

The Modern Elegy in English and Tamil

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Abstract

This paper purports to define an elegy as a formal and sustained poem of lament for the death of a poem making references to the poems of the notable poets like Tennyson, Auden, Gray in English and Kannadasan, Mudiarsan's *Irangar Paakkal* in Tamil and shows how the elegiac poems by English and Tamil poets have line of similarity in treatment of theme and content making it clear that in the modern elegies both in English and Tamil, the term 'elegy' has taken a limited scale meaning 'a song of lamentation' giving vent to philosophical elements and notes as seen rather richly in Auden's *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* and Mudiarsan and Kannadasan's *Irangar Pakkal*.

Keywords: W. H. Auden, *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, Mudiarsan and Kannadasan *Irangar Pakkal*, elegy, song of lamentation, sadness, philosophical element, treatment, limited scale, formal poem, similarity, modern age.

So far as present critical usage is concerned, an elegy is a formal and sustained poem of lament for the death of a particular person such as Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, on the death of Arthur Hallam and W.H. Auden's *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, Kavignar Kannadasan's and Mudiarsan's *Irangar Pakkal*, on the death of some leader or friend. Sometimes, the term is more broadly used for meditative poem such as Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, which deals with the passing of men and the things they value. Modern age is one in which news of tragedy and heroism circles the world with electric speed, in which the great legends of all lands are safely indexed upon literary shelves and in which the singing

strains of instrument and voice are impressed in wax for all men to renew at will and in which the traditions are gone with the wind.

Every age, perhaps sees its own time as crucial and full of perils but the problems and difficulties of our own age necessarily appear more urgent than those of any other and the need for an evaluating, clarifying poetry has never been greater than it appears to be today. Industrial changes have broken up the old culture based on an agricultural community in which the poor and the wealthy were alike concerned and on a church which bore a vital relation to the State. Parallel with this and related to it, there has been a decay of the old moral and religious order and a change on the basis of education which has become more and more strictly scientific. "Religion and classical learning, which once provided myths and legends symbolizing the purpose of society and the role of the individual, have declined and the disorder weighs heavily upon the serious poet, whether in England or America" (Roberts 8).

The significance of introducing this idea is that the condition stated above prevailed and still prevails all over. For instance, the Victorian Age was "an age of doubt and uncertainty as new scientific knowledge seemed to challenge traditional religious ideas". (Killbuck 211) Tennyson shared these doubts and part of his grief over Hallam's death stems from the fear that there is no God, no immortality and no meaning to life. 'The strong son of God, immortal love', with an invocation of whom the poem begins, has only a hazy connection with the Logos or the Incarnate God. Tennyson is distressed by the idea of a mechanical universe; he is naturally lamenting his friend, teased by the hope of immortality and reunion beyond death. Yet the renewal craved for, seems at best, but a continuance or a substitute for the joys of friendship upon earth. His desire for immortality never is quite the desire for Eternal Life; his concern is for the loss of man rather than for the gain of God.

It is a message of hope and reassurance to their rather fading Christian faith. It happens now and then a poet by some strange accident expresses the mood of his generation at the same time that he is expressing a mood of his own which is quite remote from that of his generation. This is not a question of insincerity; there is an amalgam of yielding and opposition below the level of consciousness. The beginning of the poem expresses the chill numbness of fresh grief which carries with it despair and the inability to respond to the recreative forces of the world. Though the poet believes that,

"Men may rise on steppingstones
of their dead selves to higher things"

and though by an exertion of the will he carried on, 'the sad mechanic exercise of writing', he is like the yew tree which remains sunk in gloom, oblivious of the passing seasons. Tennyson seems to have reached the end of his spiritual development within *Memorial*; there followed no reconciliation, no resolution. Tennyson faced neither the darkness nor the light in his later years. A gloomier end than that of Bandelaire, Tennyson had no singular advertisements. And having turned aside from the journey through the dark

night to become the surface flatterer of his own time, he has been rewarded with an age that succeeds his own in shallowness. The poem is the celebration of personal growth through sorrow and of the growth of the human race to a higher type which will understand the mysteries which have so filled the poet with darkening doubt. It is a long poem made by putting together lyrics which have only the unity and continuity of a diary, the concentrated diary of a man confessing himself. It is a diary of which all have to read every word.

