

From the Stages to the Stasis of Grief:  
An Examination of the Didactic Mission of Elegy

by

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For those who inspire elegies.

In memory of:

Olivia Spolyar (1996-2013)

Carrol Girard (1937-2014)

Ricky Promo (1973-2015)

Tom Petkwitz (1965-2015)

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## Abstract

The elegy is a poetic genre that has been in existence for centuries. Traditionally the form has served to act as a verbal or written tool used for the consolation of the poet and other mourners following a death, and as a commemoration and veneration of the deceased. The standard conventions of the genre approach mourning as a process, one that can be completed successfully through the expression of grief. Pastoral elegies, such as John Milton's "Lycidas" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais* survive as examples of the ideal consolatory elegy because the poems offer a clear progression through and out of grief. However, the elegy as a genre has been consistently difficult to define because the place of poetry and the place of grief have changed over time, as has the nature of the relationship between poet and audience or reader. In addition, because grief concerns such personal matters, the elegy alludes a standard formula.

As the objectives of the elegy have changed, and a shift in attitude about the purpose and process of poetry has modified the manner in which grief is confronted in poetry, a new elegiac form has been created. Despite the elegy's conventions of consolation and commemoration, critics have argued that the modern elegy resists the shared and social experience of grief. In its new form, the *anti*-elegy performs, rather than rejects, melancholy. It does not offer or express a process for grieving, which would suggest grief's eventual conclusion. The modern elegy remains in a state of melancholy, rather than moving through grief's stages.

And yet, the myriad counterexamples we might find throughout history point to another meaning of elegy, one that calls into question the trajectory of grief and challenges the genre's conventions, whether early-modern or modern. Katherine Philips' "Epitaph" and Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" are two such examples that function as neither consolatory nor anti-elegiac. Instead, these elegies reveal an emerging didactic objective that appears in contemporary elegies.

This thesis is interested in exploring the didactic mission and the authorship of contemporary elegy. Three contemporary poems about loss will be analyzed: Ed Hirsch's book-length elegy, *Gabriel*, Mary Jo Bang's individual elegy, "Visiting," and Catherine Barnett's elegy, "Site." This project investigates the changes in the elegy's performance of grief, its use of melancholy to express anger and ambivalence, and the ways in which these contemporary poets communicate that consolation is not the end goal of the elegy and, while reflecting on their love for the deceased, they also critique societal norms regarding mourning. These poems suggest that the act of writing itself is the experience of grief, not a resolution of grief, and that the act of writing must be enough, even when language fails to contain the feelings of grief, because their poetry refuses to move towards grief's resolution. These poets require, instead, that their grief be fully examined, which requires the grief to remain in the elegy, not to offer an endpoint to it.

Key Words: elegy; grief in literature; death in literature; elegiac poetry, English—history & criticism; 20<sup>th</sup> century elegiac poetry, American—history & criticism; Jahan Ramazani; Peter Sacks; Mary Jo Bang; Catherine Barnett; Edward Hirsch

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## Introduction

The modern elegy functions as a literary genre and a space for mourning. In poetry, the elegy memorializes the dead or responds to death—usually the loss of a relative, friend, or cultural figure. According to David Kennedy’s 2007 book *Elegy*, the occasion of death denotes the genre as “the story that starts at the end, or, more correctly, that starts with and because of a specific end” (117). As death provokes fear, worry, and incomprehension, a poet attempts to craft these emotions out of permanent loss and tragedy, and shape grief into a shareable form. If this describes the elegy we know today, what can we as readers make of the genre’s “prestige and longevity [...] [that] have increased its variety,” and have caused the elegy to become “splintered and [...] unrecognizable to itself” (Barden and Fowler 398)? As the genre’s form has undergone changes, there are important questions to ask about what grief looks like in poetry, what its presentation provides to present day readers, and why it matters that the contemporary elegy looks so different from elegies of the past.

For the ancient Greeks, an elegy was any poem that contained elegiac couplets, meaning that the meter was “composed of a heroic or dactylic hexameter followed by a pentameter” (Hirsch, *The Essential Poet’s Glossary* 89). Because this genre designation largely considered meter, elegies during this time were written about many different subjects other than death; most of these elegies were even performed aloud, sometimes with musical accompaniment (Hirsch, *The Essential Poet’s Glossary* 89). These performances suggest the public use of elegy, one acted out for the benefit of an audience. From the late fifteenth century to the late eighteenth century, pastoral poetry and funeral verse primarily characterized elegy (Shohet 434). Pastoral representations are often “stylized and mythic,” seen in such works as Virgil’s *Eclogues* and Theocritus’ lament for Daphnis (Braden and Fowler 397). In contrast to the “aestheticiz[ed] loss”

in pastoral portrayals, “[f]uneral verse is more immediately invested in actual mourning” (Shohet 434). These differing modes indicate how the elegy has made broad use of both artificiality and raw emotions, until finally the elegy began to take mourning as its sole subject, maintaining performative and public aspects of earlier versions while developing expected conventions that have lasted into today. These conventions include a “mode [that] is primarily lyric, [...] apostrophe, exclamation, pathetic fallacy, [...] allusion, and epitaph” (Braden and Fowler 398). Along with these devices, the poets express “shock, rage, longing, melancholy, and resolution—often in quick succession” (Braden and Fowler 398). These emotions and characteristics often function to mark a gradual, persistent shift from exclamations of grief to consolation, one reinforced by the belief in an afterlife and expressions of admiration for the dead.

The conventional view of elegy dictates that, while the occasion for writing the poem is grief, the poem can succeed in working through that grief. When writing about the genre, “[m]ost literary historians have understood elegy as closely linked to the hist[ory], theory, and decorum of cultural practices of mourning” and use “Pigman’s phrase, ‘a process of mourning’”<sup>1</sup> to describe it (Braden and Fowler 398). Representative of this process, the elegy succeeds in the work of mourning and ends on a note of solace or reassurance for the speaker and reader. The poet thus communicates, to an implied audience, that this genre performs successful mourning and functions to *overcome* grief. In this way, the conventional elegy, common between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, advocates a return to the social. By crafting a poem out of grief, the poet makes the lamentation bearable and supports moving on from it. Therefore, the consolatory elegy teaches poets/mourners, as well as their audiences, how to triumph over grief, despite death’s unconquerable reality.

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase comes from G.W. Pigman’s *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy* (1985).

Many modern critics use a variety of psychological and psychoanalytical concepts and metaphors to further explore the ways in which the elegy confronts and resolves grief. They regard consolation, for instance, as successful mourning and sufficient recovery of the mourner. In Freudian terms—often adopted by critics to demonstrate how grief progresses in elegy—after loss the mourner’s ego is preoccupied with grief; in order for the ego to again become “free and uninhibited,” his or her libido must detach from the object being mourned (Freud 154). This detachment means that the work of mourning is complete. Peter Sacks, in his book *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1985), “sees the conventions of the genre...as answerable to psychological needs” and uses Freud’s theories as one source for his close readings (Braden and Fowler 398). For example, in Sacks’ analysis of John Milton’s “Lycidas” (1638), he reminds his readers that consolation can be thought of “as the achievement of a deflected sexual assertion, of a trope for a procreative force that outlasts individual mortality” (97). Thus, for him, the trope—or the completion of mourning—represents a triumph over death and a way for the mourner to survive despite having experienced loss.

Typically, comforting expressions of grief are found in pastoral elegies such as “Lycidas,” written after the death of Edward King, and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Adonais* (1821), written in memory of John Keats. For Milton and Shelley, and other poets partaking in this pastoral tradition, death induces sorrow, and it also represents an anxiety about the future, labeling death as a force that prohibits creative endeavors and strikes before a life has reached its full potential. The act of crafting the elegy thus hones their skills as poets. In addition to a statement of poetic ambition, other elegiac tropes and conventions include: reference to the power of nature, transcendence through death, and a belief in a higher power, all which function to make death more comprehensible and bearable, while reinforcing religion’s capacity to heal.

Chapter one addresses elements in “Lycidas” and *Adonais* that scholars have identified as crucial to the modern legacy of the elegy; in a series of close readings, using Sacks’ analyses as support, I demonstrate how Milton and Shelley use these conventions intentionally. I argue that these poets shape and essentially perform grief, through their use of language and conventions, to instruct their audiences to expect a general, consolatory resolution that completes the mourning process and advocates a return to the social.

Not only do Milton and Shelley resolve their own grief in these elegies, but they also portray a general solution to grief through the depiction of shepherds, who are detached from the personal situation behind the losses. The speakers’ mournings thus inevitably become separate from Milton’s and Shelley’s. Although the poets use “I” to share their grief, they distinguish themselves from the speaker by portraying “I” as a character. Thus, this portrayal purposefully distances the poets’ losses from the poets themselves.

While the consolatory elegy offers, seemingly, a constructive and unifying commemoration of the dead and a lasting reprieve from grief, this offering may feel unsatisfactory and inadequate by being too unrealistically reassuring to contemporary (American and British) audiences living at a time in which intricate mourning rituals no longer accompany death and dying. Instead, grief is often personal and private, and contemporary society is largely “death-phobic,” so that the real implications of dying and mortality are often ignored or hushed (Samuel 147). Grief, in elegies which promote consolation, seems too structured and simple, being comprised as it is of a clear beginning, middle, and end. The poet inevitably reaches acceptance and rediscovers a creative enthusiasm in such elegies. According to Braden and Fowler, the “[e]legy’s recourse to emotion seems incompletely explained by psychological or social models of grief or even by a notion of the poem as expressive” (398). The theories of

Freud and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross<sup>2</sup> cannot adequately nor completely explain how feelings of grief function in elegy. What about grief that is not so easily resolved? What about elegies that subvert these elegiac conventions? In this thesis, I analyze the way in which the elegy has represented both public and quasi-private expressions of grief; specifically, I argue that contemporary poets Edward Hirsch, Mary Jo Bang, and Catherine Barnett craft their elegies—*Gabriel* (2014), “Visiting” (2007), and “Site” (2004), respectively—as meticulous, personal texts that ask the reader to linger on the feeling of grief while maintaining a didactic objective.

Scholarly studies often locate these unresolved portrayals of grief in modern elegies, by classifying them as *anti-elegiac*, arguing that they explicitly resist consolation, deny closure, and maintain ambivalence about faith. R. Clifton Spargo’s 2010 article “The Contemporary Anti-Elegy” claims that “[b]y evoking a crisis in the history of commemoration, anti-elegy insists on the relentless present tense of grief” (417). In Spargo’s view, another quality of anti-elegy is the poet’s acknowledgment that his or her grief cannot be resolved or distanced, which emphasizes its permanence. Jahan Ramazani’s 1994 study of modern elegy, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, analyzes anti-elegies written by a wide variety of American and British poets such as Thomas Hardy, Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Seamus Heaney, all of which he argues employ melancholic mourning, “often displacing and mocking grief,” in addition to complicating commemoration (16).

