THE 2012 HOEFER PRIZES
FOR EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

In Recognition of Writing Achievement in the
Undergraduate Field of Study

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
MAY 16, 2012
The Performance of Mourning: Elegiac Conventions in Merrill’s “Farewell Performance”

SANDY NADER

English 160
*Poetry and Poetics*

CHRISTOPHER ROVEE
ENGLISH
The Performance of Mourning: Elegiac Conventions in Merrill’s “Farewell Performance”

A famous critic of elegy once suggested that “elegy is structured like the unconscious” for the way that it mimics the movement of our natural grieving process from despair to consolation (Kennedy 52). Claiming that elegy is somehow natural for us, however, contradicts the fact that the form teems with strictures and conventions that render it an inherently performative endeavor. To a certain extent, the performative nature of elegy belies the sincerity of poem’s grief—how can a truly bereaved poet still carefully construct an elegy that follows all the rules? In his elegy “Farwell Performance” for AIDS victim David Kalstone, James Merrill addresses the problematic issue of elegy as performance. Enclosing a traditional elegiac scene within the frame of a dance performance, Merrill draws inescapable parallels between artifice and mourning rituals. The texture of the poem reinforces Merrill’s thematic emphasis on intentionality in art, with his conscientious use of punctuation, enjambment and line length reminding us that what we are reading is hardly natural. By framing a traditional elegiac farewell scene within a scene of performative diversion, Merrill portrays our rituals around death, including elegy, as fraught ways to express grief that should be recognized and confronted as forms of art.

By beginning and concluding his elegy with a dance performance, Merrill draws clear parallels between the elements of escapism and artificiality inherent in both performances and mourning rituals. The very first line reminds us that art is often taken to be palliative: “Art. It cures affliction” (li. 1). This seemingly simple statement, however, is laden with ambiguity. In one sense, “affliction” could refer to the pain of grief that eats away at the mourners like a disease, while in another it could literally refer to AIDS and the tradition of creating art to raise awareness for a cure. Either way, it
seems that Merrill calls both senses of the word into question by presenting the statement so baldly as a fact; we should know better than to feel comfortable with taking either meaning at face value. As the description of the performance’s opening lulls us into a pleasant “sea change” with prancing iambs—“as lights go down and/Maestro lifts his wand” (li. 1-2)—we might again experience discomfort with this brilliant opening number: the sea change starts within the audience, separate from the reality that surrounds them (li. 3). Beginning with the word “alembics” that conjures images of transformation, the subsequent shift in diction compounds our sense that some sort of self-deception is occurring among the audience members. Though we may not fully realize it yet, the dancers are already enacting the illusory alchemy of elegy, which falsely claims the ability to transmute the “common lot” of death into the “pure, brief gold” of resurrection (li. 4-5). The speaker’s account of the finale confirms our suspicion that this performance is more of a numbing agent than a cure. The repetition of the bravos calling the dancers “back, again back” strikes us as being more ritualistic than genuinely appreciative, while the description of the dancers as "soldered" and "leotarded" renders them more like stilted creations than flesh-and-blood humans (li. 6-7). Like elegies that have come before it, this performance has a strained quality that draws attention to its primary function for the audience—to alter their consciousness in a way that numbs them to the true pain of loss.

Merrill enhances the artful quality of this opening stanza with carefully controlled line lengths and meter, techniques that persist throughout the poem as the parallels between mourning rituals and performance become starker. Starting from the opening scene, periods communicate finality and mark the endpoints of certain rituals, while
enjambed lines indicate the emotional "sea change" of trying to process and normalize death through these rituals. Accordingly, the enjambment at the end of the first stanza sweeps us up in the movement of the performance, while the period at the close of the second stanza reiterates the harsh closing of the ritual—“it’s over” (li. 8). Merrill similarly creates recognizable patterns for the line length and rhythm of the entire poem. While the poem’s metrical feet may vary in length anywhere from dimeter to pentameter or even an irregular number of beats, the consistent shape of each stanza is characterized by expansive line lengths followed by a severely contracted last line. No matter where the stanza seems to go at first, Merrill reins in the line tightly at the end; this is a poetic voice that is well in control of his feelings, the maestro directing the performance that is the elegy itself. Like the leotards stretched over the dancers’ taut muscles, this tight metrical control gives the poem a structured quality that never lets us forget that we are engaging with a form of art.

