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'Such the conditions of our love' –The Surreal and Ethical Lack of a Centre in *Jacob's Room* and *Tender Buttons*

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By Matias Loikala

This essay explores Virginia Woolf's novel Jacob's Room and Gertrude Stein's poetry collection Tender Buttons, comparing them through the notion of a lack of a centre. Jacob's Room is concerned with this lack through its ambivalent and evasive descriptions of its protagonist and Tender Buttons through its displacement of conventional descriptive logic. I first draw on André Breton's The First Manifesto of Surrealism and its notion of 'elsewhere'[1] to link the lack of a centre to a constant movement away from a settled sense of itself. Both texts exhibit this kind of surrealist movement 'elsewhere', Jacob's Room through its interest in shifting perspectives and Tender Buttons through its interest in the metaphorical nature of poetic expression. Emmanuel Levinas' theories of radical respect towards complete otherness subsequently bring an ethical light to the question of a lack of a centre and its movement 'elsewhere'. In Jacob's Room the ethics of a lack of a centre are largely tied up with its conceptualisation of love and care, whereas in Tender Buttons they show the ethical importance of linguistic play and joy. The two texts therefore look at the surrealist and ethical aspects of the lack of centrality with equal importance but with different emphases on interpersonal love and linguistic joy respectively.

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[1] Andre Breton, 'From the First Manifesto of Surrealism' in Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents, ed. by V. Kolocotroni, J. Goldman and O. Taxidou, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, [1924] 1998), 311.

Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) are both elusive and fragmentary texts, the former through its unconventional portrayal of its protagonist and the latter through its focus on free association as the creator of poetic meaning. In this essay, I will argue that the two texts are concerned with the lack of a centre, leading them to continually look 'elsewhere' in the vein of André Breton's *First Manifesto for Surrealism* (1924). Thus, their processes of signification are constantly shifting away from a definable centre in search of something new and refusing to articulate that something in conventionally intelligible ways. This argument has a crucial ethical aspect concerning Emmanuel Levinas's ideas of Otherness: the two texts portray a lack of centre and a movement 'elsewhere' from it as ethical imperatives. Furthermore, *Jacob's Room* focuses on the ethics of the Other from the perspective of interpersonal relationships and love, while *Tender Buttons* approaches it from a view of joyful linguistic play.

Jacob's Room has an obvious lack of a centre concerning its main character Jacob, but due to
the formal qualities of the text, the novel also seems to constantly fragment itself. The reader expects Jacob, as the protagonist of the text, to be its central focus. In his own way, he fulfils this role, but only through his own absence from it. The text attempts to circle around him, but ends up circling around his absence. The narrator's plight in describing him makes this especially clear: 'But something is always impelling one to hum vibrating, like the hawk moth, at the mouth of the cavern of mystery, endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all' (Woolf [1922] 1992: 97).[2] Here the attempt to define Jacob is compared to a circling moth and Jacob himself to a cavern, alluding to his emptiness. Through this displacement, the text refuses the protagonist to enter his conventional place as the text's centre. This refusal is further heightened by the text's fragmented portrayal of its other characters. The novel has a large number of characters that are present only briefly or fragmentedly,

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[2] Virginia Woolf, Jacob's Room, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1922] 1992), 97.

such as the middle-aged ladies Mrs Pascoe and Mrs Durrant from a seaside village. Their polite but emotionally distant meeting is followed by a sudden shift in focalization of the narration, when the focalization shifts quickly from Mrs Pascoe to Mrs Durrant after the latter has left her house.[3] This shows the cinematic movement of the narration, as the narrator first stays with Mrs Pascoe as she moves back into her cottage and then moves along with Mrs Durrant as she rides away.[4] Through these fluid shifts of the 'eye' of focalization we are presented not only with a fragmented view of Jacob, but also a fragmented view of all other characters, as their entire lives are seen only through the focus on these small, transitory moments. Moreover, these fragmentary views are further reflected in the text's composition. It is largely comprised of individual, scene-like moments, with very little explanatory content connecting them. This makes the text difficult to conjoin into a unified narrative, since the movements from scene to scene happen suddenly and without clear indication of change in narrative. This is evident for example when an argument between Jacob and his best friend Bonamy shifts to a character writing Jacob a letter.[5] The omniscient 'eye' of the narrator moves suddenly from the broken coffee-pot to the letter writer's words of invitation.[6] The effect is intensified by the physical gap on the page between these two scenes, which visually creates the experience of a sudden shift in viewpoint, as if the reader were required to 'leap' from narrative fragment to fragment.

