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The Sound of Separation: The Stravinskian Resonances of Edwidge Danticat's Untwine

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In her recent collection of essays, *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*, Edwidge Danticat asserts that “We write about the dead to make sense of our losses, to become less haunted, to turn ghosts into words, to transform absence into language” (21). This statement might easily be used to describe much of Danticat’s published work, which frequently preoccupies itself with questions about death, trauma, and loss. Yet, as Danticat hinted in a recent interview, this statement is not—as it might be easy to think—a purely metaphysical statement about the nature and purpose of writing. Rather, particularly when it comes to Danticat’s most recent young adult novel *Untwine*, this statement is also descriptive of the material, intimately concrete circumstances in which Danticat sometimes wrote. For although Danticat drafted the earliest version of the novel in university, she wrote the majority of the novel in a quiet hospital room, where her mother—dying, by that time, of terminal cancer—lay sleeping. As Danticat poignantly describes it, “...when I got too sad watching my mother sleep, I would work on this book in the dark at her bedside” (*Conversations* 211).

In other words, Danticat’s *Untwine*—a book focused on a girl named Giselle who is dealing with the sudden and traumatic loss of her twin sister in a brutal car wreck—was composed, sometimes in a literal sense, in the dark. Perhaps most poignantly, it was also written in a kind of twilight between life and death—a time and space when death, while imminent, has not arrived, and grieving (as Danticat surely did) seems to have begun too soon. In such circumstances, closure of any kind seems far out of reach, and perhaps, near impossible to achieve.

It seems no coincidence, given all this, that *Untwine* seems particularly concerned with what Pauline Boss and Donna Carnes’s pivotal work on grief once termed *the myth of closure*: closure, in their framing, representing the idea that, somehow, grief has a determinable endpoint

and some decipherable meaning. The notion of “closure,” they point out, suggests a kind of linearity that few actually experience. Though its usage in daily life is widespread (rather nonsensically, for example, it could be used to describe the feeling one gets at the end of a relationship, a job, or a life), its therapeutic use is deeply confusing at worst. In fact, as Nancy Berns’ 2011 book-length study of the concept suggests (aptly titled *Closure: The Rush to End Grief and What It Costs Us*), while “closure talk” can be found with equal frequency on TV sitcoms to the nightly news (usually in references to national tragedies), it is not entirely clear that this notion of “closure” has promoted healthy, useful, or widely applicable practices of grieving on either a public or private scale (Location 147). As Berns suggests, the notions of closure as “moving on,” “finding meaning,” or “feeling at peace” can often leave those who feel they cannot definitively “move on” or “find healing” as though they are grieving improperly, or else that they are stranded in a state from which they *should* be able to move on (Location 145).

In *Giselle*, however—the young protagonist of *Untwine*—Danticat offers a model of grief and grieving that does not, as the writers of *Closure* might put it, “rush to end of grief.” As Alicia Ellis points out in her piece in this forum, the novel refuses to hurry toward an easy resolution or to follow a familiar, five-step progression from denial to acceptance. Instead, it frequently and unexpectedly loops back to the car accident and dedicates over a third of the book to a time when the narrator remains in one place, unable to move, speak, or (at times) even hear. Indeed, though her parents want to make sure *Giselle* is able to attend the funeral “so she can say goodbye,” at one particular point in the novel, *Giselle* imagines a conversation with Isabelle (her dead sister) in which Isabelle tells her, “We’ll never say goodbye” (121). In some ways, this young adult novel is not one in which the narrator gradually and eventually “comes to terms” with her sister’s

death—instead, Giselle’s grief is unruly, reiterative, and sometimes quite stubbornly circular, where she clings to Isabelle nearly as much as she lets her go.

And while there are many ways in which Danticat represents this kind of unruly grief, perhaps one of the most striking is her consistent evocations of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Firebird* (a musically unruly, unsettling composition). When the car accident occurs, on the very first page of the novel, it is Stravinsky’s eerie *Firebird* that is playing in Giselle’s family vehicle. It is *The Firebird* that Isabelle, a talented musician, had been on her way to play in the school orchestra concert. It is a selection from *The Firebird* that Isabelle’s friends, however haltingly, plays at Isabelle’s funeral. And while Giselle often longs for the tidy themes of loss, death, resurrection, and triumph that the story of *The Firebird* offers, it is this musical unruliness that Danticat subtly evokes throughout the novel. She compels her readers, as a result, to question the foregone conclusion of the “end of grief” and to explore the new, more flexible models of grieving: ones that resist overly linear, overly conclusive notions of what it means to “move on.” To use a term coined by Boss and Carnes, *Untwine* models a kind of grieving that is based not on “closure,” but on *perceptual malleability*: the willingness to let your grief, and what you have lost, have multiple and even contradictory meanings (Boss and Carnes 461).

