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“Speaking on the Edge of My Tomb”: The Epistolary Life and Death of Catherine Talbot

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Bluestocking Catherine Talbot is now perhaps best known as the closest and most “angelic” friend of the Learned Mrs. Elizabeth Carter (Carter 1809, III: 206), poet, Classical translator, and prolific letter-writer who was hailed a “living muse” during her lifetime.¹ Born in 1721, Talbot was the ward of Archbishop Thomas Secker, under whom she received a liberal education. However, despite being celebrated as a prodigy in her youth, she refused to publish her works, which she kept tucked away in her “considering drawer.”² As the Reverend Montagu Pennington, the first editor of her correspondence, put it, “She wrote not to gain credit or applause” (Carter 1809, I: ix), which certainly helps to explain her relative marginalization in literary history. And yet, despite her abhorrence of publication and of literary fame more generally, Talbot was celebrated during her lifetime and in the century after her death.

On the one hand, her collected works, published posthumously by Carter, sold very well indeed; *Reflections on the Seven Days of the Week*, a series of daily religious meditations, went into thirty-five separate editions and reprints. On the other hand, her letter-writing was also the foundation for a wide reputation during Talbot’s lifetime, even though her correspondence with Carter was not published until after Carter herself died in 1807. Recent scholarship has turned our attention to the extent to which letters were a central — rather than a marginal — genre in the eighteenth century. The “vast correspondence” of the Bluestocking Circle, Nicole Pohl and Betty Schellenberg remind us, “attests to the early

¹ I refer here to Richard Samuel’s *Portraits in the Characters of the Muses in the Temple of Apollo*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1779. The other “Muses” depicted in the painting are poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld, playwright Elizabeth Griffin, painter Angelica Kaufmann, writer Charlotte Lennox, historian Catherine Macaulay, “Queen of the Blues” Elizabeth Montagu, poet and writer Hannah More, and singer Elizabeth Linley Sheridan.

² Talbot did publish a selection in Samuel Johnson’s periodical *The Rambler*, number 30, but she did so anonymously.

establishment of a wider, virtual circle of friends who regularly contributed about politics and literature” (5). In other words, the importance of letter-writing goes beyond the sheer number of letters or of epistolary authors: letters created and promulgated intellectual networks. They represented, writes Dena Goodman of the French context, “the first circle of expansion beyond the walls of the salons” (137). For the Bluestockings, too, letters could serve both to codify and to propagate Bluestocking values in writing; “[t]he expansion of the Republic of Letters” (and, we could add, of the Bluestocking Circle) “through epistolary exchange was enlightenment itself” (139). For Talbot, indeed, “the ideology of the familiar letter [was] crucial to the creation of the social space in which [she] flourished as a woman writer” (Goodman xvi). In fact, writing letters could be seen as Talbot’s preferred mode of literary-estate planning,³ a way to control the manner in which her image was, and would be, circulated. “Letters circulated in selected extracts and through gossip,” Harriet Guest explains, “are the basis for reputation, and whet polite culture’s taste for learned women. They grant wide but oblique access to lives whose modest privacy they also serve to confirm” (2000: 109). Thus, even during Talbot’s lifetime her letters to Carter and to others in her epistolary circle would have played a large part in her public image; they were only semi-private documents.

However, Talbot’s place in the public imagination is inseparable from Elizabeth Carter’s, and this is surely no accident. In 1807, less than a year after Carter’s death, Carter’s nephew and literary executor Pennington published his biography of her, which included a number of Carter and Talbot’s letters. Spurred on by the appeal of these letters, just one year later he published four volumes of his aunt’s correspondence, the first three of which were correspondence between Carter and Talbot (Volume IV consisted of Carter’s letters to fellow Bluestocking Elizabeth Vesey). He would go on to publish three more volumes of Carter’s letters to “Queen of the Blues” Elizabeth Montagu in 1817. No originals of these letters survive. We could say, then, that Talbot is forever preserved as Carter’s coauthor. Hers are the only letters that sit alongside Carter’s in all of Pennington’s volumes, and so their friendship is offered up by Pennington as *the* friendship. In this way, Carter and Talbot have gone

³In my use of “literary estate,” I take my cue from Ian Hamilton, whose *Keepers of the Flame* (1992) underscores the multifaceted nature of the term. Evolving and changing, an author’s literary estate is subject to reinterpretation even (or perhaps especially) after his or her death.

down in literary history as friends: if Michel de Montaigne memorialized his friendship with La Boetie in essay form, then Carter's letters memorialize her friendship with Talbot who, like La Boetie, becomes the perfect friend.⁴

But Talbot plays another — and, I will argue, more important — role in Carter's correspondence, one that allows us to understand better her posthumous place as Carter's "dear and most excellent friend" (Carter 1809: 380): Talbot's literary afterlife as a marginal figure in Carter's relatively illustrious career is hardly accidental, for Pennington introduces her as — and she remains throughout — Carter's "*deceased* friend" (Carter 1809, I: vi, emphasis added). The letters chart her painful decline and then repeatedly eulogize her after death, keeping her memory alive. (Her deathbed scene is narrated by Carter on three separate occasions and mentioned numerous times in Pennington's editorial footnotes.) Though the letters are obsessed with Catherine Talbot, living and dead, Talbot's is always a voice from the past, from memory, from the margins, and that voice serves an important function: it becomes a way for Carter to represent the unrepresentable, death.

