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Vanessa Guignery, Héloïse Lecomte

► **To cite this version:**

Vanessa Guignery, Héloïse Lecomte. Introduction: The Art of Dis/Consolation. *E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone*, 2024, 22.1, 10.4000/12xgp . hal-04849676

**HAL Id: hal-04849676**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04849676v1>**

Submitted on 19 Dec 2024

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# e-Rea

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

22.1 | 2024

1. Shifting Lines in Travel Writing / 2. (In)consolation in Contemporary British and Postcolonial Literatures

(In)consolation in Contemporary British and Postcolonial Literatures

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## Introduction: The Art of Dis/ Consolation

VANESSA GUIGNERY ET HÉLOÏSE LECOMTE

<https://doi.org/10.4000/12xgp>

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### *Texte intégral*

- In 1999, Kazuo Ishiguro, the author of *The Unconsoled* (1995), wondered why people participate in art, write or read books, and he came to the conclusion that they “are trying to address some wound, or at least something that is broken in their lives,” even if they are aware that it is too late to mend whatever was fractured. When he suggested that “art is a form of consolation,” he did not mean that art could heal the wound, bring comfort or make one feel better. Instead, he believed that touching the wound, examining it, having a relationship with it could help one “come to terms with it more, or live with it more,” and that therein could lie some consolation (in Guignery, *Novelists* 57). Such a conception of the consolatory power of art shirks away from any crude sentimentalism or escapism and acknowledges the vulnerability (from *vulnus*, the wound) that comes with the need for consolation. Ishiguro’s understanding of the term and process is one possible interpretation of a concept whose meaning and scope have evolved over the centuries and which, in contemporary times, deserves to be re-examined.
- Consolation, defined as the act of “alleviat[ing] grief, sense of loss or trouble” (*Merriam Webster*), shares the same root as “solace,” from the Latin verb *solari*, which means “to soothe” (James 8). Christophe André, who understands consolation as a “wish to ease pain” (16), sees it as a projection or a process rather than a result—not eliminating or dissipating pain but attenuating it.<sup>1</sup> For the psychoanalyst Dominique



Bourdin, the Latin root *consolari* suggests that soothing necessarily implies the presence of the other and a communion with them: “Consolation would be relief or comfort coming from the other, or at least experienced in their presence” (491). The prefix *cum* (“with”) added to *solari* foregrounds the relationality inherent in consolation, as noted by Catherine Haman-Dhersin (in Poulain-Gautret 241): people are generally “to find solace together” (Ignatieff 1). Michaël Foessel concurs by stating that “consolation is, through and through, an apprenticeship in otherness. First because true consolation can only be found in a relationship with the other. Even when we offer consolation to ourselves, we do so in an inner dialogue” (28).

3 In its interpersonal dimension, consolation bears relation to such notions as comfort, compassion or empathy but also differs from them. While Jürgen Pieters uses consolation and comfort indiscriminately as shown by the title of his monograph (*Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort*), Michael Ignatieff (6) and Christophe André (16) stress that comfort is transitory, partial and limited to the present moment whereas consolation has a greater scope. David James takes consolation to be less straightforward than comfort due to the former’s “acknowledgement of incompleteness” (40). While comfort seemingly offers the perspective of unmitigated improvement of one’s condition or situation, “to be consoled [...] is not merely to be comforted; it is rather to recognise, through communing with others, one’s own sense of ‘becoming in suffering’” (179). As for compassion and empathy, though they imply a sensitiveness to and consciousness of another person’s affective experience which encourages us to “suffer with” that person (Julliard 55), they do not necessarily encompass a voluntary act of alleviating pain.

4 In the contemporary era, which Emily Horton defined as an age of crisis (2014), the notion of consolation has gained cultural visibility as a response to collective suffering, even more so in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic, escalating conflicts, and impending ecological disaster. While the notion was once dismissed as a mere diversion or sugarcoating of pain imbued with religious connotations, its identification as a “critical instrument” (Foessel 12) has led to a flurry of critical publications on the topic in recent years, notably by philosopher Michaël Foessel in *Le Temps de la consolation* (2015), literary critics David James in *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (2019) and Jürgen Pieters in *Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort* (2021), essayists Anne-Dauphine Julliard in *Consolation* (2020) and Michael Ignatieff in *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times* (2021) or psychiatrist Christophe André in *Consolations : Celles que l’on reçoit et celles que l’on offre* (2022), while the *Revue française de psychanalyse* devoted its 2015 issue to the topic.

