

# BOOK REVIEWS

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*Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*. Ed. Christian Riegel. Edmonton: U of Alberta P/*Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 2005. xxix, 273 pages. \$34.95 paper.

*Response to Death* is a compelling essay collection that situates the timely topic of mourning in comparative and historical perspective. Whether invoking "the labour of mourning," "*travail du deuil*," or "*Trauerarbeit*," this accomplished volume by North American scholars illuminates fascinating cultural developments in its six hundred year time span. Half of its twelve chapters analyze twentieth-century literature. This interdisciplinary project, then, both affirms and questions the recent preoccupation with mourning in the humanities and social sciences. Although the contents, including the introduction by editor Christian Riegel, were also published as a special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (2003), the book merits a wide audience, as Jonathan Hart indicates in his engaging foreword.

Continuity and change characterize past and present articulations of grief in imaginative writing from William Shakespeare to Sara Suleri. Whereas Leanne Groeneveld begins with Christ's Passion in the York mystery plays, Lloyd Edward Kermode concludes with AIDS elegies by American poet Paul Monette. Needless to say, early modern prohibitions against excessive mourning provide a telling contrast with more contemporary lyrics. As Ernest Smith highlights, for example, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath subvert Christian tenets by depicting the deceased as perpetrators of psychological violence. Yet unexpected juxtapositions also punctuate the collection, linking figures otherwise remote, such as Marguerite de Navarre and Helene Cixous, Richard Burton and Djuna Barnes, as well as Princess Charlotte Augusta and Princess Diana of Wales.

The volume proceeds chronologically, encompassing diverse literary genres. Several chapters address the elegy, often revisiting arguments formulated by influential critics Jahan Ramazani and Peter Sacks. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack offer an especially moving study of Donald Hall's protracted struggle to contend with the premature death of cherished companion Jane Kenyon. Other intersections abound. Complementary investigations consider literal and symbolic fathers (Smith, Thomas M. F. Gerry), mourning and the nation (Lisa Dickson, Katherine G. Sutherland), the political import of collective rituals (Heather Dubrow, Stephen C. Behrendt), the paralysis and productivity of melancholia (Barbara Hudspith, Garry Sherbert), religious doctrine and social norms (Groeneveld, Melanie E. Gregg), and the wrenching aftermath of illness (Davis and Womack, Kermode). Discussions by Behrendt and Sutherland, among others, incorporate ceremonies, commodities, or mortuary practices.

Important thinkers including Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, Saint Augustine, Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and Michel de Montaigne animate this truly eclectic existential and intellectual forum. Each essay is persuasive in its own right. Heterogeneous approaches to individual and social crisis derived from philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychology, and other disciplines arguably militate against the denial of death marking many modern Western cultures. Specific factors inhibiting psychic renewal, namely guilt, isolation, shame, and trauma, inspire nuanced explorations of grief in context; at the same time, as Gerry and Gregg rightly acknowledge, separation may galvanize creativity.

Throughout, accessible scholarship and evocative prose convey thoughtful discourse on loss.

While death may be a constant in human history, mourning routinely provokes controversy. Rules governing its public expression attest to its potential volatility, an issue expertly appraised by Dubrow in her commentary on Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*. In his introduction, however, Riegel designates consolation as the goal of mourning without explicating the ideological tensions enlivening the book. Nearly a century after Freud's landmark essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), antithetical assumptions regarding bereavement and disillusionment continue to polarize clinicians, scholars, and survivors. Sustained reflection on mourning and historical change would thus clarify the significance of this notable contribution to a subject at once particular and universal.

Marlene Briggs

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*Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*. By John J. Su. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. vii, 226 pages. \$88.95.

"Nostalgia" has long been a pejorative term in literary contexts, a synonym for mushy sentimentality and cliché, or for a lack of critical thought and political engagement. bell hook's well-known declaration that nostalgia is a "useless act," and other similar dismissals, have meant that literary critics are inclined to eschew or repudiate in-depth analyses of nostalgia. But a theoretical examination of nostalgia in literature is both important and long overdue. John J. Su's *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* reminds us that "nostalgia" is not an inherently negative term, and by thus recuperating it he is able to ask how nostalgia appears and what functions it serves in a variety of Anglophone literatures.

