

A wound in the heart of love: writing in Roland Barthes' Mourning Diary / Uma ferida no coração do amor: a escrita no Diário de luto de Roland Barthes

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the notes published posthumously as Roland Barthes' *Mourning diary*. Considering its role in Barthes' oeuvre, we examine a) the special relationship between presence and absence that occurs in mourning, b) Barthes' reckoning with that psychoanalytic concept and c) the particularities of writing harboured in grief. Our analysis revisits Freud's pioneering study "Mourning and melancholia", Kristeva's work on the same subject and Blanchot's musings on the close ties between writing and death, as well as critical studies of Barthes' *Mourning diary* and other writing projects equally haunted by the loss of his mother (*Camera lucida* and the intended novel *Vita Nova*); we also identify similarities between the writings-in-mourning undertaken by Barthes and by Dante Alighieri. At the end, we discuss inscriptions of affection in the experience of loss and the distinguishing traits of mourning writing; we propose that a certain *pathos* may be at work in the *Diary*, weaving a particular brand of connection between writing, love and their spectre-like objects and participants.

KEYWORDS: Roland Barthes; Mourning diary; Mourning; Writing; Vita Nova.

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RESUMO

Este estudo abre o *Diário de luto* de Roland Barthes para, levando em conta seu lugar na obra barthesiana, examinar algumas das questões ali pulsantes: a relação especial entre ausência e presença instaurada pelo luto, o haver-se com a vulgata psicanalítica acerca dessa experiência e seus desdobramentos em termos de escrita. Retoma o paradigmático “Luto e melancolia” de Freud e o mergulho de Kristeva nos mesmos conceitos, ponderações de Blanchot sobre os estreitos laços entre escrita e morte, bem como alguma fortuna crítica barthesiana sobre o *Diário* e os demais escritos assombrados pela perda da mãe (*A Câmara Clara* e o projeto de romance *Vita Nova*); avança aproximações entre as escritas enlutadas de Barthes e de Dante. Conclui com a proposição de uma leitura do pathos que age no *Diário* e cria ali modulações particulares entre o escrever, o amor e seus espectrais objetos e participantes, discutindo inscrições do afeto na perda e as particularidades dessa intratável escritura lutuosa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Roland Barthes; *Diário de luto*; Luto; Escrita; *Vita Nova*.

1 Openings

In *L’espace littéraire*, Blanchot (1962) integrates Kafka’s diaries and Rilke’s letters to his musings on literary writing; he seems to believe that even though what happens in these writing spaces is not a strictly poetic activity, they are still haunted by the same questions and, in their own ways, committed to the same quest.

Despite the famous opening sentence of “*Délibération*”, which reads: “Je n’ai jamais tenu de journal – ou plutôt je n’ai jamais su si je devais en tenir un” (BARTHES, 2002, p. 668), Roland Barthes did produce a great deal of diary-like writing, some of which has been published posthumously. Those texts usually have some sort of theme: some of them resemble travelling journals (“*Incidents*”, *Cahiers du voyage en Chine*), others lean more towards amorous adventures and misadventures (“*Soirées de Paris*”, the yet unpublished “*Chronologie*”) etc. More often than not, those theme-specific diaries are conceived as part of, or end up being part of the writing workspace of projects intended for publication; that is the case of Barthes’ *Journal de deuil* [Mourning Diary], our object in this paper.

Published in 2009, *Journal de deuil* consists of notes taken between October 26th 1977 and September 15th 1979, kept in Barthes’ archive (initially housed at IMEC – Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine and currently at the Bibliothèque Nationale). The posthumous publication of those notes was entrusted to Nathalie Léger, whose foreword explains that “On ne lit pas ici un livre achevé par son auteur, mais l’hypothèse d’un livre désiré par lui, qui contribue à l’élaboration de son œuvre et, à ce titre, l’éclaire” (LÉGER apud BARTHES, 2009, p. 9).

Rather than any enlightenment, however, we are much more interested in the possibilities through which Barthes’ writing meanders in this diary. Its title alludes to the period that followed the death of his mother, whose loss ignites and sustains the diary, thus tying it to the

last book published by Barthes – *La chambre claire*. Another connection often explored by Barthes' commentators is the one between *Journal de deuil* and the novel Barthes intended to write, which bore the working title *Vita Nova* and around which gravitated a two-year course at Collège de France, also posthumously published as a book. While Léger claims that the set of notes published as *Journal de deuil* consisted of a book intended by Barthes, other researchers (PINO, 2015, p. 128; SAMOYAULT, 2015; MARTY, 2010) believe that those notes would be somehow included in the upcoming novel. The connection between those three texts or projects is featured in *Journal de deuil* itself, which discusses the idea or the desire to write something after his mother.

Keeping in mind *Journal de deuil's* definite (albeit somewhat unclear) place in Barthes' oeuvre, we intend to focus on certain questions raised by those notes and in how they are therein addressed: the special relationship between absence and presence instituted by mourning, Barthes' reckoning with that psychoanalytic concept and the particularities of writing harboured in grief. The final section is on the unique modulations established by *Journal de deuil* between writing and its spectre-like objects and participants.

2 O The role of Psychoanalysis

Any investigation about the relationships between absence and writing in Barthes' *Journal de deuil* cannot disregard that that writing is born from the very loss it harbours – the loss of a beloved being, which propels the desire to write.

To that end, as we begin to discern what moves Barthes' notes in his *Journal*, we must consider the relationship between writing and absence taking into account a keyword that is featured in the book's very title: mourning.