5 The current inclusion of consolation in the fields of psychological and psychoanalytical inquiry is a modern development of consolation theory, which finds its roots in the classical era. Though the rhetorical exercise of the *consolatio* shares contemporary grief memoirs’ attempt to soothe the affliction of the bereaved, their methods and underpinnings vary greatly. From Antiquity to the present day, definitions of consolation have been shaped by philosophical discourses, which influenced the constitution and transformation of a literary tradition of consolation.

## A short history of consolation



### The classical era

- 6 While the contemporary focus on consolation is associated with the rise of trauma and vulnerability studies and the aftermath of the ethical turn of the 1980s, the notion has gone through a transformative historical and philosophical journey. In Antiquity, it found a means of expression in the literary genre of the *consolatio*, a philosophical and rhetorical exercise practised by the likes of Plato, Cicero or Seneca. At that time, the art of consolation was designed to enforce the principles of stoicism and teach the moderation or regulation of passions, as Jürgen Pieters argues:

In the classical era, [...] the practice of consolation was generally defined in terms of an appeal to reason, an injunction to overcome one's emotions, the excess of which was considered blinding: in a state of distress we no longer see the real for what it is, classical consolatory writings argue. In these texts, the logic of consolation aims for a decisive change of perspective, a return to the common sense: to be comforted involves being reminded of how things actually are. (15)

- 7 The most famous examples of *consolationes* can be identified through their shared formal features as well as philosophical and pedagogical objectives. The five books of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* (*Tusculanae Disputationes*), written around 45 BC after the death of the philosopher's daughter, stage fictional conversations with friends taking place over the course of five days in order to give room for the philosopher's reasoning to develop. Seneca's *Consolations* (such as *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, *De Consolatione ad Polybium* or *De Consolatione ad Helviam Matrem*), written 45-40 BC, are addressed to real-life people such as the philosopher's own mother in an attempt to help them navigate through dark times. However, although in general *consolationes* are formally addressed to someone as part of a correspondence, they often remain monologic in spirit and read like essays on bereavement, forming a philosophical discipline (in both senses of the term), a reflection on humanity's mortal condition as well as an appeal to reason rather than emotional intelligence.

- 8 Such an approach is also characteristic of sixteenth-century consolation manuals as analysed by G.W. Pigman III in *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy* (1985), who points to the gender bias of consolation as men were supposed to suppress grief in order to maintain reason and domestic and social order: "The bereaved are likely to feel—and be made to feel—that their grief reveals their irrationality, weakness, inadequate self-control, and impiety. The major purpose of consolation is to induce the bereaved to suppress grief" (Pigman 2, qtd in Zeiger 12-13). Since emotional excesses were rejected by the Stoics, consolation was regarded as both an act of pedagogy and a necessary art of moderation.

## Christian perspectives

- 9 Boethius's work *On the Consolation of Philosophy* (*De consolazione philosophiae*), written in 523 while the philosopher was awaiting trial for alleged treason, is widely regarded as the masterpiece of the consolation genre. It has also been deemed a "telling synthesis of Platonic philosophy and Christian religion" by Jürgen Pieters (73). It is composed of conversations between the allegory of "Lady Philosophy" and the figure of the philosopher, retaining the dialogic form of the classical *consolatio*. Pieters summarises the work as follows:

Whereas at the beginning of the text, the imprisoned narrator complains bitterly of the bad fortune that he considers to have struck him unjustly, Lady Philosophy makes clear to him in a series of Socratic conversations that he should find faith in the providential love of God, who has meant his imprisonment not as a punishment but as the occasion of a necessary period of self-reflection on the path



towards true knowledge and salvation. (74)

10 In the Christian tradition, “consolation for the travails of life” (Barnes 57) is to be found in faith and in the perspective of the afterlife: “Christian believers find comfort in the unwavering certainty that what God wants is good” (Pieters 103). And yet, according to Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, the Christian tradition displaces the classical meaning of consolation by encouraging the expression of feeling rather than curbing it: “The eulogy of the deceased, the acknowledgement of the pain of loss, the expression of sympathy occupied a very limited place among Stoic consolers, who were above all concerned with condemning the excess and sterility of affliction” (92). Christian consolers on the other hand welcome emotion as long as it does not lead to despair and lack of faith.

11 In Christian Europe, the comforting belief in a higher power that rewards rightful behaviour in the afterlife shapes the definition of consolation as a spiritual projection beyond the span of human existence. However, the gradual secularisation of Western cultures in the course of the 20th century deeply transformed the definition of consolation. While it retained the expression of emotion that characterised the Christian era, it also incorporated new perspectives opened up by the modern development of psychology and psychoanalysis.

