

Fragments of a Consolatory Discourse: Literature and the Fiction of Comfort¹

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Aber ein Wesen, welches über einen so natürlichen Vorgang wie den des Todes anderer Organismen untröstlich sein kann, ist in ganz anderer Weise mit der Trostbedürftigkeit bis an den Grenzwert der Untröstlichkeit ausgestattet.

Hans Blumenberg²

The main title of this essay will no doubt to a great extent be self-explanatory. As readers of this journal will have guessed, the reference is to *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Roland Barthes' famous 1977 book on what Richard Howard in his translation of 1978 has called 'a lover's discourse': the book of his of which Barthes prophesied (wrongly, as it turned out) that it would become the most read of his works and the one that would be forgotten the soonest.³ In this contribution, I won't be talking about the discourse of lovers, but about another cultural mode of speech, another *doxa* if you want, one of which I think it is possible to say that, in a number of important ways, it functions on the basis of principles that seem quite opposite to those underlying the *discours amoureux* as Barthes conceived of it, even though it is no doubt equally fragmented. The discourse or mode of speech that I will be dealing with is the discourse of what in English is called 'comfort', 'consolation', 'solace', or even 'consolement'. The language of Shakespeare seems to have at least four different, though in the latter three cases etymologically related, words for the type of speech that I will be talking about: the language that we use whenever we want to offer consolation to somebody who we think will benefit from the soothing effect ideally resulting from that language and from the specific mode of address that accompanies it – 'lenient of grief and anxious thought', as Milton puts it in a passage from *Samson Agonistes* that deals with the function and the effect of consolatory writings;⁴ it is the sort of language that we ourselves want to hear when we are in need of what

Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language* described as ‘the alleviation of misery’ – his definition of what consolation is, a ‘partial remedy’ as he hastens to add;⁵ it is the language whose rare occurrence and unique success the Scottish poet Don Paterson, in a beautiful poem that is entitled ‘Solace’ (and that is, in fact, a translation of poem number seventeen of the second half of Rilke’s *Sonette an Orpheus*), has compared to ‘rare, superb fruits that you stumble upon / in the trampled meadow of your loss’.⁶ Paterson’s wonderful image reflects on the fact that many are those who want to offer consolation to friends or strangers, but very few those who are really successful, while it also says something about the accidental nature of comfort – often, it is there when one least expects it.

To be clear, my plan is not simply to try and imitate that quite inimitable project of Barthes’ *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, although I have drawn an amount of inspiration from it that goes well beyond the phrasing of my title. What I will be presenting in this essay comes out of the preparations of a book-project that I have been working on for some time now and that in what, nevertheless, still seem to be the early stages of the book’s inception I would describe as a series of chapters in the interlocking histories of the Western concepts of ‘literature’ and of ‘consolation’. What I’m aiming for in that book-in-(very-slow)-progress is a double *Begriffsgeschichte*: a conceptual history of consolation and one of literature. More precisely (because describing it as such makes it sound like an impossibly vast undertaking), I want to focus on specific moments in which the historical trajectories of those two concepts intersect. I’m interested in how those moments of intersection teach us something about the development of the two concepts, considered in isolation: the moments and the texts that I want to focus on teach us something about what literature is and can do, and they are also meant to teach us something about what consolation is and can do – or, rather, what literature and consolation *were* and what they *could* do.

Let me give one immediate example of such a moment of intersection, one which might as well become the starting point of the book. In the past few years, it has struck me on several occasions that, both in reviews of books and in everyday conversations with both specialist and ‘amateur’ readers, the suggestion that a book can and does offer consolation occurs with surprising and increasing regularity. More often than not, the suggestion serves not just as a signal of the specific effect that books can have on readers and on reviewers, but also as a signal of the quality of these books. Just to give one recent example: in a recent survey article on ‘the rise of the medical humanities’,⁷ Belinda

Jack, in arguing for what she sees as a 'less obvious role' for poetry to play in the disciplinary field, refers to the power of poems to 'console, teach, amuse, enlighten, mimic, disconcert and so much more'. What strikes me in Jack's list of poetry's tasks is not so much the presence of that first verb, but the fact that it is put there first, as the indication of poetry's prime goal, so to speak, one that comes before the double Horatian imperative of teaching and amusement, of *docere* and *delectare*, the classical mixture of what is useful with what is pleasant. In the same paragraph, Jack further elaborates on what she sees as the specific consolatory function of poems. She does so primarily (and not entirely unexpectedly) by referring to the public use of poems at funeral services, where they serve as individual and collective occasions for all of those present, where, in Jack's words, '[e]ach of us can ponder what the poem conjures for us, bringing something felt into clearer and thus more comforting focus. Often the poem will be one that allows us to reconsider the absolute nature of death.' In other words: the comfort that the poem brings resides in the fact ('thus' being the signal of that specific causality) that the poem's language and formal make-up allows us to see and understand more clearly something that we have been knowing and feeling all along (the absolute and inevitable nature of mortality), something that marks us as individuals, but which at the same time binds us together, collectively. The poet Don Paterson, to whom I referred earlier, in his preface to the *Picador Book of Funeral Poems* that he edited, describes the consolation provided by this type of poems in strikingly similar terms and he also singles out the specific consolatory function of some poems as their prime goal. This is how he puts it: 'In our deepest grief we turn instinctively to poetry – to comfort and solace us, or to reflect our grief, give it proper public expression, or help us feel less alone in our experience of it. These poems, drawn from many different ages and cultures, remind us that the experience of parting is a timelessly human one: however lonely the loss of someone close might leave us, our mourning is also something that deeply unites us.'⁸

In the international realm of literary criticism, the recurrence of the consolatory function of literary writings can also be related to the return of the idea of 'bibliotherapy' – a topic that I am sure Barthes would have had much to say about.⁹ The notion is of course a polysemous one, but I want to use it here in the specific sense of the reading practice or experience that is exemplified (and prescribed) in Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin's *The Novel Cure*, a book that has now been translated into several international languages.¹⁰ In the brief preface

to their book, one and a half pages long, in which the authors try to explain that the ‘cure’ of the book’s title is obviously not a real medicinal remedy,¹¹ the word ‘consolation’ is also invoked – not surprisingly, of course. It is mentioned in a paragraph in which Berthoud and Elderkin describe the effects of the literary prescriptions that the book as a whole lists: ‘Whatever your ailment’, they assure us, in the parlance of real doctors, ‘our prescriptions are simple: a novel (or two), to be read at regular intervals. Some treatments will lead to a complete cure. Others will simply offer solace, showing you that you are not alone. All will offer the temporary relief of your symptoms due to the power of literature to distract and transport.’¹² The logic of the passage is quite straightforward: the fact that literature ‘simply’ provides comfort and the sort of comfort that it provides are coupled to its power ‘to distract and transport’ us, not to confront us with an absolute and threatening reality. Judging by several of the literary prescriptions that *The Novel Cure* offers, it would not be a farfetched idea to suggest that the literary solace that Berthoud and Elderkin are thinking of can be seen as a form of escapism, one which, however, procures the same effect as the funeral poems that both Belinda Jack and Don Paterson write about – the solace is a shared one, it results in the comforting thought ‘that you are not alone’.

