



BRILL

“Maybe nothing is an elegy”

On the Impossibility of Elegy and Transnational Criticism in Victoria Chang and Valerio Magrelli

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Abstract

This article investigates two central aspects of contemporary elegy: (1) the plausible and tempting assumption of it being disentangled from formal constraints, something that might have generated a major historical shift from poetry as a poetic form to an elegiac mode of discourse (Bardazzi, Giusti, and Tandello 2022); (2) the formal glitch it creates and, at times, reconciles via the lyric and its generative tension between personal and collective, narrative and non-narrative dimensions, linear and non-linear temporalities. This study does so by focusing on two authors who have weaved together a poetics of mourning the paternal figure: *OBIT* (2020) by the Asian American poet Victoria Chang and *Geologia di una padre* [Geology of a father] (2013) by the Italian poet Valerio Magrelli.

Keywords

Valerio Magrelli – Victoria Chang – prose poetry – genre studies – transnational literary criticism – paternal elegies

1 On Fathers. Or Elegy Is the Thing with Feathers

In a time when the difference between poetry and prose is still bizarrely central to the way literature is read, circulated, and taught, it is easy to understand how poetry has come to be too often associated with lineated versification, perhaps also as a result of how *all* poetry has come to be too often associated with an idea of what the lyric looks like (rather than how it works). Where does the

elegy situate itself within this picture today? Or should I ask, where should we locate the elegy today?

This study seeks to explore two central aspects of contemporary elegy, which will, in turn, help to develop a conceptualization of what contemporary elegy might stand for in the twenty-first century in the first place: 1) the plausible and tempting assumption of it being disentangled from formal constraints, something that might have generated a major historical shift from elegy as a poetic form to an elegiac mode of discourse (Bardazzi, Giusti, and Tandello 175–184);¹ 2) the formal glitch it creates and, at times, reconciles via the lyric and its generative tension between personal and collective, narrative and non-narrative dimensions, linear and non-linear temporalities. It will do so by focusing on two authors who have weaved together personal and collective histories of mourning of the paternal figure: *OBIT* (2020) by the Asian American poet Victoria Chang (b. Detroit, 1970) and *Geologia di un padre* [A Father's Geology] (2013) by the Italian poet Valerio Magrelli (b. Rome, 1957).

Elegy, traditionally elected to voice loss, is openly rejected by Magrelli in his choice of not writing a poetic collection and by Chang in her choice to make reference to obituaries and distancing herself from the poetic form of the elegy. Both works resist what Jahan Ramazani has referred to as (pre-modern) elegy's “consolatory machinery” and thus tend to present irresolution, confinement, rage, self-criticism – all elements that have not just been central in modern elegiac writing on which Ramazani focuses, but also increasingly inhabited in contemporary elegiac writing.² Ramazani's claim, made back in 1994, that modern elegy tends to reject consolation, is a central aspect, more than ever, in contemporary elegiac writing. Those forms of rejection, however, rather than presenting irresolution or rage as an end point, become the very site for reworking non-lyric textures, such as the obituary or prose writing, and intertwine them with the lyric. This is the novelty of contemporary elegiac writing that Chang and Magrelli craft in their collections.

These characteristics, however, were used to define “contemporary” elegy decades ago, and this is perhaps why even Chang herself does not view her “obit” poems as belonging to elegiac writing today (Spargo 413–15). In fact, on the back cover, we read that after her mother's death, Chang refused to write elegies “for fear of cliché”, and instead she started writing poetic obituaries.

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- 1 For an analysis of how the lyric could also be understood as a “mode”, see Southerden 546–562, and Johnson. For mourning as a lyric “gesture”, Giusti “Transcontextual Gestures” 75–103.
 - 2 Key features of modern elegy, according to Jahan Ramazani, are “masochism, irresolution, irredemption, aggression, and self-criticism”, features that can still be found in contemporary elegiac writing (Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* 3; 10).

What are the clichés of elegies? Have melancholic elegies that refuse to reach consolation and present irresolution, confinement, rage, and self-criticism also become a cliché by now? What happens if we read the poems in Chang's *OBIT* as elegies? If we turn to Magrelli's *Geologia di un padre*, which does not show any direct relation to poetic elegy, do we find more possibilities for understanding what elegy might stand for in the twenty-first century? Clifton Spargo, while defining contemporary mournful writing in 2010, proposed the category of "anti-elegy" to designate "not so much a new form of poetry or a break with the tradition of elegy [but] as a tendency within elegiac poetry to resist consolation by setting a contemporary mourner against past cultural and poetical conventions" (Spargo 415). This view is no longer up-to-date because then all mournful writing should be referred to as anti-elegy, and, more importantly, its main feature would remain to be the one of presenting an anti-consolatory gesture, something that pervades contemporary mournful writing and that is no longer the most interesting or defining aspect of poetry written today. Focusing on this would be at the cost of not investigating how mournful poetry works today.