## Modern and contemporary era

12 In contemporary times, the logic of consolation has become more contested with the crumbling of both “religious faith [and] absolute belief in an unshakeable common rationality” (Pieters 16). As religion gradually lost its hold on Western societies and could no longer provide comfort for all, consolation was viewed with more suspicion or given less consideration, according to Michael Ignatieff: “Today the word has lost the meanings once rooted in religious traditions. In these times, the consolation prize is the one you don’t want to win. A culture that chases success does not devote much attention to failure, loss, or death. Consolation is for losers” (2). Though vulnerability studies strive to replace the cultural model of successful autonomy and efficiency with an emphasis on human interdependence, thus shining a new light on experiences of loss, consolation can be seen as an unsatisfactory compromise between fully recovering and nurturing the open wound.

13 In 1952, Swedish author Stig Dagerman published a short autobiographical essay entitled “Our Need for Consolation is Insatiable,” in which he reflects on his struggle against writer’s block and depression, his search for freedom and transcendence, and humanity’s quest for an “illuminating consolation”. He declares that he chases consolation “as a hunter tracking prey” and is sometimes rewarded with a token in the form of a lover or companion, words or a glimpse of freedom but because he has “no belief” and has “inherited neither a god nor any fixed point on this earth” (301), most of the time, he is beset by false consolations which can only reinforce his deep despair and desolation.

14 Modern theories of consolation tend to view it as a “betrayal of the damage” (James 1) or a “negation of the reality of pain” (Bersani in James 14), so much so that some people may—consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly—choose to keep the wound open, refusing to be comforted or consoled, thus remaining faithful to their pain (14). In Freud’s words, we “know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. [...] And actually this is how it should be.” (in James 19) This is also what Flemish philosopher Patricia de Martelaere suggests when she argues that “the work of mourning begins with the desire not to be consoled” as “we do not want to move ‘beyond’ our love for the lost one” (in Pieters 230). What seemingly emerges in



contemporary times is thus a disavowal of consolation and a sense that inconsolability or what Julian Barnes calls “disconsolation” (115) should sometimes prevail.

## “The Unconsoled”: Disconsolation and Inconsolability

15 Contemporary theorists repeatedly insist that, even when pain is temporarily alleviated, consolation brings neither reparation nor full recovery or healing. In the words of Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, “consolation does not in itself amount to a cure: it does not claim to cancel the pain or the lack” (26). On the contrary, it “only brings into greater focus the wound it targets, more often exposing than dispelling the desolation it promises to offset” so that accepting solace “means conceding what cannot be repaired” (James 1).

16 As no substitute can replace what has been lost or broken, individuals tend to remain inconsolable and/or form part of the unconsoled. Michaël Foessel identifies a clear difference between these two words:

the unconsoled [...] is not the inconsolable who refuses to admit loss and categorically rejects all forms of ‘substitutes’ offered to him or her. [...] To be and to want to be unconsoled designates an attitude that is neither passive nor regressive. It consists in imagining consolations in the knowledge that they will never be definitive, since a return to the past, beyond the loss, is impracticable. (23-24)

17 In Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*, the pianist Ryder is hoping that, through his music, he might be able to mend the flawed relationship between his parents, but, in the writer’s own words, he “can never quite fulfil what he wishes to fulfil with his music. It will never mend things” (in Guignery, *Novelists* 57). In a different context, Ben Okri recalls the time when, at the age of seven, he was forced to leave England and return to Nigeria, and notes: “I said goodbye to my childhood and was disconsolate for many years. One does not recover from disconsolation.”

18 The negative affixation in “unconsoled” is worth exploring as, according to the linguist Laurence R. Horn, the prefix *-un* “tends to develop a contrary rather than merely contradictory interpretation” (Horn 332). The contradictory interpretation would gloss “unconsoled” as “not consoled” (which sounds relatively neutral) while the contrary interpretation goes further by seeing “unconsoled” as the opposite of “consoled,” with a pejorative or derogatory connotation, thus meaning devastated, crushed or still grieving after a loss. One is reminded here of Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholy in his 1915 essay (first published in 1917), where melancholy would qualify the “*inability* to let go of a lost object” (Hutton in Homans 154). To quote Michaël Foessel, while “the consoler [...] admits that there has been a loss, but requalifies it to make it become the opportunity for a new beginning,” the melancholy person refuses that “credence in the future” (34). Freud’s clear-cut dichotomy between mourning and melancholy has since been challenged by modern and contemporary theorists who rehabilitated the refusal or inability to put an end to the mourning process and be consoled. The theory of the “continuing bond” thus postulates that “rather than emphasizing letting go, the emphasis should be on negotiating and renegotiating the meaning of the loss over time” (Klass et al. 19). The literature of consolation accompanies those philosophical and psychological developments by navigating the creative possibilities of consolation, disconsolation or the middle path of continuing bonds with what has been lost. As the closing lines of



Elizabeth Bishop's famous villanelle "One Art" suggest, "the art of losing's not too hard to master" (40).