Conversely, *Tender Buttons* takes a different approach to displacing the centre through its refusal of conclusive definitions. The sections 'Objects' and 'Food' are comprised of dictionary-like poems, in which a word (or the title) is followed by a 'definition' (the poem itself). For example, a poem titled 'A new cup and a saucer' reads: 'Enthusiastically hurting a clouded yellow bud and saucer,

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[3] Ibid., 72-73.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 139.

[6] Ibid.

enthusiastically so is the bite in the ribbon.'[7] Rather than literally defining what a cup and a saucer are, the poem compares these everyday objects to a 'clouded yellow bud', a sense of 'enthusiasm' and the violent edge of 'hurting' and 'bite'. The reader can thus sense a feeling of excitement at getting a new possession in an indirect and associative way. As is apparent here, these 'definitions' do not match any conventional and familiar concepts with their subject matter. These 'definition-poems' disturb the conventional idea of signification since they present a pointedly incongruent and unconventional relationship between the signifieds and signifiers of words.[8] Rather, they rely on a sense of metaphorical association – they combine seemingly disparate and unrelated words and then freely decide that these are to be read as being somehow connected. This metaphorical process undoes itself and moves constantly into new combinations, since the nature of free association is to constantly shift elsewhere. This is apparent in the four separate poems titled 'Chicken' that follow each other directly.[9] The definition of 'chickenness' is constantly shifting as the poems constantly recreate fresh viewpoints to juxtapose with the repetition of the title. The 'dictionary-poems' therefore end up highlighting the arbitrary and artificial nature of signification, since they force the reader to connect words with their meanings in wholly metaphorical ways. This shows how the process of signification is not dependent upon stable, 'essential' meanings at all, but rather on a constant movement of connections.

The different ways these texts achieve a 'lack of a centre' resonates strongly with Breton's idea of an 'elsewhere' in his *First Manifesto of Surrealism*. In his manifesto, Breton expounds on his ideas about imagination and the unconscious, and their importance to human freedom. He specifically resists the totalising rationalisation of modern life, arguing that imagination must not be reduced to a 'state of slavery'.[10] Later he writes: 'I believe in the future resolution of these

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[7] Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons, (New York: Dover, [1914] 1997), 11.

[8] Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction, Anniversary ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 84.

[9] Ibid., 35.

[10] Andre Breton, 'From the First Manifesto of Surrealism' in Modernism: An Anthology of

two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, *a surreality*', highlighting the importance of both imaginative and rationalistic attitudes.[11] However, he immediately continues: 'It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, *certain not to find it*' [emphasis added].[12] This points toward the impossibility to grasp any final, fully 'surreal' thing, because it is unattainable in its shifting strangeness. Breton continues this line of argument later on: 'From childhood memories… there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of *having gone astray*, which I hold to be the most fertile that exists'.[13] Here it is specifically the movement away, a step toward something outside centrality, that is seen as the most important. All of this culminates in the final paragraph of the manifesto:

> 'Surrealism […] asserts our complete nonconformism clearly enough so that there can be no question of translating it, at the trial of the real world, as evidence for the defense. It could, on the contrary, only serve to justify the complete state of distraction […] It is living and ceasing to live that are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.'[14]

Breton's strange notion seems to posit that the 'quest of surreality' is existence itself, which is fundamentally a movement somewhere outside of itself: a lack of concentration that leads the mind to step 'elsewhere', this 'elsewhere' being left completely undefined. Surrealism for Breton is a force that constantly renews itself through its continuous search for difference.

This elusive, undefined and unstable 'elsewhere' of surrealism is easily found in *Jacob's Room* because it refuses to arrive at a definable centre, constantly turning

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Sources and Documents, ed. by V. Kolocotroni, J. Goldman and O. Taxidou, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, [1924] 1998), 308.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 308-309.

[13] Ibid., 310.

