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**Grief, dogs and disillusioned writers  
in the modern prose elegy *The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez**

**Żałoba, psy i rozczarowani pisarze we współczesnej  
elegii prozą *Przyjaciel*, autorstwa Sigrid Nunez**

**Abstract**

The paper analyses the themes of mourning, literature and people-animals relationship in *The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez. It also discusses how the novel conforms to and diverges from certain elegiac conventions. The argument put forward is that by preserving some of these conventions and distorting others the novel becomes a modern elegy in prose, which is characterised by preoccupation with loss. The loss, however, is not only personal but has a more general, all-encompassing character.

**Key words:** *mourning, literature, animals, Sigrid Nunez, elegy.*

**Abstrakt**

Artykuł analizuje motywy żałoby, twórczości literackiej i relacji pomiędzy zwierzętami i ludźmi w powieści *Przyjaciel* Sigrid Nunez. Przedstawia zbieżności i odstępstwa od tradycyjnych konwencji elegijnych. Tezą artykułu jest stwierdzenie, że trzymając się niektórych konwencji, a inne zmieniając, powieść staje się współczesną elegią prozą, którą charakteryzuje poczucie straty. Strata nie jest jedynie osobista, ale ma charakter bardziej ogólny i obejmuje wiele aspektów rzeczywistości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *żałoba, twórczość literacka, zwierzęta, Sigrid Nunez, elegia.*

*The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez takes as its main themes, grief following the death of a friend, the reflection on our relationship with the animal world, specifically dogs, and the nature of writing. Nunez intertwines these three themes in such a way that they become inseparable. I will be trying to make a point that Nunez's novel follows some elegiac conventions and transforms others becoming a modern elegy. I will draw on the ideas outlined in David Kennedy's comprehensive study of the genre titled *Elegy*, in which he traces its origins, development over the centuries as well as its modern manifestations, and *The Prose Elegy: an Exploration of Modern British and American Fiction* by John B. Vickery which sheds light on how the elegy seeps into prose genres.

Although Nunez has been publishing novels and reviewing books for over twenty years, it is *The Friend* that has attracted the most attention. The novel won the National Book Award for fiction in 2018 and became The New York Times Bestseller; Nunez's craftsmanship and subtlety resonated both with critics and the general public. *The Friend* is an amalgam genres: the novel, elegy, memoir and essay. What sets the plot in motion is the narrator's loss of a writer friend to suicide. The novel affords a precious glimpse into the hermetic literary world with its squabbles and thwarted ambitions. Additionally, Nunez examines a complicated relationship between animals and humans. A catalyst for these considerations is a cumbersome inheritance from the narrator's late friend, a big dog called Apollo; the only major character in the novel that has a name. The book starts after the narrator learns about her friend's death and the plot moves in a nonlinear fashion containing numerous reminiscences of the past. The main storyline covers approximately a year after the friend's death and in flashbacks records the friendship spanning several decades.

Grief can take numerous forms and it is crucial to establish the difference between lamentation and elegy as manifestations of grief. The former, as defined by Rebecca Saunders, is primarily oral, public and performative. It is a communal expression of grief refusing consolation, whereas the elegiac voice is individual and private. (Saunders, 2007, p. 49) The elegy is defined in general terms as "an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure, or reflecting seriously on a solemn subject". (Baldick, 2001, p. 76) The distinction between lamentation and the elegy is also that of gender. Lamentation is associated with women, while the elegy is "historically a form written by men and about men". (Saunders, 2007, p. 51) In the case of Nunez's novel we are dealing with an elegy in prose written by a woman writer for her friend, a man – another writer. Such a situation

seems to be out of keeping with the conventions of the genre, but these, as David Kennedy in his book “Elegy” points out “no longer seem as settled as they once did”. (Kennedy, 2007, p. 11) With regard to the sex of the elegist, *The Friend* is a modern elegy reworking the genre conventions.

