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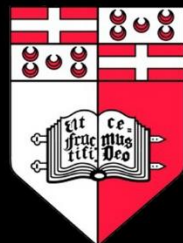


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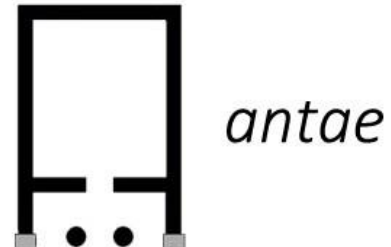
Editorial

Elsa Fiott, Aaron Aquilina

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antae is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also accepted.

Editorial

Elsa Fiott, Aaron Aquilina

University of Malta



‘To die, to sleep.
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There’s the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.’
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*¹

‘When we are gone
our lives will continue without us.’
John Burnside, ‘Afterlife’²

It is, of course, not surprising that a good portion of life is spent thinking about its end. And, after this, a possible new beginning. From a religious point of view, the afterlife conditions the way a life is led, which in turn raises the possibility of pitting life against the afterlife: being-in-the-world-now as opposed to eternal life. Alongside these religious concerns, the notion of afterlife sets up a tension between permanence and ephemerality. The unvarying endurance of artifice attracts both John Keats and W.B. Yeats in poems like ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and ‘No Country for Old Men’. Conversely, Friedrich Nietzsche denounces the ascetic life of renunciations, championing instead the more Dionysian immersion in immanence and its implicit decay. Neither is it surprising that to speak of (after)life is also to speak of death.

Is death what ends the cycle of life, or what begins it? Can we get the better of death? And, come to think of it, is there any concern as religious as this? Joseph Fletcher’s (*Edinburgh College of Art*) ‘Off with his head!’, an essay which looks at how Bataille imagines a possible re-beginning after death, reads the Acéphale project on the horizons of myth and sacrifice as that which confounds death itself. Similarly, Isabel Gil-Naveira’s (*University of Oviedo*) ‘The Afterlife in Chicano Literature: Children as Priests and Totemic Animals in *Bless Me, Ultima* and “The Moths”’ narrows in on one cultural understanding of the cyclical nature of life and death through a deconstruction of these very same implicit binary opposites. Soumava Maiti (*Visva-Bharati University*), in a paper entitled ““Borne again in repetition”: Reincarnation, Afterlives and Cultural Memory in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*’, traces the

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2006) 3.1, lines 63-68, p.285.

² John Burnside, ‘Afterlife’, *Scottish Poetry Library*

<<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/afterlife>> [accessed 2 October 2016].

link between socio-cultural reconstructions of the afterlife and notions of rebirth and reincarnation. If life is ever-present, so too seems the religious.

But the use of death as a lens which distils or distorts what life means is not solely the prerogative of religion. If a belief in the afterlife is a means of bypassing the problem of finitude, those without this belief may derive some fortitude from thought which embraces temporality. Authentic being-in-the-world, in Heideggerian terms, should be determined by the finitude that constitutes our existence. The emphasis on the finality of this life allows Jacques Derrida to speak of learning how to live finally, with life already rendered posterior as living *after* death.³ As Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard have shown, prefixes can be ambivalent, so that ‘after’ evokes distance as well as influence. To think *afterwards*, that is, in the direction of or in the time of ‘after’, encompasses a necessary delay or lateness, but also, a sense of retrospective knowledge. And yet, the afterlife often remains unknown and possibly unmappable territory. Dealing with these questions, amongst others, is Mathelinda Nabugodi’s (*University College London*) paper, ‘Answering the Questions: What is Life?’, which threads the borderlines between survival and immortality in the afterlife of literary texts—namely, Shelley’s unfinished ‘The Triumph of Life’—reflecting the idea of translation as afterlife in the paper’s very own style.

What might being-*after-life* entail, a way of being without being? Though the phrasing might furnish us with one way of referring to thought on the afterlife, it also allows us to pose this question: can ‘being-*after-life*’ be an ontology that turns its back on what we might call an intellectual “thanatobsession”, following Rosi Braidotti’s claim that ‘death is overrated’?⁴ José Saramago’s *Death with Interruptions*, however, wistfully reminds us how fantastically impossible the elimination of death is from our conception and experience of life: though death may be delayed, life will always be interrupted.