## Consolation in contemporary literature

### A Literature of Dis/Consolation

19 A long-standing kinship exists between consolation and literature. It finds different means of expression in various genres, from the poetic cadences of the elegy to the "therapeutic quality" of the grief memoir (Fowler 527). In her philosophical essay that doubles as grief memoir, *Time Lived, Without its Flow* (2012), the British poet and philosopher Denise Riley voices her desire to identify a "literature of consolation" (112), a corpus of poetical, fictional and autobiographical works that could help the afflicted by giving them a sense of community. In the literary world, consolation can stem from the very act of publishing or performing a work, which forges a bond between the writer/performer and the reader/spectator. In a conversation with Lisa Baraitser, Riley remarks that "there can be consolation in finding that a description of some feeling that you took to be unhappily unique to you is described by other people; that comes as a great relief" (4). David James, for his part, points to the paradox that one may locate consolation "in works that seem all about inconsolability" (5), "texts that refuse to console us" (6), which he calls "disconsolate art" (6). Such a discrepant experience can be found in texts like Julian Barnes's memoir on mortality *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008) or the third section of *Levels of Life* (2013) about his mourning of his wife, which do not offer any consolation in the face of death and grief, and yet the reader may find solace in the recognition of a shared condition (bringing one back to the relationality suggested by the prefix *cum* in the etymology of the term "consolation").

20 Nevertheless, while the clinical and non-clinical practice of bibliotherapy puts forward the therapeutic value of the pleasure of reading (Pieters 3-5), literary critics tend to dismiss that palliative and pacifying function or at least expose the limitations of literature's consolatory powers, which may amount to no more than escapism and diversion from the depth of pain. Thus, when Caribbean poet Derek Walcott reflects on the African diaspora's origins in the slave trade, he turns to classical myths and heroes to try and make sense of this history of loss and alienation but, as he writes in the poem "Sea Grapes" (1976), "The classics can console. But not enough" (297). Although, in his poetry, Walcott regularly goes back to Homer and foregrounds his belief in the combination of traditions, he also realises that the Western classics cannot account for all experiences. If the act of reading can sometimes alleviate the solipsism of grief, the artist/author can also seek consolation in creating and then sharing a body of work.

### Elegy and the modern genres of consolation

21 In poetry, consolation has long been a crucial concern of the elegy in all its forms (traditional and modern, poetic and narrative). The traditional elegy (such as John Milton's "Lycidas" or Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam") is best defined as a "poem of mortal loss and consolation" (Sacks 3), whose goal is to heal the wounds of grief and imitate the mourning process through poetic artistry and musicality. In *The Counter-Memorial Impulse in Twentieth-Century English Fiction*, Sarah Henstra argues that "these views of elegy as a curative, cathartic medium hinge on a reading of the genre as



*performative*: like a funerary oration or eulogy, the elegy is meant to enact a ritual of mourning through which loss is contemplated, accepted, and eventually overcome” (113). Death or mourning rituals were traditionally deemed to provide a comforting and collective structure to the experience of individual hardship by virtue of its “symbolic efficacy”: “Its underlying purpose is to reassure [...] through its structuring and soothing power” (Thomas 7). However, in the course of the 20th century, the crumbling of religious belief in Western societies also diminished the symbolic power of rituals (15).