The function of objects of art to console is also conspicuously present in *Art as Therapy* by John Armstrong and Alain de Botton, in the context of whose School of Thought the editors of *The Novel Cure* give actual sessions in bibliotherapy. In their introduction to the co-authored book, Armstrong and De Botton write: ‘This book proposes that art (a category that includes works of design, architecture and craft) is a therapeutic medium that can help guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves.’¹³ What I’m interested in, in the book that I hope to be able to finish one day, are questions that seem of lesser concern to the authors of *Art as Therapy* and *The Novel Cure* and that probe issues that seem to be taken as self-evident by them: what is it, exactly, that we mean if we say – as they do, like many other readers, reviewers, authors and critics nowadays – that art consoles? What is this consolation by a work of art or by a fictional character? How is that we allow ourselves to be comforted by fictional characters when in real life we find it hard to be consoled by the words and deeds of those surrounding us? In what does this fictional consolation consist precisely and what is it exactly in these works that consoles us? Does the beauty of the work of art, its formal shape, have anything to do with this, and if so, to what extent and on the basis of

which textual and affective mechanisms? How, to come back to the sentence that I just quoted from Armstrong and De Botton, is a consoled person a better version of himself, especially a person who allows him- or herself to be consoled by a work of art?

In the book that I'm trying to begin to write I will also be interested in how our contemporary ideas on the consolatory function of art relate to age-old discussions about the therapeutic powers of literature (or lack thereof) such as can be found in Plato's *Republic*, where the critique of literature is carried out, at several points in the dialogue, by means of a comparison with the actual healing powers of medicine.¹⁴ The *technè* of medicine is one that really heals, whereas the art of poetry only leads to confusion, to the opposite of real, true and valuable knowledge. A similar critique of literature can be derived from the famous opening scene of Boethius *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, where it is immediately made clear that in contrast to Philosophy, the muses of poetry do not provide us with consolation, or at least not with true consolation: rather than allow us to become better versions of ourselves, the muses' work results in loss of the self.¹⁵ Fortunately, the history of the intersections of literature and consolation also provides arguments in favour of the comfort of fiction, as in Petrarch's *Invective contra medicum*, where the opposite position is argued for and where a specific form of writing (we could call it literature, even though Petrarch's apology for poetry is targeted towards a slightly different group of texts) is credited with qualities of a higher form of therapy than the merely physical one.¹⁶ The history of literature, from Dante on, provides numerous examples of this idea, and in the book I intend to discuss some of these examples, to begin with Dante, and his portrayal of Virgil in the *Inferno* as 'il mio conforto', the bringer of consolation.¹⁷

The project that I have in mind is one in which I want to describe the cultural and hence, also, the historical nature of what at first sight seems to be a quite natural and maybe even universal human feeling, emotional value or affective status, much in the same way that the 'feeling' that Barthes wrote about in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* seems to lack a history: the deep value that we attach to the human (and humane) power of consoling people, the cherished feeling of being consoled, the heartfelt need that we can have of being comforted, of wanting to be consoled, of feeling the need (if not always having the talent) to give comfort to others. As an aside, I just labelled this specific emotional complex as a typically human one: the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg, in what I consider one of the most marvellous recent analyses of the subject, argues that the need for comfort but also the fact

that it is hard, even almost impossible for us to be consoled (*Trostbedürfnis und Untröstlichkeit des Menschen* is the German title of his essay: ‘the need for consolation and the inconsolability of mankind’) is a constitutive category of mankind.¹⁸ In this, Blumenberg follows Georg Simmel, who in a fragment from his *Nachlass* that Blumenberg singles out suggests that to be human *is* to be in need of comfort. ‘Man’, Simmel writes, ‘is a living being on the outlook for consolation’,¹⁹ and this distinguishes human beings from animals: animals look for help, Simmel argues, and to ask for help is something quite different from being in need of consolation. Indeed, Simmel argues, we have invented the category of consolation because as human beings we are confronted throughout our physical existence with facts of life (such as the awareness of our mortality) which leave us helpless. ‘In the end’, Simmel writes, ‘man cannot be helped, and that is why he invented the wonderful category of consolation – an experience that not only derives from the words that people utter to that specific effect, but also from a myriad of worldly phenomena.’²⁰ Simmel’s implicit conviction that animals cannot be consoled, only helped, is not completely disproven, I would say, by Franz de Waal’s conviction (expressed in his best-selling book *The Age of Empathy*) that chimpanzees, unlike ‘ordinary’ monkeys, have distinct ways of consoling each other – the distinction, according to De Waal, has to do with the fact that the latter (monkeys) are characterized by ‘an inability to adopt another’s point of view’.²¹ While I’m sure De Waal’s conclusion says something about the nature of monkeys, for me, more importantly, it also says something about the nature of modern ideas of consolation – the precondition of which is, exactly, that ability to empathize.