In this piece, I want to examine the ways that Danticat’s allusions to Stravinsky are not only literary but also *musical* in nature. I would suggest this allows Danticat to stage, in subtle yet unmistakable ways, the ways in which grief, like music, often evades our articulation, our meaning-making, and our previously-held understandings about the meaning of loss. In order to do so, in each of the following three sections, I will identify and describe a key element of *The Firebird*’s musicality, and then describe how I see this musical element at work. In particular, I argue Danticat provides a model of grief that resists temporal mandates for when to “move on”

from an experience of loss, one that accepts and validates the inability to “be at peace” with the ambiguities that unexpected tragedy often generates, and one that suggests that loss—far from being a matter of one’s individual interpretation or emotional state—can have multiple or even contradictory meanings within the context of a larger community. In this, I suggest, Danticat provides her readers with a sorely-needed portrait of grief beyond closure: a portrait that gives them permission, if needed, to linger over loss, to feel restless in grief, and to resist attempts to make sense of incomprehensible pain.

White Rabbits: Metrical Displacement

Though arguably more hummable than the infamously riotous *Rite of Spring*, *The Firebird* was disquieting to its audiences and to critics due to what music theorist Pieter Van den Toorn calls its “metrical displacement,” that is, the rejection of metrical and melodic parallelism, which forces the listener to constantly recalibrate their internal sense of rhythm. In metrical displacement, musical fragments, phrases, and motifs recur, but never in the place that the time signature would suggest they ought to (46). As listeners, we are generally able to pick up on time signatures instinctively, and when that time signature is contradicted, it puts a wrench in the gears of what Van Den Toorn calls our “inner clock mechanisms” (47). Metrical displacement, then, is the feeling that time is not operating as it should, often because we are measuring our experience of time against a temporal or rhythmic imperative to which we’ve previously been introduced.

Similarly, in *Untwine*, Giselle frequently finds herself reckoning with the feeling that the accident has thrown her sense of time out of joint: she no longer experiences time as she once expected to, or as she feels she ought to. This occurs in simple ways (realizing, for example, that

she's no longer aware of the day of the week) and in momentous ones (realizing on her first birthday after the accident that, for the first time, she is older than her twin sister) (216, 295). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this sense of displaced time extends not only to Giselle's experiences after the accident, but also to her memories of the accident itself. Giselle narrates and re-narrates the accident, and each time, she discovers that, in her memory, the *timing* of the sequence of events feels irregular, uncanny, and strangely unmoored from reality. As she recalls in the first chapter of the book, "People say that things like this happen in slow motion, as though you suddenly become an astronaut in the antigravity chamber of your own life. This wasn't true for me. Things were speeding up instead, and I did my best to slow them down in my mind" (4).

And it is in this first retelling of the accident—in the opening lines of the novel, in fact—that we are first introduced to Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. "I remember what was playing when the car slammed into us. It was Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Like most pieces of classical music I've ever heard, it started out pretty slow, then sped up, then peaked, then slowed down again" (3). Here, Giselle immediately calls attention to *The Firebird* as a way of marking or measuring time (speeding up, slowing down, and so on), and counter-intuitively, it is *The Firebird*—not the sound of collapsing metal, screeching tires, or shattering glass—that is most clearly and specifically described. As a result, the readers are made keenly aware of the strange and unsettling difference between the details that stand out most in Giselle's memory and what we expect her to most remember. The effect is rather like a film whose audio track is slightly out of sync with the visuals: we are made keenly aware that something is ever so slightly out of step with our expectations of how events ought to feel as they unfold.

In a few scant lines, then, Danticat compels her readers to experience time as Giselle does, both at the moment of the accident and in retrospect: displaced, fragmented, and strangely

delayed. Furthermore, the fact that the novel stages death as the *beginning* of the story (rather than the ending) means that it is by death that readers have to construct a timeline for what follows. Grief, Danticat seems to suggest here, re-organizes our sense of time: the past, present, and future are shuffled about in ways that feel uncanny and unnatural.

