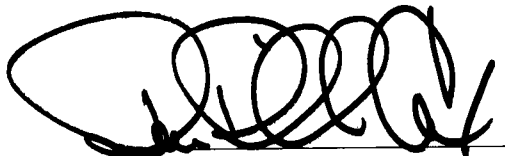


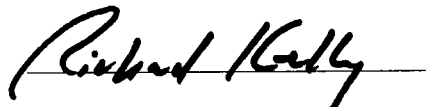
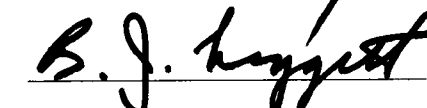
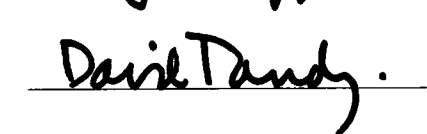
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Frances Elaine Oswald entitled "The Melody Lingers On: The Persistence of the Elegy in British Poetry." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don R. Cox", written over a horizontal line.

Don R. Cox, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lew Mink", written over a horizontal line.

Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of The Graduate School

**THE MELODY LINGERS ON:
THE PERSISTENCE OF THE ELEGY IN BRITISH
POETRY**

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Frances Elaine Oswald

August 1998

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children
Elizabeth Rosemary Oswald and William Edward Oswald,
and to my husband Peter William Oswald.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people to whom I am grateful for making my time at the University of Tennessee so rewarding. I have benefitted greatly from knowing the faculty and graduate students in the English Department over the last seven years and hope that these relationships will endure.

I am particularly grateful to my dissertation committee for their detailed, generous, and imaginative commentaries on my work. I owe more than I can say to Don Cox, my dissertation director, whose editorial incisiveness and writer's eye helped me to articulate my ideas on paper and to strive for greater clarity. My work has improved beyond my greatest hopes under his perceptive tutelage. Dr. Cox has been an invaluable mentor who has never failed to extend wise and patient advice and to urge me on to further intellectual challenges. From Richard Kelly I learned to appreciate the humor of the Victorians and the rhythms of their poetry. His own penetrating wit and cheerfulness helped to sustain me throughout this somber topic. Bob Leggett introduced me to the elegies of W. S. Merwin and has been an enthusiastic supporter of this project from its inception. In his classes, he taught me to value modern poetry. Dr. Tandy offered his support and unique insight into both the classical view of elegies and the anthropological side of death. I value the intelligence and generosity of this committee more than I can say.

It is a pleasure to record my gratitude to the staff of the English Department, who have been a source of encouragement and delight. Dinah Brock has kept me organized as well as encouraging me to take time to cultivate the roses in my garden. Lisa Lance, who always manages to remain

calm and serene in trying times, has been gracious in arranging teaching schedules that gave me time to write and think. Chana Bird and Laura Curd listened to my woes and kept me smiling. I am grateful to all of them for their patience and their instantaneous responses to my many requests.

Lastly, my gratitude goes to my family without whose help and encouragement I never would have reached this moment. My husband Peter had complete faith in me and did not seem to mind living among stacks of books and papers while I was preoccupied with works of death. He has been my most steadfast supporter. My daughter Liz kept me sane by commiserating with me and offering words of support during bleak periods of composition and revision, and my son Will has kept my computer running smoothly and helped me to see the humorous side of life.

My debts to all these people are large. George Bernard Shaw once said that there are only two sorts of people in the world; I am fortunate in that I live and work with the best kind of people.

ABSTRACT

Recent studies of the elegy have focused on psychoanalytical approaches. Researchers have identified the movement from the traditional form of the genre to the "anti-elegiac" form of the twentieth century, and they have read the elegy in terms of Freudian psychology. Psychoanalytic theory provides a framework for understanding the work of mourning performed in the elegy, and researchers have concluded that the modern elegy is characterized by a "melancholic" mode of mourning that refuses to accept substitutions for loss through which the normal process of mourning restores psychic help.

What has not been previously identified, however, is the changing nature of the consolation provided by the elegy in a period of rapid, cultural change. The last two centuries have seen radical changes, both social and intellectual, in British culture, including the nineteenth-century "death of God," and the repressed grief of the twentieth century. Yet, in this century of mass deaths, there is a peculiarly modern need for elegies, and the poetic form continues to provide consolation for the bereaved (along with other new cultural forms of mourning such as the Vietnam Veterans memorial, the Holocaust Museum, and the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt).

The connection between literature and society is analyzed through the exploration of the changing conventions of the traditional elegy as reflected by five different poets from 1800 to the present. The study analyzes the poems that these elegists wrote to commemorate the deaths of family members and

also documents how the elegists coped with grief and in what circumstances they decided to write elegies.

The work of William Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Dylan Thomas, and Seamus Heaney is examined to establish how each one takes up the role of elegist and attempts consolation in the face of death. It becomes apparent that it is the very process of ordering sorrow into a work of art that becomes the consolation and that the finding of poetic form coincides with the victory over grief. There has been a change, however, in the way that modern poets see the function of elegies. It becomes apparent, from Hardy onwards, that poets question their own motivations in writing elegies and see ethical dilemmas in writing elegies. Yet, their songs continue even while they debate their role in commemorating the dead. The elegy, a poetic genre since classical times, has evolved with the culture itself and now reflects the poet's preoccupation with unanswerable questions, rather than providing platitudinous consolation for the bereaved. Paradoxically, however, the elegy does provide consolation, by articulating the matters of life and death as well as by commemorating the dead.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. Grave Monuments: The Elegy as the Art of Grief	1
2. William Wordsworth	20
3. Emily Jane Brontë	50
4. Thomas Hardy	77
5. Dylan Marlais Thomas	107
6. Seamus Justin Heaney	131
7. Melting Melodious Words	160
Bibliography	173
Vita	184

Chapter One

Grave Monuments: The Elegy as the Art of Grief

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

(Shelley, "To Jane: The Invitation")

The singer of elegy is one who questions the nature of loss and of mankind's response to mortality. Of necessity, the poet stands on the outside of communal celebrations and, instead, contemplates death in a solitary and personal manner. In *Table Talk*, 23 October 1833, Samuel T. Coleridge describes elegy as "the form of poetry natural to the reflective mind," and traditionally the writing of an elegy is an act that signifies admittance of the poet-initiate to the highest ranks. As an ancient literary genre, the elegy can be traced from "Ionia to Sparta to Athens to Alexandria" (Potts 48) and has its own identifiable themes and devices. The conventions include pastoral contextualization, myths of vegetation gods, praise of the dead, reiterated questions, outbursts of anger, a procession of mourners, and finally, a movement from grief to consolation, aided by traditional images of resurrection. Perhaps originating in the fertility rituals, the lamentation and tributes provide therapeutic benefits to the living who offer them. In *By Mourning Tongues*, Eric Smith explains why the dead were buried with appropriate rituals:

If it was essential that the departed be seen to achieve the reward of their merits, the recognition of their powers,

either through annual celebration to an influence believed to be still existing, or in an afterlife of eternal bliss, it was also by doing justice to the dead, even propitiating them, that the mourners achieved a readjustment to everyday life. (10)

As well as providing therapy for the bereaved, the elegy has also served as a memorial to the dead, inviting comparison with more tangible structures. Indeed, early elegies included mention of building tombs that would be similar to such monuments as the Pyramids and the Taj Mahal. For instance, in Virgil's "Eclogue V," the shepherds are to construct a tomb with an epitaph (Smith 10). Later, the elegy itself became the physical monument to the dead and thus served two functions, both as the therapeutic contemplation of loss and as a memorial to the dead.

