Modern French Identities

Carole Bourne-Taylor and Sara-Louise Cooper (eds)

Variations on the Ethics of Mourning in Modern Literature in French

With a preface by Dominique Rabaté
'From Freud and psychoanalysis to Derrida and philosophy, the question of mourning has been central to a whole strain of modern thought, especially in France. This fascinating and illuminating collection of essays explores the question in a wide range of intellectual and literary settings, from the French Revolution down through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a tour de force.'

- Christopher Prendergast FBA, King's College, Cambridge

'This volume compellingly explores the intersection of ethics and aesthetics, showing how literature can enrich our sense of the complexity of mourning, grief and loss. It provides a significant contribution to scholarship on mourning, understood as a never-ending process of relationality.'

- Hanna Meretoja, University of Turku, Finland

How does modern writing in French grapple with the present absence and absent presence of lost loved ones? How might it challenge and critique the relegation of certain deaths to the realm of the unmournable? What might this reveal about the role of the literary in the French and francophone world and shifting conceptions of the nation-state? Essays on texts from the Revolution to the present day explore these questions from a variety of perspectives, bringing out the ways in which mourning contests the boundaries between the personal and the historical, the aesthetic and the ethical, the self and the other, and ultimately reasserting its truly critical resonance.

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Variations on the Ethics of Mourning in Modern Literature in French
'Le deuil oblige à dire'
– Philippe Forest, _L’enfant éternel_ (1997)

Take this moment aside
from the dailiness of the days
a block of sheer granite fallen:
run your finger on the dressing table glass
to gather a smidgen of dust
the albums I cannot open
the letters I cannot read
Not yet, I say, not yet,
now is not the time but there will be time
there will one day be time
there will be
presumably
one day
time

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Avec le deuil on ne saurait en finir, malgré les injonctions qui nous sont faites d’en faire le travail, de surmonter la mélancolie qui risque de nous engloutir dans cette épreuve de la disparition des proches. Expérience chaque fois singulière, privée (et le mot s’entend aussitôt selon un autre sens, expérience privée du destinataire auquel on voudrait continuer de s’adresser) et commune, le deuil dérange l’ordre du temps en introduisant dans ce qui nous semblait son cours étal une faille ou un abîme.

C’est parce qu’il est une expérience intensément personnelle, qu’il renvoie à une souffrance qui semble pétrifier les mots et même les réactions émotionnelles ou physiques, que le deuil a à intimement à voir avec la littérature. Nous sommes coupés de celui ou de celle qui nous accompagnait, qui était notre interlocuteur (mental ou réel), à qui nous nous promettons de dire ceci, de confier cela ; nous sommes plongés dans une sorte de stupeur des mots trop ordinaires, dans le vide moderne des rituels sociaux qui entouraient et guidaient le congé donné aux morts. Et la toute récente pandémie du covid, en comptabilisant les décès en longues processions de chiffres, en réduisant le nombre de ceux qui peuvent prendre part aux enterrements, nous rappelle cruellement cette confiscation de l’accompagnement, l’évacuation de plus en plus sensible de la dimension partagée des deuils.

Disons plus précisément, en reprenant l’inspiration principale du volume *Deuil et littérature*, paru en 2005 dans la collection Modernités, l’expérience du deuil est intimement liée à la définition nouvelle et moderne de ce qui commence à s’appeler du terme de « littérature » comme expression personnelle, comme manière de retenir un monde que le chaos des temps fait disparaître devant nos yeux. Comme tâche interminable pour retenir ce qui ne cesse de s’effacer.
Le livre collectif qu’on va lire prolonge cette compréhension à la fois historique et esthétique du lien énigmatique et puissant entre deuil et écriture moderne, à la fois comme épreuve collective depuis le cycle des révolutions, dans le désarroi d’un dix-neuvième siècle défaissant l’ancien monde, et comme épreuve toujours singulière du survivant qui cherche à garder vif ce monde qui vient de s’abolir. Car c’est toujours un monde qui s’éteint, qu’il ait la proportion d’une société qui bascule ou qu’il soit le monde privé que tout mourant emporte avec lui. Il faut le dire : tout deuil est un appauvrissement de notre monde personnel et collectif. Un appauvrissement sans remède ni réparation, car ce qui manque alors pour toujours c’est bien la personne et tous les liens particuliers que nous avions avec elle seule, tout ce que nous pouvions projeter de conversations, de voyages, de rencontres, d’avenir possible en commun.

Écrire le deuil, retenir le souvenir le plus vivant du disparu, c’est moins protester contre cet appauvrissement que déplier à nouveau la richesse de la relation interrompue, lui donner ou redonner place et volume. On le vérifiera dans ces « variations » qui composent le chemin du livre : ce souci de l’autre qui vient de disparaître, cette attention à sa singularité qui manque justement comme singularité irremplaçable obligent à une inventivité des formes et des mots, de la langue même – quand elle retourne par exemple chez Valérie Rouzeau vers le parler de l’enfance pour rester au plus près du père, ou dans les néologismes que forgent Michel Deguy ou Jacques Derrida, ou dans le retour des mots anciens et plus simples comme celui de « chagrin » chez Barthes.

