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In-Between What Once Was and What is Yet to Come: On the Phenomena of Bereavement and Grieving

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Abstract

When a significant other dies, our lives can be shattered and our worlds upended. We may find that we no longer know how to make sense of our experiences or how to engage in our practical activities. Nothing can be as it was before because the world as we once knew it has ended, and we are no longer the same persons we once were. Nonetheless this ending opens up something new because the death of the other changes the possibilities of our lived world. A phenomenological analysis of the phenomena of grief and bereavement reveals that while bereavement undermines meaning as such, there is nonetheless something existentially meaningful about the experience in general. Insofar as bereavement is a disorienting, disruptive event, it opens us to our openness by asking us to respond differently, and responding differently can recuperate us from the event by transforming us and our worlds.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Bereavement, Grief, Death, the Event, Merleau-Ponty, Romano, Heidegger, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Existential Transformation.

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1 Introduction (“Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything.”¹)

Throughout the course of our lives, there are events that we experience which irrevocably change its trajectory. These events radically upend the worlds we lived in and change us so fundamentally that we may no longer recognize ourselves or our place in the world. I call these profound lived experiences “disruptive events.” Living through the death of a loved one can be an experience of a disruptive event. When we are bereaved, the whole world is disturbed by this loss, and we can never be the same persons we were before the loss, nor can we live as we once did.

This thesis will phenomenologically describe how bereavement can be experienced as a disruptive event. It will also phenomenologically describe how we can take up the lived disruptions of bereavement and transform them through active grieving. It is because we are open to the world that we can do this at all, even when that world has been shattered and no longer makes sense to us.² Indeed, world-shattering events like bereavement seem to radically open us towards our own openness by changing our relation with and view of the world such that the quotidian styles of our existence—our habits, routines, and rituals that provide a ground and comfort of living—lose meaning.

Thus this project is a phenomenological project. Phenomenology has taught us that we must recognize ourselves as thrown into a world by virtue of our birth, and that we are intrinsically intertwined with the world we find ourselves inhabiting. I inhabit a constituted world along with others, things, and various social forces, and I am always-already shaped by this inter-relating. In short, I am always already being in the world, and

¹ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 1961, 13.

² It could be the case that one’s openness to the world is compromised due to severe physical injury and loss of bodily integrity. In this thesis I look at situations where something in the world has changed—namely, there has been a loss of a significant other—rather than situations where there has been injury or trauma of some kind to the person in question.

I have a particular style or way of being that expresses what it means for me to be in this world.³ This style expresses how I have made sense of my experiences.

While the question of what phenomenology is and how it should be practiced remains open, there have been a variety of different approaches, theories, and interpretations, all of which attempt to delimit and sketch what is proper to this domain of inquiry and its style of movement.⁴ Despite sometimes radical divergences, in each of its articulations phenomenology provides us with a method of direct description of the phenomena of lived experience. This description can be turned towards one's engagement with the world, with others, with things or objects, with socio-political processes, cultural practices, historical epochs, to Philosophy or other disciplines proper, and so forth.

Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this direct description of concrete experience reveals the meaning of a particular phenomenon, and it does so by moving between the phenomenon as it appears and is taken up by the perceiver, and the general structures or

³ The notion of "being-in-the-world" was not conceptualized by the "Father" of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. Rather it was developed by Martin Heidegger in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, originally published in 1927. For Heidegger, we can inquire into the way we are always-already being-in-the-world through exploring the way we interact with the equipment we take up in the world in order to fulfill certain projects. Specifically, when tools break down, we are confounded and unable to fulfill our projects, and this shows up the entire structure of being-in-the-world. Since its introduction, being-in-the-world has been considered by many to be a fundamental phenomenological concept. However the notion has not been uncritically taken up. It has been differently articulated through different phenomenological projects. For example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty sees equipment as absorbed into body, such that it becomes an extension of the body. In contrast to Heidegger, for Merleau-Ponty equipment shows up not when it fails us but when something in the body breaks down and thus inhibits our ability to take up equipment as bodily extension. Being in the world for Merleau-Ponty is thus more "fundamental" than it is for Heidegger insofar as it "seeks a foundation for equipmentality in the structure of bodily comportment...", which is to say that the body is always-already in the world and that it is our "medium" for having a world and for equipmentality in general. For more on the difference between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's accounts of being in the world, see Leib, "Work and Play: Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty on Being-in-the-world."

⁴ While phenomenology as a style or manner of thinking has been in development for a long time, it was developed into a discipline by Edmund Husserl. Following this invention, phenomenology has flourished. Generally Husserl, Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty are considered the most renowned phenomenologists, but this overlooks the contributions of many female phenomenologists, including Edith Stein, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Gerda Walther, and Hannah Arendt, as well as feminist phenomenologists such as Luce Irigaray and Iris Marion Young. Unfortunately it is absolutely outside the scope of this thesis to sketch the history of this development, or to outline the way that this history has been skewed by the omission of certain important thinkers. For more on the subject of the history and varieties of phenomenology, see Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, Vols. 1 and 2, 1994; Embree, *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, 1997; and Smith, "Phenomenology," 2013.

frameworks which inform our perceptions of the phenomenon in question. Our perception gives us the background against which all our acts stand out, and against which all things, persons, and relations can appear. This is because perception opens us to a world which is "...the natural milieu and the field of all my thoughts and of all my explicit perceptions."⁵ To understand any given phenomenon, then, we must describe how it appears to us in our lived experience. Our lived experience, however, is always-already shaped by our inter-relations with other persons, things, social forces, cultural contexts, social milieus, and historical situations. My descriptions thus should reveal these general structures as they express themselves in my concrete existence. Only after revealing the general structures or frameworks that inform my perceptions can I return to the phenomenon in question and draw my conclusions about its meaning.

Phenomenologically, then, we try to get beyond our natural attitudes of describing what we think we perceive in order to actually describe what we do perceive and experience. It is in this way that phenomenology is practiced as a method: through describing the particularity of inter-personal experience, one can bring to light general structures of lived human existence.⁶ The move from the particular to the general is then complemented by a return back to the particular, where the particular can now be made sense of in its relatedness to its larger and more generalized context of meaning.⁷

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, xxiv.

⁶ I use the word "inter-personal" here to specifically show how the personal is always-already interpersonal. That is, I am turned towards myself by being turned towards others. I am always-already alongside and with others in the world. Thus, as I understand it, any particular account of personal experience is always-already inter-personal.

⁷ As I see it, the movement between the particular and the general dissolves specificity of personal experience and the movement from the general to the particular preserves difference. If we remain in the particular, we can never get beyond ourselves or our egos. Remaining in the particular encourages solipsistic thinking, and we may find ourselves projecting ourselves onto what is outside of us. The danger of this is that our insights may be too individual, and may not take into account the framework or background that supports the phenomenon. In contrast, a focus on the general alone mistakes its own origins entirely; this is the case with the thinker who tries to adopt a birds-eye view of the phenomena of the world, forgetting their own implicatedness in the world. This perspective may level down difference. By moving between the particular and general, we locate ourselves as situated beings who are multiply-implicated by the world, and as beings who never have a full grasp on the spectacle before them, but who are nonetheless open to the spectacle as it unfolds.

For example, if I am concerned with how racialized perception operates, my phenomenological starting point would be a description of my perceptions of others, of things, and of relations, in order to reveal some of the assumptions and learned habits at play which have shaped how I, and how others, perceive different bodies.⁸ I can only ascertain the meaning of racialized perception through returning to my concrete experience of others, things, and relations as I have perceived them. Describing this constitutes my particular description of inter-personal experience. However, perception is *learned*. How I have learned to perceive others is in part informed by observing how others perceive and relate to each other in our social field. Thus, by describing my perceptions of others, I am truly describing how I have learned to perceive them. As such, how I perceive racialized persons is entwined with the histories of the worlds we are situated within, our cultural contexts, social milieus, gender and class dynamics, and so forth. All this is expressed in the domain of the visible and accessed through our perception. Hence, by going through a description of particular inter-personal experience I am brought to more general structures of lived human experience. To understand how racialized perception operates, I must return to how I actually perceive racialized persons as well as their relations with others and things, and then I must go through these perceptions in order to draw out the generalized background context that gives a particularized historical meaning to racialized bodies. This generalized context of meaning is what allows me to make sense of the phenomenon of racialized perception when I return to it.⁹ By bringing to light some of the social structures of perception, I can begin to really perceive what or who is actually there, which allows me to move beyond racialized structures and to actually encounter others and the world.

⁸ To see more on this topic, see Alcoff, "Towards a phenomenology of racial embodiment," 1999; Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation," 2014; and Fielding, "White Logic and the Constancy of Color," 2006.

⁹ We learn from this analysis that race is a structure of perception that constitutes the background against which everything stands out, including actions, other persons, and things. And, as a structure of perception, it shapes how the world as my "natural milieu" opens to me. Thus racialization as a perceptual structure is tacit and "hidden from view" insofar as it structures how our viewing opens up in the first place. For more, see Alcoff, "Towards a phenomenology of racial embodiment," 1999.

To suggest, then, that the project of this thesis is phenomenological is to say that this project will describe a particular set of experiences in order to elucidate more general phenomenological structures of experience. To wit, this thesis is concerned with a particular aspect of bereavement and grief, namely the way that these inter-related phenomena are disruptions that follow the event of another's death for ourselves and which radically alter the landscape of one's lived world. This is an aspect relatively unexplored in grief and bereavement studies. By exploring these phenomena, I move through the phenomena to the larger existential process which follows from disruptive events, that is, the process of disruption, response, and recuperation. Thus there are three goals to this thesis: first, I hope to bring to light the particularized meaning of bereavement and grief in its world-shifting character; second, I hope to begin to outline the generalized existential process of disruption, response, and recuperation, which plays out in moments of disorientation, openness, and transformation; and third, I hope to get beyond some of the out-dated ideas about grief and bereavement in order to describe what the experiences of grief and bereavement actually are, as well as their possibilities.

The theoretical framework of this project will primarily draw upon two phenomenological theories outlined by Merleau-Ponty and Claude Romano.¹⁰ Each of these thinkers contributes differently to my project. Merleau-Ponty brings us back to the concrete lived world by way of elevating the primacy of the body and perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, being in the world is inhabiting the world, which is being situated within it, being a part of the unfolding of the world, and contributing to it, by virtue of having an oriented body with a partial perspective that moves, acts, and takes up situations. We are, then, necessarily embodied, which is also to say that we are corporeal beings first and foremost. Romano, on the other hand, shows us how we are originarily constituted as subjects by the events of our lives. We are struck by events such that our

¹⁰ This is not an exhaustive list of my theoretical influences. Chapter three, for example, engages with a body of work assembled from the field of grief and bereavement studies. In addition, in order to be able to draw upon Merleau-Ponty and Romano the way I have, a whole history of training in philosophy generally and phenomenology specifically is presupposed. Nonetheless these are the two thinkers whose phenomenological writings most explicitly guide my work in this project.

worlds can be shattered, and from these events we must start anew. The disruptive event is thus both an end and a beginning for the individual who undergoes it. But in the moment of undergoing it, we are necessarily called to ourselves as individual selves, and we are thus responsible for how we respond to these events. Thus, by syncretically engaging Merleau-Ponty and Romano, I am able to show how our corporeality and our temporality opens us up to disruptive events, and also how it is possible for us to be existentially transformed by these events.

My primary sources for the phenomenological descriptions of bereavement and grief include an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and my own personal experience. In the case of the episode of *Buffy* this thesis draws on, namely episode 16 of season five, we see Buffy suddenly confronted with her mother's natural yet unexpected death.¹¹ This example grounds my work in chapters one and two where I am addressing the disruptive event of bereavement *as it unfolds* in lived experience. As this episode depicts Buffy's encounter with her mother's dead body and her way of coming to terms with what that body means for her, it thus shows how she experiences the disruptive event of bereavement as it unfolds into her life, and is therefore a particularly powerful source of concrete lived experience. In chapter three I turn to my own experiences with grieving in order to show how grieving can be an active response to the lived disruptions that were entailed by bereavement.

While it may seem unusual to cite an episode of television as an example of "concrete lived experience," I believe my choice can be justified. Art and literary works, as well as television and movies, can provide examples of phenomenological reductions or first-order descriptions that capture the essence of a phenomena. The *Buffy* example can be seen as a particularly powerful source for describing lived experiences of bereavement in

¹¹ The *Buffy* example does show a sudden death. Not all death is sudden, however. Some death is anticipated. Despite this difference, I think that all significant death can have a disruptive effect for us, even when it is anticipated. This is because we cannot truly know in advance how the other's death will affect us, even if we know that it is coming and prepare in advance. It may change how we engage with the event and it may change how we think of the event, but nonetheless we are still be vulnerable to being fundamentally disrupted by the death.

the way it has been taken up by viewers and critics alike. This episode has been praised by critics as the “single finest depiction of bereavement in any medium,” and as a “brave, honest, and wrenching portrayal of death and loss.”¹² Viewers also responded powerfully to the episode; show creator and episode writer Joss Whedon describes receiving emails and letters from people who told him that this episode of television allowed them to deal with their loss unlike anything else they had encountered.¹³ That people respond to this episode in this way shows that this episode reveals something about bereavement. It resonates in some way with the lived experience of griever or with the experiences that people have seen others undergo. For these reasons, I consider this episode to be a phenomenologically rich source of lived experience.

At present, there is not a lot of phenomenological literature on the way we experience bereavement as a disruptive event and employ grieving as a response to the disruptions entailed by bereavement. There is, however, work that is beginning to be done that looks phenomenologically at grief and bereavement, and there are phenomenological interpretations of lived events. In addition, new developments in grief and bereavement studies emphasize our ability to make meaning out of loss, and new models of grieving suggest our relationships with our worlds are changed by loss and must be rebuilt following bereavement.¹⁴ My thesis syncretizes ideas from these distinct domains. By looking phenomenologically across these different fields, I try to describe a

¹² Kaveney, *Reading the Vampire Slayer*, 2004 265; McLean, “Review: Last night’s TV: A real death in Buffy land,” 2001, 19.

¹³ Stormwreath, “(Transcript):BtVS5.16 ‘The Body’ Audio Commentary by Joss W.,” *Stormwreath LiveJournal*, <http://stormwreath.livejournal.com/55973.html>.

¹⁴ For examples of phenomenological accounts of grief, see Ratcliffe, “Relating to the Dead: Social Cognition and the Phenomenology of Grief”; and DuBose, “The Phenomenology of Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning,” 1997. For narrative accounts of grief that describe how the world can be changed by loss, see Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 1961; Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*, 2014; Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 2005; and Oates, “A Widow’s Story,” 2010. For a look at how grief work requires relearning how to be in the world after loss and/or relearning how to make meaning of our lived experiences, see Attig, *How We Grieve*, 1996; and Neimeyer, *Lessons of Loss*, 2000. For accounts that address how events can transform our selves and our lives, see Romano, *Event and World*, 1998; Brison, *Aftermath*, 2002; and Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident*, 2012.

phenomenology of the disruptive event of bereavement as it unfolds and then is taken up by the one who undergoes it.

In chapter one I phenomenologically describe the lived disruption that is the event of bereavement. To describe this event as it unfolds in the moment of its occurrence, I draw upon the episode of *Buffy*. This episode depicts how Buffy experiences her discovery of and encounter with her mother's dead body. I describe both the artistic conceptualizations behind the episode and specific content within the episode itself which together show up how Buffy experiences her mother's death as a "world-shifting" event. I argue that this world-shift is an effect of the breakdown in meaning and the interruption of Buffy's habitual meaning-making processes. Joyce's death causes Buffy to lose her hold on her world, and her world falls apart. This breakdown signals the end of a past world without guaranteeing in advance the shape or meaning of her future world; as such, Buffy is in-between two worlds, and is existentially disoriented by her mother's death.

This chapter thus will show how truly disruptive events—ones that radically alter our lives by completely changing our world and challenging our sense of our selves—impact the existential relationship between self and world. While it is on the level of the relationship between world and self that these events unfold, we feel the resonances of this disruption in all the dimensions of our embodied life, including our affectivity, motility, spatiality, temporality, identity, and our relationships, habits, and activities. Disruptive events undo meaning, and they interrupt the ways that we make sense of our worldly experiences: they existentially disorient us. When an event strikes us and disrupts us in this way, we find ourselves in-between worlds; we are no longer in the world we once knew, and therefore we are no longer the people we were called to be by that world; however we are also not in the world that is to come, the world where meaning is re-established and the sense of our experiences can be easily settled.

Chapter two will show how the way we respond to existentially disorienting events draws upon our sedimented world- and self-interpretations. I draw again on the *Buffy* episode, this time describing Buffy's actions in the episode. I argue that we have learned ways of responding to phenomena, ways that our bodies hold and are shaped by, ways that we

express in our actions, and our way of seeing the world is shaped by this learned interpretation of how things are. But some events are so disruptive that they completely undermine this hermeneutic understanding. Such is demonstrated with Buffy's responses to her mother's body. She first treats the body as a misbehaving body, then a sleeping body, then an ill body; only after witnessing others treat her mother's body as a dead body is Buffy able to grasp the actuality of the situation that the dead body has put her in. Accordingly, as is the case with disruptive events, the presence of Buffy's mother's dead body demands that she respond differently, in a way that doesn't make sense to her—it asks her to *be differently*. Only when she is able to respond differently can she take up the disruptive situation and develop meaning out of it. It is this meaning to be made that will, in turn, be sedimented into her new ways of being in the world.

Hence, while in the thick of an existentially disruptive event, we find ourselves experiencing what I have named existential disorientation. This existential disorientation breaks down habitual patterns of action, and in turn shows up the contingency of our settled world- and self-interpretations. Yet existential disorientation is also a radical openness. We *can* respond differently, even if those types of responses were previously uncalled for in our lives and seemed impossible to us, or perhaps never even entered into our horizons as possibilities. Moreover, the ways that we respond to existentially disruptive events plays an important role in what is to come in our futures, including the worlds we find ourselves in, the style of our being in those worlds, and the kind of persons we will become as we take up the disruptive situation.

Chapter three will look at active grieving as a specific type of response to the disruption entailed by the event of bereavement. In this chapter I draw upon my own personal experience, describing specific coping tasks that I took on following my mother's death and the ways that I have learned to make sense of these tasks through writing this thesis. In doing so I explicate a phenomenological re-interpretation of a theory of grieving as relearning the world. I suggest that this relearning can be read more deeply as a form of recreating the world when it is considered phenomenologically insofar as grieving is one way that we take up the disruptive event of bereavement *as* a disruption that has changed our world, and we transform ourselves following this disruption in ways only opened up

through the disruption. To this extent, then, bereavement ends a specific lived world, and grieving is a way that we actively recreate our world, shaping what is to come in our futures.

With this chapter we thus come full circle: disruptive events bring an end to a world that we once knew and were at home in, and they open us up to a new world that is yet to come. But this new world is one opened up and structured by the event that has disrupted us. It opens up a new world of possibilities, possibilities not seen in advance or capable of being actualized by who we used to be. Yet because we undergo these events, we are capable of responding to them, and in responding to them we appropriate them and are transformed by them. Because we are vulnerable to existentially disorienting events, we are capable of being radically opened towards our own world-openness, and thus moments of existential disorientation are, in turn, moments that open us to the possibility of existential transformation.

In conclusion, I explicitly lay out the philosophical movements I have made whilst traversing the terrain between the particular and the general in this thesis. I show what has been learned about the particular phenomena of bereavement and grieving. I also explicate how the particularity of these phenomena show up an aspect of the generalized existential process which unfolds following disruptive events. My outline of this generalized existential process is still provisional at best, for this thesis offers but one peek at it, and this singular aspect cannot be mistaken for the whole of the structure. Toward this end I close by offering prospects for the future. I suggest different ways of approaching this existential process which may be taken up as future work, and I also make note of shortcomings in the project which could be addressed in future work.

2 The Event of Bereavement and Existential Disorientation

There are events in each of our lives that change the trajectory of our lives irrevocably. These disruptive events radically upend the worlds we lived in and change us so fundamentally that we may no longer recognize ourselves or our place in the world. To the extent that these events disrupt the ways we have learned to live in the world and the sense we have learned to make of our experiences, these events can shift the landscape of our lives and alter the shape of our lived world. It is in this way that there can be for us a sense of a *before* the event, and an *after* the event. These two personal states may turn out to be incompatible, sometimes even impossible.

