

Embodied Narration. Illness, Death and Dying in Modern Culture, edited by Heike Hartung. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018. Pp. 260. €34.99 (paperback and electronic).

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This excellent collection is the fifteenth volume in the Aging Studies series at Transcript, edited by Heike Hartung, Ulla Kriebner, and Roberta Maierhofer. The volume presents a comprehensive analysis of modern and contemporary fiction in which a close interrelation between body and narration is established, as the protagonists' corporeality becomes omnipresent through either illness or intense and chronic pain. As the editor of the volume develops in an exhaustive introduction around the concept of embodiment in modern culture, recent studies have challenged Cartesian dualism in order to "move beyond the nature/culture binary" (9), which is precisely the perspective from which the term "embodiment" is developed in the different articles that compose this volume. Departing from Michel Foucault's concept of "biopower," Hartung states that "an extensive control and power over life" (11) has relegated dying to a private space and, with it, the experiences of aging and illness. However, Hartung also points to emerging debates of the concept of embodiment, introduced by researchers such as Paul Rabinow, Rose Braidotti, and Nikolas Rose, in whose work the body encompasses corporeal and psychological dimensions as well as political, social, and cultural ones. In this state of affairs, the chapters included in Hartung's volume explore the relationship between literary form and "liminal embodied experiences such as illness, death and dying" (14). In other words, each article that composes the collection looks into the ways the authors analyzed reinvent the potentialities of literature in order to reflect on embodied experiences of illness and dying. Thus, the volume brings topics such as illness and dying center-stage. At the same time, it reflects on the potentialities of these topics when approached from the perspective of literary texts which, on the one hand, explore the richness of language in creating one's own reality when in a situation of continuous pain or near death and, on the other hand, bring up significant issues about life itself.

In this sense, the wide variety of authors and texts analyzed is clearly one of the strengths of the volume while it also manages admirably to create coherence through a joint focus on the specific language choices that each literary author offers in his or her reflection on illness and death.

Heike Hartung opens the collection exploring approaches to death and dying in works by Henry James, Samuel Beckett, Christopher Isherwood, and Julian Barnes. By analyzing specific literary texts by the above-mentioned authors with a focus on the relationship between material culture, embodiment and death, Hartung delineates the words that define the experience of death throughout the twentieth century; namely, failure, loss, silence, fear and denial. In chapter two, Rüdiger Kunow offers enriching reflections on the difficulties of representing pain through literature; as he states, “[s]uch moments of excess, when the materiality of the body outstrips the resources of language, when words are failing us, are oftentimes moments of acute corporeal sensation, pleasurable or painful” (51). Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s contribution, chapter three, moves from pain to dying, an experience which is as opaque and subjectively lived as suffering from constant pain. Similarly to Hartung’s point on Barnes’s *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Gullette notes the difficulty of getting into the dying experience from an outside perspective. The knowledge we may gain either comes from reading about it or is deduced from being witnesses to the dying process that others experience. In other words, according to Gullette, memoirs happen to be a rich resource for getting insight into dying. In chapter four, Sarah J. Ablett focuses on exploring “disgust” in Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*. Ablett’s main objective is to establish disgust as a prominent emotional response to works of art. Ablett develops the interesting claim that Beckett’s investigation of disgust through his characters provokes repulsion but also attraction by inviting readers to become witnesses of “liminal physical and mental experiences” (86). In chapter five, Ellen Matlok-Ziemann offers a different view of Eudora Welty’s well-known short story “A Worn Path” by applying the concepts of “dis- and dys-appearance of the body” (104) developed in Merleau-Ponty’s, Simone de Beauvoir’s, and Drew Leder’s research. According to Matlok-Ziemann, the body of Welty’s protagonist is

made present through her failing eyesight that contrasts with her constant movement – both physical movement and psychological growth – in her familiar body within which she has lived the experiences that define her as a black woman of the South.

Mirjam Grewe-Salfeld's focus on young-adult fiction is an exception within the collection. Grewe-Salfeld maintains that death is increasingly avoided and even perceived as taboo in our present-day society, which results "in an uneasiness over the boundaries between the corporeal bodies of the living and the dead" (122). This uneasiness is at the core of two novels whose young adult protagonists experience terminal illnesses, namely, Jenny Downham's *Before I Die* and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. Both texts, following Grewe-Salfeld's analysis, provide insight into the difficulty of growing up when pain and death become inseparable companions. With chapter seven, the focus continues on a character fighting cancer and, thus, the presence of death, in Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl's analysis of *Kin*, an autobiographical family saga by the Bosnian-Croatian Miljenko Jergovic. As Gramshammer-Hohl convincingly argues, Jergović's long autobiography tries to make sense of his complex relationship with his mother, who is dying of cancer, as well as with his motherland and motherland's history, which are closely interrelated with his own body. In chapter eight, Ariane Schroder analyzes Dale Peck's novel *Martin and John* as an example of empowering storytelling in the age of AIDS through which the author faces his own fears and grief, partly inherited from the social stigma attached to the illness. In chapter nine, Vira Sachenko explores Virginia Woolf's representation of her illness through her own understanding of fiction as co-creating "a common reality" (198). Anita Wohlmann's contribution offers a detailed and convincing analysis of the figurative language present in David Foster Wallace's short story "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing," in which the main character and narrator constantly identifies with his illness and, eventually, becomes that negative, destructive Other. In the last chapter, Monika Class provides an in-depth analysis of Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost*, which narrates a lifelong experience with pain, describing her body as being under constant attack.

Each of the articles that compose the collection invites the readers into a nuanced analysis of protagonists who live through intense pain and illness, highlighting the potentialities of language as well as the contradictions that arise inside the same protagonists between their failing bodies, their selves and society's expectations. This collection traces the literary creativity that is required in narrating illness, bodily and mental disruption, dying processes, and death – topics which may be perceived as uncomfortable and even distasteful in our contemporary times but which, as the authors of the articles show, have their own particular appeal, not least because they are intrinsic to the human condition. This focus is all the more important when we are constantly bombarded by messages in which “fighting” illness and even “avoiding” death through technological and medical resources are presented as not only plausible but almost obligatory (Katz and Marshall 2003; Higgs and Gilleard 2016). Concepts such as disgust, uneasiness, distress, and grief caused by illness and the dying process are actually inseparable from the human condition. Thus, this volume reminds academics and other readers of the need to go back to the basics in human existence with the power of narrative at its very core. Through narrative, the characters, narrators, and writers analyzed in this volume turn their private experiences into public ones which, inevitably, define our common conceptions of the body in its many meanings: socially, culturally, and politically.

WORKS CITED

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