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An Encounter with the Dead and a Fantasy of Communication: Intersubjectivity of Elegiac Poetry

In his essay, “Autobiography as a De-facement,” Paul de Man comments on the elegiac prosopopeia as follows: “the latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia, namely that by making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (1979: 928). In this view, by becoming a mouthpiece for the dead, the living elegist enters the world of death. This idea has formed the basis for our current theorization of elegy as a point of intersection between the dead and the living, a medium of communication between the two.

This encounter between the dead and the living is, however, more a fantasy than an actual communication. As Helen Vendler once remarked on Elizabeth Bishop’s elegy, “First Death in Nova Scotia,” an elegy “conspires in a fantasy of communication still possible” between the living and the dead (1985: 86). It is a familiar enough practice that when asked, “if you could talk to three famous people of your choice, who would you pick?” we often include some names of the deceased. The subjunctive and optative mood of the question enables an expression of an impossible wish.

This paper examines such optative notions of encounter and intersubjectivity in the context of elegiac literature where elegy is characterized as one form of an impossible encounter that operates as a fantastical imperative of communication. To this end, the paper largely focuses on Theodore Roethke’s “Elegy for Jane” as a case study, since the poem makes explicit this element of “fantasy” in elegiac communication. Although popularly interpreted as an elegy of Catullian love, Roethke’s “Elegy for Jane” can most profitably be read as a poem that mourns for someone whom the poet hardly knew but nevertheless wishes he had known. In the poem, the wish manifests itself as a fantasy of or desire for communication. It is precisely through this desire for communication that the poet creates the deceased and, in the end, encounters her. Based on this reading of the poem, this paper addresses the questions of what a “fantasy of communication” does for us, and how its peculiar intersubjective encounter affects the sensibilities and subjectivities of the living.

“Elegy for Jane” differs from conventional elegies in that the poem mourns the loss of someone the speaker hardly knew. While it is widely known that the occasion of this elegy is the death of one of Roethke’s students, Jane Bannick, his biographer claims that Roethke “had not known her” well, since she was in his class “for only one quarter” (Seager 1991: 193). Literary critics

have long debated whether this poem expresses universal grief or a personal one. Jay Parini universalizes the poem's grief, contending that the "girl's death is rather the occasion for a poem calling up a certain emotional state" and that "the poet's feelings of grief and pity transcend the occasion" (1979: 138). Lynn Ross-Bryant individualizes the occasion by chiming in with a characterization of the loss as one "expressed in terms of a uniquely human relationship" and underscoring "his feelings for her and his sense of loss at her death" (1981: 75). Kenneth Burke champions the poem as an instance of Roethke's attempt at "personalization," a "greater *individualizing* of human relations" (1988: 36). Jeffrey Meyers also interprets the poem as an expression of "the traditional themes of the genre by contrasting the age of the poet to the youth of the dead girl, emphasizing the injustice of death and suggesting a love motif—which goes back to Catullus" (1985: 139). In *100 American Poems of the 20th Century*, the poem is introduced as "a pure and delicate emotional appreciation of an older man for a young girl" (Perrine and Reid 1966: 205). And an anthology of elegies, *Inventions of Farewell* classifies the poem as a type of friendship elegy by placing it in the section entitled "Mourning the Deaths of Friends" (Gilbert 2001: 288).

While the previous scholarship seems curiously neglectful of the biographer's claim that the poet did not know the student well, the claim is worth heeding. Although elegies are historically written for the beloved or some other important figures—whether it is Milton's *Lycidas* (1638) or Whitman's "When Lilac Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865)—Roethke's elegy is purportedly for someone the poet hardly knew. Thus, the optative of this elegy is less of an impossible desire to retrieve a lost intersection than it is a desire, albeit similarly impossible, to forge a new relation with someone the poet hardly knew but wishes he knew, and wishes to speak with—however belated the wish may be.