Surprisingly, the elegiac mode still plays a substantial role in English poetry today, even though western society is said to be a culture where death is a taboo subject. According to many social scientists, the twentieth century has seen the neglect of death and its attendant rituals. Freud observes that although World War I made society more aware of death, paradoxically, the War's long-term effect was to hasten the "dying of death" (*Thoughts for the Times*, 14:291). By the sixties, social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer was concurring that death had been suppressed in what he calls "the denial of mourning" (128). Gorer concludes that

Today it would seem to be believed, quite sincerely, that sensible, rational men and women can keep their mourning under complete control by strength of will or character so that it need be given no public expression, and indulged if

at all, in private as furtively as if it were an analogue of masturbation. . . .

. . . Giving way to grief is stigmatized as morbid, unhealthy, demoralizing--very much the same terms are used to reprobate mourning as were used to reprobate sex. . . . Mourning is treated as if it were a weakness, a self-indulgence, a reprehensible bad habit instead of a psychological necessity. (130-31)

Yet, in direct contradiction to this theory of the "denial of mourning," the end of the century has seen a resurrection of mourning rituals, at least for public figures. The year that gave birth to this study saw the deaths of three public figures: Italian fashion designer Gianni Versace, British princess Diana, and Yugoslavian nun Mother Teresa. It seemed that, in the eyes of the media at least, the whole world mourned for these prominent figures. Their funerals were televised, floral tributes poured in, and notable singers composed and sung elegiacal songs at the funerals of each one. The year of nineteen hundred ninety-seven seemed to be the end of an era, as media presenters wondered who would replace these three figures, each of whom was unique in his or her own way. In a manner reminiscent of the ancient tomb builders, the bereaved sought to construct memorials to these figures: the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York mounted an exhibition of Versace's designs, the Pope considered the sanctification of Mother Teresa, and a memorial trust fund was initiated in Diana's name.

In 1997, it seemed that what Freud describes as "the work of mourning" was topical. As I researched the nature of the elegy, I began to see firsthand

that people need to mourn and then to memorialize their dead. In Britain, where millions seemed to regard the loss of Diana as a personal tragedy, media commentators assured us that the people *needed* to mourn for the loss of their princess. Grief therapists appeared on television advising us how Diana's children should be taught to handle their sorrow, and how the public should work through their own desolation. An electronic condolence book was initiated for the first time at Buckingham Palace so that mourners could express their grief publicly. Thousands of years after the first rites of mourning were inscribed, it seems that our society has still not outgrown its need to mourn publicly for its dead heroes and then to immortalize them.

Since the first Neanderthal person was buried in a grave, we have continued to memorialize our dead with gravestones or other markers, which include words written for the dead. Poets have always remembered their dead with a tribute of words, while countries honor their dead by erecting statues or monuments. Within the last few years, America has constructed three different memorials that combine both words and visual symbols. The Holocaust Museum commemorates the Jewish victims of the Nazis in World War II, and its most moving image is the vast pile of shoes symbolizing all the many people who were sent to the gas chambers. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which is simply a black wall engraved with the names of military personnel who died in Vietnam, stands starkly refusing to offer comfort. The growing number of deaths of AIDS victims has led to another type of memorial, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. This quilt, hand stitched from patches of clothing that the dead once wore and containing evocative possessions that they had once used (such as sheet music and books), carpeted the ground from

the Capitol to the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, a distance of over one mile. While we ostensibly reject the visible mourning symbols of the Victorians, such as black armbands and mourning jewelry, we still appear to crave these outward signs of anguish. The mourners who lamented the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa felt compelled to show their sorrow by leaving floral tributes in places connected to the deceased. In Britain, the fortitude of the Royal family was called into question as the media urged Queen Elizabeth and her family to *show* that they suffered from Diana's death. It seems that there has been a proliferation of sites where those who grieve can be seen to express their sorrow by leaving tributes, floral or otherwise, to remember their dead. In the electronic age, there are even cyberspace cemeteries¹ that serve as memorials where the bereaved can post tributes to the dead, including such things as photographs and audio clips.

Despite the evidence of such widespread public mourning, however, there still seems to be a taboo about death and open mourning. Often, the dead in our society are buried within three days and the bereaved return to work after a quick funeral. While our culture still allows a more open display of public mourning in sanctioned cases, the individual is not encouraged to languish privately in mourning. Whereas Queen Victoria could go into mourning for half a century when she was widowed, today a widow must often return to work and to normal life after the funeral.

So, how can the personally bereaved come to terms with their grief and mourn for their dead? It may be that they turn to the elegist, the one who contemplates death and verbalizes his or her reflections. Poets have always

¹ Virtual Memorials can be found at <http://www.virtual-memorials.com>

known that an artifact created from grief can become a work of art that will help other mourners. English poetry has a strong elegiac tradition, from the Old English warrior who lamented the loss of his *comitatus* in "The Wanderer," through Milton's "Lycidas," Shelley's "Adonais," Tennyson's "In Memoriam," and Arnold's "Thyrsis," and finally to the magnificent elegies of Geoffrey Hill. When grief is made visible, either in words or other representations, then it becomes universal. In such a way, elegies, as well as other symbols of grief, provide a catharsis. People are suddenly given license to weep and mourn, as if all the unconsolated losses of their own private lives are allowed to rise to the surface. One might say that some people are unable to express the personal sorrow they feel until a suitable occasion for mourning arises. The finding of a suitable form for a memorial coincides with the defeat of grief, and the finished work helps to triumph over grief. Elegies are one of the art forms that help the bereaved shed the "melodious tear," as Milton expresses it in "Lycidas." Although the search for consolation is the ostensible subject of an elegy, it is the very process of ordering grief into a work of art that becomes the consolation because the finding of form seems to converge with the defeat of grief.

As well as mourning for our dead, we seek to commemorate and immortalize them as we ourselves would hope to be remembered. Mankind's greatest fear seems to be that of becoming extinct, that nobody will miss one after death. A modern poet, Philip Larkin, addresses this fear in "Aubade," when he concludes that what we fear is

The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,

Not to be anywhere,

And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

Monuments are there to remind us; they serve as memorials for the dead, but so also do elegies. The creation of poems to commemorate the dead represents the production of an expressive monument in words. Like writing elegies, reading them is more than an academic exercise; it is also what W. David Shaw refers to as a "life-and-death-issue" (7). When death inflicts wounds on us, elegists can help perform the "work of mourning" that Freud says is essential to healthy recovery. Monuments to the dead, whether in the form of words, flowers, stone, or fabric help us to affirm that our fragile lives do not fall totally into nothingness.