La suite des études réunies par Carole Bourne-Taylor et Sara-Louise Cooper dessine donc un nouveau chemin en renouvelant les points de vue et les œuvres envisagées. Commenter les livres de deuil oblige le critique, à son tour, à trouver le ton juste entre pathétique et analyse, entre proximité et distance, entre sentiment de l’irrévocable et appel évocatoire. Ce travail de relecture nous rappelle la préséance d’autrui, l’ouverture éthique qui préside aux œuvres littéraires, la patience attentive qu’il faut pour donner au temps sans fin du deuil son rythme et sa diction.
With mourning we shall never be done, despite being enjoined constantly to ‘work through it’, and rise above the melancholy that threatens to engulf us in the ordeal of losing our loved ones. It is, each and every time, a singular experience, and a private one (in the sense also of privation, of being deprived of the addressee to whom one should like to go on talking); it is a shared experience, too – mourning disrupts the order of time by inserting into what we took for its steady passage a fissure or a chasm.

Mourning is an intensely personal experience, one that entails a suffering which seems to petrify words and even physical and emotional reactions, and this is why it has everything to do with literature. We are cut off from our companion, from the person who was our interlocutor (in mind or in reality) and to whom we were going to say this, or to confide the other; we are plunged into a kind of linguistic stupor, where the words are too banal, used to fill the modern emptiness, the social rituals that surround and ease this rite of passage. The Covid pandemic we are undergoing even as I write, by turning all these recent deaths into a series of statistics, and by limiting the numbers allowed to attend funerals, is a cruel reminder of this deprivation, and of how mourning as a shared, meaningful ritual has been palpably emptied out.

To put this more exactly, let me take as my principal inspiration the volume _Deuil et littérature_, (Mourning and Literature), which came out in the collection _Modernités_ in 2005: the experience of mourning is intimately linked to the new, modern definition of what was meant by ‘literature’, that is, a personal expression, a way of holding on to a world the chasm of time swallows before our eyes. The unceasing task being to hold on to what unceasingly vanishes.
The volume by several hands before us extends our understanding of the mysterious and powerful link between mourning and modern writing in the context of history and of aesthetics; it is explored both as a collective ordeal since the revolutionary era, moving into the anxiety of a nineteenth-century coming apart from the old world, and as the perpetually singular ordeal of the individual survivor, seeking to keep alive the world that has just vanished. And it is indeed with the extinction of a world that we are here concerned, whether of an entire society or of the private world which every dying person takes with them. Lest we forget: every passing represents an impoverishment of our personal and collective worlds. And there is no reparation or remedy for this impoverishment, because what is lacking now and forever is indeed the person and all the particular links we had with him or her alone, and everything we might still have had in the way of conversation, travel, encounters and a shared future.

To write through mourning, to write it out, is to retain the most vivid memory of the deceased, less in an act of protest against that impoverishment than in an attempt to deploy once more all the richness of the relationship now severed, to give it or restore to it space and dimension. This is clear in all the ‘variations’ of this book as it progresses: the concern for the person who has just gone, the attention to their singularity which is precisely that which is irreplaceable; this demands an inventiveness in forms and words, even in language itself – hence Valérie Rouzeau, who returns to a form of babbletalk in order to remain as close as possible to her father, or in the neologisms forged by Michel Deguy or Jacques Derrida, or in the re-emergence of older and simpler words, for example, the word ‘chagrin’ in Barthes.

The collection of papers gathered here by Carole Bourne-Taylor and Sara-Louise Cooper sets us in a new direction, by varying points of view and renewing the works under consideration. To discuss books of mourning requires that the critic, in his or her turn, strike the right tone, between pity and analysis, between empathy and distance, between a keen feeling for what is lost and a responsiveness to the power of evocation, of calling someone back. The work of re-reading here reminds us of the decorum
required of the other, the ethical dimension that envelops works of literature, and the patient attention it takes, to give to the unending time of mourning a rhythm and a speech.
Acknowledgements

As editors, it is our pleasure to record our thanks to the contributors to this volume, the product of whose meticulous research you have in your hand; their enthusiasm for the project has been boundless and personally rewarding for us all, especially Dominique Rabaté for his gracious preface.

It was in September 2016, at the study day hosted by the Maison Française d’Oxford that this book was conceived. As ever, I (Carole) record the predictable support of my college, Brasenose, contributing handsomely towards the cost of publication. And to my colleague and friend, Stephen Romer, for his sensitive and accurate translation of Emmanuel Merle, as well as Yves Bonnefoy, of whom he is a leading translator. Where would any editor be without assiduous clerical back-up and persistent commitment to the nuts and bolts of production? For this, I have to thank my husband!