Theirs is a friendship "born in mourning," and the letters themselves are what Jacques Derrida terms a work of mourning, "a commemoration that would also be a reflection" (2001: 123, 80). For Derrida, death always underpins friendship, as friendship cannot exist without the recognition that one or the other friend will die first. In the Western tradition, friendship is itself a kind of eulogy performed in advance: "I live in the present," Derrida writes of the Ciceronian model of friendship, "speaking of myself in the mouths of my friends, I already hear them speaking

⁴In fact, literary critics of the Bluestockings have been seeking to understanding the role of their friendships in the eighteenth century, an interest that we can trace to the earliest attempts to recover the Bluestockings in the early 1990s, most notably Sylvia Harcstark Myers' *The Bluestocking Circle* (1990); the collection *Reconsidering the Bluestockings* (see Pohl and Schellenberg 2003) uses Myers' book as a springboard for a wide-ranging consideration of Bluestocking influence throughout the century. Throughout the scholarship on this subject, however, the emphasis nevertheless rests on the relationship between Bluestocking friendship and the modeling of a particular form of sociability — the way in which the members of the Circle "present[ed] themselves as models of acceptable or traditional notions of feminine virtue" (Guest 2005: 61). Under such a rubric, friendship itself becomes a kind of performance of feminine respectability, one with far-reaching effects. These valuable analyses are effects-oriented, invested as they are in seeing the Circle as a "gendered collective" with important roles to play in modeling its unique form of feminine civic virtue (Guest 2005: 68). The present essay focuses on the contours of these self-presentations rather than on their civic or ethical effects.

on the edge of my tomb” (2001: 5). To speak of or to a friend, Derrida reminds us, is to recognize that, at some unknowable point in time, one of you will die, leaving the other to carry the friend’s memory into the future. In the correspondence at least, it is Talbot who fulfills that role of dying first, and her passing away to the margins of the text allows Carter to move front and center.

Thus, not unlike the women writers to whom Catherine Gallagher turns in her masterful account of female authorship in the eighteenth century, the Carter-Talbot letters explore the “fertile emptiness” that comes from telling “nobody’s story,” from erasing the writing subject (327). Gallagher argues that the emerging literary marketplace “is the place where . . . writers appear mainly through their frequently quite spectacular displacements and disappearances in literary and economic exchanges” (xviii). Her explanation of the link between authorship and dispossession is also useful for thinking outside the genre of the novel (her focus). Indeed, *unpublished* texts enacted such disappearances as well, while the so-called private genres such as letters “embraced and feminized” the category of the professional author (xiii). It is Catherine Talbot’s perpetual “vanishing act” (xx) that forces Carter’s letter-writing self into view — and forces a vision of authorship whose very condition of possibility is the “fertile emptiness” of death itself. If, as Carter writes, our friends are “at several periods removed” from this world in order “to instruct us that our hopes of perfect happiness must depend wholly on *that Friend who never dies*” (1809, III: 269), then I propose that we understand Talbot as that friend who *always* dies — that friend on whose death the Learned Mrs. Carter herself is founded. In any friendship, epistolary or otherwise, one partner must die, and this role falls to Talbot: the best friend, it would seem, is a dead friend.

“Miss Talbot is absolutely my passion”: Talbot and Carter’s Epistolary Friendship

Talbot and Carter met in 1741, introduced by a mutual friend, mathematician and astronomer Thomas Wright. The attraction was immediate; upon sight of Talbot in church, a first meeting in which the two exchanged knowing looks from behind their fans but never spoke, Elizabeth Carter wrote to Wright that “Miss Talbot is absolutely my passion; I think of her all day, dream of her all night, and one way or another introduce her into every subject I talk of” (1809: 2–3). Thus began a devoted friendship that lasted until Talbot’s death from cancer in 1770 at the age of forty-eight.

The two women were very much alike: both refused to marry, both suffered from occasional bouts of depression, both shared a passionate interest in Classical philosophy and religion, and both held markedly ambivalent attitudes toward their own professional lives. Talbot's body of work, which includes essays, poems, religious meditations, and other occasional pieces, "marks Talbot as an early rational moralist" (Zuk), but she was reluctant even to circulate those works within her circle of friends. Instead, she contented herself with encouraging her writer-friends — including Carter, whose translation of the works of Epictetus was Talbot's brainchild, and Samuel Richardson, who relied on Talbot for help in planning and editing his third novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*.⁵

Elizabeth Carter did publish during her lifetime, but she, too, seemed to eschew the literary spotlight. Very early in her professional life, she was "floated" in the literary marketplace by her father, who, "unable to provide her with an adequate dowry, . . . determined to speculate on her literary assets" (Clery 76). During her time in London, Carter submitted poems to *The Gentlemen's Magazine* and worked as a translator, publishing Jean-Pierre de Crousaz's biting *Examination of Mr. Pope's Essay on Man* (1738) and Francesco Algarotti's *Newton's Philosophy Explain'd for the Use of the Ladies* (1739). However, in 1739, at the age of twenty-three, she abruptly — and somewhat mysteriously — returned to her father's house in Deal, where she lived in retirement for nearly twenty years. During this time, she published and circulated a few of her poems, but it was only with the appearance of *All the Works of Epictetus which are now Extant* in 1758 that Elizabeth Carter would publish under her own name.

