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'His Grief Is the Plague': poetry of loss and the risk of losing one's readers

Abstract

The book *Lalomanu* (2010), by Jorge Salavert, is a collection of poetry written in response to the death of the author's six-year-old daughter Clea, one of the victims of the tsunami which swept ashore in Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga in September 2009. *Lalomanu* is a deeply moving account of grief and mourning, a book that its author knows will be too painful for some to read. As Salavert points out in his poems, most people he knows seem afraid of his grief; they are unable to respond to, or acknowledge, its intensity. And yet, in its expressions of grief and mourning, Salavert's poetry also has the potential to move readers in ways that extend far beyond the personal. From one perspective, this selection of poetry can be read as part of a substantial discourse of literary response to calamity and natural disaster, especially following the tsunamis of 2004 that swept the Indian Ocean, and the more recent tsunami that struck Japan following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake. From another viewpoint, the poems are significant as migrant literature for what they have to say about language and mourning. The majority of the collection appears in English, but a number of the poems appear in bilingual form, either Spanish and English, or Catalan and English, and this multilingual format is especially important in relation to this poet's mourning. Also, I want to draw attention to the social actions and outcomes related to both the Salavert/Wykes family's loss of their daughter Clea and the book *Lalomanu*. This essay, then, will be organised in three sections: the first will consider literature and mourning; the second, mourning and language; the third, the social engagement resulting from a literature of mourning.

Keywords

losing, risk, readers, loss, one, poetry, plague, grief, his

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‘His Grief Is the Plague’: Poetry of Loss and the Risk of Losing One’s Readers

On the 29th of September 2009, an earthquake off the south-east coast of the islands of Samoa created a tsunami which swept ashore in Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga, destroying villages and resulting in the deaths of more than 190 people (‘EERI’). The book *Lalomanu* (2010), by Jorge Salavert, is a collection of poetry written in response to the death of Salavert’s six-year-old daughter Clea, one of the victims of this disaster. Salavert, his wife Trudie Wykes, and their three children - Clea and her two younger brothers - had arrived at Lalomanu less than twenty-four hours before the tsunami struck. When the earthquake occurred, the family were enjoying their first morning on the beach. As they walked, they felt the beach shake, but the ocean as far as they could see remained calm, and so they remained there, unaware of the destruction about to crash upon them. Then, as they saw the waves approach, they ran, the parents holding tight to the hands of their children. Four waves hit the island, knocking over and sweeping all before them. When the waves receded, Salavert, his wife and their two young sons were alive, but Clea was gone.

Lalomanu is an intensely personal and extremely painful book, a deeply moving account of grief and mourning, a book that its author knows will be too painful for some to read. As Salavert points out in his poems, most people he knows seem afraid of his grief; they are unable to respond to, or acknowledge, its intensity. ‘His grief’, the poet writes, ‘is like the plague. / Pain is too raw to handle. / Silence prevails’ (46). For some readers, this literature of grief and mourning may move them only to the extent that they keep their distance; they do not respond, or do not even read, in order to avoid being affected by this very personal pain. And yet, in its expressions of grief and mourning, Salavert’s poetry also has the potential to move readers in ways that extend far beyond the personal.

From one perspective, this selection of poetry can be read as part of a substantial discourse of literary response to calamity and natural disaster, especially following the tsunamis of 2004 that swept the Indian Ocean, and the more recent tsunami that struck Japan following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake. From another viewpoint, the poems are significant as migrant literature for what they have to say about language and mourning. The majority of the collection appears in English, but a number of the poems appear in bilingual form, either Spanish and English, or Catalan and English, and this multilingual format, I will argue, is especially important in relation to this poet’s mourning. Also, I want to draw attention to the

social actions and outcomes related to both the Salavert/Wykes family's loss of their daughter Clea and the book *Lalomanu*. In brief then, this essay will be organised in three sections: the first will consider literature and mourning; the second, mourning and language; the third, the social engagement resulting from a literature of mourning.

Before moving through these three areas of discussion, some background to my own encounter with this text may be useful, as the book is self-published and not widely available. I first came across work by Jorge Salavert in a collection of multicultural writing titled *Culture Is ...: Australian Stories Across Cultures, An Anthology* (2008), to which Salavert had contributed a poem, in English, with one line in Catalan, in which a migrant, walking through a winter landscape of wattle, gum trees and dust, realises he belongs 'not here / not there' (67). This pair of lines was selected by the *Australian Book Review* for the title of my review of the anthology, which appeared in 2009. A year later I received an email from Salavert, forwarded to me by the content manager of the AustLit database, enquiring about the database, and providing details of his recently published book *Lalomanu*. I wrote to Salavert, asking if I could purchase a copy; he responded that it was not for sale, but that he would send me a copy for documentation and research. When the book arrived, its format was especially interesting and relevant to my ongoing research into Australian multilingual writing. Its content, however – the unmitigated pain conveyed through its 48 poems – was almost unbearable.