Contending that something is an elegy *or* an anti-elegy – something that has become increasingly fashionable and should, on another occasion, lead to ask whether or not anti-elegy refers to the very same thing that it wants to oppose in contemporary poetry – is a gesture that plays with the very idea of what it means to categorize. Categorizing is also an attempt to identify some characteristics that conform to some generic markers that enable one to define a literary object as elegiac or anti-elegiac. This normative tendency in literary criticism can also be seen as responding to the symbolic order of the figure of the father. The name of the father, formally, stands as a figure of the law – which can be a feature in literature too, i.e. in genre (Lacan 52–53). A prose poem that goes *au delà* of the language of the father – which is normative, contained, monologic – breaks with the law. From this viewpoint, the act of breaking the line – in the sense not of lineated verse, but by expanding the line to the point of breaking it into a prose poem – is a way of refusing the generic and codified language of mourning in poetry: i.e. the elegy. The father becomes the figure to actualize a reflection on form (and, more broadly, on genre) and on what it means to reject a form. The attempt to move away from form, from standardized versification – which is what we still would expect to find an elegy to be like – is an attempt to move away from the formal constraints that the language of the father brings with it, that is from the literary genre *tout court*. The father of the elegy, one might say, is the lyric genre. What is not lyric, nowadays, is nothing but prose writing. What does it mean, thus, to write an elegy in prose? Would this be an elegy that is *not* lyric? What does it mean to bring the lyric outside the umbrella of the lyric? Will it catch a cold or grow? Grow into what? Would that

mean to make it expand, explode, shoot straight to the heart of the bird, with no possibility for hope, but only its feathers scattering everywhere to the point of overflowing the literary and becoming a mode of discourse? Can I write a scholarly piece only by asking questions? Would that be changing the features of a scholarly article or writing something that is not scholarly? The same is true for the elegy. But let us now move towards the texts, via the nearest airport, naturally: a LAX–Rome flight, or the other way around.

2 On Transnational Criticism. Or on International Flights

The first obvious distinction between these two works is how the latter is not considered to belong to Magrelli’s production as a poet and will not be found next to his collections on the poetry shelves, while the former follows the non-poetic form of the obituary together with re-workings of closed syllabic forms (i.e. the sonnet and the tanka). Starting with the assumptions that 1) elegy is to be considered under the umbrella of lyric poetry and 2) that prose poetry is, just as can by now be seen as free verse, everything but free from form. I shall argue that what brings these poets together is the way formal constraints become a poetic tool to entangle the singular and collective core of their elegiac writing. The question that holds together what will follow is whether or not “nothing is an elegy”, as we read at the end of one of Chang’s “obit” poems (“The Face’ 101) and what this tells us about contemporary poetry and the elegy today.

In *A Transnational Poetics* Ramazani suggests that the elegiac mode has become a kind of discourse that needs to be investigated from a transcultural and transhistorical perspective (Ramazani *Transnational Poetics* 71–93). What does it mean to consider both Chang’s and Magrelli’s work within the same literary cabin suitcase? Can reading Magrelli’s book as elegiac writing be done only on a flight towards LAX? Speaking of transnational poetics does not come without the need to be situated in specific privileged corners that can enable one to open on the same plastic desk behind someone’s seat books that belong not simply to two different languages (and everything that comes with language – e.g. cultures, etc.), but also two literary *milieux* created by the very people who read it, who can talk about it in that language. Can transnational approaches to certain works be made only in *one* language, within certain *national* borders and *outside* other national borders: within one particular scholarly community, that is the Anglo-American one? Presenting these questions is not an exercise in formulating rhetorical questions, but in alerting the reader to what might not be visible within this transnational flight over two works written in one language – elegy – and two languages – English and Ital-

ian. What do we gain and what is the violence or grace in extracting Magrelli's book and re-locate it on the Rome-LAX flight? Should Magrelli's book be grateful for that? Is there violence in that critical gesture? What if one work cannot be read from another language? What if Magrelli's work is an elegy in LA and a novel in Rome? What about Chang? What if none of the two is an elegy? What if nothing is an elegy and, at the same time, that is the only way we can talk about elegy today? Will we end up talking about elegy just as much critical discourse in the Anglo-American context talks about the lyric or how it is talked about in Italy (i.e. a relatively short poem about the poetic lyric "I")?

It is not a flight from place *a* to place *b*, but the attempt to create an airport where both *a* and *b* can cohabit. Should such an airport exist? Let us now turn to the texts and pause the questions for later and stop this figurative language, which is often taken to be a marker of the poetic heartbeat, but I hope these paragraphs have shown how figurative language can have the opposite result.

