# Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief
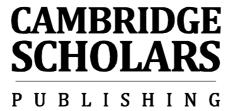
# Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief

Edited by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# LIST OF IMAGES

# THE EDITORS' PREFACE

Although generally resented and deemed unfavourable for individuals, societies and nations, grief, grievance, and grieving, along with a complex list of epithets that could in various situations, under varying circumstances, accompany them – racial grief, political grievance, protracted grieving, chronic grief, traumatic, unresolved grievance – nevertheless occupy a significant place in culture and its manifestations in literature, art, history, science, or politics. Confused experiences of melancholia, grief, nostalgia, shame, anguish, hate, longing, and jealousy continue to permeate cultural productions across historical moments, literary epochs, and political sympathies. It is these veneers that the present volume endeavours to uncover and dismantle, thus – dissolve, or, assuming yet a different approach – assemble into larger entities exhibiting common patterns of formulaic imagining.

The name *Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief* comes with several emphases in mind – great impact is placed on attempts to explore questions of how globalization has affected modes of grieving, how it has altered the subjects/objects over which we grieve, and finally, how grievances have come to adopt the shape of ultimatums, sometimes escalating into forms of sabotage, schizophrenia, or even outright military conflict. The proposed collection aims to explore literary/cinematographic representations of the phenomena under investigation from a wide array of scholarly perspectives and attitudes, including articles dealing with the potential intersections of grievings and politics; grievings and history; grievings and globalization; grievings and (post)colonization/ (post)colonialism; grievings and trans/multi-culturalism. Among the themes approached by the Contributors to *Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief*, the following have been given special attention:

- Trauma and traumatic haunting,
- Racial/ethnic grief,
- Melancholia,
- Mourning,
- Imperialisms,
- Sickness,
- Madness,

- Compulsion,
- Obsession,
- Terror and terrorism,
- Violence

In their texts, the Authors assume inter-/trans-disciplinary perspectives to explore and analyse the issues they have undertaken, since all these topics in themselves stretch across several disciplines: history, literary studies, psychology, political sciences, educational sciences, gender/queer studies, anthropology, or sociology. It is this plurality and multiplicity of voice that we wish to emphasise and celebrate with *Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief.*

In terms of formal structure, the organization of the Volume follows a linear development, with the articles arranged thematically, though not divided into separate parts. The logic behind such an arrangement assumes that the Collection constitutes a uniform monograph, the complexity and multifocality of which are overlaid with the linking fabric of the leitmotif of the Volume, i.e. the vicissitudes of grief, grievance and grieving. Importantly, those are approached from a plethora of critical stances ushering in the emergence of what may be described as a contemporary and transdisciplinary vision of trauma which reveals tenets of the traumatic experience that have frequently suffered oblivion and deficiency of scholarly and academic attention. In their articles, the Contributors – representing diverse academic backgrounds – cut across geographical, social, political, historical and generic divides, offering responses which originally bring together even the seemingly disparate themes and problematics, arriving at a final outcome that fills in a substantial gap in modern criticism and research, from trauma studies as exemplified by war and Holocaust studies, perpetrator studies, terror and terrorism, politics and literature, grief, death and the body, grief, death and sex, trauma and grieving across media discourses, photography and interactive entertainment, monsters and martyrs, as well as many others.

*Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief* is opened by **Wojciech Kalaga** (University of Silesia, Poland) who in his essay approaches the notion of grief from a philosophically-informed perspective, shedding light on the inter-dependencies between grieving, knowledge and wisdom. Noting the social bias against grieving in contemporary cultures of cheerfulness, Professor Kalaga's essay proposes a rehabilitation of grieving, revealing its multifaceted nature and ambiguity, which signal grieving's regenerative and knowledge-building powers.

The following two articles, by **Nedine Moonsamy** (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa) and **Paulina Grzęda** (University of Warsaw, Poland) respectively, engage with post-apartheid South African literature. Heavily informed by Jacques Derrida's theories, **Nedine Moonsamy's** article puts forward the concept of "nostalgia contretemps" and sets out to explore it in the context of post-1994 socio-political developments in South Africa and their bearing on the country's literature, drawing on selected works by Justin Cartwright, Marlene Van Niekerk and Mark Behr in an attempt to show how structural representations of death can be read as symptomatic of a failed nationalistic desire. **Paulina Grzęda**, too, focuses on post-1994 South African literature, seeing it as a work of mourning which might lead towards the emergence of alternative forms of community. With reference to Jacques Derrida's and Dominick LaCapra's scholarship, Grzęda stresses convergences between Mda and Coetzee in the context of both authors' engagement with South African violent legacies.

Through a shift in geographical perspective, the next two articles concentrate on the Middle East and the endemic Gaza-Israel conflict, presenting the interests and grudges of both of the involved sides. **Hania A.M. Nashef** (American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates) analyses and compares two novels by contemporary authors of Palestinian origin, shedding light on how Palestinian voices have been muted in official discourses and the people refused the right to tell their own stories of loss and displacement. **Udi Lebel's** (Ariel University, Israel) article offers a discussion of the Israeli "grief regime" put in place since the establishment of the state. Lebel's analysis provides insight into the social struggles over who can and should be included in the national pantheon, showing the workings of a stringent hierarchy of casualties deeply entrenched in Israeli culture through the insistence on the preservation of what Lebel calls "Victimological Militarism".

The following article returns to the theme of the loss of land, albeit seen from a more strictly literary perspective. **Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice** (University of Wrocław, Poland) concentrates on Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona*, approaching it from the viewpoint advocated by Anne Anlin Cheng who defined the dominant American identity as a melancholic construct. Nowak–McNeice draws on this concept and applies it to what she perceives as a uniquely Californian variety of melancholia, connected to the complex process of closing the American frontier.

