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The weight of rain: making meaning of mourning through poetry

Abstract:

This paper examines the specific use of language, and particularly poetry, to express grief and give voice to mourning. While Atchley (2004: 335) claims ‘without a loss of language...there is no mourning’, this paper seeks to demonstrate the ways poetry can be used as a vehicle to address and acknowledge grief and mourning. The paper will provide examples of poetry written from a place of grief, including works by the author. These have been written through the lens of writers such as Derrida, who has seen the act of mourning as a way to recover and revisit the past, but also as a kind of impossible bereavement; a grieving period without end. My own poetry is influenced from the writings of Romanyshyn; a storyteller psychologist who’s *The Soul in Grief* (1999) provides an exploration of mourning which acknowledges psychology is ultimately unable to provide a sufficient language for the experience of grief.

Interrogating these ideas through poetic language provides opportunity for catharsis and meaning making in the face of deep grief. The poetry has as its focus the expression of *saudade*, a kind of inherent loss or lack, which underpins the tone and content of the writing. These concepts and their application to interpreting the effects of grief and mourning are explored in depth in the paper.

Biographical note:

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This is what I know about the language of grief

When the bereaved talk and write about grief, it is sometimes described as a defined presence (Ellet 2013) and can take on the dimensions of a physical form – an unidentifiable size and shape that for some takes up the approximate vacuum left by the dead. Grief is in these instances a corporeal presence described as heavy, solid, intrusive. The language of the bereaved describes grief as something awkward, unwieldy. Grief has been famously described as ‘the price we pay for love’ by Queen Elizabeth II of England (Sapsted, Foster & Jones 2001) and a necessary and natural act (Kübler-Ross 2003). This is despite the experience of grief as feeling a bit like winter weight, a burden to shed before the summer season. There’s that word again; *weight*. Grief is uncomfortable baggage we wear unwillingly. And the imagery surrounding grief speaks of this: the bereaved are uncomfortable with grief and all it entails.

Culturally and critically we prefer grief to be conducted in private and for set periods. See Riemer admonish Didion for exposing her season of grief to the world (2011) when we expect nothing less of the writer for whom every significant moment has been the cornerstone of her writing practice for decades. See also the prescribed period of mourning as set by governments and industry: 2 days is the standard set by the Fair Work Ombudsman in Australia, just one day short of the requirement by Orthodox Christians to mourn their dead on the 3rd day after death. This observation occurs again on the 9th and 40th day after death (Thyateira 2015), in a traditional initial mourning period lasting 40 days.

The Chinese mourn for 100 days. In Judaism, Kaddish is said for 11 months. In Edwardian times, mourning garments referred to as ‘widow’s weeds’ were worn during a mourning period lasting up to six years (Holland 2014). These practices acknowledge the length of time mourning takes, and the lasting impact of grief.

Kübler-Ross defined the 5 stages of grief in the best-known model (1969), leading to greater awareness and discussion of this as a very natural human process. They are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These stages happen in no particular order, and for no set period of time, a qualification Kübler-Ross has been keen to acknowledge since developing the model. Unlike the language associated with grief and the way government organisations approach it, Kübler-Ross recognizes the permanence of the state. It wasn’t always this way and Kübler-Ross has provided acknowledgement of this and concise language to describe the experience of grief.

Before the psychological language of grief emerged, and since, many have claimed that there are no words for grief (Atchley 2004) or that grief should be mute (Wittgenstein 2001: 33), with the experience of mental pain being described as a ‘wordless sense of self-rupture’ (Akhtar 2000). The language of grief lends itself to the creation of poetry, the goal being ‘to render mental pain bearable’ (ibid). It has been the work of poets to capture this in words.

The poetry of mourning is long established and still evolving as a genre. Grief poetry, as it is known, has changed over time, in much the same way that the size and shape of grief changes for the bereaved – it adapts to circumstance, it acclimates. Despite

Kübler-Ross providing guidance for the grieving through a series of stages, grief often defies reason and order. The poetry of grief seeks to express this.

Traditional elegies provided a standard response to loss. Their language is stoic, almost formal, and yet grief is often raw. It is unkempt and reckless, frightening in its ferocity. It is animalistic and primal (Addison 2001: 14). An elegy takes its origins from the Greek word for ‘lament’; a word steeped in passion and yet control: an elegies three parts, lament; praise and admiration; and consolation and solace, are mindful of what Davis calls the ‘stage models’ (2012: 5) that seek to neatly tie up and control the process of grief like a narrative arc.

Perhaps because of this, traditional elegies are written from what feels like in the reading a respectful distance, tempered from the ferocity of grief by social mores about appropriate behaviour. These were the kinds of restrictions and euphemisms surrounding death and grieving that writers like Mitford (2000) and Waugh (1948) wrote about in order to challenge and eventually dissolve. These are reminiscent of the ways grief is moderated by experts and industry professionals, and the insistence in the language of the stages of grief that grief itself has an end, and will eventually resolve.