Carter's choice to leave London continues to puzzle literary critics and to elicit responses that underscore our unshakable investment in publication as the definition of professional authorship. Norma Clarke, for instance, comparing Carter's career to her contemporary and friend Samuel Johnson's, concludes that "Carter chose a life that was *manageable*" (26, emphasis added). Clarke's word choice implies a degree of discomfort — as though Johnson were the risk-taker while Carter shied away from the challenges of professional authorship. Of course, if Carter's life was "manageable," then Talbot's was downright comfortable; accordingly, we need to reconsider models that privilege publication if

⁵ For a more detailed account of Talbot's relationship with Richardson and her contribution to his novel, see E. J. Clery's chapter on Richardson, "Out of the Closet: Richardson and the Cult of Literary Women" (2004: 132–70).

we are going to take Carter and Talbot seriously as writers. Certainly, both women were concerned with their reputations, and so might think of their decision not to embrace the role of the professional writer as a calculated one. After all, Carter and Talbot may not have been *publishing*, but they were certainly *writing* — and writing a good deal. Writing letters, it would seem, allowed both authors to maneuver within an “extreme and gendered domestic privacy” and create a comprehensive way of seeing (Guest 2000: 110).

In fact, Talbot and Carter recognized and exploited the generative potential of the letter, the way in which it is always subject to interpretation and play. Letters “imply one another, following a circular rhythm based on chronological contingency” (Goodman 140). The writer addresses herself to another in the future, while simultaneously addressing herself to one in the past. In this way, the letter extends outward in time; it allows for a “conversation” that occurs, not only or even primarily in the present, but in several temporal moments at once. Moreover, the letter is dependent upon a writer and a reader, bound up in that other “rhythm” between letter-writer and recipient. In other words, letters allow for a degree of inter-subjective feedback denied by other genres: we are invited to read them as personal messages, as open “conversations” between friends. Instead of a model of authorship that privileges the production of single-author texts for an anonymous reading public, Carter and Talbot present us with an alternative: a vision of authorship that is social, inter-subjective, and friendly. As Carter herself puts it in a letter to fellow Bluestocking Elizabeth Vesey, “there is something very different in the kind of impression made on the heart of a friend to which [one’s letters] are immediately addressed, and the judgment of an uninterested reader” (1809, IV: 74).

“My time runs out thus imperceptibly”: Catherine Talbot’s Dying Life

Carter’s “interested” reader is a sad, philosophical voice, as Talbot explores the meditative potential of the epistolary genre. Talbot struggled with depression throughout her life, and this “splenetick” turn lends to her written work a reflective tone (Carter 1809, I: 37). Her letters, like the one dated 1761, are extended mediations on the mortal condition:

I was meditating yesterday upon death, till I felt myself amazed how one could ever think of conversing on any other subject — and yet ‘tis almost the only subject that is never treated of in conversation farther than as a mere uninteresting fact. Were any number of persons intended to embark

for a distant unknown country, of whom *some* might be called upon tomorrow, and *all* must be called thither soon, would they not whenever they met as friends and fellow travellers be enquiring amongst themselves how each was provided for the journey; what accounts each had heard of the place; the terms of reception; what passports; what recommendations; what interest and hopes each had secured; what treasures remitted; what protection insured; and excite each other to dispatch what yet was possible to be done, and might to-morrow be irretrievably too late? — Methinks it would sit pleasingly on the mind, when a friend was vanished out of this visible world to have such conversations to reflect on! — What astonishing scenes are now opened to the minds of many with whom a few months ago we used familiarly, and triflingly to converse? With whom we have wasted many an inestimable hour! (Carter 1809, II: 391–92)

"I was meditating yesterday upon death": with this first line, so striking in its nonchalance, Talbot opens up the conversation to include that most forbidden of subjects. But Talbot's meditation, surprisingly enough, is not morbid: she launches into a delightful image of travelers, treasures, and passports. In fact, the richness of this passage, with its "astonishing scenes," seems to want to challenge the way we traditionally think about mortality, for here it is death, and not life, that offers a unique kind of pleasure. Here, and in the correspondence as a whole, death is *the* topic, transformed from "a mere uninteresting fact" to an "astonishing scene." To discuss death, then, is to embrace a particular way of being in the world. For one thing, such conversation serves as a corrective to "wast[ing] many an inestimable hour" in "trifling" chitchat. But talking about death does not simply give us something better to do with our time; rather, it opens up discourse itself, as "such conversations" beget further conversation.

Forced to keep up with the hectic social schedule of the Archbishop's household, Talbot struggles to find meaning and pleasure in a world that seems to lack both, a world only characterized by the mundane and anxiety-producing "duty of conversation" (Carter 1809, II: 249). "I love to love and trifle too as much as you do," she writes to Carter in 1757. "It is not being in *merry*, but in *formal* company that I find fault with, and more than half my life passes in mere empty form" (Carter 1809, II: 248).⁶ This

⁶This motif is characteristic of diurnal writings by women. As Stuart Sherman reminds us, diarists may "worry a lot," but women's worry takes a slightly different turn, as it "aris[es] out of gendered arrangements by which social obligations, impinging on women's time, forestall their writing" (265). Female diarists — and, we could add, letter-writers — "must write selectively and intermittently, leaving days and moments (however reluctantly) unrecorded" (253).