Even though the word "mourning" designates a psychoanalytical concept, there is no denying that the idea of mourning is generalized and widespread to the point where most people have an inexperienced understanding of its implications in human life. In the layman's understanding, mourning is a deep sorrow that follows the loss of a valued object (the death of a loved one, a romantic break-up, the fracture of a deep-set belief or ideology etc.). A sorrow that, for all its depth, is only temporary, for the idea of mourning encompasses both the sorrow and its eventual overcoming. Mourning is exclusively that which can be the object of *work*, a labour to elaborate and, eventually, overcome the pain.

Therefore, the term mourning seems to designate a duration, a specific period, with a beginning and an end; a period during which the sorrowful subject re-elaborates himself and heals. In this light, mourning would then consist in the time necessary to adapt to a loss, to get used to it and reorganize one's life, renewing one's will to live. This common conception is not too far off Freud's propositions in his seminal text *Mourning and melancholia* (2010), first published in 1917.

In "Mourning and melancholia", Freud posits that mourning is the natural reaction to the loss of a valued object and presupposes the overcoming of that same state; he thus establishes a progressive *dynamis* to the notion of mourning. Freud differentiates between mourning and melancholia, specifying that mourning is the process of reinvesting the libido – that is, the desiring will to live – in activities unrelated to the lost object and that no longer seek for that which is absent.

After that work, the self would break the "painful sorrow" and the "lack of interest in the outside world" and would find themselves once again able to love and to live.

Unlike in melancholia, in mourning the subject knows what has been lost; he is able to identify that object, and such knowledge provides the potential to overcome the loss, allowing the ties that bind one's spirit to the lost object to fall apart during the work of mourning.

The idea of *overcoming* is, therefore, essential to the psychoanalytic paradigm of mourning, and it is precisely that aspect that Barthes disputes in *Journal de deuil*. That grieving writing thus offers us an alternative understanding of the experience of loss and of what *follows* that loss – which Barthes finds to be an endless '*during*', unable to ever finish its work.

Psychoanalysis is a recurrent intertext for Barthes. Many of its concepts and dynamics fructify intensely in his projects, even though that does not imply unconditional acceptance. In *Journal de deuil*, which makes public a set of notes intended (in their current form at least) for private use only, Barthes' reservations regarding Psychoanalysis are less nuanced than what can be found in the texts published during his life. For instance, a certain irritation can be read in this note from 11/30/77: "Ne pas dire *Deuil*. C'est trop psychanalytique. Je ne suis pas *en deuil*. J'ai du chagrin." (BARTHES, 2009, p. 83).

The following complaint, dated 6/16/78 (nearly ten months after his mother's death), addresses the prescriptive and pathological implications of the label 'mourning': "toujours la même *doxa* (la mieux intentionnée du monde): le deuil va *mûrir* (c'est-à-dire que le temps le fera tomber comme un fruit, ou éclater comme un furoncle)." (BARTHES, 2009, p. 160). The imagery evokes

biological processes, often associated to that which is ineluctable, and so Barthes' old foe, naturalization or the *doxa*, rears its head as one of the results of a common-sense appropriation of Psychoanalysis. That appropriation pointedly ignored the utterly destabilizing idea that we only know and partially control a very small portion of ourselves, preferring instead to bask in apparently one-size-fits-all structural notions, such as the one noted in 3/20/78: "On dit (me dit Mme Panzera): le Temps apaise le deuil – Non, le Temps ne fait rien passer" (BARTHES, 2009, p. 111).

Barthes' protests seem to indicate that mourning is not the time necessary to recover from a loss and begin one's old life anew, but rather a sort of wound that tears a hole in time and shatters it. The loved one's absence is thus fixed as that which is unsurmountable and, even if at some point the emotivity of that grief ceases, there cannot be, in any foreseeable future, a day when that loss has been overcome, when time no longer feels emptied.

In a note dated from 6/16/78, Barthes says: "Mais pour moi, le deuil est immobile, non soumis à un *processus*" (BARTHES, 2009, p. 160). The refusal to change is explained in notes from 11/29/77 (approximately one month after the loss):

Deuil : ne s'use pas, non soumis à l'usure, au temps. Chaotique, erratique : *moments* (de chagrin/ d'amour de la vie) aussi *frais* maintenant qu'au premier jour.

Le sujet (que je suis) n'est que *présent*, il n'est qu'*au présent*. Tout ceci ≠ psychanalyse : dix-neuviémiste : philosophie du Temps, du déplacement, modification par le temps (la cure). (BARTHES, 2009, p. 82)

– Expliqué à AC, dans un monologue, comment mon chagrin est chaotique, erratique, ce en quoi il résiste à l'idée courante – et psychanalytique – d'un deuil soumis au temps, qui se dialectise, s'use, « s'arrange ». Le chagrin n'a rien emporté tout de suite – mais en contrepartie, il ne s'use pas.

– À quoi AC répond : c'est ça, le deuil. (Il se constitue ainsi en sujet du Savoir, de la Réduction)

– j'en souffre. Je ne puis supporter qu'on *réduise* – qu'on *généralise* – Kierkegaard – mon chagrin : c'est comme si on me le volait. (BARTHES, 2009, p. 81)

The reply "that's mourning" normalizes the atrocious sorrow experienced by the grieving person, organizes into something normal – normalized and common – the individual experience felt to be extraordinary and unbearable. The feeling expressed in such dry, reductive terms – "that's mourning" – ends up generalizing sorrow and, by means of a word that conveys a diagnosis, ends up stealing the subject's grief, denying him the right to a sort of legitimacy of his suffering.

Therefore, this refusal of the idea of mourning, a word that disfigures (BARTHES, 2009, p. 168), pertains also to a terminological dispute and sets the battlefield in the arena of language and discourse.

