Haunting the Present Tense: Crafting Novels of Uncanny Grief

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Abstract

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In “Remembrance of Things Present,” David Jauss suggests that present tense is useful because “it is an effective way to convey unfamiliar disoriented states of minds. When we dream, the familiar becomes strange, the strange familiar, and time loses its normal meaning” (99-100). "Haunting the Present Tense" examines the ways that that the present tense can be used in this way to convey a state of grieving, another disorienting experience. The thesis focuses on novels that center themselves around the loss of a person or people (often, but not necessarily, through literal death), particularly those novels that also convey a sense of the uncanny or fantastical in relation to death and time and looks at the way that authors use tense to cultivate a feeling of haunting and sustained grieving, and am particularly interested in the use of present tense in creating a feeling of eternal or repeated loss, disorientation, and a kind of out-of-time-ness.

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Finding the right way to write a story can often be difficult and inefficient work. But, when we do find the right way to write it—the right point of view, the right tense, the right style—we know, because something clicks into place and the story begins to take on its own kind of reality, a clarity of purpose, a solidity of voice it may not have had before. Of course, we aren't always sure why this has happened, why the first person works when the third person didn't. Like much about writing, it can all seem a little bit mystical.

Zadie Smith describes the search for a novel's style and perspective as:

> a kind of existential drama, a long answer to the short question *What kind of novel am I writing?* It manifests itself in a compulsive fixation on perspective and voice. In one day the first twenty pages can go from first-person present tense, to third-person past tense, to third-person present tense, to first-person past tense, and so on. Several times a day I change. Because I am an English novelist, enslaved to an ancient tradition, with each novel I have ended up exactly where I began: third person, past tense. (100)

Smith sees this search for a novel's perspective, even if it ends up in the same place it began, as the search for the novel itself. Much is discovered along the way, perhaps not efficiently, but perhaps in the time that is needed to think through the difficult question of "What kind of novel…?" Like Smith, in this search for perspective, we often end up in the third person past or, at least, in the past. I certainly do. Often, the past tense, even after dalliances with others, is the one that feels right to me. This is likely because it is a tradition ingrained in the rhythms of my thinking. The past is, to my mind, the tense of storytelling going all the way back to the fairytales

I was read as a child, “Once upon a time, there was a house at the edge of a forest…” This is why I spent months writing my first novel in the past tense. But writing this particular story in past tense is why I felt my prose stall midway through, why I suddenly felt that I did not know what kind of novel it was that I was writing. Eventually, I decided to go back to the beginning and experiment, to try out new styles, new tenses, new perspectives. What I settled on was third person present tense, the only perspective that, in the end, clicked into place and felt right. Suddenly, I could feel the prose moving in ways that I hadn’t experienced in this work before. And it puzzled me. Why was the present tense, a tense I’d hardly ever chosen to work in before, working so much better than the past, a tense as familiar to me as an old and dear friend?

I discovered, after much thinking and reading, that the answer to this question was both laughably simple and immensely complex. The answer I found is that the present tense was in harmony with my themes. My novel is about grief, about our experience of it and the way it changes our perceptions. It’s about landscape and history and the way that we live in a life that is haunted by death. You’d think (or, I thought, at least) that such a novel would fit into the past tense, because what is dead and what is history is, by definition, past. But grieving occurs in the present the presence of grief upsets the chronology of time.

Death displaces us in time. As we experience grief, remembering the person who’s passed and, simultaneously, discovering their absence, their life, our life, loses linear chronology. Suddenly, the events of ten years ago are just as, if not more, clear to us than what happened yesterday. We experience remembered and lived events all at the same time. Time folds in on itself. Events overlap and connect unexpectedly, uncannily. The present tense is, or can be, a tense of haunting, of ghosts, of grief, of a certain kind of perpetual remembering.

Yet we often think of the present tense as a tense of action, of immediacy, a tense that lacks reflection. In "A Failing Grade for Present Tense," William Gass describes the tense as adhering to a style that is "kept simple, short, direct, like a punch, the sentences avoid subordination, qualification, subtlety." It can certainly be that. But it doesn't have to be. I would argue that present tense is far more stylistically flexible than its general reputation would suggest and that subtlety and reflection are just as possible in this tense as they are in any other.

