

Foreword

LAMENT AND MOURNING have long been part of the burial and memory of the dead. The reaction to and interpretation of death became important for poets, philosophers and historians, as it had long been for priests. The progress of body and soul is a concern in Homer, Herodotus, Plato and Plutarch. The matter of mourning and mirth, death and life are also biblical. Since its development as a modern discipline, psychology has made feelings about suicide and death, about mourning and its effects part of its purview. In *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning* editor Christian Riegel has brought together a collection ranging from the Middle Ages to the present. In his Introduction, Riegel places the essays in context and focusses on his interpretation of death and mourning.

Response to Death makes a significant contribution to literary studies and the subject of death and mourning, which touches all our lives and many fields of human endeavour. The importance of this collection lies in its very breadth in examining the work of mourning in literary texts from the first centuries of literature in English to the present. These literary manifestations of death and mourning have implications well beyond this particular kind of cultural representation. As Riegel suggests, the act of writing itself can perform a psychological function and becomes the work that is required to mourn loss. Moreover, according to Riegel, the readers discover in this work instructive models for coping or participate in public memorials or commemoration (sometimes over the death of public figures). Riegel aptly recognizes the social and historical aspects of mourning in addition to this literary element. He finds a context from ancient Greek lament and tragedy to the formal elegies of the nineteenth centuries and the elegy, anti-elegy,

elegaic fiction since. In a suggestive phrase, Riegel says that the work of mourning provides "the staging ground for emotion." These literary texts express loss and try to make up for it or at least come to terms with it because the work can never replace that which it represents. Recuperation and revival never quite happen. Still, as Riegel notes, literary history shows that while these words fail, they succeed at supporting the survivors in working through and understanding their loss. This is the perspective that *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning* takes. For so long, writers have been representing loss and mourning even if twentieth-century intellectual efforts have made us concentrate on these matters anew. This volume provides a context for these theoretical approaches and crosses cultures from the Middle Ages onwards.

Riegel reminds us that mourning is an intricate and needed activity that consoles in the face of pain. This collection crosses disciplines, periods and cultures as does the work of our journal over the past thirty years and of the Library of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* of which it is a part. The last two volumes in the CRCL Library have been on the future of literary studies and on the politics of cultural mediation. This publication will help to explore the boundaries of literature, history and culture.

Mourning the dead is something that crosses cultures. Before Freud's thoughts on death and grief, many texts took a cross-cultural and typological view of killing, death and dying. European cultures came to see their own beliefs about and images of death in the contexts of other cultures. Many views of death and mourning in the arts and human sciences have been represented in Western culture and beyond. That is why such a comparative and interdisciplinary volume is important not simply in the important field of mourning but across a range of methods and departments. The sheer richness of this collection should be suggestive to a wide group of students, scholars and general readers.

After reading the essays in this collection, I came to reflect on mourning in terms of my own work and in central texts in our culture. Briefly, I would suggest that Christian Riegel's Introduction and editorial work and the contributors' essays in this collection have the power to make us understand more deeply the nature of loss and mourning. Other readers might apply what they have come to see as a result of this volume to aspects of their own lives and interests, literary and otherwise. Two brief contexts come to

mind, one from the Bible and the other from Shakespeare. They are canonical as sources of mourning, but mean something to me personally. The context of mourning shifts in the Bible, the King James or Authorized Version, which became so central to English literature, as it represents mourning in different situations. Job 30:31 proclaims: "My harp also is turned to mourning, and my organ into the voice of them that weep." Psalm 30:11 moves from the metaphor of turning music to mourning to one of the transformation of mourning into dancing: "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness." Ecclesiastes 7:2 contrasts the solemnity of mourning and death with feasting: "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart." At 7:4, this contrast is made more explicit, and mourning and wisdom become identified in opposition to a kind of joy: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Isaiah 60:20 promises an end to mourning: "Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended." Eternity will repair the ruin of death that causes loss and mourning.

