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**“The Grave Where Buried Love Doth Live”:**

**The Poetics of Mourning and Melancholia**

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE “DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY”

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# Abstract

Mosse le penne poi e ventilonne,

*Qui lugent* affermando esser beati,

ch’avran di consolar l’anime donne.

Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX, 49-51

… then moved his plumes,

And fanning us, affirmed that those, *who mourn*,

Are blessed, for that comfort shall be theirs.

The question of mourning is perhaps one of the most fundamental issues at the core of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Mourning is not only a response to the event of a beloved person’s actual death but can relate to all forms of loss or separation from beloved, or libidinally cathected objects. For example, one can mourn the loss of a relationship, a job or even an unfulfilled dream. Considering the prevalence of varying forms of loss in human life, both psychoanalytic theoreticians and practitioners have consistently returned to this topic in an attempt to find an answer to what Sigmund Freud called the great riddle of mourning. This dissertation focuses on the work of mourning in relation to the specific instance of a beloved object’s death, and more particularly, on the role of language and poetic creation therein. Here we ask: what essentially does it mean to mourn, poetically and psychoanalytically speaking? How exactly do poetic language and creation intervene in the subjective encounter with death, and what is their relation to the complex work of mourning? These questions will be explored primarily through the prism of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as other important theoreticians who have contributed to the theory of mourning and melancholia. The literary focus of this work will lie on what is considered the paradigm of poetic mourning, the genre of elegy, particularly in the English tradition.

The encounter with death is essentially an encounter with the real. This is because the death of someone beloved confronts the subject with their own death – what is so unbearable it cannot be represented even as unconscious and for this reason can appear only as a hole. This is an experience of pure horror, as it constitutes an unmitigated moment of contact with the real, as a hole suddenly opens up within the already gaping void that is the real. Artistic creation has been a primary means of defence against this unbearable encounter from the earliest moments of human history. By many accounts, the origins of architecture, sculpture and even dance are essentially funereal and in ancient Greece ceremonies of mourning and farewell to the dead are considered the most ancient and least changing artform. Traditional narratives of the origins of more specifically poetic inventions are similarly steeped in death and loss. For example, Orpheus’ introduction of song when mourning the dead Linus, Daphnis’ invention of pastoral poetry and Apollo’s derivation of the laurel, the sign of poethood. Through the study of poetic mourning, that is, through examining individual cases of mourning as crystallised in literary representation, I believe that we may come to a closer understanding of how the complex unconscious processes at work in the encounter with death function. Here I follow Lacan’s dictum in *Lituraterre*, according to which psychoanalysis does not approach literature to discover what it already knows, but to extract new knowledge regarding the enigmas that are its concern. Indeed, as Lacan so aptly notes in *Anxiety*, literature possesses the ability to demonstrate the functioning of unconscious life in an exceptionally precise manner, pinpointing what is otherwise fleeting and elusive in nature through its articulation in fiction.

The primary way in which this dissertation approaches the enigma of man’s relation to his own death is, as noted above, by examining cultural manifestations of mourning and of the encounter with death in literary works of art, and more particularly, in poetry. However, in order to truly explore the relation between death and language, as well as its connection to mourning, I believe it essential to first examine the rites and ceremonies surrounding death that have existed for millennia as a praxis invented by man to treat the unmitigated encounter with the real. Indeed, it is these ancient rites that underlie the various forms of poetic mourning we will examine, and it is thus vital that we first understand from whence and under what circumstances they arose.

In my **first chapter** I argue that the funerary in effect constitutes the clearest intervention of the symbolic order in the life of man, and it is therefore only through a close examination of ancient funerary practice that we may learn more about the operation of the symbolic and its mediation of the encounter with death. I choose to explore ancient Greek burial practice through its literary representation in texts such as Homer’s *Iliad* and most significantly, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, whose central concern is the issue of burial. Since there is very little direct evidence about funeral practice and lament as it was actually performed in ancient Greece, we rely primarily on representations of performed laments in the visual and verbal arts. These ancient texts are not only cornerstones of Western literature, but valuable resources which I use to explore the psychoanalytic significance of the ancient rites invented by man as a defence against the encounter with death, asking what they can teach us about practices of mourning at very early stages of human culture. My primary contribution in this chapter lies in isolating the two fundamental components of the funerary through my close readings of these ancient literary texts. I first demonstrate how the funerary binds the two core elements of the symbolic function: that of treating the real and that of inscription within the social bond. Following this, I show that what is at stake in what I isolate as the two essential components of the funerary is in effect the distinction between the signifier as written in the unconscious, and as spoken. That is, I demonstrate how the symbolic order makes its intervention in the encounter with death, on the one hand by means of writing that operates on the real and on the other hand by means of speech that is communal. What is more, I address several crucial theoretical questions, such as how speech can be conceived as an act of burial, how this form of burial is related to mourning and finally, why mourning is so closely tied to language.

