# From Tumescence to Tomb

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As we confront, with varying degrees of success, each day's challenges, stumbling through tribulations and victories, we are at every moment confronted with the inescapable, incontrovertible fact of our ultimate demise. The methods by which we cope with the recognition of our imminent mortality are as numerous as blades of grass in a meadow, and range from a knowing embrace of our brief earthly tenure to a complete withdrawal from the world and its contents. Regardless of one's preferred mode of grappling with this primal truth, death is indifferent to our attitudes toward it. "It's life," after all, and there's "no keeping clear. And if you do keep clear you might almost as well die" (*Lover* 125). Implicit in such aphorisms, of course, is another basic certainty: without life, there can be no death. And life, no matter where you pinpoint its inception, draws from the wellspring of sexuality, in its myriad forms. Ignoring the sterile bureaucratic overtones, all life can be traced back to an act of *congress*, a convergence of the powers and energies of other living entities already set loose upon the globe. As Oliver Mellors, the sensually-inclined gamekeeper of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, astutely asserts, even "the flowers are fucked into being between the sun and the earth" (328). Thus we find all life, *our* lives, framed between the regenerative power of sexuality—the "creative act that is far more than procreative"—and the oblivion of death (301).

Virginia Woolf was sharply, and quite explicitly, conscious of the way this dichotomy played out in her own life. In her brief autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf, recalling her family home at Hyde Park Gate, writes that "the double bedded bedroom on the first floor was the sexual centre; the birth centre, the death centre of the house. . . . In that bed four children were begotten; there they were born; there first mother died; then father died, with a picture of mother hanging in front of him" (118). The patrimonial bedroom of the Woolf family—in the quiescence of conception, the effluvia of birth, and the slow slip of mortality—sets loose a thread running not only through the individual lives of those residing at Hyde Park, but

across generations, tying every end to a beginning. Following Woolf, it seems apt to ask if *all* expressions of sexuality necessarily, though subtly, gesture toward the tomb. Moreover, one may wonder if we should characterize—if we can *conceive of*—the arc of each and every living existence as a tension between the twin forces of death and sexuality, a taut wire connecting primordial poles.

At first glance, death and sexuality present themselves as staunchly opposed elements, two irreconcilable processes in which one's life, and every life, hangs in the balance. Sexuality, as Lawrence argues, is an inherently creative force, in all its varied forms, and at least among the human species remains fundamentally a shared, social phenomenon. Death, on the other hand, causes us distress precisely because it is a process of dissolution, disorganization, and destruction, because it undoes the carefully crafted structures of a life and its work. Though all creatures are destined toward their utter demise, death is, in the words of Martin Heidegger, our "ownmost possibility," the only undeniably private, personal experience that we will ever have (308). Thus, death appears to be the inverted, mirror-image of sexuality, destabilizing and extinguishing all that sexuality has wrought. Conversely, sexuality, as the source of life, constitutes a ceaseless flight from the entropic exigencies of death and stands as a lone dissenting voice crying out against the "black void of despair" and nothingness found in our own mortality (*Lover* 222).

But are death and sexuality really tangled in such a paradoxical, mutually annihilating relationship? Or is there a more apt, more delicately nuanced way to approach this apparently irresolvable dichotomy? Ben Bellitt, in his essay "Toward a Poetics of Uncertainty," argues vehemently for a new understanding of antinomy, in which we grasp a conflict of ideas not as a conceptual stalemate, but as an intellectually fecund resource for further developing the question itself. "The right reader," contends Belitt, "is always concerned with the potential, rather than the terminal stance," is contented with the *process* of discovery, and denies the necessity of obtaining discrete, finite, or infallible solutions to any query (186). For Belitt, the only sound investigative methodology is one in which "the coexistence of interacting polarities, or oppositions, or contradictions [moving toward] collision," are not taken to "cancel each other out as incompatibles, but reinforce one another in . . . 'complementarity'" (189). Thus, by posing death and sexuality as disparate, polarized concepts, we participate in a pattern of "systematic self-delusion," betraying "the questioner's thrust" only to reap the placations of "the answerer's placebos" (199, 177). How, then, are we to draw from the "cross-fertiliza-

