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A FORM FOR WRITING 20th CENTURY LOSS: AESTHETICS OF ABSENCE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *JACOB'S ROOM*

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Abstract || Considered her first modernist novel, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) would be remembered for its experimental techniques to tell the story of Jacob who died in the First World War. Woolf's construction of her ultimately unknowable character offers a distinct response to the changing realities of warfare and serves as a literary mode of mourning that seeks not to console, but rather to preserve and transmit absence provoked by the losses of the Great War. Here I offer an analysis of Woolf's aesthetics of absence, which I contend anticipates later concerns in addressing experiences of mass violence in literature. In particular, I trace parallels in Modiano's *Dora Bruder* (1997) and Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001).

Keywords || Virginia Woolf | First World War | Mourning | Absence | Partrick Modiano | W. G. Sebald

Una forma de escribir la pérdida del siglo XX: estética de la ausencia en *Jacob's Room* de Virginia Woolf

Resumen || Considerada su primera novela modernista, *Jacob's Room* (1922) de Virginia Woolf sería recordada por sus técnicas experimentales para contar la historia de Jacob, quien muere en la Primera Guerra Mundial. La construcción del que es en el fondo su personaje más misterioso ofrece una respuesta diferente a las realidades cambiantes de la guerra y sirve como un modo literario de duelo que no busca consolar, sino más bien preservar y transmitir la ausencia provocada por las pérdidas de la Gran Guerra. Aquí ofrezco un análisis de la estética de la ausencia de Woolf, que sostengo anticipa preocupaciones posteriores al abordar experiencias de violencia de masas en la literatura. De manera particular, rastreo los paralelismos con *Dora Bruder* (1997) de Modiano y *Austerlitz* (2001) de Sebald.

Palabras clave || Virginia Woolf | Primera Guerra Mundial | Duelo | Ausencia | Partrick Modiano | W. G. Sebald

Una forma d'escriure la pèrdua del segle XX: estètiques d'absència a *Jacob's Room* de Virginia Woolf

Resum || Considerada la seva primera novel·la modernista, *Jacob's Room* (1922) de Virginia Woolf seria recordada per les seves tècniques experimentals per a contar la història de Jacob, qui va morir a la Primera Guerra Mundial. La construcció del que és en el fons del seu personatge més misteriós ofereix una resposta diferent a les realitats canviants de la guerra i serveix com manera literària de dol que busca no tant consolar com preservar i transmetre l'absència provocada per les pèrdues de la Gran Guerra. Aquí es presenta una anàlisis de l'estètica de l'absència a l'obra de Woolf, i s'afirma que anticipa preocupacions posteriors al tractar experiències de violència de masses en la literatura. De manera particular, es rastregen els paral·lelismes amb *Dora Bruder* (1997) de Modiano i *Austerlitz* (2001) de Sebald.

Paraules clau || Virginia Woolf | Primera Guerra Mundial | Dol | Absència | Partrick Modiano | W. G. Sebald

0. Introduction

Having marked 100 years since the end of the First World War, we now approach the centennial of English literary modernism's most remarkable year: 1922 saw the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses* in its entirety, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, as well the first English translation of Proust. In her collection of essays *Not Under Forty*, American author Willa Cather observed that "the world split in two in 1922 or thereabouts" (1992: 812), echoing Woolf's own assertion that "in or about December 1910, human character changed" (2008: 32). If Modernism is understood as a grappling with the crises of modernity brought about by advances in thought, science and technology, these "audacious attempts to discern a moment of transition, […] are themselves a feature of Modernist sensibility" (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1991: 51). In addition to the overwhelming sensation of being on the threshold of transition, the irruption of the First World War would be the physical manifestation in the real world of this reality broken in two, a watershed event splitting time and changing both experiences of collective loss and their representation in literature and art. In this sense, we may understand modernism "as among the cultural effects of an unprecedentedly traumatic war" (McKay, 2017: 9), a war that would usher in a period of violence that was to define the 20th century: "rather than being the 'war to end all wars', [it] became only the originator of the phenomenon of industrial killing" (Bartov, 1996: 26). As George L. Mosse puts it, by its sheer scale in destruction, it was "a different kind of war", in which "twice as many men died in action or of their wounds […] as were killed in all major wars between 1790 and 1914" (1991: 3). The effects of a global and total war, coupled with the technological advances that allowed for killing on a mass scale, forever changed the very nature of warfare and societies' relation to it.

Barely three years after the armistice, as Woolf recovered from influenza on her 40th birthday at the beginning of 1922, she finished writing *Jacob's Room*, which would be known as her first experimental, modernist novel. While the novel indeed addresses the losses of the Great War, it would not be called a "war book" until ten years later (Levenback, 1999: 44). As a whole, however, Woolf's oeuvre has been described as dealing with loss, particularly influenced by the deaths of friends and family members.[1] Although once seen as symptomatic of her "neurotic grief", in recent decades literary critics have reached the consensus that Woolf's work subverts the traditional elegy, offering a "positive reinvention of mourning" that disdains consolatory paradigms and seeks to incite inconsolability (Clewell, 2004: 198). Scholarly work continues to focus on Woolf's fashioning a different sort of elegy[2] that would offer new forms of literary mourning for loss that reject consolation, "refuse to forget the mourned other" and express "commitment to our responsibility for the other's death" (Ball, 2020: 24).

