
‘Elegy Strives to Balance Grief and Consolation. The Best
Elegies do so Convincingly.’

Discuss

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Elegy is a poetic genre defined by conventions and cultural assumptions, rather than a set form or metre. Elegy is the response to loss, often to a death, or sometimes to lost values, opportunities, or potential. This response, part of the 'successful work of mourning',¹ in more typical Elegies such as John Milton's *Lycidas*, affects a consolatory reconciliation with the fact of the loss through a catharsis of grief. The balance that traditional elegy strikes between grief and consolation is a central part of its poetic purpose but it is only a part, one of the numerous conventions that define the genre, many of which can be seen as poetic analogues of mourning. Other characteristic features are its idealisation of the deceased, the application of the particular problem in the poem to the universal, and the dichotomy of the simultaneous need both to remember and to forget the dead. Elegy as a genre may traditionally use the convention of balancing grief and consolation, but elegies as individual poems, particularly the modern ones which have the framework of conventions to oppose and reference, both explicitly and implicitly, do not have to do so to be effective as poetry. The best elegies do not always balance grief and consolation convincingly because that balance is just one of several conventions which an elegiast might employ in their poetry.

Memory is a central feature of elegy which, as stated before, is, at its simplest, the poetic response to loss. In *Lycidas*, a poem which employs many of the conventions of elegy, memory is a key feature in the balance between grief and consolation. Grief involves the act of remembering the person while consolation involves recognising the need to forget them. This duality can be clearly seen in *Lycidas*. For example, in the idealised remembrance of their time

¹ Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, (London and Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), p.169.

together at Cambridge, the chiasmic arrangement on ‘together both [...] both together’² emphasises their closeness at the time, though this is balanced by the fact that the separation between the two phrases could be seen as an acknowledgement of the separation caused by death. Likewise, the subtitle of ‘In this Monody the author bewails a learned friend’³ clearly shows Milton’s grief for King, now dead, and also begins the process of remembrance, leading to consolation, which the poem will enact. This process of remembrance continues in lines 12-14

He must not float upon his watery bier
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
Without the meed of some melodious tear.

in which the process of lamentation, remembering the dead with the shedding of melodious tears, is necessary to pay suitable homage to King, already idealised into the Orphean Lycidas.

The convention that elegy, as a poetic analogue of mourning, should offer consolation, by means of a process of grieving, is one deeply ingrained into the genre and into Christian culture in general. In fact it can be seen since Biblical times; Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount ‘Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.’⁴ Thus the movement from despair to joy, grief to consolation, in Christian elegies, in which ‘the lyric reversal from grief and despair to joy occurs when the elegiast realises that death in this world is the entry to a higher life’,⁵ is also part of a movement from death to life. The tendency in conventional elegy to achieve consolation through a recognition of immortality is also applicable in a secular

² *Lycidas*, Ed. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic forms*, (New York: Norton, 2001), p.174.

³ *Lycidas*, *The Making of a Poem*, p.173

⁴ Anon, *The Bible: Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Matthew Ch.5.4.

⁵ M. H. Abrahams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, (London : Harcourt Brace College Publishers, c1999), p.211.

context. Often, as in King's poetic transformation into the godlike Lycidas, immortality, and thus consolation, is also achieved through the very act of enshrinement in poetry, or through the recognition of the possibility of renewal in Nature through the yearly progression of the seasons, in which the bleakness of winter is balanced by the consolation of new life in the spring.

In *Lycidas*, this mourning process, in a way that is characteristic of elegy, which has a strong socio-cultural element — Abrahms described it as 'coauthored by its community'⁶ — is transposed more widely, onto the landscape around him, as well as onto the various accoutrements of the pastoral idyll Milton invokes, 'Woeful shepherds'⁷ and

... thee the woods and desert caves,
With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,
And all their echoes...⁸

This extends even to the symbolic flowers on Lycidas's grave; 'every flower that sad embroidery wears/ [...] And daffadillies fill their cups with tears'.⁹ This transposition of feeling and the process of mourning gives the poet's personal sense of loss a wider resonance and is thus part of the cathartic process of grieving. If grief is the sorrow caused by a sense of loss, then consolation is the positive emotion which comes from the catharsis which the expression of grief, through mourning, evokes. This process of transposition is also the means by which consolation is achieved since it is part of the 'work of mourning'¹⁰ which Freud described as

⁶ Ed. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic forms*, (New York: Norton, 2001), p.167.