Questions of the American geopolitical identity and global designs on maintaining a superpower status are explored by **Julia Szołtysek**

(University of Wrocław, Poland) who, through focusing on the American war on terror and its literary representations, endeavours to establish patterns through which the seeming 'perpetrators' and 'victims' are forced into a melancholic and parasitic relationship with one another. Resorting to Don DeLillo's notion of the "organic shrapnel" as signifying the conflicted closeness between the constructs of the 'East' and the 'West', Szołtysek attempts to dismantle the constituents of this bond, revealing the long-term impact of the global war on terror and its repercussions, both on an inter/national and individual level.

The following three articles move away from direct political involvement, concentrating instead on overcoming social taboos in literature, issues of body politics, and philosophical approaches to existential dilemmas. **Anna Pilińska** (University of Wrocław, Poland) conducts a survey of Nabokov's handling of the theme of death, proposing to read death as inseparably linked to yet another social taboo, i.e. sex, with the two elicitng special, even perverse, attention from Nabokovian characters. **Anna Iatsenko** (University of Geneva, Switzerland) concentrates on Morrison's treatment of the memory of trauma in relation to the black body and its physicality, employing as a cross-reference Jonathan Demme's film adaptation of Morrison's novel, in an attempt to show to what extent 'remembering' is a physical act. **Justyna Rusak** (University of Silesia, Poland) conducts an overview of selected characters from Carson McCullers' fiction, focusing on the author's handling of themes of existential anxiety, alienation, and spiritual isolation.

In the following four articles, emphasis shifts to British and Irish contemporary literature and multiple forms of involvement with trauma and grief it engages. Through focusing on micro-histories and their relevance to Sebastian Barry's recent fiction, **Leszek Drong** (University of Silesia, Poland) puts forward a study of new developments in Irish fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, especially in terms of the relationship between literature and historiography, and a shift from large-scale narratives to those which emphasise an individual's predicament dictated by historical circumstances. **Grzegorz Moroz** (University of Białystok, Poland) discusses Huxley's personal and literary development, focusing in particular on the theme of fear of death and attempts to overcome it through *ars moriendi,* and building a bridge to D.H. Lawrence and Huxley's criticism of his philosophy of blood. **Sławomir Konkol** (University of Silesia, Poland) investigates the strategies employed by Graham Swift which have been the object of many scholars' criticism for their suspiciously traditional character. Working from this premise, Konkol goes on to show how Swift's use of tired stereotypes and cliches

proves a self-conscious technique designed to depict the preconditioned human affliction having to do with grief, trauma, and loss. **Wojciech Drąg** (University of Wrocław, Poland) examines Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Unconsoled* as an intricately structured dramatisation of its narrator's peculiar trauma-induced condition, arguing that it corresponds closely to the Freudian conception of the *fort-da* game, or repetition compulsion.

The following article also relies on Freud's theories – drawing on the Freudian notion of *transference*, **Jacek Partyka** (University of Białystok, Poland) traces representations of trauma in two contemporary Holocaust novels. Through a juxtaposition of Cynthia Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm* and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Partyka engages with the dialectics of the "1.5 generation" of Holocaust, using it as a starting point to his analysis of the vicarious experience of trauma and terror. An analysis of Sebald's oeuvre is offered by **Sławomir Masłoń** (University of Silesia, Poland) who explores a selection of Sebald's fiction, focusing on notions of mourning and melancholy and their handling in the author's works. Noting the close affinity between Sebald and Walter Benjamin, Masłoń analyses the vision of human history shared by the two, assuming a philosophically-informed perspective and methodology.

Resonant in the two concluding articles is an involvement with contemporary media discourses and their original tackling of trauma. **Sonia Front** (University of Silesia, Poland) analyses a particular strand in contemporary cinematography, characterised by its manipulation of chronometric time. Instead of the chronological plot, this type of film narrative relies on atemporality, and, as Front argues, proves particularly effective in expressing the interiority of trauma. In her discussion of *Mr. Nobody*, Sonia Front considers the notion of 'quantum time' vis-a-vis cinematic time, and conducts an investigation of the concept of personal identity as explored by the film. Drawing on postmodern theories and contemporary entertainment studies, **Tomasz Gnat** (University of Silesia, Poland) analyses a selection of popular interactive games, focusing on the figure of the postmodern monster. In an attempt to eplore the monstrosity's psyche and motivation, Gnat confronts recent modes of representation of the monstrous with older, more conventional approaches, showing the monster as heavily imbued with the frustrations, obsessions and grudges of the contemporary world.

Thus composed, *Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief* offers an intellectual excursion into realms of potentially regenerative problematics, too frequently dismissed without due consideration. In this light, the Volume constitutes a weighty contribution to the field of literary and cultural studies. Thanks to its wide-reaching critical embrace, the variety

of themes tackled and the multiplicity of approaches assumed, the collection is bound to attract the attention of scholars, critics, academics, as well as doctoral candidates and students working in the areas of American and British literature, postcolonial theory and literature, political sciences, trauma and Holocaust studies, film theory, entertainment studies, photography, as well as discourses of terror and violence, and war dialectics. First and foremost, however, *Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief* is to be intellectually enjoyed by readers with an interest in present-day literary, cultural and political phenomena, at the intersection of which grief and grieving execute an imposing presence, albeit one that remains as indeterminate and flitting as the nature of contemporary cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary encounters.