In my **second chapter**, my inquiry moves on to a close examination of the genre of elegy. Since the role of language and poetic creation in the subjective encounter with death is this dissertation’s primary concern, it is only natural that elegy, considered the prototype of literary mourning, is to be a major focus of investigation. Here I will examine how exactly elegy as a poetic form is related to the ancient rituals surrounding death explored in the previous chapter. Indeed, the issue of elegy’s funereal origins is often skirted, omitted, or outright denied in most important studies of the genre in the English tradition. However, the question of poetic form and its origin cannot be addressed in isolation without examining its relation to ritual practice. This contention is especially relevant to a genre as ancient as elegy. One of the main tasks of this chapter is to thus provide an extensive historical overview and survey of the evolution of elegy in the English tradition, while assembling evidence from the field of classical studies to demonstrate the emergence of elegy from funerary practices of ritual lament. The second task of this chapter is to then give a detailed psychoanalytic account of this evolutionary process. This account will offer valuable insight into how and why this poetic form has endured over centuries of human culture as a primary means of treating the encounter with death and most notably, will isolate elegy’s mechanisms in systematic detail, further elucidating the relation between poetic creation and the work of mourning. In addition to the ancient elegies of Archilochus’ and Mimnermus, various laments from an array of ancient texts will be examined. Special focus will be placed on Andromache’s laments for Hector in the *Iliad*, Thetis’ laments for Achilles in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* respectively, the lament of Euripides’ Andromache, in addition to several Pindaric *Threnoi*.

This chapter essentially offers a radical new reading of the genre of elegy. Unlike previous studies of elegy in the English tradition, focus here is placed on elegy’s ancient origin in funerary practice. This approach allows for a new perspective on the genre, highlighting elements that have previously been overlooked, while also bringing its status as the genre of mourning and consolation into question. The findings of this chapter are also significant for psychoanalytic theory as the evolutionary process I trace in the cultural invention of elegy reveals something of the mechanism of mourning itself. My findings link the work of mourning to the sublimatory processes of artistic creation, viewing the progressive evolutionary iterations the genre underwent as a successive layering, with each symbolic stratum providing an increasingly intricate defence against the encounter with death. The theory of mourning is enriched through the reading of this poetic genre’s evolution, as it not only finds parallels between the process of art making and mourning but shows how poetry in particular serves as an imperative means by which human subjects have defended themselves against the encounter with death for millennia.

The **third chapter** of this dissertation takes this inquiry one step further by showing how the emergence of elegy delineated in chapter two directly influences later generic conventions of English funeral elegy in the Renaissance, widely viewed as the culmination of the genre. While, as we see in the previous chapter, the genre of elegy undergoes several sublimatory vicissitudes over the centuries, it is in the Renaissance that elegy’s ancient connection to the encounter with death comes to the fore once again, via the emergent genre of funeral elegy. Pastoral-elegy, one of the principal forms of funeral elegy in the English Renaissance is of particular interest, for here a fascinating fusion occurs between the genre of elegy and the pastoral mode. As a psychoanalytic investigation, we ask what we can learn from the genre of English pastoral-elegy considered by many to be the paradigm of literary mourning and consolation in the English tradition. What can the genre teach us about these subjective phenomena? What kind of mourning is this and exactly what consolation does it offer? Finally, what can these poems, oscillating between the palliative powers of elegiac poetry to treat the effects of the real and a fervent jouissance in the morbid fascination with death, teach us about the speaking being’s relation to its own mortality?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I conduct a psychoanalytic reading of the genre of English Renaissance pastoral-elegy, dividing its primary and secondary conventions into two separate categories. I discuss each category in depth, and further sub-divide them into groups related to separate psychic functions. This categorisation helps elucidate the relation of each generic convention to specific unconscious processes such as introjection and incorporation, and most importantly, helps to identify the overarching mechanism of the poetic text. That it to say, I delineate the specific way in which this poetic form intervenes in the encounter with death, its relation to the processes of mourning and the means by which it offers poetic consolation to the mourning subject. Special focus is placed on close textual analysis of three of the most important pastoral elegies in the English language, Edmund Spenser’s “November” eclogue from The Shepheardes Calender (1579), considered the first pastoral-elegy in English, Spenser’s elegy for Sir Philip Sidney “Astrophel” (1595), and John Milton’s “Lycidas” (1637), considered by many not only to be the greatest pastoral-elegy, but the greatest poem in the English language. What is more, I engage in close readings of those canonical Continental Renaissance pastoral-elegies that most influenced the genre in the English tradition and specifically the three primary texts by Spenser and Milton. This includes, for example, the pastoral-elegies of Castiglione, Sannazaro, Alamanni, Marot, Baïf and Ronsard. Emphasis is also placed on the ancient Greek and Latin pastorals by Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, and Virgil which are essentially the inspiration for all the Continental and English Renaissance pastoral- elegies examined in the chapter. In chapter three we will see that although critics consider funeral elegy, and pastoral elegy in particular, *the* genre of mourning and consolation, when viewed from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, many of the genre’s major conventions attest not to what may be deemed mourning proper in a psychoanalytic sense, but rather to a melancholic refusal to mourn or introject loss. The dual nature of mourning that becomes evident though this examination of the genre of pastoral-elegy helps further our understanding of how exactly poetry can be said to “mourn” or “console” in addition to shedding further light on parallels between the process of mourning and art-making. Indeed, the primary contribution of this chapter is to offer a precise explication of *how exactly* poetry can be said to “mourn” or “console”, by delineating the psychic mechanisms underlying the poetic work of mourning and how exactly these bring the subject consolation.

