Brigitte Johanna Glaser, Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz (Eds.)

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Representations of Mourning, Nostalgia and Melancholia in Contemporary Anglophone Fictions

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Introduction

BARBARA PUSCHMANN-NALENZ & BRIGITTE JOHANNA GLASER

I.

100 years ago Sigmund Freud wrote his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," which was first published in 1917. There he defines the connection of loss and mourning and the distinction between mourning as a necessary human response to the loss of a loved object and melancholia which he portrays as the pathological reaction to loss by a subject unable to redirect his/her libidinous aspirations towards new aims. Most of the articles in this volume refer to Freud's seminal publication, and 20th-century studies on loss, grief and mourning regard it as the foundation upon which new theoretical concepts are built.

In the preface to his book *Signifying Loss: Towards a Poetics of Narrative Mourning* (2011) Nouri Gana deplores the lack of adequate and authentic expressions of loss and mourning in public life as well as in critical analysis, because, he says, in an age of warfare, catastrophes and global socio-political changes, manifestations of "disaster capitalism" prevail (9). And yet, the ethics and poetics of mourning have been discussed in a number of scholarly publications in the fields of philosophy, literary criticism and cultural studies before and since the turn of the second millennium and have often been closely linked to the concern with personal and collective memory culture and its politics in recent decades. Thus Peter Homans's volume *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End* (2000) comprises essays on architecture, psychology, history and cultural studies. The collection of critical essays edited by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003), which already by its title emphasises the increased awareness of mourning's political momentousness, also contains an article by Judith Butler exploring the ethics of mourning. The feminist perspective on loss and mourning, developed by Juliana Schiesari in *The Gendering of Melancholia*, her monograph on Renaissance literature, considers the discourse of mourning and melancholia among the Western intellectual elite as male-dominated and adopting heroic stances. It contrasts with the dejected notion of 'depression' reserved for women, who are absent from the portrait gallery of famous melancholics, at least when we look at the past.[1] Quoting and discussing poststruc-

[1] Jodi Kanter's article, which relies on Elisabeth Bronfen's book *Over Her Dead Body* and its hypothesis that death and practices of mourning supposedly belong to the female sphere and are repressed by patriarchal Western ideology and projected on women (Kanter 2003, 1), debates two recent novelistic examples of new 'gendered mourning': Jamaica Kincaid's angry yet reflective *My Brother* and Graham Swift's depressed *Last Orders*. Kanter's conclusion that "contemporary literary narratives such as Kincaid's and

turalist philosophers Derrida, Kristeva, Lyotard and Lacoue-Labarthe, Schiesari states on the opening pages of her book that after an optimistic period between approximately 1970 and 1990 that was filled with a sense of departure and progress, "contemporary theoretical discourse seems given over to a rhetoric of loss and to a general sense that things are at an 'end'" (Schiesari 1992, 1). This opinion possibly reflects a kind of *fin-de-siècle* mood at the closing millennium. In her conclusion and outlook she maintains with reference to Freud's germinal essay that not only has the role of female loss and grief been ignored so far, but that the valuable and useful exploration of an alternative – that is feminist – discourse of the emotions "would go beyond psychoanalysis, however, by understanding emotional processes such as mourning to be not just the undermining of the ego but a positive form of social and psychical reasoning" (267).

Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (publ. in French 1989) explored the special discourse of melancholia in literature as well as the psychological and philosophical aspects of mourning. So does William Watkin's book *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (2004, see below). The origin of the elegy and related forms – poetic genres distinguished for literary expressions of mourning – reaches far back in time, regarding both the texts and their evaluation (cf. Ernst's article, 271-73).

The topic of loss and mourning in modernist narrative prose has first been explored in fiction contemporaneous to the writing and publishing of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," above all James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) as the epitome of "narrative mourning" (Nouri Gana) or the relations of law, psychoanalysis and fiction in *Ulysses* (1922), investigated by Ravit Reichman's "Mourning, Owning, Owing" (2007). Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* and Michael Cunningham's re-write *The Hours* are compared by Madelyn Detloff at the end of *The Persistence of Modernism: Loss and Mourning in the Twentieth Century* (2009). While several scholars in the USA now address themes of loss and mourning under the impression of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 (e.g. Detloff with her focus on fiction reading after 9/11, Nouri Gana, or Laura T. Tanner who deals with the resulting culture of material representation as a "landscape of loss"), the impact of postmodernism observed in theory and fiction is focused on for instance in papers such as Charity Scribner's "The Rhetoric of Mourning" (2001), and Kathleen Woodward's "Freud and Barthes: Theorizing Mourning, Sustaining Grief" (2007) as well as in the concluding chapters of the volume *The Literature of Melancholia: Early Modern to Postmodern* (2011, chap. 13-17), edited by Martin Middeke and Christina Wald, which explores British literature from the Renaissance onwards and also includes representations of gendered melancholia.

Among the articles in this book, especially the ones by Jutta Ernst (271-74; 287-88) and Anne-Julia Zwierlein (161-64; 174-75) provide in-depth discussions of 20th-

Swift's offer us a space to practice mourning differently" (7) compared to glorifying or petrified expressions, hints at the shifting concepts of gender.

century theoretical approaches to the intertwined topics of loss, mourning, melancholy and nostalgia. Depending on the works of narrative prose selected for their analyses the different essays are based on postcolonial, transnational, philosophical or feminist theory. Other foundations such as trauma theory (Susana Onega, Jean-Michel Ganteau, Jutta Zimmermann), the narrativisation of history (Silvia Mergenthal) or the politics (Anca-Raluca Radu, Dirk Vanderbeke) and poetics of postmodernism (Heike Hartung, Ralf Haekel) appear centre-stage in the wide range of contributions.

