

Thought Piece

Speaking of the Dead and the Speaking Dead

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Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013, \$21.95). Pp. 168. ISBN 978 0 8223 5389 8.

Scholars of literary mourning find themselves in an odd position, often taking part in elegy even as they critique it. In her new book *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy*, Diana Fuss fully embraces both roles. She offers readers the opportunity to see elegy in action – she notes, “The book itself is as performative as it is purposeful, perhaps comprising its own distinctive form of elegy” (3) – even as she raises new questions about the role of an ancient poetic form in an era of mass media that is, of course, written in prose.

Although elegy’s roots in Greek poetic meter are arcane enough to deter those without a formal bent, the dynamics of elegiac relations remain complex and compelling. If an individual dies, how might the words of one mourner capture the profundity of that loss, offer comfort to others who mourn, or move God or posterity to grant the dead transcendent immortality? Peter Sacks, a leading critic of elegy, draws on Freud in reading traditional elegy as a kind of consolatory substitution for the lost individual: poetry for person.¹ More recently, Jahan Ramazani has argued that modern elegists are busy mounting an opposition to consolation, as if in the very act of resistance they show their fealty to the dead.²

This is all quite tidy: once again, the modern era seems to be bucking its predecessors. But there are complications. In reading poetry of the First World War, in which many see anti-elegy supplanting elegy, Claire Buck cautions that “if the work of mourning is also the work of cultural transmission, then we need to be careful about what disappears from view as a result of tracing a single line of descent for twentieth-century anti-elegy from the classical English tradition.” She goes on to note that in serializing Vera Brittain’s war memoir, *Testament of Youth*, the BBC replaced Brittain’s sentimental poems with more pessimistic works by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon: “The angry and satiric anti-elegies of the soldier-poets express what

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¹ Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

² Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

we want to hear: that war is wasteful, tragic, and costly.”³ Buck is right to point out that consolation and resistance to it exist side by side both through and after the war. Her example is a valuable reminder of the dangers of consoling ourselves through canonization; we can only believe that the historical “lesson” has been learned if we first isolate and promote the voices of antiwar poets to suit our narrative of history.

Diana Fuss’s work offers a similar check to received wisdom about the role of modern elegies, but she takes as her subject roughly two centuries of British and American poetry. Fuss moves against current trends by arguing that these elegies are consolatory (4), and she warns against investing too readily in a narrative of modern melancholy and enduring grief: “a refusal of consolation alone is not enough to guarantee ethics, just as consolation alone is not enough to rule it out” (113). She asks, “What, after all, could be more consoling than the knowledge that there can be no consolation?” (5), and she strikes a nerve by declaring in her conclusion, “The argument that underpins our prevailing notion of elegy is based on the common critical tendency to idealize or fetishize resistance” (108).

The ethics of literary relations are the most significant aspect of elegy to come into consideration in the past several decades. With it, the critical study of elegy has the opportunity to affect wider discussions of memory, memorialization, and the social ramifications of death. Tammy Clewell speaks for many in noting, “That the traditional elegy transforms the lost other into the writer’s own aesthetic gain raises certain political and ethical suspicions.”⁴ In psychoanalytic readings of elegiac poetry as a substitute for the dead, there is much talk of the mourner’s voice and the mourner’s state of mind, but recent work from other perspectives has shifted attention to the lost voice of the elegiac subject and the ethics of employing or replacing that lost voice. David Kennedy observes in recent elegies the desire “for the dead to continue to walk among us. Indeed, reading many contemporary elegies, it almost seems as if we need a new generic term for a literature of the undead.”⁵ This is where Fuss’s work comes in, as she crafts a new reading of elegies that “give voice to the voiceless” (3).

How can one do justice to the voice of the dead? Melissa Zeiger captures the complications of what might seem the obvious answer: to quote them. Zeiger argues that Swinburne’s quotation of Baudelaire in “Ave atque Vale” indicates,

on the one hand, the power of the dead to speak definitively, to enter and inform the language of the living, to engage, as the Baudelaire passage ironically does, the elegiac conventions. On the other hand, the powerlessness of the dead over their work or the way they are represented, and the condescension of the living toward the dead, are equally apparent. The image of Baudelaire as a discontented, petulant corpse who finds the living “bien ingrats” goes far to domesticate him; he is humanly trapped within his own words, his own irony.

It is, in her words, a “textual domestication of the dead.”⁶

Fuss, too, acknowledges that to “speak not about the dead but in the voice of the dead appears to represent the greatest ethical violence of all, exploiting loss for the

³ Claire Buck, “First World War English Elegy and the Disavowal of Women’s Sentimental Poetics,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 53, 4 (2010), 431–50, 432, 448.

⁴ Tammy Clewell, “Mourning beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 52 (2004), 43–67, 50.

⁵ David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2009), 145–46.

⁶ Melissa F. Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 39.

poet's own aesthetic gain" (5). Despite such dangers, she goes out on a limb to argue for the importance of ventriloquizing the dead:

when modern elegists choose to speak in the voices of deathbed sufferers, conscious corpses, or lost lovers, they risk a more self-directed violence, losing themselves in an abyss of pain that may or may not be their own. Ethics, at its heart, begins in the ability to imagine another's suffering, making elegy one of the most necessary, if perilous, of aesthetic forms. (5)

For Fuss, the voice of the dead is an essential part of an ethical treatment of mourning, even if the best way to include and frame such a voice remains murky.

