Writing Through the Words of Those Lost: Memoir and Mourning in Novels by Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews

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In their respective memoirs, *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest* (2006) and *Swing Low: A Life* (2000), Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews depend on the words of those who have died – in Wiebe's case his older sister, Helen, and in Toews's case her father, Mel – to measure and remember the familial past while commemorating loved ones through the presence of their words on the page. Wiebe consults Helen's diary, a record of her own illnesses and those of the family, for events he does not remember or never knew. More importantly, through his reading of his sister's words, he sees how she bravely faced her painful disease and short life in the knowledge of the inevitability of mortality. Toews, in consulting the many written records meticulously preserved by Mel, sees in them how bipolar disorder, which divided him between a world of words in the Steinbach, Manitoba classroom where he taught and a world of silence at home with his family, eventually led to his suicide. Toews finds herself performing the role of Mel's amanuensis during his final

hospital stay, recording his soft and tentatively spoken words on yellow legal notepads so that he could read them aloud in order to take them in and believe them. She continues this process in *Swing Low*, subtitled "A Life" rather than "A Memoir," transcribing remembered words onto the page as well as words that were never spoken or heard but *could have* existed in other circumstances. The dependence on the physicality of the written word exists in both texts – in Helen's diary continued by her surviving sister Liz; in Wiebe's reproduction of the original draft of his first short story; in Mel's filed records, receipts, textbook manuscripts, and travel diaries; and in the signs and notes exchanged between father and daughters in the hospital. The comforting and lasting presence of words on diary pages, manuscripts, records, signs, and notes confirms and strengthens the continuation of family connections beyond death.

In this paper I examine Wiebe's and Toews's memoirs as texts that deal with grieving and touch on preliminary mourning, but do not fully engage in the actual "work of mourning," as described by Sigmund Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917). My argument, which focuses on the language left behind in various material forms by those who have died, and relational acts of reading and writing shared by the survivor with the one being mourned, proposes that for Wiebe and Toews, representations of the real work of mourning take place in the fiction that follows the memoir. In 2014, fourteen years after the appearance of *Swing Low*, Toews published *All My Puny Sorrows* (*AMPS*), in which she responds to the death of her sister, Marj, who committed suicide twelve years after Mel. In the same year, eight years after *Of This Earth* was published, Wiebe released the novel *Come Back*, which he has discussed in relation to the 1985 suicide of his son, Michael.[1] I argue that the years between the publication of the memoir and novel mark a period of mourning for the writers that works its way into the fiction, manifesting itself in a degree of relief and muted consolation for the fictional mourners, Hal Wiens and Yoli Von Riesen. As well as viewing the grieving-mourning process as a product of time, I also see the different strategies, stages, and levels of grieving and mourning as reflections of the demands and expectations of the two different genres of memoir and novel. Although the autobiographical form may be considered a more appropriate genre than the novel for the representation of grief, it is perhaps not surprising that deep mourning is more effectively expressed in fiction, where constraints are lifted due to the more muted presence of the personal and private.

In comparing the healthy and desirable process of mourning with "pathological" melancholia, Freud argues that "[p]rofound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world – in so far as it does not recall him – the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him" as melancholia does (243), but unlike melancholia, mourning occurs in the conscious mind and results in the "ego becom[ing] free and uninhibited" (244). In answering his question – "In what, now, does the work which mourning performs consist?" – Freud explains that "the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition – it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them" (243). This desirable but difficult process of mourning, according to Freud, is gradual and slow due to the necessary detachment by stages from the "psychically prolonged" lost object (244). I see this detachment occurring in Wiebe's and Toews's fiction but not in their memoirs.

It is helpful to distinguish more clearly between grief and mourning, and I do so by referring to the work of Peter Homans, who, in his introduction to *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End* (2000), emphasizes that grief is "a painful emotion that is, so to speak, looking for a 'cure,'" whereas "mourning is a ritual that [. . .] 'heals' the pain of grief" (2). The distinction between an emotion immersed in searching and a ritual devoted to healing deftly describes and is applicable to the differences between Wiebe's and Toews's memoirs and novels. Although I do not want to risk a simplistic division of these four texts and two genres into separate camps of grief and mourning, I do see, in my concentration on language, writing, and reading, the emotions of grief prominently displayed in the memoirs, *Of This Earth* and *Swing Low*, and mourning's healing effects taking place by the conclusions of the novels, *Come Back* and *AMPS*.

