

شعرية الحداد والمرثاة الأميركية في قصيدة (عندما اينع الليلك اخيرا في عتبه الدار) لوالث ويطمان

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الخلاصة

يجترح الشاعر والت ويطمان انعطافة شعرية لعلاقة الانسان، جسدا وروحا، مع العالم. فهو يستقي الهامه في كتابته لمرثاته (عندما اينع الليلك اخيرا في فناء الدار) من مصادر جمالية واخرى سياسية. ولعل ابرزها تأثره بفكرة الروح الكوني كما جرى طرحها في سياق فلسفة التسامي الامريكية. يظهر ذلك جليا في قصائده التي تتخذ من تماهي روح الانسان مع الطبيعة موضوعا لها. ان فكرة الروح الكوني تلقي ههنا بظلالها على الرتب الانسانية التي يمر بها الاحساس بالفقد. فبدءا ثمة المعاناة والياس لينتهي في المرتبة التي يحتاز عندها المفجوع احساسه بالرضا. شهد الشاعر ايضا حدثين سياسيين، وهما اندلاع الحرب الاهلية واغتيال ابراهام لينكن، اللذين كان لهما عظيم الاثر في حياته ونتاجه الشعري. اذ اسهم هذان الحدثان في صقل شعر ويطمان شكلا ومضمونا. فبعد ان يستوعب الشاعر البنى التقليدية للمراثي في شعره، يعمد الى بث الشعرية الامرسونية في تلك البنى، ويتضح ذلك في مرثاته في التحول من الشخصي الى الكوني، وكذلك من الاغراق في الاسى الى التصالح مع ذلك الروح الكوني.

The Poetics of Mourning and the American Elegy in Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

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Abstract

Walt Whitman adds a poetic twist to the relationship of man's body, soul with the universe. His inspiration in writing his elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," draws on aesthetico-political resources. Major amongst these is his leaning towards the American Transcendentalist idea of the "Over-Soul". The basic topoi in his poems is thus his identification of nature with the soul of man. The idea of the Over-Soul sheds light on the three stages of human loss: suffering, despair, and compensation. Whitman witnessed two political events, the outbreak of the civil war and Abraham Lincoln's death, which were of a particular importance to his life and work: they helped him shape a form and thematic concerns of his own. Building on the architectonics of the traditional elegy, Whitman Emersonizes the poetics of the genre, as he incorporates Emerson's idea of the Over-Soul and the law of compensation. This is translated into the shift, in his elegy, from the personal to the impersonal; from the intense feeling of grief to the thought of reconciliation.

Keywords: Over-Soul, mourning, American elegy, compensation.

Though cultures around the world are different from each other in the way of coping with death, loss and grief, but still they are unanimous in their view of the essentialism of grief. The way of lamenting someone or living through the trauma of his passing is aestheticized in the oldest form of poetry, the elegy. This genre has made use of mythical and religious entities to make contact with the dead, and it has been used as a means to process loss of people and institutions which were dear to the elegists.

Elegies were conveyed by the word of the mouth from generation to generation in the pre-historic eras, and that is why most of those elegies were anonymous. This is to be exemplified by the Anglo-Saxon elegies whose authorship is arguable, as is the case with the tenth-century poem "The Seafarer" that might have been co-authored by several poets and scribes. The same holds true of older forms of elegy that thrived in other cultural contexts. The genre of grief or the elegiac tradition goes as far back as to the Assyrian tablets that tell the bitter agony and sorrow of king Gilgamesh who is lamenting the premature death of his soul-mate Enkido (Tablets VII & IX). This is as old enough as to give the impression that the elegy is a legacy of world literature in its both oral and written forms. In all these varieties, the pastoral elegy figures out as the most dominant genre principle. The elegiac genres and their topoi, moreover, are found to be saturating literature since the dawn of humanity. Henderson Desiree posits that the multifarious nature of the literature of sorrow attests to its universality:

