

Phoenix from the Ashes: Lorna Crozier and Margaret Avison in Contemporary Mourning

by Deborah Bowen

"A word is elegy to what it signifies."
—Robert Hass

What follows is a reading of just two small poems. Because my concern here is with the parodic reinscription of a particular generic convention, I want to make the rhetorical gesture of contrasting the massy weight of that convention with the lightness and slightness of these two poems—in itself a parodic move. At the same time, such a gesture already reinscribes the power of genre: despite first appearances, these poems sustain considerable weight through a reading of their appeal to a generic inheritance and their application of that inheritance to a subject which is also apparently slight but essentially of great, and even deadly, significance. First, then, some account of the historical place of elegy and its ambiguous coexistence with certain contemporary theoretical positions; then, a turn to the two poems in question, which are both about nicotine withdrawal. I hope to show how, in Lorna Crozier's "Quitting Smoking" and Margaret Avison's "Having Stopped Smoking," a reading of the poems as parodic elegies generates a contemporary mourning of doubled meanings and doubled selves. As Jahan Ramazani suggests of various "confessional" poems of Sylvia Plath's, "[t]o reinterpret them as elegies is not to restrict them to a new classificatory cage but to ask pragmatically what aspects of their psychopoetic character this context reveals" ("Daddy" 1142).

One might suggest that the relationship between elegy and some poststructuralist theories is already inherently parodic, because it is commonplace in such theories to talk about language as a structuration of absence and a recuperation of loss. If all language is understood as inherently elegiac, as Robert Hass implies in the line quoted as the epigraph to this paper, wherein lies the consolatory power of the genre of elegy in particular? But then, if all language is understood as elegiac, perhaps one might argue instead that the double negative of language about loss creates a positive, because the elegist is working with a medium which already comprehends the desire to compensate for the void. Nevertheless, any critique of "logocentrism" is likely also to involve a suspicion of the supposed essentialism of traditional literary genres, especially, perhaps, one

such as elegy, which purports to offer comfort in the face of death. It is appropriate, then, to consider parody, which "operat[es] as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance" (Hutcheon 20). Contemporary parody may function less in contrast to than in accord with its model: Linda Hutcheon has pointed out that the Greek "parodia" can suggest not only a "counter-song" but also a "singing beside" (32). Parody need not be dismissive or ridiculing; it may, rather, involve an ironic and serious playing with convention.

In his novel *Small World*, David Lodge wittily asserts that the one concept which evades deconstruction is death. Indeed, in face of death a certain kind of deconstructionist might seem to have little to offer, for according to his philosophy there is no more in heaven and earth than we can write. He may suggest that we must not fool ourselves by expecting any more of the signifier than a shifting trace; the world is a bleak place, endlessly excessive in meanings, and when we structure it otherwise we must acknowledge that the configuration is our own. But—and for this too we may partly credit the work of deconstruction—the process of our structuration may in itself have value. Julia Kristeva's reading of art "less as an object, and more as a process, or practice, which 'creates' the subject" argues for the dynamic concept of something "constitutive rather than constituted" (Lechte 24, 25). For Kristeva, the practice of art in elegy can move the practitioner from static melancholia to the dynamic of mourning as self-construction. And parody too, suggests Hutcheon, is capable of transformative power in creating new syntheses (20). Where she discusses mainly postmodern metafiction, I want to look at two instances of the double-voiced word in contemporary poetry, and to argue that Crozier and Avison can be read as engaging in a parodically elegiac process.

Contemporary emphasis on the text understood as an event in fact supports a study of its generic features, because such an investigation may help in relating the production and reception of the text to historically variable sociocultural conditions. Moreover, the Bakhtinian conception of genres themselves as everyday processes, historically conditioned and interactive, has reoriented genre criticism away from essentialist prescriptions and typologies (de Bruyn 84). There is a fresh awareness of genre not only as a source of creative possibilities for the writer, but also as a significant player in determining the reader's "horizon of expectations." At the same time, genres have been identified as having a sedimented ideological component, to the extent that, "[l]ike any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong" (Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* 19). The patriarchal attitude towards women that is traditionally present in the genre of elegy offers a specific example of such ideological sedimentation. One consequence of these twentieth-century generic reorientations is that the constitutive features of a genre may be ironically revisioned to reveal its implicit ideological components, in a parodic instance of Bakhtin's notion of "textual dialogism" (see Hutcheon 22).

