

# Metaleptic Mourning

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**I**N February 2003 my close friend Jeff Hubbard died in a car accident, taking the curve of an icy metro Detroit highway exit ramp too fast late one weekend night. He was twenty years old and had been living at home with his parents since we graduated from high school, working odd jobs—a host at a Mexican restaurant, a temporary letter carrier for the USPS—and helping take care of his young nephew. I was in college in New York, and a friend called to give me the news. I knew that I needed to go home to Michigan for the funeral to believe that it had really happened.

I talked with my professors to see if I could have a little extra time to submit work. My Shakespeare professor said I couldn't—I'd have to turn in the first paper, along with everyone else in our small seminar, the Monday after the funeral. I remember wheeling my maroon suitcase through the door of my dorm Sunday night, having overspent on a taxi to speed my way downtown from La Guardia, dazed and out of sorts, and immediately trying to force my thoughts back to *As You Like It*. I didn't like it. Or rather, I loved the play, but I couldn't write my paper. The mechanics of writing on drama, rather than novels or poems, suddenly eluded me; I couldn't remember how to quote it; my mind wouldn't unfog, and my eyes wouldn't stop tearing. I turned in my paper the next day, and my Shakespeare professor gave me a C+, the first (and last) of my life. I went back to his office hours later to ask if I could rewrite it—I knew I could do better, just not the day after a funeral-home memorial service that had been in the same exact room where my father's body had been on display for two surreal days three years before. He said no.

That semester, I was also in Elaine Freedgood's junior honors seminar. Talking to her in office hours was not just a different experience from speaking to my Shakespeare professor (you'll notice I'm not naming names), it was a different *world* of experience. Being in that world

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meant being a person and not just a student, it meant that the fact that I had a life to live as well as classes to take was a given, it meant being seen as someone who could hold both real ambition and real pain, and it held an immediate recognition of the kind of “grief that saps the mind.”<sup>1</sup> To Elaine it was clear that a sudden death, and one that resounded the bells and cries of an earlier sudden death, was at least equally as important as the problem play next up on the syllabus.

But I’m less interested in telling you exactly what Elaine said in office hours than in describing what she was able to do in class one of the following weeks. We were reading Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, and Elaine introduced us to the ideas in Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” an essay I’d never read. Maybe I’m misremembering this part, but the way I recall it, Elaine was speaking directly to me when she described Freud’s theory of loss: that the people we love are never fully lost, are never really gone, but are instead installed in our psyches, becoming an essential part of who we are and how we understand ourselves. She was talking about Arthur Henry Hallam, she was talking about Tennyson, she was talking about the poem; but she was also talking about me, about my father, and about my beloved, radiant, complicated friend Jeff, who died way, way too young, and behind whose ear in the coffin a friend had tucked a fresh cigarette.

In Elaine’s stunning scholarship—which, it’s true, I wouldn’t actually read until a few years down the line: she was finishing *The Ideas in Things* when I was in her class—metalepsis is a guiding figure. She uses it to describe the uneven referential practices of realist novels, and the ways we have managed to overlook or smooth them over, critically and experientially. Following Genette, she defines metalepsis as the “break-down of the boundary between levels of narration” in a literary text. An omniscient narrator suddenly starts speaking as an embodied “I”; a character walks offstage and interacts with members of the audience; a reader is murdered by the bad guy in the story he is reading; in metalepsis, a narrator, character, or reader suddenly crosses over into a narrative frame in which they do not, expectedly or ontologically, belong.<sup>2</sup> We tend to associate such moves with eighteenth-century novels cracking wise or with winking postmodern experimentation. But what Elaine wants to point out is just how much this happens in ostensibly staid nineteenth-century novels. In what Elaine calls realism’s “weird” but “thoroughly naturalized” “combination of fictionality and factuality,” metalepsis happens all the time: fictional romances take place in actual

geographical locations, novelistic plots are interrupted by real wars, and historical characters walk into fictional dinner parties.<sup>3</sup>

There is much at stake in Elaine's revivification of the weirdness of realist fiction: the revelation and dismantling of imperial ideology (as in her essay "Fictional Settlements: Footnotes, Metalepsis, the Colonial Effect"), of commodity fetishism (as in *The Ideas in Things*), of class-based elitism and its elision of working-class writing and subjectivity (as in the essay "The Novelist and Her Poor"), and the literary-critical canonization of Victorian novels and simultaneous downgrading of their colonial and postcolonial counterparts (as in her new book *Worlds Enough*).

But what struck me most at that early undergraduate stage was the fact of metalepsis of the most basic kind, the kind that Elaine showed me in the classroom: that she could be talking about my loss while she talked about Tennyson's, and that she could talk together about a theory of the psyche and a poem that repeatedly demands that we "ring out" "wild bells," that we "ring out" "mournful rhymes." I can see now—having read much more of Elaine's work, having understood it much more deeply, having seen all the ways that I should have been influenced by it, years ago, but wasn't yet ready to be—that I really did conceive of metalepsis in the most *naïve* possible way. It has taken me too long to understand the lessons of empire Elaine was teaching me, and the forms of loss so intimately bound to it. But the fact is, I've built a career on my early partial understanding, both in my writing and in my teaching, and I'm not sure I'd have it any other way—especially because I'm still learning from her, and I always will be.