These most recent novels by Wiebe and Toews are elegiac in both tone and form. In *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy* (2009), Priscila Uppal studies the language of contemporary Canadian elegiac poetry, arguing against the poststructuralist position that "language itself is essentially an inscription of absence" in its acknowledgement of its "failure to invoke the presence of the absent loved one" (17). Such

a view is at odds with the consolation she sees in the Canadian elegies she studies. According to Uppal, such "language [. . .] is not in the end a failed medium" (18) as it works with what Deborah Bowen, based on the assumption that language itself is elegiac, sees as "the double negative of language about loss [which] creates a positive, because the elegist is working with a medium which already comprehends the desire to compensate for the void" (Bowen 47). In arguing that "poststructuralist theory misconstrues the elegist's relationship to language" (18), Uppal refers to Peter Sacks's argument that "the elegist's task lies in his reluctant submission to the constraints of language," which involves "his painful renegotiations with the substitutive and artificial nature of his own words" (Sacks xiii). In this way, language becomes a site "for the creation and recreation of presences [. . .] thereby questioning the nature of absence and exploring how it can be overcome in the work of mourning" (19). I do not so much see absence as being "overcome" in the representations of mourning in the novels, *Come Back* and *AMPS*, as I see it being filled with substance in the form of language so that it is changed enough to be borne as presence rather than despaired of as void or emptiness.

Uppal's discussion of the elegy understandably focuses on poetry, but critical work on elegiac fiction has also been undertaken, most notably in Karen Smythe's *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy* (1992), in which she defines the "fiction-elegy" as a distinct genre, differentiating this form from what is more loosely referred to as elegiac fiction (5). Her concentration on the importance of the inclusion of autobiography in the fiction-elegy is relevant to *Come Back* and *AMPS* in its emphasis on the establishment and maintenance of distance between the survivor and the one who has been lost. It is the distance through fiction that invites the forward movement into mourning that is difficult to accomplish in the memoir. Wiebe and Toews infuse their fiction with autobiographical elements in order to push the characters into movement and distance, ultimately and paradoxically diminishing the space between the mourners and the mourned in a way they have not been able to do in their memoirs. Smythe, in her focus on prose fiction, points out that "in the late modern development of the fiction-elegy from its modernist predecessors, the emphasis in Freud's phrase 'the work of mourning' shifts from the idea of a work (an object) to that of work as a narrative act" (153). This concept of the work of mourning as a narrative act permeates Wiebe's and Toews's fiction-elegies, resulting in their forward motion towards some form or degree of

consolation for the characters of Hal Wiens and Yoli Von Risen – a fictional movement and achievement rather than an autobiographical one.

How exactly does language do the work of mourning in Wiebe's and Toews's fiction-elegies? Christian Riegel's *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning* (2005) pointed me in the direction of Richard Stamelman's earlier work in *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern* (1990), in which he argues that "[l]ove for the object is replaced by love for the *loss* of the object" (51), and that "[l]oss penetrates the being of language, filling it with a sorrow so abundant and [. . .] so fecund that the worded grief displaces the loved object, its source" (50-51). I agree that the penetration of language by abundant sorrow contributes to a swelling of absence into presence in *Come Back* and *AMPS*, but it does not *displace* the lost son and sister. Rather, in each of these texts, a concentration on concrete language as it appears on diary pages and other papers, along with a reverence for the intimate love of writing and reading, connects the mourner with the mourned. It is through intense grief such as that described by Stamelman, combined with an attentiveness to language in its many forms and applications, that Hal Wiens and Yoli Von Riesen are able to create presence out of absence, successfully drawing mourning out of grief, consolation out of mourning, and transforming backward glances into forward movement. By devoting close attention to words – written, read, and eventually oral – Hal and Yoli nurture and work profound emptiness into abundant sorrow, which becomes presence.

The attempt to overcome absence or, more accurately, to fill absence with substance, explains in part the reproduction of Helen's and Mel's language and material texts in Wiebe's and Toews's memoirs and the importance placed on the act of writing, which I explore in the first section of this paper. The space allocated to the act of writing initiates the process of mourning, but does not do the actual work. In the second section of my paper I examine ways in which the act of reading plays a central role in Wiebe's and Toews's fiction-elegies, and this is where the real work of mourning takes place. Robert Zacharias points out that scholars have "long recognized narrative and literature as being central to the construction and maintenance of a communal Mennonite identity" (19). In this vein, I examine how the very specific and sought-after remembrance and commemoration of the act of reading, in its contribution to the mourning process, maintains the complicated love of family and community relationships through connecting the fictional mourner with the

one being mourned and through transforming absence into presence, heavy at first, but gradually lifting to become bearable.

