

# “COMIC SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS”: OBLIQUE APPROACHES TO THE ELEGIAC

Kim Fulton

## ABSTRACT

This critical essay explores indirect approaches to heavy themes in contemporary elegiac poetry. 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. I will explore how two contemporary poets, Billy Collins and William Matthews, approach loss indirectly to evade sentimentality. Specifically, I will 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. I will argue contemporary elegiac poetry succeeds in evading sentimentality without reducing its emotional stake when poets take such indirect approaches to loss. This seems to be what an effective contemporary elegiac poem does: it draws us in with its humour or light-heartedness, gets us invested or interested in a subject that is amusing or familiar or without a necessary connection to the weight of the emotion, then shifts to its more serious stake.

## “COMIC SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS”: OBLIQUE APPROACHES TO THE ELEGIAC

As John B. Vickery notes, contemporary poems of the elegiac mode differ from more traditional elegies in that they focus on loss rather than death. “Whereas renaissance, Romantic, and Victorian elegists hewed pretty sedulously to death as their prime subject, one finds a distinct tendency in the modern period to broaden the focus to include loss of all kinds as the basic stimulus and concern” (Vickery, 2006, p. 1). Vickery argues that contemporary elegiac poems tend to be oblique, indirect, and sometimes ironic and so tend to repress the impact of the loss (Vickery, 2006, p. 6).

An explanation for such a shift is a concern among poets to avoid sentimentality. One reason is suggested by poet and critic Kevin Prufer’s distaste for sentimentality, which he proposes is the enemy of emotional complexity. It can ask us to feel outrage and sadness, but not ask us to examine those emotions. “Sentimentality, it seems to me, reduces our complex responses to the world; a poem ideally ought to expand those responses” (Prufer, 2012, p. 79).

Benjamin Myers notes that an abundance of emotion is not a bad thing in itself. But sentimentality has been defined as “emotion in excess of its object” (Myers, 2016, p. 45). Myers argues sentimentality is not simply too much emotion, but an imbalance of it. “Sentimentality offers us the dubious chance to feel while bypassing the messiness of any real human engagement: not too much feeling but too thin an experience” (Myers, 2016, p. 46). He believes sentimentality permits emotional satisfaction without emotional connection. It is an agreement between artist and audience to skip straight to gratification, “which, due to the skipping, is not so gratifying after all” (Myers, 2016, p. 46).

This assertion echoes Oscar Wilde’s famous observation that emotions must be paid for. “We think we can have our emotions for nothing. We cannot. Even the finest and most self-sacrificing emotions have to be

paid for. Strangely enough, that is what makes them fine" (Wilde, 1911, p. 111).

In summary, the challenge contemporary elegiac poets take on is to engage with feeling but without veering into sentimentality, hence their "indirect" approaches. In this essay, I will explore how such indirect approaches work by looking at the way two contemporary poets evade the risk of sentimentality. Specifically, I will argue that Billy Collins and William Matthews – chosen because both are known for their use of wit and for engaging in the elegiac mode – engage with loss through the postponement of acknowledging the loss central to the poem, the use of incongruities manifesting as humour and irony, and at times by gaining the reader's complicity through metapoetics.

## POSTPONEMENT

Collins and Matthews frequently postpone feelings of loss in their poems by beginning with a subject seemingly unconnected to any serious emotions, such as the weather, or notes in the margin of a library book. They go on to use these seemingly innocent subjects as a gateway into serious ponderings.

In a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) interview, Collins touches on this shift from the casual to the serious. If the poem "starts out with a kind of – casual straightforward tone, trying to just get the reader engaged in the first stanza by not making too many demands on the reader" he hopes the poem as it goes on becomes "a little more demanding, a little more ambiguous or speculative, so that we are drifting away from the casual beginning of the poem into something a little more serious" (PBS, 2013).