The term melancholy, when associated with mourning, comes from Sigmund Freud’s 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” In this essay, Freud distinguishes a normal response to loss, mourning, from melancholia—which is a more damaging and erratic response that inhibits

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<sup>2</sup> Swiss-American psychiatrist whose book *On Death and Dying* (1969) introduced the Five Stages of Grief.

the liberation of the ego after loss (153). Elegiac scholars often use the term “melancholia” to describe such non-consolatory responses to loss in modern elegies. Ramazani adapts the term to “abstract and recognize the psychic tendencies of the modern elegy” (30). Spargo’s 2004 book *The Ethics of Mourning* regards melancholia “as the elegy’s most persistent sign of a dissent from conventional meanings and as its similarly persistent sign of a dedication to the time and realm of the other” (11).<sup>3</sup>

In using the term for my own close readings, I take issue with Ramazani’s lens of psychoanalysis. At times he seems to treat the poem as a person, qualifying it as melancholic and therefore reading it as a live performance of modern suffering. In his book’s introduction, Ramazani claims that modern elegists often “attack the dead and themselves, their own work and tradition; and they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself” (4). While I acknowledge that Hirsch, Bang, and Barnett use melancholic aspects of mourning and thus deny consolation, I see their usage of melancholia as a conscious and deliberate choice to achieve a didactic mission, rather than a compulsion to perform suffering. By didactic mission I mean that these poems intend to teach their audience that grief cannot be overcome in elegy, but that it can be methodically interrogated and result in a sort of collective catharsis for the poet and reader. I distinguish the instructive nature of these poems from that of consolatory elegies such as “Lycidas” and *Adonais*, which encourage a navigation out of grief and a return to society. Hirsch and Bang do not attack their deceased sons, and Barnett does not lash out at her nieces, who are presumed to be deceased. These poets, instead, use their poetry as loving tributes to the dead, expressing a desire to linger on and maintain the

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<sup>3</sup> For the psychoanalytical basis for the term, see Freud. For a thorough overview of how the term has been adapted in elegy throughout its history, see Kennedy

representations of their loved ones through each line break and each word. Hirsch, Bang, and Barnett do not seek closure as much as they struggle to express their grief, to feel it in its raw form—for they know that closure is impossible. The act of creating—of writing—along with imparting a lesson or message and possibly offering a faint glimmer of hope must be enough.

Chapter two explores this act of creation in those elegies which push back against traditional elegiac conventions, including consolation and performance of general expressions of grief. I begin the chapter with a close reading of Katherine Philips' poem "Epitaph" (1655), which Philips wrote after her son died. The poem begins as a communal lamentation, but it quickly becomes self-conscious, and turns inwards. Philips remains skeptical of her belief that God can end her grief. I then analyze Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" (1976) in order to provide a framework for how contemporary poets also strain against societal norms of mourning. Bishop exaggerates the performative aspect of pastoral and consolatory elegies by using the strict form of the villanelle and attempting to persuade herself and her readers that losing something is inconsequential. She invites an audience through her use of the imperative—repeatedly telling us to practice this "art"—but also uses vague language to describe her personal losses—namely an ambiguous "you," thus turning inward. I juxtapose a seventeenth-century elegy with a twentieth-century one to demonstrate how, for centuries, elegists have adapted the genre, particularly when articulating deeply personal losses. I argue that "Epitaph" and "One Art"—the former by a woman writer in a male-dominated century, and the latter by a gay woman in the middle of the twentieth century—consciously blend a general, performative expression of grief with a personal one, while asking the audience to linger on, rather than leave behind, their losses. These elegies challenge the abstract and ideal form of the consolatory elegy. Ultimately "Epitaph" and "One Art" do not meet an audience's expectations about the conventional process of mourning; I argue

that this is precisely their intention. If the emergence of personal, non-consolatory grief in elegy is valid, three questions remain: for whom are these elegies written, what do they attempt to convey as poems, and what do they teach about us about loss that is not mastered?

To answer these questions I turn to three contemporary elegies; Hirsch's comes from his book-length poem *Gabriel* (2014), Bang's from her collection *Elegy* (2007), and Barnett's from her collection *Into Perfect Spheres Such Holes are Pierced* (2004). In a series of close readings, I analyze the poets' dismissal of conventional commemoration, maintaining that these poems act as private expressions of grief while still providing a public service to the reader. I aim to show that when elegies deny the comfort we have come to expect from the genre—especially when the poet seems to concede that the language cannot contain grief—they invite a more personal interaction with the speaker—one that asks us to acknowledge the poet and speaker as one, while provoking anxiety due to an undetermined ending. This personal encounter, however, does not assume that the poem wants to go unseen. Rather, the personal details and quasi-private expressions teach the audience about grief in poetry; while not advocating the return to the social through a public, consolatory performance, these poems weave the reader and poet through grief and allow catharsis. The poets teach the audience that consolation cannot be found in such poetry and is not necessarily the point of elegy. For Hirsch, Bang, and Barnett, it is essential to author their own grief, meaning that it is impossible for anyone else to be the speaker because their grief is so precariously and personally wrapped around their losses. This deeply personal expression allows their elegies to function as “a kind of manual or liturgy for personal use” (Braden and Fowler 398). Indeed, their poems exemplify that “[t]he emotions represented by the poem and the emotional experience that the poem offers to the readers are distinct” (Braden and Fowler

398). These poets do not portray their grief as general or conforming to a standard process. Instead, it is the very intimacy of their elegies that translates so well to our own grief.

It may also seem counterintuitive that these personal expressions of mourning would be so intricately crafted, using language and line breaks to make a product of their processing of grief, but I argue that this is purposeful. Indeed, the poets in chapter three use personal details, enjambment, repetition, and other poetic devices to articulate personal grief in poetry while also documenting their losses. While, for instance, Ramazani identifies “[g]uilt over one’s failures, impotent rage over mortality, and desolation over lost potential” in Michael Harper’s elegies for his sons (256), I maintain that my chosen poets—specifically Hirsch and Bang—concentrate their grief most heavily into creating a didactic and eternal tribute to the dead, despite their remaining guilt and anger with death’s unjustness and faith’s inadequacy. There is a relative dearth of criticism about these poems; therefore, I contrast my own close readings with Ramazani’s classifications and analyzes of modern elegies. Although my chosen poets incorporate anti-elegiac conventions, they do so not to mock grief, but to convey the impracticality of consolatory mourning in their personal encounters with loss. I argue that the act of creating these elegies suffices as the process of mourning, rather than the content or conventions in the poems themselves. If so, what do these poems recommend to us?

The poems in this chapter bluntly confront mourning, acknowledging that it has not led to healing or to a more fulfilling view of life for the poet. Each of the three poets uses a deliberate strategy to a certain end. Hirsch finds religious faith lacking, while Bang and Barnett craft their elegies to communicate the inadequacy of language, implying that words are unable to contain the immensity of loss, thereby subverting the expectation that the answer to their grief lies in poetic language. Language’s inadequacy, shown through vague word choice and repetition,

imparts an even more ambiguous and self-conscious message about loss. In these contemporary elegies, we see a much subtler—though deliberate—shaping and performance of language in contrast to Milton and Shelley. While the elegies of Hirsch, Bang, and Barnett are still shareable (obviously, in their publication) and nevertheless constructed as poems, they are specific to the poet and the tragedy, and not a general lesson in triumphing over grief in poetry.

## Chapter One

### The Legacy of Consolatory Mourning

As a genre, the elegy's power has traditionally come from its completion of the work of mourning, by expressing at some point in the poem, the achievement of consolation. Within this consolatory expression, the poet performs the action of overcoming grief for his or her audience. To demonstrate the progression of grief in a typical consolatory elegy I begin this chapter with close readings of John Milton's "Lycidas" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais*. Along with my commentary, I use Peter Sacks' analysis from his book *The English Elegy* (1985) to highlight key features in these elegies that represent consolatory mourning and confirmation of the poets' desired immortality. The legacies of Milton's and Shelley's elegies have perpetuated the belief that the elegy proposes consolation and advocates a return to the social. Understanding how "Lycidas" and *Adonais* find such consolation allows us to then understand the expressions of unresolved grief by poets such as Katherine Phillips and Elizabeth Bishop, thereby complicating the assumed purpose of elegy. "Lycidas" and *Adonais* also contrast with the contemporary elegies discussed in chapter three; the pastoral elegies rely on language to perform the work of mourning successfully because their success is assured by faith, while the contemporary elegies emphasize language's inability to contain, and they struggle to maintain religious conviction. This contrast reveals a new didactic function of elegy.

Milton wrote "Lycidas" in 1637, after one of his colleagues at Cambridge, Edward King, drowned in a shipwreck. "Lycidas" was published in a collection of elegies by various poets in memory of King, entitled *Iusta Edouardo King Naufrago*. According to Sacks, at this point in history, the elegy had become "an unconvincing, even trivial, form for a poem of mourning" (90). Such an ancient genre was no longer achieving its desired effect in the eyes of the public

who read about grief in art. Milton used the rejected genre to create a legacy for himself as a poet as well as “to carry the tradition onward to unprecedented greatness” (Sacks 90). After the publishing of “Lycidas,” countless poets would attempt to appropriate Milton’s mastery of language and progression of mourning; critics have since lauded the poem as a superb achievement of literature. The poem became exemplary for the twentieth-century conception of elegy as a tradition, and the praise and admiration of the poem has strengthened readers’ expectations that the elegy is meant to heal. Christopher Kendrick argues that “Lycidas” is in a way anachronistic because it *could* be treated as a very early example of elegy, though, in fact, it isn’t (2). While it may be tempting for contemporary audiences to think of “Lycidas” as the *first* example of pastoral elegy, Milton in fact borrows from and transforms conventions of Roman elegies that were written centuries before his lifetime. It is this borrowing and altering that has in part secured his elegy’s place in history as an extraordinary and successful navigation through, and out of, the process of grieving.

“Lycidas” closely follows ancient Roman pastoral elegiac tradition, adopting its features to present a revamped, complex version of elegy. The poem resembles Virgil’s *Eclogues* through its depiction of the deceased as a shepherd and the insistence on achieving poetic fame. The poem also “appeal[s] to Nature to mourn” and curses fate for allowing the tragedy (Norlin 297). Milton helped popularize these characteristics and move them back into the accepted and mainstream arena of writing poetry of mourning. In *Grief and the English Renaissance Elegy* (1985), G. W. Pigman argues that “[i]n the early part of the [sixteenth] century Englishmen are acutely anxious about grief, which they regard as subversive of the rule of reason and domestic and social order” (2). He continues, claiming, “towards the end of the century defensiveness about mourning becomes less pressing and persistent” (3). We in fact see Milton embracing his

feelings of grief—exploring his sorrow rather than shying away from it—only to then overcome these feelings.

Certainly, the purpose of the poem is for the speaker to achieve consolation after Lycidas' death, however, Sacks argues that Milton's goal as a poet is "to secure immortality" (91). This goal relates to the discussion in my project's introduction, that the expression of consolation in traditional elegy reaffirms the poet's strength to conquer death. In addition, Milton advocates for the return of the social, in that his narrator provokes a sort of collective healing among the other shepherds, by the poem's conclusion.