The Work of Writing in the Memoir

Reproducing Helen's words on the pages of *Of This Earth* appears to be a deliberate move on Wiebe's part to make space for the presence of the lost sister in his remembered, recreated, and imagined childhood. The success of that effort rests on the emotion felt for Helen during childhood, but depends even more on the intensification of that emotion as Wiebe reads and incorporates Helen's words into the memoir years later. Wiebe's boyhood in retrospect is set within, against, and beside the intensely short and painful girlhood of his older sister. In addition to many transcribed entries in typeset words, the inclusion of images of actual pages of the diary in Helen's handwriting, including her final words, extends the sister's presence directly and intimately into Wiebe's own text. The image of the original handwriting reflects Wiebe's attempt to get as close as possible to Helen in a memoir in which he also marvels at the intimacy of the human relationship with words – at the way in which "the residue of first reading remains a lifetime, like breathing" (119), the way in which "we grow into language" (131), the way that Low German "could not be written down, nor corrected by being made visible" (141), and the way in which a shared child language becomes "an orality now as vanished as our childhood" (140). Throughout *Of This Earth*, as demonstrated in these quotations, Wiebe emphasizes the sound of the oral word and the fragility of language that easily evades permanence and can be assumed to dissipate over time. According to Wiebe, "[t]he meanings of language sounds are always accidental; it is their rhythms that first imprint the memory" (81). In questioning if "we ever remember how we grow into language," Wiebe answers by positing that "language may be less a learning than it is a ceaseless circulation of blood through flesh and brain and bone, caught like an apprehension, perhaps an instinct that develops all the more powerfully before you are conscious of it" (131). It is part of the physical body, its systems, and rhythms. These insights are, of course, the retrospective articulate musings of an intensely literary adult mind – a readerly and writerly mind – nurtured in a home context of the richly differentiated languages of Low German, High German, and English. The linguistic experiences themselves as remembered, however, seem acutely real. Language is paradoxically both concrete and ephemeral – it is

physical as part of the body and its biorhythms while it is also, in its orality, intangible and fragile. The attraction to the written words of the past, still permanent on the page, recalls less stable language – but language powerful in its visceral rhythms and exquisite fragility.

Wiebe's inclusion of Helen's final handwritten words on the day of her death evokes very personal traces and breaths of mortality from the moment of her passing. The details in which these words are offered and included say much about their importance and impact. Wiebe transcribes Helen's last diary entry:

> March 5, Monday: Today I feel better, so good
> I had to spill ink on Jan. 31. That will stay
> there as long as the book exists. (247)

He follows the typed reproduction of this handwritten entry with a reference to the condition of the material text, noting the "shapeless blot with a strong stroke tilted right, fading for sixty years" (247), still existing long after the hand that wrote it. He remarks that the diary pages of March 6 to 28, 1945 are blank, and then records Helen's final words, reporting that they "are on a torn bit of paper when she could no longer speak, her neat writing collapsed to a slanted scrawl":

> I want to go to bed
> lets [sic] all pray
> I can have more
> breath and sleep (247)

He follows this transcription with an image of the actual handwriting on the still existing scrap of paper, which allows him to speculatively recreate the physical moment of composition as one in which "[s]he must have been sitting up, held in someone's arms in an attempt to help her breathe" (248). The date, March 27, is written by another hand below the first line of writing, but her sister, Liz, has added a note at the bottom of the scrap of paper: "Helens [sic] last writing on March 28. 2.00 oclock P.M." (248). Wiebe includes Liz's first entry, as well:

> March 28 Wednesday: Sister Helen died on 28
> of March. Her heart tore off she had an easy
> death though died March 28, 1945 2.00 P.M. (248)

In their introduction to Jacques Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas reflect on the inclusion of such posthumous texts, suggesting that,

> Citing the other speaking of death, of their own death, allows the dead a sort of *survivance*, a kind of living on, not only after their death, their actual death, but even before, as if they were already living on posthumously before their death, as if they had found a way [. . .] to enact the impossible speech act [. . .]: "I am dead." (23)

Such a *survivance* is surely part of what Wiebe strives for and achieves by including Helen's words in his text, an effect amplified by the presence of her handwriting in images of the diary pages. Through the reproduction of not only the words but of the imagined process and condition of composition, made possible through consulting and reproducing the still-existing scrap of paper, Wiebe learns to trust his hunches, artifacts, and memories of the past. By retrospectively leaning on Helen's final words, he participates anew in her passing – a moment and a transition that had a profound impact on his life, both at the time and again in later years, as he faced other deaths and losses. The loss of his sister was the first loss, devastating in its impact, but elusive in terms of remembered details, until it was recorded and placed in Wiebe's memoir in the form of the earlier pages inscribed by Helen – in words much more closely connected to the sister and the death than anything he could ever have written.