# INTRODUCTION

## GRIEVING, KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM

## WOJCIECH KALAGA

*Only through suffering and sorrow*
*do we acquire wisdom not found in books*
(A Japanese proverb)

Given the domination of the contemporary cult of silly cheerfulness, grieving does not belong to the mainstream; it is a niche of culture. However, it is a niche which, despite its gloom, should be precious to any society and any individual. A society incapable of grieving can only produce superficiality; an individual who has not experienced grief is only half a person. "Happiness is beneficial for the body", Marcel Proust wrote in *Remembrance of Things Past*, "but it's grief that develops the powers of the mind".

Yet grieving is ambivalent – ambivalent in many ways. It is a state of mind – some would say: of heart – and at the same time a process, almost an activity, albeit an unintended one. In principle (which, as we shall see, may be broken), it is not, however, a teleological process, which would end with an achievement of its task: if there is a telos, it is not at the end, as a final cause, but rather as an all-encompassing and permeating condition – grief – a necessity to maintain itself as permanence. In its essence, thus, grieving contains no end: no end as a chore to be fulfilled or as a process which, from the start, would have completion inscribed into it; the sense of an ending is alien to the idea of grief. The griever falls into grieving with no intention to terminate it, no plans to carry it out, to bring it to a conclusion. Grieving takes place in time, but – and here is another touch of ambivalence – it evades time: it is a-temporal in the sense that closure is external and contingent to it. What may eventually bring grieving to an end is the unaware labor of forgetting, the external working of time bringing rather an unwanted finale than an anticipated or inherently predictable cessation. In this sense, grieving is masochistic, but without the component of pleasure – rather than contentment, it is

suffering for its own sake, the kind of suffering that fuels itself in an endless cycle of pain.

The ambivalence of grieving extends itself to the corporeal: by way of an existential metonymy, it is also a state (and a process) of the body. Like happiness, grieving affects the body, but unlike happiness it is detrimental to it. There seems to be no greater unity of the *soma* and the *psyche*, but in grief. The grieving body is a body of pain. In the visual images of grieving, that pain is pain/ted into the contortion or blankness of the face, emblazoned in the arched torso, limp and excruciatingly tense at the same time, in the twisting of hands and the hollowness or infinite depth of the eyes. Sometimes the hands cover the face to safeguard the loneliness, to keep away the compassionate gaze from the outside, to beg off sympathy – because true grief is a lonely affair, not something to be shared with those who do not grieve. Compassion and sympathy are external impositions, they have no access to the body; the body rejects them as intruders obliterating the pain. No cure is desired because it would spoil grieving; if there is cure, as one rabbi insists, it is to continue: "The only cure for grief is to grieve".

Grieving thus re-adapts the idea of pain in a double way. First, the body aches even though no pain has been inflicted to the body itself; grieving brings about corporeal suffering without corporeal cause: no wound or fracture of bodily tissue, no impact on the skull or chest apart from the inside. The body aches from within, and even though the griever's corporeal pain may not be as acutely intense as the pain caused by physical injury, it is by no means less severe. Rarely converging in one afflicted spot, it unhurriedly permeates each cell and, while creeping in this way, unites with the pain of the self, or heart, or soul – that part of an I which has no substantial or tangible existence. If the continuity of the self is a combination of time and awareness, the agony caused by grief fills each molecule of this amalgam and eventually becomes its semi-organic surrogate. In the griever, the two kinds of pain – the corporeal and the existential – unite to create a polyphony whose score charts the graph of suffering.

Henceforth this pain of grieving? From knowledge – the condition and cause of grief. In *Lucille*, Edward Bulwer Lytton asks both radically and rhetorically: "– what is knowledge but grieving?" Yet, in his allegation, he is only partly right because not all knowledge incites grief: there is neutral knowledge, impassive, free of emotions, in-affective, one might say; there is also joyful knowledge, the chocolate for the mind, filling the knower with the self-reflexive bliss of pure knowing or with the happiness of knowing the good. Bulwer Lytton is right, however, in identifying

knowledge as the essential prerequisite for grieving; yet to do justice to his question, we should, in fact, reverse it and ask: "what is grieving but knowledge?" In the narrative of our lives, *anagnorisis* always precedes the *peripeteia* of grieving: the latter, without exception, transpires from the former.

Yet this painful knowledge, which gives rise to grief, is not a uniform power – it operates in its own multiple ways, perhaps too diverse to be pinpointed or categorized. From the perspective of grief, however, three kinds of knowledge impose themselves as those that mark out the spectrum and can be identified as grief's major determinants.

On one extreme of the spectrum, there is the knowledge of a singular event – the knowledge which strikes one like a lightning and fills the mind with the awareness of irrevocability: the death of a dear person, the loss of a lover or child that seems forever unbearable, a sudden detection of a terminal illness and the necessity to leave whatever is dearest. When set against the background of human experience in general, this kind of particular knowledge is, in fact, a triviality, unnoticed by the movement of history. Yet it is a triviality which ruins the whole procession of one's life. It has two simultaneous modes of operation and works in two directions: *a posteriori* (*post mortem*, one might perhaps more aptly say) and *a fortiori*: it shreds one's past into a mash and turns the future into a void. What has once been a life filled with unique occurrences and encounters, a life of remembrances and expectances, is now crushed into a pulp, out of which protrudes only the devastating awareness of bereavement and irreversibility. Both the past and the future now constitute only a pulverized milieu for grief.