Ursula LeGuin's description of the present tense in "Some Thoughts on Narrative," is, I think, particularly useful as it gives us a sense of the tense's advantages and disadvantages. LeGuin describes the present tense as a kind of distancing mechanism that makes the present story not more immediate, but more removed:

> The present tense takes the story out of time. Anthropological reposts concerning people who died decades ago, whose societies no longer exist, are written in the present tense. Physics is normally written in the present tense, in part because it *generalizes,* as I am doing now, but also because it deals with nondirectional time. (8)

The out-of-timeness of the present tense is both one of its great advantages and one of its great disadvantages. LeGuin goes on to define storytelling as the ordering of events into directional time, comparing it to the way we process dreams:

> It has been found that during REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, the recurrent phase of sleep during which we dream abundantly, the movement of the eyes is intermittent. If you wake the dreamer while the eyes are flickering, the dreams

> reported are disconnected, jumbled, snatches and flashes of imagery; but awakened during a quiet-eye period, the dreamer reports a "proper dream," a *story*. Researchers call the image-jumble "primary visual experience" and the other "secondary cognitive elaboration." (8)

According to this line of thinking, the process of making sense of our dreams is turning them into a story, an impulse that our unconsciousness naturally follows when given the time. In order to create a story from the fragments of dreams, we create a cause and effect narrative. Essentially, we put those dream fragments into time. In using the present tense, a tense that is located outside of time, we can, I would argue, get closer to that initial fragmented dreaming state, to the perception before we have put that perception into a narrative, to the pre-story, if you will. This use of present tense, as a reflection of perception at a particular point, is intricately linked to modernist experiments with portraying thought through stream-of-consciousness.

In "Remembrance of Things Present," David Jauss charts the intricate history of the present tense in literature, beginning with Virgil's occasional use of it in *The Aeneid*, moving through Dickens' present tense moments, and landing at the modernist obsession and experimentation with time, consciousness, and style. He suggests a variety of uses for the present tense and suggests it "is an effective way to convey unfamiliar disoriented states of minds. When we dream, the familiar becomes strange, the strange familiar, and time loses its normal meaning" (99-100). Here, Jauss describes the uncanny feeling of dreaming, the way that those fragmented pre-story images and impressions can make us feel, and the way that the present tense can be used to convey that feeling of the uncanny. Grieving, like dreaming, is a disoriented state and often uncanny in this disorientation. In grief, we dream the person we've lost who only exists,

now, in memory and imagination. The removal of a person from our external world, set beside their continued and urgent existence in our internal worlds, is an uncanny experience. It feels like magic, like a disappearing act, like transformation, an incomprehensible shifting out of one state and into another.

In his 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," Ernst Jentsch attempts to get at the meaning and experience of this slippery word:

> With the word *unheimlich* the German language seems to have produced a rather fortunate formation. Without a doubt, this word appears to express that someone to whom something 'uncanny' happens is not quite 'at home' or 'at ease' in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. In brief, the word suggests that a *lack of orientation* is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident. (2)

I like the description of the uncanny experience as being one of not being "at home" in the situation or, perhaps, in one's mind as it meets the unfamiliar situation. This not-at-homeness creates a lack of orientation that is actually quite difficult to represent in language. Authorial representations of uncanny experience often elicit at least some momentary confusion in the reader. Jentsch goes on to describe artistic representations of uncanny experience, using, as his examples, mostly descriptions of objects that leave readers uncertain as to what, precisely, that object is and, specifically, whether or not that object is animate.

Jentsch discusses situations that can elicit a sense of the uncanny, that can place the mind into these moments of disorientation:

> Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate – and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one's consciousness. The mood lasts until these doubts are resolved and then usually makes way for another kind of feeling. (8)

Jentsch goes on to discuss dead bodies, skeletons, and body parts as objects that can, momentarily, make us uncertain about what we are looking at and whether or not that something is animate, and, therefore, elicit an uncanny experience which brings us back to the concept of uncanny grief. When someone is lost, it takes our minds time to comprehend the reality of what has occurred both on the physical and mental levels. For instance, a dead body can seem to be moving. Though we know it to be impossible, our minds are disoriented, momentarily unable to be "at home" in the fact of the body's death. Uncanny grief also occurs when we think of things we'd like to tell a lost loved one, momentarily forgetting the reality of that person's gone-ness. And, I would argue, it can occur in memory, when the past seems, sometimes, as close as the present, when times fold together, disorienting us, making our minds feel not quite "at home" in any of them.