- 22 This cultural and social evolution led to the emergence of the modern elegy (also named “anti-elegy” by Clifton Spargo), a melancholic counterpart of the elegy which strives “not to achieve but to resist consolation, [...] not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (Ramazani xi). This shift from elegy to anti (or modern) elegy and redefinition of its purpose was brought on by contextual and historical reasons, according to Jahan Ramazani:

The genre [of the modern elegy] develops by feeding off a multitude of new deaths, including the body of its own traditions. Intruding into modern laments for war victims, public figures, relatives and friends are many extraneous deaths—the death of mourning ritual, of God, of traditional consolation, of recuperative elegy, of the sanctity of the dead, of ‘healthy’ mourning. (6)

- 23 In her elegy for her dead son, entitled “A Part Song,” Denise Riley both pays tribute to and shows the limits of traditional elegies by acknowledging her own poem’s attempt to become a “resurrection song” (13), all the while considering its necessary faultiness and discordant “shrilling” (6), which turns it into a “note of dread” (7) that can never be “got right” (13). By so doing, the poet expresses scepticism in the consolatory powers of musicality and the poem’s formal features. As Clifton Spargo argues in “The Contemporary Anti-Elegy,” anti-elegy is best described as “a symptom of twentieth-century modernity, perceiving the elegy’s self-reflexive doubts about the efficacy of literary conventions for redeeming loss” (415).

- 24 As the belief in poetry’s ritual dimension and consolatory powers waned in the course of the 20th century, the elegy started exceeding its generic bounds and found new means of expression in narrative form (both in fiction and life-writing) and art. This is what John Vickery refers to as the “prose elegy,” also described as “narrative elegy” by Jean-Michel Ganteau. According to Vickery, what characterises the modern prose elegy in novels by Virginia Woolf, Malcolm Lowry, William Faulkner or John Updike in comparison with the traditional poetic elegy is the “diminution of elegiac lament” (3), the diversification of modes of confronting loss and the increasing doubts over the efficacy of traditional forms of religious, moral, societal and philosophical authority to afford solace. Shelley’s protracted lamentation for Keats in “Adonais” thus gives way to more subdued and muted forms that interrogate the different ways of possibly achieving consolation. For example, in the wake of her son’s death, Denise Riley wrote and published both an essay/grief memoir (*Time Lived, Without its Flow*, 2012) and a poetry collection (*Say Something Back*, 2016). This “category-defying” body of work suggests that her grief spilled over generic bounds, requiring complementary means of expression (Lecomte).

- 25 Experimental forms of life-writing also testify to the quest for new ways of confronting grief and coping with the pain of loss. In Joan Wickersham’s *The Suicide Index: Putting My Father’s Death in Order* (2008) and Rebecca Lindenberg’s *Love, an Index* (2012), the systematic form of the index is deployed as an “incredibly comforting” means to try and restore some pattern to one’s life and memories after the shattering experience of the death of a loved one (Wickersham in Brooks). B.S. Johnson’s novel-in-a-box *The Unfortunates* (1969), a chaotic tribute to the memory of a friend who died of





cancer, composed of twenty-seven unbound sections that can be shuffled and read in a random order, and Ann Carson's *Nox* (2010), an elegy for the author's brother in the form of a 25-metre-long concertinaed scroll of paper contained in a box, reflect the writers' attempts at bringing together memories and disparate facts about the deceased in order to make sense of their lives and deaths and, possibly, come to terms with loss, all the while acknowledging the impossibility of fully piecing together a coherent story.

- 26 In *Discrepant Solace*, David James notes that if "we end up feeling consoled after engaging with a striking representation of loss," the merit may lie in the formal and linguistic performances of the text (15). However, theorists have investigated the ethical limits of consolation in literature, wondering whether it is acceptable, desirable or even possible to seek release from suffering via formal features and a well-crafted account of grief. James suggests that this aestheticisation might betray the rawness of the experience itself and asks whether it is ethical to take pleasure in the representation or expression of grief and suffering. He considers consolation "discrepant" in contemporary writing because of "the restive interplay between the solace afforded rhetorically or structurally by a text and the affective repercussions of its wrenching outcomes" (10). Such a critical view of "structural solace" (13) appears in modern and contemporary writing, borrowing some of its features from anti-elegiac scepticism. The ethical concerns relating to the process and expression of consolation not only apply to private grief but also extend to the public realm when desolation impacts the individual and the group, the human and the non-human.

## Private/public consolation

- 27 Consolation seems to unfold in the in-between on many levels: caught between the "before" and "after," between loss and recovery, it interrogates the interplay between the individual and the community, the private and the public sphere.