I (Sara-Louise) should like to thank my family for their support during this project and am especially grateful for fruitful conversations with Francesca Clara Parker and regular nudges towards completion from Lucia Beata Parker.

– Carole Bourne-Taylor and Sara-Louise Cooper
Introduction

Death is the ultimate alterity and the ultimate referent, inescapable in its reality and its unreality, its concreteness and its abstraction; the telos and the process, the finale and the basso continuo; unknowable yet intractable, evidential yet enigmatic: that which imparts intensity to life. The Covid-19 pandemic is the latest tragedy, on an epic scale, that has brought this paradox into sharp focus, an emotional mix exacerbated by a fraught political climate. Death has suddenly become an omnipresent and imminent possibility for each of us. Faced with the evidence of disaster, we have come to think of ourselves as both witnesses and survivors. Embedded within the pandemic is the death of George Floyd,¹ the personal tragedy a symptom of the monstrosity of endemic collective violence and a matter of global concern. This against the background of humanitarian conflicts, including the ongoing migrant crisis with its bodies washed away unmourned.² The pandemic may have prompted a new ‘visibility’ of death in the sense of its ubiquity, but the singularity of each death is eclipsed by the magnitude of the collective toll. A sense of loss that is certainly growing at an alarming rate, prompted by ‘the three contemporary deaths’: ‘atomic; terrorist; climactic’,³ forever accompanied by the Shoah’s lingering trauma of annihilation.

¹ The death of George Floyd, as a result of police restraint on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, sparked a sense of grief worldwide as well as reactivating the Black Lives Matter movement.
² Marielle Macé articulates her polemic in Sidérer, considérer. Migrants en France (Paris: Verdier, 2017) which argues that each single death should instantly be granted a form of public mourning, for those dead bodies are ours somehow; they are how we define (or ought to) ourselves as European subjects.
Loss, too, is carried along by a paradox: it is acute, yet diffuse; intimately felt, yet universally applicable; specific, yet all-encompassing. The particularity of loss exists against the background of its genericity. What we are, what we do, what we love, is doomed to loss. Loss is not only directed to what was, but also, and perhaps more poignantly, to what might have been or might never be. Longing overflows nostalgia, a feeling all the more overwhelming as it is undefinable. Imagination roams freely over the infinite hinterland of lack which trails off into a plethora of persistent phantasms, its pain being as interminable as death is sudden; an absence so intense that it may, paradoxically, take on the ‘thereness of a presence’.

Thriving in that indeterminate interval between anticipation and retrospection, loss is always beyond consciousness’s capability to comprehend the chasm it causes; it is experienced as an alteration of time, existence and the self, as desolation, hence the ubiquity of figures of disjunction, in congruence with a lexicon of non-adequation – ‘disproportion’ or ‘impropriété’ – and the recourse to a discontinuist technique. Indeed, grief has its own pace, its own tempo, out of step with any imposed cadence. The Proustian principle of intermittence and the Barthesian predilection for

5 Christina Howells examines the imbrication of love and loss against the backdrop of twentieth-century French thought’s emphasis on subjectivity and mortality in *Mortal Subjects. Passions of the Soul in Late Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
7 M. Deguy, *À ce qui n’en finit pas. Thrène* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), unpaginated. If this Pascalian notion is actually omnipresent in Deguy’s œuvre, Pierre Bergougnioux also submits time and space to disproportion when seeking to express the sense of disjunction between distinct existences and the impossible mourning of the original landscape, in *La Puissance du souvenir dans l’écriture* (Nantes: Éditions Pleins Feux, 2000), pp. 37–8. Emmanuel Merle’s systematic use of the prefixes ‘dé’ and ‘dis’ is also symptomatic of a general sense of loss and exile.
idiorrhythm(y)\(^9\) and interstice are avatars of discontinuity, symptoms of a loss keenly felt and at odds with norms. Inscribed in the very fabric of the text, uncoiling its diegetic spring, rupture generates its own procedures of resistance, facilitating the emergence of an alternative discourse that operates on the margins, as promoted by Abdelkebir Khatibi’s pointillist poetics.

The heuristic value of mourning lies in its reactivating and re-motivating the critical potential of literature – its writerly implications – through figuration. Outside any pre-established framework, at a loss, concepts no longer operate at full power, whereas experience thrives, carried along by its paradoxical expression: another experience, another language, generating each other. The neologism ‘désapparition’– neither appearance nor disappearance of presence, somewhere in-between – which Patrick Chamoiseau borrowed from Édouard Glissant, points to the possibility of expression within impossibility, the desperate effort to cling on to appearance within a lucid confrontation with disappearance. The motif of ‘disparition’ [‘disappearance’], which Chamoiseau prefers to ‘mort’, is inexhaustible with its Mallarmean connotations being prolonged and dramatized by Michel Deguy as some kind of conjuring trick (‘la prestidigitation du deuil’).\(^10\) Death, the prestidigitator par excellence, swiftly ravishes one’s beloved. In Deguy’s threnody, \textit{À ce qui n’en finit pas} [To That Which is Never-ending], the metaphorical dedication to his late wife, ‘à ma femme disparue en mort’ – always already ‘disparue’, just like Proust’s Albertine, herself a variation on Charles Baudelaire’s \textit{passante} [passer-by] – pushes the event into the eventuality of figuration. Whilst conjuring the all too familiar phrase, ‘disparue en mer’ [lost at sea], the metaphor paradoxically fulfils its mission of poetic transfiguration, retrieval and conjuration: the beloved is ‘mise à mots’ [put into words/set to poetry] rather than ‘mise à mort’ [put to death]. If the adjective ‘disparue’ – promoted to the status