Hamlet's distraction is as much a key to loss as Job's suffering. There are many representations or interpretations of mourning in literature, but these help me to read this collection and to take from it new ways of seeing other literary representations of loss and mourning and to look at the experience of them in life in different ways. Christian Riegel mentions loss from Homer to the present and alludes to Shakespeare, and this is perhaps the key moment of mourning in the Shakespearean canon. Claudius provides advice to their son and his nephew: "Tis sweet and commendable/ In your Nature Hamlet,/ To giue these mourning duties to your Father" (*Hamlet, First Folio*, 1623, lines 268-70). The new king qualifies his commendation: "But you must know, your Father lost a Father,/ That Father lost, lost his, and the Suruiuer bound/ In filiall Obligation, for some terme/ To do obsequious Sorrow" (271-74). Mourning, for Claudius, is natural, is part of the march of generations from birth to death to birth to death and so on. Sorrow, however, has its term. Claudius sees impiety in extending mourning beyond this period. The king, who turns out to be a usurper who murdered his brother for the crown, reiterates the notion that such mourning is against

heaven and strings together adjectives that show up Hamlet's weakness, naivety and lack of education or discipline. Claudius argues for a reality principle (to borrow Freud's phrase): "For, what we know must be, and is as common/ As any the most vulgar thing to sence,/ Why should we in our peeuish Opposition/ Take it to heart?" (280-83). Why oppose the way things are? Claudius returns to the notion of impiety, a sinful faultiness in such a kind of mourning: "Fye, 'tis a fault to Heauen,/ A fault against the Dead, a fault to Nature,/ To Reason most absurd, whose common Theame / Is death of Fathers, and who still hath cried, / From the first Coarse, till he that dyed to day,/ This must be so" (283-88). This sense of commonness and the cycle in the death of fathers is meant to have Hamlet leave mourning after a term and to return to reality, reason and necessity. Yet Hamlet is stubborn in his grief and the work of mourning persists. *Hamlet* is a long meditation on loss and mourning as much as revenge, but lest this turn into something long itself, I think it best to return to the work of mourning that Riegel and his contributors have done so much with.

In *Response to Death*, Riegel has provided a wonderful range of essays that give a literary exploration of loss and mourning, one so rich that it supplements and complicates the fascinating psychological and philosophic examinations of the subject by Freud, Lacan, Derrida and others. Theory reads literature and literature theory in a movement in which the one makes the other richer and more comprehensive. The work of mourning can be found in the making, reading and interpretation of literature and life. A mutual movement between experience and imagination is something that Riegel and the authors of the essays suggest.

THE ESSAYS that Riegel has brought together in *Response to Death* provide a rich sense of the complexity and diversity of mourning in time, place and kind of writing. Some medieval and early modern literary and dramatic texts are where this pursuit of mourning begins. This collection opens with Leanne Groeneveld's consideration of mourning, heresy and resurrection in the York Corpus Christi Cycle, more specifically of that cycle's representation of the disciples' mourning as excessive and as a cause and a sign of weak or heretical faith and its use of Saint Augustine as a means of repre-

senting the disciples' grief. The plays provided a warning to their audience of the dangers of mourning the dead too much. A close connection between resurrection and transubstantiation in late medieval culture permitted the plays to exploit the disciples' grief, for the York playwrights could then identify the disciples as Lollards (Wyclifites) and employ their example to condemn heretical beliefs on the doctrine of transubstantiation in the fifteenth-century.

In the following century Shakespeare explored a more secular course in mourning. Heather Dubrow, echoing Eugene O'Neill, explores the politics of grief in Shakespeare's epyllion or minor epic, *Rape of Lucrece*. Arguing that the rhetoric of mourning in *Lucrece* sheds light on the rhetoric and rhetoricity of other Shakespearean texts, Dubrow maintains that the poem also suggests new approaches to mourning. Dubrow notes that Freud and many neo-Freudians have emphasized the psychological dangers of grief but that Shakespeare's *Lucrece* also stresses the political perils. More particularly, this poem calls attention to the way in both individuals and a society mourning engenders what Dubrow terms "liability and volatility." Shakespeare thereby suggests how mourning generates power and authority while threatening agency.

Lisa Dickson discusses the death of kings and how the nation is mourned in the three parts of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*. Dickson asserts that eulogizing Henry V at the opening of the First Tetralogy is ineffective in the face of the power of death: Henry VI cannot defend his sovereignty or unify his nation. For Dickson, these history plays suggest that the sovereign ideal is not simply lost but is unattainable. The corpse of Henry V at the beginning of 1 *Henry VI* and Henry V's triumph at the end of *Henry V* (its events happened before but written after) have some meaning for the life and death of kings, nations and historical narratives.

