

Don't Forget to Remember Me: Memory, Mourning, and Jeremy Fernando's Writing Death

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*Rite and ceremony as well as legend bound the living and the dead in a common partnership. They were esthetic but they were more than esthetic. The rites of mourning expressed more than grief; the war and harvest dance were more than a gathering of energy for tasks to be performed; magic was more than a way of commanding forces of nature to do the bidding of man; feasts were more than a satisfaction of hunger. Each of these communal modes of activity united the practical, the social, and the educative in an integrated whole having esthetic form.*¹

Jeremy Fernando's *Writing Death* is a sensitive attempt at exploring the depths and heights to which the processes of mourning can take us. Death, as an absence, renders all gestures (for what is mourning but a gesture with many faces) surrounding it at once as a possibility and an impossibility. Fernando poses questions that often elude the mourner and the mourned – the same, and different – by raising the specter of subject and object; by compelling the examination of what it actually means to mourn; and most crucially, by considering the very status of possibility itself that the act of mourning foregrounds.

Mourning, he reminds us, is premised upon memory (remembrance, recollection), the shadow of forgetting upon which is perpetually cast – the inextricability between memory and forgetting haunts the living more than it does the dead. And if grief has anything to do with it, mourning can quite easily be mistaken for an attempt to remember in order to forget; an attempt, in other words, to deny death, deny the one thing that confirms mortality. As if living has anything to do with it.

What, then, of writing death? It becomes an unceasing process of locating – and addressing – possibility itself: the passing as possibility; loss as possibility; impossibility as, and of, naming this possibility. In confronting the passing on, it is possible, nay inevitable, to move on, move away from the site of loss, of grief. All the while, we forget, Fernando reminds us, that mourning has little to do with the dead, and a whole lot to do with the living, the mourning self. Here, he echoes Dewey's consolidation of rituals and ceremonies, of the dead and of the living, all as parts of a larger unity, of a social, public gesture meant to sate a private need:

In trying to "get over it," are we trying to get over ourselves? Or more than that: are we trying to get over the fact that we can never quite get over ourselves? (Fernando, 77)

As if guilt has anything to do with it. And "it" continues to be the point that he is driving at, driving towards. "It" is the possibility and impossibility, death and life, memory and forgetting, lost and cherished. "It" is what eludes mourning, eludes attempts to overcome grief.

¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 327.

Nonetheless, move on, he must. And Fernando does this in fewer moves than a 12-step program – hardly therapeutic, but intellectually satisfying. *Writing Death* attends to some of the pertinent aspects of the act of mourning – both as gesture and as meditation: eulogy, distress (call), tears, and the question of how (beyond ritual, beyond sentimentality) to mourn. And what's love got to do with it? Everything and nothing. Mourning, after all, is an articulation of love, but it is also one that forces the mourner to be selective, as with myth-making, in the recollection:

Remembering only ever occurs in exception to memory – quite possibly in betrayal of a memory. In this way, each remembrance is a naming of that memory, a naming of something as memory, bringing with it an act of violence (40).

Mourning is thus not only an act of fictionalizing, it is also an act of reading, to continually be compelled to respond to another, all the while keeping vigil against a reconceptualization of the dead, without, therefore, misreading the dead. This can only be done, Fernando argues, by all the while “maintaining the otherness of the other. After all, one must try not to forget that one cannot be too close – space is needed – to touch” (82). There is also tacit acknowledgement that doing so foregrounds the fact that the selectivity of memory becomes exclusive, and concretizes into a singularity, thus negating the multi-dimensionality of a life lived – and thus killing the already dead.

Writing Death is framed by two eulogies – or the approximations of eulogies; approximation because both foreground and call into question the eulogy as a genre. The first is Avital Ronell's foreword to the book, remembering Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe; the second is Fernando's own response to the passing of a mentor, Jean Baudrillard. Both are not merely attempts to philosophize their way out of the act of mourning. Both are in fact deeply moving pieces that remind us of the emotional possibilities that may reside within any intellectual undertaking, that the latter need not be cold and devoid of feelings. And whereas *Writing Death* does not attempt to make any philosophical claim for humanism, the underlying wistfulness of both pieces does suggest that there is a proper place for deep-seated human response to death. We can (and the book does) intellectualize and problematize the acts of mourning and grieving, but these do not diminish the fact that we mourn and grieve. And, framing *Writing Death* as the two eulogies do, Jeremy Fernando perhaps finally, and inadvertently, names “It” – it is, above everything else, Human.

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Works Cited

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee, 1934.
Fernando, Jeremy. *Writing Death*. The Hague/Tirana: Uitgeverij, 2011.