In attempting to discover why it was that I needed to write my novel in present tense, I read other novels that also seemed to need to be written that way, novels that, through stylistic choices in tense and manipulations of time, attempt to artistically represent the uncanny qualities of grief. My aim is not to argue that this is the only appropriate use for the present tense or that

the present tense is the only appropriate way to convey these states. But it is one potential method for conveying disoriented states and the feelings of being outside-of-time that grief can elicit. In the following pages, I hope to explore the way that tense can be manipulated to convey these states.

The Present Tense, Consciousness, and Historical Time

In a discussion of using tense and style to attempt to represent consciousness, I feel it is important to begin with modernist writers because the particular use of the present tense that I'm interested in here seems to stem from modernist experiments with the portrayal of the ways that consciousness exists in time. In *Time and The Novel,* A.A. Mendilow describes, from the vantage point of the 1950s, modernist and early post-modernist preoccupation with time:

> The time-scape of the twentieth century, we have seen, has expanded enormously. While our everyday lives are still narrowly enclosed within the limits of birth and death, a temporal ha-ha, as it were, offers us on all sides vistas of infinite stretches beyond and about the little gardens we must cultivate for our immediate happiness; these views change our perspectives and modify our sense of the proportions of the scene within. Many philosophers tell us that the pre-occupation with problems of time is the keynote of modern thought. (30)

Mendilow describes a post-Victorian shift in the way that we perceive time that results in both a widening and a narrowing of experience. The modernists in particular were preoccupied with history, with historical placement and displacement. Reading many modernist writers results in a

sense of being both inextricably caught in and caught out of time. The use of stream-of-consciousness in novels by modernist writers like Faulkner, Joyce, and Woolf, exhibit this dual effect in their attempts to capture the intricacies of internality.

Jauss describes Beckett's use, in his novel *Molloy,* of the "mythological present," a use of the present tense that achieves this inside-and-outside-of-time/historical-placement-and-displacement affect. According to Jauss, this mythological present:

> implies not only the presentness of the past, as the historical present does, but also the pastness of the present, and therefore this form of the "present" tense takes us out of the realm of historical time and into the timeless realm of myth. (110)

An uncanny place if ever there was one. According to Jauss, this mythological present decouples us from time by harnessing us to it, by reminding us that the past is ever-present and that the present will always become past. In the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse,* we can observe what I would class as a very subtle employment of the mythological present.

In *To the Lighthouse*, we do not see the death of Mrs. Ramsay, but the fact of it breaks the narrative into Woolf's "Time Passes" section. In this section, structured in fragments, we learn of Mrs. Ramsay's, Prue Ramsay's, and Andrew Ramsay's deaths in parenthetical statements, as if the deaths themselves are not as important as the effects of them. This cavalcade of mortalities is not the focus of this section, but the absence that it leaves behind is. The long-empty house that most of this part of the novel focuses on functions as both a literal result and a symbolic representation of this absence and the strange effects of death on perception and time.

Much of this section focuses not on people but on space, plants, animals, and objects.

> But the stillness and the brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and the tumult of the night, with the trees standing there, and the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and thus terrible. (100)

This passage shifts from the past tense into the present progressive, giving the sense that the trees and the flower did not just stand and look but are perpetually standing and looking, existing in a kind of eternal, a mythological, present. This subtle tense shift combined with the lack of human narrator and the image of the trees and flowers "beholding nothing" (a kind of personification that allows itself to run straight up against the inevitable impossibility of turning trees and flowers into persons) has a deeply discombobulating affect. It feels uncanny, as if we as readers are not entirely sure what it is we are looking at (are these trees and flowers perceiving? are they not perceiving? are they perceiving in the present? did they perceive in the past that the rest of this section is tensed in?) In this section, we know that time passes but we are rarely certain of precisely what time we are in. We know that perception occurs, but we are often uncertain as to who, precisely, is doing the perceiving. We know the factual details of the deaths but not the emotional details. Instead, we are given a sideways glimpse into an untethered perception. We are given a sense of uncanny grief that takes us into mythic time.