of monostich in Jacques Roubaud’s poem ‘Morte’ – best encapsulates the new state of his late wife,\textsuperscript{11} it is surely because of the enigmatic, spectral and poetic possibilities inherent in this term. Marie Darrieussecq’s \textit{Tom est mort} reveals the urge to forge one’s own idiolect\textsuperscript{12} when considering the exact meaning and value of the generic term, deuil [mourning], which sits neatly within the dictionary and which, therefore, does not seem appropriate because it is at odds with one’s own very unique suffering (which she refers to as ‘\textit{ça}’): she calls for a word that would be for her own exclusive use,\textsuperscript{13} to which she could give her own twist.

Figuration is what is left in loss – language’s \textit{alternative} when loss seeps into it. It is necessarily indeterminate and thwarted, yet propelled by an ‘energy of despair’.\textsuperscript{14} Utterance is compelled into being by non-being, wrenching from it its own ambiguous motivational force, drawing its figural energy from the gap between loss and its formulation.\textsuperscript{15} The mimetic conundrum opens up figural possibilities in this linguistic game of hide-and-seek between intention and invention, compulsion and articulation. Loss reappears as grief and bereavement, one that prolongs itself as mourning; the other disappears to reappear as \textit{other}: therein lies the paradoxical logic of writing, always at odds with its referent, always suspended between its obscure source and its elusive telos, always bound up with absence.\textsuperscript{16} Figuration is a force of differentiation\textit{/differantiation} that dispels ready-made discourses and defers completion; it ensures that truth overrides reference.

\textsuperscript{11} Roubaud, \textit{Quelque chose noir}, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Daisy Sainsbury’s analysis of Valérie Rouzeau’s neologizing prattle in \textit{Pas revoir}.
\textsuperscript{16} This conception of writing in absentia or as being bereft of its referent, as an orphan, is encapsulated by Richard Stamelman in \textit{Lost Beyond Telling}: ‘Writing is always the writing of loss’, p. 17.
What transpires is the role of writing on mourning as a challenge to dominant social, economic, or scientific modes of thought – which seek to comprehend reality solely through a normative framework. An antidote to the blandness of official discourses, literature emerges as a qualitative discourse of resistance and hospitality channelling its logico-aesthetic resources against reproducibility and screenization and transcending the limitations of conceptual systems. Despite different paradigms informing it, poethical mourning is the counter-discourse (counter in its double sense of opposition and connection) par excellence, enacting another discourse that seeks to explore the otherness of language: in the sense of an ‘autrement dit’, but also ‘with’ and ‘for’ and ‘to’ the other in a world ruled by the media with their proliferation of impoverishing or infantilizing discourses; this other discourse runs counter to the doxa of mourning – whether psychoanalytical or social – and Doxa more generally. Mourning brings into visibility the friction between the mourner’s quest for qualitative forms of thought/thoughtfulness and the demands of hypervisibility in an iconosphere saturated by cacophonic communication.

Loss and alteration are bound up with each other: the return of the past alters the present in the same way as death alters the subject. Temporal alterity is the discrepancy between events that pass temporally but not affectively: time may pass, it will pass, inexorably so, but the experience of being caught up in grief is equated with a time that does not pass. Temporal


18 Jean-Claude Pinson is one of the main theoreticians of this notion, which extends beyond poetry per se to valorize the existential and experiential motivations of literature. Cf. Poétique. Une autothéorie (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2013).


20 Jean-Pierre Siméon makes such a case for poetry in our world, in La poésie sauvera le monde (Paris: Le Passeur, 2016).

21 Dominique Rabaté’s reference to ‘un temps qui ne passe pas’ [a time that does not pass], in Pierre Glaudes and Dominique Rabaté, eds, Modernités 21. Deuil et Littérature (Bordeaux: Presses universitaires, 2005), p. 320; it reads like a variation on Kristeva’s description of ‘[u]n passé qui ne passe pas’, which binds melancholy to
discordance\textsuperscript{22} is the chiasmatic disjunction between living memories and a petrified present. Temporality is eroded and truncated, textualized as \textit{ressassement}, which is the painful duration of grief with its interplay of recurrence and difference and ‘différance’. When repetition tips into rumination, it is subsumed under the paradigm of \textit{ressassement}\textsuperscript{23} – which defines much of modern literature and is consubstantial with the aesthetics of variation in musically minded writers like Proust and Barthes. It is somewhere between distance and proximity, memory and oblivion, presence and absence, identity and exile, in that in-between of a polymorphous \textit{alteration} and representational vacillation that literature can (re)imagine aborted possibilities and propose others.

