

## The Powers of Vulnerability: The Restorative Uses of Elegy

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In the late twentieth century, critics in the field of English studies used to be very much concerned with a literary category that seems to have fallen out of fashion, that is, historiographic metafiction. We may remember that the label, created by Linda Hutcheon (1988), referred to one of the main aesthetic and ethical inflections that had come to dominate the production of the time, which she defined as essentially contradictory and prone to frictions, in its relation to the writing of history (p. 106). Her position needs to be situated within the context of a reflection on what, at the time, used to be one of the buzzwords in critical parlance, that is “postmodernism,” whose ambivalent orientation towards the past was programmed morphologically through the presence of the prefix “post”. Influential works at the time included those by French philosopher Michel Foucault and his idea of archaeology and also the French historian Pierre Nora who, in his *Les lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), accounted for the way in which collective memory bears upon the writing of history in reaction against the loss of traditional modes of narrating history and anxieties about the future, hence

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the resort to museums, monuments, archives and other means of bringing commemoration to bear on memory. In the categories of studies defined above, memory occupies a central function in its linking of past and present, and this appears perhaps most glaringly in the case of commemoration, an apparent attention to the past whose main purpose is in fact, primarily and above all, a way to glorify the present. All of them provide sites of tension, contradiction or friction that throw the problematic nature and function of memory into visibility.

Of course, such critical or theoretical manifestations need to be situated within the more general context of the ethical turn in the humanities and the social sciences, and their harbouring of the branch known as the “ethics of memory.” Alongside and embedded within the ethical turn there may be found a “trauma or traumatic turn,” which has reputedly taken hold of both the humanities and the social sciences and since the last decade of the twentieth century has spread to most spheres of society. This has been documented by many commentators, among them Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, who, in *The Empire of Trauma* (2009), identified a shift from a culture of suspicion to one that considers victimhood in a favourable light. The contemporary emphasis on trauma has also led other commentators, such as Roger Luckhurst (2008), to define trauma as a new paradigm. To Luckhurst, trauma “has percolated into many different contexts, and Western cultures have convulsed around iconic trauma events” (p. 1), which leads him to greet sarcastically the reader in the following terms: “Welcome to trauma culture” (p. 2).

Admittedly, trauma theory and culture have been the targets of recent criticism. The objection of traumatophilia has been regularly raised, and some critics have argued that the contemporary apprehension and representation of trauma, in the humanities essentially, is based on a series of interpretations, themselves predicated on the selection of aspects that have assumed a dominant and, in their eyes, distorting function. In his *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Alan Gibbs (2015) works on the “invention” of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and on Cathy Caruth’s role in disseminating a singular vision of trauma that he analyses under the heading “The Rhetoric of Trauma Studies” (pp. 5–7). The main criteria with which he finds fault is Caruth’s influential insistence on the unrepresentability of trauma, and the notion of latency as appropriating Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (p. 6). This seems to me representative of the main criticism levelled at trauma studies and

trauma critics, that is, their unhealthy attachment to the past and inherent obsession with memory.

Admittedly, one of the postures that trauma criticism has contributed to promoting is that of the backward glance, and I must plead guilty on this account. It is undeniable that the two groundbreaking volumes edited and authored by Cathy Caruth in the mid-1990s fostered a view of trauma based on the contradictory imperative of reclaiming the past while being confronted with the impossibility to do so. The enduring legacy of Caruth's work (1995, 1996)—and also of Anne Whitehead's (2004), for instance—is associated with evocations of belatedness, *Nachträglichkeit*, repetition, temporal stagnation and freezing, away from any possibility of the working-through process. In other terms, the dominating model, whose norms were established in the last decade of the twentieth century, is organized along the lines of melancholia. By using this term, I am referring to the Freudian paradigm and to Julia Kristeva's (1992) canonical study, as will become apparent in the section "Mourning as Performance," later in the chapter. I necessarily relate it to the sibling category of mourning, thereby relying on more recent proposals formulated by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (2003) who insist on the more positive aspects of loss, as I intend to make clear in my analysis of emblematic pieces of contemporary fiction. By using such categories, I address the way in which they throw into visibility the related figures and forces of dependence on the lost object, hence vulnerability, and show how mourning and melancholia are powerful.

