

The Myth and Politics of Hauntology

Tanis MacDonald, *The Daughter's Way: Canadian Women's Paternal Elegies*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012. ix + 270 pp.

It seems every elegist or critic of elegies in English owes a debt to Milton's "Lycidas," and Tanis MacDonald is no exception. The canonical poem is credited (or blamed) by the author for "awakening my questions about consolation as a possibility and the elegy as a genre, and for eventually nudging me towards thornier questions about female elegists, literary mourning, and father-daughter kinship" (3). These thornier questions, which encompass everything from literary inheritance to father-daughter eros to the politics of war and the problematics of translation, grow and twist and prick unapologetically in the fertile ground of Canadian women's poetics of the mid to late twentieth century.

Considering the vast number of elegies written by Canadian poets, let alone Canadian women poets, it is astonishing how few studies exist that even attempt to provide a framework for understanding the particular Canadian elegy breed; therefore, works like MacDonald's are automatically significant forerunners of an important subfield of Canadian literary criticism. Beyond this generic critical void, MacDonald's study plays a crucial role in understanding the lives and poetics of various oeuvres of Canadian women writers, some of whose reputations are still thriving (Margaret Atwood, Anne Carson), and others whose literary stars have perhaps dimmed within contemporary poetic discussions but who deserve serious reevaluation for their individual accomplishments as well as continued influence on current poetic trends (Dorothy Livesay, Jay Macpherson).

Although MacDonald's study is essentially divided into eight chapters, each focused on a single poet's work, she binds these women together to examine a communal vocational mission, asserting that her volume will "focus on how Canadian contemporary female elegists refuse to be the 'foolish bird' dwelling within and promoting the masculine tradition of mourning, and instead produce elegies that assert a variety of feminist positions that are negotiated within and beyond the parameters of the male elegiac tradition" (7). We are asked to conceive of the elegy, "not as a spontaneous outpouring of grief, but, rather, as a designed artifact of mourning" (12).

As MacDonald is herself a poet, she brings to her close reading of each poem a poet's eye and ear, and, if I may be so bold as to suggest, even a poet's spirit, to the project, aligning her critical apparatus with the varied motives and complex personal lives of the chosen writers. Since the poems under discussion belong to a more specialized sub-genre of elegy—elegies of fathers by daughters—MacDonald must be sensitive (without becoming sentimental) to the actual circumstances of grief which occasion the poems while remaining conscious of the highly controversial and sometimes pedantic psychological, anthropological, cultural, and literary debates regarding male and female relations as well as paternal power dynamics that inform much feminist critical discourse.

Singing is then less an expression of emotion than it is a political and social strategy for investigating the power of mourning. Eschewing the usual critical apparatus that define paternal elegies in terms of daughterly obedience or victimization, one of the main strengths of this study resides in MacDonald's intuitive understanding of how the poets claim the elegy as a site of "mythical implications and political possibilities" (20)—outlining the implications involved as many poets either reference or adopt the personae of classical heroines or mythological figures in their poems. Her interpretations argue for a balanced approach that acknowledges autobiography as initiating elegiac creation and lyrical force but which does not necessarily dominate or oppressively shape literary product, highlighting how each writer consciously challenges and rewrites generic literary mourning conventions towards specific cultural, political, and literary ends. Her analysis of Livesay's elegies for a father who envied her creative success is generous and astute, and her recurring use of the term "a daughter's hauntology" a highly adaptable and suitable concept for investigating how the gothic informs the works of writers as stylistically diverse as Macpherson and Erin Mouré. MacDonald is also skilled at demonstrating how each of the poets questions and calculates, welcomes and rebels against, dismisses and longs for, various forms of inheritance, and how grief can be used and abused and misconstrued in this complicated process of articulating grief as product.

While a single study ought not to be faulted for a lack of comprehensiveness in terms of the poets and poems under consideration, and while I did find each of the eight chosen writers worthy of discussion within the father-daughter elegy framework—in addition to the abovementioned authors, MacDonald highlights the work of P.K. Page, Kristjana Gunnar and Lola Lemire Tostevin—MacDonald ought to have argued more persuasively as to why these specific eight writers were chosen as representa-

tive of the complex mourning poetics and how each contributes uniquely and significantly to a Canadian poetic project. MacDonald claims to have chosen poets of “different generations, styles, and politics” (237); however, they do not represent the highly diverse ethnic, religious, or class backgrounds of the Canadian poetic landscape, and I found myself wondering why other writers who could have added further dimensions to MacDonald’s vital discussion were left out. The study might have had an even more profound and relevant impact from examining more diverse voices; nevertheless, the book does sing.

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