*The Ideas in Things* takes metalepsis, without naming it as such, as its overarching methodology: in the book, Elaine takes, as she puts it, "a literal approach to literary thing[s]—an approach that breaches, temporarily, the narrative frame and the symbolic system of the novel," and that reads the significance of material objects—mahogany, calico curtains, "Negro head" tobacco, emerald gems, and poor dress—both inside and outside of the text.<sup>4</sup> But it is another sentence, describing another implicit version of metalepsis, that has always pulled focus for me: the sentence in which Elaine argues for "an internalized grammar of meaning that we have learned (as individuals, as a culture) from literary novels and literary criticism."<sup>5</sup> This has always taken my breath away: that Elaine is able to say, so confidently and concisely, something I have only been able to glimpse and intuit. Novelistic forms shape us. This is the version of metalepsis that I relied on in an article I wrote on Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, trying to argue, in conversation with British object relations

psychoanalysis, that we internalize characters and install them in our psyches, just as we do our lost objects of love. Tess's dreamy abstraction as she walks through an overgrown garden and has her skin stained and stickied by sap and pollen becomes a way I feel, sometimes, too.

Elaine returns to the shaping force of nineteenth-century novels in "The Novelist and Her Poor," where she describes our internalization of omniscient narration as our most basic, daily way of describing ourselves to ourselves. Subjectivity is textual and, in fact, intertextual. "[M]any of us may go around," Elaine writes,

with only very partially modified "lines" from various grubby sources floating around in our silent narratives of ourselves. . . . Indeed, perhaps free indirect discourse is not so much a representation of subjectivity as a representation of the intertextuality of representations of subjectivity, including those we make to ourselves about ourselves. Not so much telepathy, omniscience, or an ultimate instance of the police, free indirect discourse is a kind of satire of the way in which we all recycle language—and is itself another kind of recycling.<sup>6</sup>

As you can see, where I am in earnest, Elaine is funny and cutting: because one of the ultimate uses of metalepsis for Elaine is that it absolutely forbids a politically disengaged literary criticism. Her analysis of omniscient narration in novels breaks into all the other narrative frames in which we deploy it:

The pleasure of the text is also the pleasure of consenting to not knowing, to knowing that we do not know and having that be a condition of our being in the world. We do not identify with characters because they are like people but because we are like characters, relying on forms of omniscience—governments, gravity, laws of the market, expert advice, and so on—to keep narrating various aspects of reality for us.<sup>7</sup>

Our work as literary critics, then, is charged with purpose:

The democracy of literature is always outside of it, I would argue, in acts of interpretation that link its modes of knowing and being to our own lived experience. "[I]nterpretations are themselves real changes," Rancière writes, "when they transform the forms of visibility a common world may take and, with them, the capacities that ordinary bodies may exercise in that world over a new landscape of the common" (*Politics of Literature* 30). They must also transform the forms of invisibility that govern our passivity, our acquiescence to all "narration" that is extradiegetic.<sup>8</sup>

Elaine offers here both a definition of metalepsis and a manifesto, a call to action and a way to remember that our academic work, when linked to an analysis of the geopolitical conditions of our own living, can take on a

new “radiance or resonance of meaning”—like the things in *Ideas in Things* reignited into life by the material histories of their production and returned to the novel newly glowing.<sup>9</sup>

I want to be able to use, like Elaine, metalepsis in my teaching: to speak across narrative frames to real people with real lives, with real personal and cultural histories and real investments in what they are reading. We might even imagine good teaching to be just this ability to cross narrative frames without breaking them down. To cross them occasionally, skillfully, helpfully, ethically, respectfully—and with love. In “Fictional Settlements,” Elaine suggests that the kind of novelistic metalepsis in which a fictional character walks down a real street “has affiliations with . . . transference in psychoanalysis.”<sup>10</sup> Thinking that over, I keep returning to what Freud says in “Observations on Transference-Love,” written just two years before “Mourning and Melancholia”: that an outbreak of love in psychoanalysis, though a “complete change of scene,” is not merely an illusion. Freud writes that when love is spoken in analysis, “it is as though some piece of make-believe had been stopped by the sudden irruption of reality—as when, for instance, a cry of fire is raised during a theatrical performance.”<sup>11</sup> I have been thinking about how back in 2003 Elaine heard my cry of fire and understood it should rightly interrupt, for a moment, the theatrical performance of being a student and writing a Shakespeare paper. And about how she understood, too, though, that Tennyson and Shakespeare might also be seated in the red seats of the theater, and might be able to cry out with me.

Talking about all this, being back at NYU in honor of Elaine, I feel myself regressing a little to undergraduate level. I feel like I’m giving a C+ talk about an A+ teacher, mentor, friend, and trusted guide through this weird profession and this weird, unevenly referential life. But I somehow think she’ll understand me. I think she’ll be able to see, as she always has in all my work—and she’s read a draft of almost everything I’ve ever written and published—the best in it, and help me to see it too, and to help shape it into something better and smarter and more responsible. She’ll understand that this paper’s failures gesture to the place not where grief saps the mind but where gratitude, simple and enormous, saps eloquence.

#### NOTES

1. The stanzas I have in mind throughout this piece are from canto 106. Lines 1–12 read:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
 The flying cloud, the frosty light:  
 The year is dying in the night;  
 Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
 Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
 The year is going, let him go;  
 Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind  
 For those that here we see no more;  
 Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
 Ring in redress to all mankind.

2. Freedgood, "Fictional Settlements," 398.
3. Freedgood, *Worlds Enough*, 123.
4. Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 11.
5. Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 6.
6. Freedgood, "The Novelist and Her Poor," 219.
7. Freedgood, "The Novelist and Her Poor," 221.
8. Freedgood, "The Novelist and Her Poor," 221–22.
9. Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 6.
10. Freedgood, "Fictional Settlements," 398.
11. Freud, "Observations on Transference-Love," 162.

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