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Growing Grief: Cultivating Life After Death in the Garden

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how cultural representations of gardens are entangled with stories of grief in productive and creative ways to demonstrate ongoing attachments and relationships with the dead. Building on the turn in grief and death studies towards a "continuing bonds" model, I argue that grief is enmeshed in the spaces and places of the past, present, and future, in relations between self and others, and in the social performance of private and public expectations. The garden is thus an ideal location in which to think about grief alongside perpetual return, persistence, and multiplicity as an activity of ongoing and future-oriented interaction with the deceased. In a range of cultural sources, including Hugo Simberg's *The Garden of Death* (*Kuoleman puutarha*, 1896), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), and Mélissa Da Costa's *Les Lendemains* (2020) [The Days After], gardens and gardening feature alongside symbols and storylines of death and grief. In these works, the garden becomes a site for the construction and reconstruction of relationships between the living and the dead. Gardens, therefore, do not provide closure so much as open up avenues of communication and consolation to intertwine the living and the dead, the past, present, and future, and different places, spaces, and environments. In this paper, I show how grief, without any definitive endpoint, shapes and takes shape in the garden. In argue that there is an optimism to be found in the garden as a cultural site of grieving that does not signal detachment from the dead but employs loss as a productive and creative force for future-oriented growth and change.

Keywords: continuing bonds; affect theory; mourning; bereavement; gardening; memorial

Plotting Grief in the Garden

In *Plant Dreaming Deep*, May Sarton's journal of her life in rural New Hampshire, the author describes her decision to buy a house in the USA following the deaths of her parents. The home(s) she once knew in Europe—in England, France, Belgium, and Switzerland—no longer feel like *home* and, in the marriage of Flemish furniture with American architecture, she comes to associate her ancestral European roots with her present North American life. *Plant Dreaming Deep* is thus a journal of death and grief, but it is also a journal that celebrates life and living to provide an illustrative account of the ways that grief productively and creatively ties together different persons and times in a multi-layered space. As Sarton writes:

> I suddenly realised that what I had brought with me into the house, and the house itself, were making it possible for the first time since the death of my parents to evoke their joys. For the first time the joy that surrounds them in my mind could be rooted again, and had a place to root in. The long grief rose and melted away as I have so often seen mist do over my fields in the early morning. (Sarton 1968, 48)

One of the most striking locations in which Sarton begins to come to terms with the loss of her parents and to integrate their memories into her everyday life in New Hampshire is in the house's garden, transformed from a run-down wilderness into a "small orderly pocket" of lilac bushes, dwarf fruit trees, peonies, and irises (Sarton 1968, 123). It is here, she writes, that she feels closest to her mother, especially when planting bulbs in the symbolically hopeful expectation of "burying a living thing toward a sure resurrection" (Sarton 1968, 126). In this house, and particularly in the garden, Sarton finds that "the dead are not so much presences as part of the very fabric of my life; they are a living part of the whole. This way of absorbing death is not mourning. It does not look back romantically on the past; it builds the past into the present" (1968, 184).

In this paper, I explore how gardens may be deployed in literature and art to illustrate the complex affects of grief. Grief is an important and multifaceted experience lived by most persons at some point in their lives. It exists in diverse forms as a response to many different types of actual or anticipated loss but is most commonly associated with the subjective reaction to the death of a loved one (see Kristjánsson 2018, 124; Charmaz and Milligan 2006, 516). Grief is now widely acknowledged through models of affect and "continuing bonds", both of which frame grief as an enduring process that does not disappear with time but shapes the everchanging relationship between the living and the dead. From these perspectives, the garden becomes an ideal location through which to think about grief as an intensity or affect because it eschews narratives of definitive burial in favour of those that encourage us to think of perpetual return, persistence, and multiplicity. Enacting seasonal changes broadly demonstrative of a cycle of birth, death, and eventual rebirth, the garden may be understood as a performative space for grief that does not lay the past to rest but continues to engage with it over time. As Sarton suggests, the practice of burying seeds and bulbs as a means of assuring their future growth has a profound metaphorical significance

for thinking about life and death in the garden, where future development is nourished by the organic traces of past decay and by the hopeful optimism of resurrection.