This study will explore the changing nature of the elegy over the last two hundred years. Several issues are perturbing to modern writers, who seek to question their own motives in writing elegies and thus creating monuments to the dead. For instance, in the past, elegies such as "Lycidas" and "Thyrsis" were written to commemorate the deaths of fellow-poets, and they involve questions of inheritance and vocation as well as formulating the ambitions of the poet. Celeste M. Schenck suggests that the conventional male elegy lifts the dead poet "out of the successor's way" (1986, 15) and empowers the elegist as a worthy successor. While this study does not explore these particular elegies, possibly written to enhance the poets' careers, it does take note of the similar concerns of modern elegists.

The study concentrates upon elegies that have been written in the face of extremely personal loss. Ben Jonson's elegy "To His First Son," written after the death of his seven year-old son, was the catalyst for this dissertation.

Jonson's magnificent tribute to his child, with its technically perfect lines written in an extremely disciplined form, has always intrigued me. The elegy is formed from rhyming couplets and a smooth rhythm that does not falter, apart from line five, when the grief of the father overcomes that of the poet, and Jonson cries: "O could I lose all father now!" The distinction between a father, one who is in mourning, and a poet, one who can create art from sorrow, is the question that precipitated my research. Seamus Heaney, whose work is explored in chapter six, describes this dichotomy as the conflict between "song and suffering."

In the latter part of this century, it becomes apparent that poets are unwilling to profit poetically from their grief. Perhaps this idea becomes more tangible if we look at songwriter and singer Elton John's tribute to Princess Diana and the millions of dollars he raised from subsequent recordings. John donated the proceeds to charity because he was unwilling to be seen to profit from his friend's death. While poets may not make as great a financial gain from their elegies, they are still reluctant to make an artistic bonus. Being wordsmiths, their dilemma is wrought on the page in the words of their trade. Over the last two hundred years, we have seen a transition from the elegy that was expected of a poet as part of his path to becoming a hierarch to the elegy that is wrenched from the modern poet, almost against his or her will.

If a grieving poet is able to shed "melodious tears" and create a work of art out of his mourning, then the next question that worries modern poets is the one of motivation. Why would a poet need to elegize his dead? Modern poets are troubled by this very question and the whole issue of their making poetic

profit from grief. Perhaps W. S. Merwin poses the question most succinctly in his fragmented *Elegy* (1970). Merwin's elegy vanishes into the blank page:

Who would I show it to

When we consider the question of what use an elegy is in the twentieth century, we unearth questions about the disappearance of rituals of death and mourning, about the consolation that the bereaved are seeking, and about the ethics of putting one's grief on public display.

The answers reveal that the function of elegy has altered radically in the twentieth century. Traditionally, the function of elegy was to lament, to praise, and to console. Lamentation is a custom that has always accompanied bereavement, whether as a quiet and private emotion, or as a noisy ritual of keening and wailing. The roots of keening go back to a time when it was thought that noisy articulation of grief would wake the dead. We still lament our dead, but we tend to do it more circumspectly now that the whole panoply of funeral rituals is gone. (For instance, first the symbols of death, such as black clothing and black-bordered writing paper, disappeared. Then the rituals, such as a period of seclusion for the bereaved, began to follow in their wake.) In the same manner, the function of praise in the elegy has undergone some change. Praising the dead by idealizing them is no longer desirable. Rather, we now prefer to recognize the faults of our dead and mourn them nonetheless. The death of someone whom we love is seen as a tragedy, even though he or she was merely human with normal faults. Yet, consolation may be the function of elegy that has changed the most. Religion used to console the bereaved, but now many people do not believe that death is the beginning of a better life. None of the five poets examined in this study uses the Christian idea

of an afterlife as consolation for the ending of this life here on earth. Rather, the poets, like modern authors of other genres, tend to leave the reader with unanswered questions. Elegies do not present us with consolation and say that the problem is solved. Rather, they present us with the quest itself. The process of building the monument to the dead becomes the consolatory act, one that is therapeutic and cathartic. It seems that the *singing* of the song becomes the ultimate memorial rather than the *song* itself.

This dissertation discusses the elegies of five major British poets, and is arranged chronologically. With each of the poets, their mourning and grief is plain; yet each of them has faced some dilemma in writing of that grief. The study seeks to establish how and why modern poets create this "life-and-death" art form, and how its consolations can be made to seem reasonable to readers living now. The creation of the elegy as an artifact produced by grief is both an homage to the dead and an assertion of his or her existence, so each chapter of this study examines a death in the poet's family, how that poet would have mourned for the deceased, and why that poet came to create an elegy for the deceased. This dual role of the elegy as memorial and self-expression is crucial, so my analysis explores both the linguistic style and the cultural context of the elegy, and also the means of consolation that the poet tries to extract from what is, paradoxically, inconsolability.

Without the writings of earlier critics of the elegy, my exploration would have been impossible, and specific debts are mentioned in each chapter. I have drawn upon diverse studies, some of which share my interests, and others that stop short of some crucial point in the concerns of this work. In

particular, I have been inspired by the following studies that relate to my interests.

Peter Sacks' seminal study *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* has been a wonderfully detailed source of information about the elegy. In his departure from traditional studies of the elegy that describe the form rather than interpret it, Sacks uses psychoanalytical theory to read the elegies of ten poets and he concludes that compensatory mourning is the psychic basis of their elegies. [From Sacks' perspective, the poet compensates for loss and works through mourning by creating an elegy. Though my study shares many of Sacks' interests, it departs from his work in several ways. Most obviously, this study covers a different time period of poetry in that it is focused on the last two hundred years. I use the poetry of Wordsworth, Brontë, Thomas, and Heaney; whereas, Sacks does not read anything later than Yeats (although he suggests several later American poets who could be studied), and his example of Romantic poetry is from Shelley. Another path of departure from Sacks is that my study does not solely concentrate on psychoanalytical theory. On the contrary, I explore the context of the cultural attitudes to mourning that elicit the writing of elegies.]

Another psychoanalytical critic who picks up where Sacks leaves off is Jahan Ramazani, in his *Poetry of Mourning*. Challenging Sacks, Ramazani contends that the twentieth-century elegy is based upon melancholic mourning rather than a more healthy, compensatory mourning. Ramazani's theory is that the modern elegist resists consolation; in Freud's terminology, the poet seeks to "reopen the wounds" of loss rather than to "heal" them. Starting with Hardy's elegies, Ramazani veers away from the traditional canon to include elegists

such as Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Amy Clampitt, Langston Hughes, Michael Harper, and John Berryman. Once again, I absorb Ramazini's findings with interest but find that my own path leads into the cultural context that surrounds the writer of elegies. To me, the difference between compensatory mourning and melancholic mourning lies within the individual writer and is intricately woven into his or her cultural contexts, as well as being reflected in his or her linguistic style.