Naming the suffering that occurs after a loss would, then, lessen the impact of that loss by analysing and categorizing it. To entertain the possibility that the pain might be overcome would mean depriving the subject from suffering his pain, stealing his monument, or denying a lover the enamoured discourse perpetually owed to his beloved. The grieving subject owes himself the suffering with which he tries to somehow rebuild the presence of the absent object (and, for Barthes, this attempted reconstruction involves writing, a very particular sort of writing, as we shall see).

It becomes clear, then, that the refusal of the word 'mourning' is also a refusal to accept the pain of loss as the process that is implied in that diagnostic or technical term, because that would imply that one's suffering could end, and the end of that sorrow would mean giving up the lost object's absence-presence; therefore, as he refuses to name his experience, Barthes is refusing regulations of his affection. However, psychoanalysis considers that very refusal as typical of the mourning process: what the subject in mourning experiences as immutable and unsurmountable would *actually* be changing, etc.

Antoine Compagnon is the friend named AC in the second 11/29/77 excerpt quoted above. In 2013, Compagnon published a paper on *Journal de deuil* in which he insists on the validity of the psychoanalytical paradigm of mourning as a process that can accommodate loss, in spite of the feelings voiced by the text he sets out to analyse. Although Compagnon is prudent enough to acknowledge that "Toutes les notations émues de Barthes répètent son refus du temps, c'est-à-dire du récit, qui voudrait dire l'atténuation du deuil, et sa volonté de rester dans la répétition" (COMPAGNON, 2013, §11), his lexical choices lead us to believe that he may feel sorry for the diary's writer but still believes himself to be right: despite its protests, *Journal de deuil* would be "emporté *inexorablement* par le temps, par le cours des jours"; "*irréremédiablement*, le deuil se fait, *malgré* le déni du temps"; "*Bon gré, mal gré*, le journal *devient* ainsi le récit du travail d'un deuil" (COMPAGNON, 2013, §21, §17 and §18, respectively; emphasis added). Lastly, employing Freud's terminology, Compagnon sees "le passage du deuil comme phase à la mélancolie comme état" (COMPAGNON, 2013, §21).

Things get more complicated as *Journal de deuil* begins to discuss the possibility – that gradually becomes a demand – of writing something after Henriette. There are now two writings:

Journal de deuil itself, centred on mourning, and another project, related yet distinct, that permeates *La chambre claire* and *Vita Nova*, and which is less about the mother's loss than about finding her again. Compagnon does not seem to account for that distinction and therefore considers (2013, §22-24) that the *Journal's* insistence on the impossibility to narrate mourning – exemplified by the 11/15/77 note that says death is “une autre durée, tassée, insignifiante, non narrée, morne, sans recours: vrai deuil insusceptible d'aucune dialectique narrative” (BARTHES, 2009, p. 60) – would be conquered by the decision to write *La chambre claire* and the then-untitled novel, which would indicate a second stage of mourning, open to the very thing it refuted so vigorously before, since “écrire, c'est toujours dialectiser” (COMPAGNON, 2013, §18). Compagnon offers as indicators of change *Journal* entries such as:

13 juin 1978

Non pas supprimer le deuil (le chagrin) (idée stupide du temps qui abolira) mais le changer, le transformer, le faire passer d'un état statique (stase, engorgement, récurrences répétitives de l'identique) à un état fluide. (BARTHES, 2009, p. 154).

Compagnon's hypothesis forces Barthes' *Journal* to get with the very program it denies, all the while remaining plausible and defensible. Even so, we believe that there are alternatives if one accepts the challenge of thinking with text's narrator, rather than trying to think for him. To that end, one of Barthes' books, published the same year Henriette passed, may prove useful. In a discarded version of an afterword for *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (BARTHES, 2007, p. 696-697), Barthes discusses the role played by Psychoanalysis in that book and its unorthodox applications.

Emulating that flexibility with regards to Psychoanalysis, we may remember that structural affective dynamics also feature, besides development, a special sort of repetition: to repeat or re-actualize schemes, finding equivalences while remaining open to irrepressible differences. With Derrida, we may slide and wonder whether substitutions such as that of static mourning for fluid mourning might have a *dynamis* not entirely unlike that of metonymy: the passage of the same in the other, finding the other in the same. With that, we open movement up to possibilities other than proceeding, advancing or developing. Barthes' mourning in his *Journal* does have movement and yet it retains its stubborn, intractable, opaque quality.

The *Journal* entry of 10/6/78 reads: “sur l'heure, tout un emportement de pensées, de décisions. (...) Liquider d'arrache-pied ce qui m'empêche, me sépare d'écrire le texte sur mam. : le départ actif du Chagrin : l'accession du Chagrin à l'Actif.” (BARTHES, 2009, p. 217). To Compagnon (2013, §21-24), this active, these decisions, imply a psychic-affective reinvestment in

life, a new, grieving life that would be the synthesis of the dialectical dispute between life and mourning. Compagnon believes that *Journal de deuil* features a conflict between mourning and *récit* [narrative]: the latter would imply movement, development, denouement, whereas the first would mean inwardness, immobility and repetition (COMPAGNON, 2013, §21). However, the traits Compagnon attributes to *récit* and which are repeatedly rejected by *Journal de deuil* are the very same we have argued to be connected to a common-sense appropriation of the psychoanalytical notion of mourning. Instead, we like to believe, with Blanchot¹, that there can be other types of *récit*, more compatible with what is proposed in *Journal de deuil*.

