Loss and Mourning: Writings on Death and its Appeal to the Reader [1]

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Abstract. How do writers deal with loss and mourning? Which response do they hope to evoke from their readers? In the absence of any mourners, Scott Fitzgerald himself takes up the role of prime mourner in *The Great Gatsby*. Proust prefers to immerse the reader in countless memories of his grandmother's death. Thus he and the reader arrive at the idea of his own imminent death. Joyce emphasizes that death really is the appropriate response to life here and now, however happy it might seem. Finally, in my own 'death novel' I endeavour to detach the reader from the experience of loss and mourning. Instead, by using the first person singular narrator, the reader is made to see and experience the beauty of death.

As the body of the boy is slowly hauled from the frozen lake, the onlookers drop to their knees one by one. They cross themselves and pray for the eternal life of the soul of this young boy. The last person to kneel and cross himself is the boy's father. He is a self-acknowledged atheist, and until then he only believed in science and its ability to name, calculate and predict. It was this man, the father of the boy, who used his computer to predict the exact thickness of the ice. And he assured his son that he could go skating on the ice without any danger to his life.

I am moved every time I watch this scene from Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog*. To drop on your knees, cross yourself and murmur a prayer is a beautiful, readily available ritual for the religious person to deal with loss. The writer, whether religious or otherwise, has only words available to express loss and mourning, only words to take the reader along with him in the outpouring of grief. Writers

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are often obliged to write on this subject, as death and suicide and subsequent loss and mourning are woven into the tapestry of our at times dark and ominous everyday existence.

Of interest to me is the appeal the writer makes to the reader in the writing-up or recording of loss and mourning. How does the writer want his readers to feel and how does he succeed in evoking a response from his reader? I have chosen writings of three masters, F Scott Fitzgerald, Marcel Proust and James Joyce to see what they have made of loss and mourning. Finally, I will quote a passage from my second novel, *My Beautiful Death*, for my own take on the subject.

Jay Gatsby is dead. In Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1998), written in 1924, Gatsby was the exponent of a post war romantic. He had a boisterous, expansive spirit. While the rest of America was being flooded with immigrants breaking their backs for a share in the growing wealth, while other Americans were still mourning their 350 000 sons who died in World War I, Jay Gatsby was throwing lavish parties in his millionaire's mansion. He is as carefree as can be, he loves champagne and slick cars and beautifully dressed, fey women. And he loves his dreams.

Then comes the tragic end: the great Gatsby afloat on a blow-up mattress on his silver blue swimming pool. Blood is trickling from the body. He has been shot for a crime he did not commit. Jay Gatsby is dead. And except for his sometime friend, Nick Carraway, who is also the narrator of the story, not a single one of all of Gatsby's guests from all of his fantastic parties are present to witness his death. Nick Carraway can hardly find anyone on the phone to share this immense loss. The writer mourns and grimaces about this most tragic of circumstances and he wants to take the reader with him. How does he do this?

The final swimming pool scene is described in such a way that it imitates elements of prayer. The barely perceptible movement of the water from one end of the pool to the drain, imitates the scarcely moving lips of someone in prayer. As the praying person utters the solemn words of his prayer, so do the little ripples move the mattress with the body down the pool. The spirit can elevate the words of the prayer and lift them on their heavenly path, just as a small gust of wind is enough to disturb the accidental burden on the mattress on its accidental course.

But if the description of Gatsby's body on its mattress in the swimming pool resembles a prayer, it is a ridiculous prayer, a prayer disrespectful of the man. After all, there is no-one present to mourn him, there is no-one who could fall on their knees and say a real prayer for the soul of Jay Gatsby. He is utterly alone in his death. He is left out in the cold: "[. . .] he must have felt," Scott Fitzgerald writes about Jay Gatsby, "that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass" (1998).

This is how Scott Fitzgerald concludes the 'swimming pool prayer': "The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it [the mattress] slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water" (1998). Jay Gatsby is drifting on the course of an endless curve. And no possibility exists of a river Styx which can be crossed towards a final, eternal destination.

Through this prayer of the swimming pool uttered in the absence of mourners "like poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air", Fitzgerald calls upon the reader himself to take up the mourning for the tragic fate of his protagonist (1998). The reader now becomes the sole mourner, the reader upholds the tragedy of Gatsby's death and shares the grimace of Fitzgerald: the cynical smile about the fantastic American dream of the twenties.

Marcel Proust mourns the death of his grandmother in a very specific way. In and through the act of writing he creates his version of a prayer, one resembling a bridal veil which is used to cover the body of his deceased grandmother. Her grey hair "which," Proust writes, "hitherto had seemed less old than my grandmother," becomes like a crown set on a face grown young again (2002). And so Proust gives shape to his loss and mourning by letting the dead body of his grandmother resemble, in his words, "the far-off days when her parents had chosen her a bridegroom, [she had] the features, delicately traced by purity and submission, the cheeks glowing with a chaste expectation, with a dream of happiness, with an innocent gaiety even [. . .]" (2002).