Characterised as a *bildungsroman* relating the life of Jacob Flanders from boyhood to young adulthood, through his time at Cambridge, friendships and relationships, travels specific to young men of a certain privilege, the novel only addresses the war indirectly through the protagonist's

suggested death. *Jacob's Room* as elegy does not seek to idealise or immortalise Jacob, but rather clings to his loss by sustaining his absence in literary form. This formal experimentation regarding character construction offers new modes of both relating and relating *to* collective losses brought about by changing realities of war and violence. The aesthetics of absence resulting from Woolf's placing an ultimately unknowable character at the centre of the text may be read as a precursor—if not direct inspiration—to later forms: a desperate attempt to capture an ever-changing reality that would become increasingly more urgent in addressing and representing socially and politically induced losses of the 20th century provoked by violence on a mass scale. Just as Koulouris asserts that Woolf's novel "foreshadows" Derrida's concerns about Freud's original mourning theories and model (2011: 69), I affirm Woolf's novel also anticipates theories in studies on memory and mourning that will emerge later in the century to address examples of mass violence, particularly those of the Holocaust, postcolonialism and, specifically, where these losses have effects on later generations. In what follows, I offer a closer look at the operations of this aesthetics of absence in *Jacob's Room* and trace parallels in Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* (1997) and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), both of which employ a similar narrative aesthetic as a mode of representing and approaching these experiences of losses.

1. A Modernist Milestone for the Great War

In Woolf's 1919 essay "Modern Fiction" she lays out her critique of the British authors whom she calls "materialists", who, constrained by the antiquated conventions of traditional form, "spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring". In her clamour for a revolutionary writing that would capture "life or spirit, truth or reality" (1993: 7), Woolf began *Jacob's Room* the following year, writing in her diary in January 1920 that she had "arrived at some idea of a new form for a novel" (1978: 13). In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf sought "to work free of conventions of realism […] in which the character is kept waiting in the wings until his entire environment and life history is exhaustively described" (Zwerdling, 1981: 894-895). Woolf's experimental construction of her young protagonist, the blurred, ungraspable sketches of character, is precisely what some found at fault in the work: "the successive moments build up no whole that can be held in the mind […] It must be of set purpose that we are given more of Jacob's reflection in other minds than his own experience. But the result is that Jacob remains a nebulous young man" (Bennett, 1964: 95-96). As Alex Zwerdling asserts (1981: 895), to write off *Jacob's Room* as mere experimentation in form for the sake of form is to ignore the way in which Woolf consciously places innovation in narration, perspective, focalisation and time at the service of representing the realities of war experienced by British society.

In his seminal study of World War I literature *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell lumps Woolf's work along with other "masters of the modern movement" who did not experience the war first hand as

combatants (1975: 313). Despite categorising Woolf as an outsider with regards to the war, Karen Levenback "disputes the notion that Virginia Woolf had been an impassive bystander whose interest in the war was 'negligible'" (1999: 2). In fact, as Levenback adroitly argues, the bulk of her work has, albeit obliquely, the effects of the war at their centre: in *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, "Woolf demonstrates a progressive awareness of the way in which the situations of soldiers and civilians are linked by the very realities of war that are ignored by history and theory" (1999: 7).

Elsewhere, Woolf would address the changing nature of war and the effects on civilians. In "The War from the Street", her 1919 review of D. Bridgman Metchim's book *Our Own History of the War: from a South London View*, Woolf reflects on the consequences of the war beyond the trenches and the lasting repercussions on civil society: "Mr Metchim has discovered the very important truth that history of the war is not and never will be written from our point of view" (1993: 3). Twenty years later, shortly after the start of the Second World War, Woolf considers in "The Leaning Tower" the social and material conditions that had given way to British writers from the nineteenth century to the present. The greatest authors of these—Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, George Eliot—were not affected by either the Napoleonic war or the British Empire's various wars worldwide: "their model, their vision of human life, was not disturbed or agitated or changed by war. Nor were they themselves. […] Wars were then remote; wars were carried on by soldiers and sailors, not by private people" (1964: 107). In short, they were "immune" from the violence of war, and owed their success to the peace and prosperity that shored up their own privilege and supported the "tower" from which they viewed the world, until, Woolf writes, "suddenly, like a chasm in a smooth road, the war came. […] All through the nineteenth century, down to August 1914, that tower was a steady tower" (1964: 112-113).

Jacob's Room allows for a new way of addressing realities of war which directly challenged traditional forms of both representation and mourning. Commemorating Jacob's absence by placing a void at the centre of the narrative "offers no faith in religious immortality, no applause for individual heroism, no celebration of male comradery, no stoical acceptance of fate, no aesthetic smoothing over of the war's human costs of any kind" (Clewell, 2004: 202). In short, Woolf's narrative presents and encourages a mourning process that is consciously at odds with what George L. Mosse called the "Myth of the War Experience": the construction of a collective memory that sought to remember "the glory rather than the horror of war, its purposefulness rather than its tragedy" and to "draw the sting from death in war and emphasize the meaningfulness of the fighting and sacrifice" (1991: 6-7). Additionally, "interwar imagery presents a highly favourable view of the simple soldier", although it nevertheless "fails to grapple with the fact that it was the People who had produced the shells, the bullets, the guns and the bombs, the newspapers and propaganda leaflets, without all of which the war […] would have been impossible" (Bartov, 1996: 43). To a certain extent, *Jacob's Room* very much does, in fact, take into consideration these notions: the effects of the war dead on civilian society, but also the

very mechanisms at play that led to the war in the first place:[3] "When such a young man was killed, [Woolf] seems to ask, what is lost then? What lost by him? What was lost by his friends? What exactly was it that had disappeared?" (Holtby in Zwerdling, 1981: 897). Through the character of Jacob, Woolf "implicitly indicts the fate of countless *singular* people in the industrialised slaughter that was the Great War" (Koulouris, 2011: 71).