Indeed, the *récit* to which converges *L'espace littéraire*, Blanchot's book that most overtly dwells on the relationships between literature and death, does have much in common both with the writing that takes place in *Journal de deuil* and with the one it describes as a goal. When Blanchot speaks of Orpheus as the one who connects poetic experience to the point where “ne manquent pas seulement la sûre existence, l'espoir de vérité, les dieux, mais où manque aussi le poème, où le pouvoir de dire et le pouvoir d'entendre, s'éprouvant dans leur manque, sont à l'épreuve de leur impossibilité” (BLANCHOT, 1962, p. 163), he inscribes in the very core of literature two key aspects of Barthes' mourning: 1) a radical experience of loss that destabilizes the subject to the brick of dissolution, and 2) negotiating impossibility.

3 In search of writing

In the absence of the loved one, the loss is what remains from that person and as such becomes precious. The grieving spirit begins, then, to dwell on a haunted place, on the very presence of absence, which he cultivates, trying to recreate the lost object of love by making a new object – in Barthes' case, according to *Journal de deuil*, this recreation happens via writing. It seems that mourning entails a particular relationship with the absent object. The presence of an absence also means that this relationship is *mise en place* by and in writing, since for Barthes if any “work” is possible during the time labelled as mourning, this work can only take place in writing:

¹ According to the *index nominum* of the French edition of *La préparation du roman* (BARTHES, 2003), Blanchot is mentioned in pages 29, 30, 82, 110, 127, 229, 359 and 380. In that course, Barthes points out that his novel project is not aligned with many of Blanchot's views, especially regarding depersonalization. However, this disagreement does not mean that Blanchot is absent from Barthes' yearning to write, and we believe that Blanchot's ideas can prove interesting to read the *Journal de deuil*.

31 mai 1978

Ce n'est pas de solitude que j'ai besoin, c'est d'anonymat (de travail).
Je transforme « Travail » au sens analytique (Travail du Deuil, du Rêve) en «
Travail » réel – d'écriture.

car :

le « Travail » par lequel (dit-on) on sort des grandes crises (amour, deuil) ne
doit pas être liquidé hâtivement ; pour moi il n'est *accompli* que dans et par
l'écriture. (BARTHES, 2009, p. 143).

Barthes does indeed yearn to write, and this search begins in his diary's earliest notes. For instance, even before concluding that writing is the only possible work during his mourning, Barthes had already noted as early as 11/6/77 (that is, a few weeks after the great loss), the following:

J'ai (hier) compris bien des choses : inimportance de ce qui m'agitait
(installation, confort de l'appartement, bavardages et même parfois rires
avec les amis, projets, etc.).

Mon deuil est celui de la relation aimante et non celui d'une organisation de
vie. Il me vient par les mots (d'amour) surgis dans ma tête... (BARTHES,
2009, p. 49).

This excerpt clearly shows traces of a search for words – or, to be more precise, of words showing up by themselves, running him over with what would be the expression of an endless love confession, the discourse forever owed to the loved object, a discourse that could, at a later point, become a book built from the experience of this love that pulses even in the absence of its object.

This institution of writing-in-mourning happens in a very peculiar manner and can be better understood in light of Julia Kristeva's *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie*. Although the book focuses on examining the clinical conditions of depression and melancholy and their often blurred boundaries, Kristeva reminds us of a crucial thing: building from Freud's propositions, she affirms that both melancholy and depression feature "le même *deuil impossible de l'objet maternel*" (KRISTEVA, 1987, p. 19).

This notion is of the utmost significance to us, even though at first it would not quite apply to mourning – which, unlike depression or melancholy, is clinically a finite process in which it is possible to identify what has been lost. However, we would like to point out that according to Freud, despite their clinical differences both mourning and melancholy involve the loss of an object of desire and the collapse of the signifier (KRISTEVA, 1987, p. 20).

Our interest here lies in the loss of this signifier leading to a search for another one – in the *Journal's* case, for writing as a new signifier. Moreover, aside from this loss/gain game played

by writing during mourning, Kristeva posits that each of us carries a structural sorrow related to a certain loss of the mother caused by the initiation into language (KRISTEVA, 1987, p. 15). This loss propels us to dive head-first into language in attempts to find the mother that is no longer accessible without mediation. From this point onward, there can be no imagination without a trace of melancholy (KRISTEVA, 1987, p. 15); imagination must be haunted by the primitive loss of a referent that, although nearly impossible to define, seems to tirelessly point to this initial relationship, when the ambiguous loss of the mother hurled us into language. Therefore, if all imagination is marked by a vague and indelible sorrow, everything that derives from this imagination, such as writing, must be likewise amorous, must be engaged in this same search for the primordial lost referent.

We believe that although Barthes' writing in his diary may not meet all those clinical criteria, it still involves a search for something lost that ends up materializing in writing.

And so the torrent of writing is, to the mournful subject, both quest or exertion and visceral demand. This ambivalence is signalled by Blanchot in *L'espace littéraire* (1962, p. 106) as something inherent to artistic creation, which demands work while incessantly avoiding projects, goals etc.

Among Barthes' writings directly related to the loss of his mother, we may consider *La chambre claire* as a finished book-monument and *Vita Nova* as the enigma of interrupted writing; *Journal de deuil* may, then, be read as wandering writing, as the exploration of both the absolute need for this mournful writing and its various and painful impotencies and inadequacies. A 11/9/77 note reads: "Revient sans cesse immobile le point brûlant: les mots qu'elle m'a dits dans le souffle de l'agonie, foyer abstrait et infernal de la douleur qui me submerge (« Mon R, Mon R » – « Je suis là » – « Tu es mal assis »). (...) De moins en moins à écrire, à dire, sinon cela (mais je ne puis le dire à personne)." (BARTHES, 2009, p. 50). Ten months later, in 8/21/78: "Je ne parle que de moi. Je ne puis parler d'elle, dire ce qu'elle était, faire un portrait bouleversant" (BARTHES, 2009, p. 208).