What happens in the moment we undergo the event, however? How do we individually experience the disruptive event? Are there general existential structures common to all disruptive experiences, and if so, what can be gained by elucidating those structures? Can I find in a particular disruptive event general existential structures of disruptive experiences?¹⁵

While these disruptive events can take many forms, I am particularly interested in the lived disruption that is the event of bereavement for those of us who survive a loved one's death. When we are bereaved, the whole world is disturbed by our loss, and we are no longer the same persons we were before the loss, nor can we live as we once did. The other is like a prosthesis for us; they share the world with us and we experience the world alongside them, but in such a way that we experience our worlds as meaningfully shaped by their presence.¹⁶ With their absence, then, the world is changed, and we can no longer extend into the world as we once did.¹⁷

¹⁵ For more on the relationship between the general and the particular in phenomenological research, see the Introduction to this thesis. In the Introduction I explain how descriptions of particular phenomena help us to better understand general structures, and also that we can only understand the particular in relation to the general.

¹⁶ Kym Maclaren, "Breakdowns and Living Tensions in Unreflective Experience" (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 16, 2016).

¹⁷ This idea that the world is changed by the death of a loved one has been traced out by various grief theories. See Parkes, "Bereavement as a psychosocial transition," 1993, for an example of a theory of grief

If bereavement is a type of disruptive event, then phenomenologically describing the lived disruptions of bereavement can provide a response to the questions articulated at the outset of this chapter. Such is the goal of the present chapter. What I hope to show is how the event of another's death interrupts us in our habitual ways of being in the world. It unmoors us from our familiar lived landscapes. The event of the death of another signals a breakdown of meaning and a loss of sense to our everyday activities and practices. This breakdown develops in the relationship between self and world, and resultantly, our perception of our world is irrevocably altered. This process I name *world-shifting*.

As I go on to show, world-shifting is an effect that is experienced when the world no longer makes sense as it once did, and when we no longer make sense in relation to this new alien landscape. We are no longer in the world we once knew, and therefore we are no longer the people we were called to be by that world; however we are also not in the world that is to come, the world where meaning is re-established and the sense of our experiences can be easily settled. Hence, we cannot go back to being the persons we once were, nor can we go back to being in the world as we once were, because the person we once were and the world in which we once lived are both lost to us. The immediate unfolding of such a disruptive event means we are neither in our worlds as we were before, nor have we taken up our new situation in the world. Indeed, this new world is only just emerging into our horizons, and it is only with more time that we can make sense of our new situations. Instead, we exist in-between the two worlds of before the event and after the event.

To describe this event as it unfolds in the moment of its occurrence, I draw upon the critically acclaimed episode "The Body" of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In the fifth season of *Buffy*, Joyce, mother to Buffy, dies suddenly from a brain aneurysm. The immediate aftermath of this event is the focus of the 16th episode of the season. I describe both the artistic conceptualizations behind the episode and specific content within the episode

that describes how our internal representation of the world is challenged by loss. See Attig, *How We Grieve*, 1996, for a concept of grieving that asks for us to relearn our worlds following fundamental loss. In the third chapter of this thesis I engage more explicitly with Attig's theory of grieving.

itself which together reveal how Buffy experiences her mother's death as a world-shifting event. I contend that Joyce's death is an event which, for Buffy, interrupts her learned ways of making sense of the phenomena of the world. As will be seen, this is due to the way that Joyce's death interrupts Buffy's hold on the objects of her world, such that her world is changed. I suggest, then, that this example shows how the death of another can trigger a breakdown of meaning by disrupting one's habitual ways of being in the world. This breakdown signaled the end of Buffy's past world without guaranteeing in advance the shape of her future world; as such, Buffy ends up in-between two worlds and in a state of *existential disorientation*.

I suggest that this state of existential disorientation is intrinsic to the experience of disruptive events. Disruptive events undo meaning, and they interrupt the ways that we make sense of our worldly experiences. This process inhibits our ability to extend into the world and to be ourselves in the world. Thus, disruptive events existentially disorient us. When we are bereaved, we may be existentially disoriented by this event, and this existential disorientation appears to be part of a larger existential process related to the nature of disruptive events proper.

In the first section of this chapter I contextualize the episode "The Body" as well as the show *Buffy*. Following this, the second section of this chapter will outline the theoretical framework that will inform how I interpret the episode "The Body." I then turn to describing the first act of the episode, and I interweave my phenomenological analyses with this description in the third section. The fourth section will relate the phenomenological insights about living through the event of another's death to my larger questions about disruptive events proper.

2.1 On *Buffy*

In this section I contextualize the episode "The Body." First I generally describe the *Buffy* series. Next I situate the series in its broader academic context by gesturing towards the history of academic scholarship on the critically acclaimed series. Following this I contextualize this specific episode in the series, describing its content matter and its unusual nature as compared to the customary patterns of the series. Finally I briefly

outline my points of interest in “The Body.” After this I turn my attention to my next section, which explicates the theoretical framework of this chapter.

The American television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ran from 1997 to 2003 and was created by Joss Whedon. The series followed Buffy Summers as she protected the Hellmouth by battling against the forces of darkness which sought to destroy the world.¹⁸ In the series narrative Buffy is the Slayer, which makes her the latest incarnation in a line of women who have been called to become Vampire Slayers and who have inherited the duty of protecting the world from evil. Each season features a different “Big Bad,” which are the seasonal antagonists Buffy is pitted against. As is the case with all Slayers, Buffy is mentored by her Watcher, Rupert Giles. Buffy is also backed in her efforts by her two best friends, Willow and Xander, both of whom constitute the permanent members of the “Scooby Gang.” In addition, Buffy is supported by her mother Joyce Summers and her sister Dawn. This chapter will primarily focus on the relationship between Buffy and Joyce.

The series *Buffy* is critically acclaimed and has garnered significant academic attention. It was named number 27 in The Hollywood Reporter’s 2015 list, “Hollywood’s 100 Favorite TV Shows,” number 3 on TV Guide’s “Top Cult Shows Ever,” it was included in Time magazine’s “All-TIME 100 TV Shows,” and was number 38 in TV Guide Magazine’s “60 Best Series of All Time.”¹⁹ Over the course of its run, the series was nominated for one Golden Globe and thirteen Emmys, and it won two Emmys.²⁰ In addition to its critical reception, *Buffy* has found a home in academic literature as it is

¹⁸ The Hellmouth is a portal to hell located in Sunnydale, California. Due to the presence of the Hellmouth, Sunnydale is a focal point for demonic activity.

¹⁹ Hollywood Reporter Staff, “Hollywood’s 100 Favorite TV Shows,” *Hollywood Reporter*: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/best-tv-shows-ever-top-819499/item/desperate-housewives-hollywoods-100-favorite-820451>; TV Guide News, “TV Guide Names the Top Cult Shows Ever,” *TV Guide*: <http://www.tvguide.com/news/top-cult-shows-40239/>; TIME, “All-TIME 100 TV Shows,” *TIME*: <http://time.com/3101301/buffy-the-vampire-slayer/>; Fretts and Roush, “*TV Guide Magazine’s* 60 Best Series of All Time,” *TV Guide*: <http://www.tvguide.com/news/tv-guide-magazine-60-best-series-1074962/>. This list does not attempt to be exclusive.

²⁰ IMDB, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer Awards,” IMDB, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118276/awards?ref_=tt_awd.

considered to be an excellent source of popular culture for critical engagement and interrogation. As David Lavery has noted, “There’s the complexity, intertextuality, authenticity of his [Whedon’s] stories that makes them so rich for study.”²¹ *Buffy*-related writings are particularly common in Gender studies, Cultural studies, Media studies, and Philosophy. Indeed interest in *Buffy* has also led to the development of an entire academic field, affectionately dubbed “Buffy studies” or “Buffyology.” At present, there are 13 published volumes of *Slayage*, an international journal dedicated primarily to Buffy studies.²² There are also biennial *Slayage* conferences. The Whedon Studies Association also provides an immense listing of published and unpublished academic works on *Buffy*.²³ According to a Slate.com article published in 2012, among *The Wire*, *Alien*, *The Matrix*, and *The Simpsons*, *Buffy* was the popular culture property most published upon.²⁴ And there have been a number of articles published which muse over the ever-increasing number of critical inquiries performed upon the series by academics.²⁵ Given the academic attention paid to the series in general, there is good reason for my critical interest in *Buffy*.

“The Body” is a frank depiction of the way *Buffy* struggles to come to terms with Joyce’s sudden death. Unlike many depictions of bereavement and grief, this episode offers no

²¹ Katharine Schwab, “The Rise of *Buffy* Studies,” *The Atlantic* (2015):

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/the-rise-of-buffy-studies/407020/>.

²² In winter 2009, *Slayage* transitioned to *The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* from *The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*. Then in summer 2015, the journal became *The Journal of Whedon Studies*. These name transitions reflect the transitioning nature of the journal, which now includes essays on *Angel*, *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and Whedon’s other creations, as well as *Buffy*. See the Whedon Studies Association, “Slayage The Journal of Whedon Studies,” <http://www.whedonstudies.tv/slayage-the-journal-of-whedon-studies.html> for more information.

²³ For access to this listing, please see the Whedon Studies Association, “Whedonology,” <http://www.whedonstudies.tv/whedonology-an-academic-whedon-studies-bibliography.html>.

²⁴ Daniel Lametti, Aisha Harris, Natasha Geiling, and Natalie Matthews-Ramo, “Which Pop Culture Property Do Academics Study the Most?” *Slate*: http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2012/06/11/pop_culture_studies_why_do_academics_study_buffy_the_vampire_slayer_more_than_the_wire_the_matrix_alien_and_the_simpsons_.html.

²⁵ See Schwab, “The Rise of *Buffy* Studies,” *The Atlantic*; Lametti et. Al, “Which Pop Culture Property Do Academics Study the Most?,” *Slate*; Ulaby, “Buffy Studies,” *NPR* (2003): <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1262180>; Hay, “Academics Have Written Hundreds of Papers on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” *Modern Notion* (2014): <http://modernnotion.com/academics-written-hundreds-papers-buffy-the-vampire-slayer/>; Hay, “Is Studying *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* More Important Than Studying Shakespeare?,” *GOOD*: <https://www.good.is/articles/buffy-vampire-slayer-academia>.

answers or resolution to the event of death. Instead, the episode situates the viewers directly in the unfolding of death, such that one lives alongside Buffy her bereavement.

As Whedon describes:

This episode was one that I did because I wanted to show—not the meaning, or catharsis, or the beauty of life, or any of the things that are often associated with loss, or even the extreme grief, some of which we do get in the episode. But what I really wanted to capture was the extreme physicality. . . the almost boredom of the first few hours. I wanted to be very specific about what it felt like the moment you discover something, ah, you've lost someone.

And so what appears to many people as a formal exercise—no music, scenes that take up almost the entire act without end—is all done for a very specific purpose. Which is to put you in the moment. That moment of dumbfounded shock. That airlessness of losing somebody.²⁶

Reportedly Whedon wrote and directed this episode with his own experience with death in mind, as well as the experience of having watched other people grapple with death and having listened to their stories about that experience.²⁷ By focusing on the first few hours following death in this episode, Whedon offers us a picture of death that provides us with no catharsis, declining to offer any explanation, solution, or grand narratives about the meaning of life. Instead, he simply shows us the experience—that is, what it is like to live through those moments.

For the most part, each episode in the *Buffy* series follows a straightforward template. Buffy and the Scoobies confront one to several mini-monsters, while the Big Bad of the

²⁶ Stormwreath, “(Transcript):BtVS5.16 ‘The Body’ Audio Commentary by Joss W.,” *Stormwreath LiveJournal*.

²⁷ Stormwreath, “(Transcript):BtVS5.16 ‘The Body’ Audio Commentary by Joss W.,” *Stormwreath LiveJournal*. To the extent that Whedon tried to get at the essence or essential structures of the first few hours of loss by way of drawing upon the particularity of his own experiences as well as the experiences of others, this episode presents an already-accomplished phenomenological reduction about the event of loss.

season plots in the background to undermine her efforts and take over the Hellmouth. “The Body” deviates from these customary patterns, however. This episode stands apart from the episodes that precede and follow it in the series, both in terms of narrative and in terms of cinematography.²⁸ The narrative of the episode does not directly advance the background plot of season five, which concerns Buffy’s struggle against a demigod named Glory.²⁹ Instead, Joyce’s death, sudden as it is, interrupts the struggle with Glory, effectively displacing it. Additionally, there is no background music, and each scene is very long.³⁰ Whedon also had his crew follow Sarah Michelle Gellar (as Buffy) on foot with handheld cameras, and there were several shots which linger on mere objects or feature idiosyncratic framing of subjects.³¹

²⁸ There are other exceptional episodes in the series; “Hush” and “Once More, With Feeling” are strong examples of episodes that deviate from the show’s customary patterns in significant ways. To a certain extent, then, I am generalizing by suggesting that the series has customary patterns. I do not think that this generalization does a significant injustice to the show, however, for the exceptional episodes are just that—exceptional.

²⁹ Joyce’s death additionally shifts the tone of the series. In a review of the episode, Joyce Millman of Salon.com writes, “Joyce’s death came as a complete surprise. . . . In that instant, Buffy’s childhood officially ends.” See Milman, “The death of Buffy’s mom,” *Salon*: http://www.salon.com/2001/03/12/buffy_mom/. Previous seasons saw Buffy dealing with more “teen-age” issues such as first venturing into the dating world, attempting to fit in during high school, heartbreak, and making friends. In general, we see a more mature Buffy in season five; having taken up the role of big sister, Buffy is more responsible than in previous seasons. However, as seen in the episodes that follow “The Body,” Joyce’s death shifts Buffy’s family role and her relationship with her sister. Suddenly Buffy is the sole emotional caretaker for Dawn, as well as becoming the one responsible for maintaining their home. The themes and events of the seasons which follow Joyce’s death are also much darker in tone: death and loss surface again in numerous episodes, as do issues of abusive relationships, sexual violence, identity conflicts, power, loss of connection, sado-masochism, faith, and repentance. After Joyce’s death the show is never the same. Buffy is suddenly thrown into adulthood, and it is an adulthood that is darker and less hopeful than the one we may have expected or wished for her.

³⁰ Music would have provided direction, conceptualization, and potentially catharsis for the viewers. In this way, by presenting a score-less episode, Whedon chose not to direct his viewers towards a particular interpretation of Joyce’s death and the presence of her dead body. Instead, he forces us to be attuned to the characters and their bewilderment. The soundtrack does include ambient noise, such as children giggling, wind chimes, awkward conversation, and footsteps, but these sounds seem to suggest that the world goes on even in the face of catastrophe, and they reinforce the sense that Buffy is trapped in this experience. Without music, however, we have no emotional guide to this episode. Instead we, the viewers, like Buffy, are forced to face Joyce’s dead body as a body, without the comfort of any external conceptualization, catharsis, or inherent meaning; we must make our own meaning of the experience. For more on this subject, please see Attinello et. al, *Music, Sound and Silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 2010.

³¹ Stormwreath, “(Transcript):BtVS5.16 ‘The Body’ Audio Commentary by Joss W.,” *Stormwreath LiveJournal*. The first act is shot as one long take. In order to keep viewers in the shot, to ensure that they couldn’t be let out of the moment, Whedon describes his camera team as carrying cameras on their shoulder and following Sarah Michelle Gellar as she acted out the scene. The goal was to create a “shot that just seemed never to end,” and the use of the handheld contributed an “urgency” to the shot. Shot in this

It is my view that these unusual decisions on Whedon's part strategically come together in the episode by depicting Joyce's death as something that doesn't make sense in the context of Buffy's life or the series. This disruptive element seems to emphasize how we experience the sudden death of another as an event that cannot be anticipated, planned for, nor controlled. I further suggest that the filmic and narrative techniques Whedon employs contribute to the depiction of Joyce's death as an event that breaks down sense for Buffy, and in turn, for the viewers. It is for these reasons that I have decided to focus my analysis in this chapter and the next on this episode.

In my forthcoming analysis, I focus on the first act of this episode, which depicts Buffy's discovery of the body and her coming to terms with her mother's death. I contend that this episode demonstrates three inter-related aspects of the phenomenon of bereavement: first, Joyce's sudden death foregrounds the way that we can never be prepared for the death of a loved one; second, the filmic techniques "dilate" the spatial and temporal dimensions of the episode, which effectively show how Buffy undergoes confusing perceptual disturbances when she encounters her mother's body, and which additionally have the effect of drawing us into the experience along with Buffy; and third, the unusual shots in the episode shore up how the learned habits of perception can break down in the shock of sudden bereavement.

Before presenting this analysis, I outline the theoretical context that informs my reading of this episode. As Martin Heidegger has shown, phenomenology is properly hermeneutic. This means that "... the methodological meaning of phenomenological description is *interpretation*."³² As such, my presentation of the first act of "The Body" will be necessarily interpretive. And as interpretive, it will have always already have been informed by my historical ways of thinking, ways which have developed out of my

way, the long scene which composes the first act feels dilated, such that the moments that immediately follow Buffy's discovery of and response towards the dead body stretch on endlessly. Viewers have no way of telling how much time passes over the course of the act, and we, like Buffy, cannot escape the situation.

³² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1996, 33. Though for Heidegger phenomenology is always ontological, and the project of *Being and Time* is a fundamental ontology about the being of Da-sein, I consider his insight that all phenomenological description is hermeneutical (and, therefore, interpretive) to be correct. This is because I accept his claim that all understanding has as its precondition a hermeneutic structure.

embeddedness in a particular cultural context, social world, and epochal time, and my learned styles of thinking, which include various philosophical techniques. I outline the theoretical context that informs how I interpret the first act of “The Body” so as to contextualize my phenomenological description of the episode. Following this contextualization, I turn back to *Buffy* with a description of the first act of the episode. I interweave this description with my phenomenological analyses of the episode.

So far I have outlined the questions motivating this chapter along with providing a provisional glance at what this chapter will reveal. I have also contextualized the episode “The Body.” If I intend to show how Joyce’s death is for Buffy a world-shifting event, then I must describe how it is that we have worlds that are open to this kind of radical transformation. Moreover, I must convey how it is that we are in the world such that we can be affected by this transformation. In order to do this, I turn to Merleau-Ponty in the following section. Merleau-Ponty’s particular notion of being in the world is instructive as it provides a phenomenal grounding from the perspective of embodiment that amounts to a rich description of lived experience. We are in constant contact with the world because we have been born, incarnated into the body which is ours and which we are. By virtue of our embodiment we can effect and be affected by the world. Hence, our corporeality opens us into a world that is capable of change and even capable of ending.

2.2 When the world falls to pieces...

In this next section I explain Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological views of the body-world relationship and embodied subjectivity. First I briefly describe the relationship of the body and the world in the *Phenomenology*. I then unpack this general description by explicating how our embodied acts of perception make sense of our experiences and give us our hold on the world. Next I outline a concept of world. Once I have laid out these positive articulations of the body to world relationship, I gesture towards the dilemma of the breakdown of this relationship. I suggest that world-shifting following a disruptive event is an example of this kind of breakdown. Finally, I describe the *Buffy* episode as an example which depicts a world-shift for Buffy following the death of a loved one.

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* seeks to rediscover our naïve contact with the world through establishing an account of lived space, lived time, and lived world.³³ This rediscovery takes place by returning to the world of concrete embodied experience through phenomenological description. For Merleau-Ponty, we are primordially body-subjects who are necessarily embedded in the world. In other words, we are our bodies, and our bodies take up a place in the world. Our bodies are endowed with sense capacities that provide us with direct access to the sense of the world through acts of perception. We are intertwined with our worlds thanks to our bodies which open us up to them. It is in this way that Merleau-Ponty reveals how the body is the ontological foundation of our being in the world, and is that which provides for our place in the world and allows us our very first grasp on the world in perception.³⁴

Being in the world thus means we are subjects “condemned to sense,” for the body situates us in the world and offers us a perspective on the spectacle of the world.³⁵ The body is the primary ground through which life can be experienced and sense can be made of lived experience. Because the body which I am is positioned in space, it takes up a place in the world, and it is from this place that I have access to the spectacle. My body moves, and with that movement my perceptual field shifts. When I reach out a hand and touch the surface of my desk, I can sense its denseness. The movement of my hand enables me to search out the texture of the desk, and to get a sense of it. Through our bodies we perceive the spectacle of the world as it unfolds, and moreover we participate in its unfolding through embodied action. My perception thus gives me a grasp on the spectacle and it also gives me my hold on the world by gearing me into it. In taking up my stance of being in the world through my body, I anchor myself in the world through acts of perception. When we begin with embodied perception, the visible spectacle of the world has sense, and we too have access to this sense or meaning through our contact with the phenomena of the world.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, xx.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 265.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, xxxiv.

