

Embracing Limit and Extravagance in the Elegies of Mark Doty

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“clouds of [...] plum blossoms [...] billowing on mauve” (Doty, 8, 12-14)

In *The Poetry of Mourning*, Jahan Ramazani argues that the best modern elegies offer “not a guide to ‘successful’ mourning but a spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world” (ix). Readers should expect “fractured speech” (Ramazani ix) from modern elegies, which, “scorning recovery and transcendence”, remain “unresolved [...] and ambivalent” (Ramazani 4). Mark Doty’s elegies embrace the frustrations of limited language and the superfluosity of extravagant experience in a way that supports Ramazani’s claim. ‘White Kimono’ and ‘One of the Rooming Houses of Heaven’ display the “fractured” and “unresolved” ambivalence that Ramazani believes should characterise the modern elegy. Both poems are self-consciously limited and, instead of offering comfort or transcendence, explore the difficulties of commemorating their subjects. In ‘White Kimono’, this frustration springs from the limitations of poetic language; the otherwise expressive speaker finds himself unable to confront the threat of AIDS that looms throughout the poem. ‘One of the Rooming Houses in Heaven’ expresses an opposite frustration at the shallowness of elegies that are richly descriptive yet lack depth. The speaker describes the outer mannerisms of a deceased friend in intimate detail but fails to engage with the complexities of their personality, capturing the experience of their presence but not their interiority. In actively embracing these limitations of language and experience, Doty articulates the nuances of grief, and creates AIDS poetry that goes beyond the polemical.

‘White Kimono’ demonstrates Doty’s frustrations with the limits of poetic language and the difficulties of elegy. The poem’s subject is its own inefficacy, self-consciously highlighting a moment where its rhetoric fails to capture a vital experience. Doty depicts an exuberant speaker who revels in the possibilities of literary expression until he is faced with the titular white kimono, which eludes description. The other kimonos, by contrast, are springboards for poetic indulgence. They are lambently described as “wrinkly luxuries”

(*Sweet Machine* 8, line 11) patterned with “chrysanthemum flurries” (8, 2) and “rippled fields” (8, 3); “clouds of [...] plum blossoms [...] billowing on mauve” (8, 12-14). The speaker cycles through several literary techniques to vivify the robes, indulging in the full range of poetic tools at his disposal. He anthropomorphises the kimonos, for example, stating that they “swell and breath” (8, 8). “Swell” may allude to pregnancy, and, coupled with “breath”, draws attention to anthropomorphism as a life-giving literary technique. Anthropomorphism asserts that an object possesses life through no power other than the speaker’s utterance. At this point in the poem language creates the world more than observes it, giving life and form to the kimonos.

Doty also makes use of potent linguistic music to describe these robes, such as the phrase “rough raw silk” (9, 40). “[R]ough” and “raw” are both monosyllabic and alliterative but do not rhyme. Composing this phrase so that it contains both assimilation and juxtaposition creates friction between the words; they chafe against one another, not quite in agreement. The two adjectives achieve a roughness and rawness in their interplay, approaching onomatopoeia. Doty develops his description of this kimono by noting its “slubbed green the colour of day-old grass / wet against lawn-mower blades” (9, 41-2), which demonstrates another poetic device: language’s power to be intensely visual.

This exuberant and expressive poetry seems to validate the position of Doty’s detractors, who argue that he uses language indulgently and uncritically with an aestheticized gaze that beautifies everything it encounters. Tim Dean for example, brands him a “promiscuous” poet, with an eye that finds “beauty and therefore something to praise everywhere it turns” (in Eisner 389). Hartley Williams, like Dean, argues that Doty “will happily compare anything to anything else” (in Gamble 142). William Logan criticises Doty for overusing expressive rhetoric in *Sweet Machine*: “lusters, sheens, marbled light, lustrous,

scarab-gleam [...] and that's only two pages into the first poem" (in Eisner 389). 'White Kimono', however, demonstrates that Doty uses this rich language with canny self-consciousness, and is painfully aware of its failings and inefficiencies. The luxuriance with which Doty describes the other kimonos is not art-for-art's-sake, as his critics suggest, but a way of demonstrating the limit of poetic language. This becomes evident when the speaker's rich rhetoric is thrown into sharp relief by his inability to describe the white kimono, the most significant image of the poem.