Su's analysis carefully considers both the dangers of nostalgia and its potential usefulness, particularly in "postcolonial" communities. There are many moments of valuable insight here. Nostalgia establishes place as a site of solidarity and an ethical orientation. Nostalgia can be used politically to "articulate disappointment with the present" (9), or to recover alternative histories. While these ideas are not particularly new - Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), for example, is an important influence - Su effectively applies them to examples of Caribbean literature, Native American literature, the English estate novel, and Nigerian literature. He explicitly connects nostalgia with ethics in a particularly helpful way: nostalgic narratives can offer "palpable images of human needs that are not being met," thereby contributing to the process of negotiating "between various and often conflicting responsibilities" (175).

The main limitation of Su's book is that it lacks a coherent definition of nostalgia. While he establishes a detailed definition of "ethics" (not normative codes of behaviour but rather "interactive encounters between individuals" (12)), "nostalgia" does not seem to require concrete definition. The result is a slipperiness that muddies some of Su's arguments: "nostalgia" refers to both an individual's reflection on personal memories, and a larger political desire for pre-colonial communities that no living person can remember, or that never existed. It is at once an act, a feeling or state of being, a "tone," an aesthetic style, and a political strategy. It is sometimes specifically a synonym for longing for a lost homeland. Of course nostalgia *is* all these things; it no longer only signifies the specific disease state "discovered" by a medical student in 1678, but is a term with multiple applications and

nuances. This slipperiness is in many ways what makes nostalgia such an interesting, and necessary, topic for literary analysis. But Su does not flag these differences, or consider how different manifestations of nostalgia as a concept may have different contexts, effects, or implications.

Ultimately, then, there is much more work to be done in this field. Su's book will be helpful in making that work possible, by finally recuperating nostalgia from its pejorative connotations, and asking literary critics to turn a more generous eye on nostalgia as a literary strategy and a critical concept.

Jennifer Delisle

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*London Literature, 1300–1380.* By Ralph Hanna. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xxi, 359 pages. \$111.95.

Ralph Hanna is a very distinguished scholar whose work should always be taken seriously. His command of the fields of English medieval literature, language, history, material production, his encyclopaedic knowledge and recall of a vast array of primary and secondary texts, are truly impressive, enviable—and they mean that it is impossible not to learn a great deal from this book. But there are problems at the core of the work that in the end make it more frustrating than rewarding.

Hanna begins with a modest proposal—to investigate what a “London Literature” might include in the period named. The time limit provides an interesting perspective, since the immediate answer to the question of what literature there was in the period characterized as “Edwardian” London (written in the reigns of the three Edwards) at this time is: “not much.” The 1380 date restricts the field by eliminating most of the canonical literary texts studied by Middle English specialists. The one widely studied work which can be, according to Hanna, profitably analyzed in the terms adduced for other London works is *Piers Plouman* (B version), and this is Hanna's real target. He takes the ten MSS that provide evidence of the London II dialect, and uses these as the base texts to construct something like a *mentalité* for a “London” world. London initially emerges, in a rather refreshing way, without assumptions about cosmopolitanism and unburdened by subsequent events in literary history. These MSS, such as Pepys 2498, are comprised mainly of lay devotional material, their contents largely unpublished, and are obviously full of revealing peculiarities, as Hanna amply demonstrates. His sample also includes the Auchinleck MS, a collection which includes many early English romances, one of the most important sources for scholars of the period and therefore much scrutinized. Hanna also includes arguments about works written in Latin and French, such as the “civic” MS, the *Liber Horn*, a compilation of statute law and charters and historical documents. *London Literature* devotes a chapter each to three major manuscript contexts, leading up to a long chapter on *Piers*. There is also a stray chapter thrown in on the Chandos Herald's *Life of the Black Prince*, a work which, on the evidence presented, has almost nothing to do with London.

Indeed, the concept “London” comes to seem so magically flexible as to vitiate the original interesting claims about the city as a literary backwater, just as provincial as the provinces, a locale like others (3). “London” expands to include: Westminster (it was close [124]) and hence all royal activity; York (people travelled [126]); religious communities

(they had chapters there); agricultural labourers like Piers Plowman (they were the type of all labour [274]) ... in short "London" begins to be the inclusive metropolis again. But as "London" swells and grows to include all the rich activity of the social imaginary, methodological problems emerge. The evidentiary base is not sufficient to support the vast superstructure. "Ten books written and read in London" is not enough, in my view, to confidently assert a *mentalité*. There are passing attempts to enlarge the scope, as in the cursory attempt to provide "some cultural environments of London texts" (32-39), largely about civic pageants. But for the most part, Hanna has complete confidence in what I'll call "extreme codicology": books are the material culture that matters; on a few volumes, an entire "London" culture can be built. Many of the claims about London seem strained; that there is for example a specifically "London" penitential thinking (273), a "London language of desire for what is absent" (274), a London "sanctified lay teacher" (277). Otherwise interesting readings of *Guy of Warwick* and *Beves of Hampton* are distorted by the notion that these "fables of identity" (148) are of a particularly London identity. The "London thesis" is in any case radically insufficient to explain Langland's tumultuous, shifting, recursive vision, and the implicit notion that somehow Langland's concerns are best understood as "local" is very diminishing. This is a thesis got together by violence. To what extent is it necessary at all?