Our perception is guided by directives found in our environment. Merleau-Ponty calls these directives “spatial levels.”³⁶ We always perceive according to a spatial level, whether that be a spatial level that we bring with us or a new one in which we find ourselves. In this way, the world appears according to the operative spatial level which directs how I perceive what I encounter. These spatial levels, once accepted by the body, give us our hold on the world and allow us to gear into the spectacle we have found ourselves in. Alphonso Lingis describes this process well when he writes,

We enter a room where a reception is in progress and the babel that fills our ears makes us think it would be impossible to carry on a conversation there. But then we find ourselves facing someone, and our hearing adjusts to the noise level and we find ourselves picking out effortless what she is saying.³⁷

In this case, the spatial level is the roar of the babel that fills our ears, and the process of habituation that Lingis describes is our “acceptance” of the level. This habituation is a movement from one level to the next; we entered the room with an accepted spatial level of little noise and then adjusted to the level of the roaring babel. Once we’ve accepted this level, we have geared into the situation and we have a hold on the world as it appears in this situation. Thus other phenomena can emerge in relation to this established level; we can pick out the words verbalized by our interlocutor because the rise and fall of their voice emerges in contrast to the initial babel of sound. This is how the world is given to me, indeed how it gives itself over to me, and it is this process that allows me to become oriented in space and capable of acting in a situation. Our bodies enable us to get a hold on the world because they can perceive and move, picking up the style of the cohesive field in which they are situated.³⁸

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 261.

³⁷ Lingis, “The Levels,” 1998, 25.

³⁸ Lingis, “The Levels,” 1998, 36.

To be clear, the hold we get on the world is accomplished between the body and the world. Our bodies, as actual material bodies, do not give us our bearings in space in the way just described. Instead, it is our body as a system of possible actions that can allow us to get a hold on the world and thus orient us in space. This body as a system of possibilities Merleau-Ponty names the “virtual body.”³⁹ The virtual body allows us to get our bearings in space because it projects the possibilities of our embodied being in the world.⁴⁰ The virtual body sets up spatial levels that gear us into the spectacle of the world. This gearing into the spectacle happens because the virtual body is a field “in which each phase and each part catches on to the style of the others.”⁴¹ We can gear into the world because we can pick up the style of the visible, audible, tangible, and so forth, as they cohere together in a field. In this way, the perceived spectacle of the world provides an arena for our actions, and our virtual body, as the power for possible action, meets the spectacle of the world that has invited those actions.⁴² In other words, the world evokes certain actions, and the body-subject responds. Accomplished in this evocation-response is a successful union between body and world that gives the subject its hold on the world.

The world is thus the field of our experience. Held open through my acts of perception, this field allows the presencing of the world to unfold around me by virtue of phenomena emerging as thicknesses of presence in my horizon. When I stand in a field and gaze out towards the landscape, the different parts of it are related by virtue of their positions and by virtue of my approach towards them. I turn my body, and a burst of flowers emerges first into my peripheral vision, and, by soliciting my gaze and motivating a further turn towards them, they then emerge into the fullness of my perceptual field. This movement of my body brings these phenomena into my field, where their presence irrevocably informs my present. I belong to this world because I open up to it. My faith in this bodily

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 260-261.

⁴⁰ Pulido, “An Entirely Different Kind of Synthesis,” 2010, 33.

⁴¹ Lingis, “The Levels,” 1998, 36

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 261.

perception commits me to a vast universe of possible future actions predicated upon the stability of the past as sedimented into the present moment.⁴³

Nevertheless, there can be a breakdown in the relationship between the body and the world. For example, the familiar organization of our worlds can break down with the use of psychedelic drugs or with certain mental illnesses.⁴⁴ I would argue that the suffering subject is vulnerable to this form of disturbance as well. Merleau-Ponty explains this situation when he says: “Now, if the world falls to pieces or is broken apart, this is because one’s own body has ceased to be a knowing body and has ceased to envelop all of the objects in a single hold; and this degradation of the body into an organism must be itself related to the collapse of time, which no longer rises toward a future, but rather falls back upon itself.”⁴⁵ In other words, when we do certain drugs, or when we find ourselves suffering, our manner of projecting the world is disturbed, and the world falls to pieces because we have lost our hold on it. Our hold on the world is tied to being able to make sense of it, and so when our world no longer makes sense, we lose our hold. We can no longer depend upon our sedimented bodily knowledge for making sense of what we perceive, and our habits and expressive actions no longer align with the demands of the world.

I consider the world-shifting effect described earlier to be an example of a breakdown in the relationship between our body and world. More specifically, world-shifting is an effect of a breakdown in meaning and the interruption of one’s habitual meaning-making processes. Accordingly, and to implicate *Buffy* into this phenomenological analysis, if Buffy experiences a world-shift following her discovery of her mother’s body, then what she is properly experiencing is a breakdown of meaning and an interruption of her ways of being, which together result in her world falling to pieces. Exploring this “falling to pieces” is the aim of the next section, which will be focused upon developing my phenomenological description of the first act of “The Body.”

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 311.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 294; Morley, “The Sleeping Subject,” 1999, 2.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 295.

2.3 “Mom? Mom? ... Mommy?”⁴⁶

In this section I phenomenologically describe the lived disruptions that follow the event of Joyce’s death for Buffy as it appears in the first act of the episode, “The Body.” First, I provide a general summary of this act. I then re-elaborate specific moments in order to highlight the ways that this episode reveals the breakdown of meaning for Buffy and for us (as viewers and witnesses to Buffy’s experience). This will show the ways that we can see a world-shift occurring for Buffy. I describe this world-shift by first looking at how Buffy inhabits her world pre-confronting Joyce’s death, and then describing how a specific shot in the episode shows up the precise moment when Buffy realizes that her world has broken down. Finally, I outline some of the “symptoms” of this experience as a whole as exhibited by Buffy in her responses to her mother’s body.

When Buffy enters her home at the beginning of the episode, she is entirely unprepared for what is about to happen. She reads a note addressed to her mother that is attached to a bouquet of delivered flowers, and then calls out to her mother asking her if she’d like Buffy to pick up Dawn from school. Buffy turns, and discovers her mother’s prone body on the couch, limbs astray, and eyes staring unseeingly. Buffy begins to approach her mother but pauses when she realizes something is wrong. For a moment fantasy overlays reality and we are thrown into a long scene with Buffy and her crew having Christmas dinner with Joyce. We are abruptly jerked out of this scene when fantasy-Buffy drops a pie; the sudden catastrophe of this event re-awakens Buffy to the catastrophe facing her at that moment, and she races to her mother’s side and begins trying to revive her. When unsuccessful, Buffy calls for emergency aid. She is advised to perform CPR, which is unsuccessful and results in a cracked rib. She terminates the call with 9-1-1 operators and calls Giles. When he answers, she asks him to come to the house and then hangs up. Buffy then greets the paramedics who attempt to revive Joyce. There is a brief dream-scene where Buffy imagines that the resuscitation has been successfully and Joyce miraculously begins to breathe. The dream-scene ends, however, with the paramedic’s

⁴⁶ This is Buffy’s verbal response when she sees her mother’s prone body lying on the couch.

inability to revive Joyce and the pronouncement of her death. The paramedics leave, and a stunned Buffy wanders the house. Giles arrives and attempts to revive Joyce, but Buffy stops him by yelling out what the paramedics have told her: “We’re not supposed to move the body!” Immediately aghast, Buffy realizes what she has said, and Giles moves to comfort her. At this point, Buffy can’t take her eyes off of the body.

While this episode situates us directly in the unfolding of the event of Buffy becoming bereaved, the initial moments of the episode are significant insofar as they show us how quickly our worlds can shift. The beginning of the episode features Buffy entering the house, reading the card attached to the bouquet, and calling out to her mother. She moves quickly and speaks glibly. She is comfortable within her world, and at this point, has no reason to expect anything to be different.⁴⁷ Though her mother has already died, Buffy is unaware of this fact, and so bounces into the scene with her customary vivacity and wit. Moreover, she immediately references Dawn and her worldly responsibility for picking Dawn up from school. These few moments, short and fleeting in comparison to the long act which follows them, show us both how we become comfortably immersed in our worlds, and how quickly things can change. Interestingly, this short scene is actually a repeated scene; episode 15, just prior to this episode, included it as the final scene. This is the only time in the entire series that Whedon crosses the last scene of an episode into the first scene of a following episode. I read this as a way of deepening the sense that these moments are the final moments Buffy has in the world she knew well, the world where her mother was still alive. This is the world *before* the disruptive event, and it is a world that ends and cannot be recovered or recuperated when Buffy discovers her mother’s dead body.

⁴⁷ It seems significant that Buffy is at home for the entirety of this act. Alphonso Lingis has suggested that “The home base is that zone of intimacy where the levels are within one another, and we within them. . . . Whatever takes form in the intimacy of the home has intersensorial consistency.” Lingis, “The Intimate and the Alien,” 1998, 42. Home is where we can *be at home*, and where we can feel secure enough to give ourselves over to a supportive ground and be reposed. When Buffy enters her home at the beginning of this episode she is *at home* in her home. Her mother’s death, however, will undermine her ability to be in the world so fundamentally that being at home in her own home in the world is also called into question.

If this is a depiction that shows us how Buffy was in the world before the disruptive event of her mother's death, how is her encounter with that death and with the world-shift it engenders depicted? As noted before, this episode is about showing the moments that follow the event of the death of a loved one as it unfolds into the lives of those near to the deceased. To this extent, the entire act shows up the experience of a world-shift. There is, however, a particular moment in the act which seems to demonstrate Buffy coming to realize that her world has dramatically changed. After Buffy attempts to revive her mother and calls for emergency aid, she looks down at the phone. Depicted in the shot is an extreme close-up of the telephone keypad. Shot from her point of view, it seems as though she is staring at the phone as if she doesn't recognize it or understand its purpose. This extreme close-up is the first cut of the entire scene, and the way the shot lingers on the keypad contributes to the sense of time feeling stretched out. Whedon considers this moment to be the one that shows Buffy realizing her mother is dead.⁴⁸ He suggests that this is conveyed by the way Buffy fixates on something meaningless.

I would go further. That Buffy fixates on something meaningless in this moment is representative of the way that the whole context of meaningful relationships which constituted the world she once knew had fallen away.⁴⁹ In this way, the phone is genuinely meaningless to her, because the structures that allowed Buffy to make sense of

⁴⁸ Stormwreath, "(Transcript):BtVS5.16 'The Body' Audio Commentary by Joss W.," *Stormwreath LiveJournal*. I want to note a subtle but significant detail about this "realization" Buffy has. This shot does suggest that Buffy has realized that her mother is dead, but in this shot she does not *articulate* this understanding. When she calls Giles immediately after this shot, she asks him to come to the house, telling him that "She [Joyce] is at the house." Then when she speaks to Giles following the paramedics' intervention, she refers to her mother's corpse as "the body." There is a difference of language here: first Buffy still refers to her mother as a subject, but later she refers to the body as an object. Hence, I consider the telephone shot to be the moment that she has realized her mother is dead, but the outburst at Giles is her conscious articulation of this realization, which makes it explicit for her as her new reality.

⁴⁹ Heidegger has described this everyday world (*Umwelt*) as a praxis world or a work world. This is the surrounding world in which Dasein (the being that is its being-there in the world) lives as its "worldly self." In this world, Dasein has an identity; it is surrounded by things and other persons, it takes up projects, and it understands itself inauthentically through what it does. This world is constituted by a totality of references which provides significance and relevance to Dasein's worldly doings. For more, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1998, 59-83. Understood with relation to Buffy, the world Buffy has lived in is a world constituted by a totality of referential relations in which all things and beings are inter-related, such that when these relations no longer cohere together, the world appears to break down. The death of Joyce can't be made sense of in this context of meaningful relationships, and so the relations which constituted Buffy's world begin to dissolve.

the phone have broken down. In the face of her mother's death, Buffy's habitual patterns of action no longer provide her with a sense of what to do and how to do it, and as a result the phone becomes present to hand (*Vorhanden*).⁵⁰ In other words, Joyce's death has broken down the familiar organization of the world, to the extent that the habits Buffy had previously formed fail to orient and direct her in this situation. The breakdown of the structures of Buffy's world reveals how, in this moment, everything has changed, and nothing in her world can make sense the way it had before. Joyce's death has triggered a breakdown of meaning, and this loss of sense extends even to the most fundamental cultural tools which, when put to use, are normally phenomenologically transparent to us.⁵¹ This scene then doesn't just show that Buffy has realized that her mother is dead. This scene shows how that experience, in this moment, signals the breakdown of meaning, and it does so because it is a moment in which she *recognizes* (albeit implicitly) the breakdown and what that breakdown signifies.

If this is the moment where everything begins to break down such that Buffy realizes that the world as she knew it has ended, then what does Buffy experience following this moment? And what do her experiences reveal about her being in-between the world before her mother's death and the world after her mother's death, a world which is still to come? Following this moment of recognition, we see Buffy exhibit a variety of

⁵⁰ Heidegger teaches us that we are most in our most original orientation to tools when we use them unthematically. The hammer we pick up and put to use hammering nails in order to construct a shelter is ready-to-hand, and when we pick it up and put it to use, we do so because it has a handy character and we can use it in-order-to meet certain ends. Each tool has its place in the totality of references which determine their meaning. So when an object loses its handiness, for example when it is picked up and found to be unsuitable for a task, the system of references which gives the tool meaning becomes evident. Suddenly we can see *why* we need a certain tool, namely what we are using that tool for, and we can see how the tool we have picked up instead cannot help us toward this end. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1998, 67-71, for more on this. The telephone for Buffy has become objectively present (*Vorhanden*) in this way. It is a tool that is unsuitable for the task of keeping her mother with her. What comes to the fore in this moment is the world as a whole, as a referential totality which circumscribes things as they are. And in this case, Buffy is confronted with that world as it is breaking down before her eyes.

⁵¹ When tools are ready-to-hand, their handy character makes them equipment that we just pick up and put to use. We don't contemplate the nature of the hammer while hammering nails. We *can* contemplate the nature of the hammer, but to do so we must make the tool visible to us *as an object*, which is to say that we must see it differently and orient ourselves towards it differently. However when we just put the tool to use in our activities, it recedes behind the activity and is in this way transparent to us. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1998, 67-71.

perceptual changes and bodily reactions. I describe these affective experiences in what follows.

There are a number of shots throughout the act which depict Buffy feeling trapped as her worldly possibilities close down. Several times we witness her peering outside, but we don't see what she looks at; though when we witness her looking, she appears as though she is merely staring out, focusing on nothing—her gaze is a thousand miles away. Yet at the same time that we see her gazing out onto the world we also hear external world sounds such as children playing or wind chimes ringing. In these shots, then, we see her trapped inside the space with her mother's body, and while she gazes out, she is not really seeing what is beyond her.⁵² She cannot escape the situation, and must always return to the fact of the body before her. And yet the world outside goes on, despite what is happening to her. Her worldly field is closing in on itself, to the extent that the possibilities of her interaction with a familiar environment is being barred from her. Otherwise put, her virtual body is breaking down as she is unable to hold onto the world through acts of perception—she looks but doesn't see. Because her virtual body is unable to hold onto her world, her possibilities to act in a meaningful way are shutting down.

This sense of being trapped is also shown when Buffy converses with the paramedic who tells her that her mother is dead. The shot of the paramedic's approach towards Buffy is captured from a camera location just behind her shoulder. From this point of view, he swims in and out of focus, and the shot is mostly blurry. It seems as though she is struggling to focus on the conversation she has with him. For the most part, as he talks to her we only see part of his body and mouth in the frame. We do not see him as a whole person, suggesting that she can't really relate to him as a person in this moment.⁵³ She can't get to the reality of the situation, and the paramedics are represented as literally

⁵² Even when we see Buffy looking outside the house, we never get an external shot *of* the house. We only see Buffy trapped inside the house. Thus she is trapped in this experience as it is unfolding in her home, the place where she should be most safe and most secure, and yet this is the space in which she is witnessing the end of her world as she once knew it.

⁵³ Stormwreath, "(Transcript):BtVS5.16 'The Body' Audio Commentary by Joss W.," *Stormwreath LiveJournal*.

being a blur to her.⁵⁴ There is an additional shot, however, of the paramedic talking with Buffy, and this one is taken from around the paramedic's back as we witness Buffy's response to what he is telling her. In this shot his body overwhelms the frame, and she is squeezed into the corner. Whedon suggests that this shot was supposed to express that "she didn't have room to maneuver. . . . She can't get the big picture, she's not having a normal conversation. . . . I let his shoulder own the frame. I took his eyes out of the frame. To show her experience of, literally, being trapped, being blocked off from reality."⁵⁵ By giving Buffy so little room to maneuver Whedon presented in a concrete, visual manner the way that we cannot escape the death of the other, the way that loss cuts us off from reality, and the suffocating sense of airlessness that loss engenders.

That Buffy is unable to make sense of the situation and hold onto her world is shown by her shock, her inhibited movement, her slow processing, and her vomiting on the rug following the paramedics' departure. Buffy exhibits clear signs of a deepening shock over the course of the act: her eyes are wide, dilated, yet unfocused, she has grown pale and sweaty, and she struggles to focus on conversations. After the paramedics leave she seems to be in a fog. With a slow gait she wanders aimlessly from room to room, avoiding the body. She vomits on a rug as wind chimes ring in the background. She opens the back door and we see her gaze out onto the world; the sounds of children playing are in the background but the foreground of the shot features her face with clammy skin and flat, staring eyes. She seems fatigued as she leans against the door. When Giles arrives, he addresses her, and she is very slow to respond and offers an oblique statement that fails to explain anything. In general it seems she is unable to digest the experience in which she has found herself. Her mind distances itself from what is

⁵⁴ Robert A. Neimeyer has described how persons confronted with loss may demonstrate avoidance behaviors. Avoidance behaviors are responses that demonstrate that we find the reality of loss incomprehensible, and they "soften" the blow of loss by muting our full awareness of the reality of our loss. Examples of physical avoidance behaviors are feeling numb or unreal, perceiving the voices of others as far away, or feeling detached from surroundings. For more on this, see Neimeyer, *Lessons of Loss*, 6. These behaviors are well depicted in this scene in "The Body," and we can read Buffy as being deep in avoidance at this point.

⁵⁵ Stormwreath, "(Transcript):BtVS5.16 'The Body' Audio Commentary by Joss W.," *Stormwreath LiveJournal*.

happening, evidenced by her senseless response to Giles, and her body rejects what it can't digest, evidenced by the way she walks away from her mother's body and then vomits. The loss of the virtual body's hold on the world results in a state of disorientation because her world as she had known it is closing down upon itself.

Buffy's exhibition of perceptual changes and unusual embodied responses seem to me to be symptomatic expressions of the body that has been cast adrift and which has lost its mooring in the world and its bearings in space. This is an effect of world-shifting, which was caused by the breakdown in the meaningful relationships which constituted her world. These symptoms are not just borne out by and within the body, however, but are in the world as well; the world reflects us back to ourselves, and in this case, it reflects Buffy back to herself as incapable of making sense of the situation she has found herself in. Unable to make sense of her situation, the end of Buffy's world entirely disorients her. While in-between her two worlds of before and after, Buffy cannot get a hold on her world, and she cannot gear into her situation.

As I go on to show in the following section, this disorientation exhibited by Buffy is an existential disorientation that follows from the disintegration in the relationship between Buffy's body and her world, such that her habitual understanding of how to *be* in this world is called into question. Joyce's death initiates for Buffy a radical alteration in her lived world. She finds herself in-between two worlds, neither in her world as she once knew it and once lived it, nor in the world which is yet to come, a world in which she had once again learned how to be and how to make sense of her experiences.

2.4 "I don't understand how all this happens."⁵⁶

In this concluding section I turn the insights gained from my phenomenological description of the first act of "The Body" towards one of the opening questions of this

⁵⁶ This is said by Anya, one of Buffy's friends, when she expresses her inability to comprehend Joyce's death and her profound confusion over how to behave following the death. Anya's full speech is as follows: "I don't understand how this all happens. How we go through this. I mean, I knew her, and then she's, there's just a body, and I don't understand why she just can't get back in it and not be dead anymore. It's stupid. It's mortal and stupid. And, and Xander's crying and not talking, and, and I was having fruit punch,

chapter, namely, the question of determining whether there are general existential structures common to disruptive experiences. I suggest that by examining the unfolding of the phenomenon of bereavement I have been able to catch sight of a specific element of experience that seems to be related to the generalized process which unfolds following disruptive events. Buffy's lost hold on the world follows from a breakdown in the relationship between her body and her world, and she finds herself existentially disoriented from this breakdown, unable to make sense of her situation, whilst already knowing that this situation means that everything has changed and that her world as she once knew it has ended. This existential disorientation seems to be related to the nature of disruptive events in terms of how they are taken up by the individual who undergoes them. As an experience, it emerges from the state of being in-between two worlds, where one is unable to ground oneself in either the world before or the world after.