Celeste Marguerite Schenk has written an interesting study that includes elegies in *Mourning and Panegyric: The Poetics of Pastoral Ceremony*, which has proved to be a stimulating thesis. [Schenk contends that there is some overlap between elegiac and epithalamic genres and that the point where they meet is in the theme of consolation] Using the archetypal figure of Orpheus, Schenk reads poems as "initatory moments" wherein the poet descends and then is reborn into a new passage of life. Beginning with classical elegies and ending with Romantic ceremonial lyrics, Schenk contends that poems either evolve consolation by denying loss, or they create compensation for loss. While Schenk's thesis is an interesting study of where genres intersect, it does not offer a critical reevaluation of the elegy as such, and I have interpreted her "initatory moment" as being the time when grief has been overcome because of the writing of an elegy.

Moving into the field of semiotic criticism, I have been intrigued by the work of W. David Shaw. In his *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* Shaw argues that the elegy is what J. L. Austin calls "performative" (1962, 25). Performative language brings into being the state of affairs it professes to describe. Shaw gives an example of this "doing-by-saying" as being the

mourner's resolution to return to "fresh Woods, and Pastures new" in Milton's "Lycidas." By uttering his intention of continuing with life, the narrator will make his recovery a reality. Shaw's detailed, scholarly work also examines the linguistic paradoxes that comprise the elegies of such diverse poets as Milton, Arnold, Wordsworth, Rossetti, Dickinson, Tennyson, and Geoffrey Hill. He finds the paradoxes of elegy to be inherent in elements such as consolation/inconsolability; remembering/forgetting; certainty/uncertainty; and, of course, death/life. Shaw blends the critical theory of Foucault, Kristeva, and Todorov in this remarkable book, but paradoxically he admits that the study of elegies needs critics who can also bring historical scholarship into their work--critics whom he calls "bridge-builders" (245). Shaw concludes his work with the statement:

I want to reaffirm the view that the most important aesthetic decision an elegist can make is to identify, not with consolations that are conventionally available to the mourner, but with the uncertainties of a puzzled and questioning reader, looking perhaps for the first time into the eyes of death or grappling with other limitations. (246-47)

It is my hope that in this brief study of five elegists, my role has been that of "bridge-builder," albeit that I began as a "puzzled and questioning reader," and that I have managed to combine an aesthetic appreciation of elegy with an exploration of the historical background that will further the approach suggested by Shaw.

In order to research the socio-historical background of the poets and in order to establish what death meant to them and how they dealt with it by

writing elegies, I used primary sources in the form of journals and correspondence. In the case of Wordsworth and of Seamus Heaney, they had also written extensively about the act of writing poetry, and to a lesser extent about death. I am grateful to the biographers and editors who have compiled the corpus of work about each poet and their research will be quoted within the chapters on individual poets.

Other historical researchers provided me with the tools to place myself in the past in an effort to understand those who lived in bygone times. Esther Schor's work *Bearing the Dead* is a useful study of mourning in Britain, from the Enlightenment to the reign of Victoria. As a new historicist, she puts several literary works in the context of the intellectual conditions and social movements in which they took shape. Schor, however, departs from the elegy to focus upon the mourning found in ephemeral texts such as sermons, political pamphlets, funeral orations, and philosophical treatises. Taking issue with psychological accounts of mourning, such as those by Sacks and Ramazani, Schor suggests that they interpret mourning as "a discourse between the living and the (imagined) dead," whereas her cultural account interprets mourning as a discourse among the living. Although Schor makes use of some elegies in her work, she reads them as political texts, and this study departs from her historicist criticism in order to blend cultural and psychological accounts.

Among social histories of the period in question, I have studied several works on the culture of mourning. John Morley's *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* is a well-researched and illustrated account of how the Victorians dealt with death. Morley investigates funerals, cemeteries, sepulchers, and mourning dress and etiquette in the light of what he sees as hypocrisy. To

Morley, there was a large divide between the Victorian private acts of individuals and the public performances, which he sees as "pretentious." While Morley frequently uses the writings of the Victorians to further his argument, he does not focus on literary texts. His work therefore supplements my background knowledge of funeral and mourning customs.

More widespread studies of death and its place in society are two books by Philippe Ariès, a historian who has charted the changing attitudes towards death in Western societies since the Middle Ages. Ariès is convinced that in the twentieth century attitudes towards death have been changed by the effects of American culture. In his study *Western Attitudes toward DEATH*, Ariès pursues this line of thought and concludes that the way of dying has moved from a passive acceptance of destiny and an indifference to the death of the individual, through a society that lamented the death of each individual, and finally into a society where death is unmentionable. He says that the cult of mourning that obsessed the nineteenth century was an "eloquent decor of death" (106) that faded from its prominent place. Now, adds Ariès, the dying are treated inhumanely, and the bereaved are paralyzed and inhibited.

Ariès expands the work of the previous volume into his extensive study that has now become a classic of thanatology, *The Hour of Our Death*, which involved fifteen years of researching funerary customs from the last thousand years. He has pored over clerical documents and wills as well as literary texts for this study, which discovers the background of common ideas, or the ideologies that create the cultural attitudes to death. Again, Ariès' work does not specifically look at elegies, but has proved to be invaluable background reading for a contextual study of the elegy.

Moving away from Ariès' thanatological study and the social histories of the period compiled by both Schor and Morley, Michael Wheeler examines the eschatology inherent in Victorian literature in *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*. Wheeler explores how the questions associated with death, judgment, heaven, and hell are shared by some particular writers, including Tennyson, Dickens, Newman, and Hopkins. I am indebted to Wheeler for his careful demarcations of the deathbed and graveyard scenes into "horizontal" and "vertical" dimensions that mark the point of dying. The transitions between living and dying, or from a "horizontal" plane to a "vertical" one, are the ones that are eased by the social customs and funerary rituals that abounded in the last century.

Because the work of Freud influenced the psychoanalytical critics whom I read, as well as the contemporary thanatologists who study death and dying, and the psychologists who study the effects of mourning, my research would not have been complete without reading "Mourning and Melancholia." Other essays by Freud are mentioned where appropriate.

A critic who has almost followed the approach that I have taken, one that combines biography, history, poetics, and psychology is G. W. Pigman in his *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy*. What he has done with Surrey, Spenser, Jonson, King, and Milton, I have tried to do with five later poets. Pigman argues that changes in mourning began to occur in the sixteenth century and were reflected in elegies, letter-writing treatises, and moral-theological tracts. He focuses on the grief expressed in poems and interprets elegies as either containing "blocked mourning" or "uninhibited sorrow." As well as inspiring my work, Pigman also provides a comprehensive account of

how the stages of mourning (described by contemporary psychologists) can be used in reading literary texts of the pre-Freudian age. While Pigman, however, comes closest to my concerns, he is a Renaissance scholar who does not share my interest in the nineteenth and twentieth-century poets.

My exploration of the poets' lives and their elegies uses the methods of authorities in various fields. There are many studies of the elegy, and I am indebted to the researchers who have attempted to define and delineate this literary form. Most of the critics of elegy realize that the corpus is vast and inexhaustible and they suggest where they have left omissions in their research. I, too, make no attempt to suggest that I have explored all the ramifications of life and death. Like death itself, the elegy is contradictory and uncertain, and in my extensive reading I was frequently left with imponderables. My research is an attempt to weave together several methodologies and to apply them to poets who have not been yoked together previously. While there have been many studies of the elegy, the work of this dissertation has not been duplicated by a prior study that combines both psychological and socio-historic methods. Neither have these particular poets been yoked together in any previous studies.