Importantly, in this first retelling of the accident, Giselle discovers that in trying to reckon with the event itself, she finds herself wanting to linger in a time that, in reality, sped by. For example, when she tells us exactly what was occurring before the accident occurs, she notes, “And here I am prolonging this, so I can spend a little more time in this part of my life, in Dad’s SUV, on an ordinary Friday even heading to a concert where my sister is supposed to play” (5). Here, in the opening chapter of the book, Danticat presents us with an unruly narrator who is quite literally refusing to move on: and since their sense of time and narration have already been disrupted, readers are cued to experience this not as an aberration, but as an understandable and even natural feature of the story of Giselle’s grief. As Ellis eloquently points out in her own piece in this forum, Giselle’s experience of and negotiation with grief “is a wave...rather than a linear progression from one state to another with a neatly tied knot at the end. There are highs and lows, peaks and valleys, repetitions, and also places that will never be revisited and places in which one resides.”

Danticat further reinforces Giselle’s sense of displaced time with another musical allusion later in the same scene, when Isabelle, the narrator’s sister, tells Giselle through gasps of pain, “We’re going to be late.” This spurs Giselle to remember snatches of a song from Disney’s adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*. As Giselle recalls it, ““We’re late, we’re late, for a very important date . . . No time to say hello, goodbye, we’re late”” (8). Critically, in the original film, the Rabbit’s lyric ends with three repetitions of the words “we’re late”: Danticat’s reference

to the White Rabbit's song cuts the lyric three metrical feet short. Readers (who may very well know the song well enough to complete the lyric in their minds) find their reading of the song cut short in a decidedly unsettling fashion, mimicking the way that tragedy and grief cuts short the time we unconsciously take for granted.

But perhaps the most compelling moment in this opening chapter, and its engagement with Stravinsky in particular, occurs at the very last paragraph of the chapter. In the immediate aftermath of the crash, Giselle recalls a resounding silence, followed by the wail of sirens and a chorus of honks and beeps, which she describes as “like birds chirping . . . or maybe just one, a golden firebird, glowing at a distance, tempting you to touch it, knowing you never could” (8). As Giselle informs us earlier in the story, *The Firebird* is based on an old folktale, in which, among other things, a character is brought back from the dead, and all things which were disordered are set right (“The Firebird”). It is, in other words, a simple and familiar story of loss and resurrection— of despair that turns, at the very last second, to a story of hope and reconciliation. Yet in this moment, *The Firebird* for Giselle splinters into its sonic and narrative meanings: the first, a dizzying soundscape of sirens and horns, is intimate, cacophonous, and within reach; the second, the firebird itself, is distant, silent, and unreal, arriving on the scene too late to offer any comfort to Giselle. Thus, in this, the opening chapter of the book, a symbol of a story of resurrection is accompanied by a symphony of loss and calamity. As readers, we are compelled to re-order and reconsider what gives narratives about death (and indeed, life) meaning. If the story starts in the wrong place, if the score fails to match the scene, if the ending arrives before the resolution, what do we, who are left behind, do with the future before us?

If we were to offer an answer based in “closure talk,” we might intuitively refer to some version of “closing the door” on a particular chapter of our lives. Yet, as I will suggest in the

next section, Giselle is instead allowed to experience grief as an open-ended, sometimes contradictory experience, one that may require her to dwell upon and wrestle with ambiguity.

Grief in Contrast: Uncertainties, Ambiguities, and Gaps

As Pieter Van den Toorn points out, because Stravinsky's metrical displacements often occur in places where the orchestra's instrumentation, register, or articulation holds the steadiest, the listener's awareness of metrical displacement, a kind of uncanniness from which it is difficult to escape, is heightened (48). In other words, *The Firebird's* irregular temporality is rendered all the more unsettling by its sharp contrast to the elements of the piece that have held steady. In other words, *The Firebird* is unsettling to listeners not only because of what has been disrupted (the tempo), but also because of the altered elements' *contrast* with the musical elements that have remained unchanged. Consequently, the unchanged elements of the music are *also* rendered strange and unsettling, as they suddenly feel out of step with the piece overall.

Similarly, in *Untwine*, Giselle discovers that her grief transforms her notions of permanence, stability, and futurity. Even objects, keepsakes, and places that have, in all outward appearances, stayed the same, suddenly acquire new and painful significance in the wake of Isabelle's death. In these encounters, Giselle discovers that these objects and experiences may come to mean many different ideas to her, some of which she may never be able to understand. Thus, in *Giselle*, Danticat suggests that "finding meaning" in tragedy may be, for some, an impossible task. Those who grieve may find it necessary to maintain multiple, paradoxical interpretations of their experiences, even if those interpretations feel contradictory or difficult to resolve.