The bereaved know this not to be true.

One of the ways this insistence occurs is in the final stages of the Kübler-Ross model of the grieving process, where ‘acceptance’ meant “‘closure” or detachment from the dead’ (Jalland 2005: 355). In the modern context, the act of closure can mean a more visceral experience. This is described by survivors of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, taking a ‘hands-on’ approach to finding closure for their loss and grief, insisting on experiencing a ‘blow’ to their cognitive system’ through the act of ‘walking about, touching and seeing the ruins’, and to ‘breathe the offensive smells of mold and rot’ (Otte 2007: 5).

Modern poets approach writing about grief from this new perspective, where grief is acknowledged as a lifelong state, at once primal and authentic, compared to poetry steeped in stiff-upper lip dignity. This is not to say that modern poetry about grief is undignified, or that elegies do not contain authentic expressions of grief, more that the context of the culture they were written in informs their approach and their reading.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, US Poet Laureate Billy Collins described the attacks as ‘beyond language’ (Academy of American Poets 2014), a statement mindful of the misinterpreted thoughts on poetry after Auschwitz (Martin 2006). After 9/11 there was an abundance of poetry as those affected sought to capture in language what they had seen with their eyes through the lens of the world’s media. On the first anniversary of that inauspicious day, Collins commemorated the dead by reading his poem ‘The Names’ to Congress in 2002. The poem aptly captures in devastating simplicity the collective grief felt by that country, and by citizens in many others, even after that period of time (PBS 2002).

Beyond community expressions of grief, other modern grief poetry demonstrates the very individual experience it evokes. Mary Oliver encourages the bereaved to ‘Love Sorrow’ (2008: 64), treating the female form like a child, and as something to take

good care of. Oliver also imagines the weight of grief as a ‘heart-load for each of us’ (15), echoing Ellet’s understanding of the experience and the motif of grief having size and shape. This is reminiscent of Dickinson, who ‘measure(s) every Grief’, sizing it up, to ‘wonder if it weighs like mine / or has an easier size’ (1994: 27).

Similarly, Sherman Alexie writes in ‘Grief calls us to the things of this world’:

Those angels burden and unbalance us
Those fucking angels ride us piggyback (2009).

This continues the expression of grief as having a physical shape, and a burdensome one at that, and is echoed in Natasha Trethewey’s ‘Pilgrimage’:

The ghost of history lies down beside me
Rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm (2006).

An attempt has been made to ameliorate the weight of grief in therapeutic settings via the practice of writing, particularly through poetry (Stepakoff 2007). In the examples described through the practices of Stepakoff, survivors in the aftermath of suicide are encouraged by what Mazza (1999, in Stepakoff 2007) calls ‘poetry therapy’: the utilization of poetry’ to ‘improve psychological functioning’. Using both receptive and expressive methods, the therapeutic model introduces clients to existing poetry on the topic of grief, and then provides workshopping and facilitation for clients to begin their own writing practice. Commonly known as ‘cathartic writing’ (McKinney 1976), this long-established practice has been the first step towards capturing the experience of grief in words for many writers, from Poet Laureates (McGrath 2012) to PhD students (Arnold 2009) and memoirists (Didion 2005). The next part of this paper looks at responses to the experience of grief from an artist and poet, engaged in cathartic writing and artistic creation experiences.

This is what grief looks like



Fiona Fell 2011 *The weight of rain*
terracotta and slip 53 x 58 x 28cm Watters Gallery, Sydney

The stoic figure of 'The weight of rain' (2011) represents a calm presence in the midst of a rainstorm. According to sculptor Fiona Fell, the theme and imagery that inspired this sculpture is of a bird caught in the rain, taking a moment to recover, standing firm and quietly waiting for its wing to dry. This is a moment of realisation; in order to be able to fly again one must stay still, be present and just accept the situation. It is a moment of acceptance and owning up to one's own frailties. These are hard lessons for the peripatetic bird.

The sheer weight of rain creates stillness in the figure that is both within and without. The earth tones of the terracotta provide connection to the ground, with both knees firm and flat against it, buffering against the elements. They have the appearance of sinking into soil, but nevertheless are immovable. The figure's face seems mute and resolute against this onslaught of precipitation, and there's a sense of patience, of stubborn resolve to withstand what may come. It's an admirable and strong figure, and yet tender and vulnerable. This underlying vulnerability is what drew me towards

‘The weight of rain’, along with the imagery of heaviness and a sense of inundation and deluge endemic in the title.