This sacralisation of death for the sake of the cause of war essentially operated in terms of the traditional elegy, where the individual overcomes death in his sacrifice for a greater good. This, however, ultimately provoked "a terrible mismatch between private loss and public mourning [which] shaped a generation" (Frances, 2017: 153). Whereas the Myth of the War Experience aimed "to make an inherently unpalatable past acceptable, important not just for the purpose of consolation but above all for the justification of the nation in whose name the war had been fought" (Mosse, 1991: 7), *Jacob's Room* addresses head on this disparity between private loss and public mourning through the refusal of consolation and by capturing the *unpalatability* of the past through literary form.

2. Aesthetics of Absence in *Jacob's Room*

In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf intentionally and carefully constructs her protagonist to be unknowable to both her narrator and her readers to present and transmit the absence provoked by Jacob's loss. The novel essentially has two plots: "Jacob's growth and death, and the narrator's learning about him" (Morgenstern, 1972: 353), the story of a young man who is sent to die in war, and the story of the attempt to piece that life together. In addressing the effects of World War I losses, *Jacob's Room* seeks neither to compensate for nor to overcome absence, but to adhere to it, preserve it in the narrative form:

> To mourn Jacob, then, is to acknowledge the absence he has become. And to sustain grief for this absence establishes the possibility for a vigilant relation to a fragile social present, an historical moment, as Woolf rightly recognized, that threatened to repeat the catastrophic violence of a war intended to end war (Clewell, 2004: 209).

This aesthetic or architecture of absence is meticulously constructed so as to house the loss of Jacob as a young man, soldier, son and friend and sustain it throughout the text in two ways: firstly, by presenting Jacob as perpetually absent, and, secondly, through the narrator's epistemological limitations.

2.1. Anticipating Jacob's Absence

Despite its being called a "war book", explicit references to the war are lacking, referenced in "undertones […] in allusions, metonyms and interrupted syntax" (Levenbeck, 1999: 41). As such, the war constitutes a sort of absent presence running through the entirety of the book. From

the beginning Jacob's fate would have been quite clear to readers, as his surname—Flanders—alludes to the site of several battles specifically immortalised in in John McCrae's popular poem "In Flanders Fields" (Zwerdling, 1981: 896). As the narration begins, revealing his family name, Jacob "is dead before he is born into the text, his patronymic already a citation from the text of the First World War" (Bishop, 1992: 154).

In addition to Jacob's fate presaged by his name, the novel begins and ends with two similarly telling scenes: the first, during a childhood visit to the beach, Jacob's mother, Betty Flanders, searches for her lost son who has wandered off; the final scene, Jacob's friend, Bonamy, and Betty Flanders stand alone in Jacob's empty room after his suggested death. What remains in between, the narrative of Jacob's life, is flanked by two moments in which he is not present, providing "a frame for the absence that the entire novel laments" (Ball, 2020: 25). In searching for young Jacob, his brother Archer calls out to him on three occasions—"Ja-cob! Ja-cob!"—in a voice with "an extraordinary sadness […] going out into the world, solitary, unanswered" (Woolf, 1999: 5).[4] Archer's cry was an addition to the original draft, part of Woolf's decision to shift the narrative away from a more traditional *bildungsroman* and towards the narrator's search to know Jacob (Bishop, 1986: 126). To Archer's calling, "Jacob remained, naturally, silent. There was no response, it would appear, from Jacob's infinite remove. And this motif of voicelessness continues until the end of the novel" (Koulouris, 2011: 70), where a call to an absent, dead Jacob is repeated again by Bonamy in his empty room (*JR*: 247).

Jacob's voicelessness, this calling out with no response, and later Jacob's own taciturnity, render any attempt to name him an apostrophe, where Jacob's infrequent responses flicker up in the rest of the novel like a memory of something gone. The narrator furthers ties Jacob's voicelessness with his eventual fate in her relay of other characters' descriptions of Jacob as a young man: "Then Julia said 'the silent young man', […] no doubt she meant: 'If he is going to get on in the world, he will have to find his tongue'" (*JR*: 95). Shortly after, while dining at a restaurant with Florinda, she asks Jacob a series of questions to which Jacob's responses are not reported. The failure to include his replies is characteristic of Woolf's descriptions of reality—"Talk in a restaurant is dazed sleep-walkers' talk, so many things to look at—so much noise—other people talking. Can one overhear?" (*JR*: 108)—, yet it also serves to create the effect of a barrage of questions directed to an absent Jacob, who has not found his tongue.