This kind of modernist use of present tense, as Jauss points out, is different in its aims and origins from what we often see as a contemporary use of present tense that is more interested

in action than in introspection. Jauss describes Updike's use of present tense in his 1960 *Rabbit, Run* as not influenced primarily by:

> the work of Dujardin, Joyce, Faulkner, Foldes, or any other previous writer. Rather, it was the work of Hollywood. Originially subtitled *A Movie*, the novel was Updike's attempt to 'make a movie' on the page by capturing what he called 'cinematic instantaneity.' "The present tense was in part meant to be an equivalent of the cinematic mode of narration," he told an interviewer in 1967. (89)

What we consider to be a traditionally contemporary use of present tense (a style focused on action and immediacy) comes out of the tradition of Updike and his contemporaries whose novels were heavily influenced by cinema, "focusing on dialogue and action as a way to imply thought and feeling" (89). This use of the tense, I would argue, diverges from much of the modernist focus on internality and stream-of-consciousness. I see our contemporary use of the present tense as existing on at least two divergent branches: one being the style we generally associate with present tense—the "movie style" that Jauss describes as Updike's—and the other adhering to modernist goals of capturing the intricacies of consciousness in art. This second branch is where we find novels of uncanny grief.

The use of present tense as a depiction of the experience of haunting that we see in the work of contemporary writers like Jeffrey Eugenides, Amy Sackville, and Michael Cunningham is, I would argue, an outgrowth of the modernist use of present tense as a depiction of consciousness and thought rather than what we might think of as the more contemporary use of

present tense to depict action and external motion. It embraces what is possible in a novel (the ability to be inside a character's mind and mental state) but not a movie (which is forced to use physical action and spoken dialogue to depict internal states).

Out-of-Timeness and Artistic Representation

We use present tense to describe things that we see as existing outside of time, or as being timeless. For instance, when I describe the work of an author in an essay like this, I use the present tense, the historical present. Jauss describes this use of the present as "The tense is present, but the events in time are not. Hence they are unmoored from their actual places in time" (110). Regardless of how long ago the author wrote the work I'm referring to, Virginia Woolf will always *write* that "Mrs. Dalloway said that she would buy the flowers herself" (*Dalloway* 3). This is also the way that we describe visual art like portraits and photographs, regardless of whether or not the subject of the picture is still living. This is how Jeffrey Eugenides brings present tense into the first pages of *The Virgin Suicides*:

> We've tried to arrange the photographs chronologically, though the passage of so many years has made it difficult. A few are fuzzy but revealing nonetheless. Exhibit #1 shows the Lisbon house shortly before Cecelia's suicide attempt. It was taken by a real estate agent, Ms. Carmina D'Angelo, whom Mr. Lisbon had hired to sell the house his large family had long outgrown. As the snapshot shows, the slate roof had not yet begun to shed its shingles, the porch was still visible above the bushes, and the windows were not yet held together with strips of masking tape. A comfortable suburban home. The upper-right second-story

> window contains a blur that Mrs. Lisbon identified as Mary Lisbon. "She used to tease her hair because she thought it was limp," she said years later, recalling how her daughter had looked for her brief time on earth. In the photograph Mary is caught in the act of blow-drying her hair. Her head appears to be on fire but that is only a trick of the light. It was June 1, eight-three degrees out, under sunny skies (5)

The shifting of tenses in this paragraph, though it adheres to traditional tense conventions (what happened in the past is told in the past tense with the exception of the description of the photograph), startles us by shifting the house and its inhabitants from past to present and back again. Mary Lisbon "used to tease her hair" but "is caught in the act of blow-drying" with hair that "appears to be on fire." Though Mary Lisbon is dead, we are given the sense, as the narrators look at her photograph, that she still lives, perpetually caught in the act of teenage primping.

This isn't the only instance in which Eugenides uses a piece of art (the photograph) to move us in time so that the past and the present conflate, attempting to inhabit the same moment. During a scene in which the Lisbon girls and the neighborhood boys listen to music together over the phone line, we see time shift within a single sentence, "After a long pause, their turntable began grinding again, and we heard the song which even now, in the Muzak of the malls, makes us stop and stare back into lost time" (198). In this sentence, the music moves us in time from the boys listening to records to the men listening in the malls. Each music-listening experience is, in this sentence, haunted by the other. We get the linear haunting, the way that the Muzak elicits memories of music past, but we also get the opposite. The music from the records is haunted by

the future Muzak of the malls, as if the music itself has transformed: the music, soundtrack to their teenage experience, is now Muzak, background noise for shopping. This sentence makes the songs simultaneously music and Muzak (two seemingly opposing concepts) by displacing it in time.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the past is far more present than the present for the neighborhood boys (now, presumably, men, though we never see them as such with the specificity with which we feel their boyhood) and this is reflected in the use of tense. The novel is overwhelmingly dominated by past tense with small moments, little glimmers of present. Mostly, these present tense shifts function like they do in the music scene, giving us momentary insight into the neighborhood boys' present sense of hauntedness while simultaneously displacing that hauntedness into the haunting past. But sometimes they function as they do in the photograph description, as if tense is bringing the Lisbon girls out of the past and into the present, perpetually youthful, perpetually alive.

