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“Comic self-consciousness”: Oblique approaches to the elegiac

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Abstract

This thesis, composed of a collection of poetry and a critical essay, explores the contemporary elegiac poem. Whereas traditional elegists focused on death, contemporary elegiac poems deal with loss in a broader sense. The challenge contemporary elegiac poets take on is to engage with feeling but without veering into sentimentality. In the critical portion of this thesis, “‘Comic self-consciousness’: Oblique approaches to the elegiac,” I explore how two contemporary poets, Billy Collins and William Matthews, approach loss indirectly to evade sentimentality. Specifically, I argue that Collins and Matthews, both of whom are noted for their elegiac orientation and their use of wit, engage with loss through three strategies: the postponement of acknowledging the loss central to the poem, the use of incongruities manifesting as humour and irony, and by gaining the reader’s complicity through the use of metapoetics. In the creative portion of the thesis, “Farewell, My Lovely,” I have drawn inspiration from the strategies modelled by these two poets to engage with at times light-hearted or ironic approaches to loss—via wit, irony and at times metapoetics—to produce a collection of elegiac lyric poems that approach loss indirectly.

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