
Brigitte Johanna Glaser and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz (eds.). *Narrating Loss: Representations of Mourning, Nostalgia and Melancholia in Contemporary Anglophone Fictions.* Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014, 338 pp., € 37.50.

Loss is never simply one thematic element among others in literary texts; at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, it has become a constitutive feature of literary activity as such. Modernist literature – a remarkably insistent intertext

in many of the contributions to the volume under review – cannot be imagined without the horrors of World War I and without the diminishments delivered by the interlocking dynamics of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. Postmodernism, in its turn, took on board what Jean-François Lyotard influentially identified as the loss of grand narratives – a situation of disorientation that did not absolve postmodernism of the desire to recycle that loss as new narrative material. In the new century, the trauma of 9/11 and the disastrous militarized response served as powerful reminders that narrating loss is an inevitably political act; narrating loss, in other words, is not only a way of reconnecting to the past, but also a mode of inhabiting the present. As the contributions to this volume cumulatively illustrate, apprehending the present as a situation shot through by loss entails at least two things. First, it emphasizes that contemporary life is marked by ordinary diminishments and extraordinary catastrophes, and that a literature that responsibly responds to the present must necessarily engage with these negative dimensions. Second, it draws attention to the need for a more elaborate affective register for connecting to the present – for a better understanding of what the subtitle to the volume calls “[m]ourning, [n]ostalgia and [m]elancholia”; it could have added ‘trauma’ to the list, as that signifier figures prominently in many of the volume’s interrogations of contemporary fiction’s exploration of such diverse affective modalities. Indeed, an awareness of the inevitable *ethicopolitical* and *affective* dimensions of narrating the variegated shades of loss energizes all of the many excellent contributions to this book; they underline that contemporary fiction’s preoccupation with loss invariably translates into a self-reflexive consideration of how literature shapes the dispositions through which we inhabit the present – which is to say that they know that, in spite of what the infelicitous subtitle of the volume insinuates, literature’s affective attunement to land- and mindscapes of loss is never only a matter of “[r]epresentations”, but is marked by a performative, self-reflexive moment.

Given the importance of literary self-reflexivity, it is no coincidence that many of the chapters focus on contemporary fiction’s intertextual engagements with (often modernist) precursors. In her reading of Michèle Roberts’s *Daughters of the House*, María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro shows that the novel qualifies as a “congregation of ghostly presences” (124) – not only for the dead, but also for intertextual voices that convey a ghostly effect that enables the novel to shape itself as a hospitable haunt; in his reading of Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*’s uptake of Joyce’s “The Dead”, Jean-Michel Ganteau shows convincingly how the Joycean echoes help *Saturday* communicate a sense of “immanent anxiety and vulnerability” (231), which signals both an attunement to trauma and a call to an ethics of care – a view of “humanity as essentially relational” (236). Other contributions refract their assessments of contemporary fiction’s affective and ethicopolitical opera-

tions through a consideration of its reworking of generic templates (which counts as another form of intertextuality). In a particularly convincing chapter, Jutta Ernst shows how Paul Auster's 1982 memoir *The Invention of Solitude* can productively be read as an exercise to take up the complexities and performative ambiguities that mark the traditional form of the elegy; Auster's text is not only *about* loss, even if it was triggered by the loss of Auster's father, but through its use of repetition, intertextuality, and self-referentiality, it qualifies as "a performative piece of writing which *acts out* the experience of bereavement" (272–273, my emphasis); Auster mobilizes the conflicted legacy of the elegy in order to deliver a resolutely counteridealizing monument to the dead. Jutta Zimmermann, in her contribution, assesses how two contemporary historical novels from Canada bend the genre away from the future-oriented teleological fictions that make up the nineteenth-century historical novel to tenuous and more open-ended constructs haunted by recalcitrant pasts. Zimmermann elegantly shows how these novels' possession by trauma moves them beyond the once dominant template of postmodern historiographical metafiction and resituates the Canadian past and present in resolutely transnational contexts. Zimmermann's approach resonates with Susana Onega's discussion of W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, a text whose generic hybridity – it is a composite of (at least) scrapbook, essay, oral history, and memoir – qualify it as "a specifically postmodernist type of Holocaust novel" (305). In the novels discussed by Zimmermann and Onega also, a principled openness to that which is not present – to intertexts, genres, and traumas from the past – paradoxically allows these fictions to achieve a critical vantage on the present. In an important essay, Giorgio Agamben (2009: 41) has noted that to be truly contemporary, a work cannot coincide too closely with the present; contemporariness, Agamben argues, is "that relationship with time that adheres to it by means of being out of sync and anachronistic". The best contributions to this volume demonstrate that an occupation with loss is one way for contemporary fictions to achieve their contemporaneity – and, importantly, for these critics to articulate the broader ramifications of these fictions' worldliness.

