

Introduction

The Literary Work of Mourning

Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more
 Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never sere,
 I come to pluck you Berries harsh and crude,
 And with forc'd fingers rude,
 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
 Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
 Compels me to disturb your season due:
 For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
 Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer
 Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew
 Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
 He must not float upon his wat'ry bier
 Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
 Without the meed of some melodious tear, (lines 1-14)

THE OPENING LINES of John Milton's *Lycidas* reflect many central concerns of the literary work of mourning. The first line indicates the constant and repetitive nature of death in human experience, for Milton's narrator/elegist, the Swain, notes that he is required to mourn "Yet once more." The difficulty and devastation of being required to mourn yet again are noted when his fingers are "forced" to "pluck" the berries of poetic inspiration with "Bitter constraint." Milton's Swain underscores the manner with which serious loss must be responded to despite the fact that it is never wished for when he remarks that he is "Compel[led]...to disturb" the plants before

their "season due" (7). The Swain's response, a literary one, is to create a work of mourning to not only grieve for the dead Lycidas but also to help himself to work through his grief. As he states, "Who would not sing for Lycidas?" (10) so that he can "bid fair peace" (22) to his lost friend.

What Milton realizes in this poem, as do so many other writers across history, is that death is the constant of human existence. Where there is life there will also inevitably be death, and because death often has devastating emotional consequences for the living, especially when the loss is a loved one, humans have developed means for coping with severe loss. The ways that humans deal with death are most accurately described as the work that is performed and accomplished by mourning; when mourning is indicated in a literary text of any kind, poetry, fiction or non-fiction, it is known as a literary work of mourning. Psychic processes are engaged through absolute necessity as requirements to meet the devastation of loss. Alongside the psychology of an individual's grief, societies have developed various other means for shaping and aiding the responses to immediate death.

The work of mourning, as artistic construct, falls within both parameters. For the individual creator, the act of writing itself often performs a psychic function and becomes the work that is required to mourn loss, and for the receptors of the text, the work provides instructive models for coping or has the specific function of public memorializing (such as in the case of the many elegies that commemorate the death of public figures). Furthermore, the work of mourning is a multifaceted literary text partaking of the processes of mourning while simultaneously being a product for public reception.

In this guise, the work of mourning is an inherently socio-historical construct. Ancient Greek lament and tragedy provides a particular context to the understanding of mourning as a social and as an individual practice that is obviously very different from the formal elegies of the nineteenth century or the varied texts of mourning—elegy, anti-elegy, elegaic fiction, and so on—of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. Likewise, the epic pronouncements upon heroic death of Homer contrast with the perspectives of the anonymous Song of Roland. Be it Sophocles or Shakespeare, or Tennyson or Plath, or any of the many other examples from literary history, humans have found the need to express mourning—and see it articulated—in literary terms.

The work of mourning functions as the staging ground for emotion, at times as performance of emotion for the creator and otherwise as focalizer for mourners and their grief which they can see reflected to them in the literary work. Frequently, the work of mourning will fulfill both purposes. At all times, the work of mourning is an attempt to make present that which is irrefutably lost, and within that paradoxical tension lies a central tenet of all writerly endeavour that deals with the representation of death. However much a writer labours to inscribe the lost one, the resulting product can never become that which it seeks to replace. Death is the ultimate void that all signatory practice fails to recuperate. The work of mourning is always a limiting attempt at revival and at representation, though that attempt itself is important and necessary to the mourning subject. What literary history tells us is that while words always fail to replace a lost one, they can succeed at helping the survivors to work through and understand their loss.

Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning has as its purpose to present a literary-historical perspective on the work of mourning. While much of contemporary thinking about mourning is informed by twentieth-century intellectual endeavours, literature tells us that writers and thinkers have been contemplating how to deal with death for centuries—probably since the beginning of literary culture. And so, it is useful to place contemporary thinking within a literary-historical context that informs current aesthetic and social practices in regards to the work of mourning. As this volume is not intended as an encyclopedic look at the history of the work of mourning, it begins its cross-cultural examination of the work of mourning in the middle ages and moves chronologically forward from there to the late twentieth century.

