

Simona Corso, Florian Mussgnug, and Jennifer Rushworth (eds.), *Dwelling on Grief. Narratives of Mourning Across Time and Forms*, Cambridge, Legenda, 2022, 236 pp., €113,91.

Written during the Covid-19 pandemic and published in 2022, *Dwelling on Grief* is a timely book. At a time when grief is at the centre of a considerable amount of academic research and is pervasive in public discourse, this volume offers a thoughtful and wide-ranging multidisciplinary examination of grief and its cultural implications. The edited volume comprises an introduction, twelve chapters, three *intermezzi*, and an epilogue. It grapples with mourning and grief from a variety of disciplinary, linguistic, medial, and temporal perspectives, ranging from medieval poetry to 20th century music and biology, with forays into early modern philosophy, visual studies, and the environmental humanities.

The text is organised around thematic clusters. Part I, “The Poetry of Lament,” includes essays by Catherine Keen, Helena Phillips-Robins, and Luca Marcozzi on the literary representations of mourning in the Italian lyric tradition, specifically in Dante’s *Vita nova*, the *Commedia*, and in Petrarch’s poetry and letters, respectively. Part II, titled “Lineages of Grief,” begins with a contribution on Roland Barthes’s “mournful” reading of Dante by Jennifer Rushworth, followed by Susan Irvine’s study of a 20th-century reproduction on engraved glass of an early medieval poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, and Jürgen Pieters’ essay on bereavement and consolation in René Descartes’ *Letter of Condolence* to Dutch poet Constantijn Huygens. Parts I and II examine representations of grief and mourning from literary, philosophical, philological, and art-historical standpoints. Part III, “The Politics of Mourning,” further expands the scope of inquiry to include political thought, law, and philosophy – as explored in Uta Staiger’s chapter on the socio-political implications of mourning. This political reflection is extended to the field of music and musical composition in Luca Aversano’s study of Dmitri Shostakovich’s String

Quartet no. 8 in C minor, op. 110, a piece dedicated to the victims of fascism, which was played at the composer's own funeral. The last chapter of the section, by Aarathi Prasad, investigates human and non-human grief-related behaviours, such as burial and other funerary practices, and draws from research in biology, evolutionary anthropology, and archaeology. The fourth and last Part, "Breaking the Silence," considers how literature, literary theory, and form can overcome the silence and the omissions that often surround grief, as death becomes increasingly medicalised and removed from daily life.¹ Simona Corso focuses on the emergence of the Grief Memoir in contemporary anglophone literature, and Adina Stroia reads a photographic "absence" in Roland Barthes's *La Chambre claire*. In the last essay, Florian Mussnug turns to contemporary writings informed by environmental concerns, asking which literary forms can best capture planetary mourning caused by the unfolding ecological crisis.

In psychological terms, grief is known as a 'complex' emotion. Unlike other, more straightforward 'primary' or 'basic' affects (such as anger, fear, or surprise), grief is an ambivalent, multi-layered emotion, entailing a plurality of simultaneous and sometimes conflicting feelings and emotional states.² *Dwelling on Grief* reflects the complexity and multiplicity of this emotion in its remarkable disciplinary richness, as well as in the variety of forms used to think about, and with, grief. In fact, each of the four parts concludes with an *intermezzo*. The *intermezzi* are experimental literary interludes, which include poems (David Bowe, Elena Buia Rutt, and Andrew Rutt), a review of a contemporary Finnish novel (Timothy Mathews), and lastly, the epilogue, a written record of a live artistic performance on mourning following the loss of a loved one (Zoe Papadopoulou). The *intermezzi* brilliantly complement the scholarly work presented in the chapters while engaging with the experience(s) of mourning through a variety of personal voices and stylistic solutions. This is a thought-provoking experiment with form, that is certainly very original in the context of academic publications and is particularly evocative for grief-related studies. The juxtaposition of scholarly research and artistic contributions allows us to look at grief from different angles, conveying the

1 I derive this observation from Philippe Ariès theory, as presented in Simona Corso's chapter, "A Grief Narrated: The Contemporary Grief Memoir," 152.

2 The concept of "basic human emotion" was first theorised by American psychologist Paul Eckman in the 1970s. See also APA Dictionary of Psychology. "Complex Emotion." <https://dictionary.apa.org/complex-emotion> (accessed 26 February 2023).

nuanced intricacies which characterise this emotion. Moreover, the creative interventions resonate with themes examined in the chapters, and vice versa. As the editors remind us in the introduction, mourning crosses ‘the dividing lines between life and literature, and blurs any attempted opposition of the private and the familial versus the professional and the academic’.³ Several successful examples of this could be drawn from the volume. For instance, Elena Buia Rutt’s selected poems, translated from Italian into English by Andrew Rutt, offer a poetic meditation on grief and its relation to care.⁴ Both care and grief are extended to the non-human through the representation of pseudo-funeral rites involving animals (e.g. the family’s goldfish, and a frog found dead at the edge of a pond in an urban park). Buia Rutt’s *intermezzo* appropriately follows Prasad’s chapter on human and non-human ontologies of mourning while foreshadowing Mussgnug’s argument for the need for ‘multispecies relations of care’, thus emerging as a poetic embodiment of the scholarly discussions. Throughout the volume, the chapters and the *intermezzi* are connected through numerous echoes, resulting in a composite yet very cohesive literary-theoretical framework.

Several essays in the volume touch upon the elusive, “phantamastic”⁵ nature of mourning, which is sometimes at odds with verbal expression. The tension between the urgency to reminisce, process, and articulate grief and the linguistic aporia that is often tied to it inspires some of the book’s most stimulating and compelling pages. It could be argued that the volume itself represents an attempt to overcome this aphasia through the multiplication of voices, that is, the different theoretical approaches and various forms of writing employed to grapple with grief. Furthermore, the book establishes a generative dialogue with the past, suggesting that our responses to grief are, to a certain extent, informed by a centuries-long tradition of mournful rituals, cultural artefacts, as well as literary and artistic forms. As Rushworth lucidly shows through the examples of Roland Barthes and Joseph Luzzi, who both turned to Dante’s writings at a time of personal loss, there is perhaps a quantum of consolation to be found in the work of past mourners.

3 Corso, Mussgnug, and Rushworth, “Introduction,” 1.

4 *Intermezzo* no. 3, 143.

5 I borrow the term from Catherine Keen, “The Poetry of Mourning in the *Vita nova*: An Agambenian Reading,” 28.

Engaging with the long and multimedial history of cultural practices of mourning and the outputs they inspired, this book emphasises the transhistorical and communal dimension of grief. Such an impressive methodological and disciplinary variety – in addition to the volume’s broad temporal scope – is what sets *Dwelling on Grief* apart from other studies that favour a narrower linguistic, methodological, or chronological focus. Moreover, the polyphonic engagement with grief perfectly captures the personal yet collective nature of mourning, thus laying the foundation for thinking about grief collaboratively and across disciplinary boundaries. The volume offers valuable insights to specialists across the humanities and, given its readability and the wonderful juxtaposition of academic and creative forms of writing, it may also be of interest to readers seeking to expand their understanding of this universal dimension of the human experience.

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