fear of time passing away, wasting away “in mere empty form,” lies at the very heart of Talbot’s epistolary concerns. She even goes so far as to propose an epistolary “experiment” in which she writes, “journal-wise,” one or two sentences each day: “Then it *saves* time instead of *wasting* it, as all formal Letter writing does, for it will most agreeably fill those bits and ends of time which one too often whiles away” (Carter 1809, III: 138, 120, 124). (Sadly, the experiment fails, and in a few months Talbot begins to complain that she is behind again in her letter-writing.) She lives always with an eye to the future, but such a pose is not simply forward-thinking; rather, it is predicated on a dark recognition that her past and present selves are always lacking. In this sense, Talbot literally wastes time — or rather, wastes away in the face of time:

Letters received ten months ago unanswered, books borrowed before Christmas unread, and all this without my being conscious of any very useful business or any great degree of wilful idleness. — This is but an indifferent view of life — If my time runs out thus imperceptibly without any visible expence, there must be some secret cheat I put upon myself which ought to be well looked into, and I thank you for calling upon me to do it — “throw hours away?” — “Throw empires, and be blameless.” (Carter 1809, II: 216)

Talbot’s ending reference is to Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, first published in 1742, and the passage as a whole calls to mind Young’s attitude: “Time destroy’d / Is suicide, where more than blood is spilt” (1.290–91).⁷ Indeed, according to Talbot’s calculation, “time runs out . . . without any visible expence.” There is a mad rush forward and yet Talbot

⁷Talbot’s allusion is taken from Part One of Young’s poem, “On Life, Death, and Immortality.” The larger context is thus:

Man sleeps, and man alone; and man, whose fate,
Fate irreversible, entire, extreme,
Endless, hair-hung, breeze-shaken, o’er the gulf
A moment trembles; drops! and man, for whom
All else is in alarm; man, the sole cause
Of this surrounding storm! — and yet he sleeps,
As the storm rock’d to rest. “Throw *years* away?”
Throw *empires*, and be blameless. Moments seize;
Heaven’s on their wing: a moment we may wish
When worlds want wealth to buy. Bid Day stand still,
Bid him drive back his car, and re-import
The period past, re-give the given hour.
Lorenzo, more than miracles we want:
Lorenzo — O for yesterdays to come! (298–311)

hangs back, busily doing something — what, she does not say — that comes to nothing, only “unanswered” letters and “unread” books. She is not idle, but her activities strangely lack content, as she seems to lag behind time’s rapid march, busily ineffectual. Such a vision is remarkably different from that delightful journey to “a distant unknown country” with which Talbot opened her meditation upon death. Gone is the image of careful preparation, the leisurely packing and preparing of passports. In its place we are left with a careful but desperate settling of temporal accounts. We are left, that is, with a failed attempt to quantify, to calculate, the self. In her *Reflections on the Seven Days of the Week*, Talbot had written, “Another week is past; another of those little limited Portions of Time, which number out my Life” (44). Here, the vision is much darker, for in *Reflections*, true repentance, once offered, “will be graciously accepted.” In the passage quoted above, however, no amount of “deliberate Resolutions for the future” proves adequate to the task (Talbot 48), for the subject is beyond repair.

Talbot’s letters are full of such ups and downs, new beginnings and pledges that come out of a profound fear of time’s eternal march. “I promise,” Talbot declares in 1758 as she prepares to retire for the season to Lambeth, “to become a more punctual Correspondent for the future, for methinks the great advantage of going to a new place, is the breaking off old habits that were faulty, and setting every thing, one’s time, and all in such exact order, that proper time and place may be allotted for each.” Everything in its “proper” place, even time itself: this is Talbot’s oft-rehearsed fantasy. However, the letter immediately takes a more speculative turn:

These are the cabinets, the paintings, and gildings, and all the fine fittings up on which I have set my heart. My large room is abundance of leisure which I hope to find at Lambeth, but which by the interruptions of a London life was all cut into closets and passages, and those were all filled with rubbish too. This room must be supported upon pretty strong arches and pillars of useful and necessary employments, serious studies, and domestic attentions — else the weight of it would crush one very soon. Between these at regular distances hang the portraits of friends, all drawn in the truest, yet most favorable likenesses (not by that dauber London spleen as they used to be) and under them on pedestals of marble engraved with benefits, (there is sand at their feet to scribble momentary vexations) must be citrons, oranges, and such pleasant evergreens to breathe out an agreeable odour, and a grateful perfume: some roses too with as few thorns as possible, and here and there a sprig of myrtle and bay. In proper places must be brackets for ornaments of ingenious fancy, and secretaires to hold amusing

books and materials for writing Letters regularly and duly where they are wished. In this room every thing must be so ordered, that every necessary trifle shall add a grace to it by the taste and propriety of their placing — A wonderful fine allegory this! to be sure I am dropped asleep in some cabinet warehouse, and am telling you my dream. However 'tis a morning dream and has some truth in it; for I am sensible that of late years I have slattered away both my time, temper, and spirits, and I am seriously determined to mend all by a new train of life. (Carter 1809, II: 277–78)

Passages such as this one — philosophical, profoundly introspective — are characteristic of Talbot's letters to Carter. She is a "dream[er]" whose visions re-imagine the contours of a self always conceived of as lacking. Talbot's meditation lends a new meaning to the phrase "spring cleaning," as the self is emptied out and reordered to suit "a new train of life." As Talbot describes her mind as a well-ordered room with distinctive architectural features, she not only clears away the "rubbish" and "spleen" of her past habitation but also re-creates it as a kind of salon, a parlor fitted with all the modern refinements: paintings, pillars, pedestals, "secretaires to hold amusing books and materials for writing Letters" — "every necessary trifle" to add "grace" to a space. This is a fantasy of self-recreation, but it is just as much a fantasy of recreation, of that "abundance of leisure" never possible in Talbot's domestic life of duty and "formal" social engagements. In this, her "fine allegory," to narrate the floor-plan of one's newly furnished imagination is to model a form of engagement, of being in the world, that is intellectual and not emotional: this is a realm of "useful and necessary employments, serious studies, and domestic attentions" — not of "that dauber London spleen," of uncontrollable feelings, of "extravagant" desires.