Hanna has claimed to be writing a "partial" account (in which sense I wonder), and abjures the approach of those critics (Green, Wallace) who propose historical theses of the *longue durée*, and himself proposes to be responsive to "lived experience and practice" which occurs in "a fragmented locality" (xiv). This is disingenuous. There is a large historical thesis here; indeed, there are several, though for the most part these are under-argued and obscured by dense, minute and particular arguments about manuscript history. The most important of these is very deserving of consideration, though I am not persuaded it is specific to London. Against the literary history giving foundational status to Chaucer and his ilk, Hanna wishes to direct our attention to another "literary" history, one which passes through lay devotion, bible texts and their commentaries, bible translations, sermons, and improving reading. The Pepys MS presents a truly fascinating picture of confident, even proto-Lollard, lay piety. At the centre of this "Edwardian" tradition is Langland, presented here largely as a backward-looking and time-bound figure and not enlisted, as by Burrow, for a "Ricardian" literary renaissance. (The Auchinleck fits rather badly with this narrative). This literary production has a future as well as a past, looking forward to the next several centuries, and literary history could more often allow the importance of devotional reading, and better admit its vast textual record into our understanding of literature. Hanna ends with an evocation of "Mother," who had her English, Lollard bible vetted by the authorities for orthodoxy. In a sense, this book is a plea for Mother, reconstructed from Pepys as a member of a fraternal burial guild, who reads bible and commentary material conducive to lay piety, who distrusts dirty priests and their sacramental efficacy, is confident in her own righteousness, is enjoined to give everything charitably, but who knows whom to give to—not to beggars, the thrifless or the unworthy. Hanna wants to resurrect this reader and her literary history and this may be an important task, though I for one might also see Mother as the smug and self-satisfied bourgeoisie, from whom "Literature" might be a reprieve.

Hanna demonstrates a performative mastery of the technical languages of codicology, of philology, dialectology and paleography. Dare I brazenly say that this can get a little

dull? Codicology has had enormous prestige in Middle English studies, and has revealed many things, but surely a great deal of this material should be in footnotes. For Hanna, though, there are apparently no limits to the importance of the materiality of the book. To him, the shift from Anglicana to Secretary script is a “revolution” of the late fourteenth century on a par with the arrival of Chaucerian literary poetics (305). This explains the argument of Chapter 5, which Hanna seems to find consoling: while the entire chivalric ethos of the Chandos Herald sadly declined and passed into the west, at least the secretary script used by one of the scribes involved in the MS transmission prevailed.

Elizabeth Edwards

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*Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues.* By Sarah Emsley. New York and Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. x, 202 pages. \$88.00.

Was Jane Austen a Christian? The answer has surely never been seriously in question: yes. But in what sense? And to what extent does her Christianity—however that is to be understood—inform and direct her novels?

Following C.S. Lewis, Marilyn Butler, and philosopher Alastair MacIntyre among others, Sarah Emsley sets out in this unassumingly lucid, readable book to demonstrate that the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity (or love) constitute the very foundation of Jane Austen's moral universe. In doing so, they secondarily enable the practice of the classical Platonic and Aristotelian virtues of wisdom (or prudence), fortitude, temperance, and justice, dramatizing the tensions and reconciliations among the theological and the classical virtues synthesized by Thomas Aquinas.

To historicist sceptics who might disallow Austen's knowledge of this great tradition of “the unity of the virtues,” Emsley points to her undoubted acquaintance not indeed with the works of Aristotle and Aquinas, but certainly with those of Shakespeare, Johnson, and Fielding. To religious sceptics she proffers the evidence of the three prayers Austen wrote for her family's daily use, prayers whose prescribed duties to God, to one's neighbours, and to oneself arguably inform all the novels. More convincingly, she examines the evidence of the novels themselves: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma* present patterns of Christian self-examination, confession, repentance, and atonement (interestingly, Marianne is superior to Elinor, whose classical fortitude needs to be supplemented by Marianne's willingness “to ask for divine grace” (81)). Elizabeth and Darcy not only experience a “philosophical awakening to justice” (13), but “repent and confess,” learning Christian humility in “the eternal quest of the Christian soul to reach a state of grace” (103). Fanny Price reaches a “philosophical wisdom” (117) which centrally recognizes the importance of the “‘daily practice’ of religion”—that “faith undergirds moral behaviour” (127). *Emma* educates its heroine through suffering, recognition of her errors, humility, and contrition into “clarity.” Lastly, Anne Elliot unites “the classical virtue of fortitude with the theological virtue of hope” in an ideal of “constancy” which perfectly exemplifies the melding of the two traditions in Christian “faith” (151).

