Yet verses are not vaine: elegy as performative utterance in a secular age

This exegesis and the accompanying manuscript of poems, 'Things I've thought to tell you since I saw you last', are submitted for the Doctor of Philosophy in Communication of the University of Canberra.

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Abstract

Poets have written elegiacally since the earliest times, giving meaning to and interpreting death. In doing so, they have made use of the consolations and explications found in mythology, magic and the narratives of religions. But how can the enduring popularity and power of elegy be accounted for in our increasingly secular age, when conventional consolations – from pagan tales of rebirth to more recent religious assurances of heaven and eternal life – are increasingly unavailable to the poet and, in some cases, have been assertively rejected? The aim of my practice-based research has been to explore this field through conventional scholarly research informed by creative practice.

Central to my thesis is the notion that elegy still 'works' because it constitutes a performative utterance: a linguistic statement that performs the action to which it refers. In this case, that action is the 'work of mourning'. I draw on J.L. Austin's linguistic category of performative utterance to ground my argument. My exploration also considers psychological theories of human mourning and its progression – from the first shock of loss to final resolution – and the work a grieving individual must undertake in order to emerge from mourning. Elegiac poetry often illustrates one or more of the phases of mourning, sometimes in a single poem, sometimes in a succession of poems. A particular manifestation of the performative utterance in elegiac poetry: the *ave atque vale*, or 'hail and farewell' elegy, is particularly illuminating because in these poems – from Catullus's 1st Century BCE lament for his brother through to 21st-century works – the performative utterance takes the form of the 'hailing' (naming) of the dead person by the poet, in order that they may be decisively 'farewelled'. In this way, the poet enacts what Freud and others identify as the critical final stage of mourning: the detachment of the mourner's libido from the person who has died.

I examine the notion that human beings draw upon fictions to help them perform this necessary work of mourning, and the extent to which the elegist's employment of such fictions is central to elegy's efficacy as a performative utterance and to its consolatory power. Although these fictions are creatures of the mind, they nevertheless help people to progress through the work of mourning. Writings by theorists from Kant through to Vaihinger and beyond are relevant to this discussion, as is Wallace Stevens' poetic exploration of the notion of supreme fictions. I conclude that elegy gains at least some of its potency and efficacy not from the articulation of conventional consolations, but from the consolatory effect of performing the work of mourning – work that is acted out by the elegy itself.

The creative component of my thesis is a manuscript of poems that explores related issues, sometimes in lateral ways. The poems address human mortality and actual deaths and, in 'performing' their own examination of this thesis's preoccupations they examine a variety of issues that underpin the more theoretical work they accompany.

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