Before I move on to explain what reading Roland Barthes added to my preliminary research on consolation, let me first, briefly, and also by way of an introduction to what will follow, give you a rough outline of two conceptual axes that will come to organize the ever-growing assembly of consolatory materials that I have so far in several notebooks and computer-files. First, there is a distinct historical focus to what I plan to write, decisively more than is the case in Barthes’ *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*. True, there are moments in his book when Barthes acknowledges historical determinations in and differences between specific discursive regions of the romantic discourse. This is, for instance the case when at the very beginning of the book he talks about the fact that ‘historically’,²² the lover who deplors ‘the absence’ of the object of his love is, Barthes claims, ‘miraculously feminized’.²³ Yet, the book as a whole does not reflect to a large extent upon how our ideas of love, and

the speech in which we convey these ideas, both to ourselves and to the other whom we love, are the products of a specific set of historical developments. In the reflections on the language of consolation that I am preparing, there will definitely be more history, so to speak, because I am convinced that without a proper understanding of the historical ramifications of the discourse of consolation, it is very hard to begin the inquiry that interests me. Without wanting to elaborate too much on this, and, simultaneously, at the risk of generalizing too much, a proper understanding of what it is that we define as comfort, consolation or solace, will have to deal with the clear historical differences between what for the present purpose I will call pre-modern and modern ideas and economies of consolation. The immediate difference between the two becomes clear when as modern readers we come across a classical letter of consolation, such as the one that Plutarch wrote to console his wife upon the loss of one of their daughters. Consolation, here like in other examples from Cicero or Seneca, is primarily a matter of the mind, not the heart: the consolatory logic is one that is sustained and driven by rational argument, by an appeal to the common sense that claims that one should not be sad about the death of a child, but rejoice in the time that one knew this child and that one could share one's life with it. 'The fact that [the child] has gone to a place of no pain', Plutarch writes, 'ought not to be a source of pain for us. Why should she cause us to suffer, if there is nothing that can now cause her pain?'²⁴ I don't even want to imagine what the effect would be if we quoted a line like this one in a letter of consolation to friends who went through a similar terrible ordeal – one which is obviously more uncommon in our days than in Plutarch's, but which nevertheless occurs more often than we imagine. Bardamu, the narrator of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* refers to Montaigne who, in writing a consolatory letter to his wife in similar circumstances, makes use of and refers to Plutarch's example. In paraphrasing the letter, Céline has Bardamu parody Montaigne's consolatory argument ('Ah, my dear wife, don't eat your heart out! Cheer up! ... Everything will turn out all right! ... It always does...'), in a way that makes clear that the arguments of comfort that classical *consolationes* contain no longer function properly in the modern age.²⁵ To see that, one could also compare Plutarch's and Montaigne's letters to Mallarmé's 'Notes pour un tombeau d'Anatole', a text written in 1879 at the occasion of the death of his eight-year-old son.²⁶

I'm aware of the fact that putting things as schematically as this begs the question when the modern age of comfort begins. Still, when I say that there are differences between pre-modern and modern

economies of consolation,²⁷ I am obviously also thinking of questions having to do with the obvious difference between on the one hand classical and later Christian letters of or treatises on consolation (where religion, God himself, or ‘the gods’ themselves can be seen as either a source of comfort or a set of powers that deprive human beings from finding comfort and being consoled) and on the other hand the possibility (or impossibility) of consolation in a Godless, modern universe in which this specific source of religious comfort (or discomfort) is no longer present. Where do we find consolation if we no longer can say, like the eponymous hero of the book of Job, that God himself is our consolation? If we find consolation elsewhere, as I hope we do, is this consolation different in kind, in impact, in form? If we say, nowadays, that we find consolation in a work of fiction, is that in a way similar to saying that religious convictions can bring comfort?

Secondly, the project will also be interested in the linguistic or rhetorical nature of consolation, in consolation as a speech act, one might say: in the sense that it will also look at the interesting question of what (at given moments and in specific cultural contexts) are the rules or principles that govern this speech act. What does an utterance of consolation, of comfort, have to do in order for it to be effective or successful? What are its ‘felicity conditions’, to borrow John Austin’s phrase?²⁸ There is a clear ‘sincerity condition’ involved, for instance, in the sense that for words or utterances of consolation to work, it is important that the speaker be sincere, or maybe more importantly: that the receiver of the message (the person in need of comfort) be able to consider the speech act as being sincere, as coming straight from the heart and as taking into account the ‘authenticity’ of the sorrow for which the consolation is meant. (Though that sincerity condition in itself will not be enough: there are other ‘conditions’ that govern the speech act of consolation.) I’m particularly interested in how this speech act might be described in terms that Austin’s most famous student, John Searle, used in order to describe and analyse what he considered to be characteristic of the speech-act of fiction. Searle famously described fiction as ‘non-deceptive pseudo-statements’,²⁹ which I think is what utterances of consolation also are in a certain way: they’re not really statements (of fact), but they’re surely not lies either: so they are non-deceptive (i.e., if they want to succeed they have to be taken as non-deceptive). But on the other hand, we don’t tend to think of words of comfort as being fictional, do we? And if we did, we would possibly no longer be able to see them as truly comforting? Or would we? Well,

those are some one of the questions that will be central to the book-project or at least define its background.

To be honest, Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* was not, initially, among the small library of essays that I was planning to read or reread when I began to think about this book. None of his texts actually were. The essay by Blumenberg that I just mentioned featured high on the modern section of my reading list, like the lucid essay that the Swedish author Stig Dagerman wrote just before he committed suicide on November 5th 1954 ('Our Need for Consolation is Insatiable', runs the title of the English translation);³⁰ also on that part of the list was the epistolary exchange between Flaubert and George Sand from the end of 1875, on whether the purpose of good literature is 'consolation' (as Sand argued) or 'desolation' (as Flaubert believed).³¹ The pre-modern, classical section of my library of consolation would have to contain the obvious suspects: the 'consolatio ad uxorem' by Plutarch, several consolatory writings by Seneca, Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, Boethius, of course, and Petrarch.

Not Roland Barthes, surprisingly. Barthes only became part of my consolatory library after I received Neil Badmington's kind invitation for a conference celebrating Barthes' centenary. It was an invitation that – for several reasons that I won't elaborate on here – was difficult to refuse, even though I had made myself promise (to promise to myself, moreover, which as you know are the hardest promises to keep) that in 2015 I would only give papers or write pieces that would have something to do with my new book project. I was sure, however, that Barthes would have something inspiring to say about my topic – he had always done so on any of the other topics that I have written about in the past decade or so, whether it be the conversation with the dead,³² the dynamics of tradition and literary innovation in the so-called *arrière-garde* or the prospect of writing a transnational literary history that is not dominated by the figure of the Author. Also, I vividly remembered a passage in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot*, in which one of the novel's protagonists, Madeleine Hanna, was trying to fight a serious bout of heartbreak reading Barthes' book, 'the elegant prose' of which, Eugenides' narrator at one point assures us, 'was her one consolation'.³³ All in all, my paper's title in a way presented itself, given that what I had been collecting for my book for some time now, in the hope of later beginning to organize those materials, were actually fragments of a consolatory discourse – the sort of quotations that I could begin to organize and analyze in the way that Barthes did; if only I had the same

inventive and probing mind as the author of the *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*.