For example, Giselle recalls that she and Isabelle commemorated their graduation from middle school by creating a time capsule in which they placed CDs, favorite books, and other various keepsakes. The girls take every precaution to make sure these keepsakes are preserved for the Year 3000, placing Giselle's sketches carefully into a plastic bag and pressing it between the pages of old issues of *Essence* and *Seventeen* magazines. In this instance, the creation of a time capsule is an attempt both to preserve the present and to speak directly into a distant, unseen future, one that *both* of them do not expect to live to see. As Isabelle writes on the lid of the capsule, "Not to be opened until the Year 3000, when Isabelle and Giselle Boyer are long gone" (70).

Yet in the wake of Isabelle's death, Giselle realizes that the time capsule—their tiny memorial to both their own permanence and their belief in a long if unseen future—has taken on a second, more painful meaning: it becomes, in the wake of the accident, a tiny symbol to the much more immediate future that Isabelle will never get to see. In one sense, nothing about the time capsule has changed. Neither Giselle or Isabelle will live to see the Year 3000. But in another, more painful sense, for Giselle, *everything* about the time capsule has changed: it is only Giselle who now remembers where and why the time capsule was buried, and it now serves as a reminder of how long Giselle will have to live without her.

This becomes even more poignant when the readers consider the letters to the future Isabelle and Giselle composed. Giselle's letter consists largely of statements of fact. It is a kind of permanent record of not only *when* Giselle was alive, but also of the seemingly immutable facts of who believed herself to be. "Dear future," she writes, "My name is Giselle and I am a twin. My twin's name is Isabelle. My parents' names are David and Sylvie Boyer. My best friend's name is Tina Marshall" (70). Though Giselle characterizes this letter as *boring*, it also

subtly reminds readers of the ways that even these seemingly benign, uncomplicated, and unchanging facts can, in the wake of a tragedy, develop complicated and even contradictory meanings.

For example, before the accident, the meaning of Giselle's name is deeply rooted in seemingly stable parts of her identity and family life. As she remarks, "Mom said she and Dad chose the names they did for us so they could rhyme a bit with the word *jumelle*, the word for 'female twin' in French" (19). The meaning of Giselle's name, in other words, is inextricably tied to her connection to Isabelle, and their shared status as twins. Later, Giselle discovers that her name could also be understood as an allusion to a ballet in which a peasant girl loses someone she loves and dies of grief. At the time, Giselle remarked that the name seems to have little to do with her—after all, she doesn't like to dance, and in fact, when she and her family attend the ballet, Giselle sleeps through it. Yet after the accident, Giselle *does* have something in common with the ballet: she, too, has lost someone dear to her, and though it may not always be this way, Giselle is, in fact, suffering true broken-heartedness. Furthermore, following the accident, Giselle's name also serves as a painful reminder that what she has lost is not only a sister, not only a friend, but a *twin*: a part of her identity that the accident seems to throw into flux. As Giselle asks her aunt later, "What are you called when your twin dies?" (213) While her aunt tells her, "I imagine you'll be a twin forever," Giselle finds herself wishing she has a different word for a twin without her twin. As she puts it, "I want some name other than *twinless twin*...I want something beautiful to call myself" (213). Faced with the complicated shifts in the meaning and shape of her name and identity, Giselle asks her aunt to offer her advice or words of comfort. Her aunt tells her that when a twin dies, "the gods turn the other one's sadness into stars" (214). Skeptical, Giselle quips, "What if you don't have those kinds of godly

connections?” Though her aunt’s words attempt to make some meaning or find some purpose in Isabelle’s death, Giselle discovers that this, too, feels impossible.

Unsurprisingly, Giselle feels the same way about the meaning and purpose of the time capsule. An object that, among other things, memorialized the inseparability of two sisters, now *also* serves to remind Giselle of all the ways that Isabelle is far out of reach: as far out of reach, in some ways, as the unimaginably distant Year 3000. And Isabelle’s letter—full of hopes for the future—serves to remind Giselle of all the things she now feels it is impossible to believe. “Dear future,” Isabelle writes, “please stun me. Astound me. Flabbergast me” (70). For Giselle, who now occupies the future Isabelle was writing to, the future is less filled with possibility than with uncertainty and regret. “I want to believe that I can go home, sneak out of bed, and feel my way through the dark with Isabelle next to me,” she says, “We’d pick up our parents’ shovels and dig up the dirt, still muddy from the sprinklers” (70). But this wish, too, Giselle realizes, is out of reach. “But I couldn’t dig up that time capsule anyway. It was buried deeper in the earth by the construction people when our pool was put in a couple years ago” (71). In this moment, Giselle is unable to know if the time capsule will or even can serve the larger purpose it was intended for (that is, preserving the memories of Isabelle and Giselle for the future). Instead, she finds herself occupying a position that Isabelle once described as “stand[ing] on the margins between faith and disbelief”—a space of ambiguity and discomfort, a place where “finding peace” may never been fully possible, and questions may never be answered (69).