In *Orkney,* Amy Sackville also uses the out-of-timeness of art to switch into present tense. *Orkney* follows Richard, a Victorian literature professor and the story's narrator, as he tells the story of marrying his student (he never names her), their weeklong honeymoon on the Orkney Islands, and her disappearance (and possible death) at the end of that week. In this novel, Richard casts his young wife as a kind of art object, as an entry point into the literature he has dedicated his life to and a part of landscape they visit. He describes his wife in mystical terms, associating her with the sea and with stories of the sea. His loss of her we come to understand is not only the loss of a singular person but something that puts into question an entire mode of perceiving.

And yet, early in the novel, it is his wife who is making an art object of him. In this early scene, Richard describes his wife sketching him:

> She showed me her work, and she has made me handsome, savage and dark; it seems I glower as I read. It is a good likeness, at least. Which, for the vainglorious sitter, amounts to the same thing. (133)

Directly before being shown the sketch, Richard has been in the future tense, imagining his eventual aging and death and his much younger new wife's widowhood:

> Will she dread each night, sitting up reading, her husband peering at the pages beside her, longing for a touch but not his? The sight failing, the body failing. What will go first? Heart, liver, lungs? How many years from now? She in the fullness of her fertility, tucking a blanket to swaddle her incontinent husband. And when it comes to it, she will be a lovely widow, she will be lovely still. Oh, it is unfair, it is unjust—that there she will stand, by the graveside, grieving, still existing when I am gone and cannot watch her, and some boy on the edge of the graveyard can. (132-133)

With the line, "She showed me her work," the tense switches from the imagined inevitable future to the scene that will, in that future, be long past. And then with the looking at the work, his wife moves Richard into the present tense of art ("It seems I glower as I read"). Curiously, given that *Orkney* is a novel engaged with questions of artistic representation and perspective, this shifting

into the present occurs at the same time that we move from Richard's imagining of his wife to her imagining (through sketching) of him.

Before Richard's imagining in the future tense, this section was tensed in the past, though it exhibited a tendency to shift even in its first lines, "Now the stew is eaten, the last of the juices mopped up with torn bread, staining our cuticles orange. As I cleared our plates…"(130). This minute shifting, though it makes linear sense (Richard is describing this scene after having experienced it and cleared the plates) makes time feel slippery, as if we can't be quite sure where in time we are located from moment to moment. But that it is Richard's imagining of his own death that shifts us into the future tense and that it is an artistic rendering that shifts us into the present is a crucial clue to interpreting Sackville's use of shifting tense in this novel.

The central image of the novel is of the sea and, specifically, of Richard's wife walking by the sea and in this book the sea is almost always cast in the present tense. Sackville sets this pattern and the centrality of this image on the first page as Richard watches his wife:

> She's staring out to sea now. My young wife. There she stands on the barren beach, all wrapped up in her long green coat, among the scuttle and clatter of pebbles and crabs. She stares out as the water nears her feet and draws back, and when that soft and insistent suck of the tide gets close enough to slurp at her toes she shuffles herself up the shore. Soon the beach will be reduced to a strip of narrow sand and she will be forced to retreat to the rocks; and then, I think, she'll come back to me. (1)

This passage, we are told by the chapter titles, is located on Sunday. The novel ends on Saturday after Richard's wife has disappeared. Though we are fairly sure, given the narration and the chapter titles that proceed through the week, that, between those days, time has moved forward, Sackville introduces a sense of uncertainty about that. There is a circularity to the novel, to this central image that tempts a reader to think that, perhaps, this first paragraph is not the beginning of the novel so much as the end (occurring the day after Richard's last Saturday passage). The novel itself feels like Richard's artistic rendering (in words instead of pictures) of his wife. With its shifting tenses and its curious and unreliable use of the present, it has an out-of-time feeling that stems from Richard's loss.