The other extreme is occupied by – or perhaps privileged with – the knowledge available only to the few, the kind of knowledge which requires time for its accumulation. Its object is not a particular event; no loss or bereavement is involved. This is slow and inductive knowledge, which emerges from the apprehension (in its full ambiguity) of the world and entails both distance and commitment. There is a kind of conclusiveness and finality in this knowledge, underscored by a sense of hopelessness that one might call existential: the loss of faith in the goodness of humanity, the recognition of the incorrigibility of evil in man, the awareness of the unfathomability of transcendence, the realization of the inevitability of *zum-Tode-Sein*, the ultimate understanding that there is no sense to be understood. It is bleak knowledge that blackens gradually through the various shades of lightness of life and changes doubt into certainty, leaving no promise of hope. The grieving bred by this kind of knowledge may be a detached kind of grieving of a hermit observing the

world from the shelter of his cabin, but it can also manifest itself as an innermost trembling, an insurmountable anxiety of the self, not limited, however, to an individual ego, but imparting the trembling to the world, like Kierkegaard's grieving over himself and man, or Sisyphus' anguish in Camus, or Schopenhauer's pessimism. This kind of grieving knowledge wipes out the boundary between the personal and the universal, elevates the knowing self and merges it with the Other, thus turning the griever into a philosopher.

Between those two kinds of grief-breeding knowledge, there is an intermediate kind, less distinctly marked on the spectrum. It entails neither direct loss of an object of love nor aloof reflection on the fate of humanity; rather it creeps in steadily carrying with itself residues of pain. This kind of knowledge verges on or alters with bitterness; it works in its mild and subliminal way, sneaks into clear thought and stains it with a slight sense of anxiety. Bitterness, if experienced only incidentally, will not turn into knowledge that causes grief. There is, however, a point of crossing over the critical mass – when one drinks one too many cup of disappointment with those one had trusted – that changes it into grief-inciting knowledge. The grief thus produced is not the utmost grief in which one drowns entirely and sees no surface to return to; it is rather a lingering sediment of grief which builds up and slowly raises its level. What feeds this kind of grieving is a loss of trust and faith in the other, rearing despondency and disillusionment. Like the emotional grief effected by personal trauma, this kind of grieving originates in individual experience, but it requires time to accumulate; unlike traumatic grief, however, it reaches beyond individuality and again bridges the personal and the universal. In this way, it approximates the philosopher's grief, but never attains its magnitude; rather than a philosopher it yields a misanthropist.

Grieving thus construed emerges as a trans-rational reflection of knowledge – a reflection and transmutation of the rational into the irrational. The rationality of knowledge disperses in grief into the chaos of tremulous vacillation and trembling. But if knowledge is an efficient and immediate cause of grieving, maybe we should reconsider the question of the telos and ask what is the final cause of grieving (if there is any)? A profound suggestion of that final cause is contained in Ecclesiastes (1:18): "In much wisdom is much grief […]". Wisdom thus would seem to cause grief, but at the same time it is posited as a possible effect, if not the absolute telos, of grief: *much* grief is required to attain wisdom.

But, of course, it would be a falsity to claim that all wisdom comes from grieving: there is wisdom that comes from joy, or tranquility, or distant observation of an entomologist of humankind. Yet certainly there is

also a kind of wisdom that falls upon one only as a result of grief (and which perhaps, as implied in the passage from Ecclesiastes, in a self-reciprocating loop reinforces grief). And further: the final cause of grief – wisdom – may never be attained because the (non)teleological movement of grieving usually turns on itself into a circle or spiral without end: one may fall short of attaining that wisdom, as Kierkegaard did, remaining forever in the state of trembling and anxiety, but which Schopenhauer reached by turning to the East. However, when knowledge sifted through grieving reflects on itself, wisdom does emerge: it is this special case when – in the long run – grieving becomes a bridge to wisdom, when *in* and *through* grieving, knowledge and wisdom come together.

This coming together of knowledge and wisdom may take on the form of a collision, when wisdom eventually overpowers and neutralizes the knowledge that was the source of grief. In *Pearl*, an exquisite medieval depiction of grieving, spiritual rebellion and discernment, the griever-poet mourns the death of his beloved two year old daughter Margaret – the pearl, *margarita*. He is a "joyless jeweler" overwhelmed with grief which „pierces [his] heart with pangs". One can read the Pearl, of course, not only as a symbol of the lost child but also as an allegory rich in religious and spiritual meanings (innocence, purity, perfection of the soul, beatitude, eternal life, the Eucharist etc.). However, irrespective of possible allegorical senses, what remains central is the grief of a mortal bereaved by the death of his dearest child and engrossed in his earthly suffering. When Margaret appears to him in a dream – now as a young woman in garments adorned with pearls – she demonstrates the erroneousness and triviality of his earthly comprehension of death. The griever's sense of injustice is countered and appeased by the parable of the vineyard and the vision of his daughter amongst blissful maidens following the Lamb. Yet it is not his own earthly wisdom that brings him consolation; the Pearl imparts to him the wisdom of heaven and thus drives his „dire distress" away. Her teaching eventually leads to the illumination of the griever; his sense of bereavement and his suffering are overridden and annulled by the wisdom of the heavenly realm. Grief now emerges merely as a veil of blindness which only heavenly wisdom can uncover and replace with solace and peace.

If in the Pearl the Dreamer wakes up from his grief reconciled with the world by the wisdom conveyed to him – or, better, thrust upon him – in the dream, in Synge's *Riders to the Sea* grief changes into wisdom when the knowledge of ultimate loss falls upon the griever. For the mother of six sons, who has lost five of them and her husband in the sea, life is anything but a mixture of grief and fear for the life of the last one. We witness the

peak of her grieving when the death of her fifth son is discovered and the peak of her fear when the last son is going to sea again. But then, suddenly, the fear and the grief turn into tragic wisdom. We behold this alteration of utmost despair into utmost peace when the last son's body, still soaking with water, is carried in and laid on the table: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me", says Maurya, the mother. In her wisdom of acquiescence, Maurya has now not only achieved her dreadful calmness, but also the wisdom of existential stoicism in the face of destiny, contained in the simple truth of her final understanding: "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied".

