Introduction: Rethinking Loss; Remapping the Novel

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute.

(Sigmund Freud, Letter to Binswanger)

It is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born.

(Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*)

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, novelists on both sides of the Atlantic found themselves at a loss. While earlier writers had surely broken from past traditions, they faced a new kind of problem. Heirs to a cultural past they refused to inherit or decisively mourn, writers as disparate as Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner thus construed history itself as in some sense impossible. These novelists recognized the need to mourn a range of cataclysmic social events, including the slaughter of war, modernization of culture, and the disappearance of God and tradition. They also understood, however, the impossibility of this mourning, finding its terms utterly outmoded. While they felt compelled to write about modernity’s losses, these writers participated in the critique of Victorian
mourning practices widely reported in the mainstream press.¹ They ridiculed the social rituals of nineteenth-century grief as dubious expressions of sentimentality, ostentatious displays of wealth, and sources of financial anxiety and working-class hardship. *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* demonstrates that the dissolution of the very customs of bereavement reflected a fundamentally new way of thinking about loss, one that generated, crucially, the unique aestheticism of the modernist novel. Modernist aesthetics, as I show, engages an innovative conception of mourning; it not only reflects a shift in emphasis from the communal to the psychic dimensions of grief, but also spurns consolation and the conventional aim of closure. In so doing, the aesthetic practices of this experimental fiction established a politically progressive politics of mourning for the culture of modernity. The modernist novel, as we shall also see, defined the terms of a new mourning practice for later writers, terms whose democratizing aims would be challenged and rejected in the late-modernist fiction of Evelyn Waugh but ultimately reanimated and extended in the postmodern novels of Emma Donoghue and Jeanette Winterson, novels that succeed, like their modernist precursors, in representing the open-ended aspects of loss to promote new forms of identity and social change.

Inaugurated in the modernist fiction of Woolf and Faulkner, the conception of mourning as an interminable rather than finishable labor resulted from a steadfast rejection of all symbolic forms of consolation: religious, philosophical, and cultural sources of meaning that promised to neutralize bereaved sadness and bring mourning to an end. We have tended to think, however, that while the modernist novel shores up the instabilities of inherited meaning, it also constitutes a renewal of consolation for the modern age. Leo Bersani, for one, has claimed that modernist writers represent the formal unity of their own fictional inventions as a source of consolation for loss, the only consolation, in fact, they perceive to be available in a world where epistemological certainty and social stability have disappeared.² *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* challenges the view of the modernist novel as an aesthetic form of consolation, and thus intervenes, as I discuss below, in recent scholarly debates about modernism, consolation, and the cultural politics of mourning. In what follows, I argue the idea of formal unity that has come to define modernist aesthetics, a unity that has been used to impugn