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Carol Bourne-Taylor and Sara-Louise Cooper, eds., *Variations on the Ethics of Mourning in Modern Literature in French*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022. xiv + 302 pp. Index and notes. \$65.85 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1789972733: \$63.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1789972757.

Review by David Fieni, SUNY Oneonta.

This edited volume is an expertly-curated set of meditations on how loss, mourning, and grief have been articulated and configured in a range of French and Francophone texts and contexts since the French Revolution. As the title promises, the collection focuses on the ethical dimensions of such writing, in relation to which some contributors contrast ethics with aesthetics and others present ethics as a kind of crucible through which literary aesthetics are put to the test, questioned, and become transformed. The “modern literature” in question consists primarily, as one might expect, of literature in the narrow sense of the term, and thus all but one of the chapters focus on fiction, poetry, and the essay, although several texts blur the line between literature and theory. The historical emphasis of the volume falls decidedly on work from Proust to the present, with only the first two chapters examining nineteenth century texts. It is worth noting that co-editors Carole Bourne-Taylor and Sara-Louise Cooper represent centripetal and centrifugal approaches to the study of mourning, respectively, with the former focused more on the forces internal to thought and poetics, and the latter opening out onto questions of mourning and loss in planetary space and historical consciousness and memory. Overall, they have crafted a book whose multiple axes of critique and interpretation transect core issues in French and Francophone literary production, including the relation between private and public modes of mourning, the reimagination of history as an act of social justice, and the array of literary inventiveness and experimentation that writing loss in French has generated.

Dominique Rabaté’s brief preface, provided both in French and in an English translation, accurately describes the challenges of writing critically about mourning, where a balance must be struck “between pity and analysis, between empathy and distance, and between a keen feeling for what is lost and a responsiveness to the power of evocation” (p. xii). The “variations” included in this book are highly successful in this balancing act. The editors have smartly bookended the volume with Bourne-Taylor’s introduction and Cooper’s conclusion; each also contributes a chapter to the collection. In an introduction that would be valuable as a bibliographical resource alone, Bourne-Taylor provides a dense and thorough overview of the complex set of issues involved in the topic of literary mourning. She insists on “literature’s existential value” (p. 9) as an “ethical gesture” over and above any “aesthetic motivation” (p. 9) or a focus on the literary text as “a mere aesthetic object” (p. 53). It should be noted that one of the things that makes the volume as a whole so worth reading are the myriad modes of close reading done by the different

authors that account for the variety of literary and linguistic inventions precisely in relation to ethics, and not just as so much sociological, anthropological, aesthetic, or “ethical” content. Bourne-Taylor grounds her contributions to the volume in what Jean-Claude Pinson has dubbed *poétique*, that is, literary and critical practices organized around what Nietzsche might have called the advantages of poetics and poetry for life. The introduction goes beyond the obligatory overview of sections and chapters by weaving the concerns of each author into Bourne-Taylor’s exploration of the overarching themes of the collection into a cohesive and compelling opening set piece.

Although the first section of the book, “Unmournable Revolutions,” contains the only chapters devoted to the nineteenth century, it opens the volume with fascinating, historically-grounded analyses of the de-historicizing work that narrative can sometimes accomplish. Benjamin Thurston’s “Impossible Mourning: Funeral Orations for Louis XVI (1814-1815)” explores the performative, experimental, and “curiously hybrid” modes of mourning that return with amplified intensity in the Restoration after being repressed during the Revolution. Thurston convincingly argues that these belated funeral orations perform a “re-sacralization” of the monarchy that reinforces “the cult of royal martyrdom” (p. 73). The result was that the “Revolution bequeathed a complex legacy of suppressed and belated mourning to the subsequent generations” (p. 81), what one is tempted to call a kind of unconscious of modern French mourning.