As suggested, the valence of the trauma paradigm seems to have evolved recently towards a more positive, optimistic vision, whose seeds were already present I would argue in the older model. In her latest book, *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Caruth (2013) defends a more future-oriented vision of trauma, in which obsession with the past and with memory is envisaged in resolutely creative terms, thus reconnecting with the idea of the positive effects of trauma to be found, for instance, in the writings of Freud (*Moses and Monotheism*) and Ferenczi (in some passages of his clinical diary). In her rereading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, she pores over the famous episode of the spool or *fort/da*, and concludes the first chapter of the volume with the following words:

As such the theory of trauma does not limit itself to a theoretical formulation of the centrality of death in culture, but constitutes—in Freud’s, and our own, historical experience of modernity—an act of parting that itself creates and passes on a different history of survival. (p. 17)

In Caruth’s words, then, there appears a change of inflection, and even a change in valence, as trauma is no longer considered in negative terms, as dependent on a pathological attachment to or rather presence of the past, but rather as a creative possibility, a creative “parting” couched in “the language of the life drive” (p. 13). In other words, a climate change seems to affect not only the fields outside trauma theory, but also that of trauma studies themselves, as made clear in the declarations of one of their most influential exponents. This in turn suggests a move from what has been described as the “prescriptive model” of trauma studies. Such a move cannot but have incidences on the way in which memory is apprehended, and suggests that trauma studies may be both moving *beyond* the trauma paradigm and continuing to work *with* trauma.

Against such a shifting background, I have chosen to focus on the time-honoured form of the elegy as a means to address the issue of memory frictions. David Kennedy (2007) underlines the lability of elegy as “mood more than formal mode” (p. 2) and its compatibility with the novel. Strikingly, many highly popular novels of recent years have taken this format and idiom, including, most obviously, Graham Swift’s *Last Orders* (1996) or, more recently, John Banville’s *The Sea* (2006), both of which are Booker Prize winners. In Swift’s novel, which pays homage to Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, a modern classic as narrative elegies go, five men go on a pilgrimage to scatter the ashes of their late friend and relative, in what at times looks like a picaresque vigil. It famously closes—or rather refuses to do so—with aposiopesis, hovering on the brink of dissolution, yet not altogether neutralizing any possibility of transcendence (pp. 294–95). Elsewhere, in a conclusion that takes the sea as its setting, a favourite motif in elegies (Kennedy 2007, p. 6), Banville rejects syntactic abruption and ends with repetition and return, as the closing paragraph coincides with the news of the protagonist’s wife’s demise. In this trauma narrative, where the wife’s death rehearses and reactivates the loss of two of the narrator’s childhood friends, his vigil and testimony to the departed is imbued with the powers of belatedness that both makes the past present and forces the narrator to modify his reading of the past. According to the convention-breaking rules of modern,

twentieth-century elegy as defined by Jahan Ramazani (1994), no consolation or transcendence is to be expected from the contemporary versions of the mode that specialize in voicing the absurdity of elegiac expectations (p. 37). Without multiplying instances, it might be said that some of Britain's most influential novels, since the 1990s, have been elegies, or at least have been dominated by elegiac strategies (here, among many others, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1996) comes to mind, where the narrator, the main protagonist, laments the loss of the essence of cultural Englishness that he used to consider as eternal).

In all such instances, the texts thematize the sense of loss and cultivate the art of the backward glance, addressing the lost one and at times making him/her speak according to the secular convention of prosopopoeia. This practice of hindsight provides the opportunity for a reconsideration or a re-vision of the past, and for the recall, modification and creation of memories, in what has been called the "revisionary wish" inherent in the mode (Clifton-Spargo 2004, p. 24). For this reason I consider the humble, vulnerable form of elegy—which is premised on the (failed) address to the absent other, and runs the risk of tentative revision—to be an apt vehicle to tackle the memory issue. And this is true all the more so as it spans a wide spectrum from consolation and apotheosis (in the case of traditional elegy) to melancholia (in the case of modern elegy) if Ramazani is to be believed (p. 40), thereby allowing for a contrasted vision of memorial strategies. My point is that elegy allows for the expression of suffering and the processing of both a painful present and an, at times, idealized past, connecting past and present and giving pride of place to memories. In so doing, it becomes the site of revisiting, conflict and negotiation. In what follows I address this by focusing respectively on the ethics of melancholia, mourning as performance and the politics of relationality.