There are further examples that anticipate Jacob's fate which serve as hints, as the narrator herself suggests, and appear throughout the text: "this was Jacob Flanders, aged nineteen. It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" (*JR*: 37). Here the metanarrative comment's purpose is twofold: a reflection on Woolf's alternative characterisation in fiction, as well as suggesting Jacob's unknowable character. At the narrator's behest, the reader then follows the hints that suggest Jacob's eventual fate. The narrator tells us "Jacob Flanders, therefore, went up to Cambridge in

October, 1906" (*JR*: 35), the only explicit mention of any date, less than eight years before the outbreak of the war.[5] While at Cambridge, the narrator floats between rooms, offering a glimpse into the evening doings of students and dons alike, only to stop herself abruptly: "legs, perhaps, over the arms of chairs; smoking; sprawling over tables, and writing while their heads went round in a circle as the pen moved—simple young men, these, who would—but there is no need to think of them grown old" (*JR*: 55). This allusion to the fate awaiting Jacob and his classmates is further suggested a few lines below in a reference to their reading Keats and the poet's own death at a young age (*JR*: 55).

Following the narrator's hints, we understand these young men are destined to die in the fields of battle, just as young Jimmy who, along with his girlfriend Helen, are mentioned in passing as subjects of gossip at an evening party: in catching bits of conversation, the narrator adds that "now Jimmy feeds crows in Flanders and Helen visits hospitals" (*JR*: 131). However, this ultimate end, the narrator tells us, is not an inescapable fate, but rather the consequence of "actions, together with the incessant commerce of banks, laboratories, chancelleries, and houses of business […] which oar the world forward" (*JR*: 216). Zwerdling puts it rather pointedly: "The ministers in Whitehall lift their pens and alter the course of history; and young men die" (1981: 897). These young men—and all of society—are at the whim of what "the men in clubs and Cabinets" call an "unseizable force": "It is thus we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; that it goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons. This, they say, is what we live by—this unseizable force" (*JR*: 217). Nor does Jacob escape this force, as the narrator tells us while the young man is on holiday in Greece: "They were talking about Germany at the Durrants, and Jacob (driven by this unseizable force) walked rapidly down Hermes Street" (*JR*: 217), hurtling toward the war. As readers we learn of Jacob's growing up, "reading about his intellectual and amorous adventures, but we are also witnessing the preparation of cannon fodder" (Zwerdling, 1981: 896). Despite this "unseizable force" and those who disdain literature, who "say that character-drawing is a frivolous fireside art, a matter of pins and needles, exquisite outlines enclosing vacancy, flourishes, and mere scrawls", the narrator defiantly attempts to capture Jacob, even if her portrayal of him is reduced to an "exquisite outline enclosing vacancy" (*JR*: 216).

2.2. An Unknowable Character

Just as Jacob is presented as constantly and inevitably absent throughout the text, so too is his absence made manifest in the narrative act itself, primarily through the narrator's own epistemological limitations surrounding Jacob, which themselves appear, at times, contradictory. Morgenstern describes the narrator as Woolf's most "self-conscious" (1972: 352). Her identity as a first-person narrator is not withheld, as she herself mentions in passing over halfway through the novel her "ten years' seniority and [her] different sex" with regards to Jacob (*JR*: 128). Nevertheless, the self-referential language is, while not entirely lacking,

subtle and many of the direct addresses to the reader were stricken from the draft (Morgenstern, 1972: 354). The effect of this is that we, as readers, see the narrator as "both character and device, and we are meant both to watch as well as to identify with her search for Jacob" (Bishop, 1992: 163). Given the subtlety of her own subjectivity, the narrator at times fades into the background only to irrupt again to weigh in on a specific scene or situation. In sum, she is an "intrusive narrator" in her reconstruction of Jacob's life, "a narrative persona readers cannot help but confront" (Clewell, 2004: 203).

The narrator collects and reproduces stories and information about Jacob, focusing on those who had met and known him throughout his life. As to how she came about the knowledge, "she would seem to interview the people who have come into some contact—even tangential—with Jacob. She reports what they tell her", although there is no reference to any sort of investigatory research (Morgenstern, 1972: 356). He is characterised through others' reporting as shy, taciturn: "'The silent young man', said Miss Eliot. 'Yes, Jacob Flanders', said Mrs Durrant" (*JR*: 78). Jacob's responses to many of the conversations reported with other characters are, at times, succinct, monosyllabic responses—"Jacob is only present through his absence […] evidenced by the half-finished sentences, his eerie reservedness, his aloofness" (Koulouris, 2011: 73)—, or, as in the aforementioned dinner conversation with Florinda, never reported.

While Jacob's own thoughts are presented at times, they are few in comparison to the kaleidoscope of views of him focalised through both secondary and minor characters. A particularly rapid succession of opinions on Jacob, which paint a sort of cubist depiction of him from different angles, is exemplary of how this operates:

> Mr Sopwith's opinion was as sentimental Clara's, though far more skilfully expressed.
> Betty Flanders was romantic about Archer and tender about John; she was unreasonably irritated by Jacob's clumsiness in the house.
> Captain Barfoot liked him best of the boys, but as for saying why… (*JR*: 95).

This observation of Jacob from the outside was very much intentional: "It is only after the first draft that Jacob becomes a figure seen primarily from the outside, whose thoughts and emotions remain a matter of speculation" (Bishop, 1986: 126). Zwerdling concurs, stating "Woolf deliberately minimized the reader's access to Jacob's thoughts. […] We never know exactly what Jacob feels about […] most of the other people whose lives touch his" (1981: 900).