The speaker begins his lament by proclaiming the tragedy that has sparked the creation of the poem and calling on his audience—and nature—to join in mourning:

Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more  
 Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,  
 I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
 And with forced fingers rude,  
 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.  
 Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,  
 Compels me to disturb your season due;  
 For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,  
 Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer. (ll. 1-10)

These opening lines begin the work of this pastoral elegy, situating the speaker in a pastoral setting. He uses apostrophe to address the "Laurels" and the "myrtles," explicitly telling them that he has come to stunt their growth and therefore their ability to mature. The speaker indicates that this poem arises from a premature occasion, one he seems to have experienced before, and one that is sparked by sadness and grief. We first imagine nature as a wilted scene, a slow decay caused by an exposure to a world in which grief plagues all. As a poet, the speaker defines his motive, justifies his place among nature, and uses language to mourn the loss of Lycidas. As a

presence, the speaker interferes with a normal progression, as Lycidas' death has forced him to do. He seems reluctant to write this poem; he is, in fact, "Compel[ed]."

Line nine states the occasion for elegy—"Lycidas is dead"—dispelling all ambiguity. The speaker defines this loss as "Bitter constraint and sad occasion," indicating that the speaker is almost obligated to write this elegy. From this phrase, we understand that the speaker is in mourning, troubled by the death in that its occurrence has disturbed nature. The speaker also begins to qualify the dead, producing positive remembrances, as someone who died "ere his prime" and who "hath not left his peer," meaning that Lycidas was yet to achieve all of which he was capable.

Milton's language tells us of Lycidas' death and the reason for our grief. Rather than beginning his poem in the middle of his grief, the speaker introduces the occasion, invoking grief as a process, one that starts after experiencing loss and requires narration, which can be understood by those who may not have known the deceased. Language is sufficient, it is implied, to explain this process, as Milton's bold confrontation of the loss suggests. His mastery of his craft—irregular iambic pentameter—reminds us that this poem has been constructed specifically to memorialize King and also to display the poet's artistry and own experience with grief.

The lament continues, drenched in grief, while the narrator compares Lycidas' death to destructive forces found in nature:

But O the heavy change, now thou art gone,  
Now thou art gone, and never must return!  
Thee, shepherd, thee the woods and desert caves,  
With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,  
And all their echoes mourn.

.....  
As killing as the canker to the rose,  
Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze,

(ll. 37-41, 45-46)

In these lines the speaker recognizes the permanence of death, repeating the reality of loss as if to make himself believe its implications. Even nature mourns with the speaker, responding to this traumatic and heartbreaking occasion. In using nature this way, the speaker further explores his grief, emphasizing the literal weight and oppressive gloom of Lycidas' death. The speaker compares the decay of nature to Lycidas' absence, highlighting its harmfully transformative powers and capacity to wound those affected by the death. What is "as killing" is the grief that follows the shepherd's death. This grief is destructive to all forms of organic life, demonstrating its power to disturb natural order. Sacks argues that "Milton's narrative timing" makes the reader "somehow both prepared for loss and yet forced to reexperience its reality" (100). I envision this timing as Milton's performance of grief, in effect describing the event of loss as if it is happening now for the audience's sake. Rather than reflecting on the loss, Milton is performing the action of loss for the reader.

Early in the poem, readers become aware that Milton and King are taking on new identities for the audience, thus locating a more performative experience of grief that is meant to directly appeal to an audience. King becomes the shepherd Lycidas, and Milton becomes an anonymous narrator, announcing and responding to Lycidas' death. By making King into a character and fitting him to the conventions of ancient pastoral elegy, Milton makes King feel less particular and more distant. Although "Lycidas" the elegy was written for a collection commemorating King, taken outside of this collection, the poem bears little resemblance to King as a person, aside from the speaker's mention of his drowning. In addition, the new identities demonstrate a more general expression of grief. Specifically, the speaker wants to demonstrate his ability to overcome grief for himself and for his audience.

The speaker requests that nature mourn with him, and speculates as to why Lycidas had to die at all. In the following section of the poem, the speaker turns to another one of the conventions of the pastoral elegy, by blaming the muses and fate for not intervening to save Lycidas or keep this tragedy from occurring:

Where were ye, nymphs, when the remorseless deep  
 Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?  
 .....  
 Ay me! I fondly dream—  
 Had ye been there—for what could that have done?  
 .....  
 Alas! What boots it with incessant care  
 To tend the homely slighted shepherd's trade,  
 And strictly meditate the thankless muse? (ll.50-51, 56-57, 64-66)

This series of questions reveals the speaker's struggle to accept the shepherd's death and to comprehend it. First, the speaker questions the "nymphs," whether their power could have kept Lycidas from dying, had they cared enough to intervene. In this section, the speaker "has to mourn the loss of Lycidas *and* his own loss of belief in the Muses' protection" (Sacks 103). This crisis may suggest a loss of faith in addition to his disappointment in the Muses' inaction; however, the speaker quickly reaffirms the futility of the situation and will later reaffirm God's grace. The speaker then realizes that his desire for Lycidas to have lived is only a foolish "dream" because, in all reality, nothing could have saved Lycidas from his fate. The nymphs could not have saved him from drowning. Still the speaker wants to imagine that something could have been done to rescue the dear shepherd; however, "Alas!," he finally suggests that this dream is all in vain. These lines are an attempt to make sense of the death and to accept the separation it requires, and thus to progress towards an acceptance of it. Since nothing could have protected Lycidas, there is no use for blaming fate or "strictly meditat[ing] the thankless muse." While the

speaker wants to bring Lycidas back, the realization that nothing can do this moves him closer to consolation.

Eventually the speaker recognizes that the real perpetrator is “the blind Fury with the abhorrèd shears” who “slits the thin-spun life” (ll. 75-76). He imagines the Fury as “blind,” a death striking without bias, affecting all, no matter their potential, their identity, or their achievements. The use of “blind” also suggests the senselessness of the death, in that the speaker cannot possibly see justification in Lycidas’ death. The Fury literally cuts the life of Lycidas, the verb “slit” emphasizing both the violence and ease of the act. The speaker recognizes that life on its own is fragile and easily destroyed by the force of these shears.

While these lines provoke worry and contribute to the poem’s lamentation, the shape of consolation insistently emerges, both in the form of religious comfort and in the capacity for success in heaven. Phoebus’ appearance in the elegy initially invites the speaker to consider achieving success in the afterlife, claiming, “‘Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil’” (l. 78). Phoebus reveals that, instead, it requires time and cultivation to mature, and that true and sufficient fame cannot be found on Earth because life is short and cheapened by such forces as speakers of “broad rumor” (l. 80). Instead, fame “‘lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes, / And perfect witness of all-judging Jove’” (ll. 81-82). Only God can rule what constitutes as success. Jove’s judgment equates to everlasting salvation and “‘As he pronounces lastly on each deed, / Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed’” (ll. 83-84). Lycidas will be justly rewarded for his potential and talent, despite not having lived to realize these completely. God’s “pure eyes” have witnessed his efforts and will repay the fallen shepherd in heaven.

After reassuring himself of these eternal splendors—such as the afterlife that essentially makes up for a life taken too soon—the speaker finds reason for his grief to end. This discovery

marks the place in the poem where mourning becomes explicitly consolatory. The poet reiterates his faith in God and declares to his audience that they have no reason to lament:

Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,  
 For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,  
 Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor;  
 .....  
 So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,  
 Through the dear might of him that walked the waves,  
 Where, other groves and other streams along,  
 With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,  
 And hears the unexpressive nuptial song,  
 In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love.  
 There entertain him all the saints above,  
 In solemn troops and sweet societies  
 That sing, and singing in their glory move,  
 And wipe the tears forever from his eyes.  
 Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more; (ll. 165-167, 172-182)

This consolatory shift in tone, towards the end of the poem, reaffirms the idea of grief as a process, one that can come to an end through the work of poetry. The poem's grammar becomes imperative, the speaking subject explicitly taking command of grief by directing the other shepherds to wipe away their tears. Through this confrontation with grief, and by first questioning the reason for Lycidas' death—attributing it to careless muses and corrupt clergy—the speaker realizes the benevolent power of God. Sacks argues that “[t]he turn to the mounted Lycidas thus necessarily reflects a spiritualization of the poet's own attachment, a refined reassertion of desire evident in the accompanying imagery” (114). This claim demonstrates the Freudian notion of the mourner's libido attaching elsewhere and allowing the return of desire, what Freud regarded as one step on a healthy progress through grief (Freud 154).

In addition to heaven's offering true fame through God's acknowledgment of good deeds and potential, the speaker believes that “all the Saints” will entertain Lycidas in the afterlife,

singing him glorious melodies. These saints will also “wipe the tears for ever from his eyes,” preventing the shepherd from experiencing any pain or from missing his earthly life. Since Lycidas has found peace after death, there is no need for more pain and grief. The speaker commands the shepherds to end their tears, for he has found that grief is not as powerful or as debilitating as it may seem.

The speaker now functions as one who uplifts the other weeping shepherds, in effect taking them out of their own grief and assuring them that their grief will end, while the sibilant alliteration in lines 179-181 emphasizes a calm, whispered tone that invokes comfort and soothes. This grand gesture acts as a performance, where the speaker triumphantly shows that he has found resolution to grief. Without the speaker to command the shepherds that their tears are unnecessary, who is to say when they would have stopped? The speaker’s words become a consolation in and of themselves, working to soothe the other characters in the poem. In fact the speaker claims that Lycidas is not truly dead, but has found, this time, an eternal life in heaven. The speaker emphasizes his belief in God and the power of this belief.

Towards the end, this poem becomes less about the remembrance of Lycidas, and even less about the remembrance of King, than it concludes the power of the poet to transform grief into something manageable and conquerable. Milton’s precise crafting of language and progression from sorrow to triumph reflects a belief that poetry can comfort the mourned after experiencing loss. Rather than expressing personal moments of King’s life, Milton chooses to dwell on Lycidas’ capacity to transcend. Sacks sums up the poem by claiming that it “mov[es]...from submissive gestures of compulsion and loss to an internalizing counter-usurpation of totemic power” (117). In this sense, the elegist—or Milton himself—finishes the elegy a better poet than he began. This artificiality and ambition famously sparked criticism from

Dr. Samuel Johnson, who called the elegy's form "that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting," failing to find any real passion for the loss or for King (Rogers). This criticism might suggest that an elegy *too* focused on craft or consolation could come across as insincere or unsatisfactory, and thus mean that the process of mourning is not so easily completed.

Another famous English pastoral elegy that, while representative of the genre's traditional conventions, performs grief artificially, is Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais*. Shelley's elegy also instructs readers to return to society after expressing grief momentarily. This performance of mourning that predictably leads to consolation implies that grief can only persist for so long in poetry before the elegist satisfies his or her sorrow and moves on. As we will see in chapters two and three, when poets choose instead to linger on grief, a new didactic mission emerges, one unconcerned with following the traditional formula of elegy—unlike Shelley.