Talbot struggles throughout the letters with what she considers her uncontrollable feelings and desires, and the result is a slow erasure of desire — and finally of self. Take, for instance, a letter Talbot writes to Carter after Carter's abrupt departure from Lambeth:

I believe you would have come into my room again that night, as I wished you then, and as I am now glad you did not, had you been aware into what a solemn train of thought I was led by the shutting of the door. "Now she is absolutely gone — I have not even a moment to beg her pardon, or to make out that I have not been quite so much to blame — *When* we may meet again is uncertain as human life. *How* we may meet again, is uncertain as human happiness. In this *Now* of health, and prosperity, and ease, with every thing dearest to me around, I have always received her with infectious dejection and uncomfortable gloom. How *dare* I make any resolutions for a future time — do I deserve that *such* an opportunity should ever be

granted me again! *This* opportunity then *is* gone irrevocably — The time *must* come when *every* opportunity of *every* amendment will be gone as *irrevocably*. The *last* of all last moments is hastening — and at present all the impression I leave on the mind of my most partial friend is gloom, and uncomfortableness.” Fatal dream? But now at last I am thoroughly awake, and a thousand thanks to you as the kind instrument of awakening me? I sat down and cried comfortably, writ you a note, which I will enclose, and then prudently determined not to send it, lest it should hurt you. (Carter 1809, III: 3–4)

Carter’s exit becomes an opportunity to reflect: on time, on death, on the value of human relationships in the living present. As we read on, though, Talbot’s reverie devolves into a sermon, delivered to herself, complete with directions for which words to emphasize. Talbot’s fear here is not so much a fear of death — that “*last* of all moments” — but of something even more unrepresentable. “In this *Now* of health, and prosperity, and ease,” Talbot has wasted “*this* opportunity.” But what exactly has been wasted, what about herself that needs “amendment,” is left unsaid. Talbot’s desperate line of self-questioning suggests a serious sin, something that threatens to undo her and yet cannot be named. I am reminded of Talbot’s busy ineffectualness, the propensity to waste time that so obsessed her in the quotation we considered above, but what this unnamed sin might be is elided here. In this sense, Talbot seems incapable of self-articulation; all that remains is the “gloom” and “uncomfortableness” of self-doubt and self-loathing.

Talbot’s letter performs this self-erasure at the organizational level, as well, for her response to her disagreement with Carter reads like a letter within a letter within a letter, removing her own desire, her own feelings, from the foreground. She opens with her immediate reaction — “the shutting of the door” — only to launch into an extended monologue about what we might call an existential crisis: “The *last* of all last moments is hastening.” She ends with a reference to yet another letter, attached — another self-quotation of sorts. Such layering suggests a burying of desire, a burying of personal response whereby the letter-writer can only quote from her feelings; she can never speak them directly.⁸ “How *dare*

⁸I am reminded here of Linda Kauffman’s reading of the writing heroine of amatory fiction in her now-classic *Discourses of Desire* (1986). This heroine is, Kauffman writes, “the Type, who formulates what society represses, which is far more, in fact, than a few tears. Tear stains on the paper . . . are visible signs of the body’s pain.” Talbot’s pain is visible in a similar way, for her unusual writing practices become the legible sign of her pain, “transmissions,” Kauffman might say, “of [her] body into text” (316).

I make any resolutions for a future time”: Talbot’s mantra indicates that she conceives of herself as worthless, lacking, and even empty.

As she becomes sicker, her anxieties increase, and this self-erasure becomes all the more explicit. “Am I in the right,” she asks Carter after a long bout of illness,

for trying to amuse away those hours, which would otherwise be hours of heavy and painful recollections? — Alas, I cannot help recollecting many omissions I was guilty of this sad time twelvemonth — many inestimable opportunities lost by a needless care of my own health and spirits: and all these months since what have I been doing but merely nursing myself! What improvements have I made from trials so heavy! I cannot even trace out what particular fault was to be corrected by them — And what answerable return have I made for so many blessings as have been mingled with them? I live at present almost wholly to indulgence. Come, I must leave off, or you will be angry with me. (Carter 1809, III: 183)

Talbot’s tortured syntax suggests yet another existential crisis, this one made all the more poignant by her approaching death. Crippled by self-doubt, she can no longer care for her health without feeling guilty: in the end, self-correction amounts to the absolute erasure of the self’s desire, for no “improvements” come from “needless care of my own health and spirits.” Talbot’s “I,” an important repetition in this passage, is always accompanied by its own “omission,” either in the form of a question (“what have I been doing?”) or self-denial (“I must leave off”). She seems to exist in several moments at once: in the past, characterized by those “many inestimable opportunities lost”; in the present, where she resists her own desire to “indulge” in self-reflection; and in some unknowable, unrepresentable future, that place where she must account for any “answerable return” on her behavior. Talbot hovers between absence and presence, between living and dying, and she is all too aware of it.