⁷ *Lycidas*, p.177.

⁸ *Lycidas*, p.174.

⁹ *Lycidas*, p.177.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Standard Edition of the complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, Ed. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), p.243.

necessary to recover properly from the grieving state and to avoid melancholia. Freud wrote ‘when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’ and one might thus see the process of translocating one’s grief to other objects and people as part of this process of freeing the ego. The balance here between grief and consolation is, here, convincingly even and intricately linked.

The lack of a set form in *Lycidas* might be seen as another way Milton strives towards a balance between grief and consolation. Obviously, regular iambic lines such as ‘For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,’¹¹ and ‘But O the heavy change, now thou art gone,/ Now thou art gone, and never must return!’¹² are like the wailing lamentations of a mourner, simple, though heartfelt, expressions of grief. However, it is in the abruptly shortened lines, the ‘unpleasing numbers’¹³ that Samuel Johnson objected to so much, such as as can be seen from the emphasis that falls on ‘mourn’ in line 41, in which the mind of the mourner, disordered by grief, shows itself. In contrast, the perfectly regular blank verse of the last section of the poem,¹⁴ by which time the poet has finally achieved consolation through recognition of King’s immortality in Heaven, is perhaps indicative of his now tranquil state of mind.

As can be seen from the ending of *Lycidas*, traditionally elegy moves the reader from the depths of grief and despair to a consolatory sense of optimism for the future; ‘Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high’.¹⁵ The poem ends with a sense of finality as ‘the sun [...] dropped into the western bay’, a symbol of death, but also with a sense of renewal as the swain optimistically

¹¹ *Lycidas*, p.173.

¹² *Lycidas*, p.174.

¹³ Samuel Johnson, *Life of Milton*, Quoted from a lecture by Dr Green on ‘Pastoral Elegy: Milton’s *Lycidas*’, 07/12/2015

¹⁴ Ff. ‘Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,’ *Lycidas*, p.177.

¹⁵ *Lycidas*, p.177.

'rose, and twitched his mantle blue:/ Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new.' A whole host of positive imagery is in these last two lines. The act of rising can be seen as a physical reflection of the psychological consolation achieved. 'Twitched' is a carefree verb, suggestive of an excess of high spirits, and the colour blue has long been appropriated as a symbol of renewal and rejuvenation. Blue obviously has links with water, imagery of which saturates *Lycidas*, initially with negative connotations as the medium in which King died. However, as the poem and the work of mourning progresses, so too do associations with water become more positive; Jesus is described as 'him that walked the waves'¹⁶ and Lycidas, in his apotheosis, become the 'genius of the shore'.¹⁷ 'Tomorrow' obviously looks to the future and, importantly, it is a future associated with a pastoral idyll; the sprightly sibilance in the last five words provide a formal reinforcement of the good times to come. At the culmination of *Lycidas*, by employing many of the conventions both of the pastoral genre and of the elegy, Milton convincingly balances the grief he expressed in the early sections of the poem with an optimistic sense of consolation at the end.

Thus, conventional elegy strives to mix grief and consolation in a controlled progression from the one to the other, in a way analogous to the process of mourning, and can be partially judged on its effectiveness in how convincingly it uses this generic convention, as well as others. On the other hand, modern elegy is far more resistant to such an even balance and, in fact, often resists it, invoking or consciously subverting other elegiac conventions to create its pathos.

¹⁶ *Lycidas*, p.177.

¹⁷ *Lycidas*, p.178.