To give a brief overview of the most recent scholarship on theories of loss and mourning exemplified by narrative works a few studies will be introduced in the following: the monographs by Madelyn Detloff, Nouri Gana, and William Watkin, as well as the collection of critical essays edited by Martin Middeke and Christina Wald. A study of these publications shows that in none of them the political dimension of mourning practices is evaded or ignored.

Madelyn Detloff demonstrates the "Persistence of Modernism" by analysing the sense of loss and mourning in the works by three women writers of the early 20th century: Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and American poet H.D. [born Hilda Doolittle]. In her introduction Detloff explains her reasons for the reclamation of modernism as crucial for later periods of time: "Understanding modernism as a constellation of discourses about widespread loss and violence" (Detloff 2009, 4) not only circumvents definitional debates, but renders modernism and in particular modernist fiction the appropriate way of grasping the devastations and wars of the 20th century. The three women writers mentioned above, she maintains, were at the time exceptional with their reflections on gender trouble, and all considered themselves as standing at a distance from nation and the mainstream. According to Detloff, Britain's development from imperial power to "little England," together with the gradual weakening of a Eurocentric world concept, presents a singular loss in the first half of last century; the two world wars and totalitarianism caused still more catastrophic losses that had to be mourned. Mourning seizes upon the "captivating spell of the past" (1) so that political history also has its repercussions in the memoirs, diaries and fictions of these women writers. In the later part of the 20th century, Detloff argues, collective memories of losses in the past are constantly "patched" over with new experiences: for instance, the war on Iraq (2003) could only be named and considered the Second Gulf War because it was preceded by the First in 1990; similarly, the Great War was renamed the First World War because and when the Second began. "The concept of 'patching' is an intriguing metaphor for the workings of human memory because the patch […] does more than cover an existing gap" (2) which continuously reminds us of an absence. On account of literary modernism's closeness to the sense of loss contemporary narrative works reflecting collective and individual memory represent a "patched" awareness of the present, with the past and its concurrent losses constantly inserting themselves (4).[2]

[2] The concept of "patching" is – without the use of this term – manifest in J.-M. Ganteau's article on the "ghost-text," where he deals with narrations in which the protagonist's awareness of the present is changed by his experience of the past. In terms of literary

Memorising the primeval catastrophe of the 20th century in public and private discourse, which is done in Pat Barker's narrative, may also provide the framework for the acute perception of events situated at the century's end (cf. Mergenthal 114-15).

The contributions in the final section of the volume *The Literature of Melancholia* deal with writers Howard Barker and J.M. Coetzee, Tom McCarthy and David Mitchell, in addition to Juliana Schiesari's essay on "Mourning Animals." From these texts with their focus on postmodern literature the question results whether melancholia as a literary mood is subsiding; it remains controversial. For the specific purposes of this introduction, however, we turn to the segment of Middeke's volume which precedes that issue and presents a portrayal of melancholy as a kind of diseased "British condition" at the end of last century and the role of fiction in this phase. From the sociological position Paul Gilroy's analysis "The Closed Circle of Britain's Postcolonial Melancholia" scrutinises the public mood in the wake of the Thatcher era to which he intends to add a "corrective emphasis" as absolutely necessary (Gilroy 2011, 187). This correction also "identifies precisely the melancholic, post-imperial formation" (187) that enhanced Mrs Thatcher's political legacies, as one of which he defines the "wilful dismissal of the social" (189) and the "summoning of the solid, uniform nation" (189) where homogeneity is established via exclusion. That contemporary fiction reflects these popularised attitudes is made clear in the present volume by Gerd Bayer's analysis of David Mitchell's novel *Black Swan Green*. Bayer (15-19; 20-22) precisely points to the stances and events addressed in Gilroy's article, in particular the Falklands War and the significance that Mrs Thatcher attached to it (cf. Gilroy 2011, 189-91). In spite of Gilroy's concession that Britain's "uneven pattern of national identification, of loss and of what might be called an identity-deficit" (190) is caused by multiple reasons he maintains that "during the second half of the twentieth century Britain was engulfed by a tide of postcolonial and post-imperial melancholia" (190). That is the period in which much of the British fiction discussed here was written, and Britain's above-mentioned problems with national identification and loss also had an impact on several of the texts by authors from other Anglophone countries (see e.g. Binder on Coetzee). In Gilroy's view this melancholic British mood ("The English Disease?" 197) is enhanced by the fact that the nation has been denied the mourning of what is lost – a situation that impedes the working through of loss (*Trauerarbeit*), thereby perpetuating melancholy and blocking the (re-)construction of something new. Gilroy chooses novels by Jonathan Coe from the first decade of the new millennium to point out fiction's possibility to achieve the "welcome departure from the melancholic patterns" (198) caused by losses not yet mourned in the post-imperial and postcolonial era, but he remains critical of the postmodern writer's comedy and sarcasm.

Considering that Gilroy's is a historically highly specified analysis the question arises whether the narrative expressions of loss, mourning and nostalgia in Canadian,

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criticism, the experience of past reading and collective cultural memory is 'haunting' the recipients' minds and thus also the more recent novel (*Saturday*) – one of the readers of 'The Dead' having become its author.