Exploring the borderland between aesthetics and ethics, mourning sharpens the critical potential of literature as a practice of life – that of being a caretaker of the world and our fellow human beings. Constrained as a response to loss, mourning moves in mysterious ways – unthought, unthinkable, unthought-of, even ‘rethought’\textsuperscript{24} and thoughtful – which all coalesce within a regime of pensiveness/attentiveness,\textsuperscript{25} typified by the


(lyrical) pensivité of a Baudelaire and his heir, the poète-poéthicien Michel Deguy,\(^{26}\) who has been honing his own brand of tristesse poétique. Pensivité relies on figuration, whose inexhaustibility never quite matches the immeasurability of loss.\(^{27}\) The paradigm of thinking (of or about and with) is encapsulated in the Deguyan double-entendre ‘compenser’,\(^{28}\) which extends far beyond the impulse to compensate; if anything, it resists compensation, unless one regards the possibility of figuration as the counterpoint to the impossibility of mourning. In the throes of mourning, literature is conducted as a practice of thinking/thoughtfulness which persists in interrogating what it cannot possibly express, and attending to the testimonial gesture. A plea for vigilance, ‘compenser’ conjures up the ideal of a community of mortals that would bring otherness into the fold of togetherness, which is encapsulated in the punning neologism ‘commune des mortels’\(^{29}\) [the likeness and ‘as-oneness’ of mortals: our common humanity]. Watchfulness\(^{30}\) is the watchword, in the form of a constantly reconducted act of watching over the other – ‘penser-à’.\(^{31}\) All too aware of its insufficiency, the compulsion to think of/about the other is conflated with the imperative to think with the other, which conjures up the French verb ‘composer avec’ – not so much in the sense of coming to terms with one’s loss as composing the work with and for the other. An ethics of alterity and relationality is inherent in Nerval’s paradigmatic elegiac invocation: ‘Je pense à toi, Myrtho …’\(^{32}\) [Myrtho, I think of you]: a presence imaginatively

\(^{26}\) This regime of pensivité may be described as an epiphenomenon of poésie pensante or poétique. This propensity for philosophizing in French poetry, at least since Baudelaire, is analysed in Joseph Acquisto’s, ed., Thinking Poetry: Philosophical Approaches to Nineteenth-Century French Poetry (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

\(^{27}\) Cf. R. Stamelman on loss being bound up with figuration in the sense of being beyond it, in Lost Beyond Telling, pp. x–xi.


\(^{29}\) M. Deguy, La raison poétique (Paris: Galilée, 2000), p. 34.

\(^{30}\) ‘Veiller’, which is ubiquitous in Deguy’s À ce qui n’en finit pas, means ‘to watch over’ and ‘to watch at a dying person’s bedside’.

\(^{31}\) M. Deguy, Desolatio (Paris: Galilée, 2007), p. 2. This autobiographical text on love, friendship and mourning epitomizes the anticonsolatory paradigm.

recalled, a humble thought to signify absence on the site of Virgil’s tomb. More poignantly though, the raison d’être of poetry is encapsulated in the Baudelairean proclamation of irretrievability: ‘À quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve/Jamais, jamais!’³³ [Of whoever has lost that which can never be retrieved/Again, ever!]. Here, bearing witness to the loss of the old city prompts refiguration, allegorization and hospitality.³⁴ Pensivité is enshrined in Baudelaire’s ‘Andromaque, Je pense à vous!’³⁵ [Andromache, I think of you!], which breathes humanity into the grieving mythic figure and confers onto the Baudelairean address an ethical lucidity. It is the experience of loss that makes us ‘semblables’³⁶ [like each other] and cements our fellowship: the incontrovertible truth of mortality is the ultimate criterion for our shared humanity – ‘le comme-un des mortels’ delineating an all-inclusive community. Each addressee in their singularity refers to a universal alterity, carries within themselves a universal victimhood: migrants, orphans, the Negress,³⁷ the captives, the vanquished and ‘many others’ – the list of those suffering from irrecoverable loss is growing every day. The stranded, suffering swan in Baudelaire’s poem anchors the empathetic allegorization of human tragedy,³⁸ drawing attention to the porous boundaries between existential and stylistic ideals; somehow Baudelaire’s