The dissertation begins in the early nineteenth century, with William Wordsworth. Central to the early nineteenth century is the cultural impact of loss of faith in a Newtonian universe and the corresponding lack of religious consolation. Because the Romantic age also saw the rise of subjectivity and the concept of the self in literature, we are able to explore how Wordsworth's elegies exemplify the dual role of memorial and self-expression. The copious writings of both William and Dorothy Wordsworth enable research into how

they handled their grief at the loss of family members as well as a record of William's process of composing poetry.

Emily Brontë is the next poet to be examined, and her work seems to be the precursor for much modern elegy in its use of silence, ellipses, and white spaces. Brontë's unique experimentation with linguistic form provides the basis of her search for consolation and need to overcome her grief over the loss of many family members. Like Wordsworth, Brontë found solace from other places than the church, but, she also represents a contrast to Wordsworth as the public Poet Laureate in that she did not intend her poems to be read by others.

Thomas Hardy represents the beginning of the twentieth century and exemplifies the modern elegist, who, without faith in an afterlife and any absolute certainties, seeks to record his perplexity and lack of certainty rather than seek false consolations. Like Wordsworth and Brontë, he finds that particular localities help him to commemorate his dead, but, unlike them, Hardy questions his motives in writing elegies.

Halfway through the twentieth century, after two world wars, Dylan Thomas writes what are now commonly called his "anti-elegies" because of their refusal to seek consolation. Thomas is a self-conscious elegist whose gaze is continually fixed on himself as the bereaved mourner who stands over the coffin, but he is also the one who can construct an artifact that will serve as a gravestone in immortalizing his dead. Yet, perhaps more so than the other poets studied, Thomas's elegies tend toward the self-reflexive rather than the commemorative.

Bringing the reader right up to the end of the twentieth century, the last poet in the study, Seamus Heaney, seeks to break the silence of the dead. To

Heaney, the dead have died without knowing why and he wants them to wake and tell their stories. Perhaps he is bringing back the original purpose of lamentation, which was to wake the dead. It seems that with Heaney's interrogation of the dead, the reader has come full circle back to the nineteenth century, when the bereaved were desperate to penetrate the veil that divided the living from the dead in order to be reunited with them.

Although the poetic style of these five elegists differs, they have at least two things in common. Each poet may be considered as regional since he or she is usually associated with a particular locale: Wordsworth and the Lake District, Brontë and the Yorkshire moors, Hardy and the West country, Thomas and South Wales, and Heaney and Ireland. The atmosphere of these places resonates through their poems and goes hand-in-hand with memories of their dead. Also, none of these poets is conventionally religious; i.e., they do not obtain any consolation for death from churchgoing.

While this series of readings may be seen as a coherent historical progression, the work of these poets may not necessarily be exemplary of their times, but may merely be a signpost leading toward further research. The "life-and-death" work of reading and critiquing elegies will continue to be an individual performance.

Chapter Two

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

A long half-hour together I have stood
Mute--looking at the grave in which he lies!
(Wordsworth, "There Was a Boy")

Perhaps most students of literature will categorize William Wordsworth as the man who revolutionized English poetry with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Wordsworth, however, saw his own role as being more than a poet, for in his middle years he wrote "I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing" (Letters 2:195). To the Victorians who read his poetry, Wordsworth became almost a healer and physician. References to Wordsworth as a "Great Physician" are commonplace in the literature of the time, and the philosopher, John Stuart Mill, refers to the poems as being "medicine for my state of mind" (Havely 66). Whether he was regarded as teacher or healer, Wordsworth's poetry seemed to have a therapeutic value to those Victorians who were suffering from the malaise of the age. We can ascertain from a memorial stone erected in Grasmere church the power of the comfort that he gave to his readers:

To the memory of
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH
a true philosopher and poet,
who, by the special gift and calling of

almighty God,
 whether he discoursed on man or nature,
 failed not to lift up the heart
 to holy things,
 tired not of maintaining the cause
 of the poor and simple;
 and so, in perilous times was raised up
 to be a chief minister
 not only of noble poesy,
 but of high and sacred truth.

Wordsworth felt that his duty as a poet was to teach the "truth," and his life was indeed spent in "perilous times." Not only did he witness the French Revolution and the rapid progress of the Industrial Revolution, but the intellectual climate was disquieting. James Shokoff, in his article "Wordsworth's Duty as a Poet in 'We are Seven' and 'Surprised by Joy,'" has drawn our attention to the stunned shock that lasted for more than two hundred years after Newton had discovered the law of gravitation. When Wordsworth was born, the impact of the theory of gravitation was still reverberating throughout the western world, a century after Newton's publication of *Principia Mathematica* in 1687. Shokoff describes how people were shocked to the core when they realized that the world was not held together by an infinite being, a supreme craftsman (231). From that time onwards, human beings had to face up to death and suffering, to regard death as absolute and to find their own consolations. Shokoff sees Wordsworth as rebelling against this pessimistic climate of intellectual thought into which he was born, as much as

rebellling against the artificial poetic diction of the eighteenth century (232). He analyzes the poem "We Are Seven" to illustrate how Wordsworth debated two positions that one could hold at that time: one could be consoled for the inevitability of death by a religious faith, or one could create "intuitively and imaginatively a new reality that exists within the new disorder" (234-235). Shokoff comments that "faith is a gift of grace, and, especially in the Newtonian universe, it is not easily cultivated" (232). In the twentieth century, we are of course familiar with the doubts about religion that have continued for over two hundred years, and as literary critics we are familiar with the way in which poets create imaginative worlds in order to cope with the disappearance of God and loss of faith. Wordsworth, as a teacher and healer of the Victorians, created a world where nature played a role in providing consolation.

His poetic career was spent in discovering consolations for the losses we all face in life; in particular, Wordsworth himself confronted the loss of his childhood with its attendant "clouds of glory" and visionary "spots of time." Loss, however, is a condition of growing up, and Wordsworth finds compensation in his memories. In "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798), Wordsworth finds consolation for such loss in the "abundant recompence" that comes with maturity. Later, in the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1802-04), he repeats his affirmation that there is consolation to be found. In that resounding declaration, he declares:

We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind,
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be,

In the soothing thoughts that spring
 Out of human suffering,
 In the faith that looks through death
 In years that bring the philosophic mind.

Although Wordsworth achieved some form of acceptance and consolation for the loss of his "visionary gleam," his "faith that looks through death" would be challenged at a later date by some family tragedies. In this chapter, I shall examine the correspondence of Wordsworth and that of his sister, Dorothy, in order to establish how Wordsworth coped with another grievous loss in his own life, this time an actual death in the family--that of his younger brother John. Then I shall analyze the elegiac verses that he wrote in response to the death of John. In the process of examining how he found the strength to "grieve not," I shall explore how his poetry transcends death, becoming an epitaph both for himself and for John, and in addition, provides consolation for future generations--thus enabling Wordsworth to fulfil his desire to write poetry that healed and consoled.¹

Real Death and Mourning

The first real death to motivate Wordsworth into writing an elegy was that of John, his younger brother. Captain John Wordsworth was washed overboard his ship, the *Earl of Abergavenny*, on 5 February 1805. News traveled slowly at that time and the Wordsworth family, William, Mary, and Dorothy, in their cottage at Grasmere, did not hear of the accident until 11

¹ Shokoff points out that Wordsworth saw the role of a poet as being that of teacher--that is, one whose *duty* it was to provide consolation for sorrow and death.