### THE ETHICS OF MELANCHOLIA

Admittedly, some contemporary narrative elegies might be said to encourage a fascination for trauma and melancholia. This is the case with Nicholas Royle's *Quilt* (2011), an experimental novel that does not so much distort linearity to conform to the imperatives of traumatic realism (Luckhurst 2008, p. 9) as work on rhythm and duration. The story centres on the death of the anonymous protagonist's father, and on the days and months following the latter's demise, as the son goes through the

pangs of bereavement and plunges into melancholia. As suggested in this evocation, the conventions of elegy are not strictly respected in terms of progression towards acceptance and healing: the pastoral setting is hardly present; there are no “outbursts of anger or cursing”; and certainly there are no “procession or mourners.” Needless to say, the last two phases of traditional elegy, that is, “movement from grief to consolation” and “concluding images of resurrection,” are also totally absent. Among the set of primary conventions, only the resort to repetitions and refrains may be said to clinch the conformity to the mode (Kennedy 2007, p. 6). All this underlines the status of the narrative as characteristic of contemporary elegy in Ramazani’s conception of the term, that is, texts that lament not only the loss of a dear one or the end of a period, but also the “end of assurance, hope and the promise of resurrection” (p. 40). From this point of view, *Quilt* may be said to be emblematic of some saturation with the past.

The bulk of the narrative (but for the last few pages) is written in the present tense and devoted to the evocation not only of the protagonist’s pain, but also of the lost father and, at one remove, mother. The anonymous protagonist and initial narrator (he is called “the bereaved son”) recalls his last moments with his father, his missing the night call from the hospital announcing his death, and delves into a more remote past, evoking the father’s talent for language and various other idiosyncrasies. In traditional fashion, the narrative stages a homage to the departed, casting the lost one in a favourable light, selecting and foregrounding appropriate memories. In these pages, anamnesis is prevalent, but it is also compounded of reminiscence. The site of private memory is circumscribed to the cottage that the protagonist has to empty of the father’s possessions, in a procession of plastic bags taken to the scarpard until emptiness is used to figure out the coincidence of past and present: “And then there is the incredible world of the cottage, dead and surviving, stuffed with the past now present, the present now past, in a convulsion of lunatic tranquillity” (p. 37). In such evocations, the past is both partially remembered and repeated in the present, according to one of the most basic principles of trauma, mixing up life with survival. Such an orientation fosters an impression of saturation, and signals the impossibility to forget expressed by the congealing time of trauma that clots and refuses to flow (Davoine and Gaudillière 2004, p. 167), in some eternal, limbo-like present. This is echoed in pithy phrases (“The post is past.” [p. 27]), and in metafictional developments, as when the narrator elaborates on the idea of a time “in between”:

There is time given. It is a time that never existed before. It is as if your father's phrase 'from time to time', apparently so casual, opens up like a cuckoo clock, intimating a time in between the one and the other, a mad gift. (p. 82)

Above all, one of the narrative's main characteristics is to build up a powerful cluster of images around the central vision of the ray (the sting ray, the manta ray and rays of another type). In fact, the father's cottage is emptied the better to be fitted with huge aquariums or pools in which the bereaved protagonist harbours a group of rays. In many highly poetic passages, they are described as mysterious creatures, hailing from Plato's *Meno*, and their contradictory nature is underlined:

Everything about this brainy creature is so starkly strange, back-to-front and upside down, trapeze artist of deep time, feelings flattened, gravity in chaos. And how charmingly the marine savagery of its eating habits is occluded, since the crafty mouth is concealed, underneath! How readily it would ravage a Red Riding Hood granny, its mouth packed with tooth plates, arranged in rows! No sooner does a tooth go missing, grinding up its hapless prey, than a new one is lined up in front of it: lifelong self-renewing spray! The original dragon's army! The ray is stationary even when it moves, shooting through water at unnerving speed, propelled by the pectoral fins that form the hem of the body, close to complete circularity, as the axis of the body remains unflinching. How quickly its lurking quivers into larking! (p. 39)

In these lines, the alliterative drive, the haunting emergence of iambic tetrameters and the use of rhyming converge to build up a densely poetic prose that draws the reader's attention to the ray as figure of contradiction and ambivalence, self-contained and dependent on its victims, stationary and darting at the same time, "lurking and larking." Elsewhere, it is defined through its preference for lying under the gravel of the aquarium floor, a form of "vivisepture" (p. 32) that brings together living and being dead, hence cumulative yet contradictory images of the mixture of past and present. Above all, as indicated in the previous quotation, the ray is associated with deep time, which turns it into an image of the Derridean trace, that is, of that which is always already there. Such an association with pastness and memory is clinched in the first passage when the ray unexpectedly shoots into the narrative, disrupting the story of the grieving son and providing a figural and metafictional break: "The ray is the figure of the already. It's what Meno knew all along, in

an eerie way, the ray of hearsay, the paralysing figuration of all knowledge as recollection” (p. 11). Here, the consistent use of paronomasia (ray/already/eerie way/hearsay/paralysing) echoes the ray’s already-mentioned circularity and evokes the looping of memory on memory.