It is interesting to see this kind of alteration of grief and wisdom, which was dramatized by Synge, multiplied to an ineffable diversity in thźe spatial separateness of the images of Pietà. Subsumed under one title – if we ignore chronology and geography, and focus just on the face of the Mother as an embodiment of the inner calamity – an opalescence of visions of grieving comes into view: from the all-encompassing, though invisible grief of the face covered by cloth or hands, as in the paintings by Arnold Böcklin and Franz Stuck, through utmost loss in Agnolo Bronzino or pure, insurmountable pain in Juan de Valdes Leal, in an anonymous Pietà in the National Museum in Warsaw, in Louis de Morales, or in Ippolito Scalza; through blind suffering drowned in itself, as if separate from the body of Christ, in the Gothic Pietà in St. Barbara's church in Cracow; through the emptiness of grief in Pietro Perugino, or emptiness and reproach in the Bouguereau Pietà; through the brooding grief in Giovanni Bellini or almost carnal grief of compassion in his other painting; through helpless despair in van Gogh's versions of Delacroix; through grief twisted with anger in Röttgen Pietà; through rebellion and disbelief on the face turned obliquely to heaven in Paula Ruego and much earlier in Jacob Jordaens; through grief and thankfulness in Massimo Stanzione to the solemn understanding in Titian or in the Avignon Pietà; to the sadness of wisdom in El Greco or in an anonymous German sculpture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; to the wisdom of tenderness in the painting by Van-der-Weyden and, finally, to the mature wisdom in Michelangelo: the quiet suffering overcome by the awareness of inevitability in the sculpture in Vatican and the gentle wisdom of care of the Pietà Rondanini in Milan.

Albeit occupying the traumatic end of the spectrum, Maurya, the Dreamer, and the Mother in some versions of Pietà epitomise the transition from knowledge through grieving to wisdom. Wisdom thus achieved brings consolation to the griever; it combines humility with stature for it

grows out of hardening pain. This is not wisdom of a joyful kind – it is rather nourished by stoic resignation and acceptance. Grieving, as a transitory stage, emerges therefore as a necessary moment of reflection and deliberation ensuing from knowledge, but also enriching knowledge with forbearance and thus neutralizing its trauma into the wisdom of acquiescence. With the philosopher and the misanthropist the *modus operandi* is the same, even though no immediate trauma strikes the mind or the body; the trauma of steadily accumulated knowledge is extended in time and thus dissolved into a plateau of accruing ache of disillusionment. Yet despite the lesser intensity of grieving, and maybe a greater distance to the knowledge that is its source, wisdom comes – or, at least, may come – in the end: with the philosopher, it is the wisdom of understanding, albeit disenchanted; with the misanthropist – the wisdom of bitterness. If we imagine that wisdom grown out of grief as a hemisphere (the other hemisphere being the wisdom of peaceful enjoyment of knowledge), its space is occupied by experience: either sifted through individual sensitivity or, via empathy, generalized on humankind. This wisdom, as in the Japanese proverb, cannot come from books – its only source is the grief-breeding knowledge construed as an immediate encounter with the world.

# CHAPTER ONE

## DEATH IS AN-OTHER COUNTRY: GRIEVING FOR ALTERITY IN "POST-TRANSITIONAL" SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE

## NEDINE MOONSAMY

> It is difficult to believe that the woman who chafed my shivering body –
> Matt also had goose bumps at bath-time – is the same woman now waiting
> at a faint borderline to be admitted to another country.
> (Justin Cartwright, *White Lightning* 112)

## 1.

In recent years the term "post-transitional" has come into usage in contemporary South African cultural and literary studies. Its aim is to account for the dynamic changes that occur within a national and literary imaginary after discarding the politically laden impetus of the anti-apartheid struggle and the easy optimism of post-apartheid nation-building. Yet, as I will illustrate in this article, the pervasive representations of death and grieving in contemporary South African literature illumine a premature appraisal of a "post-transitional" state.

In current writing one finds a prevalent plot structure that involves a protagonist who lives abroad but is forced to return to South Africa to confront the reality of death through the loss of a parent. In this paper I will offer analyses of Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning* (2002), Marlene Van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006) and Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water* (2010) as useful illustrations of how structural representations of death can be read as symptomatic of failed nationalistic desire.[1] I argue that these texts

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[1] The analysis of nostalgia *contretemps* is part of a larger body of research that captures this phenomenon across a much wider range of texts.

express this loss as a debilitating form of nostalgia that cannot be mourned. In addition, these texts also present reactionary impulses that seek to alleviate these feelings of loss through active examinations of how one approaches and perceives death.[2] The duality upon which these texts hinge is thus suggestive of a *transitional* moment in the national and literary imaginary that aspires towards a new ideal of "post-transitional" status but cannot lay claim to the "afterwardness" of arrival.