An emotional shift occurs in "Marginalia", where notes discovered in the margins of texts become symbols of loss as the speaker of the poem internalises them. The speaker starts by making observations about the notes: "Sometimes the notes are ferocious, / skirmishes against the author / raging along the borders of every page," he writes, while "Other comments are more offhand, dismissive - / 'Nonsense.' 'Please!' 'HA!!'" (Collins, 2000, p. 107). These observations set the poem up as a set of light-hearted transcriptions. Collins makes use of humour, as he works to convince us that this is just a poem about scribbles in texts. "One scrawls 'Metaphor' next to a stanza of Eliot's. / Another notes the presence of 'Irony' / fifty times outside the paragraphs of A Modest Proposal" (Collins, 2000, p. 107). The humour here arises from the fact that the metaphors and irony in these pieces probably go without saying. The collaboration of these two indirect techniques – humour and postponement of loss – is disarming. We seem to be reading a light-hearted poem, taking pleasure in Collins' jokes. But a sense of loss is gradually revealed through the speaker's perspective and his internalisation of the situation. This deeper meaning first comes across when the speaker observes:

We have all seized the white perimeter as our own  
and reached for a pen if only to show  
we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;  
we pressed a thought into the wayside,  
planted an impression along the verge (Collins, 2000, p. 108).

This observation suggests a belief that these people making notes in the margin are trying to leave something of themselves: some proof that they were here, engaging with a particular text. This subtly signals an awareness of the way time passes and of how people try to transcend time and leave proof of themselves, of their significance.

Matthews postpones his expression of loss by focusing first on the mundane topic of rain in "Our Strange and Loveable Weather". The speaker shifts eventually from an ostensible focus on the weather to a deeper point about the passing of time and the ways in which we can misinterpret our pasts. The poem is about the predictable way seasons pass in Seattle (Matthews, 2004, pg. 96).

Mostly we have  
cool rain in fog, in drizzle, in mist  
and sometimes in fat, candid drops  
that lubricate our long, slow springs (Matthews, 2004, p. 96).

The speaker claims that winter, though just beginning, will soon pass and bulbs will swell – a familiar image, not unique to Seattle. The speaker is aware that his observations are not unique but are clichés of life and poetry:

Here you can fill in the bad jokes  
about weather and change, about  
mixed feelings, about time, about,  
not wanting to die. . ." (Matthews, 2004, p. 96).

The speaker then returns to clichéd observations of people clearing their gutters, turning off outside faucets, and questioning how the year has gone so fast. However, in the final lines of the poem the speaker widens the piece's significance by expressing his concern at our tendency to extend these sorts of harmless generalisations to more significant things:

Time to clear the clog of wet leaves  
from the gutters, time to turn off  
the water to the outside faucets.  
And time to think how what we know  
about our lives from watching this  
is true enough to live them by,  
though anyplace lies about its weather,  
just as we lie about our childhoods,  
and for the same reason: we can't  
say surely what we've undergone,  
and need to know and need to know (Matthews, 2004, p. 97).

The speaker suggests that it is not just the weather we make generalisations about; we also generalise when we make seemingly profound observations about our lives. We need to understand our pasts in order to move forwards, but we lie to ourselves about them. While it starts as a poem praising Seattle's weather and its predictable changes of seasons, then, the poem goes on to show that many of the generalisations we make about our lives are unreliable. A feeling of loss comes with this new understanding that our pasts may not have occurred exactly as we recall.

## **INCONGRUITY – HUMOUR AND IRONY**

Poems that use humour to achieve their emotional ends work in a similar way to those which postpone loss. Both approaches achieve their effects through an emotional shift. In the poems that postpone loss, this shift occurs gradually as the piece progresses. In humorous poems, it comes in the way of more sudden cognitive shifts driven by 'incongruities'. The dominant theory of humour in philosophy and psychology is founded on the notion of 'incongruity', John Morreall notes. "The core meaning of 'incongruity' in standard incongruity theories is that some-thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations" (Morreall, 2009, p. 11).

Kevin Young argues that "Collins gains his readers' trust through humour; it's a way of descending the perch of authorial authority and sitting down next to you" (Young, 2016, p. 108). Devotees may come for his jokes, he says, but they stay for the weightier asides. Collins explained his use of humour in an Aspen Words interview. He says if he writes a poem with humour in it, "I'm probably trying to make them laugh to disarm them. Because humour is a strategy, not an end in itself" (Aspen Words, 2014). What I will suggest

is that Collins uses incongruity in his poems to create the humour that allows him to evade sentimentality even while expressing a feeling of loss.