Within the context of the elegy, the omnipresent ray represents the impossibility to forget and the permanence of recollection, yet one that lies hidden and possibly inaccessible, as suggested by the viviseulture indication, hence a memory that is there and not there at the same time, and whose availability is never totally guaranteed. The blocked time that spatializes the narrative turns it into a metaphorical aquarium in which rays are seen to intermittently surface, lurk and lark. This gives visual substance to the permanence of memory even while showing its whimsical dimension. Through, for instance, the image of the ray and its endless returns and disappearances (or “return of disappearance,” to quote Caruth once more [2014, p. 58]), building up a densely poetic narrative that takes the risk of opaqueness, multiplying textual fraying and inconsistency, and resorting to several devices that break up the narrative (like a 22-page-long paronomastic “dictionary” or lexicon of ray-related terms) the novel foregrounds its vulnerable form, ridden with holes, inconsistencies and contradictions.

Such an orientation ties in with the presentation of the protagonist’s frailty; he who originally narrates his own story before shifting to a second-person narrative and eventually moving to the third person recording his loss of agency, elocutionary surrender and stark disappearance. Such elocutionary effacement linguistically performs the protagonist’s symbolic and, possibly, literal demise, at the hands of melancholia. This conforms to Freud’s observations, when he states that while mourning is defined by object loss, melancholia is concerned with loss of self. And such considerations seem to provide an even more faithful and striking illustration of the more severe melancholic cases where the lost object is incorporated and/or identified with so much so that the shadow of the lost object falls over the self (Freud [1915] 1971a, p. 249). It is precisely in such circumstances that the self can kill itself, as it considers itself as object (p. 252). What the reader is presented with, in such circumstances, is what Kennedy (2007) calls a “literature of the undead” (p. 145), in which the memory of the departed is omnipresent and in which faithfulness to the lost leads to the expression of an ethics of melancholia where the “responsibility for the dead” and the “indebtedness of the survivor” assume pride of place (pp. 120–21). Here, memory

constitutes a vestigial sign of relationality that reaches excessive proportions, so much so that the sense of loss is metaleptically replaced by pure, endless relationality, negating the subject's autonomy and vindicating his dependence on the lost other, hence his vulnerability.

Through the image of the ray—which stands for truth as recollection, but that appears only intermittently—and through the multiplication of allusions to past traumatic episodes—that are but partly recoverable and act as screens to other less accessible or altogether inaccessible traumatic breakthroughs (Ganteau 2015, pp. 90–92)—the text ultimately foregrounds what Caruth has defined as the “thinking of the archive” (2014, p. 78), in her commentary on Derrida's *Archive Fever*:

Traumatic memory thus totters between remembrance and erasure, producing a history that is, in its very events, a kind of inscription of the past; but also a history constituted by the erasure of its traces. (pp. 78–79)

Granted, in the case of *Quilt*, this history is an individual one, unlike the collective history that Caruth has in mind when evoking the events of the First World War. Still, I would argue that the elegy of the melancholic, contemporary type reveals the problematical, contradictory pull of memory and more precisely traumatic memory, where friction is compounded of remembering and forgetting. *Quilt* throws such a frictional drive centre stage and grants it visibility.

## MOURNING AS PERFORMANCE

I am aware that the melancholic model of elegy I have been using so far is indebted to the Freudian and Kristevan visions of melancholia. And I am also conscious that counter- or complementary models are available. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, for instance, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (2003) also address the values of melancholia and see it as an “ongoing and open relation to the past,” “a continuous engagement with loss and its remain,” and more importantly perhaps “a rewriting of the present as well as the reimagining of the future” (p. 4). The idea of loss as opening up the present and “orient[ing] it towards unknown futures” (pp. 5–6) is present elsewhere in the book, when the authors discuss the powers of melancholia and of mourning. Still, while there is nothing intrinsically original in emphasizing the positive dimension or mourning, I would say that the more unexpected view of melancholia as

“enabling” and creative is more challenging, even while echoing the general drive towards more positive accounts of loss—including traumatic loss—that I alluded to at the beginning of the chapter. Even though I am not especially interested here in the idea of melancholia as becoming expounded by Eng and Kazanjian (2003), I find it stimulating and useful in contextualizing the recent changes in our perception of the memory issue, not least because it might bring in even more ground for friction when considering it in relation with elegy.