The book opens with a single poem under the heading 'Preamble' and titled 'The Polaroid (3rd January 2003)', in which the poet describes a photo taken on the day of his daughter Clea's birth. In the photo he holds his newborn daughter's hand, while in the poem he reflects on those infant hands being 'cherished treasure for him: / They're a promise of lasting love and laughter ... They hold a future he can look forward to', The poem ends with the father imagining the stories he will tell his daughter "Of faraway lands... Of so many people she will never get to meet" (9), the final line pointing towards the death of his child just six years into that future.

Literary responses to the death and destruction wrought by tsunamis have appeared with each of the major tsunami events of the past decade, and *Lalomanu* can be situated amongst the many works produced in the aftermath of these calamities. Following the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and the resulting tsunamis, anthologies of poetry were published in Indonesia (Allisah), India (Robinson et al), the UK (Daw and Kuta) and the United States (Ouzoonian). Single-author collections of poetry and short stories were published in Tamil by Sri Lankan authors (Hasan); there were novels by Indian authors (Şan□karana□ra□yañan□),

and anthologies of short stories in English published as a part of fund-raising for disaster relief efforts (John, Goyal). Australian works in response to the Indian Ocean tsunamis included autobiographies of survival such as Trisha Broadbridge's *Beyond the Wave: A Tsunami Survivor's Story* (2005) and Kimina Lyall's *Out of the Blue: Facing the Tsunami* (2004). Similarly, the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011 in Japan has resulted in numerous literary responses, including first-hand accounts from Japanese poets and an anthology of prose by a wide range of Japanese writers (Wago□; Luke and Karashima). With regard to the Samoan tsunami, apart from *Lalomanu* there is a work by Lani Wendt Young, niece of Samoan writer Albert Wendt, titled *The Pacific Tsunami "Galufi": the story of the greatest natural disaster Samoa has ever known* (2011), which gathers together personal accounts of survivors. I learned of this latter work through Salavert's weblog, in which he records his response to Wendt's book, a book he found 'very hard, incredibly difficult' to read. He writes: 'I have often snapped it shut, with tears in my eyes, cursing my fate. Sometimes what I have read has woken me up in the middle of the night, still terrified, once again fleeing the monster, the killer beast that came from the depths of the sea' (Salavert 'Notas Literarias'). *Lalomanu*, then, is part of a web of texts which offer literary response to catastrophe and record experiences of loss and trauma and mourning. None of these, it hardly needs saying, makes for easy or pleasurable reading, and yet, with so many thousands of people affected by tsunamis, the work these texts perform calls for critical reflection.

It is worth considering the historical context for poetry about the death of a child and some of the theoretical work on literature and mourning, as this will be useful in understanding what Salavert is expressing when he writes 'His grief is the plague' (46). Critical work discusses the relationship between oral lament and elegiac poetry from the time of Ancient Greece (Derderian). Elegiac poetry was, of course, a feature of Romantic literature as, in the nineteenth century, grief literature became an industry in the United States. Numerous anthologies of infant elegies were produced to meet the demands of a market shaped by rising literacy rates and high infant mortality. These anthologies were comprised of poems by well-known authors alongside those of anonymous grieving parents; they were intended as 'guides of mourning' or a literature of consolation (Roberts 141). This type of anthology – collections of poems relating to child death – did not maintain their popularity into the twentieth century. However, similar consolatory literary work did continue into the early twentieth century with elegiac poetry produced in response to the Great War of 1914-1918. Also, there is at least one Australian publication from the 1990s which conforms to many of the characteristics of the earlier volumes of infant elegies (Annand).

For a number of theorists, the end of the nineteenth century marked a shift in the expressions of public grief. Jahan Ramazani, in his important work *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), charts the radical changes in funeral practices and mourning customs in both America and Great Britain beginning in the 1880s with the rise of the professional status of the ‘funeral director’ and an increasing social denial of grief (15-19). Drawing on the work of social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, Ramazani argues that in English-speaking countries mourning has come to be viewed ‘as morbid self-indulgence’, with the social expectation now being that the bereaved will grieve in private and while in public will for the most part ‘hide their grief so fully that no one would guess anything had happened’ (22). This is what Salavert’s line ‘His grief is the plague’ refers to. The line appears in the last of the sixteen haikus that form the middle section of the book and which lead to the third section, titled ‘The Homecoming’.