A closer examination of the poem corroborates this claim. The poem features a highly metaphorical language, and in many ways the descriptions draw rather heavily on stereotypes; they are not concrete or detailed enough to constitute an actual remembrance. The shiftiness and indeterminacy in the description of the deceased seem indicative of the fact that the poet did not know the deceased, and had to create her through the language of traditional elegies. That is to say, the excess of poetic language reveals the latent loss of loss in that the poet, having lost the opportunity to know the deceased well enough to be able to lament her loss, must resort to pastoral poeticisms to fill the void. The poem's description of the deceased proceeds as follows:

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;
And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;
And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,
And she balanced in the delight of her thought,
A wren, happy, tail into the wind,
Her song trembling the twigs and branches.
The shade sang with her;

The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing;
And the mold sang in the bleached valleys under the rose. (Roethke 1975: 98, lines 1-9)

This stanza reveals a heavily figurative portrayal of the student, whose “neckcurls” are like “tendrils,” whose “quick look” is like a “pickerel smile.” She is then likened to a “wren,” which, later in the poem, turns into a “sparrow” that waits like a “fern” (98, lines 14-15), which is again later transformed into a “pigeon” (98, line 19). On one level, the abundance of metaphors signals an attempt to revive the dead through poetic language. Broadly speaking, the function of metaphor is to revitalize language; language is an approximation that expresses one thing by using something else as its representation, and metaphor, through its arbitrary association, aims to expand human capacity to associate an object with a new representation, to imbue the object with a new meaning—a new life. Seen in this regard, the discernibly lavish use of metaphors in this stanza, the vehicles of which are all living things, mimics the speaker’s effort to resuscitate the dead, the metaphorical tenor, by finding new representations for her. The word “metaphor” itself etymologically implies motion (*phora*) that is also change (*meta*): a movement toward change, a new meaning—a new life (Bertocci 1964: 88).

While this excess of metaphors can be interpreted as an act of poetic beautification, it also points to a possibility that the poet simply did not know the student well as a person. It suggests the poet had to construct a collage from available bits of information and from literary traditions of pastoral poeticism. One may liken this experience to one of conducting a phone interview with someone we have never seen: in the absence of the image of the actual face of the interviewee, we construct an image of him or her through the available information.

In other words, the effect of this protean succession of metaphors in the speaker’s characterization of the deceased is the blurring of the poem’s imagery, and such haziness underscores the poem’s failure to clarify the image of the dead. The poem’s incantatory anaphoric structure, constituted by insistent metaphors and stylistic repetitions that start the lines with the word “And,” also confirms this failure of signification by signaling the speaker’s compulsion to repeat the same thing because the previous expressions did not suffice. In short, the poem’s metaphorical language reveals two divergent impulses in this first stanza: an attempt to revive the dead through successive metaphors and a confirmation of the essential failure of such attempt. Barbara Johnson points out that the defect of languages resides in the fact that it is just as impossible to say the same thing as to say something different (1985: 270); saying the exact same thing with two different representations is a linguistic impossibility. In metaphor, there is always a gap between the tenor and the vehicle. No vehicle represents exactly the same thing as the tenor. The inadequacy of language as a system of approximate representation leads to an unending sequence of expressive attempts, proliferating repetitions of failed expressions that simultaneously generate both similarities and differences. This exposes the language as a

kind of homunculus, a diminutive version of the thing that falls short of the thing itself.¹ In the case of Roethke's elegy, the repetitive language is an indication that the poem fails to capture the deceased.

Even the attempts to include personal, anecdotal details fail. In the second stanza, Roethke writes as follows:

Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth,
Even a father could not find her:
Scraping her cheek against straw;
Stirring the clearest water. (98, lines 10-13)

The past tense of "when she was sad"—as opposed to some sort of subjunctive mood—suggests the poem's effort either to construct an actual anecdote, or to claim that this anecdote in fact did take place sometime in the past. But the details do not cooperate. For instance, what does it mean, in concrete terms, to "cast herself down into such a pure depth"? If it is an actual anecdote, the vague abstraction of "pure depth" could be substituted with a more substantive personal detail. Also, why is it "a" father and not "her" father? What is the purpose of making the father generic? And "stirring the clearest water" of where? The poem cannot help but be held back to the metaphoric language even when it tries to speak of concrete details. The lack of substantiality—a stark contrast to, say, elegies like Yeats's "Easter, 1916"—is another sign that this poem is more an attempt to construct an unknown person than a mourning for a beloved that the poet-speaker knew well.