This sculpture was created in a place of constant humidity and substantial annual rainfall, and reflects its environment in content and form. The use of slip, a type of clay application, is seen in the white surfacing and is reminiscent of the fine layers of mould found in the sub-tropics where the sculpture originated. Mould borne of humidity is a living tangible presence (National Asthma Council Australia 2015), and settles on surfaces whether they are stationary or not. It is difficult to completely eradicate, and becomes something one just must live with. There’s a slow acceptance of mould into the lives of people living in the sub-tropics, a patience and acknowledgement of its place there.

In this way, the material and themes of this sculpture are like grief itself.

This representation of grief and loss is associated to the sense of transformation inherent in all of Fiona Fell’s sculptures. An artist with ‘sympathetic insight to the inside of ourselves’ (Legge 2015), Fell’s gaunt figures are moving and evoke empathy in the viewer. The motif of rain is suggestive of the transformative and informative power of the weather on mood and behaviour, and mirrors what Kevin Brophy says about this, which is of particular significance to me as a poet:

We speak of the weather because in truth it tells what is within us (2006: 37).

Fell’s sculptures show deep emotion in their representation of the deconstruction of bodies, appearing sometimes like little cadavers in their clinical settings, manipulated through x-ray machines and scanned like tissue samples in a laboratory (Fell 2014). There’s something of the macabre in these forms, but only inasmuch they reflect our own fears of our mortality.

Through ‘The weight of rain’ the artist has revisited and recovered the past, acknowledging what Legge describes as ‘that creepy feeling that we are victims of external forces, often emotional ones’ (2015). Much like our relationship with grief, the more we attempt to control these forces, the more it becomes apparent they are uncontrollable. When I write about the sometimes animalistic and primal nature of grief, this is what I mean. Fell’s work is steeped in emotional realism, as is my own poetry, and the sculpture informed the composition of the eponymous poem in the next section of this paper.

Derrida’s work on mourning is influential here, particularly his discussion of ‘impossible bereavement’ holding that the ‘only possible way to mourn is to be unable to do so’ (Reynolds 2010: 21), owing to the dichotomous relationship between the self and other (Derrida 1989). So too, Derrida discusses at length the difficulties of finding words for grief:

I knew in advance that I would be unable to speak today, unable, as they say, to find the words (114).

But he does, on that occasion delivering a eulogy for Althusser (114), giving his grief words, a man who ‘insists upon continuing’ (Henderson 2009: 3). It is noted that in each entry in *The Work of Mourning*, ‘almost every piece begins with the

impossibility of speaking or saying or meaning’ but ‘each one...evoke[s] memories, relationships and the spirit of endurance’ (ibid: 3). Derrida captures the sensation of finding words in amongst his grief, of finding a place of stasis to recover, to sink into the earth, his abyss of language, to feel at ease with the heaviness of it, and to wait it out until the possibility of going on appears.

This is what I see when I view this sculpture, ‘The weight of rain’ (2011), and it speaks grief to me in ways words often cannot.

Responding to ‘The weight of rain’ (2011) in poetry provides the opportunity to find words where there have been none. The act of confronting art, of ekphrasis, is informed especially by the etymology of this Ancient Greek word, which refers in its roots to the practice of ‘out-speaking’; much like grief and words, drawing out the poem corresponds perhaps to the stages of grief, an important step in the process of acceptance. These for me are what Pound and Auden might have called ‘small, local and contingent truths’ (Webb 2010: 9), referring again to the very individual experience of grief.

This is what grief is

In Romanyshyn’s discussion of his poetry anthology, ‘The Soul in Grief’ (2000), he acknowledges the usefulness of poetry in place of psychology for giving words to mourning and grief, calling it a ‘poetics of the elements of the grieving process to distinguish it from the psychology of grief’ (44).

He describes a ‘black hole [that] opened in my soul’ (43), imagery correlating to the small hole in the figure at the centre of ‘The weight of rain’ (2011) representing the vacuum of absence in the bereaved. Romanyshyn details how grief ‘works its way into the core of the body’ (2000: 43), and ‘is a “cellular” matter’ (ibid), even resonating with Derrida when he describes grief as evoking a physical sensation of being split in two (2000: 45). These words, imbued as they are in the poetry of the ‘The Soul in Grief’ (1999), informed the research and writing of the poem that follows as a response to Fell’s work, and giving words to my own ongoing grief from unexpected multiple bereavements this year, and also in the past three years. Known anecdotally as a ‘season of grief’, the poem expresses the heavy burden of compounded grief.