[14] Ibid., 311.

away from it. The resemblance between Woolf's depiction of inner and outer life and Breton's ideas on reality and imagination has been previously noted by Amy Bromley, who writes that 'in the use of strange and fluid perspectives, the juxtaposition of incongruous images, and in moments of vision or reverie, Woolf and the Surrealists alter the texture and appearance of what we usually consider to be realistic.' [15] She identifies the source of this as the dialectical relationship of dream and reality. Rather than synthesising this dialectic into something clearly defined, they retain 'a gap' between each other that enables a continuous combination of subjects and objects.[16] This 'gap' is similar to Breton's 'elsewhere': 'In the gap that always still separates subject and object is the potential space of "elsewhere" […] There is a resonance here with Woolf's search for "the essential thing," which is always "moving off, or on"'.[17] As this comparison with Woolf shows, the 'elsewhere's entire function is movement, a repeated 'going astray' which retains its own newness and strangeness. Indeed, the constant shifting of perspectives and refusal to define characters in *Jacob's Room* is a search for this 'elsewhere', which cannot be conclusively ever found. This is also exemplified in how the narrator compares people of London with pictures in books, which we 'turn over and over' in search of the one we want.[18] The comparison quickly becomes metafictional: 'It is the same with books. What do we seek through millions of pages? Still hopefully turning pages – oh, here is Jacob's room.'[19] Here we seem to suddenly 'find' what we have been looking for in the novel – namely, the novel itself, *Jacob's Room* – only through constantly turning away from it, constantly looking for something else, or for an 'elsewhere' to be.

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[15] Amy Bromley, 'Virginia Woolf's Surrealist Situation of the Object,' Virginia Woolf

Miscellany, No 85, Spring 2014, 21.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Woolf, Jacob's Room, 132.

[19] Ibid.

In comparison, *Tender Buttons* is intimately concerned with 'the elsewhere' through its previously mentioned metaphorical style. The collection has often been compared to cubism and Stein herself has been compared to the painter Pablo Picasso.[20] Jayne L. Walker argues that like Picasso's paintings, Stein's writing changed from 'metonymic' to 'metaphoric' in Roman Jakobson's linguistic terms, 'metonymic' referring to close association of signifiers while 'metaphoric' to their radical combinations.[21] This shift privileged a collage-like attitude to writing, creating 'still-life' poems that depend upon relationships of juxtaposition between otherwise unconnectable words.[22] This is apparent for example in the poem 'A Sound': 'Elephant beaten with candy and little pops and chews all bolts and reckless reckless rats, this is this.'[23] 'A Sound' is here connected to an imaginary sequence of elephants, candies and rats in an attempt to convey a sound through a visual metaphor. I argue that this metaphorical nature is in itself a process of moving 'elsewhere' through the displacement of the centre. Certainly, the juxtaposition of objects with seemingly disparate descriptions echoes Breton's search for surrealism through putting the real and the imaginary together. As Ariane Mildenberg writes:

> 'In each of the prose poems in *Tender Buttons*, Stein challenges us, the readers, to bracket the "outside" names and definitions of things in order to unfold our subjective "inside" perceptions of them… All our habits of speech and thought must primarily be put out of play so that a new conceptual and perceptual logic can show itself in all its "splendour" through the cracks'.[24]

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[20] Jayne L Walker, 'Tender Buttons: The Music of Present Tense' in The Making of a Modernist:

Gertrude Stein from 'Three Lives' to 'Tender Buttons', (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984),

129-131.

[21] Ibid., 131.

[22] Ibid.,134.

[23] Stein, Tender Buttons, 15.

[24] Ariane Mildenberg, 'Seeing Fine Substances Strangely: Phenomenology in Gertrude Stein's

Tender Buttons', Studia Phaenomenologica, 8/2008, 269.

Here the meeting of the 'outside' and 'inside' in by way of metaphor creates a sense of 'splendour' through its resistance to logical, definable discourse. 'The elsewhere' Breton sees as the goal of surrealism can be located in this functioning of the metaphor itself. The chain of associations that starts moving upon the creation of the metaphor leads us to the same 'gap' that Woolf's constant shifting of viewpoints does. *Tender Buttons* could therefore be compared to surrealism as well as cubism, since its search for the 'elsewhere' concurs with Stein's command to 'act so that there is no use in a centre'.[25] Crucially, this does not deny the existence of a centre – it makes it useless and looks away from it to sustain the continuous chain of metaphorical difference. It rather undoes a centre than denies that it has ever existed, for the sake of finding out what is outside of it in the 'elsewhere'.