tion of enemy strains" on which Belitt bestows his deepest faith (189)? When we encounter a paradox, suggests Belitt, we should submit to "the gravitational pull of its looming contradictions on their way to theoretical resolution in a concept"—that is, we should allow a single, unified concept to arise from the clash of two ostensibly discordant notions (189). Belitt, citing the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, illustrates the principle by observing that the "force of a body in one direction, and an equal force of the same body in an opposite direction is not incompatible, and the result, namely rest, is real and representable" (190). Stated otherwise, we must allow for an *eroticism* of thought, and permit the productive coupling of two contrary concepts to give birth to a new notion which, though springing forth from its inspirational progenitors, escapes the apparent antagonism between them. Only our prejudice toward finality, our yearning for incontrovertible answers to even the most nebulous of questions, blinds us to the process of perpetual revelation and condemns us to facile and barren modes of thought and inquiry.

If death and sexuality, instead of reciprocally obliterating each other, do in fact give rise to "*a third thing*" as Belitt suggests, what might the offspring of their tenuous union be (186)? We can understand the answers more clearly by examining the ties between sexuality and death in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. Jacob, the novel's eponymous protagonist, lives a life circumscribed by the quiet progression of sexuality and death. At the outset of the novel Jacob, as a young child walking along the beach, encounters "stretched entirely rigid, side by side, their faces very red, an enormous man and woman," presumably in the midst of coitus; in turn, *Jacob's Room* closes with his mother and a friend, Richard Bonamy, cleaning his apartment following his death in World War I, which is implied though never specifically described or alluded to (5). In the interim periods, we find Jacob vacillating between these two "unseizable force[s]" as he develops from a boy into a young man, and ultimately, into a corpse (137). The narrative is rich with persistent, recurring imagery tracing this dual movement through Jacob's life. In particular, one finds hints of this subtle bond in the repeated appearance of moths and butterflies. Lepidoptera appear frequently at those moments when Jacob is becoming aware of his nascent, burgeoning sexuality. While boating along a riverbank with Timmy Durrant—brother of Jacob's preeminent love interest, Clara Durrant—Jacob glimpses "two white butterflies [circling] higher and higher round [an] elm tree" (30). Just beyond the tremulous orbit of the butterflies, Jacob observes a group of couples picnicking, their "white dresses and white flannel trousers [drawing] out long and wavering up the bank," twirling along with the same rhythm of the airborne insects above

them (30). This sort of parallelism is repeatedly employed by Woolf as a gesture not only at Jacob's sexual stirrings, but at the sexual frustrations of other characters, such as Jacob's mother and her paramour Captain Barfoot. The connotations carried by these creatures is not, however, the exclusive domain of the erotic. Often, butterflies or moths imply an underlying morbidity: they are found "feasting . . . upon a mass of putrid carrion at the base of an oak tree"; embalmed, stuck with pins in the "butterfly boxes" of the collector; or dying "slowly . . . in the kitchen" (107, 17-8). Though the fleeting visitations of butterflies may not provide overwhelming evidence for a common bond between death and sexuality in *Jacob's Room*, one finds a similarly opposed pairing in the repetition of boots and shoes. Footwear, though seemingly innocuous enough, marks the extremities of Jacob's life: when Jacob stumbles across the bathers *in flagrante delicto*, he focuses on "two or three gulls gracefully [skirting] the incoming waves and [settling] near their boots"; as the novel closes, we find Jacob, now deceased, reduced to "a pair of [his] old shoes" lying empty on the floor of his vacant apartment, implying his ghostly presence (5, 155).