In the Introduction to *Load Shedding* (2009), Sarah Nuttall and Liz McGregor state that South Africa has entered its difficult years. The political upheavals that have occurred since 2007, they argue, have marked a shift in the country's self-representation and signaled the onset of the early symptoms of depression for its citizens. Nuttall and McGregor state that the country is now left with the "the feeling that we were living at the end of the dream years, at the tail end of our big Idea" (10). They allude to the weariness of a cultural imaginary that grapples with the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa, a nation that has now lost sight of the expected or anticipated ideals of a democratic future. Utopia becomes a less apt description for the nation, giving way instead to a nascent nostalgia. Yet the complexity of this national malaise lies in the fact that it is nostalgic for a future that has never arrived. It is thus an experience of nostalgia that if out of time with its normative pastness – it is a nostalgia *contretemps*.

In "Aphorism Countertime",[3] Jacques Derrida conducts a reading of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Through this study we learn that the term "*contretemps*" can imply mishap, syncopation, inopportunity, out of time and in counter-time. Derrida analyses the play in order to outline its central preoccupation with the anxieties and "accidents" of time. He proceeds by first establishing the homogeneity of "objective" and "external" time, as it is an awareness of this linearity that proves to be the a priori condition out of which the *contretemps* arises. In making a display of the various "accidents of timing" that occur in the play, and which ultimately lead to its tragic end, Derrida explores how linear time opens up the possibility for "elsewhere" for the characters. In the play this is expressed through the lovers' wish and desire for the reversibility and

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[2] These trends are equally discernable in Imraan Coovadia's *High Low In-between* (2009) and Anne Landsman's *The Rowing Lesson* (2007).

[3] The French title is "*L'aphorisme á contretemps*". I have decided to retain the French term *contretemps* as I find the English translation to be a poor one. Derrida also theorises this term in *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*.

malleability of time – for a different time – such that their tragedy may be undone or "rewritten".

Similarly, in *The Future of Nostalgia,* Svetlana Boym insists that nostalgia, as a state of temporal dissonance, can be effectively read as a rebellion against the ever-narrowing parameters of time. [4] Much like the *contretemps*, nostalgia is deemed to be of an aneconomic order that seeks to disrupt an increasingly capitalist agenda of linearity. Yet, exploring the Derridian *contretemps* further, we find that it is determined also to carry us out of the "now" as opposed to granting it privilege as a centripetal framework. Contrary to Boym's nostalgia, which utilizes the present and the past to challenge the future, the *contretemps* actively employs the future as a means to challenge the present and the past ("Aphorism Countertime" 419).

Hence, to talk of nostalgia *contretemps* is to suggest that the future may indeed serve as an organizing temporality for nostalgia. It is to propose a reading of nostalgia that is out of time with current theoretical conceptualizations that validate nostalgia as an *experience* of the *present*. To talk of nostalgia *contretemps* is to grant the future unexpected prominence such that it may also begin to account for contemporary experiences of nostalgia as they occur within the South African national and literary imaginary.

Arguably, it is the new regime, post-1994, that has allowed for nostalgia *contretemps* to ensue by making available a construct of "home" that drew inspiration from the liberal and messianic cornerstones of triumph, achievement, transformation and arrival. In "Cracked Heirlooms: memory on exhibition", Ingrid De Kok states that

> The political transformation of South Africa, represented so powerfully on 10 May 1994 by the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president, was interpreted by most of its citizens as triumph premised on compromise. For support of the new government and goodwill in general to be sustained, that compromise would have to be experienced as worth it: worth the pain and suffering, worth the capitulation. Since the past has to meet the present through settlement, not revolution, it needed an accompanying rhetoric about how to process the future: and that process was divined as the act of nation building (57).

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[4] In her text, Boym describes nostalgia as an awareness that "the time of their happiness is out of joint" ( 21) – a seeming echo of the Derridian *contretemps* which also famously presents its argument through Hamlet's line, "'The time is out of joint'" (19 – 20), in *Specters of Marx*.

The South African democratic state, born anew in 1994 as a nation that sought transformation, marks a temporal break with its own past. This implies a national construct that does not extend out of the past but, instead, seeks distance from it. One notes the over-emphasis on the future as a temporal locale in order to construct a national rhetoric, or rather, a rhetoric of nation, for it is out of the promised ideals of the democratic future that the South African nation arises.[5] Furthermore, we witness the ready awareness of *transformation* of the past. By stating a need to transform the past as opposed to an acceptance of it, a utilitarian approach is adopted towards the past such that it may "count" in favour of the future-oriented nation-state.

However, in recent times this protention of hope now appears to have transformed into despair. The "event" of post-apartheid South Africa is no longer looked upon as the pinnacle of progress in the national imagination as the future that it was intended to reveal has not arrived – indeed, one might argue that it ceases to count as an "event" at all. And this, in turn, has led to conditions of mourning and melancholia in the literary imaginary where there is now a desire to "return" – *nostos* – through an assertion of longing and loss – *algia* – for a time that never was – *contretemps*.

## 2.

In *White Lightning*, the protagonist, James, a former South African, returns to the country because his mother is dying. James states at the outset that "I was waiting for my mother to die" (Cartwright [from hereon WL] 1). He is resigned to the fact that she must pass away and does not face this prospect with any apparent angst. This appears to be a common reaction in the texts: in Marlene Van Niekerk's, *Agaat*, the protagonist,

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[5] See Benedict Anderson's analysis of the temporal frameworks of the modern secular state in *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin And Spread Of Nationalism* (1986). Anderson argues that the nation-state imagines itself to extend out of the past and "still more important, glide into a limitless future" (19). From this we understand that the past, present and future are all employable temporalities in the construction of a nation. However, Anderson argues that the nation, as "an imagined community is an idea of steady, solid simultaneity through time" (63). Hence the nation is often perceived as subject to the modalities of linear time, progressing from past glory into future greatness. However, it appears as if the South African nation presents an anomaly in this regard and thus proves to be somewhat "incapable" of experiencing nationalistic forms of nostalgia as they are conventionally conceived.