Can classical “reason” and theological “revelation” be so easily reconciled? As MacIntyre himself admits, this assumption of an easy unity of the virtues may pose the greatest problem for his own account, on which Emsley's so much relies (*After Virtue*, 1984: 278). Many readers will be uneasy with her claims that Austen's fiction endorses doctrines

of original sin and grace—that only “supernature” can redeem “nature.” Are her novels the handmaidens of theology, urging us to save our souls? Or is theology the handmaiden of poetry and/or philosophy, in the service of improving secular “manners and *mores*” as *Mansfield Park* so eloquently argues? “Shakespeare...is part of an Englishman’s constitution,” after all; “one is intimate with him by instinct” (*Mansfield Park*, 1990: 306). By Emsley’s own admission, religion thus internalized—through the *poetry*—into the *mores* of a nation (Shakespeare, Johnson, Fielding) was probably the most powerful direct influence on Jane Austen’s own fiction. She does her best to reason us into belief in Austen’s ultimately theological goals; but in the end, it may be a question of faith. We owe Sarah Emsley our gratitude, however, for keeping this great question alive.

Lorrie Clark

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*Standing Wave*. By Robert Allen. Montreal: Signal Editions, 2005. 82 pages. \$16.00 paper.

Those who well know Carmine Starnino’s strong preference for formal poetry will not be surprised that as editor of Signal Editions he selected a book of sonnets and tercets for publication. Robert Allen’s *Standing Wave* contains two sections: the first titled “Thirty-eight Sonnets from Jimmie Walker Swamp” is a sequence of sonnets with a continuous speaker; the second is the third and final instalment in Allen’s longpoem “The Encantadas.”

The first section, “Swamp,” surpasses “The Encantadas” in technical skill and emotional intensity, though both texts should have had a more intensive edit before going to print; there are clichés and numerous typographical errors, including the misspelling of “Baudelaire” (25). The “Swamp” section’s focus is split between poetry, nature, music, the past, and the speaker’s ex-lover. Poets and musicians such as “Levine, Whitman” (12) are the only names mentioned in this section, while the lover is referred to as “you” (27, 36, 40). The poems are sparse and thoughtful; the speaker describes day-to-day situations and often attains a tone of beautiful boredom, in the way of Charlotte Bronte and other nineteenth-century writers. *Standing Wave* is dedicated to the poet’s father; the “Swamp” section’s speaker has lost a lover to unknown circumstances, and all of the sonnets speak from this time of mourning and waiting emotions out. In this function the sonnets perform well, in their continuous keyed-down tone.

“The Encantadas” is a narrative poem written in tercets regarding the sea voyages of an oceanographer and his friend, a tap-dancing turtle. With one hundred and fifty-eight sections (each of nine lines), the last fifty-eight are published here and describe their adventures smuggling wine between Corfu and England. This final section of “The Encantadas” doesn’t exactly stand alone from those previously published, and as might be guessed from the tap-dancing turtle, “The Encantadas” are often dorky and absurd. The tercets never reach moments of enthrallment, as we want them to, even though rapture of the deep is a probable source of inspiration for the speaker (51).

Often reaching for this kind of enthrallment, “I broke out a lined book and wrote / an hour against the desperate sky” (59), the tercets fall short: “We were sharing a joint [...] I wonder / when I smoke what centres of the brain start to kick in, and out, and when” (53). Yet certain lines, “heart a target of concentric circles” (62), speak with

the certainty the “Swamp” poems did: “The declined summer seemed to call for white wine, / then the sun sank and I was lost in time” (11). The result is a single beautiful speaker in the first section, whose voice we occasionally and fleetingly recognize in the second section.

Michael Goodfellow

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*The Mystery of Frankenberg's Canadian Airman.* By Peter Hessel. Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 2005. 248 pages, \$34.95.