As I suggested at the beginning of my essay, it should have come as no surprise that Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* contains very little reflection on the nature and functions of consolation. The languages of love and comfort, in the specific sense of the latter word that I am aiming for, seem to have very little in common in the framework of Barthes. I'm aware that I would have to develop this further, but for now, let me single out a few respects in which I see an obvious opposition between the romantic discourse of love as Barthes conceives of it in his *Fragments* and the discourse of consolation. The first difference has to do with the subject that is central to the two types of discourse, 'le sujet d'énonciation' if you want. In the discourse of comfort, this speaking subject is, to put it in the terms of the traditional communicative scheme, the sender of the message of comfort who uses language to address the receiver of the message of comfort; the success of the address can be measured in conventional rhetorical terms: if the sender of the message manages to convince the receiver of the truth-value of the message, then the comforter has been successful and has realized what the discourse of comfort is made for: to take away a specific conception of the real that prevents someone who is in need of consolation to console him- or herself.

The discourse of lovers as Barthes conceives of it is organized differently. In the majority of instances that Barthes deals with in his *Fragments* the discourse of love does not revolve around the transmission of messages by a sender to a receiver other than the sender. Actually, the discourse of love as Barthes conceives of it seems to be all about the impossibility and even the undesirability of that transmission. Before we begin reading his book, Barthes asks us to conceive of the words that we will be reading as being spoken by a subject in love: 'so it is a lover who speaks and who says' ('c'est donc un amoureux qui parle et qui dit', as we can read at the beginning of the French original³⁴) – moreover, what this 'amoureux' is saying, he is apparently mostly saying to himself. The first three entries of Barthes' lexicon already give a good idea of what I would call the discursive solipsism of the enunciating subject of the lover: the topic of the first entry, 's'abîmer' is not coincidentally a reflexive verb (whose object is by definition its subject); the second entry deals with the central 'absence' of the loved one in the lover's discourse, whereas the third entry ('adorable') revolves around the impossibility of the lover to find words to describe exactly what it is that singles out the loved one and that produces the feeling of love.³⁵

‘Le sujet amoureux’, Barthes makes clear throughout *A Lover’s Discourse*, is a subject that speaks profusely, whereas the speaking subject in the discourse of consolation is more economic with words, to say the least; it is a subject that is listening more than it is speaking, and when it speaks it has to say the right thing, at least if the consolatory address wants to be successful. In the lover’s discourse there can only be love when this love is being spoken – love and speech require each other, they are each other’s conditions of possibility, whereas, as we all know, there can be comfort and consolation when nothing is actually said. The ‘subject in love’, on the other hand, cannot *not* speak about what it feels and goes through, it *has* to express its love, and love is that which it expresses, albeit to itself rather than to the loved one. In order to make that clear, I want to move on to a passage from Alain de Botton’s novel *Essays in Love*, the writer’s debut, heavily influenced by Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*, as De Botton has acknowledged on several occasions. Halfway through the novel, the narrator is reflecting on how he can best communicate his love to his girlfriend Chloe. He has bought her a red pullover (she preferred a blue one, but since he has kept the receipt, the bought goods can be exchanged quite easily), but since he suddenly realizes that he has never expressed his love to her verbally, he wants to add a card to the present and he wants to write on it something that expresses and conveys his deepest feelings to the subject of his worship. This is what he has to say about the language of love that *should* enable him to express these feelings but that, nevertheless, he keeps questioning:

We could both speak of being in love, and yet this love might mean wholly different things within each of us. Sending out words of love was like firing a coded message with a faulty transmitter, always unsure of how it would be received [yet one nevertheless had to send, like the dandelion releasing numberless spores of which only a fraction would reproduce, a random, optimistic telecommunication effort – trust in the postal service].³⁶

It’s the second sentence of this passage that I want to think about for a second. Simply to replace ‘love’ by ‘comfort’ in that sentence would not necessarily lead to a problem: we have all been in situations in which we tried to console someone by saying specific things – well-meant things, coming straight from the heart – but in which our good intention simply back-fired because our words meant ‘wholly different things’ for the one to whom we addressed them. Speaking words of comfort is, in that respect, not entirely unlike speaking words of love:

you never know how these words will be received. Still, the difference between the two discursive situations remains clear: I have just described the position of the ‘sujet d’énonciation’ of the ‘discours amoureux’ as solipsist, and this is confirmed, in a way, by De Botton’s suggestion that to the two protagonists of his novel love means different things ‘within’ each of them. The peculiar choice of word also underscores the point that the solipsism involves what I would call a ‘failed reciprocity’: for the discourse of love to be successful (though one would begin to wonder after reading Barthes if it ever *can* be successful, or, put differently, what its success could be) the two lovers would need to experience the same feeling simultaneously. In the discourse of consolation this is not the case: it seems to be quite essential that the comforter does not feel the exact same pain that the person being comforted experiences. It is, in fact, the difference in experience that allows for the specific measure of sym-path^y (‘feeling together’) that is involved in the successful practice of comfort that Hans Blumenberg, in his essay on the ‘need for consolation and the inconsolability of mankind’ that I have already referred to, describes as a process of ‘delegation’: in the practice of consolation, the comforter participates in the experience of grief that provokes the need for consolation in the other, without *actually* feeling the exact same grief – Blumenberg labels the process as one of what he calls ‘fictive diffusion’,³⁷ whereby we delegate our pain to those who surround us and who then participate, by consoling us, in the ‘alleviation’ (to borrow Samuel Johnson’s word again) of our suffering. Blumenberg labels the process ‘fictive’, because, as he rightly stresses, those who share in our pain do not really feel it: they play a role in the alleviation of our suffering without actually participating in it.

The key word here is not solipsism, but solidarity, I would say, and it is this solidarity that functions as a prerequisite for the language of comfort to be successful: as long as the person whom we try to console or comfort does not think that we are genuinely participating in the grief that (s)he experiences, whatever words of comfort we try to express will fail to do their work. This is the case in one of the most iconic scenes of the failure of consolation to be found in the history of Western literature: Act One, Scene Two of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a play that in my view deals centrally with the topic at hand. In that scene, both Gertrude and Claudius try to talk reason in Hamlet, and they do so by means of a number of topics that are prototypical of consolatory treatises that date from Antiquity and of which Cicero gives a survey in the third book of his *Tusculan Disputations*.³⁸ They try to talk sense into Hamlet by arguing that the time has finally come to stop his mourning:

they urge him to realize that the death of his father, looked at from a sensible perspective, is nothing more than the course of nature. After all, as Gertrude famously puts it, ‘all that lives must die / Passing through nature to eternity’. If Hamlet does not arrive at that perspective, but rather, as his mother puts it, ‘forever with [his] veiled lids / seek for [his] noble father in the dust’, he will, in the words of Claudius that follow later in the conversation of the same scene, commit ‘a fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature, / To reason most absurd.’³⁹ As we all know, however, Gertrude and Claudius’ appeal to common sense does not work with Hamlet, for at least two complementary reasons: firstly because he obviously does not believe in the authenticity of the language that his mother and stepfather use (quite rightly so, in the case of the latter); and, secondly, because he simply does not *want* to be consoled.