And now he closes his prayer by saying: "On that funeral couch, death, like a sculptor of the Middle Ages, had laid her down in the form of a young girl" (2002).

Thus Proust shuts out the memory of his deceased grandmother for the time being in vol. 3 of the latest revised English version of *In Search of Lost Time*. And he appeals to the reader to dress up his mourning as a prayer for a young bride.

However, in vol. 4, just as he slowly and cautiously bends down to take off his boots, his grandmother returns to him by way of involuntary recollection: "[. . .] more than a year after her burial, because of the anachronism which so often prevents the calendar of facts from corresponding to the calendar of feelings" (2002). And only now, having already informed the reader that his grandmother has died, does he himself realise that his grandmother is finally dead.

He continues the narrative in words and sentences that follow one another like tightly woven plaits, plaited to hold together and then give way to the next, and this one plaited so that it in turn may hold together and give way to yet another plait. It is unfaithful to Proust to quote any single passage or single out any one scene from his work because of the inseparable union of the entire six volumes that make up *In Search of Lost Time*.

But for the sake of the argument: we see Proust, older now, in his room busy taking off his boots. And just as he is about to touch the topmost button of his shirt,

his chest swells and fills with an unknown, a divine presence, as his grandmother reappears to him in her chamber gown of fine white linen and enters his room and, like the time when he was a little boy he sees himself reflected in her soul and, writes Proust, "like a man who tries to fasten his tie in front of a glass and forgets that the end which he sees reflected is not on the side to which he raises his hand," he loses the consciousness of where he ends and where his grandmother begins and feels his mouth glued to her cheeks and "drew from her something so beneficial, so nourishing, that [he] remained as motionless, as solemn, as calmly gluttonous as a babe at the breast" (2002).

With this narrative of closely following images Proust immerses his reader in his way of processing loss and mourning, that is, through the counting and recounting of recurring memories. And by the time the reader gets to vol. 6, Proust, now ailing from ill health, forces himself, and by implication the reader, to acknowledge that he has given permanent residence to the idea of death. In his own words: "Not that I loved death, I abhorred it. But after a preliminary stage in which, no doubt, I thought about it from time to time as one does about a woman with whom one is not yet in love [. . .] the idea of death [still] kept me company as faithfully as the idea of my self" (2002).

Scott Fitzgerald appeals to his reader to step closer to the swimming pool of the great Jay Gatsby and take on the role of mourner himself. Proust informs the reader of the death of his grandmother in vol. 3 of *In Search of Lost Time*, then takes himself and his reader through the slow process of loss and mourning in countless memories and eventually, three volumes later, arrives at the abhorrent but real idea of his own imminent death.

James Joyce deals with loss and mourning in neither of these ways. He gives his long short story about an elegant soirée on a winter's night in Dublin the ironic title of "The Dead" (1971). On the whole, the soirée that snowy winter's night is a happy one and without hitches, but behind the Irish hospitality of aunt Julia and aunt Kate lurks the somberness of death. From the folds of the winter coats, through the cracks of the "dark, gaunt house" rises the chilling thought: there is an order of monks who sleeps in coffins every night. And they don't do this without reason.

It is characteristic of Joyce's writing that the more crass and vulgar his subject, the more sublime it becomes. In the "kink of high-pitched, bronchitic laughter", in the "haggard" glance of aunt Julia , in the folksy tongue of the servant Lily who blabbers on: "the men that is now is only palaver and what they get out of you," in all of this commonness is hidden the transcendental, the eternal destiny which we all, for sure, will become part of (1971).

Loss and mourning, Joyce tells his reader, does not come after death, it really is the appropriate response to life here and now, however happy it might seem. "They lived and laughed ant loved end left," he writes in *Finnigans Wake* (1992).

Towards the end of the story the main character, Gabriel Conroy, finds himself with his wife in their hotel room. It is already morning but still dark outside. The lovely food and plentiful drink at his aunt's house has placed Gabriel in an excellent mood and he feels rather horny towards his wife Gretta, whom he perceives as warm and sensual.

Yet Gretta finds herself in a completely different space: somehow the evening has brought forward a hidden loss that she has suffered many years ago. She remembers her love for her teenage lover who died at the young age of seventeen. What is more, she believes that he has died for her. The somberness that was so prevalent throughout the evening is recalled once again.

Gabriel, and the reader, are forced to abandon the all too human thoughts of lust and desire and are brought right to the portals of death instead. Thus is the effect of his wife recounting her loss and mourning.