In the absence of the real, the poem enters the realm of fantasy. Although the notion of a loss of an object presupposes the prior association with that object, in the case of this elegy, the object had already been lost prior to any prospect of such association. Then, the elegy must first construct the lost object in its fantasy in order to forge a relationship with that object. The final stanza of the poem can be read as an admission of such fantasy of communication:

If only I could nudge you from this sleep,
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
I, with no rights in this matter,
Neither father nor lover. (98, lines 18-22)²

¹ Various literature on alchemy describes how an attempt to revive a human being through alchemy results in a creation of a false human being, called a "homunculus," almost as though to suggest that an elegy's linguistic reconstruction of the dead is itself a kind of alchemy that is bound to fail.

² This stanza appears to be at the root of the aforementioned critics' debate over whether to interpret this poem as an expression of universal grief or of personal love and lament: some read it as the poet being neither father nor lover but claiming to be a little of each, in effect becoming a universal mourner

The subjunctive of “If only I could nudge you from this sleep” suggests that the mood of this stanza is optative. By introducing the traditional figures of personal proximity—father, lover—as negations, the stanza creates a clash between the figures of speech and the content of the speech. Here, the poet-speaker insistently uses the possessive for the lost object, such as “My maimed darling,” “my skittery pigeon,” “my love,” starting in the third stanza with “My sparrow,” in a deliberate shift from the initial use of indefinite articles like “a wren.” But then he abnegates any claims of “rights” to her, being neither a father nor a lover. This contradiction is born of the vexation that he does not know the deceased, but that he wishes he knew her well enough to be able to write her a genuine, heartfelt elegy. This poem is, in a way, a makeshift. It is a poem of wish, not of retrieving a lost someone, but of creating a new someone who had not previously existed meaningfully for the poet-speaker.

From the discordance of these lines, we sense that the speaker struggles to express his thoughts and fails; the words elude the thoughts, and thoughts elude the contemplative efforts to capture them. The sensation is almost like a writer’s block—it is the inadequacy of the language, the unspeakable, or the unsayable that lurks within and eludes us. The highly contradictory language becomes, in a sense, an expedience to grope blindly through the incomprehension of this ungrievable loss—namely, a loss of someone who was in effect absent from the poet-speaker’s life to begin with. Tropes such as metaphors, pastoral convention, or the Catullian motif of love-grief, all fail to capture what the poet-speaker feels compelled to express. The result is a shifty speech of cognitive dissonance.

Such discordance signals the difficulty of elegiac expression; with mixed, conflicting metaphors, placed as appositions that repeat and revise one another, Roethke’s poem reveals the poet-speaker’s continuous, failing attempts to find that expression. But precisely by displaying this failure, the final stanza communicates not so much by sense but rather by sound and mood. In “Elegy for Jane,” the organizing principle of its unmetrical verse is mostly line length. Here, the deliberate, successive shortening of the closing lines creates a kind of decrescendo, a gradual descent into silence, against which this very poem exists to resist. The rhythm of the poem simulates the mood.³ Trochees dominate the closing couplet, ending with a despondent tone of

(Blessing 1972: 174); others see it as an ambiguous romantic-paternal feeling that “many teachers would feel” toward an intelligent and handsome student, and justify “the words of... love” by remarking on Jane Bannick’s striking resemblance to Beatrice O’Connel whom Roethke had married (Meyers 1985: 140); and still others suggest the presence of another female student, Lois Lamb, whom Roethke had known well, as the inspiration of the poem (Seager 1991: 193). Since the biographical debate is inconclusive, the approach of this present paper is to focus on the critical rhetorical contradiction that occurs in the stanza—the discrepancy between the figure and content of the speech. Also, such critical bafflement in locating the poet-speaker’s sorrow—is this poetic grief a universal one, or is it a love for the student?—further underscores the uncertain location of this poem’s feeling of loss, further supporting this paper’s claim that this elegy’s focus is on constructing a hardly known person.

³ Roethke himself remarks on this technique of “successive shortening of the line length” as an effect he has “become inordinately fond of.” Roethke quotes D.H. Lawrence as saying, “It all depends on the

the unaccented feminine rhyme—a cadence of fall, which simultaneously avoids the emphatic conclusiveness of a strong-accented rhyme. The fantasy of communication in this poem stands precisely to resist silence. However inadequate it may be, fantasy is still preferable to silence.