I have suggested that we can interpret Buffy's response to her mother's dead body as evincing a world-shift for her. This means that her encounter with her mother's body has affected her so deeply that it has completely changed her world. When Buffy stares at the phone in her hand, we see her come to realize that her mother is dead, even if she does not yet articulate this understanding and make it explicit for herself. This is the moment when we can see her recognizing that her world as she once knew it was over, but she has not yet taken up her new world, the one in which she is a motherless daughter. Looking through this example then we can see how world-shifting, as an effect of the breakdown of meaning, covers over the deeper existential experience of being in-between two settled worlds, the world before the event and the world after the event. And the symptoms Buffy exhibits are signs of being in this in-between state. They are signs of what I call existential disorientation.

How does Buffy become existentially disoriented in this way? Buffy's ability to ground herself in her world has been compromised. It is her relationship to her world that is affected. The world as she had always known it is suddenly, radically changed. This

and I thought, well Joyce will never have any more fruit punch ever, and she'll never have eggs, or yawn, or brush her hair, not ever, and no one will explain to me why."

happens because Buffy loses her hold on the world, which is to say that that she cannot gear into her situation. As described earlier, this ability to gear into a situation and get a hold on the world results from our being able to pick up the style of the field we find ourselves in, and being able to respond appropriately to the solicitations of that field. Whilst Buffy is in the immediate unfolding of discovering and coming to terms with her mother's body, she is unable to act in a way that responds to the demands of her situations because her embodied knowledge of how to act falls short and her ability to make sense of the body is undermined.

In this way, when Buffy's world radically shifts following her encounter of the body, this disorients her. We can understand this disorientation in part as a style of spatiality concerned with how she responds to the actual objects she encounters in her perceptual field. However, this disorientation is not just a question of or an immanently perceptual experience. Rather, it resonates at a deeper level. Joyce's death above all evidences a breakdown of meaning and a loss of sense for Buffy which results in a loss of hold in the world and a fundamental change of the perceptual landscape. Once this happens, Buffy can never go back to the way things were before. She cannot resume life post-Joyce's death by living as though Joyce were still here. This, then, means that Joyce's death is not just about her now permanent absence from Buffy's life; Joyce's death also means the end of a particular world and a loss in this case then is not just loss of a person but also the loss of the world shared with that person.

Our example shows us that the existential state of being in-between two worlds is not a comfortable one. This is why it is an existential *disorientation*. Buffy was at home in her world, and then she was disrupted. She was called into question by her situation, but her ability to offer an answer to the question her situation asked of her is undermined by the way the situation has affected her. This experience entails a variety of perceptual and embodied responses, including shock, vomiting, inhibited movement and cognitive processing, an inability to focus, a feeling of unreality and an inability to connect, and a

feeling of being trapped.⁵⁷ With the loss of her sense-making structures, Buffy does not immediately have the resources to anchor herself in the world again. Being in-between two worlds following a disruptive event thus truly means the end of a world and the suspension of the self in those moments. It is a space in which one finds that they cannot be who they once were, and are still yet being called to be. Buffy is no longer just the Slayer, nor just an older sister, nor a daughter. She is now also the sole caretaker to her sister, and the individual responsible for maintaining their home, and a motherless daughter, while simultaneously still being called to be the Slayer and the older sister. From this emerges a disorienting tension.

But just as being in-between means the death of a world, it also promises a new one. The new world is on the horizon as a possibility, but is also not yet actualized; we can see how Buffy is caught up in the event of her mother's death as it unfolds, and has not yet grounded herself in the world following her mother's death. However we cannot see in this episode what the world following Joyce's death will look like. Likewise, this remains true when we find ourselves in our own in-between places; the world to come is a possibility which will be necessarily actualized, but the shape of the world to come is yet to be determined. It is in this way that this time of disorientation is also a time of radical openness to ourselves, to our worlds, and our futures.

If this is true, if the world to come for us is still yet undetermined, then do our actions in this present period of in-betweenness play a role in shaping the world to come? This is the question to be addressed in the next chapter. Provisionally, I would suggest yes; it is our style of being, our actions in the present, and the energy we bring to our existence which shapes how the world to come will appear to us. For example, when we are disoriented by an event, do we push the event that has disoriented us away or do we

⁵⁷ We can consider this progressive series of reactions to be Buffy's response to the lability of spatial levels. Merleau-Ponty suggests that "The lability of levels gives not merely the intellectual experience of disorder, but also the living experience of vertigo and nausea, which is the consciousness of, and the horror caused by, our contingency" (265). Buffy is horrified because she is thrown back upon herself as contingent, and her world has been shown up as similarly contingent insofar as it has been undermined by the event of her mother's death.

accept it? Do we throw ourselves into it without looking back on our pasts? Do we try to meaningfully bring our pasts into our futures through how we take up the present moment? Can we be responsive to the unknown, or are we set in our ways? Do we perceive our existential disorientation as a creative potentiality for self and world recreation, or do we turn away from it and plunge into the first available world?

By thinking Merleau-Ponty and *Buffy* together, the way that disruptive events are experienced has been outlined. These lived disturbances which follow a disruptive event ordinarily unfold on the existential level of one's relationship between their body and their world. Disruptive events undo meaning, and they interrupt the ways that we make sense of our worldly experiences: they existentially disorient us. In the moment we undergo the disruptive event, our relationship between our self and our world begins to disintegrate. The world as we once knew it is irrevocably lost, and we are called to be differently with relation to the in-between space we find ourselves in. How we respond may contribute to the shape of the world to come, though it is not yet clear how this is so. Nonetheless, what is common to disruptive experiences is this existential disorientation, which I interpret as an opportunity for existential transformation. By elucidating this opportunity, it will become clear that the way that we respond to disruption and disorientation shapes what is to come in our futures, including the worlds we will find ourselves in, the style of our being in those worlds, and the kind of persons we will become.

3 Responsiveness and Radical Openness

When we experience existentially disorienting events, we find ourselves unable to make sense of the situation we are in. Previously we lived in a world we knew how to navigate because we had a sense of it. The way we acted in this world expressed how we understood that world, which is to say, how we had interpreted it and how we had interpreted ourselves within it. We developed these world- and self-interpretations by engaging in our worlds such that we learned how to respond to the world's solicitations. This sense of how to be in our worlds is a pre-reflective understanding held within our body, and it shaped our body, our expressive actions, and our way of seeing the world. However, when the disruptive event disorients us it completely undermines this hermeneutic understanding of *how to be* and *how things are*. It asks us to be differently, which is to say, to respond differently, to respond in a way that doesn't make sense to us based upon our previously established sense of the world and ourselves.

Such is the case when we are confronted with the death of a loved one. Following the death of a loved one, the world holds the expectation of their presence and in the same breath it announces their absence.⁵⁸ We are called into question by the situation of bereavement because the absence of the other who fundamentally shaped our world leaves our world impoverished and disrupts our ways of extending into the world. As is revealed by the world-shift effect that follows a disruptive event, we may no longer know how to be, who we are, or how to make sense of things following the death of a significant other.⁵⁹ There is, then, a tension that arises when we are called to be, insofar

⁵⁸ Kym Maclaren, "Breakdowns and Living Tensions in Unreflective Experience" (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 16, 2016).

⁵⁹ Kym Maclaren, "Finding Oneself in the World" (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 15, 2016). In her lecture, Maclaren suggested that we make ourselves at home in the world, and that making ourselves at home in the world is the task of an implicit lived hermeneutics. In other words, we settle ourselves by establishing world- and self-interpretations, where these interpretations answer the questions of how we are to be in the world, who we are, and how we make sense of things. I am drawing her ideas together with my own by way of suggesting that a world-shift shows how our answer to these "questions" is itself undermined by the event of bereavement, such that we are no longer at home in the world, and that in turn our world- and self-interpretations have become insufficient insofar as they are caught up in the sense of our former world and cannot make sense of our present situation.

as we can no longer be as we once were, yet we do not know how to be otherwise. It is in this way that our established world- and self-interpretations are revealed to be insufficient in the face of the disruptive event. We are called to respond differently without knowing in advance how we must respond.

If this is so, if the death of a loved one disrupts us and our relation to our world such that the world itself becomes a problem, then what questions must we ask of this problem in order to determine the answers needed to move forward with our lives? Otherwise put, how do our responses to disruptive events reveal us to ourselves, and how can we work out the tension that arises between our self- and world-interpretations and the world as such on the basis of our existential disorientation? And does this tension reveal something about the larger existential process that follows disruptive events?

To answer these questions I return once more to the *Buffy* example which has thus far grounded my discussion in this thesis. This time I will focus on how Buffy's responses to her mother's body depict her past interpretations of her self and her world. Prior to the episode's commencement, Joyce transitioned from a living, embodied person to a lifeless body. There had been a transition from subject to object, and the perceptual truth of that transition is expressed by the inanimate body. Buffy's responses when she finds the body are expressive actions which attempt to take up the solicitations of the situation. But these attempts emerge out of her past interpretation of the world and an already-instituted way of making sense of phenomena. Thus, when Buffy initially responds to the presence of her mother's body, she responds according to these past terms. But these responses are ineffectual. Accordingly, as is the case with disruptive events, the presence of Buffy's mother's dead body demands that she respond differently, in a way that doesn't make sense to her—it asks her to *be differently*. Only when she is able to respond differently can she take up the disruptive event and develop meaning out of it. It is this meaning to be made that will, in turn, be sedimented into her new ways of being in the world.

This analysis will show that the time of existential disorientation is also a time of radical openness to ourselves and to our worlds. When we are in the thick of an existentially disruptive event we are disoriented because our habitual patterns of action and our ways

of making sense of the world have broken down. This breakdown reveals the contingency of our settled world- and self-interpretations. Yet we *can* respond differently, even if those types of responses were previously uncalled for in our lives and seemed impossible to us, or perhaps never even entered into our horizons as possibilities. Indeed, responding differently was opened by the disruptive event itself since it reorganized our world of possibilities by way of disturbing our settled possibilities. This understanding of the way existential disorientation is also a radical openness suggests that the ways that we respond to existentially disruptive events play an important role in bringing-forth what is to come in our futures.

In the first section I contextualize my second phenomenological description of the *Buffy* episode by describing the theoretical framework of this chapter. In the second section I describe anew the first act of “The Body,” and I follow this description with my phenomenological analyses of the description. The third section will relate the phenomenological insights about interpretive bodily responses in the face of disruptive events to the larger process of which is entailed by disruptive events.

3.1 Performing Hermeneutics by mis-responding⁶⁰

In this section I outline the theoretical context of this chapter. This chapter again engages with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, this time focusing on his accounts of action, the phenomenal field, ambiguity, error, illusion, and perceptual truth. I also draw upon Kym Maclaren’s description of an existential “lived” hermeneutics, as advanced across three lecture presentations at the 2016 *Canadian Hermeneutic Institute*, held in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

First I outline Merleau-Ponty’s views on the phenomenal field, body schema, action, and ambiguity. I show how the world, as the field of our experience, is both shaped by our learned ways of responding to it, and offers up situations for us to respond to. Our actions

⁶⁰ Kym Maclaren, “Finding Oneself in the World” (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 15, 2016). Maclaren suggests that our existential “lived” hermeneutics is performed at the level of bodily comportment in everyday life.

are thus expressive responses to the solicitations of the world, and in turn they re-constitute the field within which we live. I connect this to Maclaren's view that interpretation is a form of disambiguation, and then suggest that our actions can be considered responses which "answer" to the demands of a situation, and in doing so, our answers carve out ways of interpreting the world and our selves in relation to it. I then turn to the ways we can "mis-respond" by looking at Merleau-Ponty's views on error, illusion, and perceptual truth. We can make mistakes with our perception, but only because our perception genuinely opens us up to a world.⁶¹ Following this, I again turn to Maclaren in order to show how certain lived events can result in a loss of meaning, such that our power for answering the demands of our situations is inhibited, even whilst we are still called to respond. When this happens, our world- and self-interpretations can be challenged or undermined. This sets up my discussion in the following section, for the event of bereavement can undermine our world- and self-interpretations in this way.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology describes the perceptual world as a field which our bodies hold open and into which they can extend. Our world, as this lived field of experience, is what Merleau-Ponty calls a "phenomenal field."⁶² It is in this phenomenal field of our naïve experience that we perceive and act.⁶³ This phenomenal field is populated with things and other persons; it has perspectival horizons, and a contrast between figure and ground.⁶⁴ Moreover, we find our possibilities of action in our fields.

⁶¹ One of the ways Merleau-Ponty stands out from other philosophers is with this account of perception and perceptual truth. Consider René Descartes' "Second Meditation," 1996, 16-23. Whereas for Descartes, the fallibility of perception leads to the conclusion that the senses alone are inadequate for grasping the truth, such that all that can be known with certainty is what can be grasped by the mind, for Merleau-Ponty the fallibility of perception reveals us to our selves as embodied subjects who must perceive, insofar as we can only make mistakes with our perception because our perception truly opens us to a world and thus to grasping perceptual truths.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 52-65.

⁶³ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 2008, 27.

⁶⁴ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 2008, 133. Perception's "silent thesis" is that it coordinates all experience into a personal time. That is, my experience of this present moment followed from a previous moment and will lead into the next moment. So when I look at a landscape, I perceive an actual horizon, but it is only because I carried forth my previous perceptions that I can make sense of this actual landscape with its actual horizon. The horizon of the past moment overlaps with the horizon of the present, which opens into the horizon of the future. This is how I can be present to my present, as well as to the past which preceded

And as we gear into the world and take up those actions, the field reorganizes itself through the movements of our body, which, in turn, opens up new possibilities of action. Thus there is a constant feedback loop established between the world and my body. There is an example in Merleau-Ponty's *The Structure of Behavior* that can elucidate this way that our phenomenal fields are structured by our bodies. Describing a football player playing on a field, Merleau-Ponty writes,

For the player in action the football field is not an 'object,' ... It is pervaded with lines of force... and articulated in sectors... which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is... present as the immanent term of his practical intentions. ... At this moment, consciousness is nothing other than the dialectic of milieu and action. Each maneuver undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes it in new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field.⁶⁵

This is how our bodies hold open and extend into our phenomenal fields. Our bodily behavior is like a "directed melody" insofar as it is guided by the solicitations of our environments and is also an expressiveness that responds in particularized ways to these solicitations.⁶⁶ We act in ways that take up the possibilities found in our fields, and to this extent we take up the solicitations of our perceptual world. But when we act, we transform our fields, accomplishing something different. Our bodies then are a power for action and for a world.⁶⁷

However our phenomenal field is not just given to us. Our body is the subject of all perceptual experience, and it constitutes our phenomenal field through a "body

this present and the future that is to come. For more on the temporal synthesis of horizons, see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 346.

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 1963, 169.

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 1963, 173.

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 111.

schema.”⁶⁸ The body schema is the set of our “abiding noncognitive dispositions and capacities that orient, guide, and inform our bodily sensitivities and motor actions.”⁶⁹ In other words, the body schema is the set of skills and habits that shapes my motor intentionality, or the way I move in the world and take up situations. It is developed pre-reflectively through engaging with the world, and it is unthematic. It structures in advance our perceptual awareness of what may appear and how it appears for us.⁷⁰ It is this function of the body schema that sets up the perceived world as a field for corporeal action.⁷¹ I can act in the world because I have learned how to engage with what I perceive, and can respond according to the solicitations of the phenomena. In this way our perceptual world is shaped by our body schema, which is our learned way of inhabiting the world.

The body schema is sedimented through experience, and it is in this way that the body-subject carries its past with it. My body expresses its history in its body schema, which carves out a perceptual world, and gives the body its way of inhabiting it.⁷² To inhabit the world then is to become habituated to our being in the world, such that our body becomes an understanding body. The understanding body comes to anticipate—and in this way manifests—a certain perceptual world. To be an understanding body is to be a body that has sedimented its past experience into its present body schema. This sedimentation shapes present possibilities and defines the scope of one’s life, such that my body becomes capable of responding to the situation at hand. Thus, our perceptual field holds our pasts in it and gives us back to our selves in the ways that we have constituted it and act in it.⁷³

⁶⁸ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 2008, 132-133.

⁶⁹ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 2008, 133.

⁷⁰ Pulido, “An Entirely Different Kind of Synthesis,” 2010, 38.

⁷¹ Pulido, “An Entirely Different Kind of Synthesis,” 2010, 38; citing Carman, “The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty,” 1997, 204.

⁷² Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 2008, 133.

⁷³ We are not alone in constituting our worlds, however. We are always intersubjectively constituted, as are our worlds. I can affect another’s world with my actions, and they can affect mine. Consider the way women learn to be wary of situations that could potentially lead to sexual violence. Because women are socialized to be afraid of rape, the world appears differently after sundown to women than it does to men.

This is not to say that the world is without ambiguity. On the contrary, the world is ambiguous, and my being too is ambiguous. The phenomenal field is the zone of human existential experience that can “tolerate ambiguity.”⁷⁴ It can tolerate ambiguity because perception is essentially indeterminate, and action is paradoxical. Everything we can perceive has several senses.⁷⁵ The perspective I take upon what I perceive informs the sense I make of what appears to me. For example, whilst walking on a dirt road, I may approach from afar a brown object that is lying on the ground. Given that I am and have been walking on a dirt path, I may believe the brown object to be a stone. Hence I have perceived a stone lying in my way. But as I move towards the object and narrow the gap between it and myself, my reiterated acts of perception will reveal that I have actually been gazing upon a particularly still toad. The motion of my body and my acts of perception have clarified my initial impression of the object in my milieu. The stone/toad was the same ambiguous object, but it expressed different senses, and the sense I made of the object was informed by my bodily situation. Nonetheless both senses were right insofar as I truly saw something. The former sense was merely crossed out when I got a better grasp on the perceptual field and could get more accurate information. This is how my phenomenal field can tolerate ambiguous perceptions, for while “there is an absolute certainty of the world in general, [there is] not of any particular thing.”⁷⁶ Likewise for ambiguous action, which is expressive insofar as it both takes up the situation that we have found ourselves in whilst also accomplishing something new. Action is neither a passive mechanical process nor an active and pure decision. Instead, action happens between passivity and activity, because we are both situated and free. I could have approached the object and learned more about it in doing so, or I could have accepted my initial impression and walked away, changing my perceptual field in doing so. These are

Walking down an unlit alley at night appears for many women as an inadvisable option, perhaps even as a non-option. We understand our present possibilities differently because of how we have learned to negotiate the social world, and having learned that rape is an ever-present possibility, the world appears differently to us—and this inhibition of our possible actions gives us back to ourselves as vulnerable beings.

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 11.

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 172.

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 311.

some of the options laid out by my field, and the option I chose was informed by my historicized way of being in the world and by what solicited my perception. Nonetheless, the meaning of my action was ambiguous; I could not have known in advance what was to come given the action I chose. Hence ambiguity is an essential aspect to human existence.⁷⁷

In agreement with Merleau-Ponty's thesis that action is responsive to solicitations in the world, Kym Maclaren further suggests that our actions are hermeneutic (or interpretive).⁷⁸ When we are responsive to the world's solicitations, we are providing answers to the questions that our situations ask of us. Our environments "speak" to us: they tell us something about ourselves, and they tell us how to act. It is in this way that situations teach us what they are and what we need to know. While situations may be ambiguous initially, we can respond nonetheless, and our responses "work out" how we should behave. Hence it is by working through the ambiguities of any situation that we can come to find answers to the questions our situations ask of us. By continuing to walk towards the stone that turned out to be a toad, I discovered that I was not alone on the path, and I was able to skirt around the toad and give it its space. If it had actually been a stone, I would have walked upon it without a second thought. The sense I made of what I perceived was in this way shaped by how I responded in my situation. But by the mere fact of having responded to my situation I have already advanced an interpretation of it.