Before turning to closer discussion of the individual essays in this volume, it is necessary to further consider the terms mourning and work, which are in common usage in a wide range of discursive situations, but that require specific definition as they pertain to their use in this volume.¹ Mourning is an inherently complex and necessary activity that has the aim of providing consolation in the face of pain. The psychic nature of mourning is complemented by its socio-cultural context, for grief is framed, ordered, and filtered by the historical, social and cultural setting of the mourning subject. As sociologists have noted, it is a condition whereby an individual, in response

to a death or serious loss, suffers the "shattering of a sense of ontological security" (Mellor 12). Ontological security, notes Anthony Giddens, refers to an individual's "sense of order and continuity in relation to the events in which they participate, and the experiences they have, in their day-to-day lives" (cited by Mellor 12). A mourning individual will call into question "the meaningfulness and reality of the social frameworks in which they participate" (Mellor 13). This questioning and challenging of social existence is correlative to the psychic processes at work as psychologists have pointed out. Ester R. Shapiro argues that death "forces us to dissolve and re-create the deepest human bonds that form us" (4), and John Bowlby in his book *Loss* underscores the idea that mourning is a condition whereby the emotional investment in the deceased requires psychic response:

All who have discussed *the nature of the processes engaged in healthy mourning* are agreed that amongst other things they effect, in some degree at least, a withdrawal of emotional investment in the lost person and that they may prepare for making a relationship with a new one. ([italics in original] 25)²

Psychological thinking in the twentieth century about the nature of mourning is most heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" that appeared in 1917. Here, Freud explored the conception of mourning as work, which was to spur on later thinking about this notion of the work of mourning. Freud describes mourning as the process of "releasing the tie between an individual and the objects (including other people) in the environment into which the person invests emotional significance, particularly other persons" (Sanders 22); this process involves a great deal of psychic labour and of active labouring, or working, at mourning. As Alessia Ricciardi points out, "[m]ourning is not simply an emotion for Freud, but a performance of a work that...is a psychically transformative activity" (21). A point that is sometimes overlooked in translation, but that is integral to understanding Freud's conception of the work of mourning, is that the German word for mourning *Trauerarbeit*, is more fully encompassing than the English translation. In German the word is literally "mourning-work" and can mean "work of mourning," as in a text of mourning, or "the work that is required to mourn." Freud elaborated the second

meaning most fully by using metaphors of work (as in labour) to define mourning, considering it "in terms of the economics of the mind" (126). Grief-work is difficult and time-consuming, as Freud states: "The task [of mourning] is...carried through bit by bit, under great expense of time and cathectic energy" (126).³ As Robert Kastenbaum points out, it is an involved and complex process: "Griefwork is carried out through a long series of confrontations with the reality of the loss" (322). Kathleen Woodward provides a useful delineation of Freud's definition of mourning:

[Mourning] is psychic work which has a precise purpose and goal: to "free" ourselves from the emotional bonds which have tied us to the person we loved so that we may "invest" that energy elsewhere, to "detach" ourselves so that we may be "uninhibited." Mourning is "necessary." It denotes a process which takes place over a long period of time. It is slow, infinitesimally so, as we simultaneously psychically cling to what has been lost. (85)

Later thinkers extend Freud's conception of the possibility of the work of mourning, theorizing the role of language in terms of the labour required. For grieving to be effective, the emotions of loss must be translated into words and must be articulated. The work of mourning, notes Robert Stamelman, "penetrates the being of language, filling it with a sorrow so abundant and...so fecund that the worded grief displaces the loved object, its source" (50-51). Jacques Derrida, in his essay "By Force of Mourning," remarks on the relationship of the dual senses of "work" in regards to mourning:

Work: that which makes for a work, for an oeuvre, indeed that which works—and works to open: *opus* and *opening*, *oeuvre*, and *overture*: the work or labor of the *oeuvre* insofar as it engenders, produces, and brings to light, but also labor or travail as suffering, as the engendering of force, as the pain of one who gives. Of the one who gives birth, who brings to the light of day and gives something to be seen, who enables or empowers, who gives the force to know and to be able to see—and all these are powers of the image, the pain of what is given and of the one who takes pains to help us see, read, and think. (171)⁴

Derrida's emphasis on the notion of opening is significant to understand the concept of the work of mourning as it is employed in this book, for as much as the texts of mourning we encounter are chronicles of an individual's struggle to mourn, they also open readers to the particulars of grief. We are thus aided not only in our understanding of grief-work in our own age and socio-cultural context (as varied as they may be) but we are opened to a history of literary expression that serves to signify other socio-cultural moments. By looking back at the labour of mourning in other contexts we are opened to other works of mourning and that opening in turn reflects upon ourselves and our contextual understanding of the work of mourning. And so, reading the work of mourning, Derrida tells us, is a reflexive process that we are forced to engage in by the very fundamental nature of the subject matter we are reading.