An emphasis on the transhistorical and transcultural drift of phenomena such as trauma and loss connects several of the contributions; it gives shape to a connective dynamic that may be endemic to these phenomena – as when Roger Luckhurst (2008: 3), in his magisterial survey of contemporary trauma culture, identifies trauma as "a piercing or breach of a border [that] violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that distress and confound". In his reading of David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*, which is the author's most personal and least flamboyant novel, Gerd Bayer reads Mitchell's coming-of-age story as an occasion to revisit the

national memory of the Falklands Crisis, which in its turn serves as a belated rehearsal of the loss of empire that Britain had failed to face since at least the end of World War II. Mitchell's interweaving of the personal and the national, of crisis and latency, and his activation of the uncontrollable transitivity of loss, ultimately allow the novel to count as a multiply mediated intervention in the militarized climate of the War on Terror during which it was written, and to which it contributes the hopeful prospect that "national narratives, too, can be performatively re-invalidated" (25). Like Zimmermann's and Bayer's chapters, Silvia Mergenthal's reading of Pat Barker's *Another World* showcases contemporary literature's capacity to articulate complex interrelations between the recent and the not so recent past – in this case, World War I and the murder of James Bulger in 1993 – as well as between the public and the private; Barker interrogates the palimpsestic relations between national and private obsessions, between the psychological and the social, and between different instances of violence and traumatic loss that, Mergenthal shows, echo and amplify one another.

The chapters I have discussed showcase what is best about this volume: they share a triple commitment to, first, taking seriously the ethicopolitical and affective agency of literature; second, to integrating and interrogating current theories of mourning, trauma, nostalgia, and melancholia; and third, to undertaking patient and careful textual readings of contemporary fiction. The volume as a whole displays the broad variety of the ways in which contemporary literature is animated by loss; the contention in the introduction that literature moves beyond melancholia by "actuat[ing] sympathy and stimulat[ing] recognition" (7) simplifies the actual diversity of the narrative strategies and affective registers that the volume explores. This expansive scope is also reflected in the geographical spread of the contributions: the volume collects contributions on South African, British, Canadian, Irish, and US fiction, while it also deals with the works of expats such as Nadeem Aslam and W. G. Sebald. Because of its investment in very diverse poetics of loss – poetics that, as I suggested above, are located at the very heart of modern and contemporary literary practice – and because of the very different archives it engages, this volume works better as a wide-ranging contribution to the study of some of the most significant developments and oeuvres in contemporary Anglophone literature than as a rigorous contribution to a thinking of loss. The diversity of the volume is apparent in its rather random organization; the volume is divided in five sections: on fiction that foregrounds the political dimension of loss; on the issue of historical loss; on recurring motifs and topics that mediate loss; and finally sections focusing on intertextual relations and generically hybrid texts respectively. It is no exaggeration to say that many of the richest contributions to the volume would fit under most if not all of these rubrics.