As a thirteen-year-old member of the junior Hitler Youth (the so-called *Jungvolk*) living in the Saxon town of Frankenberg, Peter Hessel watched the devastating Allied bombing raid on the nearby industrial city of Chemnitz during the night of 5/6 March 1945. Nearly sixty years later, and a retired translator for the government of Canada as well as the author of several books on the native Indians of his adopted country among other subjects, Hessel was surprised to learn not only that Canadian airmen had played a significant role in the razing of his birthplace but that one of their number was subsequently beaten to death on a Frankenberg street. Chemnitz's fiery destruction, part of “Operation Thunderclap” which more notoriously also levelled Dresden near the end of the war, is well-documented in the records of its military executors. Not so the murder of the RCAF bomber crewman whose identity, burial site, and killers were all unknown. Hessel's account of his almost obsessive sleuthing in Canada and Germany to solve these mysteries provides the reader with “a real who dunnit” in the opening words of the brief foreword penned by Professor Desmond Morton, the distinguished historian of the Canadian armed forces.

However, this highly autobiographical volume is intended to be more than just a compelling crime story. Already in one of his epigraphs by the eighteenth century English poet Edward Young, Hessel points to the dichotomy between the killing of thousands that bestows “immortal fame” as “war's glorious art” and the murder of an individual for which the gallows awaits the perpetrator. The author thus reiterates the question first raised while the conflict was still raging by Bishop George Bell of Chichester and a few others but more recently in Canada in the 1992 CBC documentary series “The Valour and the Horror” of the morality of indiscriminate aerial attacks upon urban centres populated mainly by innocent women, children, and the elderly.

Thanks to the co-operation exhibited by several German eyewitnesses to the downing of the Canadian aircraft and even the ambush in broad daylight of the captured flyer, Hessel is able to identify the victim as the young Montreal Pilot Officer Henri Jean-Maurice Joseph D'Avril who lies buried in Berlin's Commonwealth War Cemetery. One of the book's most touching and revealing chapters recounts a commemorative service including these average citizens and also D'Avril's sister held at the very location in Frankenberg where he was bludgeoned—despite the ostentatious absence of its official representatives. The author is less certain who the killers were, but suspects fanaticized members of the Nazi Party. This is his conclusion, too, in most of the additional 25 cases of Canadian airmen “lynched” in Germany during the last year of the struggle upon which Hessel usefully reports in an appendix. They, together with perhaps 300 other Allied bomber crew (the exact figure is still disputed), bore the brunt of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels's tirades against the “terror flyers” who were systematically decimating the country's people and structures.

Whether they deserved this epithet, Peter Hessel expresses a balanced, “Canadian” opinion: yes, but how else was Hitlerism to be defeated? Fortunately, he survived both it and the *Führer’s* relentless foes.

Lawrence D. Stokes

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*Born Losers: A History of Failure in America.* By Scott A. Sandage. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 2005. 362 pages. \$47.25.

The idea of the “Born Loser” is not a new phenomenon. According to Scott A. Sandage, the time of the Born Loser was the nineteenth century, “when capitalism came of age and entrepreneurship became the primary model of American Identity” (3).

It is fascinating to look back to the “humbugs, suckers, flunkies, freaks of fortune, great fools, mad caps, meteors, loafers, lookers-on, driving-wheels, magic men, self-made men, old-womanish men, too-honest men, good-natured men, broken men, makeshift men, business men, confidence men, and go-ahead men” (83). Sandage, Associate Professor of History at Carnegie Mellon University, has combed through financial records and diaries to find the men whom luck side-stepped, “men who failed in a nation that worships success” (3). And you wouldn’t believe who was writing about it: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Abraham Lincoln, Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman.

While the surface of commercial failure is interesting enough, it is the investigation of its effect on identity that leads to deeper understanding of the pursuit of the American Dream. This is not just an important book about loss of money, business, pride and self-worth. “The cranial index, the exposure index, the credit index: all bolstered the idea that failure entailed identity and personal responsibility” (114). Today too there is the idea that financial failure is personal failure.

With the help of credit reports, business reports, and suicide notes, we are able to see what the failing business men and their families went through. The shame of loss was just as evident then as it is now, and they jumped off buildings and shot themselves then as now.

The book quotes this 1820 poem from *The New York Commercial Advertiser*:

There is a cause, we needs must own,  
Why much distress and want are known:  
Extravagance—our country’s band,  
Is spread o’er city, town and plain: . . .  
To dress, to visit, and to play,  
To get in debt, and run away,  
Are common vices of the day.

It fits contemporary America as well.

Stephanie Dickison

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