## Spatialising consolation: the pastoral elegy and the environment

- 28 A striking example of the "explosion of boundaries between intimate and public" (Föessel 9) is the pastoral elegy and its modern variations, which imply a spatialisation of dis/consolation. The traditional elegy was often set in a pastoral world that provided a natural counterpoint to the poet's emotion, "a concrete, palpable world, a world in which the elegist can place diffuse, intangible feelings of grief and thereby win his release from suffering" (Zetzel Lambert xiii). According to Iain Twiddy,

The occasion of pastoral elegy is death, naturally enough, and so in using this form to mourn, the poet comes to a reconciliation with natural forces. The pastoral elegy's standard progression is that the poet accepts death as natural, and achieves a renewal of the life-instinct, in line with the seasonal pattern of death and rebirth.  
(4)

- 29 Inclusion of the pastoral elegiac into contemporary fiction can lead to sharp contrasts between desolate or barren cityscapes and consolatory fertile landscapes. In *The Child in Time* (1987) for example, Ian McEwan imagines pockets of rural and pastoral regeneration in the midst of a London hellscape of disappearance and loss.

However, as the modern elegy started gaining prominence in the 20th century, the pastoral elegy was also reconfigured by new ecological anxieties, starting with the mass



destruction of combat zones in World War One, which led to the development of the anti-pastoral elegy:

Those elements of the pastoral elegy most resonantly embodying a redemptive drama appear to have been as definitely obliterated by the war as were the bodies of millions of mortally wounded combatants. [...] The landscape of the war was barely a *landscape* in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather a gigantic charnel house. (Gilbert 183, 184)

31 While nature mirrors the poet's loss in the pastoral elegy, in the "ecological lament, we fear that we will go on living, while the environment disappears around us" (Morton 186), thus suspending the possibility of consolation. The irruption of the anti-pastoral elegiac runs through contemporary fiction as well as poetry and provides a social commentary on private, national or global crises. For example, in Graham Swift's *Wish You Were Here* (2011), which is partly set in Devon, the rural landscape disappears behind the apocalyptic smoke of cattle-burning pyres. The absence of personal consolation after the death of the protagonist's brother in Iraq is doubled by a more general sense of inconsolability and national crisis as the mad-cow and foot-and-mouth diseases contribute to the "unmaking of the landscape" (Tollance). As the ecological crisis has developed, authors have been exploring new ways of "mourning beyond the human" (Cunsolo and Landman 2), in order to grieve for ecological losses and form a "more-than-human" community to look for consolation and develop a sense of ecological responsibility, as a spur for action.

32 Far from simply remaining a philosophical object of reflection, consolation has also gained a transdisciplinary dimension in the 21st century. Combining psychological and spatial studies, in the field of emotional-affective geography, attention has recently been paid to "places that have or take on meaning in relation to the dead" (Maddrell in Jedan et al. 49), which have been variously called "deathscapes" (Maddrell and Sidaway) or "consolationscapes" (Jedan et al.). Christoph Jedan, Avril Maddrell and Eric Venbrux perceive "maps of grief-consolation [which] should not be seen as static but rather as processual" (Maddrell in Jedan et al. 51) in "sites of comfort and ongoing attachment" (1). The mapping out of concrete places that document the process of mourning holds both private and public significance. While cemeteries and war memorials can be considered as officially and culturally invested with ritual powers of commemoration, other spaces can be given personal significance.

## The politics and the limits of consolation

33 Consolatory literary works do not only address individual grief or loss but also collective ones, especially when countries or governments refuse to acknowledge or enquire into violent events or injustices. In the case of politically motivated massacres where people disappear and are never seen again, or are not given decent burials, the inability to perform traditional funeral rites makes healing and consolation impossible for the bereaved. This is particularly true in societies, such as that of the Ndebele people in Southern Africa, where the presence of a corpse "provides the survivors with the opportunity to send the dead to the world of their ancestors" and funeral rites ensure that the spirit of the dead is not left wandering in limbo (Tarusarira in Jedan et al. 155). The lack of any proper burial of the dead and the forbidding of their mourning that was imposed by President Robert Mugabe and his party after the Gukurahundi genocide of the Ndebele people between 1983 and 1987 is one example among many of the desecration of cultural systems which entailed a denial of healing and consolation.



Literature may however constitute a place of consolation when public or legal processes fail to provide one. NoViolet Bulawayo's *Glory* (2022), a political allegory in which all the characters are animals, testifies to the heinous violence that was unleashed during Zimbabwe's post-independence era but also provides spaces to mourn the dead, be it through the day of remembrance for the Disappeared, the Wall of the Dead where red butterflies are painted, followed by the names of murdered people, or the stories of the voiceless victims that are told and written down to make sure they are "never altered, [...] never erased, never forgotten" (373).