Orkney is a novel that utilizes tense shifts so expertly that you almost don't notice them but a closer look reveals a story that seems to be constantly shifting in time. Richard imagines the future of his new marriage and he tells us the story of its recent past while describing a present timeline that continues to shift, to move forward, but only so far. Though we are in the present of the honeymoon, Richard will often tell us what happened that evening from the vantage point of later that night even though he gave us the morning while it was occurring. It is as if the past, even the recent past, is perpetually haunting, highlighting the fact that, the moment after something happens it becomes a part of the past, a memory, even as it occurs.

Mythic Present and Tense Reversal

Though much of his later work is predominately written in present tense, Michael Cunningham's second novel, *A Home at the End of the World*, is a combination of both past and

present tense narration. The work has multiple first person narrators who tell their stories in separate alternating chapters as if they are located in a present moment and looking back to describe what happened. This is a similar stylistic choice to what Eugenides did in *The Virgin Suicides* by having the neighborhood boys tell the story of the Lisbon girls from their present adult perspective. But, after establishing this pattern, Cunningham breaks it for two out of three of Bobby's sections in Part 1 of the novel. The first break occurs on the second page of Bobby's second section, when he describes his brother, Carlton:

> I was, thanks to Carlton, the most criminally advanced nine-year-old in my fourth grade class. I was going places. I made no move without his counsel.
>
> Here is Carlton several months before his death, in an hour so alive with snow that earth and sky are identically white. He labors among the markers and I run after, stung by snow, following the light of his red knitted cap. (21)

In this section, we see Bobby's perspective on his older brother in the days before Carlton dies from a tragic accident. Though the chapter begins in past tense, it continues on in present after the shift between these two paragraphs, the sense of time getting lost as Bobby recounts what is, in a sense, his origin story. We understand after reading this chapter that everything that Bobby is—all of his quirks and strangenesses, all of his strengths and needs, the idiosyncratic way that he approaches the world—begins in this handful of days that end with the event, ever-present even as he recounts the story from decades past it, that will change him. The use of present tense in this chapter, gives us the sense of a grief that never ends, of a time that becomes, in its importance, stuck outside of time.

The present tense continues in Bobby's next section, which describes his teenage years with his dad after his mother's suicide. Strangely enough, the suicide itself is described in the past tense:

> She left by slow degrees before making it official. She lived in the guest room, made rare silent appearances in a pale turquoise robe. Once, when she passed me in the hall on her way to the bathroom, she stopped long enough to stroke my hair. She didn't speak. She looked at me as if she was standing on a platform in a flat, dry country and I was pulling away on a train that traveled high into an alpine world.
>
> After my father and I found her he made the calls and we sat together, he and I, in the empty living room. We left her alone—it seemed like the polite thing to do. We sat quietly, waiting for the police and the paramedics to arrive. We didn't speak. (76).

These are the only paragraphs in this section in which the past tense predominates and, because of that, they stand out, just as the shift into the present tense did in Bobby's previous section. The tense shift here also differentiates Bobby's experience of his brother's death from his experience of his mother's. In the present tense, Carlton's death is a surprise, an astonishment of sudden trauma. The past tense here makes Bobby's mother's death feel inevitable; the prose takes on a fated quality ('She left by slow degrees…"). It has already happened and it is as if, after Carlton's death, it has always already happened. Bobby's mother's death is presented as a kind

of echo of her son's, as a current rippling out from the center that is Carlton's death, which remains forever in the present tense.

In his most recent novel, *The Snow Queen*, Cunningham writes about two brothers, one whose girlfriend is dying, then seemingly recovered, then dead, from cancer. Beth's dying and death and the various characters' experiences of it, centralize the novel, which is written almost entirely in present tense. Cunningham's use of present tense in this novel seems to be less about conveying immediacy, and certainly not about conveying action, but more about conveying progressions of thought. For instance, in Tyler's first point of view section, we are given a description of snow as Tyler perceives it when waking:

> Tyler wakens from a dream, which dissolves almost entirely, leaving only a sensation of queasy and peevish joy. When he opens his eyes it seems, for a moment, that the skeins of snow blowing around the room are part of his dream, a manifestation of icy and divine mercy. But it is in fact real snow, blowing in through the window he and Beth left open last night. (11)

In this section, the present tense allows us a glimpse into Tyler's mind as it moves out of sleep and into waking perception. It is not until after reading these three sentences (Tyler's dreams dissolving, his first perception of snow, his understanding of where that snow comes from) that we are able to put these images together into a narrative. Tyler woke up. Tyler saw snow. Tyler understood that the snow was real. As readers, we are doing some of the work of ordering perception, helping to create the story from the fragmented experience.