Clearly, there is a distinct connection between death and sexuality evident in the interplay of imagery in Woolf's novel. Nevertheless, by merely cataloguing the appearances of a certain sort of morose vocabulary alongside similar recurrences of sexual discovery or frustration, we come no closer to an understanding of the *substance* underlying their ostensibly paradoxical relationship. One may even begin to wonder if there is any actual evidence within *Jacob's Room* pointing toward a deeper, more tangible foundation on which to base the "*third thing*" alluded to by Belitt. The answer may lie in the form of the narration itself. Jacob's life is recounted in vignettes, as brief, terse snapshots, such that the reader can only infer what has occurred in the textual lacunae that intervene. The fragmented arc of the narrative leaves the reader with an incomplete grasp of Jacob's personality, denies us key moments of his inner dialogue, and strips many of his acts of clear and explicit motivation. Indeed, one is left with the sensation that Jacob is in fact "extraordinarily vacant," little more than a taciturn bundle of mute urges, an automated machine programmed to spout quotations from Virgil and Plato at regular intervals (25).

Why might Woolf choose to sketch Jacob, along with the characters surrounding him, in such a patchwork fashion? It seems to me that Woolf, deliberately incorporating these fissures, fractures, and ruptures in the narration of *Jacob's Room*, intends not only to convey a story, but to recreate the process of *recollection* itself. Writing in "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf argues that "one

only remembers what is exceptional," that our memory is composed of only those most salient, unexpected and jarring moments of our experience (69). Moreover, these "exceptional moments . . . come to the surface unexpectedly," such that the past "only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths" (71, 98). Jacob's journey from childhood to the grave is recounted not by an omniscient third-person narrator, but is rather given to the reader through an anonymous first-person voice, whose hazy presence first emerges in the fifth chapter. In a crucial sense, this narrator, whoever he or she may be, is not only retelling the events of Jacob's life, but is in fact reminiscing, providing a commentary on his or her own perceptions of Jacob in an attempt to sort out the detritus of memory, for both the reader and, presumably, the narrator's own benefit. This notion may be bolstered by the typographical conventions of the novel itself. Throughout *Jacob's Room*, dialogue is enclosed within single quotation marks implying—if we follow standard usage—that the entire novel is hemmed-in by an unseen pair of doubled quotation marks, that every line of Jacob's story arrives at the reader secondhand, is *spoken* on the page.

Thus, *Jacob's Room* is not a partial and truncated revision of Jacob's life, but is instead a collection of individual recollections, drawn together by their status as "moments of being . . . embedded in many more moments of non-being," hidden between those trivial aspects of quotidian existence which manifest themselves as the interceding gaps in the text ("Sketch" 70). In essence, the reader is presented with only those slivers of Jacob's life that *matter*, not to Jacob himself, but to the narrator who dredges them up from the recesses of memory. Paramount among these moments, if we follow the delicate logic of Woolf's imagery, are the dawning of sexuality and death in this young man's life. Though the question may seem elementary, and the answer self-evident, what about Jacob's budding sexuality, what about his death, makes them important to the narrator? After all, the actual relationship between Jacob and the narrator is never explicitly established—all we know is that they are inextricably linked by the preservative powers of memory—so we cannot assume that Jacob's passage into adulthood and ensuing death overseas necessarily constitute a series of "exceptional moments" in the narrator's life. Yet these moments do in fact endure, and through memory, Jacob lives on beyond his own demise.

Nevertheless, if *Jacob's Room* is in fact a remembrance, there must be something about each scrap revealed to us, about each shard of Jacob's life that carries some import for the narrator. But is the cyclic, splintered form of

*Jacob's Room* the only method for conveying the trembling selectiveness of memory? Woolf, briefly taking stock of her own career as a novelist in "A Sketch of the Past," suggests that a "great part of every day is not lived consciously. . . . When it is a bad day the proportion of non-being is much larger. . . . The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being" (70). As exemplars of this descriptive skill, she cites Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, W.M. Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and Leo Tolstoy—all tremendous authors, but not writers who toyed with form to the astounding degree evident in *Jacob's Room*. It would seem, then, that though Woolf may have seized upon an ideal form for conveying her conception of memory and experience, along with Jacob's story itself, the successful depiction of "moments of being" is not contingent on a particular form or structure. Thus, though Woolf may have unified the form and content of her novel with unimpeachable precision, she herself seems to imply that we are justified in turning to the texts of other authors to deepen our understanding of the forces of death, sexuality, and memory at play in her work. To discover the machinations of these three elements, to untangle the mysterious tripartite core of meaning that carries such weight for the narrator of *Jacob's Room*, we may have no choice but to move beyond Woolf's own text to the words and worlds enclosed in other novels.