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* has a thin line of similarity with Kavignar Mudiakaran's lament on the death of his five year old son. Though he is grieved by his son's death, he consoles himself by philosophising the transient nature of life. Life he compares to a notebook where the income and expenses are met, and life is a cycle of birth and death. This life cycle keeps moving throughout. "Life is a mixture of joys and sorrows and man has to realize this philosophy of life and continue his life in the world" (Tamilannal 22). Next, the poetry of Auden represents a sort of ABC of the poetry of the thirties – that is to say of 'The War Generation'" (Scarfe 11). Auden is more modern in all those elements which is purely social criticism would exalt: his poetry is a clearing-house for modern psychology and social doctrine. All that is latent in Eliot is seen developed and sometimes rotten ripe in him. In an age of muddle headedness from which such a penetrating mind as Eliot withdrew – blushing into the queasy bosom of Anglo-Catholicism, in an age of hypocrisy, fragments and wasted energies, Auden has been the only poet to attempt some kind of synthesis. "Auden's poetry has always been profoundly social concerned with man as a social creature at work and play in the twentieth century" (P 21). The chaos of the period between the two wars, he completely understood in his elegy on Yeats in 1939, when he wrote,

"Intellectual disgrace,
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye" (Roberts 238)

From the start the poet asserts no particular personal loss in the death of Yeats; at most, he may be among the few, 'the few thousand', who

"Will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did
something slightly unusual" (239).

In fact, the painful insistence of the poem is that this death has had and apparently can have little effect on the world. Robert Roth points out that Auden's means for developing the poem are 'anti-hyperbolio'. The whole poem is a 'conscious controversion' of the traditional consolations of the pastoral elegy. Nature is totally unaffected; its only reaction to Yeats' last day is recorded by impersonal weather instruments. It is purely coincidence that "the day of his death was a dark cold day". The social world with

the exception of the few thousand whose lives are slightly affected, remains the same: “the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed.” The dead man himself far from being ennobled by the poem is described as ‘silly like us’. Even his poetry cannot stand as a monument, for “the words of a dead man, are modified in the guts of living”. The initial sections of the poem deny that personal lives have impact on the world. This death and life that preceded it seem fruitless, for each man still lives “in the call of himself” (201).

The antiromantic debunking of traditional eulogy offers a hard comfort to the reader. The projected view of human life insists on very limited possibilities for human accomplishments. However, the reader is led to assent at least to the rigid honesty and accuracy of the poem’s assessment. Though the medium of that assent, Auden develops the universal significance of the death of Yeats, which is by implication the death of any poet, if not of any man. He insists that all men are actually trapped in a prison of limitations. Auden affirms that the poet has accomplished one thing – he has made it conceivable that man might freely choose to praise the life they have. Once this universal significance of language and its poetic use has been accepted, it constitutes the value of poetry and consolation for the death of a poet. The reader may be moved to feel personal gratitude for Yeats, whose poetry has been one of the particular agents, helping human beings to reorganize and rejoice in the true terms of their existence.

“Political poetry was that poetry which is concerned with the individual faced by an unprecedented crisis in the history of civilization” (Spender 270). Yeats was the modern master of that kind of poem and Auden’s elegy on his death is a great poem in the same tradition. Moving between private loss and public crisis, it brings the tragic past and the apocalyptic future together, and draws strength from that interaction; it is at once history and elegy, a work of art and a defense of art. It transforms calamity into celebration by an act of imagination and so affirms the survival of art in bad times. And if that survives, man survives too.

Like Auden’s poetry, Kavignar Kannadasan’s poetry does not have any implied meaning behind. He is plain and direct in his lamentation. We can categorize Kannadasan’s elegies into two. He has lamented for the death of his relatives as well as for others who are not related to him, they are both personal and impersonal. When Nehru died, Kannadasan sang an Irangarpa for him. His sorrow can never be measured, and he cries,

“O Rose dost thou flourish still,
When Nehru is not here to wear you?”

(Padmanaban 338)

In his personal elegies, he is seen at his zenith. The language he uses and the rhythm of his song intensify the melancholic mood. When his pet dog named Caesar died, he was so grief – stricken that he

wishes if there is a rebirth after death, he should be reborn like his dog Caesar. The reader also feels the tinge of sadness while reading the poem.

The elegies whether ancient or modern mean lamentation and the scope has not expanded but it has got a limited and narrow scope in the modern times. But philosophy occupies the one third of the modern elegies. Reality was bitter and the modern world which is empty, devoid of truth and spirituality was a terror to the poets. But they have to go along with the modern world. To seek refuge from this torture, philosophy was a medium and this medium has been widely used in Tamil and English modern elegies. Yet they impart a sense of sadness to the readers.

To conclude, in the modern elegies both in English and Tamil, the term ‘elegy’ has taken a limited scale and it means ‘a song of lamentation’ and the philosophic elements prevail rather richly in the modern elegies as seen in Auden’s *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* and Mudiarasana’s and Kannadasana’s *Irangar Pakkal*.

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