There is much more to be said about Hamlet and consolation, and I intend to do so in my book-in-progress, but now I want to move from the inconsolable Danish prince to the book by Barthes that followed the *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*: the book on photography that is also an ‘in memoriam’ for Henriette Binger, the author’s mother. It will be hardly surprising, I guess, that, in *La Chambre claire*, Barthes has as little to say about consolation as in the *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*. The book, after all, is written by one who without explicitly saying so does present himself as being largely inconsolable, the inconsolability having to do with the absence of the loved one.⁴⁰ The book is the outcome of a period of mourning that follows upon the death of the author’s mother. As Barthes puts it in the *Journal de deuil*: the ‘livre sur la Photo’ was the result of an attempt ‘to integrate [his] suffering with [his] writing’ (‘d’intégrer mon chagrin à une écriture’⁴¹). Indeed, the actual writing of *La chambre claire* (15 April - 3 June 1979) coincides with the final months (and the last few pages) of the *Journal de deuil*, which Barthes had begun on 26 October 1977, his ‘first mourning night (première nuit de deuil)’⁴², the day after his mother died in their apartment at 11 rue Servandoni, peacefully, at three thirty in the afternoon.⁴³

When I say that Barthes presents himself as inconsolable, both in the *Mourning Diary* and in *La chambre claire*, I am using that term in the specific meaning given to it by the Flemish philosopher Patricia de Martelaere, in an interesting essay about what she calls ‘the desire for inconsolability’.⁴⁴ De Martelaere’s essay begins as a reflection on Freud’s famous 1917 text on ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (a text that features Hamlet at one point), but it develops into a reflection on what De

Martelaere (no doubt for reasons that have to do with her own biographical trajectory) labels ‘the interiorisation of the object of love’, by people who are ‘desperately in love’ – like the philosopher herself, I would be inclined to think.⁴⁵ In a passage that I want to have a closer look at, she writes the following: ‘By becoming inconsolable, the melancholy one renders himself in a certain sense also invulnerable: there is nothing in the world outside that can make him unhappy, because he already is unhappy, in and of himself – he clings to his pain as the only, absolutely only thing that nobody can take away without his consent. The pain is what for the melancholy one replaces the object [of desire], it becomes his first and last, his dearest object, infinitely better and more preferable than any real object.’⁴⁶

De Martelaere’s description of the inconsolable mourner reminds me of another scene of consolation – of the failure of consolation, once more, as was the case with Hamlet – that Barthes recounts in his *Journal de deuil*: it is one of the entries dated 29 November (1977) in which he explains to a certain AC (Antoine Compagnon, presumably) that the pain that the loss of his mother resulted in is ‘chaotic, erratic’ and therefore does not follow the regular process of what he calls ‘a mourning subject to time’: ‘becoming dialectical, wearing out. “adapting”’. When AC reacts spontaneously that this is actually what mourning is all about (‘c’est ça, le deuil’), Barthes cannot but suffer from what he experiences as a painful generalization of his pain: ‘I can’t endure my suffering being *reduced* – being *generalized* – (à la Kierkegaard): it’s as if it were being stolen from me.’⁴⁷ Mourning, as Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster put it in a reflection on Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, ‘demands a period of time that is absolutely individual’⁴⁸ – it is this time that Barthes feels deprived of.

The desire not to be consoled involves the attempt, De Martelaere argues, to prove the absolute nature of one’s love. To be able to go through a normal, regular process of mourning – one which comes to an end when the mourner decides that this time come has come – would take away the ‘happiness’ (so to speak) that results from what Barthes in his *Mourning Diary* describes as ‘living in one’s pain’: ‘I live in my suffering and that makes me happy. Anything that keeps me from living in my suffering is unbearable to me.’⁴⁹ Just over one month after his mother’s death, Barthes wonders in his *Mourning Diary* whether the fact that he is able to continue life without her does not mean that he loved her less than he thought.⁵⁰ The idea is typical of the inconsolable one, De Martelaere would argue. The example that she gives in her essay is Shakespeare’s Juliet: ‘What if Juliet, the inconsolable Juliet, would

have allowed herself to be comforted, after a decent period of mourning, and after some years would have found a different lover (...)?', De Martelaere wonders. 'That could only have meant that what she felt for Romeo was *not* Absolute Love (...) I don't want to be comforted, the real Juliet says, I just want *him back*.'⁵¹

There is one moment in *La Chambre claire*, one single passage, in which Barthes does refer to the possibility of consolation, of being consoled – or rather, and not surprisingly, to the fact that he, for the time being, is and remains inconsolable after the loss of his mother. The passage occurs in the vicinity of one of his reflections in the second part of the book, in which he talks about the famous photograph of his mother as a young girl, taken in 1898 at the Jardin d'Hiver of the parental house in Chennevières, where Henriette, then a five-year-old, was being photographed together with her brother, Philippe, who was two years older than she was.⁵² In the passage that I first want to have a look at, he is writing about photographic souvenirs that he has been going through in an attempt to recapture memories of his own childhood. But the attempt fails: in contrast to friends of his who were talking about cherished childhood memories, Barthes cannot but conclude that he no longer has them. What is more, it is looking at these photographs that took the memories away: 'Surrounded by these photographs', he writes, 'I could no longer console myself with with Rilke's line', and then he quotes one specific line from a love poem that Rilke wrote for Lou Andréas Salomé: 'Aussi doux que le souvenir, les mimosas baignent la chambre.' ('Sweet as memory, the mimosas steep the bedroom.')⁵³

I could no longer console myself by means of Rilke's lines, Barthes writes: the sentence suggests two interconnected things/ideas that I would like to develop in the remainder of my essay. The first is that photographs, in the specific way that Barthes thinks about them in *La Chambre claire*, and at the specific moment in his life in which he is doing that thinking, do not bring comfort – and one has to wonder why that is the case. The second issue is that poetry, in this case a poem by Rilke, for Barthes, obviously *does* have the power to bring comfort – the fact that he says that this specific line no longer does console him, must mean that it once did. And it's obviously something in the photographs (something desolate, one could say) that takes away the powers of comfort that Rilke's poem used to have for Barthes. This brings me back to the question behind the book that I'm writing: What is it in literary texts that brings comfort? Why do we keep saying that they do?