Despite the scant views offered into Jacob, the narrator's status as omniscient is suggested in her knowledge and reproduction of entire conversations, internal thoughts of both central and minor characters and even passers-by, their pasts, their futures and their fleeting impressions. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a sort of contradiction in the narrator's omniscience when it comes to Jacob. Although intimate and private thoughts are presented, at times "the omniscient narrator suddenly and rather disturbingly pleads ignorance, becomes at best

'semiscient'" (Zwerdling, 1981: 902). This retraction of knowledge at times is less overt, marked by a simple adverb suggesting ignorance or by speculation on the narrator's part:

> [Jacob] stood smoking his pipe while the stroke of the clock purred softly around him. *Perhaps* there had been an argument. He looked satisfied; indeed masterly; which expression changed slightly as he stood there, the sound of the clock conveying to him (*it may be*) a sense of old buildings and time; and himself the inheritor (*JR*: 57; emphasis added).[6]

In other instances, the narrator claims to have been unable to retrieve words from conversations—"And perhaps Jacob only said "hum", or said nothing at all. True, the words were inaudible" (*JR*: 59)—or attributes her inability to accurately describe the situation to Jacob's quiet nature—"But whether this is the right interpretation of Jacob's gloom as he sat naked, in the sun, looking at the Land's End, it is impossible to say; for he never spoke a word" (*JR*: 63). Still, on other occasions, the narrator directly refuses to reproduce Jacob's utterances: "'It follows…' said Jacob. Only half a sentence followed; but these half-sentences are like flags set on tops of buildings to the observer of external sights down below" (*JR*: 64). Regardless of the reasons, the effect is that Jacob is the one character who escapes the narrator and remains unknowable, leaving inference and speculation the only option: "[Jacob] sat talking to Bonamy, half of what he said was too dull to repeat; much unintelligible (about unknown people and Parliament); what remains is mostly a matter of guess work. Yet over him we hang vibrating" (*JR*: 97-98).

Whether her inability to recover certain details surrounding Jacob is due to a limitation in her own knowledge or to the fact that Jacob died in the war and, thus, is unable to offer his recollections, the narrator rejects any semblance of or attempt to approach omniscience when it comes to Jacob. This is suggested in a conversation with Bonamy, interspersed with Jacob's thoughts, indicated in parentheses:

> ("I'm twenty-two. It's nearly the end of October. Life is thoroughly pleasant, although unfortunately there are a great number of fools about. […]")
> "I say, Bonamy, what about Beethoven?"
> ('Bonamy is an amazing fellow. He knows practically everything —not more about English literature than I do— but then he's read all those Frenchmen')
> "I rather suspect you're talking rot, Bonamy. In spite of what you say, poor old Tennyson…"
> ("The truth is one ought to have been taught French. […]")
> "What about a walk on Saturday?"
> ("What's happening on Saturday?") (*JR*: 96-97)

The thoughts ascribed to Jacob are, in fact, inventions of the narrator, as shortly after she explains "all this may very well be true—so Jacob thought and spoke—so he crossed his legs—filled his pipe—sipped his whiskey, […] there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself" (JR: 97). Here the narrator rejects omniscience: "She *could* tell us about Jacob, but she *will not*. […] [Woolf] does not simply eliminate Jacob's interior monologue, she gives us a narrator who reminds us what she is doing and what she could have done" (Bishop, 1992: 163). As Clewell writes, this decision of

Woolf's "preserves her protagonist's subjecthood", which "makes the thought of Jacob's radical otherness possible" as a loss that is irrecoverable (2004: 207).

In her diaries, Woolf mentions the critiques of her supposed failure to build character: "People, like Arnold Bennett, say I can't create, or didn't in *Jacob's Room*, characters that survive" (1978: 248). Just as Zwerdling asserts that to reduce Woolf's novel to a mere exercise in formal experimentation is to miss the purpose, so too is to claim Woolf's failure to build a character. Although "Jacob's character is broken up, into threads […] all the threads are rewoven by the narrator" (Morgenstern, 1972: 361) into a final product which has some semblance of a life told, albeit one that unavoidably remains as empty as Jacob's room at the end of the novel. The narrator fails in her search for Jacob, as she must: "The narrator's willingness to deflate and ultimately abandon her own projections and conceptualizations of Jacob works as a powerful critique of the desire to master loss through the order of representation" (Clewell, 2004: 208). *Jacob's Room* as a novel which seeks to capture losses of the war functions precisely through this impossibility to build a character. As a model for mourning that does not seek to compensate loss or console, neither does it offer up the literary product as a way of overcoming death through immortalisation of the lost subject. Instead, Woolf's novel offers a literary form that allows for preserving the loss of Jacob, through his absence, both in its themes—the absent presence of the Great War that haunts the entirety of the text—as well as through its form: the narrator's inability to get at Jacob made manifest in the narration of the text itself.

3. A Form for Writing Loss

What Woolf developed in *Jacob's Room* exhibits aesthetic concerns that foreshadow later forms in literature and art that would take shape after the century's other experiences of violence. As the Great War brought unprecedented destruction on a mass scale, socially and politically induced loss would continue to multiply and affect populations even further removed from the battlefield as the century advanced. The Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Holocaust, colonial wars or the Vietnam War would not only all further do away with the traditional dichotomies of soldier/civilian originally broken in the First World War, but would also necessitate new terms—perpetrator, victim or bystander—to describe the complex ways everyday citizens are implicated and connected to new realities of warfare.