In other words, Danticat leaves open the possibility that, like Giselle, those who grieve may never find a singular explanatory meaning to their tragedies. It may even require those who grieve to reconsider some of the beliefs and hopes that they implicitly believed to be the least subject to change and doubt. And as we’ll see in the next section, Danticat also suggests that it is

by occupying this unsettling space “between faith and disbelief” that Giselle is able to understand how her grief connects her to those around her: which, if nothing else, allows her to feel less isolated (and, perhaps, even less alone).

Half a Goodbye: Grief, in Concert

Though Giselle initially remarks that *The Firebird* sounds like “most classical music I’ve heard” (1), *The Firebird* was, in fact, fairly revolutionary for its time. Measure after measure, Stravinsky’s music rejects the dominating logic of orchestral music at the time: developing variation, or the notion that to repeat a phrase or motif, even with some variation, should occur, to quote Theodor Adorno’s argument, “at the service of a [singular overreaching train of thought, a process of development or growth” (Adorno, quoted in van den Toorn). In other words, *The Firebird* is a composition in which no singular theme dominates: that is, other motifs and phrases are not necessarily introduced *in service to* the most significant idea, which is developed over the course of the piece. Instead, themes circle, repeat, and reemerge in ways that, while certainly contributing to the piece’s rich and complex sound, compel listeners to acknowledge that multiple melodic lines share weight and significance in the piece’s development overall.

Similarly, in *Untwine*, Giselle discovers that part of grieving, or learning to grieve, is to recognize that Isabelle’s death may have multiple meanings not only to her, but also to a wider community beyond the borders of her understanding. Isabelle’s death touches many people, some Giselle knows and some she will never meet, and as such, each of these people will have different ways of dealing with and interpreting Isabelle’s life and death. And as Danticat suggests, while this may in some ways mean that Giselle may never truly understand the full meaning or consequences of Isabelle’s death, it also means that she is not alone in wanting to

remember, treasure, and find meaning in Isabelle's life. Whether it's by looking at Isabelle's bedroom wall with Ron Johnson, Isabelle's former boyfriend, or by sharing stories with her parents late at night, Giselle discovers that her grief—while she does experience in a way unique to her—can make her aware of her connections to all those who loved Isabelle (in ways both good and bad).

As the story in *Untwine* moves further and further away from the point of the crash, Giselle becomes increasingly aware of the various impacts of the event, which have rippled far beyond Giselle's immediate family unit. For example, near the end of the book, Giselle and her family are told that the driver of the vehicle that caused the crash was in fact a young woman named Janice, a former foster child and a kidnapping victim who was attempting to escape her kidnappers, whom the police had since apprehended and arrested. In this particular moment, Giselle recognizes that this event—which, to her, is a moment of unspeakable loss—may simultaneously signify something entirely and jarringly different to the others who witnessed or even experienced the same event. As Giselle watches the news unfold, she recognizes that, for Janice, the promise of new life and restoration has come true, if at a terrible and incomprehensible cost to Giselle. "I want to be celebrating something," Giselle agonizes, as she names the key elements of *The Firebird's* fairy-tale ending, "Bad people have been caught. A lost girl has been rescued and saved. A grey wolf? A princess? A firebird? . . . But Isabelle is still gone" (266). There is, as Giselle recognizes at the end of the chapter, no proper way to feel about the double meanings of the crash: they are bound up in one complicated fabric, seemingly contradictory and simultaneously true. Unlike the folk tale on which *The Firebird* is based, the events of ordinary life are not necessarily building to some singular theme or moral lesson:

instead, like the Stravinskian ballet, they will inevitably be variously experienced and interpreted, with manifold effects and influences beyond what we can understand or absorb.