If our actions are answers, then we must consider whether we are answerable for ourselves and to others and our worlds with our answers. There are better and worse ways of responding to a situation, and the way that we do respond tells us something about who we are, how we have been, and how we have made sense of things. For example, when my friend is sorrowful, I am confronted with an array of possible actions. I may choose to attend to them in their sorrow, or I may choose to turn away from them. It seems to me that turning away from them is the "worse" response in this situation. It also

⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 172.

⁷⁸ Kym Maclaren, "Finding Oneself in the World" (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 15, 2016).

seems to me that if I turn away, this treatment of them in this situation says something poor about my character. Yet it could be that I am turning away because I do not have the resources at that moment to effectively care for and support my friend, in which case I am making a decision to act in the interest of self-preservation. Thus, the same action (turning away) can have different meanings depending upon its context. Nonetheless, in either case by turning away I abandon my friend to their sorrow. With my action then I must respond to competing demands; in this case, the demand for self-preservation and the demand for supporting my friend. This process of negotiation is an “existential burden” according to Maclaren.⁷⁹ No matter how I respond, I cannot know in advance the consequences of my action, which is to say, how they will reorganize my phenomenal field (and in this case, my friend’s field), and so in my negotiations I must weigh which responses allow me to be answerable *for* my way of taking up the situation and answerable *to* others and to the world for how I have taken it up.

It is in this way that my actions, as hermeneutic responses, are disambiguating interpretations. All situations are ambiguous insofar as they can have several different senses. By choosing how to act in response to a situation, I choose a way of interpreting the situation.⁸⁰ I may be guided towards a certain action based upon what is said to me by my environment (or by others in my environment), but once I have acted (or chosen not to act), I am then answerable to the way that this action transforms the situation. Over time, the actions we make cohere into self- and world-interpretations which reveal how I’ve understood my world, how I’ve understood how to be in that world, who I am, and how I make sense of things. This process of sedimentation carves out the way that I perceive the world and myself in relation to it. These self- and world-interpretations thus shape our perception—what appears for us and how it appears to us—and it shapes what we sense to be possible or valid. These interpretations are “held in the world,” but this is

⁷⁹ Kym Maclaren, “Finding Oneself in the World” (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 15, 2016).

⁸⁰ Though this “choice” may not be conscious, and is certainly not unfettered from its context. As discussed before, all my possible actions are formed between mechanical response and active choice. So my “choice” of action is an expressive response which emerges from my situatedness in a context.

because they are sedimented into our bodily way of being, which is our body schema, and our body schema constitutes our perceptual field.⁸¹ It is for this reason that we are responsible for our self- and world-interpretations: we have learned these interpretations, and having learned them, they shape how we engage with the world; because we always already live in a world populated by others, the answers we offer to the questions asked of us by our situations leave us answerable for ourselves and to others.

If our responses are disambiguating interpretations, then what does it mean to mis-respond, to make a mistake in the way we perceive things, or to respond poorly to the demands of a situation? And how then is it that we can correct our misperceptions? What sense is there to our mistaken perceptions? These questions can be addressed by Merleau-Ponty's account of error, illusion, and perceptual truth.

For Merleau-Ponty, both veridical perception and illusions are instances of genuine perception insofar as they “make use of the same belief in the world.”⁸² Merleau-Ponty offers the example of believing that I see a large flat stone, and later realizing that it is a patch of sunlight.⁸³ My perceptual and motor fields provide the sense of a stone to the patch of sunlight, and it is in this way that I misperceive it. But ensuing perceptual experiences reveal the stone to be a patch of sunlight, in turn revealing how the stone was a perceptual illusion. In this way, because I am engaged in the world and open to it, my perception is genuine, even in cases of illusion and error. I may misperceive, but this misperception can be corrected with reiterated acts of perception. Yet perception is never complete, for I never have a complete hold over the spectacle of the world, and so I can never have the world laid out transparently in front of me, nor complete knowledge of the spectacle of the world. Instead my incomplete grasp on the world means that I am always

⁸¹ Kym Maclaren, “Breakdowns and Living Tensions in Unreflective Experience” (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 16, 2016). Maclaren suggested that our pasts are held in our worlds in the ways that we are reflected back to ourselves having always already made sense of the situation in our particular ways. I have explicitly connected this to the capacity of the body schema for organizing and reorganizing our perceptual field, which is the world of our lived experience.

⁸² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 311.

⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 310.

invited to look further, to see more. Hence my perception self-corrects, and illusions are shown to be possible because we are perceptually engaged with the world. It is being open to the world which makes perceptual truth possible by allowing us to fully realize a perception. With further perceptual experience, illusions are crossed out and the truth is revealed.

Error only arises because I am committed to a certain perceptual world.⁸⁴ Perception in general is committing “to an entire future of experiences in a present that never, strictly speaking, guarantees that future; to perceive is to believe in a world.”⁸⁵ The world is the “inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn,” and things guide our perceptions and invite us to perceive further.⁸⁶ We can be absolutely certain that there is a world, but there is no absolute certainty of any one thing, because my hold on the world is never complete.⁸⁷ Committing to a certain perceptual world, believing in that world, is thus committing to an interpreted past of experiences which have sedimented into a world-interpretation. Hence my acts of perception draw upon my past in the way that I put my faith in a future of experiences; that future is not guaranteed, however, for it may turn out to be incorrect or illusory and demand correction. It is because I believe in the world that I can fall prey to perceptual illusion. But I can also dispel it—I can remain under the sway of sedimented world-interpretations or I can find myself compelled to re-interpret the world and my past, thereby opening up a new way of perceiving my present and committing to my future. That this re-interpretation can happen attests to the way that the body is open to the world through its responsiveness to the present. Because I am

⁸⁴ Recall the discussion of racialized perception from my Introduction. Racist response comes out of a certain commitment to a particularly racialized perceptual world. How we perceive what or whom appears is shaped by race as a perceptual structure. But if we look more closely, we see that these structures mis-shape what appears, which is to say that the world which is actually there is not as it appears to us through racist structures of perception. In this way, racist seeing is an error that arises on the basis of a commitment to a racist perceptual world.

⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 311.

⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 360.

⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 311.

responsive to a present, a present which may conflict with an interpreted past, I can be invited to relearn the world and to relearn myself in relation to that world.

What happens, however, when certain lived events result in a loss of meaning, such that our very power for answering demands in the first place is inhibited, even whilst we are still called to respond? Are disruptive events not precisely this loss of meaning for us? On this point, we can turn to Maclaren's treatment of Merleau-Ponty, particularly her insight into his example of the phenomenon of the phantom limb as it allows us to assess the dilemma posed by disruptive events as they challenge or undermine our world- and self-interpretations.⁸⁸

The phenomenon of the phantom limb involves a patient experiencing a lost limb as though it were still present. Merleau-Ponty argues that the experience of the phantom limb is of an ambivalent presence which is best understood from the perspective of being in the world.⁸⁹ The patient had always been a two-legged individual, and their world reflected them as such. The world called for them to engage as a two-legged individual, and, even after the loss of the limb, it continues to call for their engagement as a two-legged individual. Both before and after the loss stairs call to be climbed, but when the patient loses a leg, the stairs also announce that they cannot be climbed as they had been before. On the basis of their past experience and their habituated ways of being in the world, the patient approaches the world as they had when they had two legs, because they perceive the world as calling for them to take it up as a two-legged individual. However this way of taking up the world can no longer be actualized. Thus the patient experiences

⁸⁸ Kym Maclaren, "Breakdowns and Living Tensions in Unreflective Experience" (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 16, 2016). I turn to Merleau-Ponty directly when recounting his interpretation of the phantom limb; nonetheless it is Maclaren's idea to make this theoretical move which I have taken up.

⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 83. This is Merleau-Ponty's way of describing his phenomenological account of the phantom limb. However there are multiple competing interpretations of the phantom limb in medical and philosophical literature. Merleau-Ponty himself examines some different approaches in his *Phenomenology*. His way of interpreting the phenomenon deftly maneuvers between the empirical (physiological) and rationalist (psychological) interpretations of the phenomenon. As it is not entirely relevant for my project, I will not outline these other views here. For more, please see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 78-85.

a phantom limb. Having a phantom limb is remaining open to the actions and possibilities of which the limb was capable and is staying within the same practical field established by one's past world-interpretations.⁹⁰ The world appears as able to be manipulated in past terms while it also announces that it is no longer able to be manipulated insofar as it appeals to a lost limb; it hides and reveals the deficiency inculcated by the lost limb in the same movement.⁹¹

Phenomenologically, the phantom limb then is a matter of how the world calls to us and how the person with the lost limb cannot answer the call. It is possible on the basis of our being temporal beings who both find their past cradled in the world and who are open and responsive to a present moment which may diverge from the sense of the past.⁹² The problem of the phantom limb resides in the interaction between the habit body which sustains the gestures of object-manipulation the patient once learned, and the actual body which opens them to a present that reveals them as unable to manipulate objects as they once could. The world is revealed in terms of the generalized past expressed by the habit body and the present held open by the actual body. The phantom limb vanishes when the world is relearned in such a way as to no longer beckon to the lost limb. Such a process occurs when the patient habituates to their loss, where that habituation looks like a naturalization to a new way of approaching situations and being in the world.⁹³ The patient no longer explicitly takes up a unique position in each momentary situation, nor do their responses occur at the center of their existence; instead, the patient takes some distance from themselves and what solicits them in order to develop an awareness of the objective world which can then be integrated into the order of their existence.⁹⁴ This

⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 84.

⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 84.

⁹² This is because our bodies are both habit bodies and actual bodies. Habit bodies are caught up in the sedimented past, and they inform how we perceive our present by shaping how that present appears to us. Our actual bodies are the bodies which open us to the present moment by situating us within a milieu. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 84.

⁹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 89.

⁹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 89.

distancing can allow for a new bond between the habit body and actual body as they become oriented toward a different world.⁹⁵

Thus Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the phenomenon of the phantom limb shows how the patient has to relearn the changed world by relearning how to be in the world in order to allow the experience of the phantom limb to vanish. Having been a two-legged person instituted a certain meaning of the world, and they must institute new meaning so that the world no longer beckons in a conflicting manner. The world- and self-interpretations of the patient were entirely undermined by the loss of the limb, insofar as their world was radically altered by the loss, and their habitual patterns of actions inhibited their ability to take up their new world. The landscape of their phenomenal field had genuinely changed; stairs appeared as forbidding, rather than inviting, and certain regions of the world could no longer be accessed. The sense of who they were and how the world worked had been undermined, posing a hermeneutical problem which needed to be worked out by trying out different responses. These different responses, in the end, allow the patient to relearn how to be in the world and to unite their estranged pasts with their new present, in turn allowing them to commit to a new perceptual future and to reconcile with their changed lived landscape.

In the first chapter of this thesis I showed how the event of bereavement can result in a loss of our worlds and a changed sense of self in relation to that world. Is bereavement, the state of having lost the loved one who allowed us to extend into the world and who shaped our world, like the loss of a limb insofar as it is an example of an event which can undermine our world- and self-interpretations? Shortly I will turn to my second phenomenological description of the first act of "The Body" in order to show how bereavement can be this sort of event.

When Buffy stumbles upon her mother's body, she encounters an object that calls for her response whilst also announcing that she cannot respond as she once could. The body is her mother's, and so Buffy wants to respond to it as though it *is* her mother, but because

⁹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 90.

the body in this case is a corpse which actually means that Joyce is gone, Buffy cannot respond to the body in the ways she once would have.⁹⁶ Hence, if the presence of the body reveals the absence of the person who lived, then we must come to terms with this mere physical body and the absence it signifies. For Buffy, this means coming to see that her mother is gone—and that only a mere body remains. In order to come to terms with this truth, Buffy must take up the situation that is demanded by the presence of the body. She must respond to the presence of the body, ultimately letting go of her interpretations of the world in order to come to terms with the truth of Joyce's death.

3.2 “It’s not her... it’s not her... she’s gone.”⁹⁷

This section provides a second phenomenological description of the first act of “The Body.” This time I look specifically at Buffy’s way of responding to her discovery of her mother’s corpse. I begin by referring back to my description of the episode as a whole in chapter one, and then I address Buffy’s actions as they unfold in the episode. Following this, I present my phenomenological analysis of Buffy’s responses. Buffy first responds to the body as though it were misbehaving, then sleeping, then ill. Only after witnessing others deal with her mother’s body as a corpse can Buffy come to see the body for what it is and grasp the sense proper to it. In order to come to this realization Buffy must confront her world- and self-interpretations as the body challenges and ultimately

⁹⁶ The presence of Joyce’s dead body has a meaning which Buffy initially can’t confront. The sense of the body is absence, because Joyce is now gone, and all that is left is the body. There is a transition that has taken place and which is signified by the dead body: the transition from the body as *Leib* (living body) to the body as *Körper* (objective body). Living Joyce lived from and through her body; she is her living body. She is expressive, active, and animated. As *Leib*, she is this lived, expressive body, whereas her body as *Körper* is the objective body that belongs to the world of things. In death, the body as *Leib* disappears; it becomes a mere objective body, a corpse. This transition from *Leib* to *Körper* is what is expressed by the image of Joyce’s dead body; thus, the body is significant insofar as it holds the double meaning of presence and absence. It is present—as a mere and objective body, as *Körper*—but its presence reveals the absence of the person who once lived. In addition, as Helen Fielding has brought to my attention, Joyce’s corpse is now *Körper*, but this means not just that it is inanimate, but also that it is given over to other lives because the body will now decay.

⁹⁷ In the final moments of “The Body,” Buffy and Dawn (Buffy’s sister) are in the morgue with their mother’s body. While staring at her mother’s body, Dawn asks Buffy, “Is she cold?” To this Buffy responds, “It’s not her...it’s not her... she’s gone.” Up until this moment Dawn is unable to accept that Joyce is dead, much like Buffy earlier in the episode. In both cases, the acceptance of Joyce’s death had to be brought out inter-subjectively, that is, by others, whom were able to perceive the body as a corpse and show Buffy and Dawn how to also perceive it as such.

undermines them, and the presence of the body itself guides her towards and through this breakdown. The body thus has the resources that can allow her to face the truth of the situation, but only because Buffy is open to a present which can undermine the sense of her lived past.

Recall from chapter one the drawn out process that Buffy undergoes at the beginning of “The Body.” What we have already seen is the way that the disruptive event of her mother’s death enacted a world-shift for Buffy. She entered into her home and confronted her mother’s corpse, but was initially unable to perceive it as such because the nature of the event broke down her meaningful world-structures and disturbed her phenomenal field. This breakdown of meaning, however, is accompanied by a series of ineffectual actions: Buffy mis-responds to her mother as she is unable to understand and interact with her mother’s corpse as such. This is the point I draw out henceforth.

Buffy’s first few actions in this episode involve several calls to her mother. Initially she speaks before having seen the body. She calls out gaily, and seems confused when she does not get a response. When she does not receive a response, she turns to look for her mother, and in this motion she locates the body. Her first expression to the body is the casual question, “what are you doing?” At this point, Buffy has only a slight inkling that something is off, that things have somehow changed. She enquires into the behavior of the body, not its state. She knows that the behavior depicted by the body is uncharacteristic of Joyce. From previous depictions in the series, we know that Joyce is active and spirited. She works long hours, and when she is not working she is often fixing food or hosting dinner. We only see Joyce in a state of inactivity when she is ill.⁹⁸ This is why the unusually still body on the couch catches ours’ and Buffy’s attention. The prone body behaves differently—it fails to expressively respond, where expressive response had previously characterized Joyce’s behavior. The inanimate body announces that something is wrong in its non-response to Buffy’s call. Up until and including this point,

⁹⁸ We see a few other examples of Joyce being relatively inactive in season five, particularly in episodes 8 and 9. These episodes deal with Joyce being diagnosed with a brain tumor and then undergoing surgical intervention in order to resect the tumor.

Buffy behaves as though her mother were still alive, and as though the body will move and respond to her call at any moment. While she has noticed that something is wrong, she has not yet seen what is wrong, or how wrong it is. It seems, then, that Buffy is responding to the body as though her mother is mis-behaving—that is, behaving unusually, in a way contrary to Joyce’s living style.

But the non-response of the body to Buffy’s repeated inquiries rapidly raises her level of concern. She repeats her call to her mother several times. Her pitch changes with each reiteration, as does her verbalization. She asks “Mom? Mom? ... Mommy?” with a voice that grows quieter and more fearful each vocalization.⁹⁹ Suddenly, her orientation towards the body changes. She rushes to the body and shakes it aggressively, continuing to call for her mother but now in desperate tones. She seems to be trying to rouse her mother from a deep sleep. She handles the body forcefully, but not with complete disregard; she does not inflict injury despite the aggressive shaking, but she also does not yet note that the body is cold and she does not comment on its apparent stiffness. She handles the body as if it were the body of a woman still alive, but deeply asleep—not indelicately, but also not with unease or unfamiliarity; she vigorously addresses the body, and her actions are a loud demand for a response from Joyce. Buffy now fully realizes that something is wrong, and she has grown frantic.

When Joyce fails to wake from slumber, Buffy seems to acknowledge that her efforts are ineffective. She moves away from the body in order to locate a telephone, which she uses to call for emergency services. The operator asks what the emergency is and Buffy replies: “My mom. She’s not breathing. What should I do?” The operator tells Buffy to perform CPR. She reminds Buffy how to do it for Buffy cannot recall the process. Buffy

⁹⁹ In “The Child’s Relations with Others,” Merleau-Ponty describes the link between a child’s linguistic capacities and their configuration of affective environments. He reports that “Children who have been suddenly and forcibly separated from their mothers always show signs of a linguistic regression” (109). He also reports the case of a child who regresses in language when his brother is born. This linguistic regression correlates with a change in attitude and a regression of character. In this case, the child refuses to adapt to the new situation that the arrival of his brother presents. It is interesting to consider whether Buffy’s linguistic regression in these moments might also be characteristic of her refusal to take up her new situation, where this situation means a sudden and forcible separation from her mother. For more, see Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” 1964, 96-155.

performs CPR to no avail and breaks a rib in the process. She then describes her mother as cold to the operator, but becomes outraged when the operator asks whether she means *the body* is cold, replying “No, my mom! Should I make her warm?” At this point, it appears as though Buffy has realized that something is dreadfully wrong with her mother. She is aware that her mother is cold and that she is not breathing. She has then successfully perceived something about the mere body before her. But she has not made explicit the connection that this non-breathing, cold body is a dead body. And in turning away from that connection, Buffy fails to see that her mother is gone, and that what is left is *just* this body. The presence of the mere body, the body as *Körper*, signals the absence of Joyce, but Buffy has not yet accepted this. She realizes that the body demands a certain kind of response, but she responds as if the body were alive or could be revived.

While awaiting the paramedics, Buffy hangs up on the operator and seems at odds with the situation. She does not know what to do. As she hangs up, we see a long shot of the telephone in her hand, where the focus is on the buttons. We see this shot from Buffy’s point of view, and suggested in this shot is that Buffy wants to call someone but doesn’t know what to do with the phone. She holds the phone and stares at it as though it were a foreign object whose use and meaning were veiled to her. But eventually she calls Giles and asks him to come. It seems to be no coincidence that she calls Giles, her mentor, for Buffy is still looking for guidance on what to do in the situation—on how to respond to the body. While waiting for the paramedics Buffy notices that her mother’s skirt has been pushed high up around her thighs. She pulls down the skirt and arranges it so that it covers Joyce’s body. Once more it seems as though she does not know what to do, so she reaches for the first available thing to fuss with. Buffy is now completely disoriented and confused. She looks to the objects in her immediate vicinity for guidance. These objects do not express the guidance she seeks. Indeed they seem to mystify her further. She is clearly bewildered by her situation.

The paramedics arrive and Buffy watches them respond to Joyce’s body. Their responses are habitual, but they are also trained, and they have a specific aim. They attempt to resuscitate Joyce but stop when they realize the body is cold and that it is not responding. One paramedic approaches Buffy to tell her that her mother is dead and to not to disturb

the body. They leave, and she seems to a certain degree to finally be facing the truth of what has happened. But rather than facing it directly, she walks away from it. She leaves the body and moves to a different part of the house. She avoids dealing with the body. When she remembers that she has to tell Dawn that *something bad* has happened, she immediately grabs onto this option with a burst of energy. This becomes her objective, and it gives her direction.