³⁴ A vivid illustration of the many literary filiations which criss-cross this volume, Jacques Roubaud’s appropriation of the Baudelairean hemistich – ‘la forme d’une ville’ (the form of a city) – is permeated by memory and melancholy, loss and longing, with a slight variation though: La forme d’une ville change plus vite, hélas, que le cœur des humains (Paris: Gallimard, 1999); a form of melancholic mourning, necessarily diffuse and asynchronous: Cf. Karl Heinz Bohrer, Der Abschied. Theorie der Trauer: Baudelaire, Goethe, Nietzsche, Benjamin (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), pp. 181–209.
³⁷ The generic or periphrastic appellation to refer to Jeanne Duval is construed by Yves Bonnefoy as a ‘fundamentally poetic act’, bestowing upon her the supreme gift, that is her human ‘absoluteness’, in Sous le signe de Baudelaire (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), p. 338.
Introduction

*Inconnu* encompasses mortality and figuration, while the quest for *l’Idéal* has to contend with spleen and unfolds within the reality of ailing, aging and ending. Mourning contributes to turning figuration into a potent concept that teases out and reinforces, beyond any aesthetic motivation, literature’s existential value.  

Exacerbating the rift between language and meaning, mourning relentlessly enacts its ruminative lament, mobilizing the work of memory – beyond the narrow enclosure of symbolic structures and commemorative conventions – and playing the whole scale of figuration. Thriving in breaches, relishing twists and torsions, figuration is the unexpected eloquence emerging from the impulse of silence to express suffering. If mourning has to do primarily with signs it is surely because death is the ultimate metaphor. Always already there as a prefiguration, its radicalness prompts a multifarious figuration, which encompasses refiguration, transfiguration, configuration and disfiguration. Figuration is the very admission of the faltering of language, yet is its apotheosis: its inexhaustible and vivifying potentialities unfold in an incommensurate space of loss, a loss that is invariably experienced as excess and exile, as well as a common ground. There is, of course, more to the Baudelairean homophony *cygne* [swan]/*signe* than meets the eye, but above all it signals the reappearance of the swan as an allegory of mortality; *autrement dit*, the impossibility of

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42 Deguy, idem, p. 122.

description triggers the possibility of inscription – of alterity, temporality, mortality – through allegory.\textsuperscript{44} Speaking ambivalently and elusively, differently or otherwise (\textit{allos}), allegory is a breach in signs, the very figure of exilic existence within language. The alterity of the lost other calls for the alterity of discourse. Born out of absence and spurred by language’s inadequacy, figuration contains a principle of alteration that shatters narrativity, fractures textual fabric and ruptures rhythm. Figuration is all intensity and energy, as well as hospitality, which is intrinsically ‘poetic’\textsuperscript{45} in its imaginative and altering potential; in keeping with the idea that the use of style\textsuperscript{46} in modernity is inherently ethical in its channelling both the exploration of what was hitherto hidden and the contestation of dominant values: style points to an ethical pact.\textsuperscript{47}

The quest for the lost other summons ‘a poetic experience of language’,\textsuperscript{48} one that would not actually (or merely) aestheticize, but incessantly gesture its ‘energy of despair’, delineating a figurative space outside and beyond normative and consolatory models, within which mourning – pivoting on the inextricable relation between memory and history, singularity and collectivity – can be harnessed as a critical tool.

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A number of seminal theorizations of mourning demonstrate its all-pervasiveness in a pluridisciplinary field that encompasses the politics of modernity,\textsuperscript{49} postcolonial studies,\textsuperscript{50} memory

\textsuperscript{44} Allegory is bound up with mortality; Stamelman names it ‘the trope of death’; in \textit{Lost Beyond Telling}, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{46} Cf. Antonio Rodriguez, ‘Le style et sa valeur éthique dans la modernité’, in Florence Quinche et Antonio Rodriguez, eds, \textit{Quelle éthique pour la littérature ?: pratiques et déontologies. Le champ éthique 47} (Geneva: Labor et Fideson, 2007) style being not only an aesthetic norm, but also an ethical one.
\textsuperscript{47} Rodriguez, idem, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{49} Jean-Philippe Mathy, \textit{Melancholy Politics. Loss, Mourning, and Memory in Late Modern France} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2011).
studies,\textsuperscript{51} deconstruction and psychoanalysis,\textsuperscript{52} with its far-reaching questioning potential being distilled into ‘traumatic hermeneutics’.\textsuperscript{53} Within the wide and eclectic literary corpus generated by mourning,\textsuperscript{54} life writing – whether autofictional or \textit{autobiopoietic}, or more overtly (auto) biographical – has proved particularly fertile. In texts of mourning, the logic of blurring boundaries extends to the ‘je’ hovering between narrator or speaker and author – not in the sense of a biographical or psychological subject; no mere shifter either, rather a shifting subject, who tends to relinquish any signifying authority in favour of a commitment to the beloved.