This inability to say is one of the main topics in Éric Marty's lecture *Roland Barthes, la littérature et le droit à la mort* (MARTY, 2010). Marty talks about an impediment to say that, to him, makes *Journal de deuil* "l'Odysée d'une écriture vouée à s'éteindre, promise à l'extinction, au silence, au rien, parce qu'elle n'a rien à écrire, sinon cela, mais qu'on ne peut dire à personne" (MARTY, 2010, p. 23-24). This unspeakable *that* that is the voracious vortex of *Journal de*

deuil's writing are Henriette's words, confided in parentheses: "(« Mon R, Mon R » – « Je suis là » – « Tu es mal assis »)" (BARTHES, 2009, p. 50).

According to Marty, writing in *Journal de deuil* is both propelled and stilted by the poignant and untransmissible character of these words from Barthes' mother. The latter aspect results from a special addressing: those words are addressed solely to "R" in their utter abandon of referentiality since, to Marty (2010, p. 25), the communicative goal was not to check whether R was present, but instead to manifest an affect that lays not in the words themselves but in the enunciative scene they exhume to haunt the diary-keeper: suffering, care, tenderness. Therefore, even though Henriette's words can be transcribed and repeated to a third party, their significance can only be experienced by their sole addressee; hence, R is a person and cannot be reduced to an interchangeable position or interlocution role.

Still according to Marty, the procedure that enables Barthes to write, to overcome his agraphia in *La chambre claire*, is to distance himself: to go from R, stuck in the scene of endless & impossible dialogue with his mother, to the discursive narrator that addresses a third party – the reader – thus sliding his mother to a new discursive place as well, that of the object, from "you" to "her" (MARTY, 2010, p. 45-46).

But this only happens in *La chambre claire*. In *Journal the deuil*, there is still the struggle between, on one side, the yearning for a sort of writing able to harbour love amputated of its object, and on the other side, absence as the very core of language, as stated in this question from 10/29/77: "Dans la phrase « Elle ne souffre plus », à quoi, à qui renvoie « elle » ? Que veut dire ce présent?" (BARTHES, 2009, p. 25).

The devastating quandary of the coincidence between the necessary and the unattainable is, in Blanchot's eyes, the very abyss of writing. It is a rather productive quandary: just as mourning's static time and movement open themselves to pulsing, also the failure of the desired writing unfolds into vertiginous writing; this sliding movement not only keeps the irreconcilable relationship between its elements, but derives its potency precisely from that tension:

Nous sommes, par un mouvement trop fort, attirés en un espace où la vérité manque, où les limites ont disparu, où nous sommes livrés à la démesure, et c'est là pourtant qu'il nous est imposé de maintenir une démarche juste, de ne pas perdre la mesure et de chercher une parole vraie en allant au fond de l'erreur. (BLANCHOT, 1962, p. 192-193)

Blanchot's true word is not far from what Barthes glimpsed as a-dialectic term of the terrible destitution that was the loss of his mother; *Journal de deuil* notes, on the day after

Henriette's death: "S'il y a travail [de deuil], celui qui sera accouché n'est pas un être *plat*, mais un être *moral*, un sujet de la *valeur* – et non de l'intégration." (BARTHES, 2009, p. 18). This signals the directives that will guide both the mourning subject's existence and his mournful writing: to accomplish the spectral persistence of the one that was lost. She continues to act on the way of life cultivated by the survivor and, aside from daily life, the oeuvre is also inundated and reconfigured by the sorrow of that loss, as may be read in this excerpt from 6/5/78: "il m'est nécessaire (je le sais bien) de faire ce livre autour de mam. En un sens, aussi, c'est comme si il me fallait *faire reconnaître mam*. (...) [il faut que le livre soit] un acte, *un actif qui fait reconnaître*." (BARTHES, 2009, p. 144-145).

How can this recognition take place for those who never met Henriette? *La préparation du roman* (BARTHES, 2003) studies the matter in regards to *Vita Nova*, turning to Proust to study character composition that could achieve a satisfactory transit between biography and writing. *La chambre claire* follows a different path, as shown in the following *Journal* excerpt:

29 décembre 1978

Ayant reçu hier la photo que j'avais fait reproduire de mam. petite fille dans le jardin d'hiver de Chennevières, j'essaye de la mettre devant moi, à ma table de travail. Mais c'est trop, cela m'est intolérable, me fait trop de peine. Cette image entre en conflit avec tous les petits combats vains, sans noblesse, de ma vie. L'image est vraiment une mesure, un juge (comprends maintenant comment une photo peut être sanctifiée, guider → ce n'est pas l'identité qui est rappelée, c'est, dans cette identité, une expression rare, une « vertu »). (BARTHES, 2009, p. 231).

This demand to write something after the mother has certain conditions: that writing must be as good as the mother, or as the Sovereign Good that Barthes intends to textually recreate. This goal is similar to the one posed by a writer that was a reference for *Vita Nova*, and whose title Barthes borrows for his own work: Dante Alighieri.

3.1 On Barthes and Dante

The presence of Henriette Barthes, according to Roland Barthes, is reflected in his own work as forms of virtue and affection. This can be observed as what he calls the "Sovereign Good" in his writing: "En quoi mam. est présente dans tout ce que j'ai écrit: en ce qu'il y a là partout une idée du Souverain Bien." (BARTHES, 2009, p. 142).

This perception guides other texts besides *Journal de deuil*, as seen in *La chambre claire* (2011), when Barthes comes across the picture of his mother as a child and finds in that photo the image of everything she had been in life.

The picture would then translate what Barthes had been seeking to say – his mother's extreme kindness, her distinct innocence (innocence as the impossibility of doing evil). There was, in the picture, the image of the mother once again as the Sovereign Good, and thus life without her, says the author in *La chambre claire*, had become utterly unattractive.