In art and literature, the garden may be juxtaposed with symbols and stories of death and grief in ways that evoke entanglements between spaces and places of the past, present, and future, and relations between self and Others. In three cultural works that span different centuries, countries, and contexts, themes of death, grief, and the continuity of life are tied together in images of the garden and acts of gardening. By analysing the ways in which the living and the dead interact with and in the garden, I show that gardening has both a metaphorical and a potentially practical significance for grief. In Hugo Simberg's painting *The Garden of Death* (1896) the lines between life and death are blurred as the dead nurture seedlings towards future growth. In two works of fiction, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) and Mélissa Da Costa's *Les Lendemains* (2020) [The Days After], gardens have a particular affinity with grief as the living occupy and find meaning in garden spaces that provide consolation after the deaths of loved ones. While not exhaustive, these works all clearly juxtapose themes of death with garden spaces to illuminate grief as a process of enduring interconnection between the living and the dead. By analysing these gardens as spaces that continue to entangle the living and the dead, I illustrate how grief need not detach us from the deceased but instead encourage ongoing attachments and relationships in productive and creative ways.

Grief, Affect, Entanglement

In his reading of affect, Brian Massumi distinguishes between affect and emotion, arguing that affect is an un-willed, objective, non-narrative movement of intensity that carries the potential for emotion, the embodied qualification of subjective, "narrativisable" accumulations of intensity (1995, 88). Following Spinoza, Massumi emphasises the constant charge and transformative potential of embodied affect—"a body's ability to affect or be affected"—that entangles the subject into the world through relations of movement and restriction (2015, 4). In his work on grief, George Bonanno similarly argues that although consisting in a multitude of different emotions, grief cannot be reduced to any single emotion. Emotions, he argues, are "ephemeral phenomena, generally lasting between a few seconds and several hours"; grief, on the other hand "is an enduring state that for most bereaved individuals persists between several months and several years" (Bonanno 2001, 494). Although, as Kathy Charmaz and Melinda J. Milligan identify, grief's triggers may typically be temporally situated—around the time of a loved one's passing—the end point of grief, if there can be an end point at all, "is often much less clear and may never occur" (2006, 520). Following Bonanno, Charmaz and Milligan argue that grieving "is seldom linear; it ebbs and flows", exerting what might be better understood as an affective charge or intensity that waxes and wanes but can rarely be described as non-existent (2006, 520).

Kathleen Higgins makes a similar argument when she writes that: "The grieving process is not linear, and many years after the loved one's death, one may have occasions of being

racked by distress and longing when some incident, object, or fleeting memory makes the loss seem vivid again" (2020, 17). As an affect, grief may be readily understood not as the product of an encounter, but as the mediation of encounter itself; an intermediary or in-between rather than an outcome. Feminist affect theorist Sara Ahmed argues against the stability and interiority of emotions, suggesting instead that they are perpetually fluctuating intensities that "stick" to some objects and subjects and "slide over" others (2014, 8). Ahmed proposes a theory of "affective economies" in which "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation", as when feelings of desolation and grief associated with a loss flood back at certain times of the year, when looking at a photograph, or in particular places (2014, 8). Grief, then, retains the potential to generate conflicted feelings of hurt, despair, and sadness at different times, in different ways, and to different extents.

Such affective approaches are visible in grief studies through the ways in which grief is increasingly understood to move between subjects and objects, in greater or lesser quantities and qualities, in ways that entangle the living and the dead, the past, present, and future, and different places, spaces, and persons. These approaches are therefore evocative of Phyllis Silverman and Dennis Klass' work on a "continuing bonds" model of grief, in which it is suggested that the purpose of grief is to encourage "the mourner's continuing bonds with the deceased" (1996, 3). Against the Freudian tradition, which posits mourning as a healthy—albeit painful—process of introjection following loss, and in which the bonds between the living and the dead are broken (see Freud 1957), Silverman and Klass emphasise the ways in which human beings are connected to one another in life. This web of relations between different selves continues, they argue, after death, such that the deceased continue to occupy a position of meaningful interaction and influence on the present lives of the living. In their model, grief leads not to detachment, but to the accommodation of the lost Other, a continual process of adaptation and change that leads to "the construction and reconstruction of new connections" (Silverman and Klass 1996, 18). They continue:

> We cannot look at bereavement as a psychological state that ends and from which one recovers. The intensity of feelings may lessen and the mourner become more future- rather than past-oriented; however, a concept of closure, requiring a determination of when the bereavement process ends, does not seem compatible with the model suggested by these findings. We propose that rather than emphasising letting go, the emphasis should be on negotiating and renegotiating the meaning of the loss over time. While the death is permanent and unchanging, the process is not. (Silverman and Klass 1996, 18–19)

Grief, for Silverman and Klass, is not a temporary phase through which the mourner passes unchanged; on the contrary it is a continuous force which affects the mourner—in various ways and to a greater or lesser extent—for the rest of their lives: "The process does not end," they argue, and people do not "get over" a loss but are rather transformed by the experience of grief, incorporating past relationships into evolving understandings of the self and the world: "In this process, people seek to gain not only an understanding of the meaning of

death, but a sense of the meaning of this now dead or absent person in their present lives" (Silverman and Klass 1996, 19).

The model of continuing bonds ratifies a sense of meaning and purpose in the ongoing connection with the deceased. In their more recent work, published two decades after the earlier observations of continuing bonds in grief, Dennis Klass and Edith Steffen highlight the malleability of one's bonds with the deceased and posit the opportunity to reform or renegotiate bonds in ways that may not have been possible when the other person was still alive (2017, 4). The deceased maintain a material presence in the lives of the living, not merely as memories but as objects that have the potential to exert an influence over the actions, thoughts, and events of the living. This relationship between the living and the dead reassigns interactivity and agency in the process of grief as what Robert Neimeyer, Dennis Klass, and Michael Robert Dennis call a "situated interpretive and communicative activity charged with establishing the meaning of the deceased's life and death, as well as the postdeath status of the bereaved within the broader community concerned with the loss" (2014, 485). In a footnote they clarify this description:

> By "situated," we mean to emphasise that mourning is a function of a given social, historical and cultural context; by "interpretive," we draw attention to the meaning-making processes it entails; by "communicative," we stress the essential embeddedness of such processes in written, spoken, and nonverbally performed exchanges with others; and by "activity," we underscore that grieving and mourning are active verbs, not merely states to be endured. In sum, "the work of grief," in our view, involves reaffirmation or reconstruction of a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss, at social as well as individual levels, in a specific cultural and historical frame. (Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis 2014, 486)

Although there is a general reluctance to consider grief in overly optimistic terms, or to overlook the potentially pathological or maladaptive properties of grief, the continuing bonds model suggests that grief may be productive, transformative, and informative. The frequent desire to find reason or purpose in the loss of a loved one demonstrates just one such processual avenue as grief takes on a hermeneutic function to generate meaning and understanding for those left behind: the presence of the dead persists in the epistemological and ethical orientation of the living.

This model thus evokes a distinctly Derridean turn in theoretical approaches to grief and mourning. Again, challenging Freud's framing of healthy grieving as a process of detachment that must reach closure or resolution, Derrida (1988) rejects the possibility of "successful mourning" as a brutal assassination of the dead (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004, 159–160). He suggests that mourning need not condone the abandonment of the dead, severing completely the boundaries between the dead and the living, but might encourage their ongoing interaction to remain "ouverte et au fond interminable, autrement dit *sans fin*" [open and fundamentally interminable, in other words never-ending] (Derrida 1996, 136, translation my own). Borrowing from Hegel, he designates two forms of mourning,

Erinnerung and *Gedächtnis*, and defines the former as remembrance of the dead, oriented towards the past, and the latter as a thinking memory, which seeks out potential new attachments, engaging the future. *Erinnerung* will only preserve fragments of the dead, snippets of memories, words, and voices, traces of a past that will never be present, while *Gedächtnis* is an ongoing and creative encounter between the dead and the mourner that engages the other *as other* in the production of a future-oriented memory. Turning away from a model of grief that is oriented towards the past, Derrida proposes that mourning should invoke memories that are still-to-come, encouraging continued interaction and interconnectedness with the dead through an interminable process of constructive grief.