Still, I want to move on to the linked category of mourning and to a contemporary narrative elegy of a different type, in which loss, beyond an apparently melancholic phase, morphs into mourning and opens up into an unknown future, fairly literally. The type of text I have in mind is, for example, Swift’s *Last Orders* (1996), with its final opening, or, more especially, Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2008), yet another winner of the Man Booker Prize. *The Gathering* conforms closely to the traditional elegy template, rehearsing all of its primary conventions such as the “outburst of anger and cursing” (the protagonist and narrator regularly gives vent to her anger against her family and her nation, and even against herself); the “procession of mourners” under the guise of a family vigil; an unmistakable “movement from grief to consolation”; and tentative “concluding images of resurrection” (Kennedy 2007, p. 6). As I have shown elsewhere, *The Gathering* (2008) by Anne Enright is all about memory as event, that is, memory as passive, despite the frantic attempt at anamnesis that fuels the narrative (Ganteau 2017). From the incipit, the first-person narrator poses as a witness whose function is to produce a testimony as to the circumstances that led to her brother’s suicide. In typical testimonial fashion, such witnessing is compounded of a great deal of uncertainty:

I would like to write down what happened in my grand-mother’s house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event. I feel it roaring inside me—this thing that may not have taken place. (p. 1)

From the beginning, friction appears to be one of the main modalities of anamnesis as clash, questioning and contradiction are at the heart of the narrator’s quest. In the bulk of the narrative, such uncertainty is displayed through constant indications as to the difficulty or even

impossibility to remember: “Some days I don’t remember ...” (p. 3); “I would love to remember how ...” (p. 59); “All I remember is ...” (p. 60) and so on. Despite such relentlessness, recollection is thwarted, at best allowing for glimpses into past episodes and snatches of tentative truth. Perhaps the frictional nature of the act of recollecting is nowhere more pithily expressed than in a negative epiphany in which the narrator realizes that, precisely, she paradoxically cannot know even if she seems to remember:

These are the things that I do, actually, know.  
 I know that my brother Liam was sexually abused by Lambert Nugent. Or  
 was probably sexually abused by Lambert Nugent.  
 These are the things I don’t know: that I was touched by Lambert  
 Nugent, that my Uncle Brendan was driven mad by him, that my mother  
 was rendered stupid by him, and that my aunt Rose and my sister Kitty got  
 away. (p. 224)

What obtains in these lines is a paradoxical sense of a memory failing to come to fruition, as the adverbial slippage suggests, and as the presentation of the second list, verging on the illogical or a-pragmatic, indicates. It is to say the least surprising that the result of the protagonist’s long process of anamnesis and account of herself and of her family’s lives should end up in presenting as “not knowing” elements from the past that she has coaxed herself into knowing. And the recollection process is so unstable that, at times, she simply has to resort to invention, as she belatedly reveals, when reconstituting family memories of her great-grandparents’ courtship which she never witnessed, never heard an account of and imagines from the sepia-like hues of an old photograph (e.g. pp. 30–34). Now, even if such passages are retrospectively dismissed as “romance” (p. 142), they dwell in the reader’s memories with some vividness, mixing up truth and fiction, certainty and doubt, with a lingering sense of efficient recall. And when the invention of memory is not enough, the narrator simply steals someone else’s memories, like her sister’s, for instance (p. 99). In this elegy, the incapacity to forget is paradoxically dependent on the impossibility of remembering in the first place, which constitutes one of the narrative’s main areas of friction.

Still, even though the relentless effort towards recollection is shown as largely fruitless, in a dynamic that summons the repetitive dimension of

canonical trauma narratives, I would say that *The Gathering* does not conform to the melancholia-driven type that *Quilt* is emblematic of. For hope and opening do emerge at the end of the story, even if the quasi totality of the novel is devoted to the obsessional attempt at retrieving memories, and even if the logic of re-enactment seizes hold of the bulk of a narrative written in the present tense, once again, as if repetition were congealed in an eternal traumatic present without any hope of any forward movement or healing. Despite such impediments, opening up and hope are achieved at the end, on account of one of the main characteristics of elegy, that is, its restorative function, and its ability to help the elegist—and, vicariously, the readers—perform mourning and move beyond pain and memorial saturation. In a text whose protagonist and narrator seems to be originally caught in the vice of melancholia, and whose poetics illustrate so closely those of melancholy and depression as defined by Julia Kristeva (1992, p. 61) and most of the traits of traumatic realism as explored by, say, Anne Whitehead (2004, p. 84), the last three chapters provide a move away from obsession with the past and towards hints of opening to the future. Typically, this takes place during the vigil at the narrator's mother's place, where all the family have gathered to bid farewell to the departed son and brother. Here the family manage to reconcile themselves and aspects of their memories by singing together in a moment of communion and pathos (p. 248) in which the narrator feels the presence of a ghostly, protective hand on her back. Opening to the future and continuity are also provided in symbolical, almost mawkish fashion through the surprise introduction into the cast of the deceased brother's hidden son, in the nick of time, in a moment when the conventions of elegy are made to welcome those of melodrama (p. 242). Ultimately, the presence of the child precipitates a shift from an exclusive sense of responsibility towards the dead to a new consideration of the narrator's accountability for the living: the last paragraphs spell out the narrator's healing and her reconciliation with her family and husband, complete with the possibility of having another child. Preferably a boy (p. 260).