So the mother as the Sovereign Good is a very important image in those texts that Claudia Amigo Pino (2011, p. 211) calls Barthes' "loving" works (texts that have as their driving force the issue of love), highlighting the fact that the writing of his unfinished novel would also be an attempt to communicate to the world the inexpressible qualities of his lost mother.

Barthes, we know, died before finishing the novel. It seems correct to suppose that the book was being constructed from his intimate notes – later published separately, as is the case of *Journal de deuil*. Then Barthes's novel, although only a sketch, was a real object. He has devoted his last two courses at Collège de France to talking about his work that was already being prepared. Today, this work survives as fragments. At the time of the course, however, starting from the experience of his desire for writing, Barthes's novel "was not a dream, it had a title: *Vita Nova*"² (PINO, 2011, p. 213).

In order to consider these fragments, with the help of Claudia Amigo Pino (2012), we can also look at the literary relations established by Barthes within the project of his novel.

At some point after his recent loss, Barthes would have found in *War and Peace* the impulse that led him to a state that was "miraculously suspended, relieved, full of life' by the idea that he would finally write a novel"³ (PINO, 2012, p. 231). It would thus have been from the first volume of the French edition of Tolstoy's work that Barthes got one of the inspirations for the title of his novel – the passage in which a certain character decides to change his life, seeking to become deserving of someone's love. With this in mind, Pino (2012) says that

this new life, this halfway, this second volume of Roland Barthes' writing consisted in entering literature, writing as though he had never done it. Well, what he had never done was precisely a Novel. Barthes' new life consisted in

²"não se reduzia a um devaneio, tinha um título: *Vita Nova*".

³ "milagrosamente suspenso, aliviado, cheio de vida' pela ideia de que ele finalmente escreveria um romance".

writing a novel and that novel would address this new life.⁴ (PINO, 2012, p. 239).

In addition to the idea of searching for the novel as a new way of writing, the similarities with Proust in that project would consist both in the development of a multiple form – something like a third form, between essay and novel (PINO, 2012, p. 232) – as well as dealing with the idea of becoming a writer:

[Barthes's novel would], such as *In search of lost time*, [be about] the formation of a writer (whose name would coincide with the name of the author), and the decision to write a novel (which would coincide with the title of the novel). But we would be far from a retrospective narrative of the writer's life from childhood and from the description of all his epiphany moments related to literature, as in the Proustian work. Barthes probably proposed a combination of different journals, which would show the different stages of a writer's formation: the lack of meaning in life, the search for meaning, the decision to search for meaning through literary writing, the attempts to write, etc.⁵ (PINO, 2011, p. 214).

This multiple projection in the work of a self that unfolds as a narrator, a character, and an author, is also a bond between Barthes and Dante. Barthes was seeking a “new life” that also implied in his new writing; that is, he longed for a new form of writing that would lead him to the narrative form par excellence.

But this narrative proposal led the narrative itself to another instance, from the fragmented aesthetics of diaries and intimate notes to form a composite work in which the novel form itself would be placed between a journal, an essay and a memoir. At this point, we think of Dante, because a composite writing is also something that can link even more clearly the productions of Dante and Barthes, whose relations interest us here when we consider the mourning aspect that is established in their works.

It is clear that the search for a “new life” in Barthes's novel was deeply linked to the experience of losing his mother, as well as to the desire of finding a new way of expression, all of this also connected to the pursuit of a Sovereign Good – the Sovereign Good as both maternal love and literature.

⁴“essa vida nova, esse meio do caminho, enfim, esse segundo volume da escritura de Roland Barthes consistia em entrar na literatura, escrever como ele jamais o tivesse feito. Ora, o que ele nunca tinha feito era exatamente o Romance. A vida nova de Barthes consistia em escrever um romance e esse romance trataria dessa vida nova”.

⁵ “[O romance de Barthes trataria], tal como *Em busca do tempo perdido*, da formação de um escritor (que coincidiria com o nome do autor) e da decisão de escrever um romance (que coincidiria com o título do romance). Mas estaríamos longe de uma narrativa retrospectiva da vida desse escritor desde a infância e da descrição de todos os momentos de epifania relacionados com a literatura, como na obra proustiana. Barthes propunha provavelmente uma junção de diferentes diários, que mostrariam as diferentes etapas dessa formação do escritor: a falta de sentido na vida, a busca de um sentido, a decisão de procurar um sentido por meio da escrita literária, as tentativas de escrever, etc.”.

In Barthes, the Sovereign Good turns from mourning into the question of his own writing. That is, in Barthes's novel, literature itself would take the place of the Sovereign Good, since, according to his notes, the work would portray a world that had become a "contradictory object of spectacle and indifference" and, in the midst of such anguished world, the main character would find "literature as salvation" (PINO, 2011, p. 215). Thus, this is the place of Sovereign Good, then occupied by writing. Moreover, Barthes's search for the new writing is linked not only to the names of Proust and Tolstoy, but also to Dante.

This relation between Dante and Barthes is clear from the beginning, in the title of Barthes' novel, "*Vita nova*" – similar to the name of Dante's work, which introduced a new format of literary text (just as Barthes wanted to do). This is precisely the point made by Nathalie Léger in the preface of *La préparation du roman* (BARTHES, 2003), also considering the issue of mourning:

[...] le double cours *La préparation du roman* est engagé sous la conduite de Dante. On sait qu'avec *Vita Nova*, sa première grande œuvre, Dante inaugurerait une forme nouvelle fondée sur l'engendrement réciproque du poème, du récit et du commentaire. Cette forme neuve était seule propre à dire, à la mort de Béatrice, la puissance de l'amour et la profondeur du deuil. (LÉGER apud BARTHES, 2003, p. 20).