This duality of invoking and subverting elegiac convention can be seen in ‘Stop all the clocks’ by W. H. Auden. The poem firmly resists a consolatory note, as can be seen particularly in its final line ‘For nothing now can ever come to any good.’¹⁸ However, while resisting an orthodox consolation in this poem, Auden does conform to other aspects of the genre. For example, the whole poem is a work of mourning, and the first stanza vividly acts out the rituals of a funeral. In fact the stately rhythm of the first stanza, which, in an echo of the tramp of the mourners’ feet towards the grave, uses caesura as well as alternating trochaic and iambic feet and monosyllabic imperatives¹⁹ to slow the pace of the line, is an affirmation of the mourning process. Auden expresses grief, but he does not balance it with consolation. Similarly, there are elements of conformity in the sober final instructions in the fourth stanza

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;

Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;

Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.

These, in reference to elegiac convention, invoke aspects of nature popular in pastoral love lyrics such as ‘the stars’, ‘the moon’ and ‘sun’, and ‘the wood’, but also serve to show how the speaker’s internal world has collapsed. Simultaneously, the impossibility of these actions ever being carried out heightens the poignancy of the speaker’s psychological predicament and intensifies the poem as an expression of grief.

As with *Lycidas*, the speaker’s grief is expressed through the formal mourning procession, and personal feelings of loss are applied to the public sphere. The difference between the approaches is that, while, in *Lycidas*, the transposition of the feelings of grief to

¹⁸ W. H. Auden, ‘Stop all the clocks’, last accessed 03/03/2016, <http://homepages.wmich.edu/~cooneys/poems/auden.stop.html>

¹⁹ ‘*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone, / [...] Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come. / [...] Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun; / Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.*’ [My italics]

others constitutes part of the work of mourning and affects a cathartic consolation, in 'Stop all the clocks', the conditional way in which the speaker applies their sense of grief to the wider social sphere, most pathetically in the clause 'let the mourners come', shows the failure of the world to reflect their personal sense of grief, and the failure of the mourning process to offer compensation for the loss. Even in the third stanza, which describes how the deceased quite literally means the world to the speaker, his importance is qualified with 'my', which relates the referents ('my North, my South, my East and West') to the speaker's personal experience of them, rather than metaphorically associating the deceased with those qualities. In 'Stop all the clocks' the failure to involve the rest of society in the speaker's personal rituals of mourning is how Auden resists the 'propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation',²⁰ and how he simultaneously expresses that grief; 'the traffic policemen' will not wear 'wear black cotton gloves' but go about their work as if nothing has happened. The aeroplanes circling overhead are not 'moaning' or 'Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead' but instead continuing to write their facile advertisements, unknowing and uncaring of the speaker's plight. The balance between grief and consolation is just one elegiac convention which modern elegists do not have to use to make their poetry convincing.

To conclude, while Auden does not use that particular convention he does use others, and exploits the lack of resolution to heighten the pathos of the final line and, in a similar way to tragicomedies such as *Waiting for Godot*, to dramatise the stasis of the speaker's position. 'Stop all the clocks' is, undeniably, 'great poetry'²¹, in T. S. Eliot's sense of the phrase, being

²⁰ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.3.

²¹ T. S. Eliot, 'In Memoriam', *Selected Essays: T. S. Eliot*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1932), p.333.

‘economical of words, a universal emotion related to a particular place’²² and setting, domestic suburbia, complete with all the trapping of middle-class affluence, dogs, telephones, and pianos which that entails. As a description of a response to loss it affects a compassionate sense of melancholy in the reader, placing it firmly in the genre of elegy, but does so unconventionally, through dramatising the conflict between formal, social customs and the speaker’s personal feelings. Historically elegies, such as Milton’s *Lycidas*, may have striven to balance grief and consolation, but modern elegy, with a framework of generic conventions already established, does not have to conform to these expectations and actually, in resisting them, presents as complete a response to loss as a more conventional elegy.

²² *Ibid*

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