The close relationship of grief to genres of speech and writing becomes particularly evident when we consider the large number of literary genres inspired by loss: elegy, funeral sermon, funeral oration, eulogy, obituary, epitaph, tragedy, tribute, lament, dirge, requiem, monody, threnody, encomium, panegyric, obsequies, thanatopsis, and *memento mori*. (2011,4)

Notwithstanding the subject-matter, the elegy has been employed by various poets for serious and subjective meditation. Having in mind the continuous change of the genre of elegy throughout the history of literature and the remarkable diversity of its forms, these forms partake of one substantial elegiac element of pastoral elegy: pathetic fallacy. This element is tied to the theme of the universality of death, the progression from grief to consolation, and the ultimate resolution of the work of mourning. The pathetic fallacy, furthermore, shows how the poet is tormented by grief, and how he is apt to attribute to inanimate nature either sympathy or heartless cruelty.

Within the enclave of English literature, one is met with epoch-making elegies such as Shelley's "Adonais," Tennyson's "In Memoriam," Arnold's "Thyrsis," and Whitman's "Lilacs," all of which are written in accord with the canon of Milton's pastoral elegy "Lycidas." Jeffrey A. Hammond argues that Milton's American coreligionists took the Puritan elegy a step further in their acrostic elegies to highlight the provincial nature of their Puritanism. Yet, Hammond adds that pastoral elegy in its Puritan version failed to cope with the aesthetic background as it restricted itself so economically to the Puritan-inspired funerary rites (2000, 19). It is thus a poor extreme of the funeral elegy as handed down from the Roman traditions to the paramount English elegists.

Almost inimical to, and divorced from, their Puritan-based cultural roots, the writers and poets of the American Renaissance came to cherish a new sensibility in their elegiac traditions. In Emerson's "Threnody," the mourning subject and the object of lamentation immerse in a holistic transcendental Over-Soul. In the Emersonian religio-poetic creed the conceptions of Over-Soul and compensation come to form a major thematic string in his

poetry, for this to be later adopted by other American poets. He defines man as one who secures and conceives his position in the world through the unity with nature and God. Being aware of this unity, man comes to see even the very existence of evil as a necessary part of the total goodness. Thus within his self-reflexive and poetic belief-system everything lost or every misdeed is compensated as man derives his inner light from his oneness with the Over-Soul (Emerson 2010, 56; Andrews 2003, 49-56).

In keeping with this, it is apt to say that the very titling of Emerson's poem – it is threnody and not monody – attests to the fact that he is concerned with the expectations of his genre of grief as far as it never contradicts his transcendentalist credos. Therefore, he adjusts these expectations, according to Tiffany K. Wayne (2006, 165 & 166), to comply with his communal gospel of compensation. Hence, the object of lamentation in Emerson's poem is never referred to by name but by a series of epithets, while the mourning subject is replaced by indefinite entity called "the deep heart" (Emerson 1899, 215) in the second part of the poem. All this is meant by the self-conscious poet who tries to avoid the false excess of grief, which reminds, to a certain extent, of the Puritan-inspired sensibilities, as much as it is a transcendentalist outcome.

The Emersonian genre of grief as practiced in "Threnody" is, conversely, rooted in "the heightened self-reflexiveness of elegiac convention—the tendency, for example, ... to assimilate the object of mourning to the poetic vocation of the mourning subject" (Cavitch 2007, 2). This is in accordance with Emerson's law of compensation which is natural and universal law. This concept shows that no one can escape from the law of life. Emerson explains compensation more in his statement: "For everything you have missed, you have gained something else." (1875, 267) Therefore, balance should be met out to create order and man should realize that there is no gain without loss, or no gain without pain.

The same holds true of Walt Whitman's practice of elegy. It is argued that "like almost every other major Romantic poet, Whitman was in some part of himself a believer in compensation" (Edmundson 1990, 475). Like Emerson, Whitman expresses faith in the organic structure of the universe. Emerson's views of Over-Soul, body, and existence beyond death are so manifest in Whitman's poems like "Song of Prudence," "To Think of Time," "Song of Myself" and "Song of Joys". Whitman affirms that the soul is deathless and different from the mortal body. In canto XLIX of his poem "Song of Myself" he declares that he has died many times before and the soul is unassailable to the laws of nature.

