Only a Rite

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*Only a rite, an endlessly repeated act, can commemorate this not very memorable encounter—for no one can say what the death of a child is, except the father qua father, that is to say, no conscious being.*

--Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*

On April 24, 1998, officials of Fayette county in central Kentucky exhumed an urn buried in Lot 508 at the Lexington Cemetery. The urn, according to published reports, “contained only potting soil.” But the mystery surrounding this event does not concern a missing body—at least, not the sort of body that can be subject to autopsy. The urn-burial in question had been arranged the previous November by a North Carolina physician, Dr. Hollis Tidmore. For ten years, friends and coworkers had grieved with Dr. Tidmore over the loss of a family he never had. Late in 1997, as his “web of lies” began to unravel, Tidmore had the urn hastily buried. His fraud was exposed, but newspaper accounts of the investigation suggest that something else remains to be unearthed:

It seemed so real to so many people.

Dr. Hollis Tidmore had lost his wife and son in a car accident, and years later he was still grieving, distraught, and lonely.

The Charlotte surgeon talked about it often. Just a mention of that day—Aug. 21, 1987—could bring him to tears.

Friends cried along with him, hoping he would heal someday.

He marked the anniversary of the wreck each year by placing flowers in his church during Sunday services, recalls the Rev. Charles
Page, his friend and former pastor at First Baptist Church. And every time, the doctor cried.

But the sad story was a fiction.

Tidmore never had a wife or son. There was no wreck. And the urn he buried in a Lexington cemetery contained only soil.

Somewhere in the absurdities of this imposture resides a kind of truth—the one that made an imaginary father’s loss seem “so real to so many people.” There was (to borrow Harry Berger’s phrase) no “encounter of fact,” only the utter redundancy of burying earth. Yet the emptiness at the heart of this sad story makes it an unusually pure “encounter of meaning.” The grief, the sympathy of friends, the ritualized commemoration during religious services, the consolations of mourning and the sense of community in sorrow, all these were merely symbolic, deprived of their anchor in the literal truth. Yet in spite of the doctor’s bad faith they were also real, and so, in some sense, was his loss. The sad story was false; but the true story is also sad. Surely Hollis Tidmore was himself the wreck for which he wept.

The essays in this collection, together with the growing body of work, both theoretical and historical, that they cite and elaborate, reflect a surge of critical fascination with the sad stories we tell ourselves about grief and mourning. The connection between grief and gender may not be intuitively obvious, but there is no question that the present critical preoccupation with loss, mourning, and elegy owes a great deal to gender theory. Freud’s work, from the
essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) through *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919) to *The Ego and the Id* (1921), laid down a track, retraced in the speculations of Judith Butler and others, that leads from the process of mourning to the formation of gender. In these works Freud projected an erotics of identity formation, a vision of sexual selfhood as resulting from the interplay between longing and identification in the child’s mournful response to the incest taboo. It seems reasonable to suppose that grief in adults would call up the old mechanisms to repair new damage, rebuilding the self in the wake of a devastating blow. The reconstruction of gender identity—opening it to history, and hence to revision—would have to be part of this process, for sudden and profound loss shatters us to our foundations, wrenching us back to that archaic depth of being on which the sense of sexual selfhood first took shape. Death renews the first loss; gender is what we became in response to that loss; mourning resumes that becoming, and in doing so opens us painfully to a future not yet engendered.

The connection between grief and gender also marks a point of convergence between the two most influential critical practices of our time, psychoanalysis and historicism. As a primary stage of socialization, gender-formation is ground zero for the construction of the social self; if mourning calls upon us to repeat the assumption of gender, it also calls us to rebuild our ties to the world around us, reweaving the filaments of collective identity. Such a point of vulnerability and renewal must inevitably draw to itself the ideological forces and resources of its time and place, for it provides the human raw material on which they work. Literature and criticism alike belong to this process.
Literature and criticism belong to the process of renewal, but they also resist it. Elegy imitates grief and mourning, and its mimesis must begin by recreating the sense of loss. To the extent that this loss engages our fantasies and emotions it will also enlist our sympathy for the motives of resistance. The elegy must create this resistance powerfully in order to overcome it convincingly: signs and ceremonies of mourning may bind us together socially, yet beneath that solidarity we feel the tug of a more inarticulate sympathy for the loss we cannot share, the stubborn clinging of the bereaved to the one who is deceased. This must be one reason critical studies of the elegiac tradition, such as Jahan Ramanzani’s _Poetry of Mourning_, lay such emphasis on resistance: consolation has to be authenticated by our faith in the uniqueness of each loss—in what Berger calls “its profound meaninglessness, transcending thought.” Breaking more than a decade’s silence about the death of his son, Berger still declines to find meaning in it. “Real death,” he insists, “marks the limits of literary death, of dialogue, of revision, of celebration. Silence is its best rhetoric.”

W. Scott Howard, in his essay for this collection, keys on the resistance to consolation as a way of writing the literary history of the form. Tracing in seventeenth-century texts what he calls “the true emergence of the modern poetic elegy,” he revises an argument taken over from Ramanzani, who distinguishes modern elegy from the tradition because the modern poet (in Howard’s words) “resists consolation, thereby performing oppositional cultural work through the elegy’s critique of the social conventions that govern private grief expression and public mourning practice.” I suspect that unearned consolations are already
slipping back into this account through the very language of “oppositional cultural work,” which projects the elegiac poet as a wish-fulfilling image of the cultural critic. But critics do identify with the poets they study, and for this reason criticism itself can be a highly specialized form of mourning.