It seems particularly fitting, given all this, that Izzie's heart is donated to a recipient in need: its even, iambic rhythm is, after all, the unnoticed tempo by which we live our lives, and its image is the one which we use to signify both life and love. In this way, Giselle discovers, a fragment of Isabelle lives on, beating in the way that, perhaps, it always has, but not in the place nor with the purpose she had imagined it would. As Giselle remarks, "Isabelle's body is now a nebula. It expanded into other spheres, other spaces. Her heart and corneas have been wept over, hoped and prayed for, even while they were still in her body. And even though she'd been broken that night, shattered, parts of her had landed somewhere else" (251). The fragmented, displaced rhythms of Isabelle's heart—her life, and her love, and her body—have been both an unbearable loss and an answer to prayer.

But, while allowing the life and death of a loved one to have multiple and contradictory meanings can be difficult, it is also possible for these multiple meanings to provide both comfort and hope. As Giselle discovers when she, her family, and her best friends gather to tell stories about Isabelle, there is great richness in discovering that a person you loved was loved by other people, often in capacities and for reasons different from your own. As Giselle describes it, "At the lunch, which was supposed to be a combination birthday celebration and wake, some of us tell stories about Isabelle. We barter our grief, exchanging pieces of her that were solely ours" (290). In this moment, at an occasion that marks, strangely, both Isabelle's life and her death, Giselle discovers that her grief can be simultaneously a cause of connection *and* separation. It may bring her into community with others, or it may make her more aware of the memories that she alone can recall. By holding these two in tension, however, Giselle is able to recognize that

grief, while never looked for and never desired, may prompt occasions that, paradoxically, contain both celebration and sorrow. (As Ellis explores at greater depth in her piece, this complicated understanding of the interconnectedness of life and death, grief and joy, is a concept deeply rooted in Haitian culture—as Giselle discovers through her engagement with the visual arts).

It seems fitting, then, that the novel ends with a goodbye. Though some might suggest that that “saying goodbye” is a gesture of finality—an indication, some might say, that she has reached closure—Danticat frames Giselle’s goodbyes as inherently incomplete, a musical phrase that recurs but never fully finishes. As Giselle reflects the night after the combined wake, “I know that from now on, I will always want to find some trace of Isabelle in everything that lives and breathes and tries to get close to me...I will always look for signs that she’s working full-time to piece this impossible veil between her and me” (294). Rather than framing grief as a process in which Giselle must work toward some state of completion, Danticat frames grief as an experience that recurs, returns, and evolves. This need not be a negative thing: in fact, in the last scene of the novel, Danticat compels us to see the way that grief may coexist with moments of beauty and companionship.

For example, the wake, Giselle and her best friend Tina hike to the top of a mountain beside the sea. While they stand there, Giselle is able to see a “glory”—a circular rainbow that forms a kind of halo around the sun. The sight of the glory prompts Giselle to remember the way she and Isabelle used to say “half a goodbye” to the glory, closing their eyes to make the memory last longer (106). And now, standing on the cliff with her best friend, Giselle asks Tina to help her say half a goodbye to this particular glory. “You will say ‘good,’...and I will say ‘bye,’ and each of us will have said only half a goodbye, and not a full one” (306). After a few

practice rounds, Giselle closes her eyes and tries to “keep the glory fully and colorfully alive in [her] memory”. And as the book ends, Giselle lets herself say only “half a goodbye.” In this moment, she discovers that her inability to say a complete goodbye need not alienate her from those who love her. In fact, in a strange sense, it may help remind her of all of the people who love her: both the living and the dead.

In *Untwine*, then, Danticat presents her readers with a heroine who never reaches a moment of closure with the tragedy and loss she has experienced. In *Untwine*, there is no predetermined destination to rush to, no five-step programs to graduate from, no guarantees that everything will make sense someday. Instead, Danticat presents her readers with a story about a girl who realizes that grief, the tempos, themes, and motifs of a Stravinskian symphony, will grow, evolve, and shift as we do, and may, as a result, need to be encountered again and again. In this way, Danticat has created the kind of storyline that Nancy Berns notes is deeply uncommon in a culture dominated by the concept of closure. As Berns notes, “We live in a society that is uneasy with pain. There are few storylines that allow us to sit with pain and grieve for very long, let alone for the rest of our lives” (Location 226). In a culture bereft of such stories, Berns notes, a grieving person may be far more likely to meet with “limited patience and expectations that the person will solve the problem within a brief period of time...so that bystanders can assume the person is moving on” (Location 226). *Untwine*, by contrast, is a story that gives its readers permission, like Giselle, to grieve in a space halfway between belief and doubt: to, as Danticat did while composing this book, sit in the dark, giving themselves the grace to say only half a goodbye.

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