As I suggested above, there is rhetorical intent behind choosing for

investigation into contemporary elegy two recent poems which at first glance seem slight, a merely ironical debunking of the more serious work of mourning. In these two poems, both by women, the poet may be said to choose a lesser, figurative death in order to delay the greater, physical death. This figurative death bears many of the marks of physical death: it involves separation from a profoundly desired other, with all the attendant longing and loneliness that such separation entails; it necessitates a work of mourning in order to reach a place of self-surpassal, where a doubling of the self enables both a personal death and a personal resurrection. The poet can be read as self-consciously utilizing various strategies from traditional elegy in order to do this work of mourning—a work made doubly difficult by the absence of any mourning community, since the figurative death is chosen and experienced by the poet alone. In each case, the poet is well aware of the potential absurdity of the situation, and plays with the doubled perspectives that result, rather in the manner of Richard Klein's 1993 *jeu d'esprit*, *Cigarettes are Su-. blime.*¹ Writing there with a strong sense of the parodic in a book which "aims to determine their philosophical significance, judge their aesthetic pleasure, and weigh their cultural value" (77), Klein composed "both an ode and an elegy to cigarettes" (3). Similarly, for Crozier and Avison, quitting smoking involves not only a contemporary kind of mourning, but also a contemporary kind of textual appropriation, where, as Hutcheon writes of modern parody, conventions are reinscribed with ironic distance (7).

It is the cigarette which plays the part of a loved companion who must be reckoned as dead so that the poet may live. The companion's death is therefore both desired and feared; the smoker's own death to this addiction is also the subject of both fear and desire. The fabrications of language offer a mode of symbolic action by which to allay and surpass the power of death, experienced not as the grim reaper but as a present and hourly temptation to resurrection: it is a continuation of the loved companion that will bring death, and closure around the laying to rest of this companion that will bring life and health. These elegists must fight against the notion of a living death. In this context Peter Sacks's formulation about the significant action of elegy needs to be restructured so that emphasis falls on the simile. Sacks writes, "The dead, like the forbidden object of a primary desire, must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words" (*English Elegy* 9). Instead, in this contemporary and ironic form of the elegy, the formulation is reversed: "The forbidden object of a primary desire, like the dead [since indeed it carries death along with it], must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words."

Sacks argues that success in elegy (as, presumably, in any genre) is marked by a repetition of conventions in a revisionary way, so that the consolations of continuity are brought to bear on the grief of the specific occasion. As Bakhtin puts it, "A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously.... A genre lives in the present, but always remembers its past, its beginning" (*Problems* 106). More recently, feminist critics have tried to identify

the particular nature of elegiac revisioning necessary for female writers, since this genre traditionally excludes women from all but supporting roles as muse or attendant or distracting nymph--a casting which can be read, as I have suggested above, as a particularly graphic example of ideological sedimentation. Celeste Schenck, for instance, proposes that such feminist revisioning involves "the despoiling of generic purity by recourse to attenuated, incomplete, even parodic renderings of elegiac form" ("Reconstructing" 23). Schenck's argument is reductionist in its dismissal of traditional male elegy as merely "a gesture of aspiring careerism" (14), and she oversimplifies the history of elegy: the entire nineteenth century, for instance, has been called "the elegiac century" because of the extension of the introspective, meditative vision of elegy to the majority of Romantic and Victorian lyric poetry (Potts, qtd in Fowler 206). However, Schenck's introduction of the notion of feminist parody is a seminal one for the present context, in which the reader may find two female poets engaged in a parodic revisioning of elegiac form.

• • •

Smoking a cigarette may be compared to making a poem: inhaling the hot breath of inspiration, letting words on paper burn up in the visible air of a muted elocution, exhaling swirling figures of desire, conducting with gestures and modulating in smoke a lyric conversation overheard.

(Klein, *Cigarettes are*

Sublime 52)

Although Lorna Crozier and Margaret Avison are both white middle-class Canadian women writing in English, in sensibility two more different contemporary poets would be hard to find. They are of different generations. Crozier is widely considered to be an accessible poet, Avison a challenging and sometimes obscure one. Crozier works with a postmodern aesthetic, Avison with a Christian metaphysic. Crozier is public, dynamic, and often comic. Avison is reclusive, contemplative, and usually serious. Crozier can write with ease about penises, Avison is much more interested in the "optic heart." However, these two women find common ground in dealing with one of contemporary society's most powerful addictions, and in doing so, they may be read as revising traditional elegiac elements to work through a recognizable process of mourning. The practical versatility and elasticity of generic conventions is less well served by Schenck's oppositional model than by Bakhtin's dynamic, interactive one. In a historical period when the fear of death is frequently countered by irony, these poems by Crozier and Avison suggest that focussing on an overtly ironic process of mourning can, by the positive resultant from the double negative of double irony, revalorize and perhaps even de-ironize the elegy itself, both as symbolic action and as representation of absence. Though language cannot undo the ultimate absence of death, it can *structure* absence; an ironic presentation of a choice of deaths clarifies the distinction between the present choice, the future finality of death, and the real even if fictional consolations of literary form.