While there is significant variation in the theoretical notion of what grief-work can achieve in twentieth-century thinking, from Freud's structural movement that results in loss being put behind the grieving subject (thus a moving through), to Lacan's idea that loss takes on an "interminable, monotonous tempo...a rhythm that flattens the singularity of the object and renders its historical circumstances irrelevant" (Ricciardi 43), the special focus of *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning* is on the literary response to death and loss. As the discussions in the individual chapters attest—in their collectivity—writers have approached the idea that writing can somehow partake of a labour of mourning for many centuries. Thus, the focus is on Derrida's sense that grief-work is an opening to emotion and to loss, and that this process (or perhaps processes) is a valuable and necessary one.

EACH CHAPTER in *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning* interrogates the notion of the work of mourning within a specific historical and literary context, beginning with medieval England and moving forward to the contemporary era and within English, French, American, Canadian and French-Canadian linguistic and cultural settings. Far from invoking a singular template of how mourning is invoked and employed in the texts under examination, the chapters respond to the particular requirements of a

text's articulation of mourning and proceed with the concept of the work of mourning broadly defined. Thus, this volume can more readily be read within a comparative understanding of literary history and expression. The notions of comparison, literature, and history—and indeed the work of mourning—should in the context of this collection of essays be taken in the plural, for as Herb Wyile and Jeanette Lynes remark, "literary history is hardly a consensual, communal project to which scholars make their contributions, but rather a site of conflict, debate, and revision" (117).⁵

THE INTERSECTIONS of the work of mourning and faith in the York Corpus Christi cycle of late medieval plays are examined by Leanne Groeneveld in "Mourning, Heresy, and Resurrection in the York Corpus Christi Cycle." A central question that is addressed is how the teachings of the church on the nature of grieving are reflected in the plays. These plays fulfill an instructive function on how to mourn the dead, and of how to think of the dead, that is not addressed in other medieval treatises or doctrinal documents. The grief of Christ's disciples upon his death is depicted as paralyzing and excessive in the cycle and over the course of the sequence of plays, they learn the proper ways in which to mourn. Contemporary audiences, Groeneveld notes, were able to learn about correct ways to mourn the dead. The cycle's dramatization of grief serves to warn of the dangers of excessive grief and of the importance of learning the proper ways of carrying out the work of mourning. As guidance to mourning, teachings of the church fathers, and in particular Augustine, are employed. Thus, the work of mourning is linked closely with the proper expression and understanding of faith, and, by the end of the York cycle, it is made clear that those who refuse to accept Christ's body in any form are the only ones who will not ultimately escape eternal grieving.

William Shakespeare's contemplation of the political perils attached to mourning are explored in Heather Dubrow's contribution, "Mourning Becomes Electric: The Politics of Grief in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*." The connections between loss and narrative are examined to show how this well-known poem of Shakespeare's presents a rhetoric of mourning; the poem, in turn, reflects upon other texts by Shakespeare to display new considerations of

mourning practices. Shakespeare posits that there are political perils attached to mourning alongside the psychological ones most frequently focused on in Freudian and neo-Freudian contemplations of mourning. The work of mourning in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* involves the dynamic of loss and recovery through narrative by the very activities of storytelling and the substitution of an individual's story for a competing one. Also examining work by Shakespeare, Lisa Dickson looks to the three parts of *Henry VI* to explore the complexity of the work of mourning in "The King is Dead: Mourning and Nation in the Three Parts of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*." As with Dubrow, Dickson notes that Shakespeare's conception of the work of mourning reflects an understanding of the personal and political aspects of grieving and that these two frequently overlap and affect each other. Indeed, the work of mourning is coexistent with the crisis of national identity evidenced in the plays. Dickson argues that the tetralogy forms an extended lamentation for a lost ideal of sovereignty. The fractured body politic is reflected in the mutilated and fractured bodies that are subject to the work of mourning of the grieving characters in the plays, and that the work of mourning is thus a metaphor for the loss of the notion of an ideal state.

The interest that Shakespeare displays in his writing with regard to the work of mourning is exemplary of the English fascination with death and grieving during the Renaissance. As Melanie Gregg argues, sixteenth-century France was equally preoccupied with how the work of mourning should be best articulated and understood. In "Women's Poetry of Grief and Mourning: The Language of Lament in Sixteenth-Century French Lyric," Gregg notes that the French feminist theories of *écriture féminine* in recent thinking are anticipated by the constructions of language evident in the work of Renaissance women Philiberte de Fleurs, Madeleine des Roches, Catherine de Bourbon, Gabrielle de Coignard, and Marguerite de Navarre. These women turned to the forces of their bodies to express the ineffable; the language of the body became feminine in their lyric. By working against existing cultural beliefs about grief reflected in many male poems of the mid-sixteenth century—poems where grief was rejected and that reflect a movement of anti-mourning—these female poets were able to assert the emotional and physical aspects of grieving, of the work of mourning, and thus the feminine poetic presents a fundamentally transgressive response to grief.