While the elegist and that who is being elegized are transcendently engrossed in the Emersonian "Over-Soul" (Emerson 2010, 55), the mourning subject and the object of lamentation in Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" form integral parts of the Whitmanian *American Self*. This self, which is inspirited by the phantom of democracy, is now wounded and broken as its poeticized facet, Whitman, and its politicized facet, Abraham Lincoln, are violently set apart in the very act of assassination.

O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!

O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!

O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul. (Canto II: L. 3-5)

In "Song of Myself," these two facets are the Whitmanian Me and Not-Me. Also, as is the case with "Song of Myself," in which the poetic self is conceived as the transcendental self where both versions of the self allegorize the poetic process, in "Lilacs," this self is concerned with poeticizing America as text and context of the poem/self in process. Thus, what is at stake here is what Whitman calls "my soul." The Me-and-Not-Me logic that informs the Whitmanian poetic whole is to be found obsessively adhered to in his elegy. Within the lamenting and lamented Emersonian deep heart "the figure of Lincoln has, without Whitman's awareness, usurped the poet's agency of internal authority. Lincoln has become, in

symbolic terms, Whitman's soul, just as he had become the soul of the American nation throughout the Civil War". (Edmundson 1990, 474)

Lincoln "the great star" who illuminates America after a long period of slavery and war has passed away. As a result, Whitman's soul is disordered because of Lincoln's unnatural causes of death. In his poem, Whitman's and Lincoln's souls are related to all American souls which cannot find any rest. This overlapping between the soul of the poet and Lincoln's made Whitman's soul powerless and cannot free itself from the cloud. Whitman, as Eric L. Haralson confirms, has "shifted from the self to the other, or from the one to the many, he also shifted from emphasis on the body to a focus on the soul." (1998, 477)

A glimpse of this soul – or here, the American Self – transforming in a form of substitutions might be traced in the eleventh canto of the poem:

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?

And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,

To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes, With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright, With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air, With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific,

In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there, With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows, And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys, And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning. (Canto XI, L.1-11)

The poet here reminds people of Lincoln's leadership and how he united the North and the South once again. He has given some hints about the reunification when he says that among the pictures he will hang on the wall of Lincoln's tomb is one of "the South and the North in the light." He will also hang pictures of Manhattan, of tides and ships, the shores of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, the prairie grass and corn, and other scenes of nature.

This long catalogue of substitutions, as it is one of the characteristic features of the genre of elegy, is patently Whitmanian. It is part of Whitman's poetic endeavour to encompass the American holism within the atomism of the poetic process. What is more, it is, in part, the elegiac tendency to assimilate the object of mourning to the poetic vocation of the mourning subject where one is presented with "the reflexive position of the elegist, setting out to fill the emptiness of the memorial frame with adequate image not only of the departed but also of the mourner himself" (Cavitch 2007, 250). This frame, which is in need to be filled, also calls to mind the theatrical frame which, by makeshift movement, turns Lincoln the spectator of a human comedy into a victim-character in a national tragedy. By becoming so, he enters the realm of the poet's theatre, the poet who is now at a loss, having to represent his alter ego.

In his attempt at representing the personal and national grief in the aftermath of Lincoln's death, Whitman was faced with the dilemma of how to convey his sorrow in the moulds of traditional elegy. He even succumbed to writing inventories of the lexicon most customary in the elegiac poetry, trying to find proper expression to his "ineffable grief," to find the American grammar of loss to the "thought of him I love." This is so typical of Whitman, the language-maker who is so taken to cataloguing and to making inventories that metaphorically celebrate language, above all, and the potential of arresting the presence of the self lurking in its confinements. This tendency to language-making, furthermore, marks, Mutlu Konuk Blasing points out, the tendency to flight from objects and facts (Blasing 1982, 32) towards oblivion, towards death, where the soul flings its linguistic attire. In the Emersonian canon, this would be nothing other than being claimed by nature and the Over-Soul. This Whitmanian aesthetic lies at the heart of the poetic process of "Lilacs," which never figures Lincoln's name in its linguistic array, as he is finally claimed by nature, and as

his political death indicates the poetic death of the poet's voice. This is intimated in the opening lines of the poem:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd, And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night, I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring. Ever-returning spring, *trinity sure to me you bring*, Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west, And *thought of him I love*. (Italics mine) (Canto I: L. 1-6)