In her final letter to Carter, Talbot makes this self-effacement all the more unmistakable and poignant. “Should we really want you sooner I will honestly let you know, depend upon it I will,” she begins. (What follows, Pennington informs us, “was erased in Miss Talbot’s Letter but not so as to be illegible”): “Want you one does always when one has you not, but there is such a thing as consideration” (Carter 1809, III: 203). Pennington reads this dramatic aside as “an instance of want of selfishness in that weak state” (Carter 1809, III: 203n.65), but there is a kind of self-directed violence to it as well. The pseudo-poetic, impacted rhythm of Talbot’s expunged deathbed wish — “want you one does always when

one has you not" — demands a second, even third, reading, and in the end, dramatizes Talbot's grand exit: the "I" here — "I will honestly let you know" — speaks, we learn from the crossed-out line, a lie. "One" *does* want you; "one" *always* wants you, "one" is about to die, but one must be considerate. Catherine Talbot is about to be reborn as "Catherine Talbot," the ghost who will haunt the letters and whose absent presence will "give the time of friendship" (Derrida 1997: 14).

It is in her prolonged epistolary death that Talbot allows for what Derrida has termed "the anguished apprehension of mourning," which, he claims, forms the very basis of friendship. This is the mourning of death before death, the mourning of the other before her loss even occurs: it "haunts and plunges the friend, before mourning, into mourning. This apprehension weeps before the lamentation, it weeps death before death, and this is the very respiration of friendship, the extreme of its possibility" (1997: 14). In this case, though, Catherine Talbot enacts her own apprehension of mourning; to use Derrida's beautifully metaphorical phrase, she is "speaking on the edge of [her] tomb" (1997: 5). In weeping her death before her death, Talbot, not unlike Richardson's Clarissa, narrates her own exit from the text.⁹ Because she knows she is dying, she is able to "announce the unforeseeable" (Derrida 2001: 136) and give voice to the fundamental way friendship works. Just as important, though, in grieving with Talbot over time wasted — and over a self wasting away — we readers can do nothing but wait patiently for Catherine Talbot to die and become that "perfect pattern of evangelical goodness," that perfect, because perfectly dead, friend.

"I remember when I once felt the shock of an earthquake . . .": Catherine Talbot's Living Death

Talbot's final departure from the text ironically signals her arrival, for even though her writing life may be over, her textual life has just begun. She has become that friend who always dies — that friend on whose death Carter's ultimate "instruction" is founded. Indeed, for Carter, Talbot's passing proves a painful education. On the first anniversary of Talbot's death, Carter writes to Elizabeth Montagu in spirits "particularly low," contemplating her loss: "I remember when I once felt the shock of

⁹ It is not unlikely that Talbot had Clarissa Harlowe in mind during her months of suffering. She was a devoted fan of and friend to Richardson, and counted *Clarissa* among her favorite books.

an earthquake, long after it was over, the ground seemed to sink beneath my feet, when in reality all was safe and still.” In this particularly moving image, Carter gives voice to one of the ways grief works on the self, the way in which it throws that self backward in time, to the space of the deathbed and those “recollections arising from this sad anniversary” (1817, II: 95–96). But the aftershock of Talbot’s death also serves an important forward-looking function in the letters, allowing Carter to fashion a “view of extraordinary scope and authority” (Guest 2000: 110) of a way of being in the world and, perhaps more importantly, a way of being remembered in the world. In other words, with Talbot’s death, Carter can finally glimpse the future — her own future.

The price of such a future, though, is Catherine Talbot, who becomes in death a character authored by Carter herself. And so we go from the living Talbot — morbid, unsure, generally anxious about most things — to a different Talbot, read retroactively and retrospectively — referred to time and again as a “perfect pattern” of friendship and goodness. Such a moniker gives us some sense of Talbot’s status in death as a kind of narrative placeholder, but her death is itself relived over and over in the text. For Carter takes on the charge of telling, and re-telling, the story of her friend’s final hours in a series of letters to both Elizabeth Vesey and Elizabeth Montagu, and the way she does so reveals much about what has changed with the death of the friend. Talbot’s death allows for a degree of retrospective organization — an articulation, that is, of a narrative unity that makes sense of what is unrepresentable in all life histories: death.

Let us consider at least one of these many iterations of Carter’s grief — her first account of Talbot’s death, in a letter to Elizabeth Vesey, dated January 15, 1770. Carter begins her letter with, as she writes, “a confirmation of the reality” of what Vesey has already seen in the papers, but she moves immediately to

some account of myself. I am tolerably well, and my spirits, though low, are very composed. With the deepest feeling of my own unspeakable loss of one of the dearest and most invaluable blessings of my life, I am to the highest degree thankful to the Divine goodness for removing her from the multiplied and aggravated sufferings, which in a longer struggle with such a distemper, must probably have been unavoidable. The calm and peaceable sorrow of tenderness and affection, sweetly alleviated by the joyful assurance of her happiness, is a delightful sentiment compared with what I have suffered for these last two or three months. (1809, III: 205–206)

What I find particularly strange and telling about this passage is the extent to which Talbot's pain — those "multiplied and aggravated sufferings" — and her final release from pain become synonymous with Carter's own experience: she, too, has "suffered for these last two or three months" a suffering now somewhat "alleviated" by Talbot's death. To mourn for the loss of the loved other is also to mourn for oneself; that is, mourning always tends toward a certain degree of narcissism, as the friend is now "at once too absent and too close: in me, inside me" (Derrida 2001: 114). And Talbot seems to speak in and through Carter in this passage: relative to Carter's (and Talbot's) past experience at least, the present is "delightful," a word that puts us in mind of Talbot's "astonishing scene" of death's travelers. The two friends participate in a kind of post-mortem conversation, as both their words and their experiences mix and mingle on the page. The implications of this conflation prove somewhat disturbing, however, for as Talbot fades away, Carter seems to rise out of her ashes; this is, after all, "some account of myself," born out of an account of the death of the other.