A nexus between memorial and textual recreation, the text of mourning takes up the challenge of articulating the absence of the beloved by resorting to formal experimentation, which often consists in rethinking generic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Cf. Colin Davis, \textit{Traces of War. Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in Twentieth-Century French Writing} (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).
\end{itemize}
boundaries between literary criticism and life-writing. Composite and elastic qualities often characterize the poetics of mourning, in keeping with its tentativeness. Hybridity telescopes the construction of the text and self-(re)construction, within the intentionality of an ambiguous addressivity. The tradition of elegy and the poetic livre de deuil or tombeau is the site of endless innovation, one that, in our contemporary age, tends to keep aestheticization and sentimentalization at bay in favour of disruption: anti-elegy might be a better label to describe a discourse in which experience and experiment join forces to redefine the lyrical subject as an ethical subject. Oulipianism turns out to be a reinvention rather than an outright rejection of lyricism.

The reinvention of the sixteenth-century genre of the tombeau consists in variations on voice, at least since Mallarmé, more specifically the fantasy of a ‘duo’ with the two almost indistinguishable voices of the mourner and their beloved, as in Roubaud’s Quelque chose noir [Some Thing Black] (1986) – an example of generic heterogeneity, combining fictional, poetic and meditative genres enveloped in dazzling intertextuality. In its wake, Deguy’s À ce qui n’en finit pas (1995) – labelled a threnody – qualifies as

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57 Jean-Claude Pinson’s poem, ‘Fin d’Élégie à Saint-Nazaire’, in J’habite ici (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1990), proposes new, unexpected, trivial associations, lamenting the disappearance of a poetic genre which seems incongruous in our modern world while renewing it at the same time, p. 12s.
58 In Témoins de l’inactuel. Quatre contemporains face au deuil (Paris: Corti, 2007), Dominique Carlat situates texts by Barthes, Pierre Pachet, Claude Esteban, Michel Deguy within the broader context of the attempt to rethink one’s relationship to memory since the Second World War – arguably the most traumatic event in French history since the Revolution – emphasizing the all-pervasiveness of mourning in poetic writing.
60 The revised edition of À ce qui n’en finit pas (nouvelle édition revue et augmentée, Paris: Seuil, 2017) implements its performativity as interminable mourning.
mourning diary, love letter, song of grief, poem, essay, tombeau, ‘livre-poème’ (or ‘poème-livre’), enlisting ‘obsèques’ and ‘convoi’ to converge in autobiopoiesis.

Death often shapes and re-orientates the autobiographical project. If diaries – such as the expanding ‘Covid’ brand – are contemporaneous with the event, much autofictional writing originates from a deferred relationship with History, as exemplified by Oulipian techniques of displacement. The serendipitous rhyme between ‘retour’ and ‘détour’ points to an alteration of the subject, amongst other forms of alterations. Constraints – whether hyper-consciously exploited by Baudelaire and dazzlingly manipulated by OuLiPo, or more loosely handled – invariably invigorate literature through the constant negotiation between chaos and control, emotion and elaborateness.

With their memorializing quality, texts of mourning lead to a problematization and ipso facto revaluation of autobiographical discourse, which, in some instances, can be labelled ‘genealogical’; many récits de vie are récits de

61 Michel Deguy is one of the main practitioners of the tombeau, as exemplified by his Tombeau de du Bellay and ‘Tombeau de Jacques Dupin’ in La vie subite, pp. 47–53. Despite its denomination as a mere love letter, Nathalie Rheims’s Lettre d’une amoureuse morte (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), which is haunted by a Durasian sense of loss, reads like a mourning poem or prayer within a Racinian dramaturgy, conflating the two forms of the lyrical cantata and tragic soliloquy: the result is a tombeau not only for the loved ones, but also for the narrator herself whose flesh bears the stigmata of her suffering. In fact, if Rheims’ text is so compelling, it is because a text of mourning can often be read as a love letter, all the more poignant as it is never read by its addressee.


65 Amongst Jacques Roubaud’s main preoccupations is memory, which is consubstantial with poetry and of which a recent example is his Poétique. Remarques. Poésie, mémoire, nombre, temps, rythme, contrainte, forme, etc. (Paris: Seuil, 2016).
filiation\textsuperscript{66} engaged in an experimental and devotional search for ways to express ties to the beloved and repatriate them from oblivion. In the late twentieth century, metaliterary preoccupations receded in favour of a rehabilitation of transitivity, which Barthes himself – abjuring his structuralist credo of the gap between words and the world – came to embrace: intent on writing ‘à partir d’elle’\textsuperscript{67} [with her in mind, originating from her], following his mother’s death, he defined his fantasy of the ‘Novel’ as ‘filial’.\textsuperscript{68} The epistemological rift between textual structure and extratextual referentiality subsided further, in keeping with the historical turn in the 1980s, which took on its full significance in the ethical turn\textsuperscript{69} in the 1990s, an era mourning for meaning.\textsuperscript{70} The transitivity of bearing witness is bound up


\textsuperscript{67} Barthes, Journal de deuil, p. 227. This so-called ‘quelque chose à partir d’elle’ will turn out to be La Chambre claire.

\textsuperscript{68} Barthes, La Préparation du roman, p. 378.