Jakkie is summoned back to South Africa by an urgent telegram that notifies him of his mother's impending death. In the prologue and epilogue of the text, in which we encounter Jakkie, we learn that he has actively been working on mourning for many years. He desires the completeness of an ending – a wish that is made evident when he travels back to South Africa to attempt a successful mourning for his mother. Similarly, in Mark Behr's *Kings of Water*, Michiel returns to South Africa for his mother's funeral. Much like James in *White Lightning* and Jakkie in *Agaat*, he does not have a close relationship with his mother and her sudden death appears to arouse shock but certainly not despair. The common lack of grief amongst the three protagonists, I argue, implies a willingness to embrace the death of a parent because it symbolizes a discursive entry into "another country".

In *Death, Desire and Loss*, Jonathan Dollimore states that death has often been governed by notions of perfection, which comes "from the Latin *perficere* – to accomplish, bring to an end" (73). He argues that death has often been welcomed as a timely or perfect end to which one aspires or progresses. Here death is experienced as a teleological journey where one attains a symbolic state of arrival and finds an ideological coeval in Derrida's description of border-based discourse.

In *Aporias*, Derrida entrenches his entire discussion of the philosophical aporia around discourses of death and provides description of the unique forms that the respective aporia assumes. "In one case", he states, "the nonpassage resembles an impermeability" (Derrida, *Aporias* 20). The first philosophical school that Derrida identifies employs a visible border between life and death. Because life and death are perceived as singular, and hence separable, the border represents the mark between perception and what lies beyond perception. It maintains distance between the self and the other, hence providing sufficient distance for radical alterity as the *new*.

As cited in the epigraph, James perceives his mother's death as the necessary border to be crossed to enter into "another country". Not only does Cartwright reveal the logic of a border-based approach to death, but he self-consciously depicts James's response through nationalistic rhetoric. Through the thematic desire for death as border-crossing activity into a new national space, *White Lightning* alludes to the frameworks of post-apartheid South Africa where alterity was similarly employed such that the messianic infrastructure of the "New South Africa" could be sustained. However, what we have in all three of these texts is the portrayal of a structural inability to sustain such border-based beliefs in relation to death which, I argue, is suggestive of their flailing applicability in the South

African national context. One finds that the texts, all in their own ways, provide forms of critique and revision of this notion by illustrating how a death of this kind cannot be experienced and has given way to a state of impossibility, represented as melancholia, and hence, directly revealing the formations of nostalgia *contretemps*.

In *White Lightning*, Cartwright employs his protagonist, James, to cast skepticism over border-based notions of death. As James watches over his mother and reflects on the course of her desolate life and her current decrepit state he is forced to re-evaluate his opinions about what death entails. Evoking Virgil, he states, "I agree that life is thin-spun, but I can't believe that she, or her essence, will fly off to join the numbers of the stars, as much as I might wish it" (WL 41). He can no longer accept death as that which signifies a happier prospect of graduating into a desired state of predetermined perfection. Instead, he grows to believe that the other side of the border is, in fact, "a departure to nowhere" (WL 41). Here Cartwright appears to challenge nationalistic discourse by alluding to the irony that nothing "new" can arrive when thinking within the constraints of predetermined messianism. As an alternative, James opens himself up to the prospect that death need not be informed by destinal logic and thereby grants death the radical alterity that it deserves.

In the text, this hopeful re-evaluation of death becomes so appealing that James indicates a desire to die alongside his mother such that he may have access to an-other country that now defies messianic definition: "I have a curious notion suddenly, that I should lie next to her and die with her" (WL 41). James now seeks out his own "death", and in the text this is portrayed as a desire for self-dispossession. It is for this reason that he decides to buy a farm and settle in South Africa, feeling that the country will inspire him to find happiness beyond or outside of the ego and self.

However, it is here that the text makes apparent the Derridian aporia of border-based logic by illustrating an awareness that death, as a state of impermeability, dictates that the border is always uncrossable once reached (*Aporias*). Because death is governed by a border, it keeps one from its realisation and reduces it to impossibility. Consequently, just as the narrative space for death through self-dispossession is introduced, it is exploited for its aporetic ironies and marred by impossibility as all attempts at engaging otherness fail dismally. James begins to realise that despite the allure of death as radical alterity an encounter of this kind is fallacious precisely because the boundaries between life and death exist as an assertion of distance between the two.

What *White Lightning* appears to re-establish – through negation – is that the border into death is one that is utterly impermeable and

uncrossable. The narrative of James's time in South Africa ends with the dismal realisation that "the limits of my language have met the limits of my world" (WL 243). He appears to be resigned to an existence of limitations and borders that will forever keep him away from the much desired prospect of death but nevertheless maintains a boundary that seeks to respect its alterity.

Consequently, he must learn to live with a perpetual sense of loss for "an-other country" that will never arrive and James makes a hasty return to London. This resembles a melancholic longing of sorts, for the pathos of James's awareness of his self-negating desire is indicative of an unceasing despair; in order to maintain the ideal he must continue to mourn its impossibility. Ultimately, we find that *White Lightning* thus gestures towards the alterity of the future by asserting James's longing for it yet simultaneously closes off the possibility of its arrival by encapsulating it in a narrative of loss, exemplifying the condition of nostalgia *contretemps*.