3 Taking Off: On Form

Geologia di un padre presents an excavation, starting from a highly personal history – the narrative created around the elaboration of mourning by means of a series of short paternal portraits – and sinking into a collective and, in a certain sense, depersonalizing dimension. In fact, as the title suggests, there is a suprasegmental element, beyond the subjective and the diaristic: it is a "geology of *a* father" [my italics], which is implemented via the emphasis placed on the indefinite article "*un* padre" [*a* father]. The figure of the father becomes a paternal figure, living a separate sign-life with respect to biography: "a father", in other words, ends up rising to the figure of the paternal. From this viewpoint, the paternal stands not only for the lost object of love to be mourned but also as a signifier for the norm, and thus also form. A poetics of mourning that presents itself as prose rather than lineated is, from this viewpoint, the attempt to evade the norm: the form of the elegy as crafted in poetry. Structurally, there are only four texts that are not in prose and that form the appendix: "Appendice. Cronache dal Pleistocene" [Appendix. Chronicles from the Pleistocene]. It is worth looking at the second poem in particular where the father is defined as an "immagine di poesia" [image of poetry]:

È immagine di poesia, la figura
 paterna che si nutre di me,
 la tenia che divora da dentro la mia vita?
 Immagine di poesia è la figura

di mio figlio, che beve proteso
 verso il rubinetto alzandosi
 su un piede, mentre l'altra gamba,
 prodigio della statica,
 distesa oscilla in aria, contrappeso
 magico per bilanciare la sete.
 Avessi anch'io la sua grazia
 nell'equilibrare la fame
 di chi dentro di me
 si sporge e mi dilania!

[It is the image of poetry, the figure
 Father that feeds on me,
 the tapeworm that devours from within my life?
 Image of poetry is the figure
 Of my son, drinking outstretched
 toward the faucet standing up
 on one foot, while the other leg,
 prodigy of statics,
 stretched out sways in the air, a counterweight
 magic to balance the thirst.
 Would that I, too, had his grace
 In balancing the hunger
 Of those within me
 Leans out and tears at me!]³

"11" 136

The overlap between the figure of the father and the norm (where norm stands for poetry in verse) is made explicit in the first line of the poem in which the father is referred to as the image of the poem. This line condenses what the previous eighty-three prose poems have already sketched through a metonymic

3 All translations from Italian into English are mine. Rejecting literature on the basis that it irremediably leads to aestheticizing the uniqueness of his mother into a "figure" is something that Roland Barthes has repeatedly highlighted in his *Journal de deuil* [*English trans.*] (which Magrelli has translated into Italian and often discussed in interviews) as well as in *Chambre Claire*. A similar posture is the one held by Jacques Derrida: "Me who, among other remorse and with respect to my mother, feel really guilty for publishing her end, in exhibiting her last breaths and, still worse, for purposes that some might judge to be literary, at risk of adding a dubious exercise to the 'writer and his mother' series, subseries, 'the mother's death'" (Derrida "Circumfession" 36–37).

box game in which reflections on poetic form in the context of a poetics of mourning is the main thread of Magrelli's discourse.

In the geography of the book, we find a "geological gesture" that consists precisely in a complex and multi-directional movement that accompanies a vertical excavation, in the paternal micro-history, which comes together with a horizontal arrangement of objects, places, and events linked to the figure of the father. The entanglement of these two dimensions or spaces – horizontal and vertical – allows Magrelli, in a very similar way to what happens in Chang's *OBIT*, or in the Italian context, in Anedda's *Geografie*, and before this, Andrea Zanzotto's *Il galateo in bosco* [Galateo in the Wood], to set up a geological investigation carried out around the work of mourning: an investigation that is capable of making a constant movement between personal, collective as well as impersonal.

C'è folla, sottoterra. Questa mattina, sei o sette operatori salgono e scendono tra scale e funi. Più tardi passerà anche un'ispettrice, bionda e gentile. Palanche e corde, picconi e cemento, in un'attività che durerà frenetica tre ore almeno. Intorno, alcuni visitatori, perplessi nel frastuono del cantiere, cercano di pregare i loro morti limitrofi. Ma ecco che viene fuori la prima bara. Il legno, zuppo e nero (testa di moro), si sbriciola, biscotto troppo a lungo inzuppato. Viene via, e disgregandosi rivela la sua camicia: siamo allo zinco. Anche lui è messo male, così ossidato e pallido, così corrosivo e opaco, da somigliare a un'ostia. *Eppure ancora abbastanza resistente da contenere qualcosa.*

[There is a crowd, underground. This morning, six or seven workers go up and down ladders and ropes. Later an inspector, blond and kind, will also pass by. Shovels and ropes, picks and concrete, in an activity that will frantically last three hours at least. All around, some visitors, perplexed by the din of the construction site, try to pray to their dead neighbors. But here comes the first coffin. The wood soaked and black (dark brown), crumbles, cookie too long soaked. It comes away, and disintegrating reveals its shirt: we are at zinc. It too is in bad shape, so oxidized and pale, so corroded and dull, it resembles a host. *Yet still strong enough to hold something.*]