The fear of death makes the thought of afterlife a necessary element in our defence mechanism: thinking through the afterlife not only resets but suspends the hourglass. Real finitude is perhaps unfathomable, a threateningly blank canvas which we need to fill in. Conceptualising the afterlife can also be part of our survival kit; life throws so much misery our way that our resilience often entails that some kind of afterlife is woven into the seamed fabric of existence. Interest in an afterlife can also stem from a desire to negate and reject life, where the preposition “*after-*” remains simultaneously open and closed, a blank canvas that is both promising and reticent, and with both hope and hopelessness being on the threshold between life and afterlife. To contemplate the blank canvas, then, may be calming in itself, precisely because it is a different canvas, or because it is blank in the first place.

It is perhaps impossible to think of life without any temporal prepositions. Though we know very well what the end of a narrative is, the idea of closing *our* book at the final page without there being any more pages or books to go through seems too debilitating. And what of

³ See Jacques Derrida, Jean Birnbaum, *Learning How to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York, NY: Melville House, 2007) and Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Illinois, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁴ Rosi Braidotti, ‘Bio-Power and Necro-Politics: Reflections on an Ethics of Sustainability’, in *Springerin* <http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1928&lang=en> [accessed 18th September 2016].

closing the book on humanity, rather than an individual life? Kelly Dent's (*University of Malta*) posthumanist discussion of Cormac McCarthy's novels, in 'The Unbearable Trauma of Being: Death, Hope, and (in)Humanity in the work of Cormac McCarthy', analyses the role played by hope and the intrinsically human need for narratives of the afterlife. More generally, we might even venture to say that the desire to guarantee some form of our continuity underlies some of our principle practices. The dissemination of our genes constitutes one form of what afterlife could be, whereas artistic or political contributions, for example, are, in a sense, the intellectual sublimation of reproduction, in the spirit of Shelley's 'Adonais'. After a friend's death, as Derrida poignantly reminds us in *The Work of Mourning*, we carry our friend's afterlife.

In the same manner that we fashion ourselves during our lives, some of us might also aim to control the manner in which we are re-membered in our afterlives; our textual selves, literal and otherwise, are however open to interpretation and reconstruction. Laura Martínez-García's (*University of Oviedo*) paper, 'Nell Gwyn's many after-lives: Taming "the Protestant Whore" in 21st-century popular fiction'—which looks to historical, fictional, and filmic re-interpretations—treats this very issue, as does Samuel Head's (*The Ohio State University*) 'Survival of the Most Memorable: Darwin's Textual Afterlife Through Rhetoric in *The Origin of Species*', which looks at Darwin's unique role in ascertaining his own afterlife. So too does Mary Ross-Volk (*La Trobe University*) in her paper "'The Face of Evil": Gothic Biofiction and the Figures of Enduring Terror in a Post-9/11 World'. Here, she looks at the temporal reconstructions of the literal face of terrorism through the mode and nuances of the Gothic.

These conceptions of the afterlife can only guarantee a fragmented continuity for the subject. Bartleby's previous employment in the Dead Letter Office is a woeful antidote to this, where the 'after' is largely inconsequential in view of the life that has been terminated: after our lives have ended, Life goes on. Put simply, the afterlife as a narrative cannot challenge the end of all narratives which is death. In a sense, the afterlife is a failure of the imagination: 'the fancy cannot cheat so well | As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf'.⁵ Indeed, whatever afterlife might mean to us, it is often confined to being 'a shadow of a magnitude', with mortality weighing 'heavily' on us in the meantime.⁶

Moreover, the prospect of an afterlife might be as threatening as the prospect of nothingness after death. Hamlet's famous soliloquy (quoted above) shifts the fear of death to the fear of the afterlife, which eliminates the promise of oblivion. Perhaps the afterlife does not really escape the Sisyphean cycle and it is condemned to the same absurdity that life is. And finally, "perhaps" is possibly the only word we can use with certainty in our conjecture on the afterlife. Although the questions raised here and in the papers published in this issue are unanswerable, their importance can be encapsulated in a simple thought experiment: imagine what life would be like *after* having answered these questions.

And so we end. And so we begin.

⁵ John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', *John Keats: Poems* (London: Everyman's Library, 1994), pp. 28-31, p. 31.

⁶ Keats, *John Keats: Poems*, 'On First Seeing the Elgin Marbles', p. 16.

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