This chapter is followed by Rachel Benoît’s “Unmourned Histories in Gustave Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale*,” which examines a strikingly different instance of writing (or writing over) revolution obliquely. Benoît’s goal in this chapter is to locate the traces of the Haitian Revolution in a major French novel structured around the events of the February Revolution of 1848, and to find these traces precisely in the moments where their absence would be most notable. She argues that in his depiction of the character of Frédéric, Flaubert explores how the novel’s narrative actively detaches from historical referents in real time, highlighting a mode of historical silencing in the relationship between fictional narrative and “mourning as an aesthetic ideal” (p. 86). Benoît’s claim is provocative, if deliberately lacking in the kind of counter-narrative correction offered in a critical practice such as Edward Said’s contrapuntal reading.

The second section of the book, “Inconsolable (Af)filations,” examines various modalities, both textual and embodied, of the ethics of relation that would sustain remembrance of the dead. The contributions are clustered around reflections on the act of mourning one’s mother, especially in a set of core texts by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, whose work resonates both with and against the writing of Marcel Proust, Abdelkébir Khatibi, and Patrick Chamoiseau in respective chapters.

Jennifer Rushworth’s “The Rhythm of Mourning in Proust (with Barthes and Derrida)” argues for “the mutual dependency of rhythm, mourning and narrative” (p. 109) in Proust’s writing. The essay explores mourning as constituted by intermittence, by ebb and flow, by the interplay of temporal regularity and irregularity. It is precisely in the rhythms of Proustian mourning, Rushworth claims, that readers may locate the narrator/protagonist’s ethical gesture towards loss in *La Recherche*. Because Proust’s protagonist is at times “presented as not in control of his grief” (p. 125), one wonders how conscious and unconscious mourning come into play in a novel animated by the very distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of memory. Rushworth’s reading of Derrida’s deconstruction of the binary of mourning and melancholia initiated by Freud opens up the larger question of the relation between ethics and the

unconscious. Overall, the essay is a fine example of how the ethical turn, here, in relation to mourning, provides fruitful pathways into even the most canonical of texts.

The next chapter dovetails nicely with Rushworth's essay. In "Mourning Their Mothers: Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and the Gift of Tears," Henriette Korthals Altes offers an especially poignant articulation of the intersection of justice, creativity, and embodied mourning practices. Korthals Altes puts the responses of Barthes and Derrida to their own mothers' deaths into conversation with each other, showing how both theorists "turn away from an abstract, ethical language to an embodied form of writing" (p. 129), an embodiment manifest in tears themselves. She explores how Derrida's *demi-deuil* or "mid-mourning" collapses Abraham and Torok's opposition between incorporation and introjection (p. 134), replacing it with "bodily encrypted energy" (p. 137). Similarly, Barthes, in the author's account, demonstrates how literature might be said to "dialectize the process of mourning" (p. 138), revealing not just the work of mourning but indeed a "labor of melancholy" (p. 132), a mode of "creative melancholy" (p. 140). Korthals Altes thus reads Barthes and Derrida through their negation of mourning as pathology and instead focuses on how they affirm mourning as a sustained devotional practice.

Whereas the first two chapters of this section focus on writing in French coming from metropolitan France, the second two chapters turn towards work by two of the most innovative and important Francophone writers from beyond the hexagon in the last 40 years: the late Moroccan writer, Abdelkébir Khatibi, and the Prix Goncourt winning Martinican author, Patrick Chamoiseau. Khalid Lyamlahy's "With Barthes and Derrida in 'the Margins of a Funereal Song': The Poetics of Material Mourning in the Work of Abdelkébir Khatibi" elaborates on the theme of creative mourning, here in relation to displacement, openness, and the poetics of the fragment in a short text by Khatibi from 1988, "Cendres et reliques." Lyamlahy spins the close readings of Barthes and Derrida outward in his exploration of this little-known text by Khatibi, who "seeks to move beyond the individuation of mourning to make mourning the object of shared reading and collective thought" (p. 159). What Lyamlahy brings to the surface is the way that Khatibi's writing is simultaneously a "generation of new ashes" (p. 163) and a continuous deferral of grief to future loss. "The writer in mourning," he tells us in one of this chapter's many powerful formulations of what it means to write loss, "is an apprentice translator who is working between the silence of death and the language of mourning" (p. 153).

