

Consolation in contemporary British and postcolonial literatures

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École Normale Supérieure de Lyon

Amphitheatre Descartes, 15 Parvis René Descartes, 69007 Lyon

Keynote speaker: Professor David James (University of Birmingham)

In a contemporary era defined as an age of crisis by Emily Horton (2014), the notion of consolation has gained cultural visibility as a response to collective suffering, even more so in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic. While the notion was once dismissed as a mere diversion, distraction or sugarcoating of pain imbued with religious connotations, its identification as a “critical instrument” (Foessel 23) has led to a flurry of publications on the topic in recent years, notably by philosopher Michaël Foessel (*Le Temps de la consolation*, 2015), literary critics David James (*Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation*, 2019) and Jürgen Pieters (*Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort*, 2021), essayists Anne-Dauphine Julliand (*Consolation*, 2020) and Michael Ignatieff (*On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*, 2021) or psychiatrist Christophe André (*Consolations*, 2022).

While consolation is inseparable from suffering as noted by Anne-Dauphine Julliand in the first pages of her essay, the etymology of the term, from the Latin *consolari* (*con-* + *sōlārī*, to solace, to soothe), seems to place a relational dimension at its core: one is “to find solace together” to quote Michael Ignatieff (1). From that perspective, consolation can be envisaged in relation to the ethics of care and the ethics of alterity although interconnectedness does not guarantee consolation. Even when pain is temporarily alleviated, consolation cannot be equated with full healing or recovery: it “only brings into greater focus the wound it targets, more often exposing than dispelling the desolation it promises to offset” (James 1). Thus, according to David James, accepting solace “means conceding what cannot be repaired” (1), and consolation needs to be examined in relation to inconsolability or even to what Julian Barnes calls “disconsolation” in his essay on death, *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (2008). As no substitute can replace what has been lost or broken, individuals are bound to be part of “the unconsoled”, to quote the title of Kazuo Ishiguro’s 1995 novel and the dedication to Arundhati Roy’s *Ministry of the Utmost Happiness* (2017).

There has been a long-standing *consolatio* tradition in literature and philosophy, starting from Boethius’s *De consolazione philosophiae* (523 AD), written when the statesman was in prison (and echoed more than two centuries later by Alain de Botton’s *Consolations of Philosophy* [2000]), and the *Consolatio* literary tradition comprising consolatory speeches, essays, poems, and personal letters meant to allay the distress caused by the death of a loved one. Consolation has also been a crucial concern of the elegy in all its forms (traditional and modern, poetic and narrative). While the traditional elegy is described as a “poem of mortal loss and consolation” (Sacks 1987, 3), whose goal is to heal the wounds of grief and imitate the mourning process, the 20th-century emergence of its melancholic counterpart, the anti-elegy, strives “not to achieve but to resist consolation, [...] not to heal but to

reopen the wounds of loss” (Ramazani 1994, xi). Contemporary literature appears to be navigating between these two extreme postures, either envisaging art as a possible balm that may partly dissipate sorrow or “uncoupl[ing] consolation from distraction, appeasement, and soothing repair” (James 40). When Kazuo Ishiguro says that “art is a form of consolation”, he does not mean that it will comfort us but that it will “address some wound”. That wound will never heal but “you sometimes want to touch it or in some interesting way examine the wound again from time to time, have a relationship with it” (in Guignery, *Novelists* 2013, 57), and this probing of the wound is what literature can offer. In her philosophical essay/grief-memoir *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), the British poet and philosopher Denise Riley expresses her desire to identify a “literature of consolation” (112), a corpus of poetical, fictional and autobiographical works that could help the afflicted by giving them the sense of being part of a community.

If consoling implies “crossing a boundary” according to Michaël Foessel, it might be because consolation seems to unfold in the in-between on many levels: caught between the “before” and “after”, between loss and recovery, it interrogates the interplay between the individual and the community, the private and the public sphere. Consolatory literary works do not only address individual grief or loss but also collective ones, especially when countries or governments refuse to acknowledge or enquire into violent events or injustices. Literature may also constitute a place of consolation when public or legal processes fail to provide one. Contributors could therefore examine literary works that interrogate whether any consolation or comfort can be found in such public procedures as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, offers of reparations (which could be seen as the legal side of consolation), official apologies, commemorations, monuments, or other forms that may seem to prescribe an erasure of wounds. As noted by Ignatieff, “There are many other words we use, beside consolation, when we confront loss and pain” (6), be it solace, comfort (which may be transitory when consolation can be more enduring), compassion or empathy, all of which bear different nuances that need to be explored. What should also be investigated are the ethical limits of consolation in literature: is it acceptable, desirable or even possible to seek release from suffering via formal features? David James, for example, considers consolation “discrepant” in contemporary writing because of “the restive interplay between the solace afforded rhetorically or structurally by a text and the affective repercussions of its wrenching outcomes” (10).

The aim of our conference is to theorise, contextualise and exemplify consolation (its forms, limits and aporias) as a “critical tool” in contemporary British and postcolonial literatures. We welcome papers on fiction, poetry, drama and life-writing, with possible issues and forms to explore including, but not being limited to:

- the ability of literature to offer consolation
- consolatory genres and modes
- elegy/anti-elegy in poetic, narrative and theatrical form
- vulnerability, relationality and consolation
- consolation and the ethics of care / the ethics of alterity
- the ethical limits of consolation in literature
- literature as *pharmakon* (either medicine or poison) (Pieters 14)
- legal/public reparation as a form of consolation
- being inconsolable or unconsoled, either as a refusal or failure of consolation, a temporary or lasting condition

- disconsolation
- the politics of (in)consolation

Proposals of up to 300 words in English, together with a biographical note, should be sent to Vanessa Guignery (vanessa.guignery@ens-lyon.fr), Diane Gagneret (diane.gagneret@wanadoo.fr) and Héloïse Lecomte (heloise.lecomte@ens-lyon.fr) by **30 November 2022**.

This conference is planned as an on-site event to be held at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon in France.

Website: <http://consolation.vanessaguignery.com/>

Indicative and selective bibliography

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