Published in 1821 in memory of fellow poet John Keats, *Adonais* follows a similar form to that of "Lycidas." We witness the speaker progressing from a state of sorrow and mourning—"I weep for Adonais—he is dead!" (l. 1)—to one of renewed faith and solace that Adonais is prospering in the afterlife—"Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep, / He hath awaken'd from the dream of life" (ll. 343-344). The third stanza functions as a typical outcry of grief in the pastoral elegy:

Oh, weep for Adonais—he is dead!  
 Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!  
 Yet wherefore? Quench within their burning bed  
 Thy fiery tears, and let thy loud heart keep  
 Like his, a mute and uncomplaining sleep;  
 For he is gone, where all things wise and fair  
 Descend;—oh, dream not that the amorous Deep  
 Will yet restore him to the vital air;  
 Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair. (ll. 19-26)

Similar to the speaker in Milton's poem, the speaker here is blunt in acknowledging Adonais' death. He calls upon his readers to join in his mourning, using "weep" as an imperative. The speaker provides us with a reason for our weeping, again dispelling any lingering doubt or ambiguity. He wants us to essentially lose all hope—"dream not"—in the lines "For he is gone" (ll. 24, 25). The speaker tells his readers that Adonais has left this world for good. He then lumps the collective grief of his audience together when he claims that death "laughs at our despair." The use of the pronoun "our" suggests the poem is addressed to a general audience. Early on, we as readers can recognize the distance between Shelley and the speaker of *Adonais*. By the first line, the subject of the poem—Keats—has been given a new identity, that of a shepherd. The speaker aligns himself with his audience as a fellow mourner, partaking in the ritual of commemorating Adonais, rather than referring to Keats directly.

In Sacks' view, Shelley "question[s] the efficacy of weeping" and engages in "a long interrogation of conventional gestures and figures of mourning" in the beginning of the poem (147). From this perspective, Shelley grapples with the elegy's traditional conventions, and *Adonais* explores a slightly more melancholic response to loss than in "Lycidas," whose resolution of grief tends to be associated, in modern criticism, with the genre. For Shelley, however, this skepticism is temporary, and the delay further anticipates the consolation that will somehow be found. "Lycidas" and *Adonais*, two of the most famous elegies in an English tradition, have made it seem like the genre's job is to find consolation and return the grieving subject to society.

To find this consolation and thus reaffirm the elegy's purpose, Shelley addresses the flaws of human life. The speaker claims that Adonais "is secure, and now can never mourn / A heart grown cold, a head grown grey in vain" (ll. 357-358). Like *Lycidas*, Adonais died at a

young age. The speaker, therefore, takes comfort in the security of death, as the shepherd will not experience loss, the decline of a romance, or the deteriorating effects of aging. In fact, “*We decay / Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief / Convulse us and consume us day by day*” (ll. 348-350). These lines indicate the speaker’s own dissatisfaction with life, serving both to affirm his belief that Adonais is safe in the afterlife and to turn the elegy outward to an audience. The italicization of “we” stresses that it is the living who decay, due to the anxieties and pains inherent in life. The enjambment emphasizes “decay” and “fear and grief,” stressing that life on earth brings with it suffering. These lines also function to dispel the force of grief. The speaker asserts that grief is consuming, making his eventual triumph over it through the consolatory elegy a provocation to the audience to return to the regularity of life before the loss.

The speaker’s attempt to share consolation with his audience is more explicit in the forty-first stanza, where he claims “He [Adonais] lives, he wakes—‘tis Death is dead, not he; / Mourn not for Adonais” (ll. 361-362). Telling his readers not to mourn negates his previous sentiments; at first, Shelley’s elegy framed sorrow as something unbearable, but is nevertheless defeated and triumphed over by the poem’s conclusion.

The speaker finally sees “The soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacon[ing] from the adobe where the Eternal are” (ll. 494-495). If the speaker can still sense or see Adonais even after death, Adonais has indeed lived on in the afterlife and has become “Eternal.” As a lasting message, the speaker imparts hope to his audience, that while death might be permanent, the deceased—whoever it may be—will remain as a presence looking “through the inmost veil of Heaven” and offer comfort to the mourner (l. 493).

Even though the speaker is “borne darkly, fearfully, afar,” he looks to Adonais’ soul to provide him comfort (l. 492). Shelley’s fear—of death, growing old, or being alone—does not prevent him from completing the grieving process because he believes in the “Eternal” (l. 495). Sacks argues that “Shelley completes the work of mourning by a powerful detachment from the natural man and the natural world and a subsequent reattachment to a transcendent ideal instead” (158). This “transcendental ideal” seems problematic with regard to my claim that Shelley advocates a return to the social; however, it is Shelley the poet experiencing these emotions, presumably not the reader. We saw earlier in the elegy how Shelley directs the shepherds, through the imperative voice, to cease weeping and to complete the mourning process.

“Lycidas” and *Adonais* demonstrate tropes of the ‘traditional’ elegy that have survived as major elements in Anglo-American modern conceptions of elegy. The American Academy of Poets defines the “traditional elegy” as one that “mirrors three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace” (“Elegy: poetic form”). Poetry Foundation states that elegy “[i]n traditional English poetry [...] is often a melancholy poem that laments its subject’s death but ends in consolation” (“Elegy”). Even Edward Hirsch, whose elegy for his son will be analyzed in chapter three, initially calls the elegy “[a] poem of mortal loss and consolation” in *The Essential Poet’s Glossary* (89).

What these definitions remind us is that the progression through and out of grief in the traditional elegy pervades even contemporary audiences’ and readers’ expectations of the genre. Let us return to the questions posed in this project’s introduction: What about elegies in which grief is not so easily resolved? What about elegies that subvert this conventional progression? We may think of such elegies as new and modern, but I argue that elegists have challenged the

genre's definition throughout history. Even as early as the seventeenth century elegists have rejected the function of consolation and the didactic aspect that advocates a return to the social. When poets rebel in such a way, they scrutinize societal norms and standards surrounding mourning, thus leading audiences to a less expected conclusion. While the element of melancholy can be present in an elegy that successfully does the work of mourning—as in *Adonais*—its presence in elegies that 'break' tradition or become 'anti-elegiac' is more noticeable and consequential. It can be said that the melancholy in such elegies actually prohibits a resolution or implies a failure of mourning because it is so consuming; however, I argue that these elegies teach readers that resolution is not the end goal, and therefore that the presence of melancholy indicates a sincere exploration of mourning rather than a failure of it. In the next chapter we turn to two elegies that consciously struggle to find consolation and instead ask audiences to linger in the expression of grief: Katherine Philips' "Epitaph" and Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art."

## Chapter Two

### Challenging the Purpose of Elegy

In chapter one we saw how John Milton's "Lycidas" (1637) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais* (1821) lead readers out of grief by finding consolation, and how the expectation of resolution in traditional elegy, which has become characteristic of the genre, leaves little room for uncompleted mourning. The conventional definition of elegy depends on consolation so much that that elegies failing to find consolation are often deemed *anti-elegiac*. R. Clifton Spargo's article "The Contemporary Anti-Elegy" (2010) defines the anti-elegy as a "realm [...] wherein the poets even as they propose hypothetical solutions to grief [...] remain less than satisfied with their own proposals, doubtful of any and all hypotheses by which the event of loss of the crisis behind the poem could be readily resolved" (415). While the title of Spargo's article suggests that this subversion of traditional elegy is characteristic of contemporary poems of loss, I argue that elegists have challenged seemingly-satisfactory solutions to grief throughout history. Further, I claim that elegies challenging the idea of consolation do not always outright reject the process of mourning, but ask readers to linger in the expression of grief, suggesting that writing itself is the experience of mourning.

If we consider such a possibility, a question then emerges: what does an elegy that defies traditional expectations and refuses the genre's ideal conventions, but is not necessarily anti-elegiac, look like? This chapter juxtaposes Katherine Philips' "Epitaph" (1655)<sup>4</sup> and Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" (1967) to examine how elegies have attempted to push against the norms and traditions since at least the seventeenth century, not only in the modern or contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> Philips' son Hector was born on April 23 and died on May 2, 1655. Collections of Philips' poems were published years later.

elegy. These elegies contain quasi-private expressions of grief that at first lead readers to expect consolation; however, the final moments of “Epitaph” and “One Art” fail to find consolation, thereby refusing to meet readers’ expectations and critiquing standard elegiac mourning practices. The elegists find consolation unsatisfactory for their losses. Finally, I argue that these elegies purposefully struggle to be read as either distant from the poet or inseparable from the poet’s expressions of loss, and that such a struggle influences what readers learn from these poems by suggesting an expression of grief in which poet and speaker are the same.

In contrast to “Lycidas” and *Adonais*, “One Art” and “Epitaph” each invites a closer identification between speaker and poet. Philips uses stock sentiments, at first, to encourage a universally recognizable portrayal of grief, and then she revokes this invitation to the audience, disallowing them to mourn with her. Bishop exaggerates and satirizes the performative aspects of early modern elegy by using the villanelle to parody her indifference to loss, while attempting to conceal her underlying cause for mourning by focusing most of the poem on trivial, concrete losses. In subverting such conventions and expectations, Bishop and Philips both reveal their desires to explore their mourning—thus signifying melancholy—and imply that an end to grief is not always possible or a desirable way to manage grief.

To include Philips in this chapter may appear to skirt the historical distinction of “early-modern” versus “modern” or even “contemporary” elegy; however, I believe that “Epitaph” reflects a seventeenth century-woman writer’s challenge both to the norms as well as to the nature of loss. Philips does not follow in her male counterparts’ footsteps while writing about the death of her son. She instead remains skeptical of a complete resolution. She remains engaged with loss to her poem’s end, and therefore suggests melancholia, even as she pronounces her belief in God. In contrast to the bravado of “Lycidas” and *Adonais*, “Epitaph” seems unable to

find comfort in the infant's passing. Further, one cannot separate Philips from her speaker, which is encouraged by Milton's and Shelley's elegies. Melancholia in Philips' elegy reveals an intimate experience of loss that does not consider consolation as the end goal.

Known by her pen name Orinda, Katherine Philips, an Anglo-Welsh poet, was acclaimed for her poetry—rare for a woman in the seventeenth century—with much of her work devoted to loved ones. In 1655 Philips' six-week-old son Hector died, and then she wrote “Epitaph” in his memory. The poem begins with her lamentations, a broad questioning of what it means to be human and a consideration of how flimsy our existence is:

What on Earth deserves our trust?  
 Youth and beauty both are dust.  
 Long we gathering are with pain,  
 What one moment calls again. (ll. 1-4)

The speaker addresses the fragility of life. Because life is so fleeting, there is nothing to “trust” or on which to rely. Time only brings sorrow. “Youth and beauty” are “dust,” implying that the two are insignificant and insubstantial. Pain becomes cyclical, measured by repeated moments known simply as “again.” The speaker's stock sentiments imply a conversation about grief that is perfectly shared. Through these first four lines, readers remain unaware of the cause of this grief. Philips begins by broadly speaking to human existence, and by addressing her readers collectively. In her article “The Public Statements and Private Losses of Ben Jonson & Katherine Philips: The Poet as Bereaved Parent” (1993), Sheree L. Meyer argues that Philips' elegies for her son “foreground the tension between public statement and private utterance” (173). The beginning of “Epitaph” exhibits the latter. The pronoun “our” implies an audience, one in whom the speaker confides and whom she considers to be capable of sharing this moment of doubt. As

with Shelley's speaker's railing against human flaws, Philips' speaker seems hopeless and distressed, attempting to reach out to an audience and ask for commiseration or shared comfort.