"3" 9–10 (9). My emphasis

This poem activates a *katabasis*: the focus is placed on the indistinct collectivity through the description of a common fate of death. This leads to the creation of a diffuse and anonymous identity of the dead in the presence of a collec-

tive ossuary (“c’è folla sottoterra” [there is a crowd underground]). In addition, the lost object is reconstituted through a focus on the body and matter. It is the attributes (e.g. cigarettes, drawings, books) of the object that provide the possibility for the subject to reconstruct an image of the father through the language of mourning in literature. Again, the poem succeeds in reestablishing an interstitial space for the limbic existence of the lost object: it functions as a spatialization of mourning. It is interesting to note how the image of the crumbling of the coffin, that is the container-form of the lost object, is said to still be strong enough to contain something. The emphasis on the vague “qualcosa” [something] rather than specifying what – the father – further encourages us not to see this merely and solely as a metaphor of poetic form, but *simultaneously* working as a statement on the crumbling of the elegiac form into prose. Nevertheless, this crumbled elegy is still able to resist and contain the mourned object that, in the moment it is mourned, inevitably becomes “qualcosa”: a figure thin as a wafer and yet as symbolically powerful in its embodying of the body of Christ. It is something that goes beyond the singular person of the father, and becomes plural, as belonging to someone else: “i loro morti” [their dead].

Throughout *Geologia*, Magrelli keeps overlapping the figure of the father with that of the son (as both himself as a son and himself as a father) to the point of stating that he felt “due volte padre, due volte figlio” [twice a father and twice a son] (“66” 106) while in the presence of both his father and his son. The cohabitation of the living and the dead and, most importantly, the excavation into form, is at the core of the structure of *OBIT* as a whole too. It is centered on a constant shift between the dead and the living: from exploring Chang’s father’s illness – whose brain “died before him”, an expression often found in obituaries to refer to family members deceased before the person at the center of the obituary – (“The Obituary Writer” 66) to her mother’s death which contrasts with Chang’s own responsibilities in parenting her growing children, something that leads to these two lines: “[...] help someone / grow while helping someone die”, as the first tanka of the collection concludes (“My children, children, ...”, 11, ll. 4–5).

In another text, Magrelli highlights through the metaphor of the resemblance between father and son how form imposes itself even when the object under scrutiny is different, that is to say that there is an anonymity in the wooden coffin, in the crowd that the individual image of the father summons up:

La somiglianza fra l’imitatore e il suo modello, scriveva Petrarca a Boccaccio, deve essere come quella tra padre e figlio, imponendosi anche quando

essi risultino molto diversi d'aspetto: 'Un certo non so che, che i pittori chiamano aria e che si rivela soprattutto nel viso e negli occhi, produce quella somiglianza, la quale fa sí che subito, vedendo il figlio, si ricordi del padre, benché se si scendesse a un esame particolare tutto apparirebbe diverso'. [...]

[The resemblance between the imitator and his model, Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio, must be like that between father and son, imposing itself even when they are very different in appearance: 'A certain something, which painters call air and which is revealed above all in the face and in the eyes, produces that resemblance, which makes one immediately remember the father when seeing the son, although if one were to go down to a particular examination everything would appear different.' [...]]

"23" 39

Magrelli brings the discussion back to a formal issue by going through the mechanisms of imitation, but rather than imitation the focus is on how a relationship of resemblance, such as that between father and son, always holds a profound difference when looked at more closely.

Chang, similarly, interrogates the mechanisms underlying the relationship between literary transcription of grief and the expression of the feeling itself: the expression of grief being the model and the transcription being the mimetic process. The 'obit' form has a similar function to the coffin-form container in Magrelli's collection:

[...] How many times have I looked into the sky for some kind of message only to find content but no form. She ran back to the car. The way grief takes many forms as tears or pinwheels. The way the word *haystack* never conjures up the same image twice. The way we assume all tears taste the same. The same our sadness is plural but grief is singular.

"Tears" 27

Looking up to the sky returns in a significant way in another obit which, again, proposes a relationship between container-content in relation to grief:

[...] My mother was a mathematician, so I tried to calculate my grief. My father was an engineer so I tried to build a box around my grief, along with a small wooden bed that grief could lie down on. The texts kept interrupting my grief, forcing me to speak about nothing. If you cut out a rectangle of a perfectly blue sky, no clouds, no wind, no birds, frame it with a blue

frame, place it face up on the floor of an empty museum with an open atrium to the sky, that is grief.

"Grief" 70

Building a "wooden bed" echoes the function of putting the dead to "sleep" in a coffin, of allowing grief to lie down. From this viewpoint, the frame provided by the rectangular obit, in another language than the one of the elegy, allows one to enter into the empty museum and look up to grief. To this extent, form not only stands for container but also as a filter which allows the poet to contain and thus express grief.