Framing grief as a persistent entanglement of selves across time and space helps to situate the garden as a site for the construction and reconstruction of relationships between the living and the dead. If memorialisation of the dead may be criticised for replacing absence with presence (Ahmed 2014, 156), then gardening is arguably an inventive strategy for dealing with the invariability and inaction of static memorials. Often distinct from the site of burial or scattering of ashes, gardens—and most notably memorial gardens—signify a separate space in which the dead are integrated into the lives of the living (Maddrell 2019, 56). As Avril Maddrell has argued of the Organ Donation Isle of Man Memorial Garden, "the physical garden and the embodied use of and care for the garden serve as a mesh of overlapping and intersecting emotional-affective spaces of commemoration and consolation" that connect personal loss to "the possibilities of social change" and improved futures (2019, 58). There is thus not only a metaphorical but a powerfully practical relationship between gardens and grief. Refusing to abandon the dead as worthless and useless traces of a forgotten past, gardens and gardening encourage an ongoing and future-oriented interaction with the deceased. Grief has an affective affinity with the continuity and variability of the garden, in which the dead are not buried and forgotten but provide nourishment for growth and change in the future. This is not to claim that gardening necessarily provides an antidote to the painful experiences of grief, but rather to suggest that gardens and gardening exemplify the affective possibilities of grief in ways that may offer consolation and commemoration to the bereaved.

Cultivating Life After Death

The garden is, I propose, the ideal literary site in which to imagine the perpetuity of connections between the living and the dead and to frame grief as a potentially creative and transformative activity. From the Biblical Garden of Eden to The Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew in London, the garden reflects a paradox of pleasure and pain, life and death, and nature and culture, be it in the birth of sin in the mythical utopia or in the entangled history of slavery and colonialism in Western botanical collections today (see Cornish 2020; Antonelli 2020). For Michael Brown, in *Death in the Garden*, the garden is a seductive but duplicitous site of pleasure and relaxation that harbours the constant threat of mischief or death:

> We imagine that gardens are a place of peacefulness, a refuge from the world, where we will be safe and escape the madness and dangers of the outside world; […] yet the garden could become a prison and safety could be elusive. Some plants could make you ill, or even kill you, if not used correctly. The fear of being bitten by snakes or other venomous beasts and insects is shown by the frequent antidotes provided by the early herbals. Murder and suicides are written about in stories and plays, which possibly reflected real life. Gardeners used poisons to kill the pests that attacked the plants that they needed for food, and in some cases the same poisons were responsible for the deaths of the gardeners too. Even today, many deaths and injuries are the result of tending to the garden. (2018, 7)

Certainly, popular culture reflects the ways in which the garden represents an ironic meeting place of threat and treat. In the Western tradition, expulsion from the garden of Eden and the loss of immortality have been read as an ambivalent mitigation of death (Wells 2020), while in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) Adam and Eve's duties to tend the garden are upset by the intrusion of evil as death mutates from the image of divine punishment to that of a guiding force in the ability to live a good life (Erskine 1917). In Colette's *La Chatte* (1955, The Cat), the garden provides the setting in which the drama between the three protagonists—two humans and a cat—plays out and embodies the Edenic paradoxes of refuge and expulsion: "[the garden] excludes those who were not born there, while it imprisons those who were" (Philbrick 1990, 79). In a contemporary novel of dementia, *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014), the opening discovery of a broken compact mirror in a friend's garden foreshadows the central role of the garden and the act of digging in the eventual discovery of the protagonist's long-lost sister. The garden here is a symbiotic site of concealment and revelation, and the act of digging itself is representative of the protagonist's search for clues and memories in the unfolding detective plot (Sako 2016). So too have gardens been the site of murder and death in television series, such as a *Midsomer Murders* episode titled "Garden of Death" (2000), in which a memorial garden evokes past murders in the shadow of new discoveries.

The garden is also an ideal location in which to consider the continuities between life and death through the lens of grief. For Franklin Ginn, garden landscapes reflect the current trend in death studies away from grief as a process of "putting the deceased 'to rest'" and towards the "'continuing bonds' model, which stresses continued attachment to loved ones after they have died" (2014, 232–233). The garden, he argues, provides such a "'connective tissue' that joins the living with the dead" by evoking the circulation of presence and absence, life and death, past and future (Ginn 2014, 234). Indeed, as Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester write in *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place, and Action*, the garden is a dynamic space of perpetual, synergistic transformation, characterised by the skirmishes of progress and failure, "an ecology of interrelated and connected thoughts, spaces, activities, and symbols" (1990, 2). In the garden and in the act of gardening the lines between life and death are blurred, as the gardener must confront the entangled sequences of birth, growth, death, and rebirth. Moving away from the idea that the dead must be laid to rest in the tradition of dust-to-dust or earth-to-earth, the garden yields to the "natural cycles of decay, transition

and rebirth", giving a sense that the dead are "dually decomposing and thus nurturing new life forms" (Nugteren 2019, 63).