February. That same day, William wrote to his friend and benefactor, Sir George Beaumont, advising him of the "calamitous" news. In spite of his own grief, Wordsworth feels that he should be the one to provide comfort to the grieving women:

My poor sister, and my wife, who loved him almost as
we did (for he was one of the most amiable of men),
are in miserable affliction, which I do all in my power to
alleviate; but Heaven knows I want consolation myself.

(Letters 1:542)

So how did Wordsworth deal with his own grief and that of the family? His letters make it clear that he went through what we now consider to be four stages of mourning common to most bereavers. The process of mourning, as delineated in psychological literature, has been capsulized by G. W. Pigman in his work on elegies of an earlier time, *Grief and Renaissance Elegy*. Pigman explains that the stages "do not form a linear progression, but overlap to a certain extent, and an individual may oscillate from one to another" (6). First, explains Pigman, comes a "numbing" stage when the bereaved feels numb and disbelieves that death has occurred. Violent and sudden outbursts of distress, however, may punctuate this numbness, which usually lasts up to a week. This numbing is part of a psychological process that allows the bereaved to absorb the loss gradually. In the next stage, termed "yearning and searching" by psychologists, the loss seems to have been accepted, but at the same time the bereaved behaves as if the dead person will be recovered. In this stage, Pigman characterizes the bereaved as being "preoccupied with the dead" (7). It seems that the bereaved continually relive events that led to the death, and their

symptoms include breaking into tears, wandering restlessly, insomnia, and outbursts of anger. Martha Wolfenstein, a psychologist, has described children who suffer from this "unstoppable grief":

They would cry and cry. They would cry for a month
and not forget it. They would cry every night and dream
about it, and the tears would roll down their eyes and
they wouldn't know it. (103)

The yearning and restless wandering of this stage of mourning, explains Pigman, are "the emotional counterpart of searching for the lost object" (8). It seems that when mourners visit places that used to be frequented by the dead, they are exhibiting this stage of yearning and searching, or trying to recover the loss.

As described by Pigman, the third stage of mourning entails both despair and disorganization; he explains, "As unconscious hope in the possibility of recovery dies away, memories which have been spurring the bereaved to search for the deceased tend to produce a passive sadness" (8). Yet, Pigman adds, the bereaved feels the presence of the lost person; they feel that the lost person is with them, or they imagine them in a favorite place, or even in the grave. Sometimes they feel that they are becoming the person whom they have lost.

According to Sigmund Freud, the Austrian psychiatrist who pioneered psychoanalysis, the work of mourning is the process by which the self gradually disentangles from the lost one and attaches itself to a new object. The loss will always be felt by the bereaved, but the pain may abate during what is termed the fourth stage of mourning (recovery and reorganization), when the

bereaved are able to form new attachments (Pigman 8). In his seminal essay "On Mourning and Melancholia," Freud went on to describe unresolved mourning as "melancholia," a state where the "free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego" (586).

It is not the work of this dissertation to discover why some people² are able to work through the stages of mourning to recovery, while others cannot. Rather, it is my intent to examine how Wordsworth completed his work of mourning by displacing his loss onto another object--an elegy for John--and to show that it is possible to trace the above-mentioned four stages of mourning in Wordsworth's letters.

It appears that after John's death, the Wordsworths were doing their daily chores in a state of numbness but also crying together and attempting to console one another. The evening after they had heard of the death, Wordsworth wrote to Robert Southey, begging him to visit the "house of mourning." Apparently the Wordsworths were facing up to the loss of their brother by indulging in copious weeping and calling upon their community of friends to be with them in their time of sorrow. Wordsworth makes no attempt to hide his grief ("We weep much today. . ."), but a hint of trying to overcome this grief is creeping into place. In the letter, he goes on to hope that he can show fortitude in "keeping down many a silent pang hereafter" (Letters 1:542). The following day, 13 February, Wordsworth tells his youngest brother, Christopher,

We have done all that could be done to console each

² Pigman believes the most important predictor of recovery lies in the bereaved's personality (10).

other by weeping together. I trust that we shall with
 the blessing of God grow calmer every day . . .
 Hereafter I hope we shall all shew a proper
 fortitude. (Letters 1:543)

The time for weeping is over and a second phase of mourning will enter. The next stage, "yearning," lasts for the longest period of all four stages. Pigman notes the symptoms: the bereaved lose interest in things that used to be enjoyable; instead, they relive their memories of the deceased, who becomes idealized in their memory. They also cry, wander aimlessly, and are unable to sleep. From Wordsworth's correspondence of the next three months, we can see all of these symptoms manifesting themselves. First, he begins to idealize John:

In prudence in meekness, in self-denial, in fortitude,
 in just desires, and elegant and refined enjoyments,
 with an entire simplicity of manners, life and habit,
 he was all that could be wished-for in man: strong
 in health, and of a noble person (Letters 1:556)

As he asks Richard, his elder brother, for some memorial of John ("Box writing-desk, telescope, or anything else great or small") if anything should be preserved from the shipwreck, Wordsworth also confesses to feeling guilt that John never knew how much he was loved:

He did not know how I loved and honoured him,
 and how often he was in my thoughts. (Letters 1:571)

By March, Wordsworth appears to have reached the third stage of mourning. According to Pigman, this is one of despair; the loss has been

accepted and any unconscious hopes have died away. In this stage, the bereaved feels the presence of the dead, imagining the deceased one's presence in a familiar chair or maybe even in the grave. Or, in Pigman's opinion, the bereaved may feel that they have inherited qualities of the dead; in other words, they are becoming more like the dead one. Wordsworth is still "labouring" under "distress of mind," yet as he pours out his anguish to another friend, James Losh, we see that he is being haunted by John:

Oh! my friend I shall never forget him! his image
if my senses remain, will be with me at my last hour
and I will endeavour to die as he did. (Hill 81)

Wordsworth feels that he and John are bonded together and that he must strive to live up to what he perceives are John's expectations of him:

I shall never forget him, never lose sight of him,
there is a bond between us yet, the same as if he
were living, nay far more sacred, calling upon me
to do my utmost, as he to the last did his utmost
to live in honour and worthiness. (Letters 1:547)

Wordsworth is analytical³ enough and, maybe by this stage, achieving enough distance to describe the mourning process:

Our anguish is allayed, but pain and sadness
have taken place of it; with fits of sorrow which
we endeavour to suppress but cannot. (Letters 1:546)

³ Wordsworth's corpus of poetry depends upon "emotion recollected in tranquillity," and he is adept at reflecting on what his emotions were at a particular time. I do not feel that it detracts from his grief in any way that, later, he is able to analyze the emotions he underwent.