Knowing that *La préparation du roman* is born from the attempt to write *Vita nova*, to admit the presence of Dante's text in the Collège de France course is to establish the presence of the Italian author in the novel's project.

Thus, not far from the questions textually faced by Barthes in his mourning, Dante's work is also the pursuit of writing up to his muse, sometimes the personification of Love.

This connection between the two authors – which considers the issue of lost love – also takes into account the structural issues that concern both works, especially regarding the "subversion" of genres.

Just as Dante's text promotes the combination of prose and poetry, taking the figure of the poet as narrator and commentator of his own work, the same kind of subversion can be found in Barthes' diaries, which would compose his novel.

The issue of mourning, which at first is identified as the longing for the lost love figures – Beatrice and the Mother –, eventually becomes the search for literature and for a new way of writing, and from this aspect comes the ambiguity of textual genres in both authors, whose writings are placed between autobiography and fiction, poetry, prose and fragment.

Considering these points, we must take into account Dante's *Vita nova*, in which the author "revises" and comments some of his love poems in the *dolce stil novo*.

The poetry of *dolce stil novo* promotes the vision of love for a female figure by linking it to a religious notion, an ideal of goodness, establishing a nobility of character based on the spiritual qualities of the woman's heart, so that this woman is desired by the poet as someone who emanates the divine perfection.

For a poet like Dante, we can say that the search for the right word is also a search for the word that is good enough for Love, idealized in Beatrice. This poetry, aspiring to perfection, can be approximated to the idea of Sovereign Good.

In this regard, therefore, we can see the Sovereign Good as both the mother figure for Barthes and Beatrice for Dante. In *Vita nova*, for instance, Dante describes:

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,
ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.

Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
e par che sia una cosa venuta
da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare [...]. (VN, XXVI, 1952, p. 66).

According to Dante's comment, this is the sonnet written for Beatrice to illustrate how graceful she was, beloved by the people of the city. As we can see, the poem also features the question of Beatrice's death, the issue towards which Dante's work is headed, although Beatrice's death is not evident from the beginning of the collection of poems.

Bearing in mind the matter of death and also thinking of his mother as the supreme emblem of kindness, Barthes will say in *Journal de deuil*: "D'une part, elle me demande tout, tout le deuil, son absolu (mais alors ce n'est pas elle, c'est moi qui l'investis de me demander cela). Et d'autre part (étant alors vraiment elle-même) elle me recommande la légèreté, la vie, comme si elle me disait encore : « mais va, sors, distrais-toi... »" (BARTHES, 2009, p. 42).

In Dante, Beatrice will also appear as one who, even dead, proposes an ambiguous condition of joy, making death a sweet invitation. We can see this in fragment XXXI:

[...] quando 'l maginar mi ven ben fiso,
giugnemi tanta pena d'ogne parte,
ch'io mi riscuoto per dolor ch'ì sento;
e sì fatto divento,

che da le genti vergogna mi parte.
Poscia piangendo, sol nel mio lamento
chiamo Beatrice, e dico: « Or se' tu morta? »;
e mentre ch'io la chiamo, me conforta. (VN, XXXI, 1952, p. 75).

At this point, Beatrice's death was finally revealed. Although there is suffering, the name of the beloved woman brings to the commentator a certain peace. Death will be a beautiful thing for Dante here, since death has opened itself to receive his lady, to the point that the poet is jealous of those who die (VN, XXXIII, 1966, p. 91), because they can enjoy what is denied to him.

There is also hope as the end of the work approaches, and that hope seems to concern the possibility of writing: this is because *Vita nova* ends with the poet's expectation that one day he will be able to write a piece worthy of his beloved one, saying of her "[...] quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna. E poi piaccia a colui che è sire de la cortesia, che la mia anima se ne possa gire a vedere la gloria de la sua donna, cioè di quella benedetta Beatrice [...]" (VN, 1952, XLII, p. 94).

Dante thus establishes *Vita nova* as the birth of a new writing, but also as his own condemnation, for the impossibility of saying what he sought to say, to the point that the mission would be postponed to a work to come.

When *Vita nova* begins, its pursued object is already lost to Dante, since he knows that Beatrice is dead – and perhaps he already knows, too, that the words are insufficient. The conclusion of the work is the attestation of a "failure" of the attempt to say something as good as the beloved object. But this failure drives the writing forward in search of a new verbal sign that could be like Love itself.

Considering the end of Dante's work, Adelia Noferi (1998) comments:

[...] Così la V.N. in realtà non si conclude: l'ultima visione è istituita a segno, ma non decifrata, l'enigma è mantenuto e riproposto, e la soluzione viene rimandata a un «dopo» extratestuale che postula una nuova lettura e una nuova scrittura. Allora, e ad ogni nuova lettura, agirà nuovamente il tempo retroattivo ed istituirà nel testo della V.N. una nuova isotopia di senso. (NOFERI, 1998, p. 77).

From this point of view, Dante's *Vita nova* is not concluded, one may say, as is the case of Barthes' novel. So we can ask ourselves: would that "new life" have arrived for either of them? In Dante's case, the answer may be affirmative if we consider his work within a larger project of writing pursuit, whose apex would be the *Commedia*, a concluded masterpiece. But could *Journal*

de deuil witness the dimensions of the Sovereign Good, of love, of new scripture — all sought but not completed by Barthes in his novel?