Figure 1. Hugo Simberg, *The Garden of Death* [*Kuoleman puutarha*], 1896. Finnish National Gallery (CC) [image in public domain].

The creative and productive interaction between life and death comes to the fore in *The Garden of Death* (*Kuoleman puutarha*, 1896) [Figure 1], a painting by 19th-century Finnish symbolist Hugo Simberg. The work, which can be found in slightly different versions in Tampere cathedral in Finland and in the permanent collection of the Ateneum art museum in Helsinki, is immediately striking: three cloaked grim-reaper figures wander the painting and tend to their thriving garden. The skeleton in the foreground holds a watering can while the figure in the centre of the painting appears to embrace a blue flower against her would-be heart. The situation seems unlikely: figures of the afterlife are incompatible with the life suggested by a nursery of plants and flowers, and why should the dead care if plants receive adequate water and light? Yet the stark contrast between life and death in the painting is enchanting, suggesting not so much a distinction but a continuity, borne out by the nurturing relationship of the skeletons to their botanical wards.

Although critical interpretations of the work typically draw out a spiritual reading that links to such Biblical sites as the Garden of Eden by arguing that the image depicts a place of purgatory to which the dead go before they reach heaven (Anttila 2020), I suggest that *The Garden of Death* animates the blurred boundary between the living and the dead in such a way that is constitutive of an understanding of death as continuous with life. As Edward S. Casey describes it, the garden is a "boundary" or "*liminal* phenomena", "half-way between the sacred and the profane", between death and growth or past and future—between that which has been planted and that which will eventually grow (1993, 154–155). The link between life and death in the painting is thus ultimately not only spiritual but deeply material: our bonds with the living are not broken after death but continue to supplement one another over time, demanding constant care and attention. These three cloaked grim-reaper figures, who wander the painting and tend to plants and flowers, illustrate the continued nourishment and cultivation of the living by the dead. As Ginn has argued in his cultural study of suburban gardens, the choice to plant certain varieties, install a memorial bench, or even to recognise the disorder of a domestic garden caused by the neglect of weeds can evoke past relationships, either by conjuring the memory of the dead directly or by indirectly signalling their absence in the overgrown and unkempt plants. He writes, therefore, that absent Others may "continue to produce the garden landscape after death", materialising in the specific geographies of a private or public garden (Ginn 2014, 233). This tangible relationship is precisely what connects the dead to the living and to the spaces and places of the present. As in *The Garden of Death*, this productive, transformative, and informative relationship is fundamentally affective: in a very visual sense, the dead continue not only to care for the living (plants) but to actively promote their growth and wellbeing.

For the moral philosopher Samuel Scheffler, our lives are always already entangled with the lives—and deaths—of many others, and our deaths will be no different, intertwined with the lives—and eventual deaths—of those who continue to exist after us. He argues that human beings naturally accept the notion of an "afterlife" not as the belief that we return from the dead or continue to exert conscious mental functions after our deaths but as the accepted knowledge that "other human beings will continue to live on after [our] own death" (Scheffler 2013, 131). Scheffler's theory of the afterlife insists upon and defines the relationship between the living and the dead; the living and the dead do not inhabit different worlds but the same world in different times and spaces and, for Scheffler, this awareness is comforting rather than upsetting because it implicates us—even after death—in a "future that will unfold after one is gone" (2013, 142). Although Scheffler considers this continuity in reverse—as the necessity to consider one's actions in the present through their potential impact in a future that one will not experience oneself—it nonetheless foregrounds the importance of thinking about our actions today as the precursor for others' choices, actions, and obligations in the future. Following Scheffler, we might propose that the garden illustrates a space of future possibilities that necessitate care and attention, even though the outcomes may only come to fruition after the death of the gardener. Indeed, Scheffler's words echo Sarton's comments on the perpetuity of the garden as a space that outlives the gardener: "To the flowers we never have to say good-by forever. *We* grow older every year, but not the garden; it is reborn every spring" (1968, 125). In Simberg's work, the nurture of

the living by the dead and the juxtaposition of affection and tenderness with the seemingly macabre themes of the painting inverts how we typically dissociate the living from the dead. There is not only continuity here, but a deep-seated concern that is valuable in any discussion of grief, particularly when loss typically evokes notions of absence, redundancy, and immateriality.