Let me begin with the former question, which is probably the easiest one to answer on the basis of *La Chambre claire*: what is it in the photographs of his mother – in the portrait of a loved one who is no longer there – that makes it difficult for Barthes, at this specific time, to find comfort? The specific phase of mourning in which Barthes finds himself locked has something to do with it, obviously, but part of the answer also has to do with the ‘ontology’ (*le tel*) of the photograph, with what Barthes describes as the ‘painful labor’⁵⁴ that these photographs impose (‘obligeait’) on him, in an act of what he calls real violence.⁵⁵ Just before he writes about the line of Rilke’s poem, as I already said, Barthes discusses the famous photograph of the Jardin d’Hiver of which he had a reproduction made.⁵⁶ Here is the famous passage in which he does so:

I am alone with it, in front of it. The circle is closed, there is no escape. I suffer, motionless. Cruel, sterile deficiency: I cannot *transform* my grief, I cannot let my gaze drift; no culture will help me utter this suffering which I experience entirely on the level of the image’s finitude (this is why, despite its codes, I cannot *read* a photograph): the Photograph – my Photograph – is without culture: when it is painful, nothing in it can transform grief into mourning.⁵⁷

The two italicized words in this passage – they are Barthes’ italics, by the way: ‘*transform*’ and ‘*read*’ – already hint at the point that I will want to make in the answer to my second question about the difference between photographs and literary texts, difference in view of those media’s respective consolatory potential, I will argue. The photograph cannot be read, Barthes says, it doesn’t seem to have the ability to provoke in the viewer (in this viewer at least) the power or the energy to transform the pain that he feels into something more productive, because it lacks the incentive to look elsewhere, to think differently, to imagine otherwise. To look at a photograph is painful because the photograph merely shows that which cannot be denied: the harsh reality of the mother no longer being there, whereas she once was, at the time at least when the photograph was taken. In that respect, Barthes begins to realize that in photographs like these there is a different sort of ‘punctum’ at work than the one that he had been talking about in the discussion of the studium/punctum-concepts in the first half of his book. What the photograph of his mother as a five-year-old shows – what it painfully points out – is the ‘catastrophe’⁵⁸ that any photo-portrait shows and that Barthes relates to Winnicott: it is a signal of the fact that

the catastrophe already took place: ‘he is going to die’⁵⁹, ‘she is going to die’;⁶⁰ the punctum involves what Barthes labels ‘the discovery of the equivalence’ between ‘This will be’ and ‘This has been’⁶¹ – the photo shows a person who was alive at the time of its making but who now no longer is – it gives ‘an anterior future of which death is the stake’.⁶²

Back to my second question: what is it in literary texts that allows them to function differently from photographs, as sources/purveyors/producers of comfort? Judging by the longer passage that I just quoted from *La Chambre claire* the answer to that question should be related to a text’s transformative potential, the potential, that is of offering its reader a perspective that does not only allow for the transformation of the reading self but also of what it is that is being represented in the text. The answer should also be related, obviously, to the ‘medial’ difference between photographs and texts, between ‘l’Image’ and ‘l’écriture’. As Barthes puts it a few pages after the discussion of the Winter Garden photograph to which I referred earlier: ‘In the image, as Sartre says, the object yields itself wholly, and our vision of it is *certain* – contrary to the text or to other perceptions which give me the object in a vague, arguable manner, and therefore incite me to suspicions as to what I think I am seeing. This certitude is sovereign because I have the leisure to observe the photograph with intensity; but also, however long I extend this observation, it teaches me nothing. It is precisely in this *arrest* of interpretation that the Photograph’s certainty resides: I exhaust myself realizing that *this has been* (...).’⁶³ Photographs bring to a halt our interpretive efforts, they do not need to be read or scrutinized for an implicit meaning, because their meaning is obvious and the effect of that conclusion is a deadeningly tiring, ‘exhausting’ one (‘je m’épuise’, Barthes writes in the original). Writing, on the other hand, as Barthes famously puts it in the final paragraph of ‘On échoue toujours à parler de ce qu’on aime’, the text of his that he had probably been typing out the morning of his near-fatal accident of Monday 25 February 1980, has the opposite effect – it is not exhausting (‘épuisant’), it is, rather, ‘a power’ (‘une puissance’), a form of empowerment, of energy, ‘probable fruit of a long initiation, which annuls the sterile immobility of the amorous image-repertoire and gives its adventure a symbolic generality’.⁶⁴

The first phrase that interests me in this passage is the one in which Barthes suggests that writing mobilizes – at least, it undoes the immobility of one’s imagination/imaginary. The phrase sounds like an echo of the passage on the photograph of the Winter Garden that I referred to earlier, in which Barthes recalls that sitting there in front of his mother’s picture made him suffer, ‘immobile’. The conjunction

between the two passages allows me to come to what sounds like a logical conclusion: Whereas photographs transfix you, render you immobile on account of their ‘flatness’,⁶⁵ good writing, the writing that possesses the power that Barthes has been after for most of his career, will transform you: it will enable you to see things differently, to assume a new perspective, maybe to begin a new life, a ‘vita nuova’. Good writing, to give the ultimate Barthesian example would have to be Proust, I guess. Late July/early August 1978, Barthes is rereading Proust, as several entries in his *Mourning Diary* for that period show. Reading Proust reminds him of what the essence of literature is: ‘Which is what literature is: that I cannot read without pain, without choking on truth, everything Proust writes in his letters about sickness, courage, the death of his mother, his suffering, etc.’⁶⁶ Whereas seeing photographs of his dead mother does not allow him to turn his pain into something else, Proust’s writing does seem to have an effect, whether it be letters by Proust on the death of his mother, or passages in the *Recherche* that deal with the death of the narrator’s grandmother. On that same day (1 August), he writes that he comes to understand that his pain is ‘literally *endurable*’, if only because he is able to express it in language: ‘My culture, my taste for writing gives me this apotropaic or *integrative* power: I *integrate integrate*, by language. My suffering is *inexpressible* but all the same speakable. The very fact that language affords me the word ‘intolerable’ immediately achieves a certain tolerance.’⁶⁷ This is what language does, apparently: it takes away the absolute certainty of a fixed meaning: it opens up new pockets of signification, resulting from the possibility of even the slightest distance between what is stated (‘intolerable’) and what can be understood by the statement (‘a certain tolerance’). What language also does, the passage from the *Mourning Diary* seems to suggest, is that it socializes to a certain extent individual meanings and experiences, it invites us as individuals to become more than our singular selves, and to understand our experiences as having more than the idiosyncratic meaning that we single-mindedly see, without however nullifying our individual character. Barthes adds a footnote to his statement about the ‘integrative’ function of language: ‘I *integrate* – enter into a whole – federate – socialize, communize, gregoriate’.⁶⁸ The footnote seems to echo some of the concerns that Barthes develops in his 1977 course at the Collège de France on the theme of ‘comment vivre ensemble’ (‘how to live together’), where he is clearly on the outlook for specific forms of ‘idiorrhymic’ communality that do not impede the individual in the development of his or her individuality. The phrase is also important because it echoes what to me