These concerns with the 'elsewhere' and the lack of a centre can be re-evaluated through the work of Emmanuel Levinas and the ethics of facing the Other. Ethics is for Levinas about the encounter with the Other, meaning something wholly outside and different from oneself.[26] The Other must therefore be fundamentally undefinable, since for it to be definable, it would need to somehow resemble the self, because it is only one's own self that one can define. It would otherwise cease to be entirely Other. This for Levinas is an ethical concern – if the Other is forced to give up its full difference, its being is violated. One's responsibility towards the Other is therefore envisioned through the symbol of the 'face', which 'emerges as the emblem of everything that fundamentally resists categorization, containment or comprehension'.[27] This 'face' must be 'faced' without attempting to reduce it in any way into sameness. We are ethically obliged to view difference with radical respect. In his book *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas moves from these basic concerns to a more comprehensive ethics of alterity. This largely concerns itself with a notion of

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[25] Stein, Tender Buttons, 43.

[26] Seán Hand, Emmanuel Levinas, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 36-37.

[27] Ibid., 42.

'saying', which resembles a pure signifying power before it is reified into a verbal sign or into the 'said'.[28] This signifying 'saying' sustains the difference and alterity of the Other while the established sign that is 'said' reduces it to sameness through 'thematization of being'.[29] Levinas insists that this signifying power is never fully exhausted even if it enters a comprehensible, interpretable sign. Instead it must carry on 'saying' in order to keep itself unresolved and undefined – in other words, to keep itself ethically responsible towards the absolute difference of the Other.[30] Thus, there needs to be a constant movement of undefined 'saying' towards the Other which does not reach the Other, except only through its movement towards it. This resembles Breton's surrealist 'elsewhere', but in a specifically ethical sense. A movement 'elsewhere' that is achieved by 'a lack of a centre' becomes ethically imperative since it is a movement towards facing the undefinable and uncategorizable Other.

Indeed, the ethical facing of the Other is a crucial aspect of how 'Tender Buttons' continually 'looks elsewhere'. As noted previously, *Tender Buttons* argues that we must 'act so that there is no use in a centre' in order to undo the existing centre and find 'the elsewhere'. This is an ethical argument, which gives us responsibility to choose to act for difference rather than against it and to enter the metaphorical association process to truly face alterity as it is. The collection is therefore pointedly difficult to interpret exactly because it resists the reader's impulse to make 'said' what it is constantly in the process of 'saying'. As Jayne L. Walker points out, *Tender Buttons* is in its metaphorical spirit also something 'to play with': 'What it offers is not truth but a joyous transgression of rationality, an imaginative liberation from our habitual sense of 'reality''. [31] When looked at together with Levinas' thinking, the ethical recognition of alterity becomes infused with a sense of play. This is apparent in many of collection's poems, since many of them use the juxtaposition of words to create a sense of humour

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[28] Ibid., 52.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Walker, 'Music of Present Tense', 148.

or lightness while also retaining their sense of ethical appreciation: 'This is no authority for the abuse of cheese. What language can instruct any fellow. A shining breakfast, a breakfast shining, no dispute, no practice, nothing, nothing at all.'[32] Here the glorification of breakfast into a 'shining' event, where cheese cannot be 'abused', is humorous through its bizarre combination of associations. It simultaneously requires the reader to approach breakfast from an entirely new, joyful and respectful viewpoint, allowing 'no dispute' to its brilliance. Ethical responsibility, then, is in *Tender Buttons* not a matter of grave and solemn emotion, but a joyful play of signification, which leads to a sense of wonder at the experience of the 'elsewhere' gained through the play. Ethical responsibility in facing otherness does not need to be a painful, negative experience, but a matter of pleasure: 'The reason that nothing is hidden is that there is no suggestion of silence. No song is sad. A lesson is of consequence.'[33] To claim that 'no song is sad', that there is joy in all saying, is a strong statement. It is however freeing in its celebration of 'singing' itself – or in Levinas' terms, of 'saying' itself.

The same concern with the ethical treatment of the Other is also apparent in *Jacob's Room* although this is achieved through feelings of interpersonal respect and love rather than of joyful play. I argue that the lack of definition of Jacob is in itself an ethical act. It gives Jacob the possibility to stay as the Other to the narrator and, by extension, to the reader, and resists 'explaining away' the loss we feel at his death. This is why during the final scene of the novel, where Bonamy and his mother Betty Flanders are visiting Jacob's rooms after his death, the focus is rather on the physical space and his belongings in it.[34] This again brings the focus on what surrounds him and leaves him undefined, causing Betty Flanders to shout 'such confusion everywhere!'[35] The lack of definition is here an attempt to preserve his life and being as the strange Other. As Rachel

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[32] Stein, Tender Buttons, 26.