The "thought of him I loved" indicates both Lincoln and the poet's voice by the agency of which he could utter the diseased president's name. The trinity of the lilacs and the star and poet's voice under erasure is not complete yet. It needs the thrush's song.

The thrush appears in certain intervals in the subsequent cantos, to finalize the poem's symbolic action. Throughout the poem, the thrush, as a motif/symbol, proves to be central to the poetics of mourning in the text. Its kinship to Keats's Nightingale is not hard to follow, where the bird translates the Romantic poet's mystic desire of being "half in love with death." By the same token, the thrush in "Lilacs" is brought to the poet's elegiac choral: it is the Whitmanian Not-Me that should be integrated within the gigantic Me of the American self. Equally, the poet's voice under erasure should join the bird's carol in order for it to be heard. This process of integration, however, passes through stages ranging from hesitation to listening, acceptance, and comprehension of the thrush's song. The thrush is first introduced as singing solely:

In the swamp in secluded recesses, A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song. Solitary the thrush, The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements, *Sings by himself a song*.

Song of the bleeding throat, Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know, If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.) (Italics mine) (Canto IV: .L.1-8)

Whitman's feeling of hesitation to go with the thrush was only because of the star that reminds him of Lincoln. Hyatt H. Waggoner states that "this movement of hesitation, false starts, retreat, and promise to listen 'soon' gives the poem a dramatic interest" (Waggoner 1968, 178). The poet retreats from joining the thrush's song because he still sojourns in the silencing grief:

Sing on there in the swamp, O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call, I hear, I come presently, I understand you, But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me, The star my departing comrade holds and detains me. (Canto IX: L.1-5)

This reluctance on the part of the poet is kept swaying until the fourteenth canto of the poem when both the poet's elegiac choral and the bird's carol mesh together:

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,

The gray-brown bird I know *receiv'd us comrades three*, And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love. From deep secluded recesses, From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still, Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me, As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night, And *the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird*. (Italics mine) (Canto XIV, L.19-27)

As the bird's song "received us three," meaning the lilac, the star, and the thought of him the poet loves, the patterning of the symbolic action of trinity comes to its full signification. Only now is the presence of the lilac and the western star allowed to be a significant part in the larger scheme of the poet's language/elegy that has for its two facets the poet's thought/voice and the bird's song. To put in Charles Feidelson, Jr.'s words (1953, 22), the song of the bird and the thought of the poet, which also unites life and death, both lay claim to the third place in the 'trinity' brought by spring; they are, as it were, the actuality and *the possibility of the poetic utterance*, which reconciles opposite appearances. (Italics mine) With the italicized death song of the bird, the text of the funeral elegy rids itself of its

restraining linguistic attire and goes on floating where the poet's Me and No-Me of the transcendental self are finally united, as the voice of his spirit tallies with the song of the bird. After expressing his sadness for the death of Lincoln, Whitman ends up by saying that death is a friend that soothes man' suffering and pain, and culminates in what amounts to being an Emersonian epiphanic-compensatory note:

Come lovely and soothing death, Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving, In the day, in the night, to all, to each, Sooner or later delicate death. (Canto XIV, L. 28-30)

Through the delicacy of death thus conceived, one can easily trace Emerson's influence throughout Whitman's elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". Whitman poeticizes Emerson's pseudo-religious ideas about the Over-Soul and compensation. What is more, it is apt to say that in Whitman's hands, the American non-Puritan elegy comes to take shape as it partakes of the aforesaid Emersonian poetic religiosity. Also, Whitman significantly adds to the universal genre of grief as he widens the vistas of the American self through the lenses of his aesthetico-mystic sensibility.

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