34 Some contemporary literary works interrogate whether any consolation can be found in such public procedures as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, offers of reparations (which could be seen as the legal side of consolation), official apologies, commemorations, monuments, or other forms that may seem to prescribe an erasure of wounds and a neutralisation of dissent. On the first page of Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), the Malaysian narrator, who was a prisoner in a Japanese internment camp during occupation and whose sister died there, recalls that the Japanese gardener she became acquainted with after the war "did not apologise for what his countrymen had done to [her] sister and [her]" and adds: "What words would have healed my pain, returned my sister to me? None. And he understood that" (1). When Nigerian writer Ben Okri was asked "Can apologies to ex-colonies bring solace?" he answered: "If you put a bullet through someone's mother's head and then apologise, what is the point? We have to go far beyond the symbol." He feared indeed that once you have apologised, "you do not have to pass on the truth to future generations" (in Guignery, *Conversations* 169). Such misgivings were shared by Antje Krog in her non-fictional prose work, *Country of My Skull* (1998) and by Gillian Slovo in her novel *Red Dust* (2000), books about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, a body of restorative justice meant to help heal the country and bring about a reconciliation of its people. Both writers (as well as many commentators of cases of transitional justice worldwide) expressed reservations about the success of such commissions whose aim, as needs to be stressed, was not to offer consolation, catharsis or therapy but to establish forensic truth about what had happened and to aim for a political process of reconciliation. In *Theorizing Post-Conflict Reconciliation: Agonism, Restitution and Despair* (2012), Alexander Keller Hirsch points to the risk that transitional justice, in its desire for pacifying settlement, may "unwittingly perpetuate the very injustices they aim to suture. In some cases, an injunction to 'move on', to leave the painful past behind in the name of a conciliatory future, is too quickly prescribed, resulting in the repression rather than release of the traumatic event" (16-17). Keller Hirsch and the contributors to the volume therefore explore the value of agonistic critique, *dissensus* and contestation that can allow dissonant narratives to emerge. In contemporary writings dealing with the aftermath of colonisation, decolonisation and violent conflicts, the words "consolation" and "solace" often seem inadequate and inappropriate while such terms as reconciliation, reparation, apology or redress are more commonly used even if they too are viewed with suspicion.

35 Whether focusing on private or public grief, the contributions to this dossier interrogate the contours of consolation and the possibility for art to help dissipate sorrow, by considering forms of consolation in contemporary literature from Ireland, Britain, Nigeria, South Africa, Sri Lanka and the United States. The first three articles examine how, in drama and fiction, characters may cope with depression and grief, and how their struggle is reflected in the very form of the literary works under study. They also explore the relationship between consolation and its counterpart which is variously called inconsolability, disconsolation or inconsolation.

Vicky Angelaki adopts an ecocritical and ecofeminist perspective to examine the



performance and performativity of consolation in Irish playwright Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and its 2023 production, directed by Carrie Cracknell, which brings to the fore the discomfort, grief and inconsolability of the eponymous bereaved character, at a time when ecological imperatives seem to renew the play's topicality. By first focusing on the way natural environments were staged in several productions of the play, Angelaki situates *Portia Coughlan* in the context of the tradition of the elegiac pastoral, pointing to the ways in which consolation may be offered or denied in, by and through the landscape. Portia's profound inconsolability after the death of her brother finds an echo in nature whose desolation and devastation reflect her own all-encompassing grief, thereby pointing to the interconnectedness of the human and the non-human. In its 2023 production more specifically, *Portia Coughlan* resonates with the current anxiety at the climate crisis and encourages spectators to "ask how some consolation is to be found in non-human ecosystems when human ones fail to provide it".

37 Diane Gagneret explores Jenny Diski's tale of depression and grief in her sixth novel *Monkey's Uncle* (1994) as an example of her "fictions of discomfort".<sup>2</sup> Gagneret purports to identify the "subversive dynamics at play in stories of desolation," which challenge the very concept of consolation, thus reshaping any simplistic dichotomy between consolation and inconsolability both in the private and the public spheres. In the novel, rituals of mourning are rejected rather than embraced, as they seem to reopen the wounds of loss rather than alleviate their pain, leading Gagneret to note that the narrative eschews conventional expressions of loss and consolation. Gagneret also comments on the protagonist's political grief at the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of a social model, which are both felt and expressed more keenly than private catastrophes. The art of dis/consolation in Diski's work thus "exposes the cracks in commonly accepted categories" and embraces transience and loss of bearings as unlikely sources of comfort.