Chang's obituaries are all prose poems modelled after narrow, skinny newspaper obituaries, though they also invoke the rectangular solidity of grave-stones. The obituary, one of the least poetic forms of writing, strikes us here for its intense justified verticality and, concurrently, for the way it pinpoints the all-pervading horizontality of each addressed lost one in a specific place and time even though they follow a non-chronological order – something that echoes the non-linear temporality typical of melancholic-orientated mourning that these texts evoke.⁴ Obituaries are records, short biographical sketches generally published in newspapers, of a recently deceased person. Etymologically, the word "obituary" comes from Latin *obitus* [departure], from *obire* [to fall, to perish].⁵

Structurally, *OBIT* is divided into four sections: all sections except the second one are collections of obit poems. These columnar, rectangular prose-poem obituaries are addressed to a wide range of subjects: from people to things as well as abstract concepts (such as blame, privacy, reason, appetite, memory, language, and more). These obituaries are interspersed with the compressed Japanese five-line form of the *tankas*, which are all addressed to Chang's children and several of them begin with the line "I tell my children" and several others with "My children, children". In the middle section of the book, we find another interruption from the series of obits: one long sonnet sequence with emphasized spacing entitled "I Am a Miner, the Light Turns Blue" (a line from

4 Melancholic mourning tends to discard the consolatory gesture of the traditional elegy, leaving grief in a state of temporal suspension. Melancholic remembrance leads not to redeem, but remember, revisit, and re-live (often without any resolution) the mourned object. A significant reflection on this aspect of melancholic temporality is in Riley 71; 101.

5 On the back cover we are also told that Chang was moved by the sounds of two phonemes in the word obituary: the long /o/ and the hard /t/: the prolonged phoneme /o/ pronounced with the lips forming a circular opening and the harsher /t/ marking a closure, an interruption to the preceding rounded vowel.

Sylvia Plath's poem entitled "Nick and the Candlestick"). On the form of this poem Chang writes:

That middle section is actually a collection of sonnets – fake sonnets, just fourteen lines, nothing else – all written as elegies. They were related to children and family. I collected them together into one long poem, made them all fourteen lines, added breaks, caesuras, in between. Then, I connected them just for fun. I tried to find one word or phrase at the end of each one to connect it to the beginning of the next one. They're just messing around with the idea that all things come to an end.

RODRIGUES

This idea of end is not just referring to death, but also to the still overly present view that there is an end to mourning – something that sustains the narrative of what Ramazani has referred to as "traditional" elegies from the pre-modern period (Ramazani Poetry of Mourning xi). This is something that Chang often refers to in her interviews, highlighting the tendency of moving on after a certain amount time:

In many ways, grief just happens to us. We can't change it or fix it. There's also a very American idea of 'getting over it' and I just couldn't and can't.

CHEN

Chang's emphasis on the Western attitude towards death and mourning are to be taken into account together with her recourse to the Japanese form of the *tankas* as well as the attempt to play with the form of the sonnet and the elegy together in the middle section.

That a creative and generative force can be found through formal constraints in poetry is not a novel or an uncommon view to hold today. Chang has highlighted this when referring to the use of syllabic constraint for the writing of *tankas* in *OBIT* and, most recently, for doubly constraining herself by continuing to use *wakas* as well as using W.S. Merwin's titles as prompts in *The Trees Witness Everything* (2022).⁶ "Sometimes", Chang writes in her notes, "the term *waka* is also used to mean a *tanka*. Occasionally, I broke the form." Breaking the form is a practice that is at the center of *OBIT* too, specifically the form of the sonnet in the second section.

6 *Wakas* "translated as "Japanese poem" specifically the court poetry of the sixth to fourteenth centuries in Japan", which includes the *tanka* (5-7-5-7-7 syllable pattern) among others, such as the *sedoka* (5-7-7-5-7-7) (Chang *The Trees* 118).

The dispersion of the *tankas* in-between the obit poems functions in such a way as to highlight that there is no quick "moving on"; the *tankas*, as opposed to the prose-like blocks of the obits, all look and sound very different from the obits. Chang has said that she 'started adding some of these into the manuscript as a way for the reader to *breathe* because all the grieving in the obits seemed a lot to take, almost suffocating' and that the same reasoning is what brought her to put in the long 'broken' sonnet in the middle section. The *tankas* "were written for all children and my children too. They seemed more hopeful, about the future, rather than about the past, which the obits are. They are shorter in line; they are breathier to read, less like a coffin, which the obits can seem like. They have a lot of air in them on the page physically too" (Chen). It is worth highlighting here that breathing has a particular significance, as it links with the chain of events that caused Chang's mother to die of pulmonary fibrosis on August 3, 2015. In the obit for "Oxygen" (41) she recalls her mother's difficulty with breathing that the pulmonary fibrosis caused ("I'm not sure when I began to notice her panic without the oxygen [...]") and reflects:

Like grief, the way it dangles from everything like earrings. The way grief needs oxygen. The way every once in a while, it catches the light and starts smoking. The way my grief will die with me.

"Oxygen" 41

This need for oxygen, for breathing, translates in terms of form in spacing, caesuras, to contrast the contained coffin-like obits: here lies the significance of the dispersed *tankas* among the obit poems and the middle long sonnet with emphasized spacing. In the interviews Chang presents this as an attempt to give a pause, a moment to breath from the heaviness of the grieving obits, but clearly, if grief needs oxygen, this is also a space, an emphasized space of grief. The structure of the book itself re-enacts the movement of a mourning that is intermittent but nevertheless never-ending that Chang seems to privilege and that results in avoiding the 'cliché' of the elegy, of a normative "moving on" after loss. This compulsion of 'moving on' is clearly perceived by Chang to be present in the cliché of elegiac poetry and this emerges throughout the collection. I will demonstrate this with two instances from two different obits:

There must be some way of drawing a picture so that it doesn't become an elegy.