But, what is potentially most interesting about Cunningham's use of present tense in *The Snow Queen* is the way that he breaks it into past tense in certain sections. The novel, in fact, begins in past tense and, I would argue, that the past tense that makes the first section of the novel functions in a very similar way to the present tense of Carlton's death in *A Home at the End of the World*: it creates a foundational myth, a moment that informs the rest of the story, a place in time for it to circle. The novel begins, "A celestial light appeared to Barrett Meeks in the sky over Central Park, four days after Barrett had been mauled, once again, by love" (3). The section goes on to describe the light (and the love-mauling), which becomes a central image and a guiding question for the rest of the work. This light creates, for Barrett, a moment in which he believes he has observed something outside of the mundane and experienced (perhaps/perhaps not—he is never entirely sure) the mythical. The past tense is also used to similar effect when Beth attempts to understand her own reaction to her seeming recovery by interpreting it through myth:

> Did Persephone sometimes find the summer sun too hot, the flowers more gaudy than beautiful? Did she ever, even briefly, think fondly of the dim silence of Hades, the cool and barren nowhere of it? Did she yearn, occasionally, for her winter release from abundance, from a world that demanded happiness of her, a world so rife with wonders that the garland and the dance were all but mandatory? (159)

In using the past tense to describe Persephone's experience, Cunningham sets it in the same realm as Barrett's light. Both of these experiences would more predictably, given Cunningham's

choices in *A Home at the End of the World* and the way that we traditionally use the historical, artistic, and mythic present tenses, be put into present tense while the rest of the novel would, traditionally, be in past tense. Instead, Cunningham has created a kind of tense reversal. The moments that are mythic and out-of-time are in past tense while the in-time narrative is in the present tense. The effect of this reversal is a strange and almost uncanny sense of discombobulation. Though the mundane and the mythic are seemingly differentiated, the tense reversal leaves us unsure of which is which, of what is dream and what is real, what is art and what is life, what is past and what is present. Day-to-day reality takes on mythic hues while there is always the potential that the extraordinary is, in actuality, entirely mundane. This discombobulation fits perfectly into the questions the novel explores and mimics the psychological effects of grief that the characters' experience. *The Snow Queen* and its characters exist on and around the invisible line that separates life and death, time from un-time, mundane from mythic. And the nature of this existence is reflected in Cunningham's choice of tense.

As we can see from these works, the possibilities of the present tense, particularly when it is used in conjunction with other tenses and in service of a novel's thematic aims, are immense. The present is a flexible tense that cane be employed in a variety of styles and paired with a myriad of techniques. The works I've chosen represent only a small portion of what the present tense is currently being used to do in the literature of our time and a small focused segment of its history. The question of how, in a form limited to words put together in lines on a page, we can convey the complexities of perception, is ongoing. The modernists explored a variety of techniques to do just that and I would argue that the works I've discussed here employ present tense as a contemporary development of that modernist experimentation. These novels attempt to

represent out-of-time states—haunting, grieving, death, myth, art—in a narrative form that, as Urula LeGuin argues, relies on time for its meaning. The manipulation of tense in this narrative form allows these authors to manipulate readers' perceptions of time, to put time into question, to create a sense of the uncanny.

But the power of present tense might really come down to its implicit acknowledgement of the hope that art gives us of freezing time, of taking a moment—a vision, a story, a landscape, a person—out of the flow of chronology and placing it on a page or a canvas, in a rhyme or in lines of a song, to remain the same, forever present, while time moves around it. And in this stasis, perhaps, we can look at it long enough—at the color and shape, at the thought jotted down—to understand it, to see it clearly in ways that we can't when we're looking at moments not rendered in art, in moments that move through the swift flow of time we exist in. Art is the magic that allows us the gift of reflective perception, of the leisure of stasis. the present tense acknowledges that attempt at perpetual newness, at forever out-of-timeness, even as it shows us the artificiality, the impossibility, the uncaniness of that attempt. Because, of course, despite our best efforts, stasis is impossible. Paint fades. Pages crumble. Even photographs degrade over time. And interpretations change. Words shift their meanings. References are lost, technologies forgotten. The book we read now will never be the same book as the book we read later. Even as the words stay the same, the book will alter because we, the readers, the perceivers, have changed.

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