In a 1993 interview, Crozier said, "Most humour is very serious. I like humour with some sort of edge; it makes you smile, but there's something else going on, too Humour can be radical and subversive; you can say things with humour that you can't say in other ways and get away with it" (15, 16). "Quitting Smoking" is a very funny prose-poem with something else going on too. The present participles of the title in themselves suggest the incompleteness of the process that the poem describes. With her horizon of expectations defined by the genre of elegy, the reader will see here a reinscription of the elegiac "amatory complaint" in which desire for the beloved (the cigarette) is projected onto everything in the external environment:

Your cat is grey. When he comes in from the muddy lane, his paws leave ashes on the floor. The dirty burner on the stove smokes, the kettle smokes, your first, your last cup of coffee demands a smoke. The snow on the step is a long Vogue paper waiting to be rolled. Above the chimneys stars light up and smoke the whole night through.

(st.2)

The traditional procession of mourners is parodically transformed into the procession before the poet's eyes of every last thing in this universe which all, except the poet, have access to the desired object. "In Montreal there are stores where you can buy one cigarette": here the deliberate conflation of generic "you" with particular "you" creates one face of the doubling that carries the irony of the poem. Anyone who wants, *except* "you," can buy. And is the particular "you" the poet's *alter ego* or an actual other? The result of this problematizing of voice is that the traditional elegy/eulogy mystification is also given a doubled reference: poet and "you," "you" and cigarette. The reader, moreover, is implicated as a "you" who may also be in mourning.

In traditional elegy, repetition has the dual function of offering consolatory pattern against the discontinuity of death, and convincing the griever of the fact of death. In Crozier's poem, because the issue is the *choosing* of a death rather than the prior *fact* of one, the repetitions are suggestive of the obsessive nature of addiction, and of the way in which it is obsessively associated with life's daily repetitions: "The phone says smoke when it rings, the radio says smoke, the TV smokes its own images until they are dead butts at three A.M." Because traditional elegy has a dual role as memorial and self-expression, "the finding of form coincides with the defeat of grief" (Smith 21); but here, the form mirrors the obsessiveness. Even the discipline of the traditional poetic line is too limiting for this mourner: Crozier utilizes the ongoing sentence-formations of prose poetry to suggest insistent and continuous pressure. Lack of closure represents not the triumph of continuity which Schenck sees as typical of feminist elegy, not "writing as a strategy for prolonging attachment" (Schenck 22), but an inability to effect *any* kind of linear determinacy except by the distancing mechanism of

humour. We can more easily detach ourselves from an obsession once it is seen to be ridiculous, because the self is then humiliated by the self.

The elegy is traditionally understood as a dramatized action symbolically doing the work of mourning. Crozier's poem, too, moves through a sleepless night with a central and parodic descent narrative ("Women you could fall in love with approach you from the shadows and offer a light") to the dawn of the condemned mourner's day ("blindfolded and one last wish") and then to "the grey of morning—smoke from the sun settling on the roofs." Because "desire begins and ends on the tip of your tongue," the whole body is inhabited by language and cries out the final lyrical absurdity of the apostrophe of the poem: "O Black Cat; O ageless Sailor, where have you gone? O Craven A, first letter of the alphabet, so beautiful to say, O Cameo . . ." (st.6). Tobacco tries to insinuate itself as good luck (the black cat) or wisdom and experience (the ageless sailor), but black cats can also mean sorcery, and ageless sailors may be cursed like the Ancient Mariner. The first letter of the tobacco alphabet may be beautiful to say, but it is also self-confessedly "craven"; the final tobacco reference, "O Cameo," is reminiscent of the archetypal lovestory ("O Romeo") at the same time that it intimates the whole poem as a portrait ("cameo") of a process at once ludicrous and deadly serious. Jonathan Culler has pointed out that "there is a close relationship in lyric between apostrophe and the threat of becoming inanimate: elegies, for example, are highly apostrophic poems which take an irreversible temporal disjunction, the passage from life to death, and displace it into a reversible alternation of apostrophic moments" ("Changes" 51)—thus when the moment *is* reversible, there is a double irony. "The shape of your mouth around an imaginary cigarette" is, of course, "O," the cipher "an abstract you can taste." Language degree zero literally on the tongue.