In *Agaat*, Marlene Van Niekerk introduces conflict to border-based beliefs by portraying the sheer impossibility of mourning. Jakkie has been actively working on mourning for many years and assumes that Canada, the country to which he has immigrated, is a suitable environment to effect such a plan because nationalistic mourning has been achieved; "here the blood has long since been spilt. Cold. The massacres efficiently commemorated, functionally packaged, sanitized" (Van Niekerk [from hereon A] 2). Through the economy of mourning Jakkie assumes that he will finally be able to live without loss and so he travels back to South Africa to attempt a successful mourning for his mother, Milla De Wet.

Despite expressing a wish to see his mother before she passes away, he eventually gets to South Africa and feels "relieved after all that I was too late. Couldn't have stomached it" (A 677). His relationship with her has been polite at best. Jakkie has never had a strong connection with Milla and as he casts an eye over her belongings he feels alienated and distant from her. Having no way or means for accounting for her identity or their relationship, he feels stuck as to how to consolidate their relationship at her funeral. Because this is a loss that cannot be sufficiently identified or understood, Jakkie struggles to mourn for it.

Furthermore, much of his hostility towards his mother stems from the shroud of secrecy she created around Agaat's existence in their lives. In this text, Jakkie has a close relationship with his former nanny and domestic servant, Agaat (after whom the text takes its title). She was more of a mother-figure to him but at the same time, the closeness he felt and still feels for her was and is corroded by the racial and class politics of apartheid. Throughout his life Jakkie feels that he knows too little about

Agaat to lay claim to a definite connection to her and she plays heavily on his conscience even though he no longer resides in South Africa. In this novel, much of the narrative is structured around the mystery of Agaat's history and the secret bedtime story that she shared with Jakkie when he was a boy. Despite his wish to forget, Jakkie still cannot erase this story from his mind as it keeps flooding back into his consciousness, which is indicative of a haunting of sorts.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida defines the nature of the specter as aneconomic in its potential to haunt. The imposition of the ghost is not felt only in relation to the past but also as an arrival that "seems to be out front, the future" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10). Derrida explains that the figure of the specter is representative of that which is neither present nor absent. As an always becoming-body, we cannot locate, identify and name it and therefore, we can never successfully mourn for it by ensuring its burial as such. The specter introduces us to a liminal reality that compromises the notion that life and death are divisible entities – it declares the border non-existent. It invites us into the borderless space of absolute hospitality where one is meant to assume responsibility for the other by playing host to it.

*Agaat* provides an interesting elucidation of hauntology, for it is clearly not only the fissures of the past that exact a haunting force upon Jakkie but also a more profound sense of loss – that of imagined loss. Because Jakkie remains uncertain as to who Agaat is and what their true relationship entails, this carries further obsessions as to what their relationship is in the present and could have been in the future. Nevertheless her omniscient absence-presence asserts itself upon him and Jakkie harbours a residual hope that the intimacy of their connection will result in full realisation when he returns to South Africa for his mother's funeral, which will serve as such an "event" of imminent arrival.

However, when he returns to South Africa, the idealistic quality of this hope is exposed. The imagined intimacy that he shares with Agaat in his dream is far from the woman he encounters on the farm. He finds her clinical and hostile, consumed by bitterness that comes with a life spent in servitude. The empty narrative of her past that he has always longed to hear and the hope for a future relationship is turned into palpable loss as he describes her as an "Apartheid Cyborg" (A 677) – a disembodied and empty soul.

Encountering this reality, he remains determined to mourn the loss that he feels. Yet despite Jakkie's determination, haunting compromises the very frameworks of mourning and as Jakkie flies back to Canada, he states the following:

> What remains? Grieving. Grieving till I've mastered the hat-trick. The difficult triple sanity: Wafer, stone, and flower in turn. De Wet individuated. Do I hear something under the engine noise, through the air conditioning? A melody? A rhythm?

> Why that? Of all things? Gaat's story, the last story that she always had to tell me before I'd go to sleep, the one she never wanted Ma to hear (A 683).

The wish to mourn is followed by the immediate arrival of Agaat's secret narrative. She has only ever shared this story with him and it is his inheritance to carry despite himself. He is caught in the "messy" borderless space of spectral poetics.

Much like Derrida's ethical stance in *Specters of Marx*, *Agaat* casts a skeptical eye over the Freudian construct of mourning by illustrating its impossibility. Derrida argues that the Freudian experience of mourning is only an anxious containment of the specter by seeking to condemn its becoming-body (as half body and spirit) to death. Jakkie is left with the burdensome inheritance of Agaat's secret story. Not only must he carry this narrative as his secret but as a story that contains Agaat's secret self as well.[6] The inability to mourn is a recurring trace suggesting an endless strain of melancholia for the loss that has occurred and for what continues to remain missing.

Much like the repetitive and improvisatory style of the bed-time story used in *Agaat*, the specter, Derrida argues, is both "repetition *and* the first time" (*Specters of Marx* 10). For Derrida, that which we are forced to inherit from the past is responsibility of and for a future that will allow for the return of the ghost. By allowing for its iterability rather than mere repeatability, one allows for the potential newness of the story yet to be told in the future. However, Jakkie has no intentions to live with ghosts and seeks to deny the borderless space in which spectrality operates. And by seeking escape from it he becomes increasingly melancholic about the inability to exorcise them.

Again, Jakkie's stance exemplifies that of nostalgia *contretemps*, for much like James in *White Lightning*, Jakkie carries with him a wish for "another country" as a fantasy of alterity – using death as a trope to suggest that the new may help them realise all of their messianic hopes for something other than the past and present circumstances. The loss they both encounter is twofold: realising that if the future is to be maintained as an exemplar of radical alterity it will be forever unattainable ( more self-

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[6] The story is presumably her version of her personal history.