Gabriel Conroy now moves to the window of their hotel room and looks out onto the dark, snow-covered landscape outside. Joyce closes "The Dead" with Conroy's sublime soliloquy:

> Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. [. . .] It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (1971)

In conclusion I would like to quote from my own novel, *My Beautiful Death* (2006), in which loss and mourning is treated in yet another way. The novel tells of Konstant Wasserman who leaves his people, culture and country of South Africa behind and emigrates to Australia only to contract a fatal disease. He is forced to prepare himself for his death.

Here follows the final passage where Konstant tells of his entry into death. The names mentioned in the passage are of Jude, his lover, and of Shane and Deloris, two close friends. I will briefly comment on how the passage trades in loss and mourning for the reality of death.

> I know, I can see my coming now. My heart's still warm: only a little wandering around left here. Go now Jude, Jude, you were my loveliest Judie, go gently, go sweetly, my Jude.
>
> Just your outline, just your . . . not talk any more, tongue swollen. Verbs don't fit my I any more, I am not to be found any more. More voices outside. The dog, wind? Comes in through the window, he's everywhere, windows everywhere. Who's talking, what's talking? Ears go everything up deaf just Sha still left just shadowy around bed still, where the bottle, where water? Heavy now. Gone, always gone. Must hand to forehead . . . Scratch, too heavy, fingers stumps. Can't even to cheeks, hollow now. Gone. Deeper down, heaviest of all. Feather blanket. Must get Ma to take it

away, too heavy. Feathers so so full lead apples don't swing can't hand too heavy. Somebody extra here too, somebody? More people figures, too many here, too many outlines. People bodies weigh too heavy. . . . See a trembling image. It's a big body, hand. Somebody takes my hand. Voice in inside head. From far away, she. Hear her with inner ear. She she she's so full, my hand in hers.

I see you, Deloris, I see you.

Sowhycomesofarsofardeljustoseemesleep.

Turn around. Okay like this, no, on side, turn around . . . on side plea on side . . . left no right I more cushions one too many more or less sweeter sleep the sweet wind blows everything away, away inne dust trembling after after more after the dust there he is, there the mirage.

Nose running. Water. Out. It's not tears. Eyes don't just cry. Moistures will be last. Don't need again . . . to dirty you, last pantsshit this. Hands whose? Is she still here? Whose hands? Careful, you lot, body shivering still, but can't smell anything. Last thing had no smell. I just water, just only water. Trembling now, mouth dry throat leathery. There's no more water lips suck up all moisture gone. Terribly thirsty now, must drink more. Why doesn't anyone give water? Everyone so slow, where's water? Right here, me. Can nobody see dry tongue? Too worried about smell, drying up quickly, the smell dissipates, the smell nice here come to pool, arrived here, glow over peaceful waters where little boys romp in sun pools of golden glass, but quickly passed, away, everything washes away again, chosen the foggy way…So much mistiness here. There they are, little puffs of smoke, there they are in the mist, weak little breaths.

Going away now, last bit of warmth in toe in foot, away. All warm clapping little hands cold creeps up, running hard up running to heart, there's nothing more just cold fire at nose cold breath who are you? Cold breath, ice on my tongue iced everything, Pa's name? Gone everything unknown. See sounds. Take away, the water, weaned from it. Hear faces. Whose are you, whose? Everything up in flames, everything together now little pile may as well set alight, whole life collected together: just a pile of sticks. Flames now, it's good like this. See them, hear them. Red sparks atop holy fire.

Breath short-short, short-short, rasp raaasp, ghuuu thereisntnothig nothing here nothing more all for naught blow out big breath out see him it's Grandpa smells like white bread his hands so beautiful white what wind brings blow big wind, hey, Grandpa wind around my heart . . . last little bit last bi…warmth there lamp of the heart…Grandpa comes with glowing lamp red and right in just a little, little breath long out . . . blue breath out, everything out . . . all stuff blown out, all suffering for all

> always. That's it! . . . there it is now . . . little eye of the little lamp is . . . is white light is white I see around . . . it's around, it surrounds me everywhere pure white
> I (2006)

The text draws on Buddhist teachings which informs us of the three stages or visions which one experiences as you lie dying. The first one is: the sensation of a small breeze and the loss of the senses; the second is: the vision of a mirage and the loss of all body heat; and the third: the sight of a light and the last appearance of the beloved ones.

By importing these three physical stages in the death process of the main character, I wish to emphasize the realness of death to the reader. It is not an obscure process which we, whether we are the dying person or part of those left behind, need to fear and mourn. To the Buddhists the knowledge of the stages of death are not based on speculation, but rather on observation and experience. We as the readers are able to know the process by experiencing it in the first person with the main character of the novel. Konstant Wasserman constantly tells the bystanders not to mourn the loss of his death. By knowing the process as he is busy getting to know it in the here and now, we are called upon to see and experience the beauty of death.

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