In "The Sandhill Cranes of Nebraska", the speaker presents a series of natural spectacles he has missed by being at the wrong place at the wrong time: the sandhill cranes in Nebraska, the azalea bloom in Georgia, the autumn foliage in Vermont (Collins, 2013, p. 173). The humour in this poem arises from a cognitive shift. We assume the speaker will be disappointed at missing these events, but he seems not to mind. This ambivalence comes across when the speaker recounts that he "nodded and put on a look of mild disappointment" when told what he had missed (Collins, 2013, p. 173). The speaker avoids sentimentality by refusing a familiar lament about the ephemerality of nature. This unexpected image of a poet feigning interest in something he ought to be moved by gains its humour by turning on the incongruity between what we expect and what we get from his response. But if he gently mocks the importance of these specific spectacles, downplaying his missing of them, he nevertheless finds something poignant about having done so. In the final stanza, he describes himself drinking coffee in a motel lobby. He says the peak of the foliage of Vermont is:

a phenomenon that occurs, like the others,  
around the same time every year when I am apparently off  
in another state, stuck in a motel lobby  
with the local paper and a styrofoam cup of coffee  
busily missing God knows what (Collins, 2013, p. 173).

This observation that he is "missing God knows what" brings back the humorous image of a poet unfazed by loss. The image is even more unexpected, and hence funnier, this time around as we expect some sentimentality, or at least seriousness, from the final line of a poem. This image of the speaker in a motel lobby is comedic also in that it contrasts sharply with the natural images. At first, the scene seems less significant than those of natural beauty. Despite this, it indirectly hints at a larger loss, the passing of time. He will never be in that motel lobby, drinking from that disposable coffee cup, reading that day's paper again. The disposable cup and the daily paper are images of transience, like the natural scenes, but in this case, they will not return.

Matthews uses humour derived from incongruity to deflect from the tragedy at hand in "The Waste Carpet", a lengthy poem about an ecological apocalypse. In the poem, he imagines a "grotesque parody of the primeval muck" oozing out over America (Matthews, 2004, p. 49). At times, his humour works through exaggeration. He claims, for example, that the United States had hoped it would get off easy in this impending disaster, losing only California which would "crumble into the ocean / like Parmesan" (Matthews, 2004, p. 52). It is a funny image in playing on much of the country's mixed responses to the State of California, a point he presses with a humorous tribute to California:

We were ready with elegies:  
O California, sportswear  
& defense contracts, gases that induce deference,  
high school girls with their own cars,  
we wanted to love you  
without pain (Matthews, 2004, p. 52).

But while we might laugh at this feigned pity regarding an unrealistic loss, not all losses in the poem are this unlikely. Throughout the poem, the speaker hints at subtler but more real losses. The speaker recounts places he grew up and imagines them seething:

First we lived on Glade Street, then  
on Richwood Ave. I swear it.  
And now all Cincinnati –

the hills above the river,  
the lawn that sloped toward Richwood Ave.  
like a valley of pleasant uncles,  
the sultry river musk that slid  
its compromising note  
through my bedroom window –  
all Cincinnati seethes (Matthews, 2004, p. 51).

We are unlikely to see a literal ooze covering the country or the loss of the entire State of California, but it is clear that the speaker sees the world and its landscapes changing for the worse. His extreme and humorous observations were perhaps a metaphor for, or a satirical take on, the true loss occurring.

Irony is another approach poets use to evade excessive emotion through incongruity. While the approach is similar to humour technically, it achieves its ends in a different way. Irony allows poets to access emotions indirectly by requiring their readers to uncover their real meaning through careful attention.

Collins uses irony, for instance, to suggest indirectly a sense of loss and loneliness in "Old Man Eating Alone in a Chinese Restaurant". This irony suggests a speaker's refusal to acknowledge his true emotions. The piece is unsentimental in part because of its mundane setting - the speaker is reminiscing not about a beautiful natural landscape but about his local Chinese restaurant in which he eats alone (Collins, 2013, p. 121). In previous years, he observes, he would have felt sorry for someone in his position. When he was young, he perceived an old man eating in the restaurant as someone to pity "the poor bastard, not a friend in the world / and with only a book for a companion" (Collins, 2013, p. 121). The speaker claims that perception would have been "all wrong" and suggests it has changed as he has become the old man. He appreciates his book, the light falling through the windows and the soft brown hair of the waitress. There are, however, hints that what the speaker says is not what he means: "So glad I waited all these decades / to record how hot and sour the hot and sour soup is" (Collins, 2013, p. 121). It is difficult to take seriously his suggestions that he is glad he waited decades to record such a mundane experience; this in-turn, casts doubt on the contentment with ageing that he has expressed. This would seem to invite us to re-think the other assertions. Perhaps the speaker is lonely and is trying to kid himself that he is not the "poor bastard" he would have pitied years earlier. This loss in the poem comes across obliquely through our understanding of the speaker's irony. We are invited to pity him not just for his lonely situation but also for his failure to be initially honest about his feelings of loneliness.