When Giles arrives and tries to resuscitate Joyce, Buffy cries out to him. For the first time she refers to her mother's dead body as "the body." This articulation conveys that she has come into full awareness of what has transpired. And she is horrified by it.¹⁰⁰ While Buffy's bodily responses seem to express that she has become aware of what has happened to her mother prior to this moment in the act, the actual verbal expression seems to make real Joyce's death.¹⁰¹ In this moment Buffy's reality seems to be revealed to her as her new reality for the first time. At this point, she sees the body for what it is. She now sees how the presence of the body signifies the absence of her mother, and she understands the problem that the body presents—that it simultaneously calls for a response and fails to provide a response, and that the response it calls for is one that Buffy cannot know how to give. Finally Buffy is able to gear into her situation, and in doing so, she reinterprets her situation. As a result the perceptual errors that gave rise to the impression that Joyce's body was merely misbehaving, sleeping, or ill fall away.

From this discussion it is clear that Buffy approaches the body in a number of different ways, where each style of approach expresses a different understanding of what the dead body is and what it asks of her. From Buffy's incomplete hold on the spectacle of the world arose the illusion that the dead body was a misbehaving body, a sleeping body, or

¹⁰⁰ Recalling the discussion of labile spatial levels from chapter one, we can consider this moment to be one where Buffy establishes a new spatial level which reorients her world. However this new level is accomplished after a period of disorientation, a time when Buffy was unable to get a hold on the world. As addressed previously, the horror Buffy shows in this moment speaks to her having been thrown back upon her contingency, and shown how the grounds of human lives are precarious.

¹⁰¹ See Chapter one of this thesis, where I describe how Buffy's treatment of the phone is the moment that she realizes her mother is dead, and this outburst towards Giles is the moment she articulates and becomes fully aware of the meaning of her realization.

an ill body. She first addresses the body almost characteristically, as though the body were merely misbehaving insofar as it fails to provide the anticipated responses. Following this she addresses the body as though it is sleeping, but the style of her address betrays that she is coming to realize that something deeper is wrong. Next she addresses the body as an ill body that needs medical attention, but her administrations are found to be insufficient and lead to the recognition that some essential bodily expressions which are indicative of life have disappeared. Finally, while watching others respond to the body, Buffy comes to a sort of perceptual awareness that her mother's body is a corpse. This awareness is synthesized and then externalized by her verbal articulation of the event, in which she identifies her mother's death with the mere body, finally perceiving and making sense of the corpse as a corpse. Not until the final moment of this act is the perceptual truth of the body confirmed, such that the sense of the dead body becomes the absence of Joyce.

Nonetheless, Buffy expressively acts again and again in this episode, "trying out" a variety of responses towards the body. Each of these actions draws upon her sedimented past knowledge of how to deal with her mother and how to deal with bodies. Because the body maintains an ambiguity for her, she is unable to determine the "correct" course of action and finds herself disoriented. The body appears in Buffy's perception in the light of a "confused configuration" that prepares her to see the illusion of a misbehaving, sleeping, or ill body.¹⁰² In this way, when she encounters Joyce's body, she reaches back into her previously instituted and well-established world- and self-interpretations. Her world interpretation is one where Joyce was alive, and her self-interpretation is one where she was able to call to and respond to Joyce. Buffy is upended by the ambiguous status of the body, and in an effort to make sense of what is happening to her she attempts to impose previous understandings onto her present situation. In short, she attempts to meet the radically new demands of her present situation with her previous corporeal schemas, in effect committing herself anew each time she acts to a world now lost, one where her mother was alive and the body was responsive.

¹⁰² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2012, 310.

Yet because the body *is not* responsive and cannot become responsive, this commitment to a world with a living Joyce cannot be maintained. The future committed to by her responses is itself dismissed as an illusion when the paramedics pronounce her mother dead and when Buffy comes to accept their pronouncement. Indeed, the world that Buffy's actions had committed to was itself shown to be illusory insofar as it was unable to sustain her responses. In this way, Buffy's failed responses serve to shore up the perceptual truth of the body, and it is these failed responses that allow her to come to take up her situation. In confronting the perceptual truth of the body, Buffy must also confront herself; she must confront what she knows of herself and what she knows of being in the world in order to come to see the body as a corpse. This can happen because she is responsive to the present as it presents. When Buffy interprets the present body as an ill body, she is responding to her present. Her response, however, had been decided in advance as the way that she was to perceive her present was through her interpreted past—thus when she confronts the body anew not as an ill body but as a corpse, she has also confronted the way that the world has offered up a new possibility previously unimaginable to her, a way which is responding to the present moment as it presented for her in its uniqueness as a disruptive event.

Buffy's responses, insofar as they suggest that she is committing perceptual errors and witnessing perceptual illusions, reveal that she is misinterpreting the situation. Having lived in the world, Buffy has established patterns of behavior which reveal how she has understood the world and which support her particular interpretation of the world and her view of her place in the world. In perceiving, Buffy commits to a particular world and a future of perceptual experiences that are in kind with her sedimented past of experiences. She experiences perceptual concordance and finds herself at home in her world. But with her mother's death, the world becomes a problem for Buffy. She is no longer shown to herself as the competent person who feels at home in her world. Rather, she is shown to herself as someone who fails to recognize the situation she is in, who cannot take it up, and who must work through error and illusion to discover perceptual truth. Yet thanks to her series of responses, Buffy is eventually able to take up her situation and see the body for what it is. This is thanks not to the veridicality of perception, but to the way

perception is the activity of her openness towards the world and the way that her body is necessarily responsive and answerable to a present.

In this way, what is disclosed by Buffy's failed responses is the perceptual truth of a situation. When Buffy's responses fail to get the desired response, she is redirected by the body itself into providing a different type of response. That is, when Buffy acts towards the body as though it were misbehaving, sleeping, or ill, she finds that her actions are "incorrect" because the world cannot sustain those actions. Those actions are unsuccessful in achieving their aim, where this lack of success is revealed by the non-response of the body, and Buffy is thrown back upon herself. The presence of the body makes its demands on her by its inanimation, but this very inanimation itself expresses something meaningful to Buffy insofar as it confounds her ability to make sense of and gear into her situation. If Buffy's actions are questions that she is implicitly posing to her situation, if she is inquiring into the meaning of the present body, if the presence of the dead body means Joyce's perpetual absence, then the dead body is the problem which asks of Buffy to raise these implicit existential questions, and it is also the key towards answering those questions.

3.3 Openness

In conclusion, I connect Buffy's existential disorientation at the sight of her mother's body to her radical openness to the world. Perception is the activity of that openness, and the openness is constituted by her temporality. Hence, the time of Buffy's existential disorientation is also the time of her radical openness towards the world. This adds a new dimension to the existential process which is being sketched out by this thesis, namely, that because we can respond when existentially disorientated, our time of disorientation is also a time of radical openness.

Buffy was existentially disoriented by the presence of her mother's corpse. Her responses showed that the corpse maintained an ambiguity for her. In order to disambiguate its meaning, Buffy committed herself to a variety of interpretations of the situation, but none of these interpretations were tenable. The body itself presented a problem for her which required her to trying out different responses as "answers" in order to determine what the

question itself actually was. And in the same way, the body itself provided her with the answer insofar as it confounded her ability to make sense of and take up the situation until she had correctly perceived that the presence of the body meant her that her mother was dead.

This time of existential disorientation was thus also a time of radical openness for Buffy. Thrown back upon herself, unable to make sense of her situation, Buffy was called to face her self and her own past interpretations of the world as they were being undermined by her present situation. In order to work out the ambiguous situation, she had to seek out answers in her present environment where this seeking was, as Maclaren would suggest, a “blind groping” until she hit upon the truth.¹⁰³ In this way, the situation readied her by providing her with new resources for understanding the world. But she could only access those new resources by being open to her present situation, and by letting go of her sedimented past habits of action and ways of seeing as they had structured in advance the appearance of that present.

Existential disorientation followed from the breakdown of Buffy’s habitual patterns of action and her ways of making sense of the world, revealing the contingency of her settled world- and self-interpretations. Yet Buffy was able to respond differently. This is because the event somehow fundamentally restructured her world, disorienting her, but opening her to herself and to her world anew. She was called to be present in this situation, where this present stood out as unique from her structured sense of the interpreted past. The disruptive event of Joyce’s death had the resources to undermine her settled world- and self-interpretations only because they also provided her with resources for instituting a new set of interpretations. Only in the final moments of this act do we see Buffy begin to take up this possibility of instituting new interpretations. Nonetheless, it seems as though the situation called for her to be differently, where being differently in essence meant that Buffy would have to take up a previously unimaginable future and

¹⁰³ Kym Maclaren, “Breakdowns and Living Tensions in Unreflective Experience” (presentation, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Toronto, ON, June 16, 2016).

commit herself to it. This would, in effect, completely restructure her ways of perceiving and making sense of her world.

From all this we can learn a bit more about the generalized process which is entailed by existentially disruptive events. The time of existential disruption is a time of radical openness. This is because we are thrown back upon ourselves in existential disorientation, and radically opened up to our own openness to a present that does not cohere with the way we had previously anticipated this present to appear. We are able to try to respond differently when a situation demands this of us because our bodies open us to the present moment. And by testing out different responses, we may be able to take up the disruptive situation. Taking up the disruptive situation in this way thus means that we have learned to perceive differently so as to receive the disruption. This suggests that our responses to the existential disorientation of a disruptive situation plays an important role in shaping what is to come in our future, and this is all possible because existential disorientation radically opens us to our own world-openness in the present.

4 Existential Transformation through Recreating the World

When existential disorientation throws us back upon ourselves during disruptive events, we are radically opened towards our own openness in the present moment. The world as we once knew it has ended, and a new world is opening up for us. We perceive ourselves to be in-between these two worlds, and because we cannot rely upon what we have known to be true about the world before, we cannot anticipate the shape of the world to come. We are opened instead to a present that is radically discontinuous with our past, and we know not how to take up our futures. Nonetheless, the situation of the disruption itself provides us with the resources to recognize that our world has ended by showing us what has changed and calling for us to learn to be differently.

How, then, might our actions during the present period of in-betweenness play a role in shaping what is to come for us? And how does the situation which teaches us what we need to know itself shape how we might act in this present period, in turn informing the world to come? Can we actively take up the disruptive situation *as* a disruption, directly confronting the event which has disrupted us, and in this way actively contribute to what is to come for us? In other words, what does an active confrontation with disruptive events entail when it is precisely their nature to suspend the self from their world as their lived context?

In this chapter I examine the phenomenon of grieving for a deceased significant other as a type of active confrontation with a disruptive event. Grieving, understood as relearning the world after loss, is an active process of reckoning with the ways our world changes following significant loss. As addressed in chapters one and two, these changes includes our habituated patterns of action and our ways of making sense of our experiences, which together shape the field of possibilities that constitute our worlds. However, because our birth originarily opens us to a world populated with specific others, we also lose the world that we shared with the lost person, and the self that we are in relation to the deceased other dies to us as well. Grieving then allows us to relearn how to be in the world following loss, but only by transforming the world we lived in and the ways we understood ourselves in relation to that world; to that extent, then, bereavement ends a

specific lived world, and grieving is as much about *recreating* the world post-loss as it is about relearning it.

In turn, considering the bereaved griever who recreates their world in this fashion reveals what active confrontations with disruptive events entail. Disruptive events bring an end to a world that we once knew and were at home in, and they open us up to a new world that is yet to come. But this new world is one opened up and structured by the event that has disrupted us. The disruptive event opens up a new world of possibilities, possibilities we could not anticipate, and which were thus incapable of being actualized by who we used to be. Yet because we undergo these events, we are capable of responding to them, and in responding to them we appropriate them and are transformed by them. Because we are vulnerable to existentially disorienting events, we are capable of being radically opened towards our own openness, and thus moments of existential disorientation are, in turn, moments that open us to the possibility of existential transformation.

In this chapter I will bring together and move between three different philosophies on the topic of grieving by using descriptions of grieving from my personal experience to ground this discussion. To provide a basic understanding of the nature and experience of grieving I first draw upon Thomas Attig's work on this topic. In order to deepen this understanding, I bring the analysis of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology that has been effectuated throughout the previous two chapters into conversation with Attig's model of grieving. Woven into this conversation are descriptions of my own personal experiences of grieving for my deceased mother. Following this I turn to Claude Romano's phenomenology of the event and eventual hermeneutics in order to elucidate how grieving is an active confrontation with a disruptive event. This reveals a third element in the process of undergoing existentially disruptive events, namely, the possibility of existential transformation.

In the first section I examine the phenomenon of grieving while bereaved and elaborate a phenomenological interpretation of grieving as a form of recreating the world through relearning it. In the second section I show more precisely what disruptive events are, what worlds are, and what kind of beings we are insofar as we are vulnerable to

disruptive events. In the third section I look at the phenomenon of bereavement as an eventual/disruptive event, and I suggest that grieving is our responsive way of appropriating this event and transforming ourselves in relation to the disruption that the event entailed. In the fourth section I describe a third element of the process of existential disruption, that is, existential transformation, which is made possible through existential disorientation and radical openness.

4.1 Bringing about the End to the World as We Once Knew It: Grieving as Relearning and Recreating

In this section I examine the phenomenon of grieving for a deceased significant other. First I outline Thomas Attig's model of grieving as relearning the world. I show what is effective about this model, and I emphasize the resonances between it and what I have described so far in my thesis. Following this I outline some of the phenomenological insights gleaned from my previous descriptions. From this I argue that while Attig's model shows us something true about grieving, his emphasis on relearning misses a fundamental insight to his model of grieving. Seen phenomenologically, active grieving is transformative and creative, and it recreates our world by constructively bringing together our pasts with our present. This leads to my suggestion that "relearning" can be read more deeply as "recreating" the world insofar as grieving is a way that we take up the disruptive event of bereavement *as* a disruption that has changed our world, and we transform ourselves and our worlds following this disruption in ways only opened up *through* the disruption.

There has been significant development in bereavement studies over the past decade, and Attig is one of the leaders in this new wave of rethinking grief and bereavement.¹⁰⁴ For

¹⁰⁴ Historically two types of models or theories of grief have dominated the field of bereavement studies: stage/phase accounts, and accounts that hold the grief work hypothesis as an underlying assumption. These two types of accounts are not mutually exclusive; many stage accounts maintain the grief work hypothesis. In both cases, these dominant views have been inherited as "common sense" notions about grief in Western contexts (Gross 10).

Broadly, stage or phase accounts promote the idea that the grief of bereaved persons is constituted by a series of stages/phases, and to "get over" the loss the bereaved must pass through these stages in a linear fashion. Examples of these types of accounts include Bowlby's four phases of mourning (1980),

Attig, grieving is an active process of relearning the world following bereavement. He suggests that becoming bereaved disrupts the patterns of living that people have learned over the course of their lives, and that grieving is about learning new ways and new patterns.¹⁰⁵ The problem is that bereavement disrupts how we are ourselves in the world, such that we as whole persons are changed by the disruptive event of loss.¹⁰⁶ If this is the challenge of loss, then we must relearn how to be ourselves as whole persons after loss.¹⁰⁷ Grieving is this relearning, and it is an active coping process that requires the investment of our energy towards addressing coping tasks. Coping through tasks allows us to come to terms with changes in “objects, places, and events; relationships with family members, friends, fellow survivors, the deceased, and, perhaps, God; and elements of our daily routines, work and leisure lives, ongoing projects and commitments, perhaps

Kübler-Ross’s stages of dying (1969), Rando’s six “R’s” (1993), and Parkes’s psychosocial transition theory (1993).

The grief work hypothesis is first found in Freud’s grief theory in *Mourning and Melancholia*. For Freud, mourning is about withdrawing libido (psychic energy) from the lost person or object. This is a process of detachment and it is the work of grief. The concept of grief work has since evolved, and now refers to “the notion that one has to confront the experience of bereavement in order to come to terms with loss and avoid detrimental health consequences” (Stroebe 1992, qtd in Gross 45).

These historical accounts are read as normative accounts insofar as they ascribe objective ideas to individual grief experiences and stipulate that there is a “correct” or “universal” way to grieve and respond to loss. As Wortman and Silver have pointed out, this is an ungrounded assumption held by researchers, scholars, clinicians, and laypeople (349). More contemporary work in bereavement and grief tends to refute or complicate these historical notions. For example, constructivist theories of grief and bereavement in particular promote an understanding of grief as non-linear and non-phasal. For an example of this, see Neimeyer, *Lessons of Loss*, 2000. In addition, continuing bonds theories suggest that the goal of grieving should no longer be to “detach” from the loved one but rather to relocate them or renegotiate our relations with them. See Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, *Continuing Bonds*, 1996. Attig is one of the leading scholars in this new wave. See Attig, *How We Grieve*, 1996. For more on the changing landscape of bereavement studies, see Gross, *Understanding Grief*, 2016; and Doughty, Wissel, and Glorfield, “Current Trends in Grief Counseling,” 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Attig, *How We Grieve*, 1996, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Attig stresses that this is not an intellectual process: “it is not a matter of learning *that* the world is different because someone we care about has died” (13). This, I believe, is a major difference from Parkes’ assumptive world theory, in which the griever works to match their now-outdated internal representation of the world with the real world that has challenged their fundamental assumptions and beliefs. Attig’s take is much more practical and concerned with *our styles of being as whole persons*, rather than as rational thinkers.

¹⁰⁷ Later I question whether it is possible for us to aim to become “whole persons” in this way after loss. Consider the comparison between the loss of a loved one and the loss of a limb. While we may have phantom pains our entire lives following an amputation, eventually we learn to move on without the limb through adapting new patterns of behaviour and shifting our pre-reflective understanding of how to be in the world. Likewise, it seems, with loss: we carry the loss within us forever and are radically changed by it, and healing is not about becoming “whole” again as though we could mend the wound, but is rather about having been changed by the wound and learning to live with it.

our fundamental beliefs, and our expectations and hopes for the future.”¹⁰⁸ In this way, while we had no choice in becoming bereaved, we can choose *how* we grieve—which tasks we engage with, how long we work at these specific tasks, and the ways that we do so, as well as whether we grieve publically or privately. Though in bereavement the world itself is changed, and we find that everywhere something or someone can remind us of what has been lost, we can make choices about how we address this changed world.

Supporting this model of grieving as relearning the world is a robust concept of choice. Whether our actions are deliberate, reflective, habitual, or unreflective, choosing how we address specific coping tasks opens us to decide how we grieve and how we learn to live following the death of a significant other. I may choose to donate my deceased mother’s belongings, or I may take some of them with me to my own home, or I may maintain them as they were in her home, preserving them and by extension her—these are all choices that I can make when I am grieving following her death, and the choice that I do make will change the world I live in. For example, by preserving her belongings, to some extent I mummify her presence as it was in my world, refusing to cede to the change that her absence signifies, and thus I may remain in a landscape of perpetual grief insofar as I am thrown back upon myself when reminded of the place she used to occupy in my life and the absolute vacancy that place now holds. In this way, the actions we take while grieving shape the world following our bereavement, and when we actively choose to grieve, we cope through tackling tasks which address the changes the death precipitated in our lived world. The choices we make while coping change the world we live in, and with each choice new landscapes open up.¹⁰⁹

This robust concept of choice returns me to the work I accomplished in chapters one and two. From these chapters we learned that our actions are formed between passivity and activity, meaning that they are responsive and expressive. As responsive, they are responsive to what has solicited them, and the manner of response has been sedimented

¹⁰⁸ Attig, *How We Grieve*, 1996, 55.

¹⁰⁹ Attig, *How We Grieve*, 1996, 55.

or learned through our prior bodily experience. As expressive they are interpretive choices that we make which can accomplish something new, whether that be by transforming the perceptual field that constitutes our world, or by instituting an entirely new way of being in the world. We also know that the event of bereavement *ends* a particular lived world. This world cannot be recuperated once it is gone, because the passage of time has sealed away that world and the other which opened it for us. When read phenomenologically, what Attig has shown with this robust concept of choice is that our grieving responses, understood as specific coping tasks, are *responsive to* the end of our lived world insofar as they address the changes that emerged in our environment when the significant other died. But by taking up specific coping tasks, we chose how to respond to the bereavement, and thus we have always already interpreted the changes in a particular way, and we have interpreted how to respond to those changes. And those interpretive choices lead to further changes in our environment, which, in turn, transform our *already-changed* landscape and give us back to ourselves differently. Thus the robust concept of choice that is operative in Attig's model of active grieving sets up a process of self- and world-transformation that takes place through our action.

