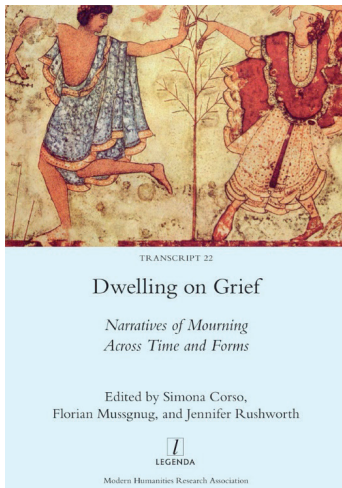


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Dwelling on Grief: Narratives of Mourning Across Time and Forms

Simona Corso, Florian Mussnug & Jennifer Rushworth (eds). 2022. Dwelling on Grief: Narratives of Mourning Across Time and Forms. Cambridge: Legenda, 236 pp., € 85.00, ISBN 978-1-839540-35-6



<https://www.mhra.org.uk/publications/Dwelling-on-Grief>

As a timely response to the new challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, *Dwelling on Grief: Narratives of Mourning Across Time and Forms* offers a uniquely rich investigation of cultural practices and literary / artistic forms of mourning. Against the hyper-specialisation that is increasingly narrowing the scope of humanistic research, this volume addresses the topic from a remarkable variety of disciplines, methodological approaches, chronological and geographical perspectives. It moves in a broad temporal and cultural spectrum across fields that range from Literary Studies and Modern Languages, to Biology, Music, Political Theory, and the Environmental Humanities, in a nonetheless compellingly consistent overall structure created by the constant, thought-provoking dialogue between sections and chapters, as well as the core theoretical premises they share.

Drawing upon the understanding of mourning as an inherently personal and yet universally shared experience that generates an urge to overcome the limits of language,

Dwelling on Grief seeks new theoretical frameworks and calls for new terminological distinctions. On the one hand, we have the notion of “narratives” as inextricable from the individual mourning they relate to explore the “ethical and aesthetic possibilities of literary expression as a necessary form of cultural mediation” (3). On the other hand, the editors foreground the idea of “dwelling”, that is, of engaging with works that linger over suffering for the death of loved ones in action or thought. In this sense, mourning is explored as “an ongoing, unfinished, and unfinishable, yet ever-changing experience” (4) that can raise (self)awareness of mortality and thus hopefully bring change.

This volume not only combines private and public, past and contemporary, human and non-human perspectives on mourning but also blurs the boundaries between academic and creative contributions. Following an introduction that illuminates the complexity of a topic that defies straightforward definitions, the collection is structured in four thematic sections interspersed with three experimental literary *intermezzi* and an epilogue – poems by David Bowie and Elena Buia Rutt, a contemporary novel review by Timothy Mathews, and the record of a live performance by Zoe Papadopoulou.

In Part I, “The Poetry of Lament”, Catherine Keen shows that Dante’s *Vita nova*, exceptionally written *after* Beatrice’s death, in fact explores the importance of mourning beyond personal experience and presents it as a collective condition. Helena Phillips-Robins draws from medieval sermons to claim that Dante’s grieving for Virgilio’s sudden disappearance at the end of *Purgatorio* emotionally involves readers to the point of “giv[ing] a script for their own voicing of compassionate grief” (35). Luca Marcozzi moves to the analysis of how late Petrarch, by warning against excessive displays of sorrow, turns from mourning to consolation, and from lyric poet to moral philosopher. Part II, “Lineages of Grief”, focuses on responses of twentieth-century readers to medieval representations of lament. Jennifer Rushworth illuminates how Roland Barthes’s grief for his mother’s death is mediated by his reading of the *selva oscura* as a metaphor for Dante’s suffering at the loss of Beatrice, a reading which changes our understanding of Dante by suggesting “a new, personal, emotional reading” (71). Susan Irvine offers a comparative analysis of the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* and its imaginative recreation by engraver Laurence Whistler in the window of St Nicholas Church in Moreton. In both examples, the expression of mourning is transfigured into one of joy, “into a yearning that reaches beyond the human towards the mystical or divine” (77). The section ends with a chapter by Jürgen Pieters that moves from a letter René Descartes wrote to poet Constantijn Huygens. Here Descartes invites to find consolation for the death of his wife in rational thought and opposes suffering and reason as a warning against inconsolable despair. In Part III, “The Politics of Mourning”, the focus shifts to the political side of grieving, since – as the editors remind us – mourning always “takes place within and is inflected by broader societal structures and norms” (10). Uta Staiger analyses burial practices through the paradigmatic case of Sophocles’ *Antigone* as a model for “the nexus between mourning and the law as the place where political action is possible as well as constrained” (111). Luca Aversano examines String Quartet n. 8 in C Minor, op. 110 composed by Dmitri Shostakovich and dedicated “to the victims of fascism and war”. In this piece, the apparent contradiction between individual and collective mourning is reconciled through the blending of examples of lament from different musical

traditions, including Shostakovich's own compositions. Finally, from the interdisciplinary perspectives of archaeology, anthropology, and biology, and within the new field of "evolutionary thanatology", Aarathi Prasad looks at evidence of burial practices among our human ancestors and the animal world, starting from the assumption that "any analysis of a burial is an analysis of a symbolic action" (131). The last section of the volume, "Breaking the Silence", begins with a contribution by Simona Corso on the recent emergence of grief memoir in contemporary anglophone literature. The three examples provided witness to the ability of this genre to break long-standing taboos surrounding death and loss by establishing an intimate connection between writer and reader and providing an aesthetically refined space to dwell upon grief. Adina Stroia addresses the relationship between mourning and photography from Roland Barthes's *La Chambre claire* to the *récit de mort*, a genre that follows a "photographic logic" (170) in the depiction of grieving: photographs are often evoked through ekphrasis or textual disposition in line with Barthes's treatment of the most moving picture of his mother in his book. Finally, Florian Mussnug turns from the human to the "more-than-human" world in contemporary writings that engage with the environmental crisis. He suggests that mourning is always communal and creates shared experiences, especially now that the coronavirus pandemic has proven "a powerful reminder of the omnipresence of death, but also of the inexhaustible, generative force of human and more-than-human communities, and of the strength of social ties" (181).

As a much-needed addition to the recent wave of scholarly debate on the topic, *Dwelling on Grief* marks a very significant contribution to our understanding of mourning. The vast purviews and far-reaching overtones of this volume are effectively epitomized by its uniquely broad disciplinary, methodological, national, and chronological focus, which will pave the way for future research in the different fields that the authors navigate in each chapter. The volume's fascinating combination of academic and creative reflections will also stand as a brilliant example of how creative experimentation can enrich each field of research with insights resonating with our lived experiences, and disclosing alternative visions.

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