Doty's confidence falters when he approaches this garment, and his language becomes tentative. Qualifiers proliferate his description of the white kimono; it "seems" an artifact (*Sweet Machine* 8, line 21) that "might" tear (9, 30). The poet uses two qualifying phrases in a single line when he states that the kimono "*seems to tremble a little*" (9, 31, emphasis mine). The confidence with which Doty anthropomorphises the other robes in the third stanza is replaced by the tentativeness of simile, Doty describing the white kimono's sleeves as being "like moth wings" (9, 23). Unlike anthropomorphism, which announces a lifelike quality in an object, simile contains an inherent cautiousness as a comparison between two or more existing elements of reality, not a declaration of a new reality. Doty also fails to pin the white kimono down in a single image. In stanza twenty-one it is both "a lunar token" (10, 62) and "something / the ghost of a moth might have worn" (10, 62-3). Line sixty-five calls it both a "petal" and a "phantom" (10), a clash of contradictory nouns. A "petal" is a tangible sign of life, the antithesis of a ghost, characterised by death and ephemerality. These disparate images cancel each other out, leaving the white kimono an unresolved and indeterminate presence in the poem, despite the speaker's best efforts.

This is more than aesthetic failure, as the white kimono partly serves as a metaphor for the deaths of Doty's friend, Lynda, and lover, Wally. In failing to capture the kimono in language, Doty simultaneously fails to confront the passing of his loved ones in 'White Kimono'. Although Doty is unable to pin the kimono down in a single image and describes it as many things, a semantic field of death and the afterlife enshrouds the garment. It is a "spirit" (10, 60) and "phantom" (10, 65), worn by a moth's "ghost" (10, 63). In a poem dedicated to two dead loved ones (117) it is difficult not to read the white kimono as, in part, a harbinger of death. Lynda "[does] not dare to try [the kimono] on" (10, 69) but is "slight" enough to consider it (10, 68), suggesting her proximity to death. Like the white kimono, the threat of AIDS hangs over the poem in the reference to Wally "already" being "tired all the time" (10, 46), a sign of his deterioration from the virus (Wally Roberts died of AIDS in 1994. *Heaven's Coast* ix). The "intimate" (10, 53) memory of ironing the robes is overshadowed by the white kimono which hangs "all the while" (10, 60) over the poem as an unreconciled symbol of death alongside the oblique reference to AIDS. It is the poem's namesake, a metaphor for the death of loved ones, and the image Doty ends the poem with, yet it eludes the grasp of poetic language. Doty's rich descriptions of the other kimonos demonstrate he is operating at the height of his linguistic prowess, yet language fails to convincingly capture the poem's most important image. Doty's embellished poetic rhetoric, which Dean and Logan would dismiss as frivolous self-indulgence, reveals the limitation of poetic language when it runs up against the white kimono. Rather than meaningless aestheticism, it is a pointed demonstration of where language falters. For all its lambent expressivity, this is ultimately a poem about the inability to articulate an image of loss. 'White Kimono' is an elegy about the frustrations and limits of the elegiac form itself. This is not to say that 'White Kimono' is a bad poem or a failed elegy. In self-consciously revealing

the limits of poetic language, the poem demonstrates the near impossibility of articulating grief. Doty touches on this frustration in *Heaven's Coast*, where Wally's death is "that territory where language fails [...] the unsayable edge" (300). 'White Kimono' articulates this sense that language is an insufficient tool for grief. In embracing its own limitations, the poem captures the unresolved nature of mourning.

Another poem in *Sweet Machine*, 'One of the Rooming Houses of Heaven', explores a different obstacle to elegy; the danger of documenting experience that is merely extravagant, and lacks thematic weight. Like 'White Kimono', 'Rooming Houses' is a frustrated, unresolved elegy that elides a full confrontation with the dead. Here, however, this is not down to a failure of language but an over-emphasis on extraneous details. The poem is bathetic, building to a revelation it never delivers. Doty furnishes 'Rooming Houses' with an intimate account of its subject, Bobby, as if he is laying the foundation for a profound disclosure. He establishes that they had a complex relationship; Bobby was an "old friend" (49, 2), yet they "weren't ever that close" (49 4). Bobby haunts Doty: he "hear[s] him talking / in the kitchen" (49, 5-6) despite being "dead these years" (49, 2). A sense of unfinished business between Doty and Bobby pervades these opening stanzas and puts emphasis on the content of Doty's "dream" (49, 1): it might explain the tension between speaker and subject and offer some resolution. Doty intensifies this feeling of expectation by listing the dream's superfluous details, perpetuating the sense that he is laying the groundwork for a profound conclusion. The "hotel between worlds" (49, 9) has "good heat in the radiators" (49, 11), for example, and "easy rent" (49, 12). Bobby's bed is "narrow" (49, 14), his shade "green" (49, 15) and pulled "almost" (49, 16) all the way down. Doty brings this extravagance of detail to its fever pitch in the final two stanzas. The phrase "[h]e was telling me -" (49, 17) seems to finally promise some substance in all the extraneous detail, a tangible statement from Bobby