The next part of the poem gets more intimate in that it reveals the occasion for this elegy's construction. Readers begin to recognize an inward turn, and to understand that the speaker has turned away from a shared experience:

Seven years' childless marriage past,  
A Son, a son is born at last :  
So exactly limbed and fair,  
Full of good Spirits, mien, and air,  
As a long life promised,  
Yet in less than six weeks dead. (ll. 5-10)

The speaker's struggles with childrearing are evident, and these serve as an example of the "pain" mentioned in line three. Relief and exaltation result from Hector's long-awaited birth. Interestingly, Philips refers to the child as "a son," rather than "*my* son," speaking clearly of herself as a mother while also continuing to speak to her readers as if her tribute were a narrative and not a lyric. The lack of "I" and "you" resists a lyric reading. By resisting such a reading, "Epitaph" fails to include a defining characteristic of elegy (Braden and Fowler 398). Such resistance may point to the poet's turning inward, as if she is writing a diary entry or talking to herself. Philips no longer reaches towards her audience. There are no more instances of "our" or "we." There is a noticeable tension between an external, public presentation and an internal, private expression.

When "Epitaph" becomes more personal to Philips, the elegy attempts to idealize and commemorate the deceased, seemingly to try to find consolation. No longer interested in discussing human flaws, Philips offers praise to her son. Both his physical build and disposition were exemplary, hinting at the promise of a long and healthy life. The promise of growing old,

however, was not kept. Finally granted a son after seven years of waiting, Philips' blessing was taken away only days after being given. Amidst her lamentations, Philips attempts to find consolation by turning to religious sentiment:

Too promising, too great a mind  
 In so small room to be confined :  
 Therefore, as fit in Heaven to dwell,  
 He quickly broke the prison-shell.  
 So the subtle alchemist  
 Can't with Hermes' seal resist  
 The powerful spirit's subtler flight,  
 But 'twill bid him long good-night. (ll. 11-18)

The infant was too bright, offered too much hope to be “confined” to such a limited life and space. Meyer believes that this attention given to Philips' son “accentuates the pain” (179). Building on this, I believe “Epitaph” does not advocate a return to the social, but instead expresses a desire to preserve the deceased's memory while allowing Philips to experience her individual catharsis. Allowing Philips to experience a catharsis that, even if it does not see her turn toward society and social norms, nevertheless serves her, and, it may be argued, can be used by a reader. Philips' catharsis may impart a lesson to readers that sometimes consolation cannot be found, is in fact not the point of elegy, but that the act of writing about and through grief exemplifies the process of mourning.

Seeming to conform to the norms of mourning in elegy, Philips attempts to justify her son's death by looking toward heaven as a place and means for Hector to escape the confines and sorrows of Earth. Much like Milton in “Lycidas,” Philips wants to believe that God will offer her son an eternal and superior existence in the afterlife. Hector was “fit in Heaven to dwell,” meaning that he was meant to quit the “prison” of Earth and find eternal life in the embrace of God. If “Lycidas” represents the more accepted and expected portrayal of grief as a process, we

would expect the conclusion of Philips' poem to resolve her grief by triumphing over it—in essence performing successful mourning; however, we notice “Epitaph” attempting to find more reassurance and solace than religion or faith can offer. The final lines of the poem offer a more ambiguous resolution of grief, remaining unconcerned with artificiality and performance:

And so the sun, if it arise  
 Half so glorious as his eyes,  
 Like this infant, takes a shroud,  
 Buried in a morning cloud. (ll. 19-22)

Representative of funeral verse, “Epitaph” appears more concerned with individual mourning and with the memory of Hector than with acting out this process for an audience (Shohet 434). Further, Philips chooses to conclude her poem on a note of non-consolation, which emphasizes her prevailing grief. The expectation of consolation fails here because Philips pushes against the requirement of successful mourning; she remains unconvinced that elegy completes the mourning process. She makes a pun of “Sun” and “son,” questioning the sun’s ability to rise in such a dark time. Even if the sun does manage to rise, its light will hardly compare to the light from the infant’s eyes. Meyer argues that “Philips brings the Sun down to son” and “becomes, like him, ‘shrouded’ and ‘buried in a morning Cloud’” (176). While Philips incorporates a pastoral trope, inviting nature to join in on her mourning, she does not include the eventual moment of glory or resolution. The sun remains unable to rise, and therefore cannot offer comfort to Philips. While in death Lycidas protects those sailing on rough waters (ll. 182-185), Hector remains static. The second pun on “morning”/mourning insists upon melancholy, as Philips imagines light or happiness obfuscated by grief. Meyer believes that by “[r]efusing to lift her eyes from the child’s eyes and from his grave, she averts her gaze from heaven. She does not give up her son to God [...]” (176). Taken this way, the ending of “Epitaph” appears to

forcefully resist severing the motherly bond. Philips uses this moment to subvert the expectation of a consolatory, joyous ending, and remains fixed on the image of her infant son.

While the speaker in *Adonais* imagines the deceased as a star that serves as a beacon, Philips is unable to visualize her son's presence in the afterlife. Nevertheless, he is "buried." Thus, Philips' elegy seems less concerned with finding consolation than with portraying a realistic experience of grief, in which sorrow is not so easily overcome by a belief in God. As the elegy becomes more personal in its conclusion, Philips writes what Meyer calls the "private utterance" (173). Meyer also argues that "Philips' loss is a private one, not meant for publication" (181). While I disagree that Philips' grief rejects the possibility of publication, having crafted her poem deliberately, I do recognize her progression from conventional sentiments requiring an audience, to the expression of a grief that belongs exclusively to her.

The analysis of Philips' "Epitaph" reminds us that the elegy is a complicated genre that is difficult to define. Due to modern readers' belief of its tradition and legacy, the elegy that achieves consolation can mistakenly appear as the only type of elegy—especially in the early modern period. However, poets have consistently pushed back against what is seen as representative of the elegy, as evidenced by "Epitaph." We turn next to a twentieth-century elegy that challenges the ease and bravado of pastoral elegies: Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." The juxtaposition of Philip's "Epitaph" and Bishop's "One Art" will reveal another didactic mission of elegy often overshadowed or unexamined, namely, one that invites grief to remain unresolved and teaches audiences that writing *about* grief does not necessarily mean writing *out* of it.

The Massachusetts-born poet Elizabeth Bishop experienced several significant losses in her life. Her father died before she was a year old, she was separated from her mentally ill mother by age five, and she spent much of her life moving from place to place, losing any sense

of belonging. In addition, Bishop lost the two loves of her life, both women—one by a break-up and the other by suicide. Her verse often concerns these losses.

Her elegy “One Art” is a villanelle. Following the strict rhyme scheme and requirement of a repeated refrain, the poet describes various things she has lost in her life, emphasizing loss as a skill, one that can be perfected, or, more accurately, “mastered” (ll. 1, 6, 12, 18). Bishop’s elegy comes close to mocking public expressions of grief as it builds towards an irreplaceable loss, when she suddenly instructs herself to linger on grief and seems to contradict her previous message that loss is not a “disaster.” Jahan Ramazani briefly refers to the villanelle in *Poetry of Mourning*’s introduction and uses it to help define the collective modern elegy:

If the traditional elegy was an art of saving, the modern elegy is what Elizabeth Bishop calls an “art of losing.” Instead of resurrecting the dead in some substitute, instead of curing themselves through displacement, modern elegists “practice losing farther, losing faster,” so that the “One Art” of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but the immersion in it. (4)

Ramazani’s mention of “an art of saving” could refer to the performances evident in such pastoral elegies such as “Lycidas” and *Adonais*. As mentioned in chapter one, the elegists’ goal is to complete their mourning successfully—essentially curing themselves of grief. One distinguishing feature of the modern elegy, by contrast, is the insistence on holding on to grief and loss. Ramazani argues that the modern elegist focuses heavily on his or her loss, without the hope or expectation of closure. Indeed, he imagines the modern elegist’s “immersion in it,” almost a wallowing in grief. The implicit idea in each view of the elegy—both Ramazani’s and the older conventions his argument both constructs and depends upon—is that grief is like a pool or an ocean in which one can swim or drown, or out of which one can pull oneself. I argue that

Bishop does not immerse herself in grief, but skims the surface. She and the poets in chapter three demand a new metaphoric for grief, one that allows for the interrogation and persistence of grief, but does not include wallowing in a performance of suffering.

“One Art” tackles progressively higher and higher stakes for the speaker’s losses as the objects lost become increasingly more abstract—and perhaps harder to let go of. The objects begin as small and insubstantial, but grow into immense and intangible losses. The first three lines declare loss as insignificant:

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster. (ll. 1-3)

The speaker begins by defining loss as what it is not. This technique of negation is one we will return to in chapter three. Rather than stating “The art of losing is easy to master,” the speaker claims that the art “isn’t hard.” While the rhyme scheme produces sound that is sweet to the ears, it also limits readers’ access to the poet’s raw emotions, which are concealed by the form’s rules. Rhyme restricts the words that can be used at the end of the line, perhaps prohibiting Bishop from entirely indulging her true feelings. Bishop must rhyme “disaster” with “master.” The restrictive form of the villanelle becomes its own figure for loss, and the repeated refrain attempts to convince readers of its validity—that Bishop’s claim is indeed true.

The grammar is imperative, using language as direction and takes on a breezy, advice-giving air. The speaker directs her words towards a general audience, telling them how to practice losing, so that loss will not cause pain or discomfort. Her advice is meant to be lighthearted and simple. If we compare this strategy to performative, pastoral elegies, such as “Lycidas” or *Adonais*, we see that “One Art” exaggerates the didactic mission of these elegies.

Milton and Shelley tell their readers not to weep, while Bishop tells them to *lose*. Bishop performs the act of loss through language, repeating the action with different objects, thus emphasizing and exaggerating the ease with which they can be lost:

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

(ll. 4-9)

Notably, the speaker chooses the words “farther” and “faster,” two words which are dangerously close to “father.” Bishop’s own loss seems to materialize here. This indication of language slippage indicates that the speaker’s tools, and her mastery, may be crumbling, while hinting that the ability to prevail over grief is harder than she first imagined. Bishop clearly rejects the belief that poetry—specifically elegy—is redemption from grief and loss. The line break after “meant” is another instance of language failing to contain—a conscious choice made by Bishop to separate the idea of intention from action, both revealing the elegy’s meticulous construction and questioning the agency of a mourner. In fact, according to an online article in *The New Yorker*, Bishop wrote seventeen drafts of “One Art,” revising and perfecting the poem relentlessly (Pierpont). We recognize the speaker’s apparent desire to “master” these losses—and to master the poem itself—through craft, but these conscious exhibitions of its inadequacy and limitations suggest another intention of the poem.

