

— I used to write cheerful poems, happy and life-affirming,
But my eyes are wet with tears and the poems are those
That only grieving Muses would prompt me to compose,
Heart-breaking verse from a suffering, heartbroken man,
But these woeful songs turn out to be my consoling
companions.

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

Enforced suffering, grief, mourning, and the need of consolation are existential predicaments of every living soul ever since the first breath of life. Consolation is also a subject with a long history. From the biblical psalms of consolation – stretching through thousands of years of religious and literary history – and in ancient texts as *Gilgamesh*, and the *Iliad* over classics such as the above quoted Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Thomas More's *Dialogue of Comfort*, to all kinds of contemporary literary expressions of consolation. The subject could also be seen from different angles: the reading of consolation, and the consolations of writing. These activities are often intertwined. The consolations of writing when published might become consoling for the reader. The communication of consoling is in other words also deeply reciprocal and dialogical. What kind of texts that will give a reading and distressed subject comfort or release can't be decided by anyone but the sole reader. Moreover, the subject seems to be limitless. Consolation is a truly manifold and interdisciplinary subject. This volume of essays is an excellent proof of this.

This work began some years ago at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion. A group of interdisciplinary researchers developed ideas and research-plans on the topic of consolation, and this anthology is a manifestation of that highly interesting and promising project. As a result of the mutual interests in literature and religion among many of the researchers at the department and due to a propitious academic milieu, the Network for Literature and Religion was established in 2012 at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion (LIR). During the last years a promising collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Literature, Theology & the Arts at the University of Glasgow has developed, and these essays are the first proof in print of this international cooperation.

The present essays were first presented as speeches at the conference »Consolation – Literary and Religious Perspectives«, held at the University of Gothenburg and arranged by The Network for Literature and Religion at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion (LIR). The focus of the conference was on the tradition of consolation as expressed in

literary and religious texts. This focus, however, is part of a wide field including cultural and historical contexts as well as conceptual studies, sociological and psychological investigations, and phenomenological perspectives. Therefore the conference was free for all kinds of perspectives within the complex of literary/religious consolation. That perspectival freedom within a thematic unity is preserved in this collection of essays.

— Consolation was a basic element in ancient philosophy. A good example is Seneca who was arguing for a stoic form of consolation. Stern and severe, and with the Christian hope excluded, the consolation offered by Stoicism was unlike Christian consolation. Stoic arguments have nevertheless seen a revival in modern coach literature, where »acceptance«, focus on the present, »carpe diem«, and mindfulness are current words of prestige, as Bo Lindberg observes in his essay.

The consoling text does not remove the suffering or the causes of suffering, but might change the sufferer's perception of and attitude to his or her suffering and its causes. Thus, the experience of consolation involves a shift of horizon that momentarily can change the sufferer's life-world. Focusing on the textual traditions of consolation, and with a wide range of examples – from Homer to Derrida –, Beata Agrell investigates the relationship between this textual rhetoric in the Western world and the phenomenology of consolation.

The crucial question of reading as a consoling act is scrutinized in Torsten Pettersson's essay »Shared Experience – Shared Consolation? Perspective-Taking and Existential Stances in Literature«, in which he discusses a topic of immediate interest, namely the possibilities of book therapy in a secularized present-day Western society where mental illness is becoming the chief reason for early retirement and the use of anti-depressants keeps escalating. He employs concrete textual examples to present some coordinates for book therapy, and they include consolation of three kinds: transcendent and cognitive; immanent and cognitive; and immanent and aesthetic.

A moment in life where consoling practices are enacted is of course »On the Deathbed«, which is the title of Cecilia Rosengrens essay on the 17th century philosopher, dramatist and author Margaret Cavendish, and her »Advice on What to Say in Times of Grief«. The essay highlights a couple of fictitious speeches of dying persons. Relating Cavendish's intervention on this stage to early modern philosophical discussions on emotions and to the rhetorical genre as such, the paper discusses how Cavendish conceived of the concept of grief and consolation in her age.

Contrary to what scholars in general have suggested the Biblical Opera Libretto *Cain und Abel Oder Der verzweifeln*

Bruder=Mörder (1689), by Christian Heinrich Postel, is not about guilt, moral concern, the rightness of actions, the legitimacy of the self, violence, envy, mystery, the erotic, offerings or murder, but consolation, argues Dag Hedman in his essay. This 17th century opera gives an intriguing example of how the theme is exposed in a piece of art and at the same time have consoling effects on the audience. In spite of the depressing theme of the opera, the spectator/reader finds consolation in the loving trust in God shown on stage and by the thought of the coming Savior, as Hedmans conclusion reads.