As Fuss wades into the battle over elegiac consolation, she captures the problem for aspiring elegists:

It turns out that what might be ethical for one (the dead) may be unethical for the other (the living). Elegies speak to both audiences, forced to negotiate the impossible ethical demands of a genre that strives neither to disrespect the memory of the dead nor to ignore the needs of the living. (5)

It is precisely here that I would argue that prose has much to offer the modern elegist. The flexibility of the novel form makes it easier to craft elegies for both audiences, including a range of elegiac relations in a series of portraits that strikes a balance between the views of the dead and those of the elegist. As a result, the reader of a prose elegy finds him- or herself in a position unlike any in life: listening to the voice of both the living and the dead.

For the voice of the dead to be more than an opportunistic appropriation by the elegist, the elegy should take advantage of one of the oldest of elegiac conventions: the division between or within mourning voices. For those critics who want to see elegy performed ethically, how better to sort through the many problems of elegiac discourse than in a dialogue of perspectives that brings to light the clashing of motives and complex relations among the various players? And what better way for the many different voices of mourning (the dead, the elegist, and the host of other mourners) to be heard? Even psychoanalytic critics such as Peter Sacks may find value in this approach since, as he notes, there is a "confrontational structure required for the very recognition of loss," the means through which the mourner "is forced to accept a reality that he might otherwise refuse."⁷

An emphasis on dialogic elegy brings the "other" mourners – so often merely peripheral figures in the elegiac drama – more fully into the scene. Here, the lone elegist of literary tradition is placed in a more realistic context, making him or her now simply one of many. Such a regrouping is itself an ethical reappraisal of the role of the individual mourner in favor of the multitude, as well as a testament to the significance of the loss mourned by them. A new, conversational elegy may better reflect the needs of the clusters of elegies for those with AIDS or cancer, elegies that, as with their First World War predecessors, acknowledge the thin line that separates the living from the dead. These groups are part of a growing body of elegiac conversations linked by particular events or concerns, rather than by poetic form or a consolatory/anti-consolatory function.

Although poetry can certainly perform the elegiac variety I have described, perhaps none with such versatility and stamina as Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, fiction lends itself to multivoiced mourning. In David Kennedy's astute study of the elegy, he opens with

⁷ Sacks, 35–36.

Virginia Woolf's famous diary query: "I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel.' A new – by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?" He acknowledges that "the possibility that a novel might be an elegy exemplifies the particular difficulties in giving an account of elegy written in the last hundred years or so. If a novel can be an elegy then we have already travelled some considerable distance from elegy as a sub-genre of poetry."⁸

Many modern fiction writers insist on bringing the voice of the subject back to elegiac literature, but they do so by placing it in conversation with the other voices of mourning. One result is that the voice of the dead is denied the authority that so often accompanies the spectral voice, and that so effectively silences those who are left behind. Hamlet is one of few in literary history who bothered putting his ghost to the test; much of the time, final diary entries, scribbles on unfinished manuscripts, and Ouija missives leave survivors demoralized. Although Fuss celebrates the "revivifying" nature of what she calls "corpse poems," in which the poet imagines the dead speaking from the grave, incorporating the language of the dead into an ongoing conversation about his or her significance to others might keep both the words of the elegist and the words of the dead from stifling the acts of mourning. It also staves off the monumentalizing that seems to shut down so much variation and movement in the unfolding of grief.

For an ethical elegy, literature must perform mourning dialogically, as Woolf and Faulkner do through the crowd of mourners and mourned in their novels. Rather than, as in Tennyson's elegy, offer a single speaker who is critical, inchoate, and eulogistic by turns, the novelists distribute these different approaches among various characters who are then forced to interact with one another's modes of grieving. Through such interactions, mourning and elegy are also placed in relation to a larger set of social influences. Although the traditional elegist often professes to offer only a pure outpouring of emotion, Woolf's and Faulkner's works reframe the scene of mourning to include the elegist's audience, his or her social and educational position, and the various other factors that have shaped such emotions. Mikhail Bakhtin declared that the dead are "are removed from the sphere of contact,"⁹ but Woolf and Faulkner challenge this distinction by addressing the means and modes of mourning in the body of their novels, and thus do much to return the dead to contact with the world they left behind.

In shifting the elegiac relationship from poetry to prose, novelists place both the elegist and the elegiac subject within a larger narrative field. The shift from a lyric "I" to a narrating character is a radical one, and it enables writers such as Faulkner and Woolf to explore the relationship between the individual qualities of a character and the limitations of what and how he or she sees. By making the elegized subject a character, the authors also undermine the tendency to treat the dead from a distance, as if he or she lacked distinctive qualities, much less flaws. If Fuss wants readers to recognize the "revivifying" power of the voice of the dead in elegiac poetry, modern fiction writers enflesh that spectral voice, giving it the narrative context of a larger conversation to make it part of the mourning process, rather than, once again, apart from it.

⁸ Kennedy, 1.

⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 20.