This is the burden of Harry Berger’s “Commencement Address: June 1976,” a beautiful oration on the poetics of loss and consolation that embodies in its own carefully crafted form all the generic modulations Howard distinguishes in the elegiac tradition since the seventeenth century. Berger’s “critique of the social conventions” is at once playful and serious, established immediately in the mock-antagonism with which he admonishes his audience that their celebration is premature. His resistance to consolation lodges itself in the distinction between encounters of meaning and of fact. We realize this distinction in loss, for there are no encounters of fact except in purely negative form. Every living encounter mingles fact and meaning inseparably—as when a teenage son confronts his father in a relationship bedeviled by misunderstanding because it is fraught and over-fraught with contradictory meanings. Separation occurs through the irrevocable subtraction of death, which leaves us to choose between meaning and the silence into which that lost other has fallen. Berger confronts this choice at the turning point of his elegy, and accepts it with moving simplicity: “It happened to him, not to me. I lost him, but he lost everything. And that’s what has stayed with me. That’s the fact.” This is the moment of separation, the moment of letting go.
The distinction between fact and meaning registers this deeper separation. Freud famously speculated that melancholy involves “a loss of a more ideal kind,” observing with epigrammatic clarity that the patient “knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him.” The essays in this collection repeatedly find in the aftermath of separation a labor of interpretation that sorts through the meanings of loss and reinvests it with new significance: thus Martin Luther, in Patricia Phillip’s essay, sees “political and social losses figured in or attendant upon” his daughter’s death; women in Anglo-Saxon texts after the Norman Invasion, as Claire Ingham shows, “bear the grief for a culture in transition.” Even resistance to meaning and its consolations takes on significance when, as Phillippy demonstrates, it serves to distinguish maternal grief from the public performance of masculine restraint. Meanings are themselves forms and objects of desire, ideal ties that bind us on the one hand to those we have lost and on the other hand to the persons, communities, and ideals around us.

Loss sets in motion an essentially textual process because it opens these meanings, the forms and objects of our deepest emotional investments, to revision. Grief resists speech so intensely because silence is the only response that can preserve our absolute fidelity to the one we have lost in all his (and its) uniqueness. To put loss into words is already to symbolize it, to renegotiate its meanings, to revise it—and, with it, ourselves. Anne Prescott reminds us that Marguerite de Navarre, writing in the aftermath of her brother’s and her mother’s death, “has, at least to some degree, taken the liberty . . . to remake her now helpless relatives if not out-and-out Lutherans then more Erasmian, more
Evangelical, more like Marguerite.” There is a kind of terrible freedom in this return to language—including, as the extreme example of Dr. Tidmore reminds us, the freedom to refashion ourselves through lies. In his fantasy of mourning, Hollis Tidmore became a husband, a father, and an object of pity. In her fantasy, Marguerite makes her brother more like herself and herself more like him, adopting “the person of a male lover” to explore the significance of her loss.

This freedom to revise ourselves and remake others in the aftermath of grief is real, but not absolute. Marshall Grossman invokes the psychoanalytic model of transference as a way of understanding the rhetorical structures through which mourning negotiates ideal losses and reconfigures the emotions they release. Transference counterbalances the awful freedom that we purchase at the cost of our dearest loves; its tropes suspend a thread of continuity across the radical discontinuity of separation. Between the absolute severance of death and the persistence of love borne across death by the rhetorical structures of the transference, we locate one possibility for what Berger calls “celebration,” at once a separation and a return.

Among the defining features of the modern elegy as Howard describes it are “a heightened sense of the linguistic negotiation of loss” and “the placement of consolation within the context of human temporality.” Berger’s oration fuses these elements deftly, taking death into itself formally through the motifs of separation and timing, which it then carefully manages in order to create a sense of closure and decorum. First the speaker sets himself apart from his audience by declaring their celebration premature. Then, against the prematurity of their
expectations, he opposes deliberate gestures of delay. He mentions the “encounter of fact” almost at once, but postpones any explanation in favor of “the worm and the word.” The worm, too, is introduced only to be deferred: “I’m not ready to talk about it yet.” So, again, is the word: the speaker will celebrate, he will rejoice and make merry with his listeners, but “not yet.” First he must insist on separation: on his own isolation from the students behind him and the parents in front of him; on the distinctness of his four encounters, each introduced only to be suspended, held apart in the mind until he is ready for them all to come together; and on the separateness of events in time that allows for celebration in its root sense, as a revisiting of what is past.

All these separations are artfully overcome in the oration as the absolute rift between Harry and Tommy is, simply, accepted. “I have let go,” says the speaker. In letting go he has taken the risk that Ryder avoided and that Socrates’ companions resisted: “they’re afraid to go away from themselves, let themselves go, risk losses.” But without the risk of discontinuity, even in its extreme form as the shattering experience of a loved person’s death, we cannot open ourselves to history or change, and so we cannot celebrate. Only after he lets go in this way can the speaker move to his peroration. Only then can he rediscover the decorum of the occasion, the propriety of mingling elegy with commencement, and in doing so, rejoin the audience from which he has held himself aloof: “When I think of Tommy,” he can say, “it makes me more joyous now to be standing here with good friends and with those students whom I’ve come to know well, and who mean much to me, and with whom I’ve wanted to share this encounter.” At
this moment, the “encounter of fact” yields, as it must, not to mere “encounters of
meaning,” but to what he calls the act of education and love, the living moment in
which meaning and fact, like self and other, are not only separate, but also
inseparable.

1 All quotations are cited from the account of Blair Anthony Roberts of the Knight
Ridder News Service, as published in the *Lexington Herald-Leader* (Monday, July 27,
1998), B1 and B3.

2 Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the