Immediately following his relation of Helen's death and the haunting presence of her words, Wiebe ponders the doubt that accompanies memory and then reproduces in his memoir his own words in the form of the first draft of his first short story, "Eight and the Present," written when he was 21 years old, 11 years after Helen's death. As he attempts to narrate Helen's death in his memoir so many years later, he turns back to reread and offer his first attempt to order that narrative through fiction. Again, he comments here on the material text, referring to the handwritten pages as "a stained holograph barely decipherable now, scribbled and crossed out in a notebook written on both sides of the page sometime during January 1956" (250). The story recounts the terror of a character, Rudy, as he listens to the screaming of his sister, Helen, on the night of her death. Sent by his mother to bring the neighbours to help, Rudy returns with the Thiessens, who offer "a bit of laudanum" (258). Using the actual names of real people and told in a third-person limited narration, the autobiographical story provides the young character's reactions to a death he does not comprehend at the time – a death that only registers at school

the next day when he opens his desk and sees a "book he and Helen had made for Health in school" (259), says the words "she's dead" (260), and breaks down. Once again, the sharing of written words, in this case as they appear on the pages of the health booklet, is central, and the physical presence and positioning of bodies at the time of writing are reflected in the material text, in this case by the "kink" Helen had made in the "round red tomato she had cut from one of her tomato juice labels" when Rudy "bumped her because he was leaning so close as she sat in bed cutting it out" to paste on the cover of the booklet (260). Setting down in conversation with Helen's diary his own written words from the past, in the form of the short story, and his present words in the memoir re-establishes a sibling relationship of love. Wiebe's relationship with Helen as he writes *Of This Earth* rests on the vagueness of childhood memory, but it is memory corroborated by language that is set down, first in Helen's diary, then in Liz's continuation of that volume, and finally in Wiebe's own short story in which the words of the co-written health booklet play a major role. As such, this particular memory of Helen's death, rooted in words that still exist on paper, defies the ephemeral qualities of the imperfectly remembered past and the Low German spoken at home in childhood.

The premature death of a family member, Mel Toews, is similarly mediated by the written word in Toews's *Swing Low*. Wiebe's provision of the diary entries, including the actual handwriting of Helen, and Toews's recalling of the words that kept Mel functioning, as well as her imagining of the words that *could* have been thought and spoken by him, are powerful ways of bringing forth the intimate language of the one who is being mourned, of perpetuating presence and sustaining voice. *Swing Low* was written by Miriam Toews against the words "*Nothing accomplished*" (xi), whispered to her by her father the day before he died. The text is her attempt to prove his words wrong, and to respond to her father's periods of silence – the most extreme of which had been a full year of silence after her birth – with an abundance of words. Despite the value Mel places on words and writing, words do not come easily to him; their existence depends on habits and rituals. Throughout his life, Mel's compulsive or obsessive writing, for example, takes the form of "writing down facts and details and lists and instructions to [him]self" (4), copying messages from historical markers word for word in his notebook when travelling (137), and faithfully "writing down the details of the lives of these accomplished" Canadians – "Emily Carr, Lucy Maud Montgomery, and Foster Hewitt" – in order to

"learn how to live" (4). Toews reflects that her father seems to "put a lot of stock in words, in written words" (13), as demonstrated by his devotion to the *Class News*, written by his grade six students, which he collated on his ping pong table in the middle of the night, looking forward with delight to the moment his students would see their words in print. "To create a permanent written document bearing witness to real life" was, for Mel, "better than a thousand photographs, it was out of this world" (13); we are told his "senses were activated by the words describing the events rather than by the events themselves" (13). Mel is essentially a writer, who orders his world and experience through setting down words on paper – words that provide evidence that the world exists.