The elegy is traditionally a poetic genre but prose works and films also contain elegiac temper. This quality has been becoming more and more apparent since the twentieth century, which saw major armed conflicts as well as other political and cultural transformations and had to deal with their aftermath. John Vickery notices that modern elegy is not only the mourning of the death of an individual in a poem but it can also deal with other losses in a work of fiction, “This climate has consequently been reflected in a broad range of individual texts that lament, confront, and assess the sorts of consolation currently available to the range of losses commanding the attention of the modern world and reader”. (Vickery, 2009, p. 164) Loss has always been inherent in human existence but the changes in all spheres of life (political, cultural, sociological) in the last century have made it even more apparent, and loss as a theme features in many genres. The sociological change that the process of mourning has been undergoing is that its public part is reduced to the minimum, therefore, as James Brown notices, “we moderns are cut off from the sustaining power of ritualized myth”. (Brown, 2015, p. 189) More than ever before, mourning has become a private affair, which is also the case in Nunez’s novel, and the narrative voice is also the solitary voice of the elegist.

The first element of the elegy is the declaration of sorrow. The traditional elegy is a male genre and it is customary for the elegist to control his emotions. Stereotypically, the opposite holds true for women. “It is in women’s natures to weep at even the natural order of things,” states Kennedy in his study of the elegy. (Kennedy, 2007, p. 28) Such a lack of restraint is incompatible with the genre conventions. Uncharacteristically, in *The Friend* we are dealing with a female elegist who allows herself to weep for days. Vickery makes a point that the declaration of sorrow in modern prose elegies is kept to the minimum and there are no elaborate obsequies and outpouring of emotions. (Vickery, 2009, p. 4) This observation partially holds true for *The Friend*. Although the narrator admits that she cried for days after learning about her friend’s death, the account of this stage of mourning takes just a few lines in the novel. Her declaration of personal grief is quite succinct, “I was lying down, it was the middle of the day, but I was in bed. All the crying had given me a headache, I’d had throbbing headache for days. I got up and went to look out of the window, there was a draft. [...] I thought of the women who’d cried themselves blind. I blinked and blinked, fear ri-

sing. Then I saw you". (Nunez, 2018, p. 9) The above passage is undeniably the depiction of extreme sorrow but after just a few sentences the narrator goes off on a tangent about her friend's walking habits. What is more, the reference to the women who cried themselves blind directs the reader back to a story recounted at the beginning of the novel, which, incidentally, was the last thing the narrator and her friend discussed. It is the story of Cambodian women's plight. Having lost their families in the war, they could not stop crying for years and were subsequently afflicted with some kind of psychosomatic blindness. Metaphorically speaking, after the horrors they had gone through, they could not look at the world anymore. Considering the profession of the main character, it is perhaps unsurprising that at the very beginning of the novel personal grief is mediated through the tale of another person's life. The narrator is scared she could be struck by blindness and stops crying, which could be interpreted as the decision to end the withdrawal from total isolation.

Another element of the initial part of elegy is registering the death by the public world, i.e. the funeral ceremony. In accordance with his wishes the friend is cremated with no funeral and the obituary clearly states his atheism. However, disregarding his disgust at memorials, one is organized. It is not particularly solemn and, apart from a slideshow, it is like any get-together. The participants entertain themselves with jokes and gossip about the deceased which makes the event not much different from any other literary gathering, "People mingling at the reception were heard talking about money, literary prizes as reparations, and the latest *die* author, die review. Decorum in this instance meant no tears. People used the opportunity to network and catch-up". (Nunez, 2018, p. 11) The lack of gravity and pathos in the memorial scene is in keeping with Brown's observation about the modern reduction of the initial part of the elegy mentioned above. It is as if the direct expression of emotion was a faux pas in the literary world. Humour, irony and gossip are the tools used too distance oneself from uncomfortable feelings.

Interestingly, in spite of various deviations from the conventions of the genre, *The Friend* conforms to numerous elegiac traditions with respect to writers and writing established by the Greek poet Theocritus, the author of proto-elegies. For instance, in Theocritus's poem *First Idyll* Thyrsis, a shepherd poet sings of the death of another poet, Daphnis. (Kennedy, 2007, p. 13) This situation is mirrored in *The Friend*. Here, the writer also mourns the death of another writer. The literary world in novel is fiercely competitive which also gestures towards Theocritus' poem. In this idyll "the unnamed goatherd promises Thyrsis the prize of the cup if he can sing