The chapters dealing most directly with the politics of loss are divided by their position on the role of the nation in that politics. Gerd Bayer's reading of Mitchell, Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz's wide-ranging discussion of the figure of the orphan, and Christiane Maria Binder's discussion of J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* all rely on an analogy between the personal and the familial on the one hand and what Binder calls "politics and the fate of the country" on the other (38). In a typical formulation, Binder writes that Coetzee's Mrs Curren figures "South Africa as an old country in the process of being repossessed by new children" (40). In marked contrast, Anja Müller's sophisticated and convincing articulation of nostalgia and survival – the latter notion foregrounding a future-orientedness that often remains buried in the former (46) – in her reading of Anglophone narratives about – of all places – Bulgaria shows how these fictions render the analogy between nation and individual inoperative; what emerges instead is a form of "ethical individualism" (46) that entails "saying farewell to nation as a basis for identification" (50) in order to prepare for new connections and relations. (This movement away from a stable conception of ethical goodness is also central in Anca-Raluca Radu's much less productive reading of Nick Hornby and Carol Shields). Peter Childs's chapter on Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* continues Müller's bracketing of the nation, as it interrogates celebrations of "rootless levity" (59) in postcolonial and cosmopolitan theory through its reading of Aslam's novel's "cross-national portrayal of complex, imbricated lives" – a portrayal that also tracks the costs of diasporic existence. Eleanor Ty's equally convincing discussion of Jane Urquhart's *Sanctuary Line*, another novel of migration, further loosens the bonds of the nation, as the novel inscribes contemporary life in a resolutely hemispheric context. The result is a fragile, vulnerable sense of connection, and what Ty calls "the difficult gain resulting from globalised migration" (79). Cumulatively, these chapters make clear that life beyond the nation is not only a matter of liberation, rather involves a less straightforward admixture of loss and gain; they demonstrate that contemporary literature is one domain in which this complex affective constellation is contemplated and given shape.

A number of chapters stand out through the close attention they pay to the literary techniques that shape a sense of loss. Heike Hartung reads Julian Barnes's later works as so many engagements with "the 'ordinary' catastrophes of old age" – minor disasters they express through irony, formal experiments, and gentle refusals of narrative closure (158). Like several other chapters, Hartung's chapter reads Barnes's 'late style' (a notion borrowed to great effect from Edward Said and Theodor W. Adorno) as a series of formal choices that open life up to unanticipated alterities and experiences; Barnes's "defiance of generic categories" (158), that is, removes constraints that would leave it shackled to a diminished life, while his works' generic hybridity intimates a more open-ended

sense of connection. Two other contributions discuss that other contemporary master of literary style, John Banville. Ralf Haekel patiently reads Banville's mature work as a response to "an increasing sense of contingency, a loss of security" in contemporary life (240). In a particularly impressive essay, Anne-Julia Zwierlein reads Banville's *The Sea* together with three other contemporary works as examples of the maritime trauma novel, in which maritime mindscapes serve "as symbols of and catalysts for individual human development" (175). In a remarkable overlap with Haekel's essay, Zwierlein considers these maritime mindscapes of mourning and melancholia as scaffolds for "a new, post-postmodern kind of 'authenticity,' perhaps even 'realism'" (162) – as "symptoms of a post-postmodern wish to return to a time before the dissection of subject, identity, and agency" (174). In light of the subtlety and variety of the other contributions in the volume, this split between the postmodern and the post-postmodern is probably best thought of as only one possible version of the different attunements to the present that literary mediations of loss make available.

Considered as a theoretically informed and ethically and politically attuned survey of contemporary Anglophone literature, the contributions to this volume collectively make a compelling case for the centrality of intertextuality and generic hybridity; for the erosion of the nation as the default container of literature's ethicopolitical concern; and for the complex and multifarious interrelations between affectively charged instances of loss and diminishment. The volume chronicles the breakdown of customary analogies between the collective and the private, the nation and the individual, and it presents convincing instances of fictions that figure personal strategies for overcoming the melancholy impasses of losses. What remains unthought, perhaps, is a consideration of new collectivities – of emerging and future life forms that rupture both the individual and the nation. Nancy Armstrong (2011: 10) has noted the need for a new "analytic vocabulary" to capture the "model of human life and the future it augurs" she finds in the most exciting contemporary novels – a life and a future that cannot be captured through notions such as "*narration, plot, point of view, setting, and character*", terms that, she notes, "activate the themes of a lost community based on one-to-one identification". It is the great merit of this volume that it brings existing vocabularies of loss, mourning, melancholia, nostalgia, and trauma to their limits, and makes the question of the future of fiction and of life all the more urgent.

Works Cited

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