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Mark Spilka, *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel with Grieving*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. 142 pp. \$13.50.

Review by Grace Farrell Lee

A decade ago in a dust filled hallway leading to a locked lecture hall, I sat in a stairwell near a group of other students, waiting for the arrival of Mark Spilka. Head of the English Department at Brown University, author of *The Love Ethic of D.H. Lawrence* and *Dickens and Kafka: A Mutual Interpretation*, Spilka was giving a course on modern novelists. I remember those lectures, the easy beauty of them, the tenderness of his insights, the occasional wry comment spilling out of the widening corner of his mouth. His lectures on Virginia Woolf focused on the concerns now fully developed in his new book, *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel with Grieving*. It is a fine book, a subtle interplay of psychobiography and literary analysis which looks deeply inward to the author and to the fiction, but which also projects a bold voice towards the readers, that we might join Woolf in confronting our own "unworked burden of grieving, loss, defilement, guilt, and anger."

Virginia Woolf, molested at the age of six by her half-brother, unable at thirteen to mourn the death of her mother, at twenty-two dealing with overwhelming emotion at the slow death of her father and the erotic attentions of another half-brother, Virginia Woolf would, at crucial times throughout her life, hear voices and break

down. Spilka sheds new light on the correlation in Woolf's writing of the threats of death and sexual violation, and, in so doing, deals with Woolf's "impacted grief" as it bears upon her own and her characters' sexual evasions.

He considers a wide range of Woolf's fiction and makes important use of diary and autobiographical materials which were unpublished before 1976, as well as of Quentin Bell's definitive two volume biography. James Naremore has also discussed Woolf's association of sexuality and the fear of death and destruction, with especially evocative attention to *The Voyage Out*, in *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (Yale University Press, 1973). However, Spilka turns most of his analytical powers towards Woolf's two "elegies," *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*.

Mrs. Dalloway, plainly put, is about one day in London during which Clarissa Dalloway makes plans for her evening's party, while her day is intersected at various points by that of a young man, Septimus Warren Smith, who, that night, kills himself. They are fictive doubles, this middle-aged woman and this mad young man. Both Clarissa's failure to grieve and her failure to love are displaced into Septimus, whose "quarrel is with the fate of man, with death itself, which — like some devouring carnal rival — has taken away his beloved Evans. . . ."

Spilka revises the usual psychoanalytical explanation given for an inability to mourn, that is, that the failure stems from guilt created by ambivalent feelings over a death, including the fear that one wanted it, and, thus, wanting it, caused it. For Virginia Stephen Woolf and Septimus Warren Smith (Spilka notes the hidden anagram) loss of love, not the desire to lose it, has resulted in anger and the inability to mourn.

The real problem set forth in *Mrs. Dalloway*, then, is loss of love, "the lost possibility of passionate heterosexual love," and the person whom Clarissa must mourn is Peter Walsh, the man she gave up, or lost, the man who returns to London on this day of Clarissa's party and Septimus' death. "It is the death of romantic love which Clarissa mourns in mourning Peter Walsh, and she is quite relieved to be rid of it." She prefers her husband, who "keeps his respectful

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distance," who does not violate her narrow attic bed or the "privacy of the soul' [which] is the supreme miracle and mystery which she must preserve at all costs."

Spilka maintains that nowhere in Woolf's mature fiction can we find the union of passion and affection which is necessary for adult romantic love; "there are only predatory passions on the one hand, and respectful or gallant affections on the other. It is thus a Victorian standoff, a Victorian impasse, for all its modern sexual frankness." Woolf tried "courageously," he writes,

to deal with sexuality as part of human suffering and human comedy, and of the ongoing struggle, in modern times, for human dignity and fulfillment. She knew abstractly that it had to be taken into account, and further that it ought to reflect the intimacy and fullness of her own bodily experience. But like so many women writers since her time, she had learned only to use it as men tend to use it, that is to say, defensively, as a convenient province from which the feminine affections are excluded — as a masculine cover, then, for her own failure to love, or to get at the sources of that failure in her unworked grief and childhood shame.

In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf moved closer to resolving her absent grief; "she tried to meet it bravely enough for most human purposes, in her own belated way — the way of therapeutic elegy — with all the main chords muted." In this novel Woolf creates a mother who dies and a daughter-figure who finally grieves. Spilka analyzes the three sections of this work in fine detail, pushing to new limits past criticism of the relationships between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, their children, their guests, and of Lily Briscoe, their artist friend who returns to their summer house with the last of the Ramsay family, years after Mrs. Ramsay's death, and there, finally, releases

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her grief. Lily rages against the abandonment she feels at Mrs. Ramsay's death, mourns her as a daughter might mourn a mother, and in so doing lets her go and turns towards life and her own creative independence.

After writing *To the Lighthouse* Woolf recorded in her diary that "I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her." But the accommodations which Virginia Woolf made through her fiction with the "senseless deaths" which filled her life were only provisional. Spilka reveals how they released neither herself nor her characters, neither Clarissa nor Lily, from the inability to form passionate love relationships. Her marriage to Leonard Woolf remained as it had always been, with Leonard providing maternal-like care for Virginia. And as death would continue to take those she knew from her, Woolf would continue to have periods of crushing self-doubt, until finally, with England under siege in 1941, with life terribly disrupted, her home bombed, she would walk into the River Ouse

to escape those thinning, splintering, hardening present pressures and those obsessive churnings of the past they had reawakened, and to rejoin her beloved dead — Minny and Herbert, Julia and Leslie, Thoby and Stella, and her many early friends and literary peers — in those cold fulfilling depths beyond all splinterings and churnings. She had finally yielded to her lifelong enemy — and by now her oldest and most intimate friend — senseless death.

Biographical criticism is more vulnerable than most to the ultimate "So what?," and in the early chapters Spilka is a bit defensive of his method. He need not be, for his analysis of the

literature would hold true if nothing were known of its author, and yet only through knowledge of her life are many of his insights available. He does not fall into the biographical trap of confusing Woolf's illnesses with her artistry, which sometimes happens in an earlier, and also valuable, psychobiography of Woolf, Nancy Topping Bazin's *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous* (Rutgers University Press, 1973). And beyond this, it is through both her life and her literature that Spilka can elucidate certain aspects of modern culture as it reacts against its Victorian ancestry. The Victorian prudery over sex and overt emotion over death are reversed for us. As Spilka puts it, "our own refusals to mourn owe much . . . to the transition from Late-Victorian effusiveness to modern prudery and reticence [concerning death] which Virginia Woolf and others like her have made for us. Her quarrel with grieving is very much our quarrel. . . ."

This is an elegantly written book, humane in its insights, thorough in the elucidation of its thesis, subtle in its play between life and art.