In *The Gathering*, the readers may be left with the impression of a narrative and aesthetic scruple, as if the last pages had been added to tone down an atmosphere of stark despair and black melancholia—as if too much awareness of what the trauma genre is and a desire to ward off any accusation of traumatophilia contributed to the decision of bringing in some corrective vision, in extremis. Still, I would argue that this choice is perfectly in keeping with the conventional transformative logic of elegy,

and that, further more, it solicits a massively melancholic narrative the better to set it off against the swift irruption of hope and healing. In other words, melancholia seems to be displayed so as to stress the more positive aspects of mourning. This, of course, has implications as to the treatment of memory, as if it were necessary to stage its blocking off, inaccessibility and fruitless repetition to underline its liberating effects. From this point of view, I would argue that novels like *The Gathering* choose to put elegy in the service of the representation of trauma. More precisely, such narrative elegies help show that the literary presentation of traumatic memory is not exclusive of the presentation of healing. One step further, they may be used as conversion apparatuses or operators that allow for a move from the pathological to healing, certainly an inheritance from the poetic elegies of yesteryear that were fuelled by a restorative drive, instrumentalizing memory for healing, commemorative purposes. This ties in neatly with the notion of mourning as performance, as the text, through its rhythm, makes the reader perform both the repetition of the partially failed anamnesis and the final release from the repetition compulsion, in conformity with what specialists of the genre have described (Kennedy 2007, p. 28). The character's ritualized performances, whether collective (in the vigil) or individual (witness the narrator's protracted recollections), enable the conversion of melancholia into mourning, exchanging saturation with the past for the possibility of future-oriented memories. In this way, the represented emotions of anger, shame and pain, which *The Gathering* is apt to represent and name in the present-tense narrative, are not only granted a mimetic purpose but, beyond this, a performative function that not only describes effects but also generates them, as we are reminded by Sara Ahmed (2004, p. 13).

Perhaps not *beyond* but *along with* the trauma model, the possibility of tapping the positive power of memories, or the processing of traumatic memories, or the acceptance of their inaccessibility, is taken into account by the performative, healing powers of secular elegy. And I would suggest that such a characteristic may be envisaged in relation to the genre's affinities with care. This brings to mind some critics' comments on elegy's tendency to stage a "fantasy of care" (Clifton-Spargo 2004, p. 24) for the departed, which is part of the revisionary pull that is characteristic of the genre, as if the survivor or elegist could still set things right and avoid catastrophic loss by caring for and lavishing his/her attentiveness on the cherished lost one. Seen in this light, elegy may be

said to perform a logic of care, in that it is essentially concerned with the pain of the departed, but also with the elegist's own pain and, further, the readers'. In its double address to the lost one and to the mourners, and in its double orientation towards the past and the present, elegy both represents and performs the four basic elements of care as defined by Joan C. Tronto ([1933] 2009), that is, by *caring about* the departed and the grieving, thus exerting the capacity of *attentiveness*; by *taking care of* both the departed and the grieving, thereby assuming *responsibility* for care; and by actually providing some measure of *care giving*, through the means of narrative and poetical intervention—what I have called “performance”; and, at the other end of the line, *care receiving* is also in order, which warrants the cathartic experience of the reading of such elegies and gives aesthetic incarnation to the fourth competence intrinsic in the practice of care, that is *receptiveness* (p. 127). The potential of affect is carried by the elegiac form as a vehicle for a literary practice of care that is also the expression of an ethics of alterity in which the grieving subject exposes him/herself to the lost other and to the other mourners (notably, and vicariously so, the readers).

To round off this section, I would say that elegy presents us with vulnerable subjects: even if they manage to move beyond a form of imprisonment from the blocked time of trauma and even if they succeed in escaping from the repetition compulsion, they are presented as intrinsically dependent characters. The protagonists of *Quilt* and *The Gathering* are essentially relational subjects, affected by object loss and by an unflagging responsibility for the departed. Because of their submission to violent affect, they renounce any autonomy and are, in Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's (2013) terms, dispossessed of their sovereign selves (p. 2). The elegiac subject is cast as dependent, and his/her relations with others are evoked in terms of sheer interdependence. The fact that this should be couched in the vulnerable form of the elegy, with its permanently failed address to the departed, and its tentative opening towards a future in which survival to the lost becomes tinged with the will and power to live on, seems to me to be most fitting.