Melanie E. Gregg examines the language of lament in the French lyric poem of sixteenth century. She maintains that these women poets were dissatisfied with the limits of rational language to express their experiences and thus turned to their bodies to represent the ineffable. The best examples of this poetry of grief and mourning and of instances of this feminine language of the body (*avant la lettre*) included poems by Philiberte de Fleurs, Madeleine des Roches, Catherine de Bourbon, Gabrielle de Coignard and Marguerite de Navarre. For Gregg, women's love lyric, secular *complaintes*,

or devotional compositions, also support this argument. In England and France, then, the subject of mourning had important roles to play in interpreting the classical, biblical and national pasts as well as in making room for women to manoeuvre in poetic and literary space.

In subsequent times, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the matter of mourning continued to be a key cultural practice. Stephen Behrendt connects the mourning of two princesses in Britain, one near the beginning of the nineteenth century and the other near the end of the twentieth. He links mourning, myth and merchandising in the death of Princess Charlotte in November 1817 to the public grief over the death of Princess Diana of Wales in 1997 and the subsequent commercial activities of mourning her. According to Behrendt, these events serve as reminders of how public mourning rituals stabilize and restore society. He argues that, in such cases, mourning becomes a public performance that brings together the people and the elite as a common public. Thus, rituals of mourning can be democratic.

Another analysis of mourning in the nineteenth century occurs in Barbara Hudspith's discussion of the relation between Mary Ann Evans's (George Eliot's) grief at the death of her father, Robert Evans, and the creation of *Adam Bede*. Hudspith also looks at the connection between the author's mourning and that of her protagonist. Moreover, she examines the issue of the links between mourning and biography and interprets Adam's situation in terms of healthy grief and pathological grief.

Gary Sherbert analyzes a twentieth century text, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, as an anatomy of melancholy and unfinished work of mourning. Sherbert says that the ongoing critical debate about whether incest happens between the main character, Nora Flood, and her grandmother suggest that this is unfinished mourning because her memory of their relation conceals as much as it reveals. For Sherbert, as readers, we harbour the absence of death. Nora's dreams and the crypt of her grandmother are two productive examples of exterior resistance and interpretive efforts to internalize, to make an anatomy of her melancholy. Thus, Nora's and Barnes's work of mourning is also the reader's.

Poets continued in the twentieth century to take up the ancient laments and elegies. Ernest Smith argues that John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* mythologizes the loss and the figure of the father as do some important poems of

Sylvia Plath. Smith asserts that their poems concerning the father are among the most memorable and involve new directions for the elegy despite a honouring of the conventions of the genre. Both poets challenge previous works of mourning. In Todd F. Davis's and Kenneth Womack's essay on mourning in another central American poet, Donald Hall, they maintain that in *Without* (1998), Hall remembers his life with the poet Jane Kenyon as she wrestles with and dies from leukemia. Hall expresses grief and tells stories at once in an "ethics of mourning." For Davis and Womack, Hall succeeds, by publishing this book and giving poetry readings, in expressing his grief and sharing it with others, so that Hall not only makes a memorial of Kenyon's life, but also renews his own.

Hybrid genres also do the work of mourning. Thomas M.F. Gerry discusses Lola Lemire Tostevin's *Cartouches* (1995), which includes poems and journal entries in French and English that provide a meditation on death and the act of remembrance. In the ritual she creates, Tostevin is the mourner who remembers her father as she remembers her self. Here, Gerry suggests, is a community of mourning.

Discussing maternity, mourning and nation in Janet Frame, Sara Suleri and Arundhati Roy, Katherine G. Sutherland argues that the association between these aspects is a recurring theme in the writing of women in post-colonial nations. Moreover, she says that this "representational matrix" may cast some light on the understanding of nationality. Sutherland's tentative hope is that by coming to terms with the embodied experiences of women, we might avoid brutal, grotesque and abstract myths of nation.

With a particular focus on the works of Paul Monette, Lloyd Edward Kermode argues that the active engagement between the work of the AIDS elegy and the future of a community of sufferers justifies a separation of this kind of elegy from classical pastoral elegy with its tendency to reflect and console the now. Kermode maintains that this new kind of elegy involves a political movement in the world along with the grievous physicality, despair and inscription of AIDS in discourses of the body. The AIDS elegy is social and literary at once.

Mourning becomes us and we become it. In a culture that sometimes hides death and the dead, the work of mourning is a necessary matter of expression and renewal. Christian Riegel and the contributors he has brought

together here have provided us with *a*. music and dance to remember. For that, we can look backward with something to look forward to. The collection, like Hamlet's mourning, is itself but gestures beyond itself. This work on mourning is a matter worth exploring.

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