Carter continues by going back to the past to recount Catherine Talbot's final days, and she does so with all the care Richardson reserved for Clarissa:

Two or three days before her death she was seized with a sudden hoarseness and cough, which seemed the effect of a cold, and from which bleeding relieved her; but there remained an oppression from phlegm which was extremely troublesome to her. On the ninth this symptom increased, and she appeared heavy and sleepy, which was attributed to an opiate the night before. I staid with her till she went to bed, with an intention of going afterwards into her room, but was told she was asleep. I went away about nine, and in less than an hour afterwards she waked; and after the struggle of scarcely a minute, it pleased God to remove her spotless soul from its mortal sufferings to that heaven for which her whole life had been an uninterrupted preparation. Never surely was there a more perfect pattern of evangelical goodness, decorated by all the ornaments of a highly improved understanding, and recommended by a sweetness of temper, and an elegance and politeness of manners, of a peculiar and more engaging kind than in any other character I ever knew. (1807, III: 206)

The first half of the passage presents the dying friend in glaringly corporeal form: she is hoarse, coughing, phlegmatic, heavy, sleepy. By the end of the passage, though, we have a very different Talbot, the elegant, polite, engaging character — that "perfect pattern of evangelical goodness." Catherine Talbot becomes "Catherine Talbot," the exemplar, the

quiet sufferer whose “whole life” was “an uninterrupted preparation” for death.

As Carter offers Vesey a way of reading Catherine Talbot in death, she transforms herself from recorder to interpreter. She has, she writes, “just returned from seeing all that was mortal of my angelic friend deposited in the earth,” and she concludes her letter by reflecting on the education she has received:

Little, alas! infinitely too little, have I yet profited by the blessing of such an example. God grant that her memory, which I hope will ever survive in my heart, may produce a happier effect.

Adieu, my dear friend, God bless you, and conduct us both to that happy assembly, where the spirits of the just shall dread no future separation! And may we both remember that awful truth, that we can hope to die the death of the righteous only by resembling their lives. (1809, III: 207)

In life, Talbot’s “example” went unheeded, but in death she “may produce a happier effect.” Carter moves between past, present, and future in this passage, and in doing so restructures the way we think of memory itself. To “profit by” Talbot’s “example” is to take her “memory” into the future — to allow it to “survive in my heart” and “produce a happier effect.” But here, strangely, memory is future-oriented, for what we “remember” is that we “hope to die.”

What I want to underscore is the extent to which the *entirety* of Carter’s correspondence serves as a kind of funeral oration for Talbot, a work of mourning that fixes her memory after (and even, as we have learned, before) her death. Indeed, Carter’s eulogy works in the past, present, and future all at once; hers is a *story* that lends narrative unity to Talbot’s life history and to her own. Carter reassembles Talbot in writing in order to “resemble her life.” In effect, Talbot’s death becomes the origin myth for Elizabeth Carter, for though Carter cannot write her own complete narrative, since she cannot write its final moment, she can author Talbot’s and, in doing so, “conduct [herself] to that happy assembly.” For Carter, Talbot’s death, because of its absolute *representability*, allows for a new articulation of selfhood, born out of friendship and (of course) death.

Thus, after Talbot’s death, Carter has license to dwell on *herself*. In a 1770 letter to Elizabeth Vesey, written just after her friend’s death, Carter reflects on Talbot’s transformation from corporeal to ethereal and uses that reflection as a springboard for further reflection:

but I do not withdraw myself from the society of my friends; and though I am not capable of any high degree of pleasure, my thoughts are perfectly

awake to the innumerable and unmerited blessings which I enjoy, and I hope no deprivation will ever make me forget how sensibly I should feel the loss of any of those which remain. Under these restrictions I believe you will not accuse me of indulging any unreasonable grief, by fixing my attention as much as possible on the dear object who has engaged it for so long a course of years. While she was in a mortal state I was accustomed to look up to her as the most perfect pattern of goodness I ever knew; and now my thoughts pursue her into the world of glorified spirits with more awful impressions: and I cannot help considering her sometimes as more present to my mind than when the veil of corporeal obstruction confused her view. There is no describing the various sentiments with which this idea strikes me — From the whole of what I feel on this affecting subject, I find reason for thankfulness. (1809, IV: 4–5)

We should note that Carter begins with a series of disclaimers — “but I do not withdraw myself . . . my thoughts are perfectly awake” — that ironically allow her to withdraw, to “[fix] my attention as much as possible.” Death has become, not just *the* topic of conversation, but a catalyst for self-reflection. Just as we saw in her narrative of Talbot’s death above, Carter fixes the subject of the eulogy into an object, a vehicle for self-directed rumination and interpretation. In other words, Carter’s rumination is not only on death and mortality, as is the case with a eulogy, but on selfhood, on the very conditions of selfhood. Death gives Carter license to dwell on her self, on her mind: notice, for instance, the emphasis on the “I” in Carter’s syntax (“my mind,” “this idea strikes *me*,” “I feel,” “I find reason”). Here, then, grief *becomes* self-reflection. It becomes the very definition of selfhood.