The aesthetics of absence understood as an open-ended mourning that commemorates loss through the recognition of the irrecoverable through narrative would lend itself to addressing these changes. In addition, it anticipates future ways of theorising these losses whose effects across the century will prove far-reaching. Woolf's aesthetics offers a way to portray how absence integrates the present, even when those absences bear witness to losses which are not directly our own: the narrator in *Jacob's Room* markedly distances herself from Jacob in both age and

sex, and yet attempts to search for him, ultimately coming up empty handed in the confrontation of his loss; Woolf may be considered a bystander, a civilian far from the trenches in relation to the Great War, but shows "from the street" the ways loss integrates her reality in light of the changing nature of war.

Several of these questions—dealing with loss on a mass scale, its lasting and transgenerational effects, the imperative to remember, changing understandings of political responsibility and implication—underpin later theories in memory and mourning studies, especially those emerging in the contexts of the Holocaust, postcolonial and postdictatorial societies. Notions of absence as either an abstract concept or a physical reality have proved integral in theorising collective forms of memory and, particularly, absence's capacity to signify and transmit meaning in distinct forms of representation. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, for example, addresses the traumatic aspects of an *absence* of memory transfer between generations, both within the bounds of the family as well as beyond (2008). Beyond the context of Holocaust studies, theories on memory and mourning in the case of the Southern Cone's detained-disappeared often tackle questions related to absence of a body. Uruguayan sociologist Gabriel Gatti identifies two sorts of social narratives emerging in postdictatorial Argentinian society: *narrativas del sentido* and *narrativas de ausencia de sentido*. While with the first he associates the task of putting back together what the catastrophe of forced disappearance broke apart, the second consists in social narrative within a posttraumatic reality that are constituted in and assume the catastrophe as the "lugar de enunciación […] aunque sea un lugar difícil de decir" (2012: 147). These narratives assume "*la imposibilidad misma de representar* y la necesidad consecuente de dar con resortes y lenguajes para trabajar con esa imposibilidad" (2012: 150).

Literature[7] abounds with examples of narrative that have sought to communicate experiences of loss and absence in a similar way to what I have called here Woolf's aesthetics of absence. Within the context of the Holocaust, Michael Rothberg's theorising of what he calls "traumatic realism" addresses the difficulties of "construct[ing] a recognizable narrative out of extremity", where "the narrative must turn on absence" (2000: 99). While literary examples are numerous, I offer here a brief reflection on two novels that are particularly suggestive when placed in dialogue with *Jacob's Room,* as they both present narrators in search of other individuals who have died and, in turn, relay the story to the reader.

Patrick Modiano's novel *Dora Bruder* (1997) is a work of autofiction in which Modiano, the narrator, becomes obsessed with finding any information he can about Dora Bruder, a young Jewish girl whom he reads about in an old newspaper announcing her disappearance from her boarding school. In his search, he learns that she was later detained, interned, and deported to Auschwitz. Like in *Jacob's Room*, Modiano's novels constructs a similar aesthetic of absence around the ultimately unknowable, irrecoverable young Dora, an endeavour whose effect is that of locating and sustaining loss.

While gathering any mention of her or her family members in official records, the narrator uses cautious language, careful to stick to the facts when piecing together any information he can. Nevertheless, faced with limited knowledge about young Dora, the narrator has no choice but to admit his own ignorance and, at times, resorts to supposing and inferring what *might have* happened to her as he retraces her steps through the city. The effect is the narrator is constantly skirting the absence that is Dora, unable to fully recover her story:

> It is said that premises retain some stamp, however faint, of their previous inhabitants. Stamp: an imprint, hollow or in relief. Hollow, I should say, in the case of Ernest and Cécile Bruder, of Dora. I have a sense of absence, of emptiness, whenever I find myself in a place where they have lived (2014: 21).

Moving through the very spaces witness to Dora's disappearance, this absence becomes the inevitable portrait of the narrator's failed reconstruction, resulting in a litany of rhetorical questions and suppositions that bestow upon the narration a sense of caution in order to get as close to this absence surrounding Dora and her family, but without filling it in. Like Woolf's rendering of Jacob's voicelessness through the text, so too does Modiano capture the members of the Bruder family's inability to speak, leaving the post-Holocaust witness with his own questions and guesswork. For example, in the narrator's attempt to delve into the past of Dora's father, Ernest Bruder, and his past in the French Legion, as readers we are tentatively told that

> his childhood *would have been spent* in [Vienna's] Jewish quarter, Leopoldstadt. His parents were *almost certainly* natives of Galicia or Bohemia or Moravia […] Or did he come from a less poverty-stricken background than the refugees from the east? The son of a Taborstrasse shopkeeper, perhaps? How are we to know? […] The Legion *must have* released him from his engagement because of his war wound. I don't suppose he talked about it to anyone (2014: 16).[8]