In Matthew Ratcliffe's phenomenological typology of grief, he notes that following a loss the world lacks a path or a pattern and disrupts previous forms and relations of meaning-making. He condones instead the notion of a continuity with the dead as a form of grief that retains "a sense of connection with the deceased [which] can play an important role in navigating the indeterminacy of loss and also endure beyond the point where one might be said to have adjusted to the loss" (Ratcliffe 2020, 663). In the same way that, in Ratcliffe's analysis, he defends the suggestion made by Jean-Paul Sartre in a memorial essay dedicated to the memory of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that the latter philosopher was "still alive" for the former because his "world is still affected by a certain style [of relating to the world]" (Ratcliffe 2020, 665), so the dead can, more broadly, be understood as still living in the garden through their influence on the landscape, the plants, and even the role the garden takes on after their passing. Thinking about the processes of grief in the garden illuminates the ways in which grief does not bury the dead and lay them to rest but rather opens up the material possibilities of integrating the past into the present in constructive, creative, and compassionate ways.

Growing Grief

The role of plants in the processes of grief have been well researched. Yeh-Jen Lin, Chi Yun Lin, and Yu-Chan Li summarise that:

> Flowers during bereavement are helpful in a number of ways. They brighten a sombre environment and offer a source of comfort. The unique quality of the grieving ritual featuring plants is the juxtaposition of life and death. The plant life cycle provides a metaphorical framework for contextualising death that is illustrative and meaningful. Plants elicit innate feelings of peace and contentment as individuals may appreciate their fragrant beauty replete with tactile and visual aesthetics. (Lin, Lin, and Li 2014, 604)

In Kathleen Higgin's (2020) work on aesthetic practices in response to grief, she particularly notes the imposition of a need for closure in Freudian conceptions of grief. Defending the continuing bonds model, she rejects the idea that closure is frequently seen as the goal of grief, but she defends the need—at times—to contain grief, and sees aesthetic practices, including funeral rites, the production and contemplation of art, storytelling, and even the adornment of a gravestone, as a means of establishing boundaries that facilitate some form of open-ended closure, providing a shape and form to the tangle of emotions that reconnect the grieving individual with others. In this sense, I suggest that gardening is just such an

aesthetic practice that—particularly when performed in the private grounds of one's own house as is the case in the examples that follow—constructs the necessary boundaries for the containment of grief while maintaining a connection to the past and to the absences of loss. Localising the processes of grief within a particular space and preventing its pathological overgrowth through the acts of weeding, pruning, and cutting, gardening is a valuable metaphor for thinking about the ways in which grief can persist while being simultaneously maintained, contained, and tamed.

As a literary trope, grief may be entangled with the image of the garden to reinforce notions of constancy and circularity. Indeed, perhaps the best-known literary representation of grief in a garden setting is Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* ([1911] 2008), a novel aimed at a young adult audience. This infamous example of a meeting place of magnificent flowers and plants with childhood grief recounts the orphaned Mary Lennox's discovery of the wonders of a locked garden in the wake of her parents' deaths. Mary is not the only child in the novel to experience the loss of a parent; Colin Craven, too, has lost his mother, drawing both children together in their mutual grief. When Mary discovers the garden, she finds it still and silent having been abandoned for ten years. Nonetheless, it still shows signs of life as the small shoots of underground bulbs peek out through the dense grasses and, with the child's help, find space to breathe and grow. Despite the spectral shadow of loss that hangs over the novel, the garden provides a space for the bereaved to "come alive" (Burnett [1911] 2008, 326). In a later essay titled "In the Garden," written shortly before she died and later published as an illustrated book, Burnett wrote that:

> As long as one has a garden one has a future; and as long as one has a future one is alive. It is remaining alive that makes life worth living—not merely remaining on the surface of the earth. And it is the looking forward to a future which makes the difference between the two states of being. There are a number of things and conditions which will provide futures if time and interest are given to them, but no one of them seems so natural, so simple and so alluring as making a garden. (1925, 10–11)

Burnett, herself a keen gardener who modelled the fictitious gardens of Misselthwaite Manor on the real gardens of Great Maytham Hall in England, sees in the garden the pull of the future, of life and vitality, and of possibility. Every season is the future of the one that came before, and the sense of "mystery and wonder" (Burnett 1925, 14) at what lies beneath the surface or pokes through the earth infuses the garden with a valiant multiplicity and tenacity that, Burnett argues, one cannot find anywhere else.