He can recognize that his distress is becoming less anguished, and, with the benefit of hindsight, we note the significance of Wordsworth wanting to die as his brother did; in other words, he wants to take on the qualities of his brother. Apparently, Captain Wordsworth's last words, as his ship went down, were: "let her go! God's will be done" (Letters 1:550) and Wordsworth wants to emulate his courage.⁴ Although this imitation would be a normal act of mourning, the courage that Wordsworth tries to muster is a quality that helps him survive the next few months of grief.

Wordsworth is attempting to take for himself the quality he most admired in John, that of fortitude. Fortitude, suggests Stephen Gill, is the quality that motivated Wordsworth towards overcoming his grief (241). Gill points out the significance of Wordsworth's frequent references to fortitude and the definition of it found in a letter to Sir George Beaumont. On 12 March, Wordsworth quoted from Aristotle's summary of vices and virtues in order to describe John:

It is, says he, the property of fortitude not to be easily
terrified by the dread of things pertaining to death . . .
it is the property of fortitude to labour and endure,
and to make valorous exertion an object of choice;
further, presence of mind, a well disposed soul, confidence,
and boldness are the attendants on fortitude:--and besides
these, industry and patience. (Letters 1:559)

⁴ Dorothy too is going through this stage and she writes to her brother Christopher that she has repeated John's last words to herself "a thousand times over" (Letters 1:550).

Wordsworth is endowing John with superhuman qualities, but he is also striving to emulate those qualities.

At this point, Wordsworth is relying on conventional theology to help him attain fortitude. He relies on God to give him the quality (Gill 241). He also sees no answer to the inevitable question of "Why?" that follows death unless it is God's decision. Describing their "condition under this grievous affliction," Wordsworth tells Thomas Clarkson that "the will of God must be done" (Letters 1:544) and he repeats this sentiment to Sir George Beaumont on 20 February: "it was the will of God that he should be taken away" (Letters 1:548). Sometimes, his struggle to accept God's will seems to endeavour to convert it into a blessing: "I bless God that our beloved lost one lived a virtuous Life and in his death was worthy of his life" (Letters 1:550).

Dorothy echoed Wordsworth's feelings. In a letter to Mrs. John Marshall (Letters 1: 559), she confesses that "consolations rather come to me in gusts of feeling, than are the quiet growths of my Mind." She too accepts God's will and consoles herself with the belief that John is "out of reach of all sorrow and pain." Dorothy even goes so far as to surmise that he is better off dead, for "We know not what anguish might have been his lot if he had lived."

The family are consoling themselves with religious platitudes, and Wordsworth is still submerged in sorrow and unable to write poetry. Dorothy, however, while working through her own grief, is also concerned that William's benefactor and sponsor should not lose faith in his talents. In a letter addressed to Lady Beaumont, she circumspectly reminds them that she is working to "raise up the spirits of my dear Brother William . . . to make him fit to accomplish the works he meditates" (Letters 1:567).

A breakthrough comes in March with the retrieval of John's body.

Obviously the fact that there had been no decent closure to the tragic event had been weighing on their minds. On 4 March, worried that if John's body were not claimed, it would be thrown into a communal grave, Wordsworth had written to remind another brother, Richard, that arrangements should be made for when and if the body should be recovered from the sea (Letters 1:552). On 27 March, the family learn that at long last, John's body had been recovered by dragging and was already interred near Weymouth on the south coast. (At the end of the twentieth century, we tend to forget how cumbersome the means of traveling and of despatching news to distant areas was.) The *Gentleman's Magazine* reports that, on 21 March, "the body was conveyed in a hearse to the parish-church of Wyke-Regis, followed by a great number of the principal inhabitants of Weymouth, and there interred" (qtd in Letters 1:574). The funeral was presumably arranged by Richard, and "by the directing of an aunt of Mr. C. Wordsworth" (Letters 1:574). After six weeks at sea, it was important to bury the remains quickly, and the funeral took place the day after the body was recovered. Consequently there was no question of any of the northern branch of the family being able to attend the funeral. However, it seems that even learning second-hand that John had been buried with suitable ceremonies was enough to propel the family forwards into resuming their public roles once more. Dorothy confesses to finding "great comfort" in being able to consider that "his grave is a resting-place for our thoughts--the end of all in this world" (Letters 1:574).

William must have felt a sense of peace too, for by 1 May, he was writing again. He advised Sir George Beaumont (Letters 1:586) that he "had a

strong impulse to write a poem that should record my Brother's virtues." This statement comes from the public man, the poet, who wishes to immortalize his brother. However, the time is not yet ripe; his emotions are still too raw and he finds that he is too overcome to hold the pen and write. Ever considerate, Wordsworth comments that he forbore from using his wife or sister as a scribe, but he is determined that the work should be done at a later date, because he would "never be at peace till, as far in me lies, I have done justice to my departed Brother's memory." Here we see a poet struggling with the idea that he must write an elegy.

Wordsworth is almost ready to write again. He has passed through the four stages of mourning, the "painful and protracted struggle to acknowledge the reality of the loss" (qtd in Pigman 6), and now he is ready to move from a private expression of grief into his public role as poet. For a poet, the elegy represents an essential work of mourning that must be done. Celeste Marguerite Schenk theorizes that the elegy is "a gesture towards the past, a way of memorializing the 'multiple miniature deaths' which compose the poetic life" (7). Wordsworth, the poet, is now approaching the stage where he can memorialize John in verse.

Mourning and Artifact

We can assume that, about a month later, Wordsworth had arrived at a watershed point and was able to hold his pen steady enough to write of John. A letter dated 11 June from Dorothy to Lady Beaumont tells how Wordsworth on the previous Saturday had gone fishing with a neighbor to a local tarn. The tarn was near where they had last taken leave of John, and while Wordsworth had

obviously been overtaken by memories, he was composed enough to inscribe his grief in words. According to Dorothy, "with floods of tears" he

quitted his companion, and poured out his heart in
some beautiful verses to the memory of our lost Brother,
who used to go sometimes alone to that same Tarn;
for the pleasure of angling in part, but still more,
for his love of solitude and of the mountains. (Letters 1:598)

Writing those verses proved cathartic for Wordsworth, for Dorothy describes him as being cheerful and in good spirits when he returned. She comments that "a happy change has been wrought in his mind" (Letters 1:599).

This seems to be a turning point in Wordsworth's grief; his work of mourning is almost over, and it may be that it is completed by his writing this verse to John. If Freud is correct about the work of mourning being completed when the libido can detach itself from the lost object and attach itself to a new one, then maybe Wordsworth's libido, which had been attached to his dead brother, was attaching itself to the elegy he wrote in John's memory.

At this point in Wordsworth's grief, we see that he has passed through various stages of mourning and that maybe he has finally arrived at this stage where he can detach himself from John in the act of writing an elegy to him. If this is the case, then Wordsworth finds recompense in the making of the poem; his love for John is redirected to the artifact that he creates. In Freudian terms, this elegy for John to some extent will replace the man it mourns. The poem becomes the new object to which Wordsworth's libido is bound; hence, he is

able to return home purged of sorrow and free to move on.⁵ I suggest that Wordsworth was consoled by his creating an artifact to "replace" John, and that the resulting elegy consoles through the redemptive powers of nature and religion in a typical Wordsworthian manner. First, I shall examine the nature of the artifact that has been created, and then I shall explore how Wordsworth dramatizes consolation within the elegy.