The Italian dramatist, novelist, and poet Luigi Pirandello, and his 1926 novel *One, No-one and One Hundred Thousand* is the centre of Ruth Dunster's essay in which she claims that the protagonist Moscarda's journey can be seen as a deeply theological one, and how his ultimate madness is in fact a place of consolation and rebirth. She argues that it becomes an autistic theology when its problematic stance towards relationships is taken into account, and the comfort of Moscarda's ultimate consolation becomes an acceptance of the space where a mystical theology might resonate with a theology of autistic »Mindblindness«, namely, the ultimate failure of human knowledge and communion.

Mystical theology has also for a long time been a theme highlighted among critics and researchers of Tomas Tranströmer's poetry. In accordance with this line of interpretation goes Staffan Olofsson in his essay in which he stresses that in the poetical universe of Tranströmer human beings are not only rational and social beings, but also spiritual and existential beings. When distributed in an inimitable metaphorical language these insights into spiritual aspects of life might have a consoling effect on the reader as well.

Reading – writing – reading. The chain of the consoling activities seems to be endless. Jennifer Reek reads and writes about Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th-century founder of the Society of Jesus, who was reading while recovering from a battle wound in 1521 the only texts available to him, of lives of the saints and Christ. The French thinker Hélène Cixous experienced a comparable consolation in unexpected and life-changing encounters with texts, in her case it was a chance reading of the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector in 1978, after years of reading and writing in what she describes as a desert without women companions. In her essay Reek explores the idea of reading as consolation in the work and life of these two disparate yet essentially compatible figures.

To ease the pains of a marginalized group of people different imaginary ideas could be developed within the group. In early Christianity the idea of the end of times includes eschatological themes as the emergence of new heavens and a new earth. This biblical code has been transformed into vast range of

popular culture products. In science fiction literature, a variant on this theme of cosmic regeneration is outlined as the escape to an earth-like planet with the help of an interstellar space ship. An interesting recent case of such an offer of consolation in outer space is the novel *Voyage to Alpha Centauri*, by Michael O'Brien, a contemporary Canadian author. The story is read by Clemens Cavallin as a commentary on the marginalization of traditional, especially Catholic, Christianity, and the growing strength of a liberal secular order.

Consolation might not be found just in outer space, but even in the most trivial domestic objects. Elizabeth Anderson seeks in her essay about Hilda Doolittle's (»H. D.«) writing from the Second World War an answer to the question of how the author's engagement with crafting material things formed a spiritual response to the time of crisis in which she wrote her mature poetry and prose. The French theorist H el ene Cixous's writing on the gift performs the functions of a fruitful framework for the discussion of gift exchange amongst H.D.'s friends as a process of crafting community in the face of trauma. That is how ordinary things become pathways towards healing and consolation.

Objects have obviously been understood to have consolatory functions in Western culture. In her essay, Heather Walton gives a line of examples from the tradition but foremost refers to new Materialist thinking in her discussion on the consolation to be found in human/thing relations. This potential is explored with particular reference to Etty Hillesum's war-time journals which place the consolation of things in a challenging and creative theological frame.

With reference to a wide range of theological, philosophical, and literary sources Carl Reinhold Br akenhielm argues that religious believers are justified when they draw consolation from their faith. They have a license to hope – and under certain specific conditions – also a license to believe and draw consolation from their faith. But the element of doubt is nevertheless deep-rooted. They have, in short, a quantum of solace and doubt, as Br akenhielm points out.

Psychoanalysis has seldom occupied itself with the notion of consolation theoretically. Consolation (comfort – solace) is not a psychoanalytic concept. And Per Magnus Johansson points in his essay to the fact that Freud only uses the word once in his general reflections on the human condition. Focusing on Freud's theories about religion Johansson notices that Freud saw religion as an effect of man's infantile need for consolation and compared it with obsessional neuroses. Inspired by the project of Enlightenment Freud was convinced that the spread of thinking influenced by science in the long run will lead to abandonment of religion. In Freud's scientific-ideological attempt at turning psychoanalysis into a scientific discipline, phenomena that are parts of the religious and literary fields

are lost. The human need for consolation is such a phenomenon, as Johansson concludes.

— Read as an ensemble these essays demonstrate the manifold aspects of the concept of consolation, at the same time as pointing to its fundamental meaning and function. Consolation is always an unexpected gift, received in the deepest despair. Whether it is given or found, and whether the medium is a human act, a material thing, or a spiritual event, consolation infuses some kind of light into darkness. Even a stoic renouncing of consolation may bring a glimpse of this light into a suffering soul: this sudden insight of the harsh truth of life may be somehow consoling. Reading literary or religious texts may give consoling insights, but it may also function as a soothing stroke of an invisible hand. This range of nuances in function is perhaps why consolation is such an intriguing phenomenon for study and so inseparable from human life.

— Beata Agrell & Håkan Möller