## **METAPOETICS**

Metapoetics differs from the other indirect approaches discussed in its technical features. Yet it shares with them what Matthew J. Marr would call an underlying "comic self-consciousness", which liberates poetry from its traditional seriousness and allows for more surprising approaches to emotion (Marr, 2003, p. 422). Marr argues that modern verse is tied to a legacy of vocational seriousness which has a long history in the genre "Beginning in the nineteenth century, poetry is locked in a sort of symbiotic relationship with somberness" (Marr, 2003, p. 422). In recent years, however, the institutionalisation of this solemnity of purpose has been challenged by the forces of humour. "Indeed, a prominent though understudied aspect of literary postmodernism is its drive to defame and topple the burden of vocational seriousness cultivated by the modernists" (Marr, 2003, p. 423). One way of carrying this out, he argues, is through "a playfully irreverent and self-derisive strain of metapoetic humor". Marr describes this metapoetic humour as "a comic self-consciousness" (Marr, 2003, p. 423).

Collins uses metapoetry in "Lines Composed Over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey" to acknowledge the familiarity of the elegiac sentiment he expresses. In doing so he works to set himself apart from all who have expressed the sentiment before in familiar and perhaps seemingly insincere ways. He builds complicity with his reader by presenting himself as somebody who does not take his vocation too

seriously (Collins, 2000, p. 127). Collins playfully draws attention to the poem as a poem to acknowledge the shortfalls of poetry and thus gain the reader's trust. First, Collins pokes fun at the tendency of poets to lament the way places change over time.

I was here before, a long time ago,  
and now I am here again  
is an observation that occurs in poetry  
as frequently as rain occurs in life (Collins, 2000, p. 127).

In his title, Collins refers to the famous William Wordsworth poem "Lines Written a few Miles Above Tintern Abbey", which deals with a speaker who revisits a site five years after his last stay and reflects on the changes in his surroundings and himself.

Collins' poem addresses the way poets often reflect on changes in this way: "Something is always missing- / swans, a glint on the surface of a lake, / some minor but essential touch" (Collins, 2000, p. 127). In mocking the lack of originality among poets lamenting lost time, Collins nevertheless draws attention to the universality of that sentiment. The poem suggests Wordsworth felt it two hundred years ago and Collins feels it now, and many poets and readers have felt it in between. Through what Marr would call his "comic self-consciousness", Collins laments a loss larger than that of a single location such as Tintern Abbey, or the dark Bavarian forest that the poets who he mocks lamented. Collins' speaker is lamenting a more collective, more universal loss - the passing of time itself.

Matthews uses metapoetics to express a surprising loss in the poem "Search Party" – a loss of faith among readers in the sincerity of art. The stake at the surface of the poem is a child's life- the poem is about a group of parents searching for a lost child (Matthews, 2004, p. 3). The piece is metapoetic in that there is a play between the text as writing and the text as commentary on that writing. Matthews accuses the reader of scepticism by addressing us in the poem: "Reader, by now you must be sure / you know just where we are, / deep in some symbolic woods" (Matthews, 2004, p. 3). He assures us that is not the case, as though believing the poem was merely art would reduce the stake somehow. The speaker claims the search is not symbolic and argues that a child's life was in fact at stake:

"You're wrong, though it's  
an intelligent mistake.  
There was a real lost child.  
I don't want to swaddle it  
in metaphor (Matthews, 2004, p. 3).

The true loss in the poem derives from his need to persuade us. Behind his self-awareness is a fear that the reader doesn't believe in the poem's sincerity. The speaker builds trust with the reader through these direct addresses by acknowledging the reader's intelligence manifested as cynicism.

Toward the end of the poem, he accuses us of not being as indifferent as we might suppose.