The number of things Bishop suggests her readers lose represents Bishop skimming the surface of grief, and the use of almost playful exaggeration suggests that the format of pastoral or traditional elegies might be too simplistic or idealistic to impart something truly meaningful to an

audience. If Bishop is critiquing the function of consolation in elegy, something must give. The lost objects of “One Art” gradually expand into ever more abstract concepts, each of greater importance and having more physical and metaphorical weight. As the objects become more significant, and the losses become more extreme, Bishop reveals that grief is, in fact, not so easy to resolve. It is when “One Art” struggles to triumph over these losses that it begins to reveal a new didactic purpose of elegy:

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
 some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
 I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster. (ll. 13-15)

Here the loss feels hyperbolic and geographically, almost comically, huge. The verb “owned” implies possession of these lands, suggesting that since the speaker owned these spaces, she could lose them. The last line, however, makes a concession. The speaker admits to “miss[ing] them,” although she negates this with the conjunction “but,” and claims instead that the loss was not something that destroyed her. Bishop’s language slips again as she concedes that there is an absence now, as she has lost these places. While the word “but” serves to negate the previous claim, we remain unconvinced, as she includes it at all.

Bishop’s concession reveals that finding one’s way of out grief may not be the point of elegy. By the end of the poem, she turns away from giving advice and instead reflects on her most significant loss. She asks readers to consider the effect of experiencing such a loss, rather than stating it and immediately moving on to another object. “One Art” thus instructs readers that grief should be examined, that confronting sorrow without expectation of consolation is not a failure of elegy; instead, the confrontation is something that can be written down without need for resolution:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster. (ll. 16-19)

The explicit mention of “you” reveals the real subject, so that we understand that the poem is indeed an elegy—and not just elegizing material objects—because the speaker experienced the death, or loss, of a loved one. Bishop’s long-term partner Maria Carlota Costallat de Macedo Soares committed suicide in 1967. After Soares died, Bishop met and fell in love with Alice Methfessel while teaching at Harvard. Bishop leaves the identity of “you”—Methfessel or Soares or someone else—up for interpretation. The first parenthetical refers to an ambiguous “you,” either belonging to the one who has died or to Bishop. Its verbiage seems distinctly private, an almost you-had-to-be-there moment, because Bishop does not describe the gesture or, really, the voice. Rather than proclaiming her grief or directing her lamentations to an audience, Bishop references the mourned directing, thereby calling into question her previous grand claims about grief because she asks us linger on the memory of “the joking voice” and the “gesture.” Bishop’s disclosure of the personal loss implies a quasi-private expression of grief, one obscured by the villanelle form and exaggeration of the performative aspect of “losing.” This expression suggests that when an elegist is at his or her most vulnerable, the abstract idea of consolation is unimportant because the act of writing and crafting is productive and representative of a personal mourning process.

Bishop concludes that loss is inevitable, but she concedes that it may not always appear reasonable. Her claim that the ease of mastery is “evident” appears doubtful after we have witnessed how her claims and their corresponding language have been slipping, how her language has been unable to contain her grief. The speaker’s emotions are difficult to ignore,

mostly because their appearance feels rare in a poem structured so tightly, so that when the speaker's vulnerabilities do come through, they are even more visible. In addition, the speaker invites us to consider what it would be like if we *really* weren't affected by loss and did not respond with any feelings or grief, and whether this would be beneficial or detrimental. Thus, Bishop expresses that the act of sharing grief is a powerful one. The parenthetical demand also calls attention to the didactic aspect of the poem; even if the master fails, the work of the poem is to teach. The imperative insists on the experience of loss; its job is to instruct, and it seems to want to teach itself something, to feel the loss and the experience that it has been keeping at bay.

While this chapter demonstrated how "One Art" and "Epitaph" propose the idea of consolation only to decide that it cannot and does not need to be found, the next chapter looks at three contemporary elegies that reject standard consolation entirely. An even more prevalent didactic objective is present in Edward Hirsch's book *Gabriel*, Mary Jo Bang's poem "Visiting," and Catherine Barnett's "Sight." Like "One Art" and "Epitaph" ask readers to linger in grief, these contemporary elegies reject moving on from their deceased loved ones, and they also show readers that language often fails to contain grief in elegy, which suggests that it is more meaningful to find a personal catharsis in the writing of elegy than it is to craft an ambitious and performative elegy that appeals to a general audience.

### Chapter 3

#### Melancholy with a Mission: The Contemporary Elegy

So far we have seen how the elegy can portray grief differently by a variety of devices and conventions according to didactic objective. This chapter analyzes three contemporary elegies that express and instruct, though differently than the poems in chapters one and two because the impossibility of true consolation and closure is acknowledged throughout the entirety of the contemporary elegies. *Gabriel* (2014) by Edward Hirsch, “Visiting” (2007) by Mary Jo Bang, and “Site” (2004) by Catherine Barnett do not follow the formula of conventional elegy—lamenting, then praising the dead, and culminating in solace—nor do they exhibit all signs of the supposed ‘anti-elegy’; specifically, they do not lash out at the dead and, they maintain that lingering grief can serve a didactic purpose. These elegies may include anti-elegiac conventions as defined by Jahan Ramazani in *Poetry of Mourning*, including rejection of consolation, wariness of commemoration, melancholic mourning, and skepticism towards religion; however, they use these conventions to encourage personal catharsis that can be found when writing about grief.

These poems purposely fail to find consolation, using language insufficient to contain the enormity of grief, implying that this non-resolution can function as the point of elegy. The poems ask their readers to linger in the poets’ griefs and to interrogate the feelings of loss. While these feelings are often used as stepping stones to reach consolation in conventional elegies, *Gabriel*, “Visiting,” and “Site” use them to explore grief in a more horizontal way—for example by testing language’s limits—instead of in a vertical way that eventually reaches consolation. In addition, these elegies encourage a reading that considers poet and speaker as one and the same. This reading results from the personal details within the poems becoming inseparable from the

poets' individual losses, creating quasi-private expressions of grief. While these elegies might suggest the desire of a private reading, their publication and intricate crafting prove otherwise.

The first poem—selections from the book-length *Gabriel*—follows a loosely chronological narrative of the titled individual's life through Edward Hirsch's—his father's—eyes. On his acknowledgement page, Hirsch states, “This is a father's book, but it belongs to my son Gabriel, who animates it. Some debts are too deep for words.” This statement points to Hirsch being *the* speaker—*the* father—and directs the book's ownership to the one being mourned; Gabriel's life is his father's inspiration. Already, language proves to be insufficient to contain the elegy's subject—in this case the debt between a father and son. The contents of *Gabriel* acknowledge language as insufficient and use this deficiency to subvert our expectation that language can overcome grief.

While the characters of Lycidas and Adonais could be interpreted as people other than King and Keats, respectively, in that without the context for these poems we could assume Milton and Shelley had lost almost anyone, Hirsch, instead, crafts his book so that the only subject we recognize is Gabriel. Hirsch leaves no ambiguity. While we might be able to recognize our own grief or encounters with loss in the language that Hirsch uses to describe his own grief, we cannot mistake the lost subject as anyone other than Gabriel. Indeed, according to an interview with the *Guardian*, Hirsch “wanted to give [the book] a life of its own” and for his reader to understand his son (Adams). For this reason, no other character or identity would do.

When asked if he had written the poem for a specific reader, Hirsch answered, “I guess if I did it is some future reader who doesn't know us, doesn't know me and doesn't know my son Gabriel [...] and the only way that reader is going to know my son is through the burden of my poem” (Adams). In contrast to the public expressions of grief that we examined in chapter one,

Hirsch suggests a quasi-private exchange. He does concede to a possible intended audience, as he recognizes that “shaping” a poem “does imply a reader,” but this reader is not intended or expected to find consolation or to join in Hirsch’s presentation of grief and sorrow; rather, the reader comes “to know” Gabriel’s life and to understand these moments within a life taken too soon (Adams). Hirsch’s claim that his poem is a “burden” implies that the reading of the poem will not be easy, that the journey is not one with a clear destination or mode of transportation. I suggest that *Gabriel* reimagines the purpose of the elegy in that it welcomes the listening ears of an audience but does not perform the suffering of the poet; rather, Hirsch strives to represent his son’s life in an accurate and lovable way that does not and cannot find consolation or come to a general conclusion about the process of mourning.

*Gabriel* consists of only three-line stanzas, which Tim Adams recognizes as “a quiet echo of the terza rima, the chosen form of Dante’s descent into hell in the Divine Comedy; it asks the reader to take something like the same journey with the grief-wrecked poet.” This journey begins with the difficulties Hirsch and his wife faced while raising a son with a severe developmental disorder, one who was often uncommunicative and reckless—a boy who “adored typhoons and tornadoes/ Furies unleashed” (p. 19 ll. 20-21). The collection then reveals the details of Gabriel’s tragic death. During Hurricane Irene, at twenty-two, Gabriel left home and never returned. Hirsch and his wife discovered *four days later* that their son died after taking GHB (a common club-drug) and having a seizure, which led to cardiac arrest. After Hirsch details this loss, he confronts the grief that is so consuming, including the agonizing moments at his son’s funeral. There are frequent allusions to poets and figures from mythology, often those who have also lost a child or experienced sorrow. Throughout the book., Hirsch explores the rich history of mourning in poetry and literature, contrasting it with his own experience.

While *Gabriel* winds through the complicated life of an impulsive and outspoken young man, our interest concerns when Hirsch finds it difficult to locate justification or acceptance of his son's death. One morning is particularly challenging:

Why did the sun rise this morning  
It's not natural  
I don't want to see the light

.....

I'm not worried about a heart attack  
Nothingness  
You've already broken my heart

I will not forgive you  
Sun of emptiness  
Sky of blank clouds

I will not forgive you  
Indifferent God  
Until you give me back my son

(p. 77 ll. 1-3, 22-30)

Much like the speaker in Milton's "Lycidas," Hirsch wants the world to mourn with him, so he questions why the sun did not partake in his mourning and instead cloaked the earth in darkness, mimicking his own internal gloom. Sunrise signals a new day—one bright and full of light—and, evidently, after losing his son, Hirsch finds this warmth inappropriate. The pun on "sun"/"son" mirrors that of Philip's "Epitaph"; Gabriel can no longer rise, and Hirsch believes that the sun should respect this time of mourning by withholding its light. Hirsch uses the pathetic fallacy to imagine nature mourning with him; however, there is no signifier of healing or acceptance as there is in the pastoral elegy. There is no indication that things are progressing as they should. Indeed, Hirsch "will not forgive," implying a lasting pain. Ramazani might recognize Hirsch's lethargy, anger, and melancholy in these lines. Perhaps the difference is that, rather than

demonstrating anger towards himself or to Gabriel, Hirsch feels betrayed by the world, especially by God.

Rather than being the savior for the fallen, God is “Indifferent” towards Gabriel’s death. While Milton looks past the apparent cruelty of the nymphs for not saving Lycidas, choosing to reassure himself and readers that heaven is the best place for the shepherd (ll. 81-84), Hirsch can fathom no such thought. By extension, God is to blame for this tragedy, having the power to return Gabriel but apparently not choosing to do so. The line “Until you give me back my son” may not represent a complete rejection of religion—considering that Hirsch chooses to address the figure of God at all—but as readers we can gather that this moment signifies a loss of faith because Hirsch’s forgiveness of God depends on the impossibility of Gabriel returning. Even the belief in an afterlife is not always enough to find one’s way out of grief, according to Hirsch.