'The Affliction of Daphnis' as well as he did in a recent contest with Chromis of Libya". (Kennedy, 2007, p. 13) The reader of Nunez's novel is often reminded that writing is a contest and struggle and one has to act ruthlessly to win. The literary dog-eat-dog world is depicted in the following way, "It's like a sinking raft that too many people are trying to get onto. So any push you can deliver makes the raft a little higher for you". (Nunez, 2018, p. 12) Contrary to the stereotype of a writer as a highly sensitive individual, the literary profession is not for the fainthearted. It is a brutal world of gossip and intrigue where success is short-lived and even strong predictors of success can lead to failure. One can be appreciated by the critics and win literary prizes but their book will not sell. One can be a talented up-and-coming writer with bright future ahead and suddenly find themselves unable to write. Not to mention the constant scrutiny of your work by other writers, critics and students of writing. All of this can result in a debilitating writer's block and depression.

*The Friend* highlights a number of important ideas for thinking about the creative process. One facet of writing is that it can be destructive and toxic. What is especially bewildering – it is authors themselves who cherish such a belief. At some point in the novel, the narrator quotes various writers and journalists such as Henry de Montherlant, Joan Didion and Janet Malcolm expressing hatred towards their own profession: writing is an aggressive, even a hostile act, a destructive addiction, an act of egotism and very much like prostitution. It is useless, shameful, immoral; writers are always selling somebody out and the list goes on. (Nunez, 2018, p. 41) Moreover, those who write are accused of being either narcissists with inflated egos or impostor syndrome sufferers fearing exposure as frauds. The destructive nature of writing is exemplified by a good number of writers who committed suicide, including the narrator's friend mourned in the novel. If they do not commit suicide, they drive their family members to suicide, presumably because of the pathological relationships in writers' families. Nunez provides a host of examples of writers who killed themselves: Virginia Woolf, Heinrich von Kleist as well as an unnamed poet who taught at the same university as the narrator. As for writers' family members and friends, the victims include the daughters of Rilke and Simenon or Flannery O'Connor's close friend. The havoc that writing wreaks is epitomized in the quote by Milosz, very popular among writers, "When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished". (Nunez, 2018, p. 42). The narrator paints a rather bleak picture of her profession. It seems that in such circumstances being a writer can only be the result of an unhealthy obsession or pathological addiction.

Apart from being an elegy for the friend, Nunez's novel goes beyond mourning for an individual and, in keeping with the new elegiac trend, bemoans the disappearance of a certain era for writers. The narrator reminisces about the bygone era when writing was "a religion requiring the devotion of a priest" as embodied by the poet Rainier Maria Rilke. (Nunez, 2018, p. 93) In the second decade of the twenty-first century such notions are grossly out of date. At some point, one of her students in the creative writing course accuses the narrator of portraying writing as more difficult than it really is, presumably, fearing competition of young writers who do not want to read ? they want to be read. The seemingly obvious rule related by David Lodge in his essay *The Novel Now* which says, "You cannot begin to write novels without having read at least one, and probably hundreds; without defining yourself in relationship of apprenticeship, discipleship, rivalry and antagonism with precursors and peers" no longer applies. (Lodge, 2013, p. 146) What used to be a prerequisite for becoming a writer, is no longer considered necessary. Even some university professors of literature teach texts without reading them. Basic literacy skills like the knowledge of grammar and punctuation can no longer be taken for granted among aspiring writers. It is suggested that the decline of the profession as well as the disappointment with the changing role of literature contributed to the friend's depression. "I think how you had started telling your students that if there was anything else they could do with their lives instead of becoming writers, any other profession, they should do it". (Nunez, 2018, p. 94) In the twenty-first century, young writers do not believe in the world of the past when the process of writing was a constant struggle, frustration, and picking yourself up after numerous failures. The narrator's friend once said, "Now everyone writes just like everyone poops and at the word *gift* many want to reach for a gun". (Nunez, 2018, p. 44) Writing has become so commonplace that almost anyone can aspire to be a writer, which exemplified by what the narrator hears from her therapist: "Everyone I know is writing a book". (Nunez, 2018, p. 102)

What is contrasted with Rilke's grand ideals is the depreciation of writing at universities and various writing courses (including video lessons of writing offered by a best-selling author). "You can write and enjoy gourmet food, write and taste wines, write and hike in the mountains, write and sail on a cruise ship, write and lose weight, write and kick your addiction, write and learn to knit, cook, bake, speak French or Italian, et cetera. Today a flyer for a literary festival: *Who says writing and relaxation don't mix?*". (Nunez, 2018, p. 99) For literature things hit rock bottom when the narrator receives and offer to buy a calendar with twelve authors posing nude.