Though the specific significance of the gently-sewn patches of text holding together *Jacob's Room* may, at this point, remain obscure, we might find further clarification in the work of one of Woolf's contemporaries, D.H. Lawrence. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* could be considered the richly-rendered, feminine counterpart of Woolf's portrait of sexual discovery and initiation. Lawrence's novel recounts the story of Connie Chatterley, a young woman whose marriage to Clifford Chatterley provides her entrée to the well-lined coffers of the Victorian aristocracy, while drawing her into the confines of Wragby, the Chatterley's ancestral home in the coal-rich midlands of the English countryside. From the very opening of the novel, Clifford exhibits some curious parallels with Jacob: shipped to Flanders in 1917, he too finds the expected arc of his life abruptly derailed by his own wartime misfortune, "shipped over to England again six months later, more or less in bits. . . . Crippled forever . . . never [able] to have any children . . . shipped home smashed" (1-2, 9). Just as the specter of war, the sinister stillness and tranquility of the home front, lingers over the events of *Jacob's Room*, the "war had brought the roof down over [Connie's] head," crushing both her husband's legs and the possibility of ever conceiving a child—of even having penetrative sex—with the man she married (1). Clifford's injuries, however, only camouflage the fact that even at the time of their wedding, "the sex part did

not mean much to him . . . was merely an accident . . . one of the curious obsolete, organic processes which persisted in its own clumsiness, but was not really necessary" (9). Instead, Clifford turns his attention to writing and philosophy and, enraptured by his pursuit of a "purity and integrity" of the mind, flees all bodily pleasures, rejecting his very corporeality (34). Connie, denied not only the act of coitus but the entire spectrum of physical affection and sensuality, in turn begins an affair with Oliver Mellors, the gamekeeper at Wragby and a man who does not fall prey to "all this cold-hearted fucking that is death and idiocy" (222).

At various points in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, we find "moments of being" searing themselves into the memories of those residing at Wragby and Tevershall, the surrounding, melancholic company town that supports the Chatterleys' fortune. Ivy Bolton, in particular, has had flashes of this "being" burned into the internal retina of her recollections. Ivy, a matronly woman who had formerly served as a nurse to the coal miners, is hired by Connie to tend to Clifford's basic, almost infantile needs, such as shaving and bathing. Though twenty-three years before she had lost her husband in a mining accident—"an explosion down th' pit" which the mine's owners, ultimately Clifford's father, refused to take responsibility for—he remains a palpable presence for her (83):

> 'I don't believe he had any right pleasure with me at nights after; he'd never really let himself go. . . . He didn't want . . . any more children . . . couldn't take it for natural, all that pain . . . I could only say: Oh my lad, what did you want to leave me for!—That was all my cry. But somehow I felt he'd come back . . . I kept expecting him back. Especially at nights. I kept waking up thinking: Why he's not in bed with me—It was as if my *feelings* wouldn't believe he'd gone. I just felt he'd *have* to come back and lie against me, so I could feel him with me. That was all I wanted, to feel him there with me, warm. . . . '
>
> 'The touch of him,' said Connie.
>
> 'That's it, my Lady! the touch of him! I've never got over it to this day, and never shall.' . . . The touch of him! For the bonds of love are ill to loose! (175-6)