This sense of futurity is critical to the entanglements between grief and gardens, permeating the garden with possibilities for the living and for a life that is not abandoned by the dead but rather nourished by their continued presence. In a recent work of French literature, Mélissa Da Costa's *Les Lendemains* (2020) [The Days After], the garden once again becomes a space of grieving for the protagonist following devastating losses. Moving away from urban Lyon to the rural pine forests of Auvergne after the unexpected deaths of her husband and

unborn daughter, Amande Luzin grieves both the loss of the deceased persons, but also the loss of her social roles, including the anticipated but unrealised future role of motherhood (see Silverman and Klass 1996, 18). Yet, in the silence and isolation of the house, Amande discovers the calendars and diaries of the previous occupant, Mme Hugues, which have been annotated with comments and reminders:

> 2 avril: Repiquer les plants de laitue. 6 avril: Diviser les pieds de ciboulette. 10 avril: Maraîcher. 13 avril: Semer le persil. 18 avril: Tartine de confiture de fraises? 20 avril : Planter les dahlias. 22 avril: Installer le salon de jardin sous l'arbre de Paul. 30 avril: Rempoter les lauriers-roses.
>
> [April 2: Plant out the lettuce. April 6: Separate the chive stems. April 10: Market garden. April 13: Sow the parsley. April 18: Bread and strawberry jam? April 20: Plant the dahlias. April 22: Install the garden furniture beneath Paul's tree. April 30: Repot the oleanders.] (Da Costa 2020, 41, translations my own)

These notes, accumulated across ten years' worth of calendars and diaries, give detailed information on the weather, instructions for the cultivation and maintenance of the land, and even recipes for the consumption of the produce. Having found these notes and following their instructions, Amande begins clearing the overgrown garden, preparing the apples from the apple trees, and planting winter vegetables and spring bulbs.

The novel's garden ultimately brings together different persons and times, intermingling with their different expressions and charges of grief. For Mme Hugues, this garden provided a refuge in the years following the death of her husband, Paul, as a way of advancing through her desolation. For Amande, the cultivation of the land similarly helps her to regain a sense of purpose and value in life after the deaths of her husband, Benjamin, and unborn daughter, Manon: "je prends beaucoup de plaisir à bêcher, creuser, me plonger corps et âme dans ces tâches qui m'épuisent le soir venu, et permettent à mon esprit de s'évader". [I enjoy working the soil, digging, throwing myself body and soul into these tasks that tire me out by evening and allow my mind to wander.] (143) At the same time, for Julie, the daughter of Mme Hugues, it is the sight of the garden and particularly the apple trees being revived from their state of abandonment and neglect that resuscitates joyful memories of her own mother. For Richard, Benjamin's father and Amande's father-in-law, the construction of garden furniture enables him to recuperate after an acute depression. Finally, in re-enacting the actions of Mme Hugues, Amande's own grief interacts with that of her predecessor, a woman she never met: "Je pense beaucoup à Mme Hugues, quand je bêche, à l'énergie qu'elle a dû déployer pour remplir l'absence de Paul. Et je pense à Benjamin qui me répétait que je me plairais à la campagne." [I often think of Mme Hugues when I am working the soil, of the energy that she must have exerted to fill the absence left by Paul. And I think of Benjamin, who always told me that I would like it in the countryside.] (143–144)

In the garden, the bereaved find a sense of purpose that offers a glimmer of hope and happiness after so much sorrow. As Amande discovers the first cabbages and lamb's lettuce

in her vegetable garden she gleefully registers her own achievements: “Semer des graines, faire renaître la vie sur une terre stérile et depuis longtemps abandonnée. J’ai réussi. Cinq choux sont nés. Cinq choux sont en train de croître.” [Sow the seeds, create life on sterile earth that had long been abandoned. I succeeded. Five cabbages have been born. Five cabbages are now growing.] (202) In contrast with the finality heralded by the deaths themselves, the garden offers a flourishing site of growth and multiplication. Moreover, despite the impermanence of the garden, whose flowers and vegetables wither, fall, and die in cycles, both Mme Hugues and Amande find trees to be dynamic reminders of the dead. For Mme Hugues it is what she calls Paul’s tree, a weeping willow near the house, while for Amande it is a tall pine tree with a hollow in the truck and later an Amelanchier that she designates as sites of the memories of Benjamin and of Manon, memories that are not only traces of the past but possibilities for the future.