### THE POLITICS OF RELATIONALITY

As suggested above, anger is one of the components of elegy; it may be directed at fate, at the elegist's own failure in preventing the death of the loved one and it may also target the incorporated image of the departed,

hence the self, as relevant in extreme cases of melancholia (Freud [1915] 1971a, p. 252; Kristeva 1992, p. 10). In *The Gathering*, shame accrues to the Irish nation, in the narrator's vision of a "country ... drowning in shame" (p. 168) for closing its eyes to the offences perpetrated in families and in several institutions, namely religious ones. In the pages that evoke the silver lining of the Celtic Tiger years, the elegy doubles as satire and brings in the sense of the collective in a punctual yet systematic way, insisting that the individual cannot be considered independently of the collective, and inquiring into chains of responsibility. Such an interest in the political is present in many elegies, as encapsulated in Uberto Pasolini's film *Still Life* (2013), whose protagonist, Mr. May, is a council case worker in London whose job is to find the friends or relatives of those who died on their own. *Still Life* systematizes the idea of mourning, multiplying cases and typecasting Mr. May as the embodiment of attentiveness to and responsibility for the departed. It promotes a deep-seated sense of care for the dead and creates a relational subject whose institutional function is to grieve, but whose grieving goes well beyond the strictly institutional. And of course, Mr. May's work as official elegist performs the belated fantasy of care characteristic of traditional elegy and goes through the various conventions of the elegiac process, compiling records of the dead people's lives, collecting photographic evidence from the past, writing the eulogies delivered at their funerals and following them to their graves. Ironically, by focusing on the post-mortem work, the impression that the film gives is that the State puts more interest and care in the dead than in the living, as suggested in the various scenes staging vagrants, or in the narrative strand centring on the last case that Mr. May has to investigate, that is, that of a never-do-well, with a record of drinking and violence, and a participation in the Falklands War. Even if tentatively, the State's responsibility in the character's downfall and demise is hinted at, as if fighting for one's country may lead to dying on one's own. And the fact that the main protagonist should be made redundant on the grounds of cost efficiency is yet another disparaging comment on public policies that whets the satirical edge of elegy.

A similar orientation is to be found in Jon McGregor's third novel, *Even the Dogs* (2011). It is narrated in the first-person plural by a chorus of disincarnated speakers whose frail ontological status suggests that they may be the ghostly witnesses of the protagonist's past and present. The choral narrators, who see everything without being seen and fail to hear what most of the characters say, paradoxically incarnate the

social invisibility of the world of outcasts, drug addicts and dossers that the novel trains the reader to consider and engage with. The fact that they rub shoulders with the other characters without the latter noticing them paradoxically grants them a form of sensorial superiority redolent of dramatic irony that allows them to fulfil the function of what French philosopher Guillaume le Blanc called the “precarious witness” (2014, p. 152; my translation). The novel opens with the discovery of the corpse of Robert Radcliffe, who died alone in his derelict flat at some point during the Christmas holiday, when nobody was around. The choral narrators and witnesses are there before the police and record all the events. Through the five chapters of an elegy structurally built up as a tragedy, they go through the traditional stages of mourning as they accompany the body in the ambulance, keep a vigil over it at the mortuary, attend the public session when the coroner gives the conclusion of his inquest and prepare to attend the cremation. On top of such elements adapting the primary conventions of the elegy, the chorus fulfil some of the traditional functions of the elegist as they indulge in fantasies of care by imagining what they could have done to save Robert, and fancying giving the dead friend a decent vigil and burial:

We sit around talking in low voices, looking at him, and someone puts on his favourite CD, Neil Young singing I’m going to give you till the morning comes, and someone else comes out of the kitchen with plates of sandwiches, sliced ham and cucumber and cottage cheese. Cut into little triangles and passed around the room, and when someone says Oh I couldn’t possibly someone else says Eh now come on you’ll want to keep your strength up la. And we light more candles. Do we bollocks. (p. 150)

As suggested in the last line, the fantasy never comes to fruition, and neither does the ending correspond to the traditional apotheosis of conventional elegy, since in the place of resurrection, what we get is a bitter parody, this being the last sentence of the novel: “We rise. What else can we do, we fucking rise.” (p. 195)