"Empathy" 65

When we remember the dead, at some point, we are remembering the picture, not the moment

“Language” 29

What we have, therefore, is a non-compensatory anti-elegiac gesture that strives towards irresolution not just within the individual obits, but within the overall structure of the collection with alternations of poetic forms, between the feeling of suffocating and the breathing present in the white spaces of the *tankas* and the middle long poem. I believe that this is the most interesting way that a discourse of anti-elegiac poetics emerges in *OBIT*.

4 Landing: On Metaphor and Simile

Both Chang and Magrelli anatomize the “unsayability” of mourning and how language, which in *OBIT* gets three obituaries on its own, fails us – it fails the father’s attempt to make sense when using language, but it also fails us in the work of mourning. It also fails the language of poetry and its “figurative” tools: “Similes–dies on August 3, 2015. There was nothing like death, just death. Nothing like grief, just grief” (“Similes” 92). The work of mourning does not end and there is no reconstitution of the poetic subject from the depths of grief, rather we witness several deaths of the poetic subject in *OBIT*: these are not just a realization of one’s own mortality in the confrontation with the death of the *other*, but a gradual dissolution of the self: “In returning out of the tears, the first person *I* dissolves a little more each time” (“Affection” 93).

Death seems to be carried on by the living, quite literally, as the father carries his deceased frontal lobe or as Chang accompanies her parent through his *dying*. Chang’s latest collection of poetry is a testimony of the changeability of grief as well as the recording of another loss: of one’s language in the depths of mourning. And yet, she has the resolve to “Write it!”, to use Elizabeth Bishop’s exhortation in “One Art” (16–18). Grief becomes so pervading that anticipated mourning is actualized also in the form of self-elegy:

Victoria Chang–died unknowingly on June 24, 2009 on the I-405 freeway. Born in the Motor City, it is fitting she died on a freeway. When her mother called about her father’s heart attack, she was living an indented life, a swallow that didn’t dip. This was not her first death. All her deaths had creases except this one. [...] Because he did not die but all of his words did. At the hospital Victoria Chang cried when her father no longer made sense. This was before she understood the cruelty of his disease. It would

be the last time she cried in front of it. She switched places with her shadow *because suffering changes shape and happens secretly*.

"Victoria Chang" 7

Similarly, Magrelli overlaps the mournful subject with the mourned object:

Desiderio di rievocarlo: perché? Forse perché mi manco. È come se soffrissi per la mia morte. Infatti, ai suoi occhi, il morto sono io. Io l'ho preso, nella maniera in cui lui ha perso me. È come se avessi perso per un lutto riflesso, una parte di me. E dunque mi compiangono, molto più di quanto non compiangano lui. Mi guardo attraverso i suoi occhi: ci siamo morti entrambi reciprocamente. Con la sua morte, è stata la nostra coppia a scomparire. Ormai siamo spaiati, definitivamente. Perciò, parlando di lui, passo dalla sua parte, gli giro dietro, gli vedo le carte, mi vedo al di là del tavolo da gioco, e scopro che per il suo sguardo io non esisto più. Morendo, lui ha perso suo figlio. Un nodo talmente complesso da non capire più a quale dei due capi ora mi trovi.

[Desire to recall it: why? Perhaps because I miss myself. It is as if I am suffering from my own death. In fact, in his eyes, the dead man is me. I have taken him, in the way he has lost me. It is as if I have lost through reflex mourning, a part of me. And therefore I mourn myself, much more than I mourn him. I look at myself through his eyes: we both died mutually. With his death, it was our couple that disappeared. We are now displaced, permanently. Therefore, speaking of him, I step to his side, turn behind him, see his cards, see myself across the card table, and discover that for his gaze I no longer exist. By dying, he has lost his son. A knot so complex that I no longer understand at which of the two ends I now stand.]

"29" 49

Grief and its continuous changing in form and through time pervade *OBIT* and this is often conveyed through a heavy use of figurative speech, just as Magrelli does in *Geologia*:

Grief—as I knew it, died many times. [...] *The grief remains but is changed by what it is covered with* [...].

"Grief" 70, my italics

Grief moves like a verb, it blossoms, and breathes; it is recognized, smelled, and voiced:

[...] I always knew that grief was something I could smell. But I didn't know that it's not actually a noun but a verb. That it moves.