[33] Ibid., 45.

[34] Woolf, Jacob's Room, 246-247.

[35] Ibid., 247.

Hollander argues, Levinas' ethics are central to *Jacob's Room* in its refusal to sympathise with its characters:

> '… by insisting on the impossibility of easy sympathy, by confronting the reader with the limits of knowledge and representation, the novel lays the groundwork for a different kind of receptivity: not an understanding of the other built on knowledge and talk […] but rather the unpredictable and almost indescribable moment of intimacy'.[36]

This kind of 'moment of intimacy' is recognizable on the last page of the novel: 'A harsh and unhappy voice cried something unintelligible. And then suddenly all the leaves seemed to raise themselves. 'Jacob! Jacob!', cried Bonamy, standing by the window. The leaves sank down again.'[37] Bonamy's shouting is set side by side with the 'harsh and unhappy voice', thus juxtaposing his cry for Jacob with the unintelligible cry outside. Emotionally this moment is loaded with love, affection and sadness, but Bonamy leaves the core reason of these feelings unintelligible in order to respect Jacob's position as absolute Other from himself. In *Jacob's Room*, love is therefore seen as the absolute respect for the Other in all its difference and undefinability.

Both *Jacob's Room* and *Tender Buttons* thus show the textual side of Levinas' ethics of the Other. To exemplify this further, I will look at longer quotes from *Jacob's Room* and *Tender Buttons* to illustrate this ethical imperative in action. In her attempt to once again define Jacob, the narrator paints a depressing view of human interaction:

> 'In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is

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[36] Rachel Hollander, 'Novel Ethics: Alterity and Form in Jacob's Room,' Twentieth-Century

Literature, volume 53, 1/2007, 62.

[37] Woolf, Jacob's Room, 247.

true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us–why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.

Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love.'[38]

This passage supports the earlier argument concerning *Jacob's Room*, that to love is to face the unknowability of the Other without attempting to alter it. The narrator underlines the impossibility to fully know or possess anyone else by comparing humans to shadows, and also questions how it is possible to feel affection for them. The crucial detail here is the definition of unknowability as 'the conditions of our love' – affection for others is possible exactly because they are unknowable, because that is the only way we can face them as the Other that they are. Love cannot survive the violence of the definition, but rather only through the acceptance of full Otherness, which can only be met in 'sudden visions'. The ending of *Tender Buttons* shows a similar sort of faltering of understanding, only on a more joyful note:

'The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain.'[39]

This passage identifies failure of understanding as an aspect of 'caring' – to fail at defining the rain or the green is an act of caring, both in the sense of affection and precision. The focus on the incredibility of 'justice and likeness' brings together the notions of ethical facing of the Other and the metaphorical act of attempting to find a 'likeness' through comparing disparate things. Defining things in a way that is 'wrong', or in unconventional and metaphorical, leads to an ethical understanding of their constantly shifting difference and to a deeper way of understanding them with 'care'. This is highlighted by the ending, which

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[38] Woolf, Jacob's Room, 96.

[39] Stein, Tender Buttons, 52.

at first seems to be sure that this leads to 'a magnificent asparagus', but then adds to this static image with 'and also' the moving image of 'a fountain', as if unable to stop from going more and more 'astray'. The movement of signification does not cease, but rather continuously searches for new routes of expression.

Jacob's Room and *Tender Buttons* both interact seriously with a sense of 'a lack of a centre'. They both destabilize their own centres – the former through its characterization and focalization, the latter by questioning the signification-process itself – in order to find a Bretonic 'elsewhere'. This 'elsewhere' is undefinable by default, because it is a constantly shifting sense of difference. Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the Other, and his ethics of absolute respect for its Otherness, illuminate the search of this 'elsewhere' as an ethical process. These concerns are apparent in both texts, in *Jacob's Room* through its discussion of love and in *Tender Buttons* through its notion of linguistic play. Both texts also widen our understanding of what it means to read with respect – the lack of centrality forces the reader to accept this uncertainty as a crucial function in the texts, rather than as their faults. They require the reader to understand that they cannot conclusively know what the texts want to say. Rather, they must stay open to whatever the texts end up 'straying into', trusting that the texts will carry them along.

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