One of Mel's evening activities at home was "wander[ing] around the house picking up scraps of paper that had writing on them" – "[s]illy notes written by [his] daughters, grocery lists, receipts, and odd things doodled on the edges of newspapers and flyers, phone messages to the girls, pages ripped out of school notebooks that had been used to work out answers to math questions and discarded" – which he filed in "a folder marked 'Family'" (99). These fragments are obvious signs of the busy lives of his wife, Elvira, and his daughters, Marj and Miriam, in the family home – activity from which Mel withdraws but to which he is, nevertheless, deeply and lovingly drawn. Just as he gathers these fragments of lives into the family folder, so he follows the characteristic noises of each of the family members as he shuts himself away in the evenings. A collector, archivist, and lover of history, Mel saves and assembles the casually written words of family fun and love from which he necessarily cuts himself off as a participant, his own energy and words being devoted to the notes he writes to himself in order to survive. As he gathers his family into the folder, he refers to the type of note Miriam would write to Elvira to get her off the phone: "'I'm having difficulty breathing. My vision is blurry. Please tell your friend you'll call her back after you've performed CPR on me'" (99). Reading and treasuring the words and humour of the mother-daughter relationship as signs of Elvira and Miriam's exuberance, Mel is the admiring and somewhat bewildered keeper of the family records.

Mel's world eventually shrinks to three sites – school, church, and home – with words playing important but different roles in each place. His day begins with the ritual of reciting Bible verses into the mirror as he shaves, watching as well as hearing the words as they fall from his lips. Even as a severely depressed hospital patient, he plays with words, proposing a sign for his door that

displays the type of word play enjoyed by Elvira and Miriam: "C'mon in, patient is already disturbed" (29). The importance of the written word is the basis of an ordered life for Mel Toews. His ritualistic writing to himself in lists and on yellow recipe cards left as reminders on his shoes overnight provides the structure that allows him to function, while his careful gathering of the words others have written assures him that there is humour and light-heartedness in his home and the world and that he is ultimately cherished and beloved by his family.

In his final illness, Mel loses the solid anchor provided by words. In an attempt to solidify language in order to persuade Mel that he is valuable, loving, loved, and accomplished, Miriam and her sister Marj write affirming messages in big block letters on their father's yellow writing pads in the hospital. "WE LOVE YOU," they write. "YOU ARE A GOOD FATHER" (10). Toews, as the recorder of Mel's words and the writer of "his" memoir, also puts the words and voice of Mel onto the yellow pages, replacing the big block letters and words once offered to him by his daughters with an experimental memoir in his own words – both actual and potential. Toews's risky decision to continue to write in her father's voice as "a natural extension of the writing [she'd] done for him in the hospital," as she puts it in the preface, "of hearing what her father might have talked about if he'd ever allowed himself to," and "[i]f he'd ever thought it would matter to anyone" (xiii), places an emphasis on the manifestation of the ephemeral. It brings into existence, in the form of words on the page, both that which was and that which could have been. In Miriam's account, the words so important to Mel as a teacher stopped making sense as his health declined; even his daughter's love letters could not save him. It is particularly poignant, then, that the words of the memoir, offered by Miriam on Mel's behalf, work to commemorate his "lifelong faith in the power of reading and writing" (190), and, further, are manifested in the town's library "he was so instrumental in founding" (191) and in "the brand-new Mel C. Toews Reading Garden" (190), which opened in Steinbach in 2000. Miriam notes that the garden, when it opened, contained the red and white petunias Mel loved, planted by the grade six students of Elmdale School. Toews concludes *Swing Low* with this image of flowers and reading.

The tragedy of Mel's loss of devotion to words and writing not only isolates him from his family and community but also from the ritualistic organization of his own routine. His withdrawal from words marks his withdrawal from living. The one question Mel would ask C.S. Lewis (or Miriam imagines him wanting to ask) is

"how does a man feel less alone when he can no longer read?" (37), or "[w]here to turn when words stop making sense?"(37). The final gift offered to Mel's family by the last person to see him alive, a waitress in a restaurant near the train track where he killed himself, consists of her carefully framed and comforting words: "Isn't it a beautiful place to leave this Earth and meet God?" (190). The yellow recipe cards on which Mel wrote daily notes to himself were scattered on the tracks following his death. "Sadly," Miriam writes in the Epilogue, "the yellow cards that fell out of his pocket and onto the tracks were blank" (190). Perhaps, but the generous and uplifting words of the waitress impress themselves in their kindness and understanding on the minds of the survivors and of the readers of the memoir and are, in a sense, written on those blank yellow cards. The conclusion of *Swing Low* conveys grief in the form of emotion immersed in searching, with the abruptness of the ending strongly suggesting that the work of mourning has not yet begun.