If a notion of expressive action that has the power to transform the world underlies the Attig's concept of choice, then by connecting this concept of choice to relearning Attig misses a fundamental aspect of his own insight. Our actions make changes to the alterations already made in our lived world by the event of bereavement. Learning implies coming to grasp what has already been accomplished, and relearning suggests that we come to learn again what has been accomplished differently. When we learn, we sediment knowledge, and this opens up the possibility for us to turn that sedimented understanding towards our actions. However we *do act* in grieving. If grieving were just about relearning, we would merely be learning what the changes evoked by the event of bereavement were and how to be with those changes, and then when further changes were brought about by our active grieving, we would learn about those new changes. But this process of learning what those changes are and how to be with them is itself accomplished by expressive actions which, in turn, bring about the new changes. And we cannot see in advance what our grieving responses will evoke in our perceptual fields. In

this way, our process of relearning is transformative, and because we can make choices in the way that we relearn, it is also creative.

From this it follows that Attig's model of grieving is not merely about relearning the world post-loss but is *also* about recreating it. We do not merely bring forth our sedimented knowledge about the old world in embracing the new one. We also do not merely learn how to be in the new world without transforming it in some way. Rather, grieving allows us to recreate our post-loss worlds insofar as the choices that the griever makes creatively contributes to the shape of the post-loss world. Donating all of my mother's belongings was previously an unimaginable possibility. Indeed, seeing my mother's belongings as unnecessary things that were merely taking up space was foreclosed as a possibility in my previous lived world. Her things were *her* things; they were meaningful for her insofar as they were useful for her towards particular ends, and they related her to herself and her world. But attending to her death meant that I must address her belongings as things that had both the sense of being unnecessary things that were collecting dust, and the sense of being formerly meaningful things that still maintained a link to her (lost) life. Part of my grieving tasks involved collecting these belongings, ordering them, deciding which to keep and which to donate, and then following through with these decisions. Following through with these tasks altered the *already-changed* landscape of my life. Her death had left her bedroom vacant, but without her belongings her bedroom is *just* a room (as opposed to a vacant room that once belonged to her), and resultantly her home has been transformed into the home of another. Hence, while we *do* relearn the world following loss, we do so *by* creatively transforming it, and then we relearn again. Relearning and recreating come together as two essential aspects of grieving.

It is in this way that Attig's model shows us that while we are already bereaved it is possible for us to take up a stance towards our bereavement such that we actively shape the world to come. Thus, by bringing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological vocabulary into conversation with Attig's model it becomes evident that while we are already bereaved we actively shape the world to come. This is how our actions in the period of in-betweenness initiated by the event of bereavement plays a role in shaping what is to come

for us. The event of bereavement itself initiates a change in our lived worlds, bringing about the end to the world as we once knew it. However, as shown in chapter two, the situations we find ourselves in possess the resources to teach us how to be differently following the disruption. If this is so, then we must ask in what ways does the situation of bereavement teach us how to be following the death of a significant other? If grieving is our active response to this situation, what does our grieving entail when the event of bereavement itself suspends the bereaved from their world as their lived context? And what does this show about the existential process of disruption as such?

In the next sections I will answer these questions by addressing the nature of disruptive events, the worlds they open up, and the way they individuate the one who undergoes the event. To do this I will turn to Romano's evential hermeneutics. In this view the world as our lived context is different from the world that opens up in the event. I will show how the event advenes in our lives by ending a world and opening us up to the advent of a new world, one borne within and traced out by the event itself. We are beings that can experience events, and in undergoing events, the one who is struck by the event is implicated in its happening and is brought before themselves in the event. As such, a properly disruptive event implicates me and demands that I face myself and relate myself to events by undergoing them.

4.2 “...an event itself makes a world”:¹¹⁰ The Event of the World's Advent

In this section I lay out Romano's phenomenology of the event and his evential hermeneutics. First I outline events as Romano describes them, distinguishing between evential events and events as innerworldly facts. I then relate this to my broader discussion of disruptive events by reinterpreting my concept of the disruptive event through Romano's concept of the evential event. Next I sketch Romano's two concepts of the world as they correspond to different types of events. I suggest that the evential world opened by the evential event is experienced as a state of *in-betweenness*. Finally I address

¹¹⁰ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 65.

how undergoing the eventual event singularizes the individual who undergoes it—I alone experience the events of my life, and in undergoing them, I am called to myself as the self that faces them.

According to Romano, all events have two common phenomenological characteristics. Broadly, (1) no events can be univocally assigned to an ontic substratum or support. And yet, (2) all events nonetheless appear as though they do have an ontic support because they happen to something or someone.¹¹¹ These two claims can be illustrated with the example of a lightning flash.¹¹² The lightning flash *flashes*. It shows itself in the flashing and when it flashes it flashes of itself. In other words, the flashing is the “taking-place” of the event, which is its very happening *as* an event. This is how the event is the lightning flash itself as it flashes, as opposed to being something *of* the lightning flash.¹¹³ In this way, it has no ontic substratum or support because it does not occur within a being. Nonetheless it appears as a flashing to a witness, or more precisely to an open plurality of beings including other entities as well as things and an entire landscape. This is *to whom* or *to what* the event as a “taking-place” occurs. Thus, while the lightning flash has no ontic substratum, it does happen for someone in the sense that someone witnesses its appearing.

Yet, while there may be an open plurality of witnesses to any event as it occurs, some events are personally assigned. Events that happen to nobody in particular but rather to an open plurality of beings are innerworldly facts. Lightning is an innerworldly fact. Events as innerworldly facts “enter *into* the world, which consequently forms the horizon of their *meaning*.”¹¹⁴ This is to say that they happen in a world, and it is within this world that they make sense. Innerworldly facts are not addressed to particular witnesses, and they appear indifferently for each witness.¹¹⁵ I am just a spectator to the innerworldly event

¹¹¹ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 25.

¹¹² Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 24-26. This is Romano’s example, but he gets it from Nietzsche. See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 1998, 25.

¹¹³ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 24.

¹¹⁴ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 27.

¹¹⁵ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 30.

when I witness it. I am not put into play in my very selfhood when I see the lightning flash, as though I must understand myself anew from the lightning flash's flash.¹¹⁶ In contrast to events as innerworldly facts are eventual events, which are personal events. They happen to someone in particular, and they cannot but happen with relation to someone.¹¹⁷ They strike at our very selfhood, at the core of who we are as individuals. As events, they are impersonal in and of themselves, but are personal to the one to whom they occur.¹¹⁸ Romano cites the example of bereavement to clarify here. The death of another is an innerworldly fact, and to this extent it is impersonal, but the event of bereavement following another's death is the way that I receive this impersonal event as an event *for me*—bereavement is an event in the eventual sense insofar as it is wholly personal.

Eventual events have three distinguishing characteristics. First, they occur unsubstitutably to the individual who undergoes them. When a loved one dies, I face this loss alone, even if others near me suffer for their own loss of the same person. It is my experience first-hand, and mine alone; it calls for me to experience it uniquely, singularly, and no one can take the event away from me or experience it in my place.¹¹⁹ This is because, by its very nature, the event implicates me in myself *as myself*. This leads to the second distinguishing characteristic of the eventual event. Eventual events upend our worlds by radically altering our possibilities. As Romano writes,

...an event is nothing other than this impersonal reconfiguration of my possibilities and of the world—a reconfiguration that occurs in a fact and by which the event opens a fissure in my own adventure. Transformation of myself and of the world is therefore inseparable from the experience I undergo of it [the event].¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 29.

¹¹⁷ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 27.

¹¹⁸ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 30.

¹¹⁹ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 31.

¹²⁰ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 31.

Because I am implicated in the event as I undergo it, I am transformed by it, and in this transformation a new world of possibilities opens up. Moreover, my old world, the one I understood myself in and through prior to the evential event, falls away in the face of the radical upheaval of the event. This brings us to the third characteristic of the evential event, which is that it institutes something radically new. The meaning of the event cannot be grasped by our previous worldly context because it institutes its own horizon of meaning. Evential events burst forth, in and of themselves, upheaving our settled worlds, disturbing our sense of our possibilities, destroying the meaning we have previously made of our living adventures, and they bring about something radically new and something entirely unpredictable.

Over the course of this thesis I have described the nature and lived experience of disruptive events. Having elaborated Romano's phenomenology of the event to this extent, I am now able to reformulate this notion of disruptive events as events in the *evential* sense. If disruptive events are evential events, then they are events that strike at my core, occur to me and me alone, implicate me in their happening, and transform me and my world. They do so by ending a world and opening up a new one, and by calling me to undergo this metamorphosis. But what is the different between the world before the transformation entailed by the event, and what the world that is opened by the event?

Corresponding to the two types of events outlined earlier, Romano proposes two concepts of world: an evental world and an evential world. I will first address the evental world. Consider again a lightning flash. Lightning is an innerworldly fact, and innerworldly facts occur within the midst of a world. For lightning to be understood by me as lightning, it must appear within a signifying context. This signifying context is the "world" of the event of lightning, and the lightning flashes within the horizon of this world. The world is thus the lightning's *evental context*, but this context is not merely a "spatiotemporal 'setting.'"¹²¹ Rather, it is the "articulated unity of meaning, from which this event can be

¹²¹ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 32.

understood, which is to say interpreted, on a unitary horizon.”¹²² Thus, the lightning is understood in its relation to other atmospheric phenomena (suddenly intensifying wind, darkening clouds, rolling thunder claps, upwards-turned tree leaves), but this overall evental context is not a *sum* of phenomena; rather it is the articulated unity of their meaning. It is in this way that the evental world is the horizon of meaning for all our understanding, and it also provides us with a totality of articulated possibilities. It is from this totality of possibilities that interpretation is possible and can be put into play as action.¹²³ Accordingly, we explain events through these preexisting possibilities which endow the event with meaning through the relationship they hold with other innerworldly facts. The lightning is understood in its relationship with other atmospheric phenomena, and these other phenomena in turn made the lightning possible insofar as they may have served as the “cause” for the lightning. Interpreting an event as an innerworldly fact thus also means that we have subordinated it to a “universe of prior possibilities from which its factual arising becomes explicable.”¹²⁴

However events in the *evential* sense cannot be understood by a prior *evental* context. Disruptive/evental events do not make sense according to a prior horizon of meaning. Rather, by bursting forth in and of themselves they institute something new, in turn becoming the new origin of meaning for any interpretation.¹²⁵ And it is in this way that they upend the settled world which was our evental context. By reconfiguring possibilities an evential event signals the advent of a new world. This new world is an evential world, one that was opened up by the bursting-forth of the evential event.¹²⁶ By moving beyond prior possibilities—indeed, “upend[ing] the possible as a whole,” and therefore the evental world as such¹²⁷—evential events establish a new world. This in effect “[introduces] novel possibilities in the former world. . . by altering its meaning

¹²² Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 32.

¹²³ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 35.

¹²⁴ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 37.

¹²⁵ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 38.

¹²⁶ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 39.

¹²⁷ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 67.

through and through.”¹²⁸ Hence “an event ‘is’ precisely nothing other than a metamorphosis of the world and its meaning, and, on the other hand, the world ‘is’ only the event of its own advent, which happens or enworlds through this metamorphosis of the possible.”¹²⁹

Let me clarify all of this with another example. The evential event individuates the one to whom the event occurs. When my mother died, I alone underwent this event in its evential sense. No one could take my place, nor could they take the event away from me. The event of my mother’s death concerned me in my singularity. And from this event I occurred to myself in my singularity; I was called to undergo it as myself, where undergoing it meant the metamorphosis of my world. This metamorphosis of my world occurred in—and *as*—the event that upended my world as a previously articulated totality of meaning. And the event of my bereavement was its own bursting forth as it opened up a new world of possibilities in its very occurrence.

Such an experience is unsettling insofar as I experience it as a loss of ground and find myself facing a “fissure” in my sense of self and a gap in my world. Romano writes: “In the face of what happens to me beyond my measure, I discover myself deprived of settledness; the gap in the “world,” the collapse of any interpretative settledness, are what gives an event its specific traits.”¹³⁰ If the evential world is the hermeneutic structure outlined by Romano, then it is by upending the possible as a whole that all our interpretations of the world and of ourselves in relation to that world are rendered insignificant. And this rendering insignificant exposes a gap in my lived worlds through disrupting my sense of self. I am called to be myself, where being myself means being transformed by the evential world, and being transformed means *no longer being myself as I was*. Accordingly, the event *is* the lived transition between worlds, or the metamorphosis of the world in which context collapses and meaning is in play.¹³¹ The

¹²⁸ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 67.

¹²⁹ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 68.

¹³⁰ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 68.

¹³¹ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 69.

world as evential is the horizon of all novel possibility and meaning, and it opens when I am no longer in my former evental world. From this opening I am called to reinterpret myself in light of the new possibilities which were opened by this opening, and I am called to do so as the one to whom the event has happened, as precisely myself in this event, such that all that follows follows from this event as it opens up a new world.

I take the evental world described by Romano to be the everyday world prior to a lived disruptive event. This world is our home, and we are settled in it; we understand ourselves through the possibilities disclosed by it and we act in accordance with this background of meaning. Events as innerworldly facts make sense in this world because they unfold into the world. We are habituated to this world and by it; we have learned how to be in this world, we have learned how to navigate it and act within it, and because of this pre-reflective understanding of how to be, when we do act we find that the world sustains our actions because our aims and projects make sense, which is to say that they take up the possibilities that compose the context of meaning that forms our world.

In contrast, the evential world opened up by the disruptive event is an alien landscape which unmoors us from our interpretations of the world and of ourselves. We are called to be ourselves as ourselves in this world, unlike our previous unreflective style of engaging within the world. And in being called to be ourselves in this way, we are called to undergo the metamorphosis of the world that constitutes the event and which the event itself evoked. Can we habituate to this new world, transforming it from evential world to the evental world of context? In other words, can the reconfigured world of possibilities which was called forth by the bursting-forth of the event become the background context to our action once more? If so, what must be done for us to be able to familiarize ourselves with the evential world in this way? Is it by re-understanding ourselves *as* who we are *to* ourselves *in* the event that we can transform the evential world into a world of context? With the case of bereavement, is this what it means to *recreate* ourselves and our worlds through active grieving? And, in turn, is this what it means to actively confront disruptive events?

In the following section I will explicate Romano's eventual interpretation of the phenomena of bereavement in order to answer these questions. I will then relate this to my hypothesis that grieving is a way of recreating the world. In conclusion, I will refer the results of this inquiry to my broader questions about the possibility and nature of an active confrontation with disruptive events.

4.3 Bereavement as an Evential Phenomenon and Grieving as Recreating the World

In this section I look at bereavement and grieving as eventual phenomena. I suggest that bereavement is an eventual/disruptive event that we undergo, and grieving is a process of habituation to this eventual event that involves us actively confronting ourselves whilst confronting the eventual world brought about by the bereavement. First I show how bereavement is an eventual event. Next I discuss how what is lost to the former world can be momentarily resurrected by remainders that remind us of how things used to be. I nonetheless take this to be evidence that what is lost can never be entirely regained, such that the former world prior to bereavement has indeed ended. Finally I address grieving as recreation of the world within this context of world-finitude and world-advent. I show how if the event of bereavement signals the end of our former world and the advent of a new world, then grieving, as responding to this radical change, is our way of making this new world inhabitable through the power of expressive action. This conclusion will lead me to my final section, where I reveal how our capacity for actively confronting the disruptive event of bereavement shows that the third element of the process of existential disruption is existential transformation.

Bereavement is “the absolute experience of separation.”¹³² With her death, to a certain extent my mother became part of my past. Her death happened in time and was “sealed” by time.¹³³ It was both an impersonal and deeply personal event. I along with others witnessed her death and we were each bereaved by our loss—we shared the event to this

¹³² Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 114.

¹³³ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 115.

extent—but we underwent our bereavement individually. In this way we are witnesses to the event of another’s death, but we personally undergo the event of another’s death as the event of bereavement. There are three aspects to this event. We experience the event of bereavement in part as a death to ourselves, in part as the death of a world that we shared with them, and in part as a loss of their presence.¹³⁴ This is why bereavement is experienced as absence. I feel this absence of the other as their absence, as an absence of a world, and as an absence to myself.

Because I shared a world with the lost other, their death means the end of that world insofar as the world of possibilities we shared based upon our history is lost along with them. As Romano puts it,

In the event of bereavement, as in any event, I am in play myself in my selfhood. If every event is an *advent* for me, and allows me to understand myself and to advene to myself as myself, then it is the same for the event of an encounter, where my world is opened to dimensions of another world—another’s world—and, correlatively, in the event of bereavement, where this world closes over again, and so closes over my world as well, together with the constellation of possibilities that were only mine because they befell me from encountering another.¹³⁵

Otherwise stated, my possibilities are entwined with the other’s possibilities in our “common history,” such that their death does not just bring about the end of their world but also the end of the world I shared with them and, hence, the end of the common history of possibilities we shared together. My mother’s death prior to my graduation forecloses the possibility that she will see me finish my graduate degree. And I, in turn, will be a different person when I graduate than I might have been had she survived and been able to be present for the experience.

¹³⁴ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 115. According to Romano there is a real death to ourselves here; we die to ourselves as the one who we were unsubstitutably for the loved one, and the one who we could have been to them in the future.

¹³⁵ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 116.

This link between death to another and death to myself is thus the eventual meaning of bereavement, according to Romano. While events in the eventual sense reveal how originary our relations with others are, this is particularly evident with the event of bereavement. In the case of bereavement, what is shown up is how my world is always already intertwined with the world of the other, such that the “retreat” of their world carries my world, and myself, along with it.¹³⁶ The event of my mother’s death struck at me in my very selfhood, such that I, as a self, was radically and irremediably changed. My mother’s death, while impersonal in the sense of being an innerworldly fact, did not just occur outside of me and affect me. Rather it entirely upended all my possibilities as they had been articulated in my former world. These possibilities formed the horizon of my self-interpretation, and as such, with their upheaval, I was necessarily called to transform in the most intimate of ways. I could no longer be myself as I once was, but was called to re-interpret myself in light of the event and through the event. Hence, when the other dies to us, we die to ourselves, and we die to the world we shared with them. This is the meaning of bereavement as we undergo it.

It is in this way that what is lost—our selves as we once were for the other, our world of possibilities formed in our relationship with the other, and the other themselves for us—can never be regained after the event of bereavement. There is a fissure in the self that opens in the event of bereavement, and this fissure is the wound of our loss. While Attig suggests that we should grieve as whole persons after death, Romano stresses that loss creates a wound that never fully heals. Like the amputee who has lost their limb, we are forever changed by the loss. We may “move on,” which is to say that we may for the most part get over our pain and we may find new ways of being in the world despite the loss. Nonetheless, we are forever wounded, and we are therefore vulnerable to phantom pains which resurrect the originary pain of the loss and the eventual world that accompanied it, or the eventual world which preceded the loss. In the case of bereavement, these phantom pains which have the power to resurrect what is dead and gone may be remainders of the former world that remind us of the deceased other. For example,

¹³⁶ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 114.

objects which belonged to the other may remain in our world, but they are “vestiges of a former world: details in which the former world gleams with a sudden intensity, as though we were transported there anew.”¹³⁷ If this wound of bereavement can never entirely heal, then we must carry it with us permanently in the ways that it shapes our new world and the persons we become through the event of this world opening. This is how bereavement is a new origin for us; from it, everything changes, including all of our possibilities, and we must begin again *from* the event.

The event of bereavement brings about a new world, but it does so by advening us to ourselves, forcing us to undergo the event as our selves. This means that I am open to receiving events and I am capable of responding to them. It is in this way that the event of bereavement, which calls to me singularly and calls to me in my very selfhood, demands that I re-interpret myself starting from the reconfigured set of possibilities that constitute the eventual world. I am responsive to events, and to this extent I am responsible for responding to events. By undergoing what happens to me, I am transformed.¹³⁸ Events of this kind thus show us precisely what it means to be a self—to be a self means being open to undergoing experiences, and being called to be myself as a self in undergoing experiences, from which point I can respond to myself as myself and re-interpret myself through this response.

Transforming ourselves through appropriating the event of bereavement is thus a death and a birth. We die to ourselves in being born to a new world. As Romano writes,

To appropriate an event by understanding oneself starting from it is at the same time, and on each occasion, to be transformed through undergoing it, to forget in a positive sense, to die to oneself and to others, to break away from a concluded past by opening oneself to a future that transcends any

¹³⁷ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 121.

¹³⁸ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 140.

projection, to renounce all mastery or hold of one's adventure and of the temporality that events temporalize.¹³⁹

Thus in undergoing the death of another as a retreat of their world and the death of myself to myself, I appropriate the event and interpret myself anew through it, and this re-interpretation on the basis of the novel possibilities opened in the bursting-forth of the event is self-transformative. Simply put, the world transforms in the metamorphosis evoked by the event and I am transformed in relation to it. I am no longer who I was, and my former world has been abolished. I am called to be myself anew, and this functions as a sort of birth.