In Margaret Avison's "Having Stopped Smoking," the poet more clearly attains to a place of personal resolve and, therefore, a kind of consolation.² Here the action of the poem is overtly concerned with the aftermath of the death of the smoking habit ("Having Stopped . . ."), but it is no less parodic than Crozier's more flamboyant piece. Where Crozier's mourner projects desire onto the outside world, Avison's mourner experiences death within the privacy of her own body. The poem, unlike Crozier's with its breathless prose-lines, moves in carefully-controlled stanzas with a precisely patterned scheme of pararhyme. The final relinquishing of anxiety about the initial "pile of fingers" is expressed in a metrically superfluous last line which brings "dangle" to rhyme with the opposing challenges of "still" and "nettle": "Let the fingers dangle" is the mourner's private acceptance of her little death in lieu of a greater one. The poet accepts a sense of physical loss, and in resurrection is maimed but free.

But to reach this acceptance has required its own work. Elegy is traditionally characterized by a series of questions, both informational and rhetorical; questions offer a means of protestation, a release of the energy associated with

anger against death, and an avenue for the shifting of focus from the grief of loss to an acceptance of contingent reality (Sacks 22). The inquisition that the poet carries on with herself in Avison's poem moves through a weary disconnectedness ("Is this / the astral body perhaps?") to a reminder of the common lot of humankind ("It's being less than whole /—as who is not?") and ultimately to a direct challenge to the present state of affairs, in which she addresses her own hands as the site of contention: "Hands in the lap, are you / right to lie still? / is this your calling true?" The poet's response to this challenge is a reaffirmation of the will that incorporates past, present, and future: "See, I resolve to go / having grasped the nettle." Since the death of the smoker has been actively embraced already in the past, the poet visibly ("See") reaffirms her resolve in the present to follow her "calling true" in the future, and to "Let the fingers dangle." The nettle is grasped by fingers other than those dangling ones, because coexistent with the embattled self are two bodies, the physical one of the smoker who is reckoned as dead, and the spiritual or volitional one of the living mourner, alive to nettle-stings and muscle-twitches. This Cartesian division of physical and spiritual functions as a distancing technique in a similar way to Crozier's doubled "you."

Part of the work of mourning to reach this resolve has certainly involved a parodic descent into desolation. Loss of the beloved has meant a loss of the stillness needed for some powers, and a paralysis of uneasiness for others: "capacities / that need stillness twitter, and real / and unrealized powers call / 'we're atrophying' in their new unease." Even when "Motor mechanics restore / motors," it is "at a price"; the lowest point of the human restoration process is a recognition of the unpredictable responses of the human body to having stopped smoking, so that the price of the "tune-up" (the chosen figurative death) can seem "a worse / fate . . . than return to source" (the deferred literal death). In fact this 'little death' can seem worse than "seeing oneself in the glass"—that is to say, being made aware of one's ultimate mortality. Is the tune-up worth it, then? The poet's response is a strong deflection of desire from the beloved of the past to the activity of the future: "I resolve to go," to move and do, even and despite the physical handicaps that accompany loss. This final reconstruction resonates precisely with Kristeva's view of the artistic process as constitutive: Avison's poem enacts the movement from melancholia to mourning as self-construction.

As with Crozier's poem, the notion that women may use elegy as a strategy for deferring separation (Schenck 22) can here be useful only parodically: the poet must separate to live, and the elegy must work in a traditional linear pattern from mourning to acceptance of loss to enable some degree of literal self-surpassal. To resurrect the dead is a real and dangerous temptation for both these poets; their own resurrection depends on their continuing to reckon as dead their beloved, prior source of fulfillment and power, now tasted as cipher and seen as mortality. The writing of elegy becomes in a revisionist sense a defeat of death because a completion of it. Ramazani talks of elegy in Plath's poems as an act of murder: "Plath uses the frequently patriarchal discourse of the elegy to banish and kill the

patriarch" ("Daddy" 1151). Paradoxically, Crozier and Avison have murdered too, but their killing is of the addicted self so that the wiser, writing self may live.