is the programme of the *Journal de deuil* and *La Chambre claire*: Barthes' attempt 'd'intégrer [s]on chagrin à une écriture' ('to integrate [his] suffering with [his] writing').⁶⁹

I want to come back, in that respect, to a second aspect of Barthes' definition of writing in the final paragraph of his last text: writing, he states there, as we have seen, mobilizes and it does so by confronting our imaginary with what he calls 'une généralité symbolique'.⁷⁰ In the context of what I have been saying before, the word 'généralité' echoes the passage from the *Mourning Diary* that I quoted earlier and in which Barthes complained about one of his friends 'stealing' away his pain from him by making generalizing remarks about the natural course of mourning. That type of generalization was negative in the sense that it deprived Barthes of something that he clearly wanted to call his own; while the 'généralité symbolique' that he talks about in his text on Stendhal, is positive, in the sense that it integrates – without reducing the integrity of one's own experiences it reaches out to include those experiences in a more collective form – it allows one to see that the idiosyncrasies of our personal pain and our individual grief can be shared, in the way that we have seen Hans Blumenberg describe the mechanism of consolation, whereby we are enabled to 'delegate' our grief for others to share it in a mechanism of 'fictive diffusion'. The fact that Blumenberg uses this particular adjective may well account for the feeling that many readers have that even characters in novels or films can give us comfort – and they often seem to do a better job at it than some actual people. Let me end with one final quotation, not from Barthes, but from Alain De Botton. The passage is taken from *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, a book which was also obviously heavily influenced by Barthes:

After being abandoned by a lover who has expressed in the kindest way imaginable a need to spend a little more time on their own, how consoling to lie in bed and witness Proust's narrator crystallizing the thought that, 'When two people part it is the one who is not in love who makes the tender speeches.' How comforting to witness a fictional person [who is also, miraculously, ourselves as we read] suffering the same agonies of a saccharine dismissal and, importantly, surviving.⁷¹

There is much more to say and to be said about why literature functions in consolatory ways – why this particular form of language use that often provides us with the same wonderful reading experiences that Barthes

had (experiences that we often understand the better for his analysis of them) gives comfort. Given the time and the opportunity to pursue this issue further, I think I would introduce Barthes' conception of literary texts as transitional objects in the discussion or reflect further on Barthes' fascination for the figure of Orpheus, one of the recurrent heroes in the joint histories of literature and consolation. But I feel that it is about time to come, if not to a conclusion, then at least to a moment where I can, for the time being, round off the trajectory that I have followed in the course of this essay. Several of the fragments that I have commented upon in this text have provided us with one of the basic questions that underlie the discourse of consolation: should we take consolation, solace, comfort, consolement in terms of a confrontation with the real (whereby consolation involves our actual seeing the real as it is, and our being shown the real for what it actually is) or do we, rather, take comfort in the fact that the person who is trying to console us offers us a way to escape from a harsh reality? Of course, we did not need the example of Barthes to show us that the opposition, put in those straightforward binary terms, is in itself a reduction of the problem at hand. We probably no longer need his example to remind us of ideas that his work, for the past four decades, has put so decisively on the agenda of literary and cultural studies. I take comfort from the thought that that in itself may well be the most convincing proof of the enduring legacy of this 100-year-old.

Notes

¹ This essay was originally given as a paper at the conference ‘Roland Barthes at 100’, convened by Neil Badmington at Cardiff University, 30-31 March 2015. I would like to thank Neil for his kind invitation to speak at this conference and for his comments on my talk. I would also like to thank Britt Grootes, Marie Gil, Diana Knight, Emma Mason, Andy Stafford and Michael Wood for remarks and questions that have enabled me to clarify my argument.

² Hans Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006), p. 626.

³ Roland Barthes, ‘La Crise du désir’, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. V, pp. 941-45 (p. 944). It is the second part of the prophesy that was wrong: the book was indeed Barthes’ biggest success – it sold 70,000 copies in the year of publication, Tiphaine Samoyault writes in her recent biography. Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes. Biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), p. 618.

⁴ John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, in *Poems*, ed. by B.A. Wright (London: Dent, 1973), line 659 (p. 456).

⁵ Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*. I made use of the tenth edition (1792) available online at Google Books.

⁶ Don Paterson, *Orpheus* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 47.

⁷ Belinda Jack, ‘The Rise of the Medical Humanities’, *Times Higher Education*, 22 January 2015: <<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/feature-the-rise-of-the-medical-humanities/2018007.fullarticle>> [accessed 6 September 2015].

⁸ *The Picador Book of Funeral Poems*, ed. by Don Paterson (London: Picador, 2004), p. xiii.

⁹ Not surprisingly, Barthes’ name crops up in the introduction to Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie. Lire, c’est guérir* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p. 20.

¹⁰ Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, *The Novel Cure: An A-Z of Literary Remedies* (London and Edinburgh: Canongate, 2013).

¹¹ In the terms that Ouaknin uses (*Bibliothérapie*, pp. 13-14), it is not ‘iatrikè’ but ‘therapeia’, not a real remedy, but a form of care-taking.

¹² Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, p. 2.

¹³ Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (London: Phaidon, 2013), p. 5.

¹⁴ See, for instance, 599c of Book X of *The Republic*.

¹⁵ ‘He has forgotten who he really is’, Lady Philosophy states in the second section of Book I, ‘but he will recover, for he used to know me, and all I have

to do is clear the mist that beclouds his vision.’ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by David Slavitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 6.