"My Mother's Teeth" 18

Grief stays and there is no 'moving on' from it. Deaths inhabit *OBIT* – doctors, clocks, music, appetite, language, voicemails, yesterdays, secrets, a blue dress, memory, hands and handwriting, oxygen, America, almost everything dies and is mourned in *OBIT*; we read about unwilling deaths, unknown deaths, and the slow, painful death-in-life of an ill father. Each death is named and recorded in time and place; they happen on high-speed highways; in a hospital named Sunrise that can only bring sunsets. Language dies too as exemplified by the father's loss of speech when his "front lobe–died unpeacefully of a stroke on June 24, 2009 at Scripps Memorial Hospital in San Diego, California" ("My Father's Frontal Lobe" 5). This echoes the way in *Geologia* the father also separates from both himself and from language because of his illness:

[...] O forse quel cavo era il maglione che io gli tagliai in due, e da quel giorno non è più tornato. Ha continuato a galleggiare a lungo, come in assenza di gravità, nella stratosfera della sua malattia, isolato nel nulla, definitivamente sganciato da sé e dal linguaggio.

[Or maybe that cable was the sweater that I cut in two for him, and he has not returned since that day. He continued to float for a long time, as if in weightlessness, in the stratosphere of his illness, isolated in nothingness, permanently disengaged from himself and language.]

"19" 34–35

Poetic language can recreate a space that has been zeroed out in the temporality imposed by illness. The poetic word of mourning recreates a space not only of reflection but also of re-stitching what has been unraveled. Most importantly, form dies too:

Form–dies on August 3, 2015. [...] Grief isn't what spills out of a cracked egg. *Grief is the row of eggs waiting in the cold to lose their shape.*

"Form" 75, my italics

But that 'dead body' of form, i.e. elegy, is kept there by the use, if not exasperated use of its body parts: its figures of speech. Metaphors function as tools aimed at this spatialization. The real, understood as emptiness and absence according to Lacan, remains unspeakable. We need to recreate *another* (and

therefore poetic) linguistic space in which this emptiness can become pronounceable again. As Derrida writes in the text dedicated to Max Loreau in *The Work of Mourning*, "the discourse of mourning is more threatened than others, though it should be less, by the generality of the genre"; when confronted with the unique event of a death, silence would appear to be "the only rigorous response" (Derrida *The Work of Mourning* 172). Yet, Derrida "accepts the generality of the language of mourning and its rhetoric, as even viewing someone's death as "impossible mourning" would constitute betraying the uniqueness of that loss, as it would mean transferring that singularity onto some conceptual generality" (Bardazzi *Montale* 152; Rushworth). A similar movement is the one that generates the elegiac writing of Chang and Magrelli: when confronted with the impossibility of elegy's generic core, they do not opt for silence, for an anti-elegy, but continue to work within the elegiac space while questioning the very nature of that space. This is why we can no longer talk about anti-elegy as we could a few decades ago as Spargo did. These are not anti-elegies, they are elegies that contend that nothing is an elegy while taking the shape of one. This is how both Chang and Magrelli develop a possibility for the 'impossible elegy', in particular by a recurrent use of figures of speech – metaphors as well as similes:

Ci sarebbe un'immagine poetica: il padre anziano come una scorza. Il vecchio che si secca, corteccia che si stacca dal tronco dell'albero. Ma preferisco pensare a una tessera smagnetizzata. Vai per pagare, e non funziona più. Eppure dovrebbe essere carica: la scheda plastificata è lì, la scadenza lontana. Vero; ma non va più.

[There would be a poetic image: the old father as a bark. The old man drying up, bark peeling off the trunk of the tree. But I prefer to think of a demagnetized card. You go to pay, and it no longer works. Yet it should be charged: the laminated card is there, the expiration far away. True; but it no longer works.]

"20" 36

Both Chang and Magrelli move from a reflection on form to a reflection on what the form contains: what is mourned. As elegy itself is seen in need of changing 'shape' in its being a dead body itself, both poets bring to light, through those very poetic mechanisms that have encoded elegiac writing, such as the metaphor and the simile, their fundamental emptiness and how they come to empty the dead body that is mourned: i.e. the father, but also the father as a figure, i.e. elegy. The father is a metaphor as well as a form: form is thus the cof-

fin and what is inside the coffin. This emerges also in the way Chang portrays, through a metaphor, the father's moving towards death:

[...] If you unfold an origami swan, and flatten the paper, is the paper sad because it has seen the shape of the swan or does it spire toward flatness, a life without creases? My father is the paper. He remembers the swan but can't name it. He no longer knows the paper swan represents an animal swan. His brain is the water the animal swan once swam in, holds everything, but when thawed, all the fish disappear. Most of the words we say have something to do with fish. And when they're gone, they're gone.

"The Clock" 82–83

Or similarly, as we read in another obit:

[...] I put a fish ball in my mouth. My optimism covered the whole ball as if the fish had never died, had never been gutted and rolled into a humiliating shape. To acknowledge death is to acknowledge that we must take another shape.

"Optimism" 23

5 Time for a Conclusion

Chang's obituaries and Magrelli's prose texts develop an anti-consolatory gesture that does not aim to commemorate or idealize the dead, but rather presents conflicting and unresolved feelings towards them, enacting a work of mourning where grief is depicted in a constant movement of change and transformation, where memory comes short, and language appears to fail us. Both poets resist the Freudian work of mourning which appears to be merely culturally normative, a work of mourning that encourages one to "move on" and free the poetic subject from grief. Instead, they favor the non-poetic form of the obituaries or prose narratives over the poetic form of the elegy in such a way as to go back right to the core of how writing elegy today might be possible.