The final stage of my process of investigation is to ask what happens when a subject is unable to mourn? Indeed, to fully examine how poetic language and creation intervene in the subjective encounter with death we must also look to those instances where their ability to treat this horrific encounter is pushed to its utmost limits, and even to its very breaking point. To this end, in my **fourth chapter**, I turn to the poetry of Paul Celan, the Romanian-born Jewish German-language poet and Holocaust survivor, whose work constitutes a paradigmatic example of poetic mourning pushed to its limits. In Celan’s poetry, we see a subject faced not only with the death of a single beloved object but with a catastrophe that obliterated millions who for him were kin. Moreover, unlike the texts we examine in the first three chapters of the dissertation, where the dead are mourned by some kind of funerary ritual, or at the very least receive burial in a tomb that bears a name, Celan’s poetics, particularly in their early phase, offer a unique opportunity to examine how those who have received neither funerary rites nor a grave may possibly be mourned. Bereft of the protection offered by the funerary and its signifying rites, Celan’s work helps to ask what poetry can do in the face of catastrophe, and how, if at all, it can function as a defence against such unspeakable horror.

In this chapter, it will be argued that despite certain characteristics of elegy, Celan’s earliest work may be viewed as a distinct literary mode of response to death, which I call “poetic burial”. This early mode may be conceived as a poetic equivalent of the burial rites and ceremonies which have existed for millennia to treat the real of death by means of language. I show that, having been deprived of the chance to perform even the most basic rituals surrounding death for those he lost in the Shoah, in his earliest poetry Celan attempts to bury the dead through language, making a grave in writing for all that he lost and in so doing, poetically conferring the dignity of burial on those from whom it was taken. While the mode of poetic burial characterises Celan’s earliest work, its protective function gradually begins to collapse over time, and tragically, ultimately fails. Traces of this progressive fragmentation begin to appear from the time of *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (*From Threshold to Threshold*) onward. However, the breakdown of the attempt at poetic burial can be most clearly located in Celan’s next collection of poetry, 1959’s *Sprachgitter* (*Speech-Grille*). Here the ability to operate on the real through the praxis of poetic burial clearly deteriorates and those same elements which once veiled the hole in existence become charged with full libidinal force. That is, the signifying veils that once created distance – the flowers, stones, stars and other fragments from which the poetic tomb was forged – progressively take on a real value and we are witness to the very disintegration of the symbolic into the real. While in the evolutionary development of elegy explored in the previous chapters we saw a progression over time from scream to lament, to elegy, in Celan’s later poetics we see the reverse: what may be deemed “elegiac” in his earlier work quickly turns into agonised lament and ultimately falls silent. This chapter will attempt to trace the trajectory of the distinct literary mode of response to death found in Celan’s early work, identified here as “poetic burial”, as it progressively deteriorates over time. This reading will offer an opportunity to examine the action of poetic burial in retrospect, allowing us to observe not only what was there but how it was created, precisely because it comes apart.

The four chapters of this dissertation may be seen as four steps or stages in attempting to decipher the great enigma of mourning. The movement they trace extends from the examination of ancient cultural practices surrounding death to their evolution and development into some of the most intricate and finely-wrought pieces of literary art. The last stage of this process explores what happens when the cultural and artistic practices implemented throughout the ages by man to defend himself against the encounter with death crumble. The chapters of this work thus attempt to provide a comprehensive account of how poetic language and creation intervene in the encounter with death, both in instances where this intervention is successful as well as in those instances where it fails.