The gap in the world that opens in the eventual event of bereavement is the metamorphosis of one world to another, in this case, the world pre-loss and an “aftermath” world where one confronts their loss. It is this eventual world of bereavement that evokes self-transformation. What is the role of grieving with relation to the eventual world of bereavement? Could it be that grieving is our way of making this eventual world *inhabitable*? For surely we cannot live forever in the world of loss and bereavement. And if this is a process of making the eventual world inhabitable, does this involve a deliberate and active recreation of ourselves and our worlds in the wake of the event? In other words, is it the case that in grieving, we transform further the eventual world that has emerged as novel from the event itself *through* appropriating the event *as* self- and world-transformatory? If we re-interpret ourselves in the wake of the event, transforming who we are to ourselves in the event, and if grieving is the process of actively choosing how to respond to our bereavement, then it seems as though grieving is a way of actively taking up this process when we are bereaved.

When we grieve, we act in ways that transform our lived world—a lived world that was already changed by our loss. We take on coping tasks that address *how* our world was changed *by* the event of our bereavement. And in so doing, we find ways to relocate the deceased other, we develop new patterns of actions and new habits, and we relearn how

¹³⁹ Romano, *Event and World*, 2009, 141.

to relate to the living others in our lives. This is not merely about learning how the world was changed. It is also not about bringing our old habits or interpretations forward. Indeed, the world as we once knew it has ended, and we can never be who we once were. Our possibilities as a whole have changed, and we are responsible to be who we are as selves with relation to these reconfigured possibilities. Hence, the fissure in our selves is a forever a wound, and the gap in our worlds forever remains a gap. We cannot close over it: bereavement is an absolute separation. But we can begin anew from the moment of the taking-place of the event, when the new world began to take shape. And from this place we creatively contribute to the shape of the emergent world. We act in ways that shape the landscape of our lives following the radical upheaval which rendered our prior possibilities as impossibilities, and made impossibilities possibilities.

Grieving, then, helps us learn how to inhabit the evential world opened by the event of bereavement. It helps us learn how to live in this new world with its new possibilities. When we grieve, we mourn for what is gone, but we do so by bringing our pasts into our present. We relearn how to be, and in relearning how to be, we recreate what we inherited through the event. Our recreation of the world thus sediments the *evential* world into a new *evental* world. This evental world becomes our new context. We can learn to be at home in what was opened up in the evential world, but only after we move out of the period of in-betweenness that is being *in* the evential world. This is possible on the basis of expressive action, which allows us to transform our perceptual fields and to take up our new possibilities. We respond to the disruptions opened by the event of bereavement, and by doing so we creatively transform our world, finding ways to live in this new world and to live with what has happened.

From this analysis, it seems that it is indeed possible to actively confront disruptive events. Grieving is an active response to the disruption of bereavement insofar as it is our way of taking up the situation evoked by our loss. What, then, does this sort of active confrontation with the disruptive event of bereavement show us about the existential process entailed by disruptive events?

4.4 “You must change your life”:¹⁴⁰ The Possibility of Existential Transformation

In conclusion, I relate grieving as recreation to the process of existential disruption. By emphasizing the creative capacity of grieving as recreation, I have shown how phenomenally disruptive events bring together disorientation and transformation. Existentially disruptive events disorient us, but in doing so they open us to our own openness, and this provides us with the possibility of existential transformation. Thus the third element to the existential process of disruptive events is existential transformation.

A world we shared with the loved one ends when they die, and the part of us intertwined with them also dies to ourselves when they die. This results in a breakdown of habitual patterns of action and a loss of sense to our everyday activities and relations. When this happens, we find ourselves in-between two worlds, and the world opened in this moment is the eventual world of bereavement. This experience is existentially disorienting. It fundamentally and radically changes the existential relationship between my self and my world.

However this time of our existential disorientation is also a time of radical openness towards our own openness. The interruption we face in our activities throws us back upon ourselves, and we are opened to our own openness to a present moment that does not fit with our established sense of our pasts nor our projected possibilities which anticipated our future. The event of bereavement irrupts in and of itself, and as its own origin, it opens a new world by advening us to ourselves. We are called to our selves as selves when we undergo the event of bereavement, which is to say that we are called to receive and respond to the event of bereavement. The analysis of grieving shows that it is possible to respond by appropriating the event and interpreting myself in relation to what opens in the event. Thus, because we are open to a present that radically diverges from our past, we can learn to respond differently, and we can find ourselves changed with relation to the novel possibilities that have emerged from the event.

¹⁴⁰ Rilke, “The Archaic Torso of Apollo.”

The world that opens up for us in the event of loss is one that opens in the moment of in-betweenness. But this world is not yet sedimented into an inhabitable world. It is one where meaning is destabilized because the previous world of possibilities has shut down. In the wake of this event we grieve. Grieving now means to relearn how to traverse this world, where relearning how to traverse it creatively transforms it and in effect recreates it. This process of traversing it continually reshapes it until it becomes our home once more, where the world as our home is our horizon or context of our daily doings, the supportive background of our human projects, and the landscape of our human adventure. This home-to-be is always a home that can remind us of what has been lost; we never entirely forget the world we shared with the other, and are vulnerable to encountering remainders which cast us backwards temporarily into our world of loss. Nonetheless we are eventually able to inhabit the new world as we did the former one, and we do so by transforming it. Hence when we are existentially disoriented we are opened to our own openness, and this provides us with the possibility of existential transformation, where transformation means recreating our world and recreating our selves in ways only opened up through the event.

The disruptive event abolishes our world as our context, such that we are shorn from the lived world in which we were at home. We find ourselves in a radically new world. This new world is opened up by and through the disruptive event itself. This was possible because the disruptive event altered my articulated totality of possibilities as a whole. Yet it is our nature, as the ones to whom events occur and the ones who are called to be themselves as themselves in the event, to be open to this event and to be responsive to it. Thus, when the new world opens up in the event, we are called to re-interpret ourselves on the basis of the reconfigured possibilities of this world. Hence, insofar as I am responsive to the event I undergo, I am called to transform by the transformation of my world. Our responsibility to be responsive to this event means that I can act deliberately, should I so choose. It follows, then, that I can actively confront a disruptive event, even if I have lost my hold on the world and my sense of self has been dissolved with the abolishment of my former world. Actively confronting a disruptive event in this way means confronting the self-transformation that takes place through the “taking-place” of the world-transformation, and it also means confronting the world-transformation that

precipitates the self-transformation. This two-fold confrontation occurs by appropriating the event that one has undergone as one's own and as transformatory.

5 Conclusion

When the people we love die, it can shatter our worlds and completely undermine our sense of our selves. Becoming bereaved disrupts the quotidian styles of our existence, including our habits, routines, actions, and rituals, which previously had provided a ground and comfort to our existence. We understand ourselves by our activities in and through our worlds, and so, when our worlds are shattered by loss, we feel the resonances of this “shattering” in our selves. In the face of this disruption, meaning breaks down, and we no longer know how to make sense of our experiences. We have lost our hold on the world, and our world falls to pieces. We are left to ask our selves: how can we learn to live with this loss, and with our selves after this loss?

In these first moments we are unable to take up the situation we have found ourselves in; the death profoundly disorients us and leaves us shocked. This experience teaches us that everything has changed and nothing can be the way it was before, even if we do not know what this means, nor what to do. This is because significant deaths shift our worlds. World-shifting occurs when a disruptive event has ended the world we once knew without settling us into a new world. Whilst in-between these two worlds, we are disoriented, unable to find our bearings or reorient ourselves. This disorientation is fundamentally existential insofar as it unfolds on the level of the relationship between the body and the world.

We may not know what to do when someone we care for dies, and we may feel as though our world has fallen apart. Nonetheless we persist, which in this case means that we exist whilst in-between the two worlds of before the loss and after the loss. We are thrown back upon ourselves when bereavement occurs and we are called to face ourselves in undergoing the event of another’s death for us. We must learn how to live with this loss, which in this case means we must learn how to make sense of the loss. Making sense of the loss involves facing a reality we never expected or wanted to have to take up. It means making sense of an experience that defies all prior meaning. Facing our new reality as it opens in the event of bereavement requires facing a present that is radically discontinuous with our past, such that we cannot draw upon what we have known to be

true of ourselves and our world in our attempts to make sense of the loss. However, because we are embodied and we are temporal, we are open to the present as it presences, even if that present moment does not fit with our pasts.

Thus our time of existential disorientation following the event of loss is also a time of openness. We are called to face ourselves in the event of loss through being called to our relation with and our view of the world as it is transformed by the loss. We respond to this loss in a variety of different ways, and these responses allow us to take up the situation evoked by our loss. Our existential disorientation radically opens us to our own openness to our time and to our world, such that we can learn to perceive and be differently following loss.

It is in this way that we can learn to make sense of our loss, which is also making sense of the world we inherited when it opened in the event of loss. When I was struck by loss, I grieved for the person who had been lost as well as the world we had shared together and the person I had been for her. Grieving is our response to our bereavement, and it helps us learn to live with what has happened. Grieving addresses the transformation that took place when the person we loved died, and it does so by further transforming the alienating world which opened in the event of loss into a world that I can inhabit and make my home. This possibility of transformation is contained within and opened by the event of the loss itself, and this is how my loss can have the resources to reorient me in the world even as it undermines and disorients me. Grieving allows me to re-interpret myself and the world which opened in the event of loss. This re-interpretation is a creative transformation of the disruptions that followed the loss, and it occurs on the basis of taking up the possibilities opened by the loss.

Hence, when I am bereaved, the lived world I once inhabited is shorn off from me, and I find myself in-between what once was and what is yet to come. Yet because I am the one who has undergone the event, I am called to be myself in it, and to re-interpret myself in light of it. I am responsive to what I undergo, and I am responsible for my responsiveness. By facing the self- and world-transformation that takes place through the “taking-place” of the event of loss, I can confront and further transform the world that has

been transformed by the loss, and I can confront myself as I have been transformed and continue to transform in relation to that world. Existential disorientation is our time of radical openness to our worlds and our selves through our openness to time, and it bears within itself the possibility of existential transformation.

This investigation has provided new insight about the particular phenomena of bereavement and grief. Bereavement can be undergone as a disruptive and eventual event. When a significant other dies, this is a loss in our worlds which results in a loss of the world as we knew it insofar as we shared it with them. Bereavement thus complicates the fundamental existential relationship between the self and their world. It does so by breaking down the structures which give meaning to our world and which allow us to make sense of our experiences. To this extent, becoming bereaved can pose significant complications for persons. It raises an existential tension—that is, a conflict unfolds between who we once were and who we will become, and this conflict unfolds on the level of our style of being in the world. I have suggested that it is possible for us to resolve this tension by addressing the conflicts that emerge in the disruptions entailed by our loss. This is possible because we are open to the world through our temporalizing bodies and because we can act in response to what presences for us. Addressing the conflicts entailed by the event of bereavement is the work of grieving. Inasmuch as grieving is an active responding to the disruptions entailed by loss, it allows us to relearn how to be in the world by confronting the changed landscapes of our lives and by further transforming them into inhabitable zones. By transforming our possibilities as a whole, bereavement offers us a specific transformative possibility, though this transformative possibility is veiled by unsettling experiences of disorientation.

Looking through the analysis of bereavement and grief has provided a glimpse at an existential process that takes place when events disrupt our ways of being in the world. When one is struck by an existentially disruptive event like bereavement, one is initially existentially disoriented. There are a variety of symptoms that can come with this disorientation, including shock, vomiting, inhibited movement and cognitive processing, an inability to focus, a feeling of unreality and an inability to connect, and a feeling of being trapped. These symptoms occur when one is unmoored from their surroundings and

cast adrift whilst in-between two worlds, which is to say that these symptoms follow from a loss of ground and a loss of our “home” in the world. However we are capable of being existentially disoriented because we are open to the world. This makes us vulnerable to events coming at us as if from nowhere. This openness means that I am called to myself as myself when I undergo a disruptive event. Moreover, because we are open in this way, we are also able to take up our present situation as it presences. This means that becoming existentially disoriented radically opens us to our own openness. This radical openness towards our own openness in turn means that the disruptive event has offered us a possibility for existential transformation. We can take up the situation and make meaning of it, and we can establish ourselves as being-at-home-in-the-world once more. We can renegotiate our living relationship between our selves and our world. The disruptive event offers us this possibility by completely dismantling our world of possibilities and presenting us with a new one. The generalized existential process which follows disruptive events thus consists of modes of *disruption*, *response*, and *recuperation*, which play out in moments of *disorientation*, *openness*, and *transformation*.

While I have elucidated the way existentially disruptive events unfold in lived experiences of bereavement and grief, there is certainly more work yet to be done. Approaching this generalized existential process from the perspective of bereavement and grief sheds a particular light on the phenomena. As is the case with all approaches, there are limitations and shortcomings to the work that has been done, and there are unresolved questions that have opened in the course of this study. I now address these limitations and shortcomings of my study while also raising questions that further complicate what has been outlined thus far as a means to gesture towards possible future directions for this project.

This thesis has dealt with a specific type of grieving. I have dealt with “uncomplicated” grief, and have left complicated grief entirely to the side. Complicated grief is a form of grieving which is prolonged or is undergone at the wrong time and significantly impairs

the griever.¹⁴¹ If becoming bereaved poses significant existential conflicts for us, then it seems that failing to address what happens when those conflicts become too complicated is a significant oversight. Can the analysis I have offered still shed insight on complicated grief? I am inclined to suggest that complicated grief occurs when we remain in-between our pre-loss worlds and our post-loss worlds. Perhaps it is the case that a refusal or an inability to take up the disruptions entailed by grief leaves us stranded in a world that is fundamentally structured by absence. In this case, it would seem as though we do not have the resources to take up what the situation offers us. However, this seems to pathologize complicated grief, which is itself questionable. While it was outside of the scope of this thesis to engage with complicated grief specifically, the question that it asks of the work that I have accomplished in this study suggests that examining complicated grief more carefully would be advisable for future work.

I have additionally emphasized “active” grieving in this thesis. I have taken my departure from Attig in making this theoretical move, but I still wonder whether there can be passive grieving. Is the difference between active and passive grieving a difference in the way we take up the disruptions entailed by the event of loss? And if so, what might this mean for my project? If it is possible for us to grieve passively, then are we still taking up the situation evoked by our loss and transforming ourselves in relation to it? Following Romano, I would think that yes, this self-transformation process still happens. By virtue of having undergone the event we were called to ourselves as selves, and we were transformed. This is not just a question of temporality, however. Deciding not to actively grieve is itself still a form of action insofar as it is a response that emerges from our situatedness within a field. It is a decision that one does not have the resources, is too tired, depressed, etc., and therefore will not, cannot, or does not perceive themselves needing to actively grieve. Nonetheless it is still unclear how passive grieving figures into my dynamic of recuperation-transformation, and addressing this oversight would be a fruitful direction for future study.

¹⁴¹ Gross, *Understanding Grief*, 2016, 97.

This thesis has also dealt with a specific type of bereavement. Every chapter of this thesis included phenomenological descriptions of bereavement and/or grief from the perspective of daughters who have experienced the loss of their mothers. An obvious question arises from this, namely, can the analysis that was developed alongside descriptions of mother loss still apply to other cases of loss? Or are there fundamental differences in the structure of other losses, such that the analysis developed in this thesis is insufficient for explaining the particularity of other types of loss? While it is outside the scope of this present work and my present research to respond to such a question, I am inclined to provisionally suggest that this analysis may still be applicable to other types of loss. I suggest this because my analysis led me to a more general understanding of how existentially disruptive events unfold in our lives—that is, as they unfold in modes of disruption, response, and recuperation, which are experienced as corresponding moments of disorientation, openness, and transformation. This generalized process is an existential framework which is built upon a phenomenological construction of the body-subject who is in and towards their world by virtue of their body which situates them in a spatial environment and opens them to the passage of time in the present moment. For this reason I sense that my analysis is still insightful in the case of other types of loss, but further research needs to be done to confirm this hypothesis.

This discussion, however, leads to my next shortcoming and set of questions. The generalized existential process I have outlined turns upon the mode of response and its moment of openness. Existential disorientation can only be experienced because we are open to disruption, and we can be transformed only because we are open to our openness and can therefore recuperate from disruption. What happens in cases where our openness is compromised? That is, what if our openness to our being-open is compromised, and/or what if our being-open is compromised? This actually poses two different dilemmas, each of which I examine in turn.

It seems as though there are cases of compromised openness to our own being-open. I think here of Frantz Fanon's powerful essay, "The Lived Experience of the Black

Man.”¹⁴² Fanon states, “Beneath the body schema I had created a historical-racial schema.”¹⁴³ Called to himself by the summons of a white child who had already racialized him, Fanon’s body schema collapses, and the historical-racial schema dominates, surfacing as an epidermal racial schema.¹⁴⁴ Simply put, this amounts to a consciousness of himself as a self that is reduced to the consciousness of his body as a body-for-others, where his body was always-already reduced to the historical meaning borne by his epidermis. In this way, Fanon finds that the meaning of his existence is not self-created but is waiting for him and is pressed in upon him.¹⁴⁵ There is a corporeal malediction created in this disequilibrium between Fanon’s body schema and his historical-racial schema, and this burden is placed upon him by the white other. To say the absolute least, this inhibits Fanon’s ability to extend into and take up the world, insofar as the body which is his own and which is given back to him as his own by the gaze of the white child is returned “spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter’s day.”¹⁴⁶ With this in mind, does the ability to take up the existential disruption entailed by certain lived experiences really turn on an uninhibited openness to our own being-open to the world and to time? What happens when our ability to be open to our own openness is compromised? It seems to me that Fanon has described a compromised ability to be open to his own being-open, and this inhibited openness is a judgement which has been exercised upon him in advance.

And what of cases where our very being-open is compromised? In cases of bodily trauma or illness, our very being-open to the world by being in the world may be inhibited. Consider as an example the personal experience described in Jean-Dominique Bauby’s memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. After suffering a massive stroke, Bauby is left with locked-in syndrome. He is almost entirely physically paralyzed, although he retains

¹⁴² Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” 2008, 89-119.

¹⁴³ Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” 2008, 91.

¹⁴⁴ Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” 2008, 92.

¹⁴⁵ Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” 2008, 113.

¹⁴⁶ Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” 2008, 93.

some ability of movement in his head and eyes.¹⁴⁷ If, as described over the course of this thesis, our openness to the world comes about through the intertwining of our perceptual and motor intentionalities, then how open is Bauby to his world? It seems that his ability to be open is compromised by the loss of his ability to move, which in turn compromises his ability to perceive. Can we still understand Bauby's experience of living through his paralyzing stroke through the existential process of disruption, response, and recuperation, as it plays out in moments of disorientation, openness, and transformation?

What these examples truly call into question is the phenomenological construction of the body-subject who is in and towards their world by virtue of their body. If we are open to the world because we are embodied and always-already in the world, then to what extent does compromised bodily integrity or motility frustrate our capacity for transformation? And to what extent do the historical social and cultural dynamics which we inherit by being born into certain worlds inform our ability to be open to our selves and our worlds, and to thus transcend ourselves and our situations through acts of self-transformation? The answer to these questions are not readily available at this point, but it may be that these examples demand a rethinking of the construction of phenomenal inter-subjectivity, embodiment, and world.

Finally, there are specific shortcomings on the part of my thinking and writing that I should address. Over the course of this study I have employed certain philosophical concepts rather loosely, and in effect I have elided some significant conceptual differences. These elisions are a result of limitations in my understanding, and they are expressed by my imperfect articulations. For instance, I have at times passed over the distinction between *my* world, *our* world, and *the* world. The problem this presents is that it remains unclear whether changes in *my* world result in changes in *the* world writ large. In other words, when I state that the world is changed by our loss, whose world do I mean? Which world? A world for whom? Is *the world* changed or are our subjective experiences in the world disturbed such that our worlds are impacted? Additionally the

¹⁴⁷ Bauby, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2002.

question of how individual worlds can exist within—and alongside—a general world remains unanswered within this work. Similarly I have elided the distinction between *my self* and *myself* (or our selves and ourselves), where my self (as a Self) might function as an ontological notion, and myself may be the self which is immersed in practical daily doings in the world.¹⁴⁸ Taking these shortcomings as a starting point would be a philosophically rich direction for future work.

¹⁴⁸ I am grateful to Thomas Szwedska for asking me these precise questions about my articulations of the concepts of world, world-shifting, and the self in this thesis, thus challenging my liberal use of these important philosophical concepts.

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