OBIT and *Geologia* do not propose a compensatory elegy, but rather a writing that exposes a continuously changing grief, and yet, a grief that remains engraved and melancholically framed in each of the obituaries of *OBIT* and the texts of *Geologia*. If grief is contained, compressed, within the space of these block-obit poems or block-prose poems in an attempt to navigate the inevitable transformations that come with it, time is represented as collapsing during the work of mourning: "Time is enlarged, blurry" ("Time" 73), we read in one obit,

and, similarly, "Time after a death changes shape, it rolls slightly downhill as if it knows to move itself forward without our help. Because after a death, there is no *moving on* despite the people waving us through the broken lights" ("Sadness" 64). Or, as we read in Magrelli: "Il figlio come un filo che deve entrare nella cruna della propria crescita. Il padre come un filo che va sfilato" [The son as a thread that must enter the eye of his own growth. The father as a thread that must be unthreaded] ("16" 29).

In his *Journal de deuil* Roland Barthes effectively conveys the relationship between narrative and mourning:

There is a time when death is an *event*, an adventure, and as such mobilizes, interests, activates, tetanizes. And then one day it is no longer an event, it is another *duration*, compressed, insignificant, not narrated, grim, without recourse: true mourning not susceptible to any narrative dialectic.

BARTHES *Mourning Diary* 50

Among other things, the suitability of the lyric for mournful writing results from one key feature of the lyric: its peculiar temporality. What Barthes refers to as non-narrated *duration* resonates with how the lyric is able to articulate mourning outside a sequential, linear time. The temporality of mourning imposes a non-linear, non-sequential, non-narrative time and the lyric offers precisely this non-narrative temporality, or what Jonathan Culler refers to as the "special now of the lyric":

The fundamental characteristic of lyric, I am arguing, is not the description and interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special 'now,' of lyric articulation. The bold wager of poetic apostrophe is that the lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the 'now' in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur. Fiction is about what happened next; lyric is about what happens now.

CULLER 226

What is worth pointing out in the case of the mournful writing of Chang and Magrelli is the way they make use of a form of writing that is traditionally porous to narrative – prose – and re-work it within the space of the lyric. From this viewpoint, other recent works engaging with and re-working the codified generic markers of elegy through the incorporation of narrative elements

might be re-considered as being expressions of contemporary elegies. This includes, but is not limited to, Max Porter's debut book *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015), also placed on the fiction shelves of bookshops just as Magrelli's *Geologia*; another significant instance is Anne Carson's *Nox* (2009) for the way its grey cardboard box materializes what has been discussed about form-content in relation to Chang's block-obits and Magrelli's block-prose texts. This might, to some extent, be a return flight to the city which inaugurated prose poetry and that, I contend, has led to the way narrative can be part of a lyric mournful writing and not a signal of it not being poetry: Paris. *Végétal* [Vegetal] (2001) by Antoine Percheron might be, from this perspective, an elegant re-working of self-elegy, a work that, again, is not read as belonging to lyric elegy, but that shows how "impossible elegies" can be written today:

Un jour, j'ai changé d'odeur. Je me suis mis à sentir le végétal. D'un coup. Moi, je n'avais rien demandé à personne. [...] Mon corps nu sent l'humus, je me vois bien tout blanc dans la glace, mais quand j'inhale, c'est de la terre brunâtre qui entre dans mes narines. Suis-je bien dans mon lit ou suis-je dans un lit de feuilles, je mange de la terre à pleines dents tous le soirs. [...] Je suis tout simplement en train de pourrir, je tombe en décomposition: c'est le printemps, ou l'automne.

[One day, my smell changed. I began to feel the green vegetal. Suddenly. I had not asked anything to anybody. [...] My naked body smells of humus, I see myself all white in the mirror, but when I inhale, it is brownish earth that enters my nostrils. Am I in my bed or am I in a bed of leaves, I eat earth to my heart's content every night. [...] I am simply rotting, I am falling into decomposition: it is spring, or autumn.].⁷

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7 Ibid., 9. My translation. *Végétal* enacts, quite literally, what Robert Pogue Harrison highlights in *The Dominion of the Dead*: "[t]o be human means above all to bury", and, as he continues, "Vico suggests as much when he reminds us that *humanitas* in Latin comes first and properly from *humando*, burying [...]. As *Homo sapiens*, we are born of our biological parents. As human beings we are born of the dead" (Harrison 11).

tions into Italian. Adele Bardazzi, “The rain is undressed from the sky”: Victoria Chang’s *OBIT*. Selected translations of Victoria Chang, *OBIT* Copper Canyon Press, 2020’, *Italian Poetry Review* 15–16 (2020–2021), 183–216 (© Società Editrice Fiorentina).

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