In the blocked present tense of the elegy, once again evocative of limbo, observations of episodes in the present mix and at times blend with recollections, making past and present impinge on one another, without at times any possibility of discriminating between one and the other. This is the case in the first chapter when the present state of the derelict apartment is spookily juxtaposed with the cleanliness and

comfort that used to characterize it when Robert's wife and daughter shared the premises. Thanks to striking cinematic devices like fade out and acceleration, the past is made present, to figure out the traumatic nature of the dead protagonist's pain of loss. Elsewhere, without any transition, as an excarnated narrator can avail him/herself of the privilege of telepathy, other secondary characters' memories are displayed, at times in a haunting poetic prose. This is the case in several episodes evoking some of the characters' pasts as soldiers in the Falklands (p. 68), Bosnia (pp. 102–107) or else Afghanistan—witness the long panoramic description of a soldier's evacuation from a scene of war towards England; the helicopter and plane he is carried on board duplicating the clandestine routes favoured by the organizers and agents of the global drug trade (pp. 112–20). In *Even the Dogs*, the permanent temptation to peer into the nature of the offence, to express revisionary fantasies of care and to idealize some past moments of connubial bliss also becomes the occasion to raise political issues concerning both UK foreign policy and social policies, a tendency that the novel shares with *Still Life*.

Admittedly, *Even the Dogs* is dominated by an impossibility to forget, as deplored by the choral narrators:

Things we don't want to remember but we do.  
Can't block none of it out no more. Not now we're here like this. (p. 99)

And of course such an impossibility finds its most violent expression in the evocation of the eternal present of witnessing and keeping the vigil, in a present tense narrative that does not seem to leave any opening towards release, as the narrative always promises more of the same in terms of recording and precariously giving an account of the lives of the departed (and, I should add, of the *departing*). Yet, despite such an obvious saturation, what appears in the novel (and in the film, though to a lesser extent) is the transformative power of melancholia that aims at disrupting social and political consensus. *Even the Dogs* activates the political drive of elegy and teaches the reader that in loss begins responsibility for the dead *and* for the living. As indicated by Clifton Spargo (2004), there may be found in the genre the power to renew one's responsibilities (p. 27). Interestingly, such a renewal is partly made possible by using a first-person plural narration, which is no gimmick but provides a narrative illustration of ghostly matters incumbent on the evocation of traumatic states, and above all offers a means to take up the tradition of elegiac

address (as the “we” continues to defamiliarize the reader thereby implicitly soliciting a “you” more than a more traditional “I” would do) even while shifting the elegiac from an individual to a collective plane. This is what Judith Butler implies when she insists that “[t]he ‘you’ comes before the *me*, before the plural *you* and before the *they*” (p. 32), the idea being that the reader is solicited in his/her singularity by such an address. In Guillaume le Blanc’s terms, this is tantamount to “speaking in the other’s name” and not “in their place” (Le Blanc 2011, p. 139; my translation). One step further, what the novel puts forward is a sense of the community of the dispossessed by referring to a “we” that implies and performs a “putting together of vulnerability” (Le Blanc 2011, p. 140; my translation) and loss. I would argue that this type of elegy reminds us of two things at least: first, that there is a continuum between safety and precariousness, autonomy (even relative) and utter dependence (Maillard 2011, p. 153); and secondly, that our emotions are characterized by their sociability (Ahmed 2004, p. 8). The logical implication is that all subjects are relational, hence social, ethical and political subjects.

Beyond the apparently morbid, possibly prurient fascination with loss and melancholia, some ethical horizon appears, as distinct from one oriented towards the ethics of melancholia. It conditions the writing of a committed literature whose engagement finds its roots in the vulnerability of both its content and its form. Such elegiac narratives put centre stage the figure of the subject as a citizen conscious of his/her limits, exposed to loss, hence vulnerable to risk and to the other. What we are reminded of, ultimately, is that in loss and vulnerability are to be found the seeds and conditions of responsibility (Pelluchon 2011, p. 44). From this point of view, vulnerability as susceptibility to damage and loss is what guarantees man’s ethical and political orientation, and elegy may be considered one of the main channels through which attentiveness to the singularity of the lost other and of the other *tout court* is made possible through the *practice* of consideration (p. 302), which Corine Pelluchon defines as the *attentiveness* to the other’s singularity based on a sense of justice, a category that she considers as eminently ethical and political (p. 328). Elegy thereby, through its vulnerable form and by tapping the powers of vulnerability, contributes its might to the production of a narrative democracy based on attentiveness and “attention to all” (Rosanvallon 2014, p. 26; my translation), in their singularities, as a condition for the practice of solidarity.

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