The public performance of mourning that accompanied the death of the Princess of Wales, Charlotte Augusta, in November 1817 is the focus of Stephen C. Behrendt's essay, "Mourning, Myth, and Merchandising: The Public Death of Princess Charlotte." He explores how the public mourning of Charlotte Augusta became a commodified process of exchange: physical objects and artifacts could be bought by individual members of the public, which then provided forms of gratification for the mourner. These public rituals of mourning are inherently restorative and stabilizing, and, because of their public nature—rather than the private mourning of the elite level of society Charlotte belonged to—are democratizing. The grieving public was able to claim the Princess as their own, an identification as commoners. Behrendt examines the range of aesthetic consumer goods, such as prose and poetic writing, visual art, and other items (such as ceramic pieces, stamps and commemorative coins) that were produced in the period after Charlotte's death to establish the function of the very public work of mourning for individuals, who were able to find corollaries between their own life experiences and that of the mourned subject. Thus, comfort was drawn in recognizing the narrowing of the gap between the mythical world of elite society (and specifically royalty) and the more mortal individuals of the common world. Behrendt notes the striking similarities between the public mourning of Princess Diana and Princess Charlotte and concludes that these similarities reveal a societal impulse to mythologize a popular subject in periods of domestic instability and crisis that supercede the constraints of a specific historical context. Thus, the work of mourning as described by Behrendt is likely to occur at any time when a certain set of cultural and societal conditions occur, as was the case with Charlotte and then Diana.

Focusing primarily on close textual reading through the lens of twentieth-century psychotherapy, Barbara Hudspith in "Adam's Mourning and The Herculean Task in *Adam Bede*" examines the work of mourning carried out by the protagonist, Adam. Hudspith delineates the double-edged nature of Adam's work of mourning, for it functions as a curse and as a blessing, as a wound and as a gift that allows the reparation of not only the immediate loss but also of the conflicts associated with the loss. Eliot prioritizes the work of mourning as process in *Adam Bede*, as Eliot traces Adam's immediate response to loss that is followed by his painful yet ultimately effective working through of deep loss.

Garry Sherbert's examination of Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* marks the shift to twentieth-century texts in this special issue. In "Hieroglyphics of Sleep and Pain: Djuna Barnes's Anatomy of Melancholy," *Nightwood* is theorized as an unfinished work of mourning, following Freud's opposition of mourning and melancholia. Invoking Abraham and Torok's revision of Freud's work on mourning, and employing Jacques Derrida's writing, Sherbert explains Nora Flood's struggles to effectively mourn her grandmother as a resistance to the interiorizing and idealizing powers of language: she is unable to successfully articulate her work of mourning and thus she mourns interminably, staying instead in a melancholic state. Readers of *Nightwood* participate in the work of mourning without closure by the very act of reading itself as this act assembles and ultimately disassembles the loss, never consoling; thus, Nora's work of mourning also becomes the reader's work of mourning.

In "Colossal Departures: Figuring the Lost Father in Berryman's and Plath's Poetry," Ernest Smith examines the changing nature of elegy in mid-century poetry in America. Both Berryman and Plath engage the issue of paternal loss and the subsequent anger at what they sense as abandonment. For Smith, Plath and Berryman are engaged with the work of reconciling the ambivalent emotions of love and hatred for the father that shadows their adult lives. Conventions of elegy are refigured to fulfill the highly personal nature of their loss; elegy becomes the domain of private psychic exploration and thus is a challenge to the earlier much more public expressions of the genre. The work of mourning performed in Plath's and Berryman's elegies is related to the needs of mourners in the twentieth-century; that this work does not in the end result in consolation as the generic requirements of elegy demand is a sign of the changing understanding of mourning and psychic processes in mid-century America.

Where in Barnes the work of mourning is relegated to failure, to an absence of closure and consolation—and indeed in Plath and Berryman as well—the poetry of contemporary American writer Donald Hall is seen as a positive attempt to articulate and to engage in the process of writing grief in Todd F. Davis's and Kenneth Womack's essay, "Reading the Ethics of Mourning in the Poetry of Donald Hall." *Without*, which was written as a response to the death of Hall's wife, poet Jane Kenyon, presents his struggle to transform the reality of his loss into an aesthetic realm. Narrative effec-

tively becomes therapy whereby grief and anger are worked through. Davis and Womack's approach stresses the notion of an ethics of mourning; this ethics recognizes that the desolation of loss can be countered by the balm of language. In *Without*, they argue, the grief and anger over Kenyon's death is recontextualized as well as narrated in the realm of art. The resulting text that readers encounter presents the work of mourning in both senses, as product and process; further, *Without* requires of its readers active participation in the work of mourning that comprises its text.

