



BRILL

Contemporary Entangled Elegy

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Among poetic genres, the elegy, defined as a poem of mourning, is well-established and, in the Western tradition, widely practiced in different eras and national traditions; but recent scholarship on the elegy has not caught up with new developments in contemporary elegiac writing, particularly in an era of world, transnational, or global literature, where poetic practices from Western and non-Western traditions interact to produce a different literary landscape. This Special Issue responds to this new cultural situation, confronting a broader, more international range of poems than those that are usually studied under the rubric of elegy and exploring idiosyncratic practices that push traditional boundaries of elegy.

Terms such as “transnational”, “global”, and “world” have come to play a key role in re-thinking the study and the circulation of literature and its reception, and they frequently appear in this collection. Nonetheless, “transnational” and “global,” have often led to mapping a history and sociology of literature, which is not the aim here. Nevertheless, these contributions offer possible indications of how transnational approaches might work today in ensuring that non-Western literatures are part of World Literature and bringing greater cultural and literary diversity to the World Canon.

One of the key questions that animates this special issue does not concern what contemporary elegy is or how it might work. Instead, it concentrates on reformulating one central question: how does the elegiac writing find different expressions within a global and interconnected late twentieth and twenty-first

century? The answer lies in the many ways several expressions of the elegiac genre – and related literary criticism on them – interact with and affect each other on a transspatial and transhistorical scale. These movements are expressed through forms of reciprocity and simultaneity that were not imaginable before the last decades in what have been defined as traditional and modern elegies. All the collected articles converge on the idea of the entanglement of contemporary elegies: the individual expression of the elegiac genre does not precede its interaction with other traditions and cultures, but rather, contemporary elegiac objects emerge through their intra-actions. As explained by Karen Barad in her *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, “to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence”. Entanglement is a useful concept insofar as it can, figuratively, shed light on how the elegy moves both in space and time in our global era. Indeed, the different elegiac objects analyzed in this special issue behave remarkably similarly in their being at great distance from each other on both a temporal and spatial level. Togetherness, simultaneity, and synchronicity here substitute for traditional frameworks dealing with causality, influence, and diachronicity. As a result, entanglement points towards the fruitful possibility for an investigation of contemporary elegies on a global, transnational, and interlaced scale.

Genre has been at the center of recent scholarship attempts to define lyric poetry, including the elegy. Nonetheless, definitions and labels have been losing ground or, at least, have been problematized since the introduction of the different strands of “studies” such as Gender Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, and Ecological Studies. Although the questioning of genre does not accompany an actual disappearance of certain types of traditions, cultural strategies, and stylistic forms, these still must be problematized in light of the extra-literary forces that may renegotiate the structure and definition of a literary genre: those forces could be related to gender, race, minorities, the environment, social conflict, and contemporary history. This is the case with contemporary elegy too.

While situating itself on the unknowable threshold between life and death, the elegiac genre crosses a variety of other borders, even within a single literary or linguistic tradition. The shared presence of the treatment of the work of mourning in any lyric national tradition locates the elegiac genre within an intricate entanglement of transnational and transcultural influences (Ramazani *Transnational Poetics*). The embeddedness of each individual poem within such a dense set of traditions plays a significant role in establishing transhistorical connections. Elegiac writing not only assumes the key responsibility of voicing grief, but also reflects (or, at times, challenges) cultural and histor-

ical trends that have come to characterize, on a national and individual level, the experience of mourning today. The movement from an individual/private to a collective/public experience of mourning emerges as one of the main features of contemporary elegiac discourse as it will be discussed in the articles by Ivanna Sang Een Yi and Adele Bardazzi. In addition, the essays collected here show how late twentieth and twenty-first-century elegists move from the mode of a literary genre to a mode of discourse beyond its literary origins. Moreover, this special issue offers not only an array of critical views on what elegy might stand for in the twenty-first century, but also how literary criticism works from the viewpoint of World Literature. One example is the potential for works to gain new dimensions and new meaning outside of their national borders through translation, as explored in some chapters of this special issue such as those by Nick Admussen, Adele Bardazzi, Roberto Binetti, Jahan Ramazani, and Gail Holst-Warhaft.

Elegy Today builds upon current debates in genre theory, that ignited an unprecedented renaissance of studies dedicated to the elegiac genre: from Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* to Clifton Spargo's chapter "The Contemporary Elegy" in the *Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*. In the introduction to *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era*, the editors highlight how "[c]ontemporary elegies carve out a public space for black grief, while decidedly resisting the turn toward consolation that often characterizes the poetic form" (Austin 14). Indeed, the movement between singular and collective, individual, and shareable is at the core of most contributions in which the "I" is inscribed in a collective form of mourning. Mourning as a lyric "gesture" has in fact been conceptualized as fundamental to allowing the formation of a collective, if not forms of communities, as a result of the lyric's capacity to be repeated (Giusti 75–78). Elegy today requires the development of existing scholarship that delves into its idiosyncratic characteristics and highlights how new tendencies have come to play, in addition to what has marked the turn from traditional to modern elegy: its rejection of the compensatory model of poetic mourning. Elegy remains a poetic genre and yet, it has also developed a "mode of discourse" that moves beyond its literary borders (Bardazzi, Giusti, and Tanello) and finds its expressions in entangled intra-actions between the most diverse range of elegiac objects.