Grief, without any definitive endpoint, shapes and takes shape in Amande’s Auvergne garden. Her grief nourishes the garden, waxing and waning according to the seasons, until she finds that life has come to grow in the isolation and silence of the abandoned plot: “C’est la vie qui se niche un peu partout autour de ma vieille maison.” [Life has taken up residence all around my old house.] (355) Yet the grief does not come to an end here but finds, in the garden, a way of persisting, of intermingling with the grief of other persons and of other times, sometimes more strongly and at others only faintly. As Amande remarks: “Moi j’ai ça: la terre, les arbres, les plantes qui naissent et qui meurent, mais qui renaissent encore”. [I have this: the earth, the trees, the plants that are born and die, but are reborn again.] (290) In the garden, this cycle represents the circulation of memories and of absence and presence that brings together the living and the dead as co-presences in a complex, hybrid environment. Building, as May Sarton suggested, the past into the present, the garden ensures a permanency of the loss that is grieved, not as that which is necessarily present, but as that which has the potential to grow, if treated with continued care and attention. In the end, there is ultimately an optimism to be found in the garden as a literary site of grieving, illustrating the ways in which grief may never disappear but may instead become a productive and creative force for future growth and change.

Towards Future Growth

I have argued in this paper that grief is not about letting go of the past but of recognising the potential for death to nurture new life in the future. Acknowledging the permanency of a connection with the dead, grief studies advocate a model of continuing bonds that emphasises ongoing and future-oriented interaction with the deceased. Turning towards cultural representations of gardens and gardening, which may be juxtaposed with themes of death and grief, I have shown that the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth in the garden illustrate the fruitfulness of death for future growth and life. Rooted in this interconnection between the past, the present, and the future, and between the absences of loss and the materiality of growth, the garden shapes, and takes shape in, a space of ongoing interaction between the living and the dead, or the past and the future. Tracing connections between

grief and gardens in art and literature, I argued that Simberg's painting demonstrates the ways in which the living may prosper from nourishment by the dead. *The Garden of Death* emphasises how life continues after death—and even because of death. As the garden takes shape over time, growing towards a future that the gardener may never experience themselves, death feeds into these cycles as a necessary stage of life. Extended to works that explicitly follow bereaved protagonists, grief takes on creative and constructive forms. In the work of Burnett and Da Costa, who deploy acts of gardening as a means of consolation and commemoration after death, grief, like the seeds and bulbs planted in their gardens, alternately sprouts and withers over time, an affective force for change and renewal. In these works, grief is a necessary process for the growth of the garden, a sign of the ways in which the dead continue to nurture and nourish the lives of the living.

Although it is clearly too simple to claim that gardening may be an antidote for grief, the garden juxtaposes the precarity of everyday presence with the certainty of loss in ways that evoke the tenuous human relationship between life and death. May Sarton's New Hampshire garden, for example, suffused with memories and with the spectral presence of her mother in particular performatively encompasses the productive—if unpredictable—ways in which loss may be mobilised and embodied within the lives of the living. In this article I have argued that gardens illustrate the growing acceptance of a continuing bonds model of grief that does not seek to abandon the dead but, as Sarton wrote, builds the past into the present. In art and literature, images of gardens abound in works of death, loss, and grief in ways that are often informative, transformative, and productive, illuminating how the dead maintain a nurturing presence in the lives of the living. Ultimately, the garden is a hybrid space of life and death, past, present, and future, and of possibilities and limitations that allows grief to take root, not in order to lay the past to rest but so that it might nourish the lives of those who are still living and of those who are yet to come.

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Avril Tynan is an international research fellow at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI), Germany. Her current project explores how French fiction is entangled in global and national, and public and private understandings of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. She has published widely on the representation of ageing, illness, and death in French and anglophone literature, including in *Modern Language Review*, *Narrative Works*, and *the Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*. She is co-editor of *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* and a visiting academic in the Open University's Open Thanatology interdisciplinary research group.

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