Ivy Bolton could remember any number of things about her husband: his scent, the timbre of his voice, their courtship, nearly anything contained within the span of their all-too-brief relationship. We only catch a fleeting glimpse of his thoughts and idiosyncrasies, the defining features of his personality, and the only phrase that he utters, a phrase passed through Ivy's lips before it reaches the reader, is his fervent conviction that the anguish of childbirth is just "not right!" (175). He seems little more than an evanescent sen-

sation, a passing dizziness, a spark caught out of the corner of the eye and quickly forgotten. But Ivy does not forget; she is tormented by her inability to shed her bond with the dead man, his physical presence lingering on like a phantom limb. The touch of love, of even a love partially withheld, transcends death, scorching not only Ivy's memory but her very body with the heat of an unspoken sexuality. We see clearly that it isn't Ted Bolton himself who Ivy clings to; rather, she longs for past instances of touch, for the contact itself. As Oliver Mellors promises to Lady Chatterley, "nobody forgets. It's not a question of memory," since, as an enduring, revenant impression of touch, Ted Bolton has never left (181).

One might protest that this, again, is too obvious: after all, Ivy and Ted Bolton were married, with two children; how could she *not* be profoundly affected by his untimely death? Memory, however, is not so straightforward. Connie Chatterley, along with her sister Hilda, both began their sexual lives while students at boarding school in Dresden, losing their virginity "by the time they were eighteen" to "sturdy youths bearing guitars . . . lusty and splendid-throated young fellows" (3). If the sexual stirrings of *Jacob's Room* are to be taken as typical, if we grant that one's earliest dalliances should remain vivid and salient, we might rightfully expect Connie and Hilda to hold onto these memories for quite some time—but this is not the case:

> In the actual sex thrill within the body, the sisters nearly succumbed to the strange male power. But quickly they recovered themselves, took the sex-thrill as sensation, and remained free. . . . Before Christmas of 1914 both their German young men were dead: whereupon the sisters wept, and loved the young men passionately, but underneath forgot them. (5-6)

Here we see clearly the distinction between sexuality and the sexual act: Connie and Hilda, much like Ted Bolton, relinquish their bodies, but not *themselves*. All three draw back from the brink of surrender, leaving only an eroticism interrupted, allowing no "*third thing*," literal or figurative, to emerge from the act of union. Erato, taking a brief clinical turn as a physician in John Fowles' *Mantissa*, maintains that the "memory nerve-center in the brain is closely associated with the one controlling gonadic activity" (17). Though her physiological observations may be correct, even Erato herself has committed the grievous error of conflating the genital and the genuine, of assuming that coitus is the source, and not the manifestation, of a deeper creative synthesis. As Jean-Paul Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness*, the sexual act is "only the instrument and . . . the *image*, of a fundamental sexuality . . . [which] appears with birth and disappears only with death" (499). Yet

Sartre, for all his erudition, misses what Ivy Bolton needs only her body to know: if one makes that great silent leap, if one is willing to yield oneself fully to another, then sexuality, or at least its fugitive imprint, can persist past even the numbing embrace of death itself. Thus, one is left to sadly wonder if, had Ivy perished instead of Ted, he would have clung so ardently, so reverently to the fading image of her touch upon his skin.

What about this openness, this concession of the self to the concord of sexuality, is so threatening and ominous? Why are we consistently unable to give freely of ourselves? Connie, especially, is filled with trepidation, even in the midst of her growing love for Oliver Mellors. Mellors, the man whose child Connie will soon come to bear—and who, as an employee of Connie's impotent husband, carries the greater share of the risk in their surreptitious encounters—inspires in her an unparalleled panic: though "she put her arms round him under his shirt . . . she was afraid . . . of his thin, smooth, naked body" (184). There is a vulnerability even in the vocabulary; in writing these pages, I myself have chosen 'relinquish,' 'yield,' and 'surrender' (Lawrence preferring 'succumb,' among others) as the most active verbs under which to subsume the supposed creativity of sexuality. This is the lexicon of *submission*, and Connie, through Mellors, is only beginning to gain fluency in this strange yet familiar tongue:

> She felt his penis . . . yielded with a quiver that was like death. . . . It might come with the thrust of a sword in her . . . and that would be death. . . . But it came with a strange slow thrust of peace . . . a ponderous, primordial tenderness such as made the world in the beginning. . . . She was gone, she was not, and she was born: a woman. . . . It cost her an effort to let him have his way and his will of her. She had to be a passive, consenting thing, like a slave, a physical slave. Yet the passion licked round her, consuming, and when the sensual flame of it pressed through her bowels and breast, she really thought she was dying: yet a poignant, marvelous death. (186-7, 267)

Why the quivering hesitation to allow Mellors's "touch upon her living secret body" (133)? Though their relationship may be illicit, it has long passed the initial stages in which their furtive liaisons drew her out of the "growing restlessness" of her marriage (18). It seems to me that Connie wavers because sex—when fully imbued with the *reciprocal sexuality* lacking in our purely carnal urges, with their "little greed, and no gentle reverence of the return gift"—forces us to come face-to-face, quite literally, with the fragility of the body, and thus ultimately with the brute fact of our own mortality (*Died* 177). What a "frail, easily hurt, rather pathetic thing a human

body is, naked," writes Lawrence, "somehow, a little unfinished, incomplete!" (*Lover* 72). The submission of one body to another is, in essence, a metaphor made flesh, a small scale recreation of the final resignation in death. Mellors himself seems to alight on this hidden truth when he declares that sex "is really only touch, the closest of all touch. And it's touch we're afraid of" because, in touching another human being, we eventually uncover our own frightful powerlessness (301).

Yet, as we have shown, in sex, touch, and in memory there is a saving duality, a continual overturning that gives us rest and respite. Through the touch of another we're forced to confront our ceaseless and intrinsic decrepitude, our drifting toward death; nevertheless, if in that touch we admit the contingency of our bodies and give ourselves over fully in our fragility, in the *trust* of sexuality, we absorb the indelible mark of another person which, in the nourishment of memory, creates the very possibility of transcending mortality. Here, perhaps, lies the deepest source of Connie's fear: to rescue herself, she has to put her faith in the wager that Mellors too will refuse to withhold himself, that he will not betray her with "cold-hearted fucking" (222). The bravery of creating one's own deliverance through trust is a truth which Lawrence, writing in *The Man Who Died*, recognizes as "so different from . . . courage of death" because it demands a confidence in an unknowable quantity: another flawed human being (203). In sexuality—with or without the contrivances of sex itself—we come to epiphany, come to see "but one wave-tip of life overlapping for a minute another, in the tide of the swaying ocean of life . . . the destiny of life . . . more fierce and compulsive . . . even than the destiny of death . . . a shadow compared to . . . [its] determined surge" (172).

"Dare I come into touch?" asks the protagonist of *The Man Who Died*, the risen Christ, for surely touch "is further than death. But dare I come into this tender touch of life?" (196). Tender: both the condition of fragility, and an act of *offering*. It is precisely this tenderness, in its two-fold sense, that Jacob, unlike Mellors, lacks. In his dealings with women—be they prostitutes or debutantes—this "silent young man" never permits himself to become delicate and vulnerable through the gift of himself, or his body, to another (49). Certainly, he prides himself on taking part in "a most reasonable conversation; a most respectable room; an intelligent girl"; but these are appropriative, not giving gestures (90). Here, perhaps, we can finally come to understand Jacob's relationship with the narrator. I suspect—though Woolf's text limits us to speculation—that Jacob and the narrator once shared the bond of touch, a submission unrequited in Jacob's obstinacy. The narrator placed a bet on reciprocity, and lost. *Jacob's Room* is her attempt to reconstruct and resur-

rect Jacob, to justify the mark that his spiritual miserliness left upon her by delving into his formative moments. Jacob lives on through memory, but as a hollow man whose reticence prevented him from ever really living in the presence of others, as an apparition for whom the "tenderest thing you could do . . . perhaps, would be to give . . . death" (*Lover* 304). If Jacob's life teaches anything, it is that only in selflessness is the self allowed to flourish.

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