The idea of such a calendar was earlier put forward by her friend as a grim joke but it did not take long to become reality. What transpires in the novel is a sense of shock and bewilderment at what the literary world has come to. It is accompanied by the sense of reality inevitably changing, which hangs heavily over the members of the older generation of writers.

With such a devaluation of the profession come the questions about the purpose, commercialization and politicization of the literary world as well as the moral aspect of writing. The narrator's friend became disenchanted with literature on one occasion saying, "[...] no novel, no matter how brilliantly written or full of ideas, was going to have any meaningful effect on society". (Nunez, 2018, p. 81) Some students of creative writing, the narrator teaches, think only successful writers from the past should be studied. For these aspiring writers the number of the sold copies is the only measure of success and their goal as writers is to achieve. But apart from pointing out such attitudes, the novel addresses more probing questions, like the politicization and of literature. The idea of art for art's sake is questioned by would-be writers. They either want instant success and financial gain or have a political agenda that they want to pursue in their writing. So, the problem of the form is becoming less and less relevant. Another issue is the elitist character of writing. It is suggested not only those who are talented and, by extension, privileged should be writers because it "leaves too many voices out." If the moral thing to do is give voice to the disenfranchised, is it wrong for a writer as an advantaged person to be the one who registers this voice? Perhaps, it is even immoral to write about your own class as well since it "furthers the agenda of white supremacy". (Nunez, 2028, p. 130) For the narrator novelizing what she heard from women who were victims of abuse feels immoral. It will not help the writer understand their situation better. The victims will not benefit from it either. Another issue is that perhaps journalism is a better form of bearing witness and the journalist's role should be giving voice to those who suffer. Conversely, writing fiction is an act of egotism on the part of the author and as such it is shameful. (Nunez, 2018, p. 131)

Finally, the novel addresses the hypocrisy of writers and the divergence between beliefs articulated in one's writing and life as well the discrepancy between fiction and reality. What makes the narrator wonder is Rilke, who wrote beautifully about love but could not love his wife, whom he left a year after they had married. Yet another example of his hypocrisy is the relationship he had with his daughter. "Rilke, who found such richness and meaning in the experience of childhood, and who wrote so many beautiful words about children, neglected his only child". (Nunez, 2018, p. 95) This dupli-

city is hard to swallow for contemporary students of creative writing and they tend to be unforgiving of writers' flaws and mistakes, refusing to study those whose conduct and outlook on life they find unacceptable. Rilke's definition of love as "two solitudes that protect and border and greet each other" keeps on recurring in *The Friend*. (Nunez, 2018, p. 94) Clearly, it is of profound importance to the narrator and describes her relationship with Apollo. However, a reaction to these words she gets from one of the students is, inadvertently echoing Hamlet, "What does it even mean? [...] It's just *words* It has nothing to do with *real life*, which is where love *actually happens*". (Nunez, 2018, p. 95) It looks like one of the key differences between old and new writers is that for the older generation writing is inseparable from life. It is something that is integrated into their lives and they cannot stop doing it. Old writers do not distance themselves from literature like the generation of new writers, who topple big names from their pedestals and have no problem separating real life from their profession. Nunez's novel is permeated with pessimism about the quality of literature that the new generation will produce. (Nunez, 2018, p. 98)