which might elucidate his relationship with Doty or explain the ambiguous “hotel between worlds”. However, Doty interrupts himself with a four-line parenthesis describing the exact qualities of Bobby’s voice; “his soft, / exasperated way, not too impressed / with anything, in confidence, // as though possessed of the best gossip in the world” (49, 18-21). The repeated use of caesura here creates a halting effect. None of the phrases flow together; they stop and start awkwardly, each comma generating a pause that disrupts momentum. The detail becomes so extravagant as to be frustrating; it is an obstacle that delays the insight Doty promises by stating, “he was telling me -”. In its final line, ‘Rooming Houses’ reveals its anti-climax. The escalating tension and intricate description amount to nothing, as the speaker “can’t remember now a single thing [Bobby] said” (49, 24). All the reader is left with is the extravagance of detail. The precise tone of Bobby’s voice is described in near-maddening exactness (49, 18-21), but his actual utterance is forgotten. What seemed like set-dressing is the centre of the poem, and any possibility of closure or comfort is elided by an abrupt ending. Unlike ‘White Kimono’, which identifies a symbol of death but finds language too limited to fully articulate it, ‘Rooming Houses’ avoids the encounter with its subject by focussing exclusively on the outer trappings of experience. The effect, however, is the same: a frustrated, ambivalent elegy that elides a full confrontation with death.

Like ‘White Kimono’, ‘Rooming Houses’ reveals a difficult aspect of grief in its lack of resolution. The inevitable process of neglect and forgetting that comes after mourning is replicated in the poem’s patchwork depiction of its subject. That Bobby has been “dead these years” is manifested in the unreliable memory of the poet who “can’t remember now a single thing he said”.

These poems confront grief at its most unresolved and ambivalent. In communicating the inability to confront loss and the process of forgetting victims, they self-consciously elide a transcendent or comforting encounter with the dead. That both these elegies commemorate victims of AIDS complicates their difficulty and open-endedness. Sarah Gamble has identified a trend where poetic responses to the AIDS crisis are expected to act as political statements, functioning “culturally like a lyrical version of ACT UP” (147), the grassroots political organisation that endeavoured to end the pandemic. Gamble argues that many critics in Doty’s praise “prefer to analyse his work as a sustained exercise in [...] radical politics” (142): they see Doty’s output as polemic not poetry. Her assessment of Doty’s critical milieu is validated by writers such as Deborah Landau, who analyses Doty’s work as if it were purely political.

For Landau, Doty’s poems perform a set of social “functions” (194): they “provide a historical record” and “rage against public mismanagement of the epidemic” (194). Landau cannot assess Doty’s poetry on its own terms, seeing it only for its social utility, its “functions” within political discourse. Reading Doty’s poetry purely for its socio-political usefulness hamstring a nuanced interpretation of his work. This is exemplified by Landau’s blanket assessment of Doty as “a poet who envisions sustaining moments despite great suffering and offers his reader a ‘way to continue’” (205). While this is true of many of his poems that respond to AIDS, the lens of social utility that Landau has forced onto Doty’s work leads her to disregard anything that does not serve a transparent and immediate communitarian purpose. ‘White Kimono’ and ‘Rooming Houses’ demonstrate that Doty explores the frustrated and unarticulated sides of grief in his work and does not solely seek to comfort the bereaved or challenge political authority, as Landau argues. Enforcing this prescriptive lens on Doty’s poetry makes Landau guilty of a similar kind of misreading as

Doty's detractors. Dean, Logan, and Williams insist that Doty's heightened poetic language is mere aestheticism, which blinds them to his nuanced and self-conscious use of rhetoric. In arguing that Doty's work serves a set of transparent socio-political functions, Landau suppresses the emotional complexity of the poetry, just as Doty's detractors suppress its linguistic complexity. Doty himself insists on the importance of "writ[ing] from a different kind of position" and "try[ing] to get as many [...] modes of being on the page as [he] can" (in Meinen). Landau's restrictive interpretation of Doty's poetry limits this endeavour. By insisting that AIDS poetry must transparently serve social utility, Landau implicitly forbids the exploration of complicated and frustrating feelings.

Ultimately, it is Ramazani's theory of the "unresolved" (4) modern elegy that gives Doty the artistic freedom to explore many "modes of being" (in Meinen). Liberated from the need to console his reader or address an immediate political problem, Doty can embrace the limits of language and the frustrations of purely extravagant experience. The results are poems like 'White Kimono' and 'Rooming Houses', which elide consolation but express the difficulties and nuances of grief.

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