While the poems in the first two sections of the book depict the approach, the impact and the aftermath of the tsunami, and centre upon Clea’s death and the poet’s grief, the poems in the third section focus upon the poet’s sense of isolation following his return to Australia. The poem ‘Afraid of Grief’ comments on the silence of his telephone, the lack of communication with friends: ‘The minutes, the hours tick by until it’s bedtime: are they afraid of his grief?’ (57). Two pages on, in the poem ‘A Curse’ the poet’s anger is directed at friends who have come to the family’s house after Clea’s funeral.

Let all those who imbibed in her backyard
And laughed and joked or were simply merry
Be cursed. Some care or warmth? It was too hard!
Just minutes after having her buried,
A few of her own mother’s so-called friends
Stood around, full wineglasses in their hands,
While they were then struggling to comprehend
Their sad loss: her death in a foreign land. (59)

In other poems, anger gives way to shame. In a poem describing the first day of school for Clea’s younger brothers, the poet writes:

Was today a rite of passage: the principal’s welcome,
The same old warnings to parents about the car park chaos,
Which some would ignore just about the next day.
These two looked around and seemed to wonder.

Yet it was his mind that wandered.
He lowered his head,
And tried to hide his tears from inquisitive gazes.
The absence of her giggle was distinctly felt
On her brothers' first day of schooling. (65)

This sense of isolation and shame continues to the penultimate poem, titled "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" in which the poet writes:

[...] there are days when he sits down and waits
for a phone call that never comes,
for a gaze that does not hide within silence,
for someone who may listen to his crying
other than his own wife.

However, he asks himself if it might be true
that he is too difficult for them to listen to,
if his pain might be so raw that it burns them,
if months may go by without him feeling
the support of known voices
or the sighs of the moon and sun.

However, he would like to know when the shadows of terror
will stop hounding him, when the memories
of the water's fangs will melt
into the golden sands of Lalomanu. (71-73)

Salavert's poems are not in any way a literature of consolation, nor a guide to mourning. Throughout the work the poet remains steadfastly disconsolate, insisting that his grief will have no end. In this respect, the poems in *Lalomanu* conform to aspects of modern elegiac poetry as outlined by Ramazini, cited earlier, and Patricia Rae, whose edited collection *Modernism and Mourning* (2007) builds upon Ramazini's earlier critical work.

Both of these texts take as a starting point Sigmund Freud's 1917 essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', in which Freud outlines what he understands of the grief process and 'the work of mourning.' As Rae reads Freud, mourning is a 'painful but ultimately healthy

process of severing the libidinal ties binding the mourner to the deceased' and in so doing, 'freeing the ego so that it may attach to a new living person or ideal' (Rae 13-14). When grief is unsuccessful, according to Freud, the mourner succumbs to melancholia, a pathological state of unresolvable grief, self-criticism and self-blame (Rae 14). In his reading of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry, Ramazani recasts the distinction between mourning and melancholia, arguing instead for an understanding of a range of forms of mourning, from normative (which takes the form of consolatory, restitutive or idealising expression and practice) to melancholic (which is characterised more by scepticism, ambivalence and recalcitrance) (Ramazani xi).

For Ramazani, modern elegy is not failed or unsuccessful mourning, but a melancholic mourning that often refuses the consolations typical of the genre in earlier periods. Rae and the contributors to her edited anthology extend this argument, directing their analytic gaze to twentieth-century texts responding to the mass deaths of the two World Wars, to the AIDS epidemic, and twenty-first century texts written in the wake of terrorist attacks including 9/11, to argue that 'a refusal to mourn' is characteristic of many of these literary engagements with death. 'Refusal to mourn', of course, points to Derrida's writing on death and his understanding of an 'ethical mourning', one that respects the finality of death but at the same time refuses closure, refuses 'to work things through' (Rae 17-18). This resistant mourning is characteristic of a literary strategy that resists the status quo; that 'repudiates consolation' (18) and connects contemporary literature of mourning with social action. Rae points towards literary works responding to the AIDS epidemic, the militant sadness of mothers of the disappeared in Argentina, and some of the literature following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as literature which resists 'state efforts to manage ... sorrow' (19). Both Ramazani and Rae see this resistant mourning as characteristic of the contemporary writing of grief.