At Gabriel’s funeral, Hirsch describes an almost out-of-body experience, where he must acknowledge his son’s lifelessness. He admits that the event “was too much to go through” (p. 74, l. 3). He imagines it possible to detach himself from grief:

I was shaking but I was also looking down  
At myself from a great distance  
Poor grief-stricken father

I pity you I thought  
Your heart is lying there  
Stretched out in a box

(p. 78, ll. 1-6)

Absent from these lines is the self-torment that Ramazani argues as characteristic of the supposed anti-elegy. In fact, Hirsch only feels “pity” when imagining himself looking at the casket. This other representation of Hirsch recognizes the immensity of his loss, that his son—his “heart”—has been taken from him. This memory of an out-of-body experience suggests a

reluctance to deal with the grief, though Hirsch's decision to construct this poem is in itself a confrontation of loss. Ramazani might argue that these lines employ a sort of mocking of grief, as Hirsch sarcastically pities himself. I, however, imagine Hirsch as reflecting self-consciously on himself and his inability to remain composed at his son's funeral. His pity and label "Poor grief-stricken father" may also critique normative masculinity, meaning that while Hirsch should—according to societal norms—be a rock in this situation and remain unaffected, this expectation is unrealistic and even insulting. Hirsch challenges these societal norms to express that some types of grief cannot follow what has been deemed a conventional progression.

Hirsch continues his recollection of Gabriel's funeral, commenting on death's permanence: "And now you must say goodbye / Lamentations forever bereft" (p. 78, ll. 8-9). Again, Hirsch turns inward, commanding himself to let go; however, he recognizes an eternal absence that cannot be filled by mourning in the syntactically-strange following line. Hirsch will forever be deprived, unable to find the right words or lamentations to heal his sorrow.

The experience of laying the dead to rest continues:

I had to stand on a stepladder  
To reach him I couldn't tear myself away  
From leaning down and kissing him

On the eyes the forehead the cheeks  
The lips colder than ice  
The wretched sound

Started coming out of me again  
He was there in the coffin  
He was not there in the coffin

It was Gabriel it was not Gabriel  
Wild spirit beloved son  
Where have you fled

(p. 78 ll. 19-30)

As Hirsch says his final goodbye, he describes kissing Gabriel's individual features, lingering, attempting to stretch out the moment; however, the moment feels rushed and jumbled, and Gabriel's lips are cold. The words on the page struggle to recall and contain that moment. The poet focuses on touch and sound, perhaps intentionally leaving out the sense of sight because it is too painful. He knows what's in front of him is his son and is also not his son. Language can only state this paradox; it cannot contain it. This ebbing and flowing of acceptance to denial suggests the rejection of consolation and the idea that some aspects of grief cannot be addressed by elegy or otherwise. Further evidence of this is the last line of the book that ends on an open and never-to-be-answered question. Hirsch has nothing left to write. There seems to be a doubt of—or, conversely, a plea for—the existence of something beyond life. If Gabriel is not there, he must be somewhere else. But rather than Hirsch claiming that his son's spirit has been embraced or saved by God, it has “fled.” As an audience we do not receive comfort or experience a triumph over grief; we instead witness a man losing his faith in God. *Gabriel* demonstrates that even a loss of religious conviction does not signal a failure of mourning in elegy; instead, it is the creation and product of the elegy that can preserve *something* of the deceased.

The loss of a son also provoked the creation of the second elegy analyzed in this chapter, also from a book-length tribute. Mary Jo Bang's thirty-seven-year-old son Michael died of an accidental prescription drug overdose in June of 2004. Bang spent the next year writing a collection of elegies, which would be published in 2007 and simply titled *Elegy*. This collection of sixty-four poems traces a mother's endurance through a time of excruciating grief. In an interview with *Bloom*, Bang claimed, “*Elegy* was the result of a year spent trying to distract myself from crushing grief by writing poems. The grief was so consuming there was no other available subject for the poems” (Chung). Like Hirsch, Bang depicts herself as the speaker of

these poems. We as readers have access to deeply personal examples of her mourning, from the initial shock of loss to the upcoming “death day,” which signals a new, though still grief-drenched, year.

The last poem of Bang’s collection, “Visiting,” struggles with language’s inability to neatly contain memories and thoughts of Michael. Through ambiguous enjambments and linguistic slippage, Bang purposefully displays language’s failure to contain during a time of mourning. The poem seems intended to house the grief, even though it is unable to do so. There is an attempt to elegize and to seek this transcendence through language, yet the poet shows us the limits of her language. The poem’s title is ambiguous on its own. It might function as either a verb or a noun. As a noun the word is an act of staying with someone, while, as a verb, it means to come to someone in order to comfort or benefit. The word’s two meanings seem to be a conscious choice made by Bang to cherish the memory of her son, or as a quasi-mystical visitation by her son, which in turn should—according to the definition of “visiting”—offer comfort in her time of grief. This double meaning suggests how language is often vague and unable to convey all, or precisely what, it intends. Bang perhaps could choose a more precise word, but she purposefully leaves the title’s meaning open to interpretation. She denies us a complete understanding of her grief, and this ambiguity persists throughout the poem.

Beginning in the first stanza, Bang defines her surroundings as what they are not. Whether in an actual, physical location or simply wandering through memories in her mind, her descriptions repeatedly lack a concrete, defined subject. She states “The city’s dirty edges are found and are / Unsoftened, unchanged” (ll. 1-2). Rather than using the first person pronoun, Bang leaves herself out of the poem, intentionally describing the city from an unseen and obscure vantage point, thus recounting a place that we, as readers, cannot access. We are left to

wonder where these city edges are and from where they are being seen. The line break after “are” emphasizes the present tense, conveying the city as living—a label we soon realize does not apply to the poem’s intended addressee. In addition, this line break is followed by a description of the city’s edges, also as negative; again, the scene *lacks*. Instead of indicating the edges as hardened and maintained, Bang defines her world as *un*—conveying an abstract absence.

Even referring to Michael becomes an example of Bang’s quasi-private expression of grief. The second person pronoun only functions to name the deceased in the next stanza. Emphasizing ambiguity, Bang claims, “You whose name is you / Are a fantasy that remains” (ll. 5-6). Using apostrophe to speak to this absent subject, Bang refuses to name this person beyond a vague “you.” Distance and intimacy clash here. In one sense, the speaker’s use of “you” assumes an ambiguous identity, suggesting a person who has lost his or her real name and by extension his or her personhood in death. In another, “you” is a familiar reference to the deceased. This absent person survives through his connection to the mourner. Of course, the speaker knows who “you” is; it is Michael. Any other name would be too formal or cold. Further, Bang acknowledges death as separation in the line: “The no longer / Attached you and me” (ll. 22-23). Again, Bang’s and Michael’s names are reduced to pronouns—simpler and more vague than even the titles “mother” and “son”—an assumption that, for Bang, is nonexistent because it is fact. These numerous instances of ambiguous labeling insist upon Bang’s inability to produce new memories of, and connections to, her son.

There are also instances of exact repetition, attempting a novel assertion, but then failing, purposefully, as language cannot contain the grief. Lines such as “You whose name is you,” “Cold is that cold” and “Rust of all we were when all was good” hinge their meaning on the repetition of the same word (ll. 5, 8, 28). While these lines may seem meaningless or

unsuccessful, their blunt reiteration of imprecision conveys Bang's submission to language's limitations and to its scarce workings, in that she has no other alternative but to rely on these same words to express her feelings. In these lines, Bang expresses that some grief is inaccessible or indefinable through language. The elegy cannot adequately articulate every emotion of grief or every step of the grieving process.

Further contributing to a conscious didactic mission is Bang's awareness of the existing culture surrounding grief, which further prevents her from finding consolation. She comments on how common expressions fail in their attempt to comfort:

Look at all the meaningless gestures

People keep

Making: flowers in a vase and overheard

Overblown terms like seldom

And massive, and missive and all

The words except

I miss you.

(ll. 9-15)

Similar to other moments in the poem, in which meaning is vague, these "gestures" lack discernible significance or purpose. Quickly, the "gestures," which appear to imply something not needing language, evolve into the use of words. Unlike the gestures, the terms are "overheard / Overblown," referencing a quality that is *too much*, either through lack of privacy or exaggeration. The wordplay with "massive" and "missive" also seems to indicate language's imprecision because the words resist a clear connection to consolation. The only words that Bang can conclude are not "over" or under ("un-") in any way are in the direct, simple phrase "I miss you." This phrase is one instance where language can contain the feeling of loss, though Bang spends six lines coming to that conclusion. The line break after "keep" capitalizes on ambiguity

and creates two meanings—the second created after enjambment. These lines are an example of the conflict between conservation and production. “Keep” functions as the former and “Making” as the latter. In one sense Bang recognizes that these memories and mental visits with Michael must be conserved, as they are the only moments left. In another sense, she feels the need to hold onto these external attempts at comfort despite their meaninglessness. Production, conversely, occurs as a response to the loss, as she must go back in her mind—the “excavation” of memories—to produce new interactions with Michael (l. 21).

The last stanza is perhaps the strongest instance of language’s inability to perform and contain grief. Bang remains purposefully vague in order to communicate that her grief will continue, even after the year ends and her elegies have been completed:

The ordeal comes  
To its periodic end  
Which simply means  
The ahead is again (ll. 29-32)

The passing of time is simultaneously expanded and narrowed; even though Bang may be attempting to look ahead and to heal from her loss, anything in the future is only a repetition of the present, which is grief. The “ahead” does not represent progress but the persistence of heartbreak. While the rhythmic quality suggests a playful life lesson—maybe something similar to the tone of Bishop’s “One Art”—the actual language imparts a tragic message. When Bang’s vision or memory ends, grief remains. While the year may be coming to an end, and Bang has written these poems to distract herself from her grief, there remains only a subsequent year to live through without Michael. While the “end” may hint at the supposed completion of the grieving process, in fact it only signifies death’s and mourning’s continuation. This so-called “simpl[e]” meaning is far from an easy or consoling reality to accept. Language, through Bang’s

manipulation, again fails to contain the true implications of this. Even though Bang appears stuck in grief, and thus exhibits melancholic mourning, she does not, as Ramazani might imply, perform modern suffering or wallow in grief; rather, Bang constructs her experience of grief so as to show readers that these feelings deserve attention.

In “Visiting” Bang communicates that in such a time of intense grief there is less room for exact comprehension through language. While the creation of elegy may offer a temporary relief from grief or preserve the life of the deceased, Bang shows that it is futile to assume that poetry can contain precise expressions of the experience, as it cannot truly remedy loss.

While “Visiting” and the last section of *Gabriel* confront death by name and include personal details of the deceased, Catherine Barnett’s “Site” approaches grief in a less direct manner. Still, the construction of “Site” remains intimately connected with a specific loss, particularly through its rejection of standard mourning practices. So, while it may appear that Barnett is keeping readers at a distance, she is in fact asking us to dwell on what the discomfort of grief asks us to keep at bay—similar to the command (“Write it!”) at the end of “One Art” (l. 19). Barnett reveals her grief and doubt through a controlled expression, in that she does not express her grief and anger uncontrollably, but leads us through the disappointing and heartbreaking nature of the process, just as Bishop begins with concrete, inconsequential losses and builds to the one that essentially exposes her lasting grief to the audience.