¹⁶ A good recent translation of the ‘Invective contra medicum’ can be found in volume 11 of the I Tatti Renaissance Library: Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, ed. and trans. by David Marsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 2-179.

¹⁷ For instance in *Purgatorio* III, 22 and IX, 43.

¹⁸ Hans Blumenberg, ‘Troostbedürfnis und Untröstlichkeit des Menschen’, in *Beschreibung des Menschen*, pp. 623-55.

¹⁹ Georg Simmel, *Fragmente und Aufsätze* (München: Drei Masken Verlag, 1923), p. 17. My translation.

²⁰ Simmel, *Fragmente und Aufsätze*, p. 17. My translation.

²¹ Frans De Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), p. 141. The consolatory potential of chimpanzees is also discussed on pages 90 and 139.

²² Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (London; Vintage, 2002), p. 13 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 41).

²³ Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 14 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 42).

²⁴ Plutarch, *In Consolation to his Wife*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 9.

²⁵ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (London: Alma Classics, 2010), p. 236.

²⁶ Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Notes pour un tombeau d’Anatole’, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), vol. I, pp. 881-944.

²⁷ Differences between pre-modern and modern conceptions of the notion of consolation are discussed summarily in (among many others): George W. McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 3-17; Paul A. Holloway, *Consolation in Philippians: Philosophical Sources and Rhetorical Strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 55-83; Michel Guérin, *Le fardeau du monde. De la consolation* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 2011); Cornelis Verhoeven, ‘Filosofie van de troost’, in *Het leedwezen. Beschouwingen over troost en verdriet, leven en dood* (Bilthoven: Ambo, 1971), pp. 21-54; Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering. Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁸ John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 14, 22.

²⁹ John Searle, 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse', *New Literary History*, 6 (1975), 319-32.

³⁰ Stig Dagerman, 'Our Need for Consolation is Insatiable', trans. by Steven Hartman, *Little Star*, 5 (2014), 301-07. The Swedish original was published in 1955.

³¹ Their exchange of letters is the subject of an interesting essay by Julian Barnes, 'Consolation vs. Desolation', in *Something to Declare* (London: Picador, 2002), pp. 215-34.

³² See the chapter on Barthes in Jürgen Pieters, *Speaking with the Dead: Explorations in Literature and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 121-135.

³³ Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011), p. 79.

³⁴ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 9 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 35).

³⁵ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, pp. 10-21 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, pp. 37-50).

³⁶ Alain de Botton, *Essays in Love* (London: Picador, 1994), pp. 104-05.

³⁷ Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, p. 625: 'Es scheint, dass das Leid nicht nur reell von anderen zu beeinflussen ist, indem sie Hilfe leisten, sondern auch durch einen eigentümlichen Akt der fiktiven Diffusion, indem sie Anteil an etwas nehmen, woran sie doch nicht reell teilnehmen können. Indem die anderen zu leiden simulieren, vollzieht sich eine Art Delegation des Leidens, der Summe des Schmerzes, auf diese anderen. Und es ist nicht gleichgültig, wie viele das sind und in welcher Masse sie darin glaubwürdig erscheinen, ihren Anteil übernehmen zu wollen oder übernommen zu haben. Der Leidende gibt von seinem Schmerz ab, er delegiert die Funktion, die er als Träger des Schmerzes zunächst selbst und allein auszuüben hat. Der Trost beruht auf der allgemeinen Fähigkeit des Menschen zu delegieren, nicht selbst und allein alles tun und tragen zu müssen, was ihm obliegt und zufällt.'

³⁸ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. by J.E. King, Loeb Classical Library (London and Cambridge, MA: Heinemann/Harvard University Press, 1966), 3.31.76 (pp. 315-17).

³⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 170ff. for the quotations here used.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977 - September 15, 1979*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang,

2010), p. 42. For the original French, see *Journal de deuil. 26 octobre 1977 - 15 septembre 1979*, ed. by Nathalie Léger (Paris: Seuil/Imec, 2009) p. 52.

⁴¹ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 105 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 114).

⁴² Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 3 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 13).

⁴³ “Elle s’éteint doucement sans se réveiller” (‘She softly extinguishes, without waking up’), Barthes writes in his diary (not the *Journal de deuil*): quoted by Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 634. My translation.

⁴⁴ Patricia de Martelaere, ‘Een verlangen naar ontroostbaarheid. Over Freud en melancholie’, in *Een verlangen naar ontroostbaarheid. Over leven, kunst en dood* (Amsterdam/Leuven: Meulenhoff/Kritak, 1993), pp. 63-76.

⁴⁵ De Martelaere, ‘Een verlangen naar ontroostbaarheid’, p. 73. My translation.

⁴⁶ De Martelaere, ‘Een verlangen naar ontroostbaarheid’, p. 73. My translation.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 71 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 81).

⁴⁸ Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster, *The Hamlet Doctrine* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 119.

⁴⁹ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 173 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 185).

⁵⁰ See Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 68 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 78).

⁵¹ De Martelaere, ‘Een verlangen naar ontroostbaarheid’, p. 76.

⁵² Barthes also writes about the photo in his *Mourning Diary*, pp. 143 and 226 (*Journal de deuil*, pp. 155 and 237).

⁵³ In Rilke’s original: ‘So milde wie Erinnerung / duften im Zimmer die Mimosen’. The poem, ‘Dir zur Feier’, was begun in 1897 and finished in 1898, the year of the Winter Garden photograph. The passage occurs in Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Flamingo, 1984), p. 91 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 863).

⁵⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 66 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 843).

⁵⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 91 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 863).

⁵⁶ The *Journal de deuil* shows that he received it on 28 December 1978 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 231; *Mourning Diary*, p. 220). He discovered the photograph on 13 June 1978 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 155; *Mourning Diary*, p. 143; Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 673).

⁵⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 90 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 862).

⁵⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 867).

⁵⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 865).

⁶⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 867).

⁶¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 867).

⁶² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 865).

⁶³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 106-07 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 875).

⁶⁴ Barthes, 'One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 296-305 (p. 305) (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 914).

⁶⁵ Barthes has a lot to say about their 'platitude' in *Camera Lucida*; see, for instance, p. 106 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 873).

⁶⁶ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 177 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 189).

⁶⁷ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 175 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 187).

⁶⁸ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 175 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 187).

⁶⁹ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 105 (*Journal de deuil*, p. 114.)

⁷⁰ Barthes, 'One Always Fails', p. 305 (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. V, p. 914).

⁷¹ Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (London: Picador, 1997), p. 28.

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