Salavert is not writing about, or against, a death related to war, or terrorism, or social marginalisation. He is, however, writing about and against a social process in which the emotion of grief – his grief for his daughter – is denied adequate recognition and expression. To some extent, perhaps, this inadequate recognition of mourning is related to Salavert's experience of migrancy and I would like to turn now to some of the poems that appear in bilingual format to consider the relationship between mourning and language. In a collection of essays written in honour of the scholar of French feminist literature Elaine Marks, Nelly Furman makes the connection, in her chapter titled 'The Disease of Monolingualism' (2007), between language and death. Like Ramazani and Rae, Furman draws on Freud's seminal

work in this area. Furman summarises the well-known passage in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which Freud describes a one-and-a-half-year-old child, whose mother has left the room, throwing a wooden reel with a string attached over the edge of his cot then retrieving it while exclaiming ‘Fort-Da’ or ‘Gone/There’ (78). Freud uses the child’s behaviour to argue that ‘one of the functions of language [is] the expression of loss and recovery, as a means of mastery over the pain of loss’ (78-79). Furman sees this relation between language, loss, and recovery as being linked to one’s first language, the language of early childhood. On the other hand, acquiring a second language, she writes, ‘is to put one’s self at a loss. It is to give up mastery, and through the acceptance of self-loss, to open oneself to the other, and to our own mortality’ (79). This is very much the situation expressed by Salavert in the poems in *Lalomanu* which refer to his migration to Australia and his loss of his earlier languages – Catalan and Spanish – in the sense of having fewer opportunities to speak them, to write them, to live in them on a daily basis.

In the first of the bilingual poems, which appears in Catalan as ‘La terra li l’ha furtada’ and in English as ‘The Earth Has Stolen Her from Him’, the poet describes his ‘presence-less present’, the absence he feels so sharply and painfully, and how in taking the life of his daughter Clea, the tsunami has robbed him of his future.

And now he cries, he cries broken-hearted,
Cries because the knife of destiny has stabbed
His soul. (21)

In the English-only poem that immediately follows this, titled ‘The Void’, the poet writes: ‘He does not speak his language / As often as he used to’ and then goes on to describe the silence, the void he feels in his life (22). One Spanish word appears in this poem: ‘*inmóvil*’; the poet stands immobile, paralysed in the face of the void: ‘The huge gap in his life / A massive mountain of water has made’ (22). In the following poem, ‘At 45’, again, in English-only, he writes:

At forty-five years of age
He has been left
Daughter-less
In a strange land
In a random act of nature
and cruelty

At forty-five years of age

He feels lost for words
He lost more than his own language
In the killing whirl of water:
He lost his loving daughter (23).

Through these three poems, it emerges that the death of his daughter is tied to the poet's sense of a loss of language; perhaps it is related to Salavert having spoken regularly to his daughter in Catalan or Spanish; or perhaps her death, which provokes reflection on his own death, on the pain he knows he will feel until his death, causes the poet to relive the death he has already experienced in life, the death associated with migration and separation from the language(s) of one's birth and younger self.

Furman, drawing on the work of Marks, argues that being monolingual is a disease inasmuch as it erases differences, denies 'cultural specificities, and the emotional dimensions of another's life, the other's culture, the other's social communicative skills, as well as his or her personal idiom' (81). The poems in *Lalomanu* demonstrate powerfully this disease of monolingualism and its effects on a grieving father. In reading Salavert's book, we encounter not only the father's grief for his drowned daughter, but also the poet's grief for a self whose cultural specificities and emotional dimensions cannot find expression, or, as asserted, are denied recognition in the Anglo-centric cultural milieu of the Australia in which he now lives. It is significant that as one continues reading through *Lalomanu*, the bilingual format increases and eventually replaces the pattern of English-only poems, as if in acknowledgement that poetry and mourning are inextricably tied. In fact, it is following the poem 'A Curse', discussed above, that the bilingual poems begin to dominate. For this reader, much of the affect, the emotional impact of this book, is linked to these reflections on language and loss and the realisation that this loss of self through loss of language is not secondary to Salavert's loss of his daughter, but that they are somehow bound together.