The memoirs of Wiebe and Toews do not engage in that forward movement that accompanies the hard work of mourning. As memoirs, the texts look back and are steeped in emotion that still overwhelms the narrators. Tragically, the deaths of Helen and Mel are followed years later by other deaths – the deaths by suicide of Rudy Wiebe's son, Michael, and of Miriam Toews's sister, Marj. Wiebe and Toews engage these deaths, too, in their writing, but in both cases they are treated with the words of fiction-elegies, rather than the words of memoirs. Paradoxically and perhaps counter-intuitively, this decision to move away from the intimacy of memoir lifts restraints, provides distance, and ultimately works to diminish the space between the mourner and the mourned, resulting in the progression from grief into mourning.

The Work of Reading in the Fiction-Elegy

In *Come Back* and *AMPS*, Hal Wiens and Yoli Von Riesen seek the written words of son Gabe and sister Elf respectively, which provide some insight into the depressions, and, in the case of Gabe, the obsessions that precipitated their suicides. Twenty-five years after his son's suicide, Hal reads the words left by Gabe in diaries, planners, notebooks, letters, and loose pages stored in stacked boxes on shelves in his basement, labelled by his deceased wife Yolanda. Direct addresses to the reader make it clear that Gabe expected the writing to be read. Actual diary entries form a large portion of the novel, inviting the novel reader to read alongside the

character of the bereaved father. Responding to the entries and conversing with his son in the process, Hal attempts to gather enough of Gabe's life to mourn him, finding at least a cause, however puzzling, in Gabe's record of his obsession with a girl far too young. In Toews's novel, Yoli is bequeathed Elf's writing, a manuscript of a story in which Elf refers to literary sisters and concludes with an emotional farewell to the reader – a complete surprise to Yoli, who knew nothing about the writing project. The discoveries of the words written by and from son to father and sister to sister are powerful. But the real and surprising turn in the search for and discovery of the one who has been lost lies not in the words they wrote, which reproduce their voice and presence, but in the words they read, which expose a private and vanished relationship between the reader and the text. It is the glimpse into the word as read rather than the reproduction of the word as written that advances the grieving into a stage of mourning, thus opening the possibility of release and a degree of relief for Hal and Yoli.

Elf's personal mark, the spray-painted "AMPS" scattered on surfaces throughout East Village, is derived, as Yoli well knows, from the phrase, "All My Puny Sorrows," from a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The letters are modified by Yoli, who, before its public display, advises Elf against intertwining her own initials with the Coleridgean acronym. It is not until Elf is hospitalized during her final illness that Yoli accesses the entire poem, "To A Friend, Together With an Unfinished Poem" (237). The poem's subject – losing sisters through death – certainly speaks to Yoli, but this is not the text that brings her into communion with Elf. This is still the surface – an extension of the spray-painted AMPS – that speaks to the dynamics of care ethics in the sisters' relationship, but does not move beyond the moment of death and loss. It is the introductory paragraph of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that brings Yoli into intimacy with Elf, and it is worth quoting in full as it is written in Toews's novel:

> Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen. (317-318)

Through the narrator's observation of the human response to life "among the ruins," which consists of following a forward path that

goes around and over obstacles "no matter how many skies have fallen," Yoli seems to hear Elf's wise voice. The first line of Lawrence's novel – "Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically" – was provided earlier to Yoli by Elf in one of their many literary conversations. It is a conversation that is only fully completed after Elf's death, when, in finally reading the recommended first paragraph and then the entire novel, Yoli finds that she fits into the post-cataclysmic human behaviour "among the ruins, [where] we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes." Finding herself in this paragraph, among the ruins of her sister's suicide and literally building up a new habitat in the fixer-upper she buys in Toronto with her inheritance from Elf, Yoli lives out the paragraph that has been repeatedly read by Elf, which, along with all the other words of all the other books in Elf's life, could not save her. Instead, books became the distraction Elf orchestrated in order to create the time and space for her suicide. While on a birthday visit home from the psychiatric ward of the hospital, Elf asks her husband to go to the library to get her a pile of books. It is during his trip to check out the books that Elf leaves the house and goes to the train tracks where her father before her had ended his life. Reading the compelling encouragement offered in the first paragraph of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to persist in the face of life's tragedies not only deepens Yoli's relationship with Elf in a way she had resisted when she was focused on "saving" her, but gives her permission to move forward in a way Elf could not do herself. Or, perhaps, in a way Elf chose to do differently.