For Carter, then, death is retrospective, but it is also prospective insofar as it allows for a certain knowledge of the future, what Carter terms in the passage above “a reason for thankfulness.” After Talbot’s death, Carter’s “thoughts pursue her”: death promises forward momentum. Of course, Carter’s “thankfulness” is rooted in her belief that her fellow “travellers will at last be sure to meet in the same common and eternal abode” (1809, IV: 63) — an image straight out of Talbot’s death reverie we considered earlier. This is, in other words, a Christian conception of posterity, founded in her belief in a future meeting. In a 1765 letter to Elizabeth Montagu, Carter puts a finer point on this Christian vision:

If all our hopes were terminated by the grave, what a melancholy must accompany the anticipation of every pleasure, from the reflection that our passage to it, is insensibly wasting that existence which is the foundation of every enjoyment! But by the hope which connects time with eternity,

the idea of death vanishes into a trifling interval, or a mere imaginary point. (1817, I: 270)

Carter's reflections on posterity as a journey that lends "hope" to the "melancholy" of the grave should put us in mind of Catherine Talbot's reflections on death as, on the one hand, a wonderful journey of "fellow travelers" and, on the other, that "last of all moments," "when *every* opportunity of *every* amendment will be gone." But Talbot's obsession, her fear of wasting time — and of wasting away — in the face of death, is negated here, made into an effect of what already is not the case: "*If* all our hopes *were* terminated by the grave." In Carter's vision of things, human time and godly time merge in the "hope" of eternal life — and it is the "idea," or fear, of death, and not the person, that "vanishes."

Talbot may become the ultimate example or "pattern" for Carter, but ironically her death is the lesson that teaches Carter what she already knows: death is not the end, for when we die, we live on — in heaven, certainly, but also in the mouths of others, in the writings of our friends, in our own writings. In this sense, the Carter-Talbot letters are fundamentally philosophical: dialogic, conversational, and semi-public, the letter provides the perfect philosophical forum to reflect on the relationship between self and other. Since letters always reference the scene of writing (a quality Richardson and other writers knew how to exploit so well in the epistolary novels popular in the eighteenth century), they work to ameliorate one of the fundamental problems of philosophical writing: "the speaker tends to disappear in the ideal philosophical situation, to become in some sense a medium if he is true to the rules of philosophical discourse" (Richetti 6). As Richetti rightly observes, the act of writing is a variable often ignored in philosophical discourse, but letters, as a genre, invite us to read them as personal, as between friends. They find their power, to quote Elizabeth Carter once again, in the "impression made on the heart of a friend to which they are immediately addressed" (1809, IV: 74).

We could say, then, that the Carter-Talbot letters attempt to inject writing and reading subjects back into philosophical discourse and then theorize the interplay between those subjects. This is, in other words, a philosophy of friendship, and Carter and Talbot form in the letters what David Clark has termed "a friendship of thought" (293), an intellectual comradeship of thinking and feeling that is not necessarily bound by time and space. Clark uses the phrase to describe Derrida's relationship with Martin Heidegger: Derrida reads Heidegger "not as a closed book but as a kind of philosophical postcard, or perhaps as 'the remainders of a

recently burned correspondence” (300).¹⁰ In reading Derrida’s relationship to Heidegger in this manner, Clark links posterity, philosophy, and epistolary correspondence. “Among close friends,” he writes, “something far away comes; in memory of the intimacy those friends afforded me. . . . I found myself promised to the future” (293). Such an understanding is crucial to our reading of Carter’s epistolary friendship with Talbot. In other words, Talbot’s dying life and her living death do not simply remind Carter that she herself is alive, or that she will someday die. Rather, they set the stage for what Carter herself terms a “hope of any future representation” (1817, IV: 15). They promise her to the future.

Therefore, the epistolary philosophy to which we are introduced in the Carter-Talbot correspondence is a philosophy of friendship, certainly, but it is also a world view that allows Elizabeth Carter to claim her place in a posterity of her own choosing. As Carter had written of poet Elizabeth Rowe in 1737, “virtue sacred and thy maker’s praise. / This still shall *last*, when every meaner theme / In death must quit the memory like a dream” (1990: 20–22, emphasis added). Given Carter’s own retirement from publication, we forget the extent to which she was nonetheless interested in what would *last* that ultimate moment, death, when everything “quit[s] the memory.” She would leave behind letters, which would last — in fact, would *outlast*. Admittedly, this vision of authorial afterlife seems rather alien to us now, familiar as we are with the image of the professional author, writing by himself, always with an eye to publish. As Deidre Lynch has noted, the Bluestockings are, in the end, “awkward subjects for a literary history organized (as it would come to be during the age of professions that dawned during their lifetimes) around individual authors and publications” (215). But Carter seems to celebrate a different kind of authorship, a different — and decidedly feminine — form of literary estate-planning. This promise of eternal life creates for Carter a unique kind of posterity, one more in line with her philosophical and religious beliefs (not to mention her lifelong discomfort at being in the literary spotlight). As she herself puts it, by “connect[ing] time with eternity, the idea of death vanishes into a trifling interval”: that is, in reflecting upon, obsessing over, and narrativizing Catherine Talbot’s death, Elizabeth Carter also creates in the letters a place for herself in eternity. She writes and reflects upon her own life and, in doing so, formulates an epistolary philosophy that, even if it were to remain unpublished, “still shall last.”

¹⁰ Clark is quoting Derrida’s *The Post Card* (1987).

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