\textsuperscript{69} Thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Martha Nussbaum, Jacques Bouveresse, Cynthia Fleury, Alexandre Gefen, Sandra Laugier, Pascal Rienceau, Rita Felski, etc. have become established references in the consideration of literature as a site of ethical resistance.

\textsuperscript{70} Christian Prigent exploits the polysemy of the expression, ‘en manque de sens’, which encapsulates an acute sense of deprivation: both the undeniable fact (perceived as a fatality) of this lack and the act of suffering from a lack of meaning (in the sense also of suffering withdrawal symptoms) and craving it, in À quoi bon encore des poètes (Paris: P.O.L., 1996), p. 7.
not only with subjectivity but also with contingency, which is the intersection between ethics and aesthetics: something of our fragility and vulnerability is incorporated into discourse. Transitivity has to do with loss, which has become the all-pervasive mood in French culture, with its proliferation of narratives of rupture and return: a return to the subject and the author – with a more acute consciousness of alterity – to the story and history, all symbiotically connected in a pluridisciplinary ‘discourse of return’. A sense of things disappearing pervades much contemporary literature with its renewed emphasis on filiation (and transmission).


74 Cf. Dominique Rabaté, Désirs de disparaître: une traversée du roman français contemporain (Rimouski: Tangence, 2015). Jean-Philippe Mathy addresses this disenchanted in Melancholy Politics.

75 The melancholia that pervades those writings is linked to an ethical project. In his ‘Figures de l’héritier dans le roman contemporain’, Études françaises, 45 (2009), Demanze looks at the crisis of transmission in contemporary literature with regard to the condition of the orphan. Pierre Michon’s reinvention of hagiography delineates an extinct rurality. In the mournful deplorations of Jean Clair’s Terre Natale: exercices de piété (2019), loss stems from moral bankruptcy and an erosion of national identity. Further right on the political spectrum, Richard Millet’s neo-reactionary chronicle of the plight of la France profonde – in his trilogy: La Gloire des Pythre (1995), L’amour des trois sœurs Piale (1997), Lauve le pur (2000) – smacks of nostalgia for an agrarian ancestry and a more classical brand of French. The ubiquitous trope of yearning for a bygone era in the age of globalization betrays a certain idea of France. In a very different vein, turning to the left, Deguy combines grief and grievance to mourn the old Paris – most notably in his Spleen de Paris (2001) – and lament the demise of culture, reduced to cultural capitalism and eschatologically described as ‘apocalypse’ and ‘deluge’ (La raison poétique, p. 140). This so-called ‘culture’ is a leitmotiv, especially in La Raison poétique and Réouverture après
which is the axis of genealogical and biographical investigation and fosters an ‘ethics of restitution’.\textsuperscript{76}

The ‘ethics of restitution’ relies on an ethics of transcription. The literary text engages in the fraught enterprise of restoring voice to the voiceless and metaphorizing one’s own memory through that of the other. In this respect, the thriving genre of the investigation\textsuperscript{77} – or counter-investigation for that matter – reads like a search for ethical restitution through the coalescence of personal identity and historical trauma: the mourner’s desire to write proceeds from a sense that the lives of their loved ones have been silenced or sidelined, repressed or betrayed by collective memory. The sense of a broader context may be diffuse or marginally relevant, but mourning invariably points to an ethical agenda that hinges upon an intricate

\textit{travaux} (Paris: Galilée, 2007). Informed by Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle promoting ephemera and spluttering simplistic meanings and Jean Baudrillard’s hyperreality, humanity has fallen prey to the idolatry of its own technologically enhanced image: uniformity engenders inhumanity. This consumer society hides a more insidious side, which Jérémie Lefebvre has anatomized in \textit{La Société de consolation}. \textit{Chronique d’une génération ensorcelée} (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2000) with its mass-production of myths and illusions that fill the void. For thinkers of disappearance such as Deguy, these are all interrelated preoccupations, amongst which anthropomorphist humanity’s estrangement from a world it has wrecked through systematic carelessness. An all-encompassing label, \textit{Poéthique} (with which Deguy is synonymous) extends to a geopoetics of attachment or ecopoetics – which applies to Emmanuel Merle. Amongst the many reasons for the pervasiveness of the motif of disappearance in contemporary literature, there is also the instinct to insulate oneself from terrorist systems and the tyranny of hypervisibility. Chamoiseau’s denigration of the destructive effects of tourism on Creole culture is on the same continuum. All these endeavours testify to a sense of unshakeable grief.


\textsuperscript{77} In \textit{Un nouvel âge de l’enquête. Portrait de l’écrivain contemporain en enquêteur} (Paris: Corti, 2019), Laurent Demanze highlights the ethical stance of such investigators as George Perec, Patrick Modiano and Kamel Daoud, amongst many others, all cultivating an ‘ethics of opacity’ (p. 266; p. 277), which guarantees the integrity of the testimony by acknowledging the problematic nature of experience and its rendition.