In spite of all the negativity and destruction that are associated with writing, the narrator's feelings about literature are ambiguous. In fact, for almost every argument against being a writer, we get one for it. Writing is a phenomenon that is fraught with contradictions, whose meaning, role and limits cannot be easily defined. To counter the argument that writing requires priestly devotion from the writer we get quotes by other distinguished authors which put the issue in a different light. The narrator cites Flannery O'Connor who said, "If writing wasn't painful, [...] it would not be worth doing" or Virginia Woolf's statement that "putting feelings into words *takes the pain away*". (Nunez, 2018, p. 98) Christopher Isherwood is quoted claiming that "the fictional character is like the beloved: extraordinary, never just another person," which challenges the view that writing about someone is a way of abusing or even destroying them. (Nunez, 2018, p. 133) Then, there are people who were saved by writing. The narrator reminisces about a writing workshop she taught and a participant who had been a prostitute and a drug addict, "Like many people I've met, she believes that writing saved her life". (Nunez, 2018, p. 44) A lot of women from the shelter for victims of human trafficking did not want to talk about their experience or even went mute. What served a therapeutic function was writing about their past. There was even one woman who was unable to speak and instead started journaling in a compulsive way. "Her hand ballooned, her fingers blistered and bled, but she wouldn't – couldn't stop". (Nunez, 2018, p. 49) Finally, Natalia

Ginsburg is quoted having called writing “the best vocation in the world”. (Nunez, 2018, p. 94) This, however, for both, the narrator and her friend was something they started losing faith in. So, in *The Friend* an aporia arises between writing as an act of destruction and an act of creation.

Another elegiac convention reworked in *The Friend*, also present in Theocritus’ *First Idyll*, is pathetic fallacy. When Daphnis dies, foxes wail and cattle moan for him. (Kennedy, 2007, p. 13) So, human perception of the world and emotions experienced by a mourner are reflected by the natural world. This situation is also mimicked in Nunez’s novel. The friend’s wife does not want to keep the dog her husband found in the park for fear he would remind her about the complicated feelings she had for her late spouse. Also, she cannot stand his howling, which started after the suicide. So, she turns to the narrator with the request to adopt the dog, which, according to her, is what her late husband would have wanted. To the narrator’s surprise the dog turns out to be a harlequin Great Dane, which complicates things because her apartment is very small. Nevertheless, after some consideration she agrees to adopt the animal. Apollo, the representative of the natural world in the novel, very much like the foxes and cattle in *First Idyll*, mourns the poet’s and at the same time his master’s death. He behaves as if he lost the will to live, not showing interest in the surrounding world, let alone, in his new owner. He is very much like a depressed person listlessly allowing the narrator to take him out and ignoring her during the day. Strangely enough, he intensely sniffs around her at night but does not want to make any other contact. The narrator feels so sorry for him that she does not protest when he banishes her from her bed so she has to sleep on an inflated mattress on the floor. At night, she is scared to move when he overwhelms her with his weight lying his paw on her when she is asleep. It makes her reflect on animal sadness, “They don’t commit suicide. They don’t weep. But they can and do fall to pieces. They can and do have their hearts broken. They can and do lose their minds”. (Nunez, 2018, p. 35) After she adopts the dog, he becomes the focal point of her life and the title of the novel acquires another meaning – Apollo becomes her friend. In a way he takes over her life and, gradually, the narrator’s main concern becomes lifting his depression and keeping him in as good health as possible.

The idea of a special relationship between a dog and a woman is not new in literature. Laura Brown in *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes* studies the theme of a lady and her lapdog providing numerous examples from literary works that span a century and a half, beginning in the early eighteenth and ending in the nineteenth century. The inter-species connection

between women and animals is a motif in Elizabeth Barrett's poetry, Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, Dickens' *Dombey and Son* and many others. In her interesting analysis of the concept of the lady and her lapdog Brown draws our attention to otherness as an inherent feature of such relationships, "The product of astonished difference, this new notion of love is based on alterity rather than of sameness and coherence". (Brown, 2010, p. 89) Indeed, even Apollo's grotesque size contrasted with the petite frame of his new mistress underscores the otherness. Similarly to the literary texts analysed by Brown, *The Friend* raises numerous questions about the role of animals in our lives and the limits to understanding what it is like to be an animal. Like Thomas Nagel in his seminal essay *What Is It Like To Be a Bat?* the narrator comes to the conclusion that it is not possible to know how it feels to be a member of another species. She observes, "He wags his tail, and for the thousandth time I think how frustrating it must be for a dog: the endless trouble of making yourself understood to a human". (Nunez, 2018, p. 92) It also works the other way round, "[...] we humans don't know the half of how dogs' brains work. They may well, in their mute unfathomable way, know us better than we know them". (Nunez, 2018, p. 97) Apart from vexation, what transpires here is a sense of wonder on the part of the narrator who realizes there are parts of animal life that are shrouded in mystery.