Similar to the way in which Yoli turns to Elf's story manuscript to better understand both her sister and herself, Hal attempts to gain insight into his son by reading Gabe's writing—his diaries, letters, and notebooks. And just as Yoli turns to poems and books beloved by Elf, so Hal searches in the words read by Gabe – the words of Rilke, Donne, Joyce – eventually concentrating for the clues he is seeking on Gabe's blue-covered Revised Standard Version Bible, given to him by his parents on his seventh birthday. While initially perusing Gabe's marked Bible, Hal had come upon and reread his own diary pages, written twenty-five years earlier in response to first reading Gabe's diaries in the days immediately following his suicide. Hal's own writings, although a conversation with his son, constitute a separate document written in anguish against the suffering revealed in Gabe's diary. Gabe's underlinings and markings written on the actual pages of his Bible, on the other hand, are an inclusive part of the material text with which he is conversing. They capture and preserve the relationship between

the narrative and the reader, which is very different in spirit and intention from the lament of Hal's separate countertext, which, although responding to the diary of Gabe's suffering, is written and remains outside and against the original text.

In turning to his son's Bible, Hal searches to determine whether or not Gabe was conversant with the life and figure of Christ and, more specifically, whether Hal led his son to the very human form of God. In the penciled marginalia and underlining of Gabe's Bible, Hal finds conversations between his son and the text. Hal's lost son here expresses, in simple and concise marks, much deeper thoughts than anything revealed in the confessed obsessions of his many diary pages and notebooks. Deuteronomy 28:25, for example, is underlined: "The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies" (253), and "a grey square [is] around 1 Samuel 3: 'Now the boy Samuel was ministering . . .'" (219). The colour pictures of "Jerusalem from Mt. of Olives" and "In the Wilderness" are "dog-eared" and have "tiny tears from much fingering" (219). It is Gabe's reading, then, rather than his writing, that provides Hal with the reassurance he is seeking. Inserting protruding markers onto interior marginalia, Hal tags the underlinings and markings in Gabe's Bible, imprinting yet another layer and adding yet another voice to the multivocal text. Eventually he reads and contemplates four heavily underscored lines of Matthew 4, describing Christ's temptation in the wilderness, but is then caught by "a pencil touch in the margin at the bottom corner of the page beside the third verse of Matthew Chapter 5: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'" (267). An earlier reading of Matthew 4 had yielded a frantic rifling through the pages of the Bible until Hal had landed at Luke 23:39, where he saw with relief a light pencil mark in the verse of the words of the thief on the cross: "Jesus, remember me" (219). This particular episode in Luke, and specifically the words of the thief, had formed the basis of an obsessive search for Hal, who was determined to find in them a sign that Gabe had been in relationship with Christ, thus reassuring Hal that he had led Gabe in what he considered to be the right direction. In studying the words of the thief in Luke and in "contemplat[ing] the message of the pencil touch" (268) in the beatitude in Matthew 5, a much lighter mark than the heavy underlining of the temptation in the wilderness in Matthew 4, Hal waits for the knowledge, for the reassurance, that God does indeed hear the cry of the poor in spirit. In his pursuit of his son's faith through Gabe's markings of the words he read, Hal participates in the polyphonic text to the point where he has positioned himself *beside* Gabe, rather than opposed to him. Gabe's past reading

influences Hal's present as their layered relationships with the written word provide Hal with a degree of transcendence, taking him beyond the difficult and tortuous spaces of the present readings – his basement in the house in Edmonton and the living room of the Aspen Creek cabin and its surrounding landscape, the location of Gabe's suicide.