Similarly, when speculating on Dora's personal life in the Catholic boarding school she would later flee, the narrator insists: "I don't know if Dora Bruder made friends at the Saint-Coeur-de-Marie. Or if she kept to herself. Until such time as I have the testimony of one of her former classmates, I am reduced to conjecture" (2014: 34). Indeed, there is no information about those months that passed between Dora's disappearance, her return home, before her later deportation: "So far, I haven't found a single clue, a single witness who might shed light on these four months of absence, for us, a blank in her life" (2014: 73). Later, the narrator explains that after seeing the old newspaper announcement, he discovered Dora had been interned in the Drancy camp after previously passing through the Tourelles camp in Paris. Nonetheless, the narrator has no indication as to the motives behind Dora's initial detainment in Tourelles: "When, and for what precise reasons, was Dora Bruder sent to Tourelles? I thought there might have been a document, a clue, to provide me with the answer. I was reduced to making assumptions" (2014: 49). In short, the novel on a whole is a desperate attempt to approach the void that is Dora and her family, necessary, yet impossible. Of the twenty-six sections that make up the book, ten begin with a question or missing information; eleven end in the same way; still,

a third of them begin with some fact, piece of information or document, but always quickly followed by more questions and possible hypotheses (Cook, 2005: 293).

The purpose laid out in *Dora Bruder* is twofold: on one hand, rescuing Dora from oblivion; on the other, insisting constantly that any such recovery whatsoever is inevitably impossible. Indeed, while it would appear that the objective here is to clarify facts surrounding Dora's life, her disappearance and subsequent deportation to Auschwitz, we know—and here the parallel between Modiano and Woolf is most telling—thanks to Alan Morris' study of Modiano's research process that the author made a series of corrections and additions to the novel's second edition in which he consciously decided *not* to include all the information he had: concrete facts on Dora's parents or even photographs of Dora and her family. As Woolf crafted her novel to limit readers' access to Jacob, so too does Modiano ensure the integrity of Dora's absence, "where silence, absence, voids, secrets, hidden or lost information, and the untold are paramount" (Morris, 2006: 283). In a way Modiano's narrator admits to the reader, to quote the narrator of *Jacob's Room*, that "what remains is mostly a matter of guess work" and "yet over [Dora] we hang vibrating", persistently attending to the claims of a void that seeks not to be filled but to be recognised (*JR*: 98).

The German author W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001) likewise contains a search for information about a traumatic past; however, in this case it is the character Jacques Austerlitz's search about his own history. In the novel, an unnamed narrator of German descent tells the story of Austerlitz, whom the narrator meets at the end of the 1960s in Antwerp. After thirty years apart, they meet again in 1996 in London. The narrator then goes on to relay to the reader Austerlitz's own story, told to the narrator upon their reunion. While they had lost contact, Austerlitz discovered he had been one of 10.000 Jewish children sent from various countries to the United Kingdom at the outbreak of World War II. Austerlitz then went on to discover the fate of his parents, who had stayed on in Czechoslovakia during the war. The narrator tells the reader that Austerlitz travelled to Prague only to discover his mother had died, most likely in Auschwitz, and that he his father died in the concentration camp Gurs after having fled Prague to France.

While the protagonist Austerlitz does indeed confront his past, the novel never ceases to have at its centre the absence produced by the loss of his parents and his own history. The unknowns of Austerlitz's own story are not limited to specific details, but rather the novel itself is lacking in any direct narration or explicit references to concrete tragedies of the Holocaust: neither it nor the word Auschwitz is ever mentioned, constituting a present absence that underpins the entire novel that is only hinted at with every utterance of the protagonist's name, Austerlitz. In Theodore Koulouris' reading, the novel brings together the notion of permanent absence with "our inability to address the systematic extermination of life via conventional forms of textual mourning" (2016: 55). In a similar way to how Woolf offers a model of mourning that does not propose a reading of Jacob's death in terms of a glorious sacrifice,

but rather by conveying through narrative form the resulting absence of his death, Sebald "suggests that the act of narrating the Holocaust necessitates a kind of textual mourning which, first and foremost, considers itself *impossible*" (Koulouris, 2016: 53).

The inconceivable nature of the Holocaust is thus maintained through the absence of the horrible details and stories. Sebald himself would comment on this characteristic of his work in a radio interview broadcast eight days before his death:

> […] the main scenes of horror are never addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people, because we've all seen images, but these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things. And also paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity. So the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation (Silverblatt, 2007: 80).

The constant present absences of specific atrocious acts fill the work with the sensation that the narration is continuously pointing elsewhere, but whose name is never mentioned.

Sebald's aesthetic of absence also operates on the level of the narration. What we may understand as a sort of hypermediated narration, every detail and fact about Austerlitz's past arrives to the reader through several mediators: everything we know about the character Jacques Austerlitz arrives to us by way of the unnamed narrator; everything Austerlitz discovers about his past he learns from others, like Vera, an old family friend Austerlitz reunites with upon his return to Prague, but for the reader it arrives doubly mediated: first through Austerlitz, after, through the narrator. Instances of this sort of narration are a constant in the novel, too numerous to reproduce here, but an especially complex example, with its various layers, comes from a moment when Vera tells Austerlitz how she came to know his parents, Ágata and Maximilian:

> It was through an interest in every aspect of French civilization, she added, something which as an enthusiastic student of Romance culture I shared with both Ágata and Maximilian, that a friendship began to develop between us immediately after our first conversation on the day when they moved in, a friendship which led as if quite naturally, so Vera told me, said Austerlitz, to her offering, since unlike Ágata and Maximilian she had her time largely at her own disposal, to assume the duties of nanny for the few years until I started nursery school (2001: 154).

