in

the same seawater: no living things—  
not beneath any of the stones. The octopus

was gone, despite that it still lived  
there, semi-eternally, as a thing that possessed

a sense of unresolved loss.

The poem can be read as an allegory of phantasmal haunting: the death of the octopus had already been “lost” by means of oblivion, for the fact that its existence had been forgotten, and its loss never registered in anyone’s consciousness. But precisely because its loss is never recognized in anyone’s perceptual universe, the octopus continues to haunt, as something that is neither alive nor dead, as a “thing that possessed / a sense of unresolved loss.” The odd final line in the poem of even couplets formally signals the lost-ness, missing-ness or absence of the octopus at the same time as signifying its irresolute, phantomatic presence.

The drive of the poem has in its roots both a desire to be a witness to this lost loss and a hope to keep this phantasmal creature away—by, paradoxically, recording its loss of loss and dissipating the lost sense of dispossession. The poem makes one wonder if the secret objective of the poetry of lost loss may be precisely to ward off the phantoms by cataloging the loss of the object-loss and giving them a shape, so as to calm the raging wraiths and to help them disappear. As examined in the Bishop chapter, writing, once again, proves to be the third pole, separating itself from both remembering and forgetting.

In many ways, human reactions to a loss falls into a dichotomy: on the one hand, there is a drive toward emotional alchemy, such as the compensatory consolation and its wringing of sorrow to produce consolation, the politics of constructing an imagined

community through a shared experience of loss, or the politicizing of turning casualties into justifications of the fortitude to fight for the cause; and on the other hand, there is a resistance to such emotional alchemy, such as the anti-elegiac rejection of the compensation, or the personal desire to be left alone in an unadulterated dejection. The history of elegy-writing has been an oscillation between these two poles.<sup>17</sup> The project of this dissertation is to propose a third voice, between emotional alchemy and its resistance, between the successful mourning and melancholic mourning, between consolation and desolation. Its aim is neither to celebrate fiction, melancholia, mourning, nor to negate them, but to comprehend those mechanisms, and to “be”<sup>18</sup>—to be the fiction-making, constructive beings that we are, who cannot help but keep weaving monsters of elegies.

Poetry of lost loss, by virtue of the fact that the loss has itself been lost, necessitates an overt construction of the fictive narrative of loss. It makes explicit the element of fiction-making in elegiac mourning. By making explicit the fiction involved in elegiac writings, one may hope to gain an ability to facilitate helpful fictions, at the same time as discerning away unhelpful, manipulative ones; the process restores agency to the mourner. And it allows us to be conscious of this otherwise unconscious premise of “loss of loss,” upon which we have constructed our elegiac fictions.

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<sup>1</sup> While one phrase hardly does justice to the landmarks of the previous elegy scholarship, the texts referred to here are Sacks's *The English Elegy*, Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning*, and Butler's *Precarious Life*, in the respective order.

<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney, "The Settle Bed" in *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Amy Clampitt, "Beethoven, Opus 111" in *The Collected Poems of Amy Clampitt* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes" in *The Work of Mourning*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, "Editors' Introduction" in *The Work of Mourning*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Similar to the way in which Sappho was constructed in the nineteenth century as an "artifact of Victorian Poetics" (Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999], 3). Just as the Victorian interest in fragments led to a construction or reconstruction of Sappho as the first woman poet, our twenty-first century awareness of "lost loss" can construct or reconstruct that element in older elegies.

<sup>7</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971), 144.

<sup>8</sup> Celeste Marguerite Schenck, *Mourning and Panegyric: The Poetics of Pastoral Ceremony* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>9</sup> And if, to revisit the previously cited passage from Paul Ricoeur, "the plot of a narrative is a creation of productive imagination which projects a world of its own [and] the stories are no less poetry than versified literature" (Ricoeur, "Poetry and Possibility," 452), any poetic theory, by extension, can be applied to any literary forms. At that point, genre studies become of little use, and only the supremacy of the mind that finds associative applications of any theory to any genre will reign.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33. The passage was quoted previously by Rae, *Modernism and Mourning*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 141.

<sup>12</sup> One may say that one of the tasks of literary scholars, namely the discovery of unknown writers, qualifies in one sense as this act of redeeming them from being lost to the loss effected by their exclusion from the canon.

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Forché, *The Angel of History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 81.

<sup>14</sup> Respectively from "Elegy," "The Garden Shukkei-en," and "The Angel of History."

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Rand, "Editor's Note" in Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 169.

<sup>16</sup> David Graham and Kate Sontag, "Containing Multitudes" in *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001), 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> By my presumptuous count, critics such as Sacks, Butler, Rae, and Cavitch fall into the former category, while others such as Ramazani, Derrida, Spargo, and Levinas fall under the latter category.

<sup>18</sup> Therefore, criticisms such as those by Patricia Rae and Greg Forter that melancholic mourning celebrates a "bleak and joyless" state of being (Rae, *Modernism and Mourning*, 22) is misguided, since the point of the elegiac poetry of lost loss is neither to embrace nor deny and shun melancholia or dysthymia, but rather merely to capture it as a condition that in actuality does exist in this world. It does not seem judicious to celebrate or stigmatize a psychological phenomenon that is worthy of being studied: the present study is meant not to be evaluative or prescriptive, but descriptive.

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