Hal's reading of Gabe's engagement with scripture is more directed and orchestrated than Yoli's almost casual and surprised discovery of what Elf read in Lawrence's novel. Hal reads toward what he desperately wants to find, whereas Yoli reluctantly allows herself to trace what Elf had recommended. Despite these differences, both Hal and Yoli read alongside the ones who have died, gaining insight into private reflections and conversations that are less deliberate and concrete than the written words left behind. In this tentative and shared space of reading, there is depth and intimacy. "Reading alongside" is also the position of the reader of Wiebe's and Toews's fiction-elegies, which accounts, I argue, for their powerful impact, as readers not only observe but also participate in the relationships forged through textual conversations. The ongoing struggle with language – in the first instance discovered, remembered, imagined, and created in attempts to reproduce the words and voice of the one being mourned, and in the second instance painstakingly written by the mourner to adequately honour and commemorate the one who has died – is set aside in this concentration on the private space between reader and text, which relies on words but does not demand the creation of new ones. Letting go of the compulsion to render language concrete and to meet words with other words releases both Hal and Yoli into a less demanding relationship with language. Language becomes a mediator of time rather than its simple marker, the work of mourning becomes a process rather than a product, and the past of the loved one becomes part of the mourner's present and future. Gaining entry into the ineffable and tenuous space of son and sister as reader, Hal and Yoli partake of the intimate nature of the human relationship with language, fragile as breathing – insubstantial, delicate, and capable of vanishing. It is the acceptance and even celebration of the elusive nature of this space and relationship with language that turns absence into the lightest and most fragile of presences – all the more valuable because of its fragility, which cannot be grasped or held, but is powerful precisely because of its tenuous nature and evocative capabilities.

But in neither text does the companioned reading end here. Into these readings alongside the lost son and sister enter the voice and

words of the mothers. As Hal reads Gabe's Bible in the warm living room of the Aspen Creek cabin, he is taken back to his childhood home and the singing of his own mother:

> *Schlop, Kliena, schlop*.
> Sleep, little one, sleep.
> *Buete senn de Schohp*,
> Outside are the sheep,
> *De Schohp mett witte Woll*;
> The sheep with their white wool;
> *Nu drintj dien Bukje voll*.
> Now drink your tummy full. (265)

From the intense concentration on the written and read word, Hal finds himself back not only in the oral language of childhood, but in the sound of "singing memory," accompanied by the thought that "[h]uman song must have begun with the howl of lament; which became prayer; which became hope" (265). The comfort and consolation come from the maternal voice of the past, which softens what has perhaps been too pointedly sought, found, and confirmed in the written text as controlled and directed by the desire, sorrow, and needs of Hal the father.

Yoli, too, is deeply moved by her mother's words as they gently make their way with confidence and strength into the mourning space. In the closing pages of the novel, Yoli's imagining of the arrangement of Elf's death in an earthy Mexico (as opposed to an efficient Switzerland) introduces into the novel a lulling neo-Platonic form of pre-existence reminiscent of that found in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." In envisioning "a hammock swaying gently like a cradle, a return to infancy, to the void, and then to nothing" (258), Yoli gently moves Elf back to a beginning and to a time and space before beginnings. She cannot follow Elf into the place that predates existence, but thinking lovingly of Elf retracing her life back to its origins and even farther allows Yoli to turn around in order to move forward. It is, however, not only a sense of Wordsworth's "Ode" as an intertext that permeates the conclusion of Toews's novel. After Elf's suicide, their mother's favourite poem by Wordsworth, "It is a beauteous evening," makes its way onto the page. Yoli has heard her mother, Lottie, recite it before, "but this time it ripped at [her] heart" (282):

> Dear Child! Dear Girl! That walkest with me here,
> If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
> Thy nature is not therefore less divine:

> Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
> And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
> God being with thee when we know it not. (282)

Lottie's spontaneous recitation provides faith and reassurance that goes much deeper than anything Yoli has deliberately sought or casually discovered, including all of the words read and recommended by Elf. The power and eloquence of Lottie's consolation is breathtaking. It is, in the end, the words of poetry read aloud rather than literature read on the page that lead Yoli into her own versions of creative consolation in the form of daydreams, visions, and dreams, which release her into forward movement.

Hal's moving memory of the sound of his mother's singing and Lottie's confident, fulsome, and ecstatic rendition of Wordsworth's sonnet form the final layers of language to be inserted into the absences that have gradually undergone transformations into presence. These layers of maternal language offer the strength and gentleness that not only render the presence light enough to bear but infuse it with consolation. Consolation follows the grief associated with the written words left behind and the mourning experienced in the intimate space of shared reading. The healing comfort of consolation finally arrives in abundance in the form of song and poetry – in the return to the power of oral language, originating in the rhythms of the body, the childhood home, and the laments of previous generations.

Notes

[1] Elizabeth Withey includes in her review the information about Michael Wiebe's suicide in 1985. She reports that when asked about the subject matter of *Come Back*, Wiebe said that "[e]very writer writes about the basis of his own experience to an extent, and dear God I wish this weren't part of my experience" (Withey).

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