The expression of the work of mourning within a postcolonial and Canadian context is the focus of the following two essays in the volume. Katherine G. Sutherland, in "Land of Their Graves: Maternity, Mourning and Nation in Janet Frame, Sara Suleri and Arundhati Roy," examines mourning as a social practice that engages in conceptions of nationhood. Invoking nineteenth-century Canadian writer Susanna Moodie, Sutherland argues that the work of mourning involves understanding how the death of her children and the subsequent grief are similar to the separation she suffered at leaving her mother nation (England) and the eventual attachment to the new nation. Mourning is conceived by Sutherland as an expression of cultural value and as a discourse of nationalism. The association between mourning, maternity and nationality are recurring themes in women's postcolonial writing and thus present new perspectives on notions of nationality. The idea of nation in women's postcolonial writing is constructed through intimate, material, and bodily associations by the representation of mothers, sisters, and children. Lola Lemire Tostevin's focus is less on the political than it is on the aesthetic and the personal, writes Thomas M.F. Gerry in "If Only I Were Isis: Remembrance, Ritual, and Writing in Lola Lemire Tostevin's *Cartouches*." The work of mourning in *Cartouches* is a postmodern contemplation of mourning as an enacted ritual of movement towards renewal and consolation whereby the interplay between the text as product and as simultaneous process of mourning is highlighted. Gerry focuses on the multidimensionality of the readerly and writerly processes involved in partaking of Tostevin's work of mourning. For readers of *Cartouches*, the process of narrative-making is a necessary and active one as we are participants in the charging of language with intention. For Tostevin herself, the collection is a working through of the grief at her father's death and the subsequent process of identity-renewal at the loss.

The final essay in this volume addresses the urgency presented by contemporary disease by asking how the work of mourning can be produced in AIDS elegy. In "Using Up Words in Paul Monette's AIDS Elegy," Lloyd Edward Kermode asserts that AIDS elegy functions successfully on the level of artistry but is also a politically and socially effective means of cultural productivity. Kermode relates Monette's elegiac practice in the collection of poems, *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, written upon the death of his partner Rog, to conventional elegy and argues that convention is both employed and broken. AIDS elegy shifts from the pastoral influences in conventional elegy and alters the traditional apotheosis to the creation of healing for the future. The focus of *Love Alone* becomes dual, chronicling the poet's own movement towards consolation and speaking more largely by providing what Kermode describes as politically-active documentation that results in readers being drawn into the inscriptions of AIDS within contemporary discourses of the body.

As all the texts examined in the essays in this volume attest, from medieval English drama to Shakespeare's work, to contemporary explorations by writers such as Hall and Tostevin of the form that grief takes, the work of mourning is complexly conceived and thus reflects the social and psychological complexity of specific contextual responses to death. A comparative view of the work of mourning across the centuries, and within varying socio-cultural and national contexts, reinforces the interconnectedness of the central tenets of the literary response to death. As much as linguistic and contextual concerns—and indeed the approach to the work of mourning—differ between the texts examined in *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*, the fundamental nature of death in relation to the human condition is asserted in the collectivity of plays, poems, and novels.

NOTES

1. For further discussion of these concerns, see my discussion in *Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning* (Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2003).
2. While variously constituted in the specific processes involved, the general notion of the gradual breaking of the emotional connection to the dead person in order to move on is a common and accepted one in psychological writing. Formal theorization begins with Freud in his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (*A General*

Selection From the Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. John Rjckman [Garden City: Doubleday, 1957]), but includes numerous commentators. Amongst these are David A. Crenshaw in *Bereavement: Counseling the Grieving Throughout the Life Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 1990), Peter Marris in *Loss and Change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), Beverly Raphael in *The Anatomy of Bereavement* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

3. Later on the same page Freud refers to "mental economics," thus reinforcing this image of labour and complexity (126).
4. These words are from a talk Derrida gave at a conference honouring Louis Marin, the visual artist and critic. Derrida's words serve in themselves as a self-conscious work of mourning, while at the same time further define the concept.
5. See also, Christian Rjegel, "Recognizing the Multiplicity of the Oeuvre," *Challenging Territory: The Writing of Margaret Laurence*, ed. C. Riegel (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1997) for further discussion of plurality and literary history, pp. xi-xxiii.