Regardless of how well humans and dogs understand each other, Apollo becomes a substitute for a human being. The substitution creates a disconcerting feeling of something outside the norm happening, which, again, is not unheard of in literature. Laura Brown writes about Florence Dombey from Dickens' *Dombey and Son* for whom a dog become "a direct substitute for her cruel alienation from her father". (Brown, 2010, p. 82) In her analysis of these eighteenth and nineteenth century texts, Brown also comes up with numerous examples of interspecies intimacies being replacement for human ones, "Indeed, the lapdog seems to be both an inappropriate or perverse sexual partner for the woman, and also a metonym for female sexuality". (Brown, 2010, p. 72) Interestingly, these ideas also echo in *The Friend*. Apollo emerges as a sort of replacement of the dead friend and ex-lover. The narrator's therapist claims that she was in love with her friend and that is why her grieving is complicated. The acquisition of a dog is the form of therapy but at the same time there is something disconcerting in the relationship with the animal that other people notice and the narrator herself too. For instance, sitting in her therapist's office with the dog on her side the narrator feels as if she was in couple's therapy. On another occasion, a passer-by calls Apollo sexy, which unsettles the narrator. Then, at a party, a woman giggles and

asks the narrator whether she is the one who is in love with a dog. (Nunez, 2018, p. 120) The dog has eyes that look like those of the dead friend and according to the narrator what needs to happen for Apollo is to forget about his previous owner and fall in love with her. (Nunez, 2018, p. 63) All these situations in which Apollo is anthropomorphised and elevated to the status of a life partner raise questions about the nature of interspecies relationships. They also throw off balance the notion of hierarchy in such relationships as well as the very concept of love. What transpires in *The Friend* is that pets need people, just like people need pets because in spite of their otherness, animals are capable of filling an emotional void in people's lives. However, there is always a gap between the two species, the inability to fully comprehend each other. Paradoxically, according to the narrator if people and dogs knew each other's languages and could communicate without any problems, it "would ruin everything". (Nunez, 2018, p. 120) For people, these blank spaces in the knowledge of the other are an opportunity to vest them with meaning, usually by anthropomorphising the animal, which as the narrator observes herself is simply inescapable.

The last part of elegy is "consolation for the inescapability of death". (Vickery, 2009, p. 1) In the final chapter of the book the narrator retreats to the countryside, actually forced to do it because of Apollo's deteriorating health – he walks with difficulty and is incontinent. Big dogs do not have a long life expectancy and are troubled by numerous diseases. Luckily, an opportunity materializes itself in the form of a friend who has a cottage at the seaside. This is where the pastoral, traditionally an elegiac convention comes into play. The narrator moves to the seaside with a very sick dog to reflect and start healing. "The pastoral becomes a kind of retreat, a kind of turning aside from everyday concerns and routines, a clearing of imaginative and poetic space in which to contemplate fundamentals. At the same time the pastoral is a place of work and an interlude from work [...]". (Kennedy, 2007, p. 17) The cottage at the seaside according to elegiac standards is supposed to be a consolatory space and a place where the writer can overcome the block.

It is interesting to look at the process of mourning from the psychoanalytic and anthropological perspectives. The Freudian model of the work of mourning is outlined in his *Mourning and Melancholia*. According to Freud, to complete the healthy process of mourning, as opposed to pathological melancholy, what needs to happen is the detachment of the mourner from the object of mourning, whereas melancholia means that the mourner's ego is identified with the lost object and, as a result, the mourner cannot let the object go. The tendency for modern elegists is to write elegies that are