You've read this far, you might as well  
have been there too. Your eyes accuse  
me of false chase. Come off it,  
you're the one who thought it wouldn't  
matter what we found (Matthews, 2004, p. 4).

In his closing lines he expresses confidence in the job he's done relaying this tale in a manner his reader will care about:

Though we came with lights

and tongues thick in our heads,  
the issue was a human life.  
The child was still  
alive. Admit you're glad (Matthews, 2004, p. 4).

Perhaps he is also expressing confidence in his reader, who has, after all, stayed with him for the entirety of the poem. He leaves his reader hanging for a moment ending the second to last line with the word "still". The reader might worry that "still" refers to the child being dead. The word takes on a second meaning, however, moving from adjective to adverb in the final line, when the speaker reveals the child was "still / alive". It was a poetic trick that had us worried. There is, then, some hope in the ability of poetry to move us. When the speaker asks the reader to admit they were glad, he suggests they are being dishonest in their indifference. The poem takes an indirect route to a loss in that it repeatedly jumps away from the lost child, which is only the ostensible, potential loss at stake in the poem. The metapoetic technique, however, allows it to move toward the real, arguably greater loss: our perceived loss of faith in the ability of poetry to engage in feeling.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary elegiac poetry succeeds in evading sentimentality without reducing its emotional stake when poets take an indirect approach to loss. Collins' and Matthews' elegiac pieces show that this bypass of sentimentality can be achieved through postponement of loss as well as through incongruity manifesting as humour and its subspecies irony. Poets can also achieve this result by using metapoetics to build complicity with a reader. These two poets postpone loss by beginning with a quotidian topic unencumbered with emotional connotations and so surprise us with the true loss at the centre of the poem. They use the incongruity of humour to shock the reader with the loss, having set up a casual and comic scene. They use irony – a distance in opposition to sentiment – to imply loss. Both poets at times use metapoetics to acknowledge the reader's scepticism about poetry's reliability and thus build complicity from a reader that is necessary to present a loss that is otherwise too familiar.

---

Kim Fulton is the Content and Communications Lead at Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in literary journals in New Zealand and overseas including Landfall, Mimicry, Poetry New Zealand, Hue and Cry, JAAM, takahē, and The Pangolin Review. In 2020, she published her first book of poems, *I kind of thought the alpacas were a metaphor until we got there*. Kim holds a Master of Creative Writing, a Bachelor of Art majoring in English literature, a Bachelor of Science majoring in ecology, and a National Diploma in Journalism.

## REFERENCES

- 01 Aspen Words. (2014). *The Art of Humor. Aspen Summer Words 2014 Panel Featuring: Billy Collins and Melissa Bank*. [www.aspenwords.org/shared-words/transcripts/the-art-of-humor/](http://www.aspenwords.org/shared-words/transcripts/the-art-of-humor/)
- 02 Collins, B. (2000). *Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes*. Picador.
- 03 Collins, B. (2013). *Aimless Love New and Selected Poems*. Picador.
- 04 Marr, M. J. (2003). Comic Self-Derision as a Vacation from Solemnity in the Postmodern Metapoetry of Roger Wolfe. *University of Pennsylvania Press*, ano 56, no. 2, December 2003, pp. 421- 432.
- 05 Matthews, W. (2004). *Search Party Collected Poems of William Matthews*. Houghton Mifflin.
- 06 Morreall, J. (2009). *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- 07 Myers, B. (2016). The Sentimentality Trap: Benjamin Myers argues for realism in Poetry. *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, issue 267, November 2016, pp. 45- 49.

- 08 Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). (2013, October 28). *Poet Billy Collins discusses humour, authenticity and 'Aimless Love'*. [www.pbs.org/newshour/amp/show/entertainment-july-dec13-collins\\_10-29](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/amp/show/entertainment-july-dec13-collins_10-29)
- 09 Pruffer, K. Sentimentality, The Enemy? *Pleiades*, vol. 32, issue 1, 2012, pp. 77-80.
- 10 Vickery, J. B. (2006). *The Modern Elegiac Temper*. United States of America: Louisiana State UP.
- 11 Wilde, O. (1911). *De Profundis*. The Knickerbocker Press.
- 12 Young, K. (2016). The People's Poet. O, *The Oprah Magazine*, November 2016, pp. 108.