Continuing the use of these formal techniques, the interlude of the farewell ceremony from stanzas three to seven introduces us to a typical elegiac scene that is rife with elegiac conventions. The first of these conventions is a secluded location far removed from everyday life, where the speaker and another person scatter the ashes of Kalstone, the dead friend. That the speaker is with someone else suggests a compressed version of the mourning procession included in many elegies, while the maritime setting alludes to one of the most seminal elegies of all time, Milton’s <i>Lycidas</i>. However, rather than settling comfortably into the elegiac tradition, the strong performative atmosphere of the scene puts forth a critique of these elegiac conventions. To begin, the boat’s rocking reminds us of the “sea change” of the opening performance, as the enjambment at the end of each stanza
mimics this unease and lets us know we are back in the motion of the ritual again. Next, in a
departure from tradition, the scene fails to create the separation between life and death that
we would see in a conventional elegy like *Lycidas*. The direct address of "you are gone" (li. 9) pulls the dead into the world of the living with such frankness that Kalstone’s presence never leaves the poem again. The speaker continues on to juxtapose the vitality of
Kalstone’s life with the paltriness of his remains in a series of uncanny descriptions of his ashes—“a mortal gravel,” the "grayly glimmering sublimate,” and “the gruel of selfhood” (li.11, 12, 21). The repetition of glottal stops with the alliterated “g” sound forces us to
choke up every time we speak the words that mercilessly pair the lifeless matter with the
departed spirit. Ultimately, the focus on the textural qualities of Kalstone’s ashes draws
attention to the fact that the body is both present and not present, a woefully inadequate substitute for the man. The dichotomy between the dead up above and the living down below is not as clean as Milton would have us believe.

This broken dichotomy suggests that the ceremony of scattering ashes has little
connection with the reality of loss, which seldom allows those left behind to draw such
sharp divisions between the dead and the living. Instead, the death rite amounts to a
performance that offers only partial consolation, and parallels the creation of elegies as
similarly performative acts that do not reflect the actual way humans experience grief. To
further communicate this idea, Merrill revises the moment in *Lycidas* when Lycidas is “sunk
low, but mounted high” (*Lycidas*, li. 172) when the speaker describes Kalstone’s ashes
sinking low but only empty applause resounding in the sky above. The moment marks the
beginning of a surreal transition back into the present that blurs the boundaries between the
performance at which the speaker currently sits and the past memory of the funeral scene.
Gulls clap for the farewell performance just as the audience did at the show, and beams from the sun are house lights that freeze the scene into a caricature of comfort: “True colors, the sun-warm hand to cover my wet one…” (li. 27-28). Yet we are now aware that we cannot trust in this comfort. Comparisons like the one between sunlight and “house lights” resituate the pastoral elegiac scene into the artificial world of the stage, in which moments are carefully constructed to have an effect on the willing audience (li. 24). Although the speaker tells us that the scene is “set for good,” the ellipsis at the end of stanza seven suggests that the ordeal of grief is not over (li. 27).

An answer to this moment of anticipatory pause, the opening line of the eighth stanza brings the performers back again and catapults us into the present moment. This time, however, the specter of Kalstone is also in attendance and remains so until the curtain falls. Unable to separate Kalstone’s death from the performance any longer, the speaker wistfully notes “how you would have loved it” (li. 29). The performance is no longer an escape, but a stark reminder of Kalstone’s absence. At this concluding stage of the poem, where we might expect images of resurrection and inheritance from a traditional elegy, a key moment of confrontation instead occurs between audience and art. Having purged their “pity and terror” through cathartic release, the audience seeks to do the impossible—to “join the troupe” and merge art with reality (li. 30, 33). Instead, they come face to face with grief stripped of performance’s protective layer: the performers, once impenetrable objects of arts enveloped in the mystique of ritual, now deflate into human beings pale and sweaty with the strain of it all. In exposing their humanity, the performers’ deflation bestows elegy with a consciousness of its own inadequacy in a far more subtle way than the typical elegiac railing against the failures of language. In a moment unlike any in a traditional elegy, Merrill gives
the reader a chance to confront elegiac art one-on-one, to see elegy at its weakest with “downcast eyes” in a way that is not obscured by the presence of the poet himself.

Through this original reimagining of elegiac conventions, Merrill encourages us to return to the statement at the beginning of the poem with a renewed consciousness about the relationship between art and reality. The end scene suggests that the poem’s opening statement should be critiqued just as Merrill has critiqued the consolatory tradition of elegy throughout the poem. Rather than allowing art to act upon us, we should face up to the limitations of art as an important part of the healing process. Just as elegy cannot actually enact the grieving process in a truly natural way, so AIDS awareness art cannot actually find a cure for the disease all on its own. This is not to suggest, however, that art has no place in the alleviation of affliction. Rather, Merrill provides us with an interactive version of elegy that forces us to grapple with the art form and evaluate its connection to our own experiences of loss. Arguably, this new interactive model of elegy is more powerful than the traditional one: instead of posturing as a genuine expression of grief that we might passively encounter like an audience at a show, the poem invites us to actively engage with it as part of a public artistic discourse. To regain sincerity, Merrill seems to say, elegy should recognize itself as an art form and encourage us to challenge it—allowing us to honestly confront our loss, rather than numbing us against it with the shroud of ritual.
Works Cited