anti-consolatory and, as a result, melancholic in nature. (Kennedy, 2007, p. 57) Indeed, in *The Friend* it looks like the narrator is suffering from melancholia because the period of mourning is extended and the therapy does not seem to help. The former owner of their retreat used to be a woman who is suffering from dementia. As a result her past is taken away from her, including the memory of the things she lost, like flowers she planted earlier as an avid gardener. This situation makes the narrator reflect, “What we miss – what we lose and what we mourn – isn’t this that makes us who, deep down, we truly are. To say nothing of what we wanted in life but never got to have”. (Nunez, 2018, p. 143) This statement makes peace with life as a state of permanent loss, but is at the same time out of keeping with the idea of healthy mourning that involves detaching oneself from the object of mourning. Here, loss becomes a formative, even enriching experience and there is some value in not letting go completely. The narrator states she would not like to stop missing her dead friend. The people we mourn constitute our identity and the situation of loss is constantly replayed in our lives. In the novel, it is exemplified by the loss of a human friend, followed by the loss of animal friend. The dog dies with butterflies swarming over his head in the final idyllic scene of the novel. From the anthropological perspective, as related by Akira Mizuta Lippit in *Electric Animal* people once considered animals the inherent part of their existence. Gradually, they separated from the animal world. As a result, the humanity has remained in the state of mourning. “The mourning is for the self – a self that had become dehumanized in the very process of humanity’s becoming human”. (Lippit, 2000, p. 18) Hence, Apollo’s death points to an ever present sense of loss that people have felt since they started looking at the animal as the other. This, again, fits into the more recent elegiac trend – a sense of bereavement that goes beyond the personal.

One way of dealing with grief is artistic creation, which can help to channel the energy of the mourner. James Brown in *Tears and the Art of Grief* observes that “[the] genre of elegy seeks not to represent but to participate in mourning, and is thus implicitly committed to its success”. (Brown, 2015, p. 190) So, the very act of writing should assist and accelerate the process of mourning. The narrator analyses the idea of writing about the deceased too. “Sure I worried that writing about it might be a mistake. You write a thing down because you’re hoping to get a hold on it. You write about experiences partly to understand what they mean, partly not to lose them to time. To oblivion. But there’s always a danger of the opposite happening. Losing the memory of the experience itself to the memory of writing about it”. (Nunez, 2018,

p. 142) The novel metafictionally reflects on the power that stories have. What transpires here is a certain ambivalence about the role of the writing process for the elegist. There is a danger of the activity erasing the elegised from memory and replacing him with the memory of artistic creation. Paradoxically, the elegy emerges as a means to remember and forget at the same time. Writing also gives the narrator a chance to reverse the irreversible, albeit for a moment. One chapter of the novel retells the story of the friend's suicide but in this version he is found at the last minute and rescued. In the alternative ending of the story the narrator meets him, they talk about the suicide attempt and her friend is glad he survived. She tells him she is writing the story of his suicide attempt with some details changed and they have a conversation about it. This metafictional, self-referential aspect of the novel draws the reader's attention to the business of writing and gestures towards other post modern texts like *French Lieutenant's Woman* or *Flaubert's Parrot*. It blurs the line between life and representation and also raises questions about the relationship between the narrator writer and her characters, as well as the addressees of this story. Finally, it poses questions about the narrative power. Can writing bring people back from the dead? The novel starts with the narrator addressing her dead friend and ends with her addressing the dog, who dies in the final scene. Is the mourning process over or will the dog's death instigate another one? These questions remain unanswered in *The Friend* rendering interpretative closure impossible.

The narrator's statement about loss as a shaping force in a person's life is in line with the changes that the elegy has been undergoing for a few decades. They have broadened the scope of the genre and challenged its traditional poetic form. "The twentieth century gradually transformed the elegy into a focus on the diversity of losses occurring in human life and a shaping of new (or different) elegiac responses to them". (Vickery, 2009, p. 1) Indeed, *The Friend* is as much about losing a loved one to suicide and as it is about the disappearance of aesthetic ideals and work ethic that writers once espoused. It is also about the passage of time and how it affects us physically and mentally. It takes as its subject losses incurred in writers' personal lives by their lifetime vocation such as the destruction of their families and loneliness. What is more, the novel shows that loss can be experienced by another species, but the nature of the emotion is for us unfathomable, whereas the humanity remains in the state of mourning for its lost connection with the animal world. Finally, it withholds answers to the questions about the nature of artistic creation, like so many postmodern texts calling us to concede the lack of resolution.

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