• • •

Thus these poets encourage a generic reading of their texts as elegies because they address a common problem of loss, they revise conventional elegiac motifs, and they make connections to traditional ceremonies associated with mourning. By co-opting the elegiac for a parodic purpose, Crozier and Avison, two such different writers, underline both the seriousness of an addiction to nicotine and the continuing power of generic convention as a flexible mode of "typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations" (Miller 159). Sacks suggests that the modern elegy has been rendered problematic by a revolt from the subject-matter of death now understood merely as obscene and meaningless (299). He sees elegists withdrawing either into intense privateness or behind a "mask" of irony. But a parodic poetry of the doubled self, in which the smoker has died but the mourner rises to life, counteracts this impasse by offering elegy as an instance of the personally constructive powers of language. One function of elegy has always been to structure the self, to affirm in the shattered mourner the possibility of continuance. The conflictual structures of elegy traditionally dramatize the emergence of the heir who has wrested an inheritance from the dead, normally understood in patriarchal terms (Sacks 37); Crozier and Avison make this drama one of personal victory over `thanatos' as personified in the smoking self. The work of art has become, as Kristeva suggests it may do, the mark of a "vanquished" depression (*Soleil Noir* 76). Over the absent (cremated) body of the cigarette/smoker, the phoenix rises from the ashes, and she again discovers the value of speaking in elegiac poetry.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Professor Jon Kertzer for introducing me to this book. [\[back\]](#)
2. This consolation is then of a different kind from that of the protagonist in Italo Svevo's 1923 novel *La Coscienza di Zeno*. Zeno devotes a lifetime to the business of quitting smoking, lighting up "the last cigarette" innumerable times. Because smoking is his life, "to want to cure it is to suppose that life itself is a disease that needs the attention of doctors" (Klein 99). [\[back\]](#)

Bibliography and Works Cited

Avison, Margaret. "Having Stopped Smoking." *Selected Poems*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1991. 160.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

———. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986.

Cohen, Ralph. "Do Postmodern Genres Exist?" *Genre* 20.3-4 (Fall-Winter 1987): 241-57.

Crozier, Lorna. "Quitting Smoking." *Angels of Flesh, Angels of Silence*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988. 39-40.

———. "Against the Grain." Interview. *Books in Canada*. April 1993. 14-17.

Culler, Jonathan. "Changes in the Study of the Lyric." *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*. Ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1985. 38-54.

de Bruyn, Frans. "Genre Criticism." *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Ed. Irena R. Makaryk. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993. 79-85.

Devitt, Amy J. "Generalizing about Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept." *College Composition and Communication* 44.4 (Dec. 1993): 573-86.

Fowler, Alastair. *Kinds of Literature: an Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1982.

Hass, Robert. "Meditation at Lagunitas." *Praise*. New York: Ecco Press, 1979. 4-5.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York and London: Methuen, 1985.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.

Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward and Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. T. Bahti. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982.

Klein, Richard. *Cigarettes are Sublime*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993.

Kristeva, Julia. *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987.

Lechte, John. "Art, Love, and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva." *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: the Work of Julia Kristeva*. Ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. 24-41.

Lodge, David. *Small World: an Academic Romance*. London, U.K.: Secker and Warburg, 1984.

Miller, Carolyn R. "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70.2 (May 1984): 151-67.

Potts, Abbie. *The Elegiac Mode*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967.

Ramazani, Jahan. "'Daddy, I Have Had To Kill You': Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy." *PMLA* 108.5 (Oct. 1993): 1142-1156.

Sacks, Peter. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.

Schenck, Celeste M. "Feminism and Deconstruction: Reconstructing the Elegy." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 6 (Spring 1986): 13-27.

Smith, Eric. *By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977.

Stimpson, Catharine. "Feminism and Feminist Criticism." *Massachusetts Review* 24 (Summer 1983): 272-288.

Stone, Carole. "Elegy as Political Expression in Women's Poetry." *College Literature* 18 (1991): 84-91.

Svevo, Italo. *La Coscienza di Zeno*. 1923. Trans. as *Confessions of Zeno*, by Beryl de Zoete. London and New York: Putnam, 1930.

Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Origin of Genres." *Genres in Discourse*. 1978. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1990. 13-26.

———. *Mikhail Bakhtin: the Dialogical Principle*. Trans. Wlad Godzich. Theory and History of Literature Vol.13. Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1984.

