

IDENTITY AND LOSS: MOURNING AND ELEGIAC TRADITION IN SELECTED POEMS FROM TONY HARRISON'S THE SCHOOL OF ELOQUENCE

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*In his paper entitled "Mourning and Annihilation in Tony Harrison's The School of Eloquence," Anthony Rowland places Harrison's "family sonnets" within a larger context of "poetry of mourning," which is "conventionally explicated within the recognized . . . and transgressive structure of elegy"¹ Rowland focuses on theoretical approaches to the issue² although he does not ignore the importance of literary models of elegy, applied to Harrison's work by Rebecca Smalley in her (unpublished) thesis *The Role of Memory in the Poetry of Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison*. Undeniably, structures of elegy and theoretical models concerning mourning cannot be treated as "a rigid interpretative grid" (Rowland 1998: 1) while explaining Harrison's "complex and elusive"³ approach to the process of mourning. Nevertheless, they are useful in interpreting the theme of loss and, as the following paper will prove, its relation to the issue of constructing identity in *The School of Eloquence*. The reason for this being that structures of elegy and theoretical models concerning mourning lay great stress on "identity's diachronic relation to its past," in other words they focus less on the "contingent-in-the-present character (i.e. the social construction of identity) and more . . . [on] the ways in which past experiences appear to 'hard-wire' or determine categories of identity"⁴*

*The paper focuses on the way in which traditional structures of elegy and theoretical models concerning mourning take up new forms in Tony Harrison's The School of Eloquence and explains the role this process plays in the poet's approach to the issue of loss. The analysis of selected sonnets of the sequence investigates the issue of mourning primarily in relation to the theme of constructing identity and shows how, through the revision of selected traditional elegiac conventions, the continuity of mourning is being sustained and universalized in order to, as was pertinently described by Eric Stantner in *Stranded Objects*, forge the process of "integrating damage, loss, disorientation, . . . into a transformed structure of identity . . . of . . . an individual as a member of a cultural group"⁵*

¹ Rowland, Anthony. "Mourning and Annihilation in Tony Harrison's The School of Eloquence." *Working Papers in Literary and Cultural Studies* no. 27 (1998): 1-15.

² Applying the theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok.

³ Rowland, Anthony. "Mourning and Annihilation in Tony Harrison's The School of Eloquence." *Working Papers in Literary and Cultural Studies* no. 27 (1998): 1-15.

⁴ Prager, Jeffrey. "Melancholic Identity: Post-traumatic Loss Memory and Identity Formation." *Identity in Question*. Ed. Anthony Elliott and Paul du Gay. London: Sage Publication LTD, 2009. 138-157.

⁵ Stantner, Eric. *Stranded Objects*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, xii.