Sara-Louise Cooper, in "Mourning the Mother, Mourning the World: Patrick Chamoiseau's *La Matière de l'absence*" continues this exploration of the relation between individual loss and collective loss in her exceptional chapter on Chamoiseau's *La Matière de l'absence*. Cooper explores the way that Chamoiseau elaborates on the shock and utter otherness generated by loss, which he terms *l'en-dehors* (the without). *L'en-dehors* reveals the uncomfortable proximity of "the fraught oneness of the world" (p. 202) and cultural difference. Cooper shows how Chamoiseau writes mourning both as a mode of decolonization and as a skillful deconstruction and rearticulation of the universal and the particular in the context of neoliberal globalization. This chapter reads *La Matière de l'absence*'s meditations on the eruption of Martinique's Mont Pelée in 1902 as they are mediated through both Aimé Césaire and Michel de Montaigne. In this way, Cooper writes, Chamoiseau layers the kind of rewriting of the classics of French literature that is a trademark of much postcolonial writing with "a movement further back in time and further outwards towards the concept of the human than is traditionally emphasized in postcolonial criticism" (p. 200).

The third section of the volume, “*Poétique: Between New Elegy and Anti-Elegy*,” presents a dazzling array of close readings of contemporary French poetry. In “‘The Door Pushed Back the Light’: On a Phenomenology of Mourning in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Roubaud,” Ariane Mildenberg explores the phenomenology of loss in relation to poetic expression and the attempt to continue to make meaning in the wake of the death of a loved one. This chapter makes some insightful claims regarding the “bodiliness of mourning” (207), the poetic fragment as failure, and how the layering of metaphors in Roubaud’s *Quelque chose noir* unmoor the text, even if the essay at times applies Merleau-Ponty to Roubaud in too facile a fashion.

Daisy Sainsbury’s “The Ends and Beginnings of Language in Valérie Rouzeau’s *Pas revoir*” is a standout chapter that presents a brilliant reading of Rouzeau’s breathtaking book of poetry from 1999. Sainsbury works through the phonetic renderings of child-like speech that animate *Pas revoir*, a book of mourning for the poet’s father. In its close reading of the elision of *je*, the sparsity of adverbs and adjectives, and the idiosyncratic use of the infinitive, this essay references childhood language acquisition research to great effect. “For Rouzeau,” Sainsbury concludes, “it is the return to this language of childhood that offers a means to reconstruct, and to acquire language afresh in the face of death’s silence” (p. 247).

Carole Bourne-Taylor, “*Poethic Justice: Re-incarnations in Emmanuel Merle’s Poetry*,” is another superb chapter that elaborates Pinson’s concept of “poétique” or *poethics*, as well as Michel Deguy’s *géopoethique* through the work of mourning done in Merle’s poetic work. Co-editor Bourne-Taylor does dense yet elegant close readings throughout, describing how one line, for example, “creates an onomatopoeically beating rhythm of harsh alliterations and curt assonances compelling to both the ear and eye” (p. 158). Those trained in the acrobatics of literary-theoretical writing in a French deconstructionist mode will likely thrill to Bourne-Taylor’s writing, which is animated with the critical gestures it describes. Importantly, the chapter examines how Merle’s poetry builds a bridge between individual mourning and collective mourning, as mourning of the poet’s father also entails “ethical attention to all victims of genocide” (p. 269).

Co-editor Sara-Louise Cooper brings this rich and varied volume to a fitting end. Her conclusion, “Mourning in Motion from Ireland to the Caribbean,” performs an opening out of the issues discussed in this book toward an ever larger political and ethical imaginary. She describes how Chamoiseau’s *Frères migrants*, which, notably, quotes of line of Merle’s, evokes a transnational solidarity emerging from the affective imagination of unmourned people from around the world. By illustrating “the way the mournable body emerges from a complex intertwining of the geographical, historical and political borders of France” (p. 272), as well as the Francophone world, *Variations on the Ethics of Mourning in Modern French Literature* is a vitally important point of reference for scholars whose work lies at the intersection of ethics, mourning, and literature, whether in French or any other language.

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