The contributions collected in this special issue develop a conceptualization of contemporary elegy as a further "turn", building on how modern elegy has previously been theorized. Today, the main gesture of elegies is not to reject what was at the core of modern elegy, that is, its resistance to the traditional elegy's "consolatory machinery" (Ramazani *Poetry of Mourning* 3; Spargo) but to enact a further movement towards an entangled poetics of mourning – what

has here been defined by Ramazani as “elegiac solidarity” (Ramazani *A Global Web of Elegy*), by Sherman as “posthumous personhood”, and by Bardazzi as “impossible elegies”. Within these critical frameworks, the traditional and modern melancholic postures typical of modern elegies become intertwined with several other literary structures that need to be analyzed within the plural and interconnected twenty-first century. As Alain Aspect contends regarding Quantum Physics, the concept of entanglement shows that new scientific theories do not imply that the preceding ones are no longer true but rather tend, most of the time, to inglobate them and extend them. This is a presupposition that underlies the aim of this special issue in proposing new conceptualizations on the elegy in a global world. Just as the quantum revolution has brought forward debates beyond the sciences, particularly philosophical and epistemological debates, discussions on elegy are interlaced with discussions on how we mourn today and how the living sustain an intra-relation with the dead. With this aim, *Elegy Today* gathers fourteen essays that investigate the many ways through which the transnational entanglement is expressed in the synchronic intra-action of a diverse array of literary objects.

The special issue is divided into three main sections that are the expression of three critical movements. The first aims to highlight the mechanisms of resistance performed towards the generic markers of the genre and their expression in literary criticism of elegiac writing. Admussen's chapter draws on the mourning of the literary critic over the impossibility of translating a collection by the Chinese poet Hei Guang – and thus allowing for a global circulation of the text. Similarly, Bardazzi elaborates on the resistance of elegiac non-lineated forms in two collections of prose poems by Victoria Chang and Valerio Magrelli. Resistance to secularized markers of the genre is also at the core of Sherman's essay which explores the variations of apostrophic addresses in the poetry of Natasha Trethewey, Danez Smith, Sam Sax.

The second section is modeled on a revision of certain trends and cultural positions. Particular attention is given to the reformulation of some key questions concerning the embeddedness of the dimension of the public and of the private in the elegiac genre, as demonstrated in the essays by Ivanna Sang Een Yi – on the transhistorical reconfiguration of collective mourning in Kim Hyesoon's *Autobiography of Death* – and by Roberto Binetti – focusing on the revision of the genre of the self-elegy in Italian women's poetry with the aim to build the idea of a posthumous literary community.

The last section proposes a re-mapping of various elegiac traditions with a perspective moving from a transnational approach to investigate the links and trajectories that interconnect and enhance the exchanges between different world regions. Individual literary traditions – such as the Iraqi and Egyptian in

Emily Drumsta's contribution, the Greek in Holst-Warhaft's essay – are investigated through an interlaced viewpoint that aims not only to problematize questions of representation within a national literary canon but also to highlight how each territory drawn by literary criticism cannot be encompassed within given national borders. Drumsta focuses on the re-surfacing of the woman-elegy association in two examples of Arabic poetry: al-Mala'ikah's *Ila 'Ammati al-Rahilah* [To My Late Aunt] and the quasi-elegiac threads woven through the prose poems in Mersal's collection, *Mamarr Mu'tam Yuslah Li-Ta'allum al-Raqs* [A Dark Corridor Suitable for Learning How to Dance]. Holst-Warhaft explores the impact of ritual sung verses – dirges and laments – on Modern Greek literature by reconfiguring the definition of how the elegiac tradition is crafted in the Greek context. The attempt to re-map the elegiac genre is expanded in the analysis of Edward Hirsch's *Gabriel*, a text that Jahan Ramazani investigates as a portal of the elegiac genre's globality. Hirsch's gathering makes visible the elegy's global resonances, divergences, and scope by quoting more than a dozen mourning poets from classical and Edo Japan, medieval, Renaissance, and Romantic Britain, Renaissance Poland, nineteenth-century Germany and France, and twentieth-century Italy, Russia, and India.

Overall, each contribution moves from the knowledge that every act of revision is always an act of resistance, while, at the same time, any act of resistance concurrently results in an act of revision. When this intuition is translated onto a global (or, at least, globalized) scale with the attempt to map out the interactions between several literary objects and traditions, it is also fundamental to remember how “[n]ot only is it easy to lie with maps, but it is also essential” (Monmonnier). Any attempt at representation is necessarily vitiated by the point of view, be it a map, a picture, a literary history, an essay on genre theory, or, in this case, the manifestations of a literary genre in a given historic period. Elegy, in this sense, is a particularly deceptive genre, especially when transported into and investigated from the global critical dimension of World Literature. Rooted in a classical legacy, elegy still constitutes a problematic, and yet highly fertile term. This suggests the need to consider whether it is still helpful to provide an all-encompassing definition of the elegy, or whether its current hybridity, extra-literary forces, and literary objects are more in tune with a dynamic of productive entanglement. *Elegy Today* investigates how the dead dwell in the world of the living and how this continuing relationship produces fertile forms of poetic writing in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries that still need to be mapped out and analyzed within and through a transspatial, transhistorical, and entangled viewpoint.

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