This type of narration structures the entire novel, resulting in a dizzying effect which, at times, borders on confusing. Nonetheless, in this "poetics of suspension", in the words of Amir Eshel, time, past, all chronology are suspended in regards to conventional narration: instead of a transparent representation or description of an event, the narration constitutes an event in itself and assumes a literary temporality that brings together different temporal levels, bringing us closer to the past, but with an inevitable barrier that serves as a reminder of the impossibility of completely arriving at past loss, regardless of whatever the urgency and importance of doing so (Eshel, 2003: 74).

To continue with the parallel between *Jacob's Room* and *Austerlitz,* in the same aforementioned interview, Sebald mentions Woolf's brief essay "The Death of a Moth", published posthumously, in which she describes a moth's final moments on a windowsill. In Sebald's reading of the essay, he sees the same sort of oblique, tangential approach to catastrophe as in his own work: the text is

> Written somewhere, chronologically speaking, between the battlefields of the Somme and the concentration camps erected by my compatriots. There's no reference made to the battlefields of the Somme in this passage, but one knows, as a reader of Virginia Woolf, that she was greatly perturbed by the First World War, by its aftermath, by the damage it did to people's souls, the souls of those who got away, and naturally of those who perished. So I think a subject which at first glance seems quite far removed from the undeclared concern of a book can encapsulate that concern (Silverblatt, 2007: 80-81).

On Sebald's novel, Hirsch writes that it has a "self-conscious, innovative, and critical aesthetic that palpably conveys absence and loss" and "the determination to know about the past and the acknowledgement of its elusiveness" (2008:119). In the same way, *Jacob's Room* is a self-conscious novel that addresses the process of constructing and capturing a literary character through the narrator's task of knowing Jacob. From the position of both author and narrator who did not participate in the battlefield, his loss nevertheless affects their own experience. In his absence, though, Jacob remains ever elusive, and the novel stands as a testimony to that loss.

4. Conclusions

Many of Woolf's concerns for a new aesthetic that would capture the changing realities of modernity were born of a time "between the battlefields of the Somme and the concentration camps", flanked by two wars and the conviction that new experiences of violence could only be apprehended through new forms. Just as in Modiano and Sebald's novels, in *Jacob's Room* the narrator's attempt to seize and penetrate the young man lost to war fails. However, Woolf bestows upon her narrator the task of erecting "outlines enclosing vacancy", where the vacancy is not the emptiness and futileness of writing referred to by those who the narrator tells us denigrate "character-drawing [as] a frivolous fireside art"; here the vacancy is Jacob himself, sent away to war to die. Just as the walls of his room are the outlines that enclose his absence, such are the narrator's attempts to apprehend him.

Just as the Great War would supersede previous wars in dimension, the Second World War would do the same and this time the civilian toll would be significantly higher. The form in *Jacob's Room* to address this type of loss, if not a direct influence, offers a literary answer to a pressing need to deal with this loss. In an unsettling way, through its proposal of an anticonsolatory model, *Jacob's Room* prepares the way for addressing future losses of the 20th century that would inevitably exceed those of the Great War. Both Modiano and Sebald seek similar, albeit particular, ways of capturing and expressing the losses of the Holocaust in the literary text

that similarly hinge on an inability to fully recover or to get at the past, which serves to preserve loss through the text, making the literary text a witness to absence and the act of reading a mode of mourning.

This year marks yet another anniversary: eighty years since Virginia Woolf's suicide. In contemplating Woolf's own absence and the legacy of her novel elegies, we are reminded thus of the ways in which we may be moved to respond to loss, especially to loss that is not directly our own.

Notes

[1] *Jacob's Room* is said to be influenced by her brother Thoby's death in 1906 (Clewell, 2004: 206) and *To the Lighthouse* (1925) is a working through of her parents' death.
[2] Andrew Ball offers a review of terms used by theorists to describe Woolf's work: anti-elegy, fiction-elegy, reconstructive feminist elegy, satiric elegy, cultural elegy, self-elegy. The author takes issue with the term "anti-elegy", opting instead for the term "counter elegy" or "novel-elegies" (2020: 23).
[3] According to Clewell's reading, Jacob is "an embodiment of patriarchal attitudes that led to a war many believe to have been fought without real purpose" (2004: 204). On Jacob's misogyny, chauvinism and privileged class position, see in particular pp. 204-205.
[4] This edition will be cited hereafter with the initials *JR*.
[5] While there are no other years mentioned, "the novel alludes to certain well-known public events of the years just before the war—the Irish Home Rule Bill, the transformation of the House of Lords—in a way that would have reminded her original audience of dates—1911, 1912, 1913" (Zwerdling, 1981: 896-897).
[6] The italics are mine.
[7] Both Hirsch and Gatti consider the role absence plays in visual art: Hirsch references Shimon Attie's photograph series *The Writing on the Wall* (1992) and Gatti analyses Gustavo Germano's series *Ausencias* (2006). Likewise, Clewell asserts Woolf's model of mourning in *Jacob's Room* anticipates works like "Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial or the NAMES Project Aids Memorial Quilt" (2004: 199).
[8] The italics are mine.

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