Seen in this light, “Elegy for Jane” presents itself not so much as a smaller claim of reduced circumstances, a mere formalistic elegy, a lament for an attractive student, or a vague universal grief, but rather as an attempt to speak of a sorrow of which one does not have the language to speak—an endeavor in which the poet-speaker makes an utterance in the face of silence, by employing all conceivable resources of his language, and by betraying the failures of them all. If this poem tells us anything, it is that the poem creates, through those failures, a language to speak of the thing for which we previously did not know how. Fantasy, in other words, is a means of creating a language and giving shape to emotions or thoughts of connection that had not previously existed. And this fanciful encounter with the imagined or constructed dead forges a type of intersubjectivity that enables the elegist to speak with himself in the disguise of the dead. The name, Jane, is an archetypal female name, as in “Jane Doe,” a name given to someone unidentified or unidentifiable; Roethke’s purposeful exclusion of the surname from this poem associatively turns this elegy into an act of giving a name to the unknown or unspeakable.⁴ In this elegy—occasioned by someone the poet-speaker did not know, did not have, and can only describe figuratively, as a montage—the poet-speaker constructs the dead, gives it a provisional identity, and sustains the work of what can be oxymoronically described as a “self-dialogue”: a dialogue between the self and the other that the self imaginatively creates.

The elegist constructing the dead and speaking with them is a form of a dialogue: one speaks to the other that resides within oneself, by enacting a self-split similar to what Paul de Man calls *dedoublement*.⁵ Because of this imaginative dialogue, the elegy becomes consoling, even if it may essentially be the same thing as a self speaking to oneself. Still, one may question: what is the point of a self speaking to oneself? There are two answers to this question. First, Carolyn Forché, when asked if her poetry of witness is capitalizing on the plight of the other people and hence unethical, answered that, yes, but even if it may be exploitative, it is the only thing we

pause, the natural pause,” which he interprets to mean “the breath unit, the language that is natural to the immediate thing, the particular emotion” (2001: 72). In other words, Roethke views this technique as a method of mimicking one’s emotion by varying line lengths.

⁴ Especially considering that, conventionally speaking, it is not unusual—as witnessed in examples like John Dryden’s “To The Pious Memory of the Accomplished Young Lady Mrs. Anne Killigrew”—for an elegist to use both the first and last names of the deceased when the elegy is specifically about an individual.

⁵ In “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” de Man defines “*dedoublement*” as one’s capacity to observe oneself as if it were an other, without necessarily effecting a synthesis of the self or unifying the self (1983: 187-228). In the case of the present Roethke elegy, the self-split is enacted by one’s capacity to construct the “other” within oneself through one’s imagination of the other—a process one makes possible by regarding one’s own imaginative construction as an “other” and by suspending one’s awareness that this “other” is merely one’s own creation.

have (2005). While poetry of witness may in some instances be unethical and exploitative, we would not even know these people's suffering without it. Jacques Derrida, in his book *The Work of Mourning*, observes that the dead people are in some ways already lost to us before their actual death, in that there is always a gap in any encounter, communication, or intersection between ourselves and the other (2001: 34); therefore, creation or construction of them really is the only thing we have, whether we do or do not know the deceased well. Even if a fantasy or self-dialogue may not be an optimal form of communication, that is essentially the only thing left to us.

Secondly, and more importantly, we maintain and preserve a pretense of intersubjectivity and an illusion of communication by creating a homunculus of another person within our own psyche: however fantastical it is, and regardless of the fact that it essentially amounts to a monologue, such intersection sustains the communication, and enables one to continue speaking. By continuing to make us speak, the fantasy of communication becomes our subterfuge, whether against silence or against dejection. "Elegy for Jane" stands for us as a reminder of the affirmation of such fantasy. Whether the object is a lost beloved, such as in the conventional elegy, or a dead near-stranger, such as in "Elegy for Jane," the fantasy of communication allows for a forgery of a type of intersubjectivity—albeit within one's own psyche—and it acts as a makeshift bridge toward an encounter that could not otherwise take place.

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