Familial tragedy sparked construction of the collection from which “Site” comes, *Into Perfect Spheres Such Holes Are Pierced*. Barnett’s nieces, aged six and eight, were in a plane crash, and their bodies were never located—or at least that’s what readers are led to believe from the contents of the collection. If it is true that the girls are only presumed to be lost, then the poet and her family grieve without knowing for sure if they are dead. Barnett struggles with these

crucial distinctions in her poetry. How do you elegize someone who could still be alive? Barnett's lamentations are sometimes vaguely hopeful, yet cautious, in the way that she hopes her family will one day find the girls alive. In some poems in the book, Barnett contemplates the fragility of her own identity as a mother, confronting the possibility of something similar happening to her own son. Other poems depict Barnett attempting to talk about death with her son, acknowledging that language can only do so much to help another grieve and come to terms with loss.

In a way, "Site" is less elegiac than the poems previously analyzed in chapters one, two, and three. In those elegies, the reader definitively recognizes the loss of human life. In "Site," however, Barnett skillfully avoids explicitly confronting the issue of death. It is only within the context of the collection that we as readers can gather enough information to view the poem, as indeed responsive to loss. While "Site" does not address the poet's son as "Visiting" and *Gabriel* do, it does address and critique expectations and customs of grieving. The poem's personal qualities come from Barnett's positioning of *us* versus *them*, or, more accurately, the "we" who encompass Barnett and her group, and the "everybody" telling them how beautiful the "[s]ite" will be. Rather than reaching towards an audience with the third person pronoun, Barnett uses "we" and "us" to designate and separate those who are skeptical of the standard mourning process from those who perpetuate the idea of the progression as direct and purifying.

The title "Site" could be a play on words. It might refer to a location or place—a spot on a beach where the family might find the girls. Alternatively, the word could refer to "sight," or the visualization of what is necessary to reach closure. The beginning of the poem alternates from assertion to negation, and back again. Barnett is evidently dissatisfied with what she has

been told to expect, and this moment of grieving and the attempt to find consolation is not as idealistic as she has been led to believe:

The dirty sand everyone said was beautiful  
 wasn't—it was dirty, or oily,  
 something turning it to hardness.  
 It was ugly when we were told  
 beautiful, shattering when it was  
 supposed to make us whole, cold  
 when it should have been warm  
 and all of us dressed in wrong clothes  
 because everything was wrong. (ll. 1-9)

Verbatim repetition seems to again convey language's inability to contain and reflects Barnett's disappointments. Specifically, either Barnett cannot find a different, more precise word to express her grief, or the blunt repetition of the word must suffice in this instance. Language does not fail as something crafted in the poem, but fails to contain what Barnett feels. As readers, we know what cold is, what dirty is, and what wrong means, but Barnett does not offer any comparisons or provide a more accurate description of the word. Is the sand as cold as snow? Or a light rain? The plainness of these words conveys an atmosphere that is hollow and clearly somber. The imprecision works to describe the scene as dull and lifeless, mimicking Barnett's emotions. Barnett purposefully stretches her description out, making us wonder what her occasion for writing is. While in "Lycidas," Milton announces explicitly in the first few lines that Lycidas has died, Barnett keeps this declaration unstated, and instead requires us infer the cause for the poem. We must infer that the "we" of the poem is waiting—*maybe* even hoping—to find something on this beach.

The several instances of repetition imply that language cannot contain the complexity of grief. Barnett persistently states the positive adjective that she was told she could expect—

something of beauty or warmth to count on—and almost immediately negates that comfort with a series of negative adjectives—“dirty,” “ugly,” “cold,” “shattering,” and “wrong.” She remains ambiguous about what she means by “wrong clothes.” Are they wrong for the weather? Or for the occasion? The expectations and the “supposed to” refer to specters of the social. The event is not a typical performance for finding consolation, and thus Barnett does not advocate a return to the social. The verbs “was” and “wasn’t” pertain to the fundamental existence of these descriptions. Rather than a verb such as “felt” or “appeared,” Barnett refers to the being of the sand—its most basic action. Barnett’s negations are similar to Bang’s in “Visiting” in that she describes her surroundings and grief as they are not. In “Site,” what Barnett has been led to believe about the transformative process of mourning has been a lie. Barnett chooses to make language inadequate, as she repeats the same vague words in an attempt to express her grief.

Aside from language conveying dissatisfaction, Barnett challenges what it might mean to wallow in grief. The exploration on the beach leads to Barnett and her family to situate themselves in this dirty and all-around wrong environment:

We walked the beach early,  
lay down in the sand, and tried to sleep  
there in the dune hardly a dune it was so low,  
but away from the wind—

(ll. 10-13)

The group immerses itself in the sand, which has been described as “dirty” and “ugly.” One can imagine the granules settling into the creases of their clothes and in between their toes—an intrusive and discomfoting presence that will not be washed away easily. Barnett reveals that their group will be there for a while, that they “tr[y] to sleep” in this sand. The detail implies an inability to rise. The sand dune is “so low,” but Barnett realizes they must stay out of the wind. For this reason, one can assume that they had to drive themselves into the dune and the sand to

get away from the disturbing force of the wind. This concept of rising can be extended to the concept of triumphing over grief, in the way that this harsh environment prevents them from doing so. In reality, Barnett and her loved ones cannot *expect* to make progress towards healing or consolation when they remain unsure about the girls' fate. While Ramazani might claim that the immersion in the sand relates to the immersion and therefore wallowing in loss, I believe that Barnett is commenting on the ability to persevere in such an uncomfortable environment, which represents the process of grieving. While she may not find solace in shielding herself from the wind, she refuses to let herself be buried.

This juxtaposition between hopefulness and caution becomes fully realized when Barnett tells us the purpose of coming to the beach:

The locals told us not much ever  
washes up on the beach. (ll. 14-15)

Here we can most explicitly assume the occasion that inspired this elegy. What the “we” is searching for is assumed, or feared, to be gone. This is cause for relief but also pain. If nothing washes up on shore there is no evidence—nothing that says “okay, now where do we go from here?” At the same time, however, this statement also implies that there may not be proof that anything washed ashore, nothing confirming the tragedy to begin with.

The ending of “Site” continues the repetition of specific words, but it also ends on a more hopeful note than *Gabriel* and “Visiting,” perhaps subtly echoing the solace found in conventional elegy. Instead of teaching readers that grief can and should be solved in elegy, however, Barnett instructs them to continue to examine grief and to remain attentive to any sign of comfort, even if that comfort is as simple as a peaceful image:

How cold it got down by the water.  
 The water was cold.  
 The windsurfer wore a wet suit and sailed  
 back and forth like the birds. (ll. 16-19)

Again, there is a reliance on repetition; here it is a repetition of the word “cold.” This lack of warmth encompasses the entire scene and environment, not only the water itself but the air around the water. The scene is again presented as harsh and unwelcoming, made numb by repetition, denying the reader a more precise or vivid image. The alliteration of repeated w and s sounds produces a rhythmic quality that is unlike the sound in other stanzas. The ending image of this poem is vaguely hopeful, in that we are left with the swaying motion of birds, rather than the frigidness of the water or the dirtiness of the sand. Unlike Barnett and her party, the “windsurfer” is dressed appropriately for the elements, and he represents a faraway presence on the horizon, meant to possibly bring some bit of optimism. This ending, however is far from consolatory, as there is no assurance or closure for the family. As far as we know from the poem, nothing ever washed up on the beach. Thus, Barnett cannot find consolation in this moment, though she does not seem to want consolation in its artificial form, as she appears content enough to end her poem on soothing image.

Rather than making an outward declaration to her audience about grief, Barnett turns inward and suggests that the expression of grief in elegy is a personal one, one that can still share the experience of loss with readers in a constructive manner without the need for consolation. Barnett does not use apostrophe or even include “I” in her poem. By using third person, she does not reach out to an audience to impart a grand message about grieving, but instead aligns herself with her family—a collective unit experiencing precarious grief together. She communicates a disappointment, and possibly even harmfulness, in the way society has traditionally discussed

finding closure and consolation after experiencing loss. While she subverts these characteristics, she also maintains agency over her grief, in that she doesn't lose herself in anger or resentment, and even manages to conclude this elegy on a moment of vague hope.

Before we experience loss we may assume there is an inevitable end to mourning, according to triumphant and consolatory elegies—those that survive as particularly representative of the genre; afterwards, however, we realize the occurrence is much less prescriptive than the messages of condolence and assumed belief in an afterlife make it seem. “Site,” “Visiting,” and *Gabriel* all imply that there is no shame in voicing or writing about such realizations and exploring what elegy can and cannot teach us about real grief. Though the elegy remains particularly difficult to define, these contemporary poems of loss suggest an emerging didactic mission of elegy that instructs readers in how to examine and linger in the personal and complex feelings of grief.

## Conclusion

When I began this project last summer, I knew I wanted to write about poetry. Out of all the genres and forms of poetry, I wanted to analyze one that was personal to the author and one that felt almost like it *had* to be written. Knowing first-hand the scars that grief leaves behind, I turned to elegy. I was and continue to be drawn to the intimate nature of such poems, in their unapologetically personal encounters with death, and to their patient and painful laments. A well-written elegy describes in such delicate language what can feel indefinable, unspeakable, or cliché. While grief is often destructive and draining, writing an elegy transforms this negative force into something beautiful, something that can provide comfort, teach, or even last forever.

Despite the vast amount of scholarship devoted to the genre, the elegy remains difficult to define, analyze, and track throughout history because loss never strikes in exactly the same way. Put simply, everyone grieves differently. In poetry, each poet expresses his or her grief according to many interwoven factors, including the circumstances of the loss, intended audience, and literary conventions of his or her culture and time. My project examined some of the problems that arise when critics or readers attempt to define the elegy with clear boundaries: that it can lead to the lauding of an unrealistic consolatory progression, or lead to the assumption that the elegy only performs grief or melancholy without offering a lesson or takeaway for readers.

There is an obvious need for additional studies on elegy, those which look at a larger sample of contemporary elegies, or even on an entire book-length collection of poems. Perhaps a more complete study of, say, Mary Jo Bang's *Elegy* would have provided different insight into the expression of grief in recent elegies. Further studies will simplify or perhaps complicate the idea of the contemporary elegy. If critics agree that the modern elegy is largely anti-elegiac, what can contemporary poems of loss be labeled?

My thesis was also limited in its engagement to primarily two scholars. Jahan Ramazani and Peter Sacks provided the most comprehensive views of the elegy as it has appeared to change over time, and I specifically wanted to challenge the abstract ideas of the consolatory elegy and the anti-elegy. Another approach to such a study of elegy might be to look at a larger number or wider range of elegiac studies and analyze the poems based on gender or relationship to the deceased. Additionally, a project that traces the history of elegy beginning at an earlier century could provide different results or points of comparison. Further, the use of a psychological lens regarding human responses to loss could reveal how a contemporary society can best use elegy to confront a culture that often shuns communal and public mourning.

The elegy remains a rich and complex genre, one which will always have a place in poetry. The incomprehension, anger, and melancholy inspired by death will always lead poets, and their readers, to the genre of elegy, where their grief might be shaped into something meaningful, and where this human experience is shared.

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