From this discussion, it is clear that the poems portray, relentlessly, the disconsolation and the social isolation of the poet, whose grief can find no adequate form of recognition, and whose mourning extends to the sense of self that slips away with the diminishing use of the languages in which he grew up. Opportunities for communication and social connection that might alleviate the pain are given short shrift, even in the poet's first languages. In the poem 'Re:' which appears in both Spanish and English, the poet answers a friend who writes, presumably in email, 'tell me something', with the reply:

Tengo tanto que contar
Tanto, que podría gritar o aullar

Tanta tristeza que me ahogo al no poder darle salida
Tanto que contar o que callar
No sé ni siquiera con qué empezar. (52)

I have so much to tell
So much that I might scream or howl
So much sadness that I choke when I cannot voice it
So much to tell or keep silent about
Don't even know what to start with. (53)

In another bilingual poem 'Roto', or 'Broken', the poet writes:

Nothing anyone might utter
Shall alleviate the enormity
Of his pain. He does not seek to live:
He fell into a peace-less chasm,
And speaks in a barren tongue. (61)

Communication, it seems, is impossible, useless, pointless; nothing can undo his loss, speaking is a barren exercise, and even writing is a task he undertakes 'just to kill time' (61).

Although the poems in *Lalomanu* reiterate the poet's social isolation, they have also been acknowledged as reaching out and somehow speaking to others affected by the Samoan tsunami, thus making the book and its author agents in forms of social engagement that the poet in his pain could hardly have imagined. In 2010 the Samoan government released its official report of the disaster and its aftermath, and included in the report was an extract from one of Salavert's poems titled 'On Lalomanu Beach'.

Beautiful hues of surrounding green and blue
And inviting golden sand
The soothing breeze blows under the Samoan sun
Peace is close at hand
The horizon is a white line of reef and surf
Fish come near the shore
The hill stands majestic
An idyllic backdrop of lushness and mystery...
The sand vanishes into the ocean. ('Tsunami' 5)

This extract is from one of the few poems in Salavert's book that makes no reference to the death that was to come, and it is reproduced in the report superimposed on a photograph of a

pristine Lalomanu beach, as yet untouched by the tsunami. The extract appears under the title ‘Tribute to what once was’ and, as an opening to the report, it serves the same function as it does within the book *Lalomanu*: a reference to something beautiful and vulnerable, in the moments before its destruction. In the original poem, the line “The sand vanishes into the ocean” refers to a game the poet’s children play, as in building a sandcastle they drop balls of sand into the water and shriek in glee ‘;Mi pelota!’ as the sand dissolves (13). The report goes on to recount the events of 29 September 2009, the deaths and destruction and the relief and recovery responses. In an appendix, the report lists the names of the 143 confirmed deceased, among them Clea Salavert Wykes, age 6, citizenship Australian.

Following the release of the report, the *Sunday Samoan* newspaper carried a story which contained the full text of another of Salavert’s poems ‘Lalomanu Sunrise’ which ends with the lines:

A brutal sea-tongue, full of force, a slaughter
Wiped out their lives with a grisly roar.
My loved one, my loving daughter,
Was one of the many children it took. (Telefoni 15)

And with these words the poet acknowledges something that the report makes clear: that Clea was one of many children drowned in the tsunami – almost half of the deaths that day were children – and that the poet’s grief is shared by numerous Samoan parents whose children were swept away, and whose families have been torn apart. The newspaper article goes on to report on the memorial services held in Samoa one year on from the tsunami. Salavert’s book *Lalomanu* is one of these acts of memorialisation. In another, the Salavert and Wykes family have worked towards the establishment of the Clea Salavert Library at Lalomanu Primary School in Samoa. The library opened in October 2010, with donations of books organised through Clea’s and her brothers’ school in Amaroo in the ACT, Australia. The day following the opening of the library, the *Samoa Observer* newspaper carried a full page story titled ‘Remembering Clea Wykes’ which detailed plans for a pen-pal project linking students in Lalomanu with those in Amaroo, and an annual reading award in both schools named after Clea. Since then, the Salavert / Wykes family have made several return trips to Lalomanu to visit the school and maintain their links with the community there. Salavert documents this ongoing activity on a weblog titled ‘The Clea Salavert Library – Biblioteca Clea Salavert’; a recent post records that Clea’s mother and auntie visited the school in Lalomanu in July of 2013.

Although the poet tells his readers that there is no end, let me end here, with this: *Lalomanu* is a book of unremitting grief; there is little consolation within its pages; on the contrary, there is the repeated assertion of the poet's sense of isolation and his certainty that his pain and mourning will endure to his own death. And yet the book should also be understood as one of a number of related acts of memorialisation that have contributed to social engagement, engagement that would not have occurred without the commitment to remembering and honouring the dead, the children – Clea among them – whose lives were lost in the Samoan tsunami. *Lalomanu* is melancholic mourning, a practice that refuses closure, that recognises grief and sorrow as a part of ongoing life, that asks that its readers to acknowledge this living grief, and that contributes – through the poet's and his family's and his community's commitments – to establishing and sustaining connections with others whose lives have been forever changed by disaster.

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