*The weight of rain*¹

An expectant sky bears down hard on the horizon
Wearing the grey furrowed brow of grief
It’s a comforting crocheted blanket
Settled over this too-flat earth
Covering us like the memories of our dead

A good place to hide for a while
But don’t stay under too long

The air disappears and all that remains is expired dioxide
And a little warm death² in the dark

A grey fantail is caught in the storm
And alights on a railing in the shade
Then attempts a silent stasis towards recovery
One wet wing held in salute
To the impossible weight of rain

The atmosphere is visible today
A coat of gloaming to cover us
Encroaching the safety of the verandah
Settling glistening beads on leaves
Leaving a fine sheen of humidity everywhere

The North window shimmers with a grey reflection
Of a sky thick with the promise of more
While inside the rain soaked mattress
Absorbs everything we once were

Driving through the horizontal ghosts of the lowlands last night
Fog cobwebs cover the car and whisper their words;
'What do we think the dead say to us,
when we stop to let them speak?'

The dead are in the trees around us
If only we could dare to look up
The car weaves its way through flood plains
As the soft breeze blows your voice out of my head
Our narrative ended abruptly
Leaving no possibility of resolution

This regret is caustic
It drips off devastated lips
Rots teeth from the inside out
And leaves hollow spaces
Where life had once been

The black salve on your heart corrodes a hole
As deep and wide as this search for meaning with no end
Because sometimes there are not enough words
There is only the weight of rain

What do I know about grief?

An uncomfortable silence follows death, a hollow and empty space. We know space has a sound (NASA 2013) but the silence after death seems as limitless in its scope.

The silence fills the space the dead occupied, follows the bereaved around like a bell jar they could climb into, and makes the rest of the world going about its business seem foreign and removed. It settles over conversations where there seem to be no words to appropriately capture this feeling of *lack*. Once words come back, they take shape, much like grief. These words came to form ‘The weight of rain’ (2015), and in turn reflect the sculpture bearing the same name.

The Portuguese ‘saudade’ is more feeling than word per se, being a word untranslatable in English (Garsd 2015). Saudade is a state of nostalgic melancholy for something that may not even be over, or absent. It is found in the words of ‘Driving sideways’ a poem written about mourning endings before they occur:

The cobwebs keeping us together slowly disintegrate
As you pull away even while sitting next to me (Hawryluk 2010).

As a concept saudade captures the emotions characteristic of both grief *and* poetry about grief in equal measure, and is present in the language and tone of the poem ‘The weight of rain’ (2015). There is some comfort to be found in this state, likened to a familiar and welcoming crocheted blanket. This is the first of several references to holes, gaps, absences in poems, using the kind of imagery the French ‘*tu me manques*’, a phrase meaning ‘you are missing from me’, seeks to capture. These images represent not only the noticeable physical absence, but the more subtle vacuum the dead create in our lives and how grief covers everything and fills that void. The tangible weight of it. There’s that word again. The poem speaks to silence after death, and the way grief can be suffocating.

In the poem we are introduced to a particular bird associated with death in some cultures, the fantail. Arnold (2010: 5) writes about the appearance of the fantail at her window in the aftermath of her daughter’s death, and the many unexpected moments of apophenia she experiences. Apophenia is the human tendency to make connections between events where there are none (Conrad 1958). This seems to happen often when we speak about the deceased and of moments in the mourning where they appear to us in different forms, in a song, via a bird, or through seemingly uncanny incidences.

Apophenia is expressed in the poem ‘The weight of rain’ (2015) through the image of the dead in the trees, which is also informed by notions of animism (James 2007). In the poem, the dead whisper to drivers in dark cars late at night and fog takes on the appearance of ghosts. This is the essence of apophenia.

Defined by writer William Gibson as ‘the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things’ (Graham 2003) apophenia has been largely debunked scientifically, but this does not diminish a reliance on it for instances of what might be called ‘spiritual’ connection – a significant song playing on the radio when thinking of the dead or the fantail arriving on your daughter’s windowsill to accompany thoughts of her or calls from her friends lamenting her death (Arnold 2010: 5).

There are countless examples of these amongst the bereaved, and while they may not hold scientific efficacy, they do speak much about the effects of grief and the ways we

find meaning. As Joan Didion would have it, ‘we tell ourselves stories in order to live’ (2006). Apopenia to me then is a way of finding meaning in the midst of the most random of circumstances, when our every being is seeking order and understanding.

‘The weight of rain’ is my attempt to find understanding, to express *saudade* in the midst of multiple significant bereavements, to understand and express a season of grief. It finds links in my existing writing about landscapes and the weather (2009, 2012, 2014) and their inherent connectedness and influences on our state of mind. The poem also finds parallels in existing writing about grief, especially in poetry. Writers as diverse as Poet Laureates and clinical psychologists have struggled under the weight of wordless grief, and used poetry as a means to express it. It may not lead to closure, but it does give words to hitherto unspeakable suffering.

Let me tell you what I know about grief:

Nothing. Hardly anything. Everything.

Endnotes

¹ Fell, F 2011 *The weight of rain* (Sculpture, terracotta and slip) Watters Gallery

² Wilson, C 1995 *A little warm death on New Moon Daughter*, Blue Note, NYC

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