38 In his article, Cédric Courtois reflects on the fictional representation and literary form of grief after the death of a loved one by suicide in the works of South Africa-based Nigerian author Yewande Omotoso (*An Unusual Grief*, 2022) and British-Nigerian writer Onyi Nwabine (*Someday, Maybe* 2022), and encourages the reader to question the "western-centred approach to grief, whereby the living would be separated from the dead". Arguing that the "untidiness of grief" (Nwabine's words) finds an expression in the language and form of the novels, he analyses fragmentation as a means of conveying vulnerability on the page and suggests that the metaphorisation of grief is a form of indirect expression that could be considered as an "attempt at putting in place a form of consoling process". Drawing attention to the physicality of consolation (as an outwards-looking process) and of the expression of emotions (with a focus on the role played by tears in in/consolation), he notes that the temporality of consolation (turned towards the future) clashes with that of melancholy and inconsolation. Questioning the possibility of reaching any sense of closure as well as the binary separation between consolation and inconsolation, Courtois argues that the two novels portray the bereaved on their way to acceptance.

39 The next two articles more specifically focus on the combination of private and public grief and interrogate the possibility of achieving consolation not only for the individual but also for the community.

40 Judith Misrahi-Barak turns to Michael Ondaatje's 2000 novel *Anil's Ghost* which addresses the painful topic of the exhumation and identification of bones in the context of the civil war in Sri Lanka. She argues that although some critics found fault with Ondaatje's meandering narrative, it is precisely the process of "drifting" which can help the main protagonist (a forensic anthropologist returning to her native island to



investigate the mass killings) and the bereaved community to come to terms with the traumatic past and find some form of solace in social bonding. Misrahi-Barak analyses how the text formally generates a space for consolation through detours in space and time, analepses and intertextual resonances, but also through connections between characters, countries and cultures, whose aim is to bring the community of the living together. The dynamics of drifting and “textual kinetics” enables the forensic anthropologist to re-engage with the island and create a space of “textual togetherness and kinship” that may provide consolation both for herself and for the families of the victims.

41 Frank Miroux tests the limits of western-centred theories of consolation, resilience and healing in his examination of Robert Arthur Alexie’s novel *Porcupines and China Dolls* (2002), which exposes the legacy of the Canadian Indian Residential School system. Stating that “Alexie’s narrative seems to resist consolation,” Miroux seeks to veer away from the Biblical connotations of consolation. Drawing from his analysis of the inexpressibility of trauma and of escapist attempts at reaching temporary comfort, he argues that consolation appears first as a mirage, an impossible process and an unreachable state, putting the motif of the “open wound” at the heart of the narrative. And yet, the link that Miroux identifies between consolation and survivance suggests that the narrative does not subscribe to any paradigm of victimhood. Though the novel highlights the refusal of closure and leaves room for the voicing of rage and sorrow, a fraught path to consolation may be found via the use of myth and the sharing of stories, which contribute to the “resurfacing of a tribal identity colonisation had obliterated,” a sense of togetherness and connection with ancestors.

42 As it explores and questions clearly established dichotomies between consolation and disconsolation, this collection of articles builds on the renewal of scholarly interest in the topic. The papers investigate the aesthetic, ethical and political dimensions of the art of dis/consolation both in narrative and performance, in public and private spaces, highlighting its critical potential and emotional implications in the contemporary era.

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## Notes

- 1 All translations from French texts in this introduction are ours.
- 2 The expression is inspired by the title of Jürgen Pieters's work *Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort*.

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## Pour citer cet article

### Référence électronique

Vanessa GUIGNERY et Héroïse LECOMTE, « Introduction: The Art of Dis/Consolation », *e-Rea* [En ligne], 22.1 | 2024, mis en ligne le 15 décembre 2024, consulté le 19 décembre 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/18838> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/12xgp>

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## Auteurs

### Vanessa GUIGNERY

Vanessa Guignery is Professor of contemporary British and Postcolonial Literature at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon. Her research interests include the poetics of voice and silence, generic transformations, fragmentation and genetic criticism. She is the author of monographs on Julian Barnes (including *Julian Barnes from the Margins: Exploring the Writer's Archives*, 2020), B.S. Johnson (2009), Ben Okri (2012) and Jonathan Coe (2015), and the editor or co-editor of fifteen collections of essays on contemporary British and postcolonial literature, and of several volumes of interviews with writers.

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**Héloïse LECOMTE**

Héloïse Lecomte completed her PhD in 2021 and teaches at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon. Her research and publications focus on the poetics and politics of mourning in contemporary British and Irish fiction and life-writing and their interactions with the poetic elegy or visual arts. Together with Alice Borrego, Esther Peeren and Gero Gutzzeit, she has been spearheading the transdisciplinary seminar “Invisible Lives Silent Voices” since 2021.

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