



A Letter from the Editors.

One of the elegy's quiet embarrassments is how uncertain it seems to be of its own purpose. The elegist proclaims an act of preservation: to render some element of the dead, the lost, so precisely through language that it is captured and, by this act, embalmed in text. Yet the elegy has a tendency towards a destabilising interiority. The more urgently the writer reaches away from themselves towards the lost object they seek to represent, the more insistently does the presence of the author emerge as an opaque shield before it. The dead are invoked, praised, and mourned, but what remains most vivid is the living speaker, grappling with rupture and feeling their way through absence. The loss of the Other becomes the point around which the self is constituted; alongside the presence of the dead, the elegy records the speaker's own spectral subjectivity.

Still, the form persists in presenting itself as an address to an Other. In this sense, the elegy becomes one of literature's most fraught undertakings: compelled to preserve what it can only ever approach indirectly, it encircles its subject with reverence and longing, but rarely achieves the enclosure or reclamation it aspires to.

If a tension emerges at the level of address, as the elegy proves unable to fully reach or preserve the object it invokes, this instability is not confined to the relation between speaker and dead, but extends into the very structure of the form itself. Beleaguered by formal and definitional ambiguities, the elegy names a tradition that seems to split along the lines of its internal tensions: both a genre of inherited ritual structured around sequential consolation and a mode whose architecture cannot remain stable.

The funeral elegy, whose lineage stretches from the Greek lamentation rites through Milton and Shelley, traditionally follows a recognisable movement of praise, lament, and consolation. This tripartite form is not simply descriptive; it stages a model of mourning in which loss is rendered as process rather than static condition. The dead are recalled, lamented, and then placed at sufficient distance for a renewed sense of continuity to emerge. Peter Sacks notes this process in *The English Elegy* (1985), wherein he claims elegy “enacts the work of mourning.” To read an elegy is to be made a spectator to grief’s labour. The dead are present, but as occasion and catalyst, while the elegiac form converts bereavement into a narrative of endurance and progression, in which loss is given a substitutive form through art—a stable image, object, or figure through which it can be rendered and borne.

The formal elegy imposes both representation and sequence: the presumption that grief can be arranged into ordered time. The form depends upon this ordering, yet where consolation is reached, it is shadowed by what cannot be assimilated into its logic: the return of the dead as residual absence, as memory that does not settle easily into symbol. Consolation is staged, but it is staged against what it cannot fully incorporate. Across the history of the form, the elegy can therefore be read as a repeated attempt to stabilise this tension. Loss is organised through metre, image, and narrative progression, yet the experience from which the poem emerges persists as something that exceeds such arrangement. Grief can be given form, but form does not exhaust it, so that the consolatory structure reads less as resolution than as a temporary holding.

If traditional elegy attempts to stabilise loss through such structures, even where that attempt remains incomplete, what might it mean to

abandon this stabilising impulse altogether? This refusal, and the formal and conceptual challenges it entails, are explored in the work of B.S. Johnson, a writer to whom this first issue of *Catachresis* owes a substantial debt.

Born in Hammersmith in 1933, Johnson studied literature as a mature student after years of other work. He was vehemently impatient with the complacency of post-war fiction, which he argued had carried on “as though the revolution that was *Ulysses* had never happened.” For Johnson, any contemporary project which eschewed the responsibilities of High Modernism risked retreating into the “irrelevant” forms of the early nineteenth-century novel. He understood these inherited conventions as emerging from a reality defined by “pattern and eternity”, while he believed the present was more accurately characterised by “chaos”, demanding forms capable of reflecting rather than disguising this disorder. In this context, Johnson turns to Beckett, a writer against whom he continued to measure his own “dialogues in form”:

“What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be a new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos, and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. [...] To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.”

Johnson most directly confronts chaos in *The Unfortunates* (1969), a book written after the death of his friend Tony Tillinghast. The novel arrives not as a single bound volume but as twenty-seven individually bound sections in a box, with only the first and last fixed. The reader is asked to shuffle the rest. Though seen by a number of critics at the time as a gimmick, Johnson argued for his novel as an earnest attempt to capture reality as he understood it. “Life does not tell stories,” he wrote. “Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untidied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification.”

Johnson’s arrangement does not simply render disorder visible; the formal experiment is inseparable from its subject matter, exposing the impulse to impose narrative order upon what resists it. The reader is

made responsible for imposing sequence upon Tony Tillinghast's death, arranging the fragments into a form of coherence that the novel itself refuses to provide. Yet no arrangement can alter the inevitability at the centre of the work: Tony dies in every possible configuration. The structure itself insists on this inevitability, and on the ultimate arbitrariness of sequence. Johnson's text does not simply reject the consolatory structures of elegy, but radicalises the tensions already within it, exposing both the imposition of narrative upon loss and the persistent mediation of the self that prevents any unambiguous relation to the dead.

At the centre of Johnson's elegiac experiment lies Tony Tillinghast's death from cancer. The novel returns repeatedly not only to that loss, but to the impossibility of representing it without distortion. Recalled by a narrator (a very thinly, if at all, veiled authorial insert) sent to report on a football match in the city where his friend once lived, the fragments circle Tony's illness, his bodily decline, and the narrator's continuous unease at shaping these events into a coherent account. Through this narrator, Johnson grapples with his own position as a writer, returning to the problem posed by his conviction that, because "Life does not tell stories", narrative must therefore impose itself upon, and distort, experience. *The Unfortunates* becomes a remarkable form of elegy because it remains acutely aware of the limitations of its own project. Johnson acknowledges his faltering memory throughout, along with the tendency to impose meaning on events through the knowledge of what comes after, and struggles to describe the death that affected him profoundly without lapsing into already tired clichés.

Bleak and imprecise though it may be, *The Unfortunates* is a compelling attempt to work with constant awareness of the limits of memory, form, and representation; to portray loss in all its mundanity and disorder, and to implicate the reader in its disorientations, demanding a confrontation with an absence that it refuses to resolve.

Following Johnson, we want to reconsider the possibilities of elegy: its inherited forms, its unresolved tensions, and the new approaches to absence that might emerge from them. Thus, our first issue of *Catachresis*, 'Elegy: Loss, Mourning and Vanishing Objects,' is in part a homage to Johnson, and in part an effort to continue the spirit of his

project. The works we have chosen attempt to reckon with loss not only of individuals but of place, time, and feeling; loss in its various destabilising forms. We have selected pieces that approach absences from new angles, testing the consolatory structures through which elegy has traditionally approached loss.

The most visible homage to Johnson lies in the presentation of the journal itself, which appears in six evenly sized, individually bound booklets. We encourage you to shuffle and choose them at will. It is our own tribute to art that, in Beckett's words, "admits the chaos" and "accommodates the mess."

We would like to thank our contributors for allowing us to publish their work, Reid Jameson Potts for his artwork, and all those who have been involved in the publication of this journal.

The Editorial Team

Grace Lynch, Lucia Frances Della-Savina, Connor Nicol.

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