Returning to the non-accidental form of Barthes's diary, with its fragmented narrative, the author seems to compose there the kind of text appropriate to the painful experience of mourning. If Dante's *Vita nova* can be read as proof that a new life can come when someone is facing the death of a beloved one, then *Journal de deuil*, as it came to us, seems to operate in a similar manner, also postponing its conclusion, but in this case postponing it forever. With Barthes' death, the unfinished novel seems to suggest a shape with missing contours, the idea of what it would have been. Thus, Barthes' novel may not have arrived, but ironically the absent presence of this object is also the embodiment of a lost love, of an absent body.

Mourning, writing, love...

Throughout this study, we have chased recurrent questions in Barthes' *Journal de deuil* and considered the relationships between that set of notes, psychoanalytic concepts and the particularities of writing weaved in mourning, visiting the *Journal* and other barthesian projects, such as *La chambre claire* and *Vita Nova*, whose ties to the eponymous work by Dante Alighieri were approached as well.

Our reading is infused with the tireless irruption of certain motives and dynamics. One of them is the particular configuration mourning exacts upon certain pairs usually considered antithetical: life and death, presence and absence. Part of Barthes' theoretical proposals in the period when *Journal de deuil* was written (*Comment vivre ensemble*, *Le neutre* and *La chambre claire*, among others) aim to destabilize such pairs without recurring to a third element that could accommodate and overcome the conflict, but instead proposing different types of relationships between the terms. Among those, haunting is of particular interest to us for it operates in a state of in-betweenness, of permeabilities that are strange, difficult to stomach, even unbearable: sparks or shadows of the existence of someone who has passed can be glimpsed in fragments of words, gestures, objects etc.; the enduringness of someone so broken by his loss as to claim he feels as if he were dead (BARTHES, 2009, p. 119)...

As the writer finds himself irrecoverably apart from the one he loves, his writing seeks ways to construct a presence in the core of such terrifying absence: the lost one's legacy (value),

essence (innocence), affection. Whilst in *La chambre claire* those are both the departure points and the destination of an adventure, in *Journal de deuil* they come as twinges:

5 novembre [1977]

Après-midi triste. Brève course. Chez le pâtissier (futilité) j'achète un financier. Servant une cliente, la petite serveuse dit *Voilà*. C'était le mot que je disais en apportant quelque chose à maman quand je la soignais. Une fois, vers la fin, à demi inconsciente, elle répéta en écho *Voilà* (*Je suis là*, mot que nous nous sommes dit l'un à l'autre toute la vie).

Ce mot de la serveuse me fait venir les larmes aux yeux. Je pleure longtemps (rentré dans l'appartement insonore).

Ainsi puis-je cerner mon deuil.

Il n'est pas directement dans la solitude, l'empirique, etc. ; j'ai là une sorte d'aise, de maîtrise qui doit faire croire aux gens que j'ai moins de peine qu'ils n'auraient pensé. Il est là où se redéchire la relation d'amour, le « nous nous aimions ». Point le plus brûlant au point le plus abstrait... (BARTHES, 2009, p. 47)

The narrator burns with the impossible but nonetheless felt presence of the lost one, with the barrier that blocks the temporal flow, sews the past into the present and seals any future; in one word, he burns with the love that insists in persisting and choking the subject in mourning. And out of everything we have been trying to say about *Journal de deuil*, perhaps we have yet to mention the most important: how touching it is. Surely, those notes contain the seeds of much that will be developed in *La chambre claire* about Time, Death and the un-interpretable, as well as aspects that will become goals of *Vita Nova* in *La préparation du roman*. However, besides its relevance for Barthes' oeuvre, we are deeply moved by the affection in *Journal de deuil*. We are pierced by the account of crying bouts, of feeling untethered, of moments when words stutter and projects stagger; also by the chronicle of how sorrow can be resilient beyond all reason and infiltrate places, habits, plans, convictions, identity itself and especially writing – this writing that, before it can be rediscovered as a possible dwelling-place for Good (BARTHES, 2009, p. 236), does undergo destitution and crumbles apart.

'Opaque' is a recurrent term in *Journal de deuil* and according to Zublena (2015) it organizes the profound trouble brought by mourning to Barthes' writing. In his reading of the *Vita nova* plans, Zublena posits that Barthes functionalizes his mourning as a moral trial required to gain access to the noble realm of Literature, which would be the terrain chosen to express the pathos (ZUBLENA, 2015, p. 56).

Sticking to the *Journal*, we see there the sorrowful meanderings of a mourning that resists being apprehended, co-opted or solved, that imposes living with the catastrophic

coexistence of love-and-death in its full unbearableness. Before mournful writing can become a blinding flash and reach the status of affective knowledge developed in *La chambre claire* and sought by the hybrid of essay and narrative that *Vita Nova* meant to be, there is a place where that writing is the abyss of inscrutability itself, barely scratched by sentences that define very little and that we might qualify as corny or poetic, inasmuch as “La Mort, le Chagrin ne sont rien que: banals” (BARTHES, 2009, p. 233).

Mon étonnement – et pour ainsi dire mon inquiétude (mon malaise) vient de ce qu’à vrai dire, ce n’est pas un manque (je ne puis décrire cela comme un manque, ma vie n’est pas désorganisée), mais une *blessure*, quelque chose qui fait mal au cœur de l’amour. (BARTHES, 2009, p. 75)

One last thought: there are studies showing that Barthes’ mourning did run its course, with the affective investment migrating from the mother to literary writing, and that the inability to speak that *Journal de deuil* affirms repeatedly was conquered in *La chambre claire*; we believe that it is also relevant to highlight the degree of opaqueness of this mournful plunge where love becomes overwhelming and spectre-like and is embodied in rather precarious writing. This opaqueness is not unlike the one described by Blanchot: inapprehensible, inordinate, excruciating, ruin, and it does not seem incompatible with notions dear to Barthes during his final years, such as the intractable.

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