"Elegiac Verses in Memory of My Brother, John Wordsworth" was not published until 1842, possibly because the poem was too disturbing for the family. Even then, the poem was published without the first verse, which was not published until 1847 (Moorman 43). This unpublished first verse makes Wordsworth's anguish at returning to John's favorite haunt more accessible to us:

I only look'd for pain and grief
And trembled as I drew more near.
But God's unbounded love is here
And I have found relief.

The precious Spot is all my own (PW 263)

Why did Wordsworth feel that he had to write an elegy and to return to this haunting place that John had loved? Wordsworth himself seeks to answer this question in his "Essay upon Epitaphs, I," where he dwells on the motives that compel people to memorialize the dead and thus immortalize them. Wordsworth is convinced that we need to believe in immortality, for unless "an

⁵As Ramazani points out, Milton epitomized the relinquishing of grief as he dramatized the work of mourning in his elegy "Lycidas." After creating the poem, the poet is free to move on, "Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new" (3).

intimation or assurance within us, that some part of our nature is imperishable" counterbalances our fear of death, "such a hollowness would pervade the whole system of things, such a want of correspondence and consistency, a disproportion so astounding betwixt means and ends, that there could be no response, no joy" (Essay 51-52).

Wordsworth sees the wish to immortalize the dead as being universal: "Almost all nations have wished that certain external signs should point out the places where their dead are interred" (Essay 49). He theorizes that the desire to memorialize the dead led from early burial practices and simple monuments to the written epitaphs inscribed upon those monuments. Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, points out that these written epitaphs were the "earliest form of written poetry," and thus became a subsequent link to lyric poetry, which "serves to memorialize and monumentalize people and places" (87). This poetry which results from loss, considers Bate, is a gain to be set against the loss of a person or a place, thus making gains and losses inseparable. In "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry," Geoffrey Hartman has also concluded that "Inscribing, naming, and writing are types of a commemorative and inherently elegiac act" (223).

To encapsulate these complex arguments, it seems that when a person dies we obviously lose them, but, if they are memorialized, then we gain a monument that, depending on the sophistication of the culture, may be a physical part of the landscape, or the words engraved upon that monument, or the words that have been dislocated onto a page in the form of lyric poetry. If we accept that these gains and losses are inseparable, then it may be that, in the

loss of his brother John, Wordsworth gained compensation by writing an elegiac poem that memorializes John just as much as a gravestone-marker would. As a poet, Wordsworth apparently felt it was his duty to write an elegy to commemorate his brother, and in doing so, he helped to complete his work of mourning.

By a subtle transformation at this stage, Wordsworth's libido has become fixated on the new object, the elegy for John. The poem becomes almost a substitute for John, as Wordsworth's thoughts mingle with memories of John and as he communicates his thoughts onto the page. If Wordsworth can no longer talk with John directly, then he can at least communicate with him through his memories and via the written word on the page, which has become the verbal marker of John's death. In *The Linguistic Moment*, J. Hillis Miller discusses how, on reading Wordsworth's elegies, he is reminded of Plato's "image of the book to describe that inner consciousness that takes place for a man when there are no other men with whom to talk" (87). In such a way, theorizes Miller, does writing become an essential act in order for a man to communicate with himself:

The mind of man in order to communicate with itself
must separate itself from itself . . . The mind must divide
its oneness into the multiplicity of signs stamped upon
the printed page, add to its natural power the
supplementary power of the written word . . . Man's
naked spirit must clothe itself in the naked leaves of a
book. (87)

So, on the fishing trip, Wordsworth is alone at last with his grief and able for the first time to address his memories of John and communicate them through the written word. Miller, sensing this indefinable moment when John and the poet come together, defines what he terms as "the linguistic moment" in Wordsworth as the one where the poet, in the very act of writing his poem, "brings death, imagination, and human time into being, in the signs for them" (77). The poet transforms his thoughts into words on the page which become signs. Miller considers Wordsworth's act of writing a poem in semiotic terms:

The death that gets spoken or written down in literature
is not death itself. Death is as mute, signless, and senseless
as a stone . . . Death is the gap between here and now and
what the here and now point toward, between signifier and
signified . . . Any printed poem means death, the imminent
approach of death, but it is also dead. It is the corpse of its
meaning, the spirit turned letter, mute marks on paper.

The poem on the page is a dead body. (106)

Although the words on the page are dead, or "the shell of the flown bird" as Wordsworth describes them in his "Essay upon Epitaphs, I," the poem still serves as a bridge between the living and the dead. It is the only link that can remain between the mind of Wordsworth and the mind of John.

Yet, as Wordsworth himself pointed out in his "Essay," we see that the elegy becomes as much a monument to the poet as it is to the deceased, John. In his "Essay" Wordsworth uses the example of Shakespeare having no need of a pyramid to enshrine him, for

Thou in our wonder and astonishment

Hast built thyself a livelong monument,

And so sepulchred, in such pomp dost lie,

That kings for such a tomb would wish to die. (Essay 61-62)

Or, as Miller describes the process for the poet who, in writing an elegy, thus immortalizes himself,

It gives him entrance into that library-mausoleum which

will preserve his mind as long as there are books and men

and women to read them. Each poem is implicitly

posthumous and presupposes the vanishing of its author.

The poet in writing his poems prefigures his death and writes

his own epitaph. (108)

If the elegy serves as a bridge between living and dead, and the mind of the poet and the mind of the deceased, then it must also immortalize each of these communicants. Thus, Wordsworth is immortalized just as much as John is.

Bate has further theories on immortalization, and he points out that, in the case of Wordsworth, the poet also immortalizes a specific place with his poetry. He highlights the similarity between Wordsworth's geographical "spots" and the "spots of time," which are significant moments when the poet has had spiritual epiphanies. What Bate calls "geographical spots" are those places that Wordsworth has preserved through his poetry as holy and private places, formerly known as a *locus amoenus* in classic pastoral poetry (94). The places, Bate adds, are "characterized by shady spots, soft green turf, grove, brook and pool, birdsong, and gentle breeze" (94). Edward Thomas, the twentieth-century English poet, concurs with Bate:

It is more natural and legitimate to associate

Wordsworth with certain parts of England than
 any other great writer . . . and both he and his
 sister left considerable records of his times and
 places of composition. (qtd in Bate 87)

Miller would agree, for he has also pointed out the place specificity of
 Wordsworth's acts of writing by recalling the weight of the titles of some
 poems:

"Written with a Pencil upon a Stone in the wall of the house (an Out-
 house), on the Island at Grasmere"

"Written with a Slate Pencil on a Stone, on the Side of the Mountain of
 Black Comb"

"Written with a Slate Pencil upon a Stone, the largest of a Heap lying
 near a deserted Quarry, upon one of the Islands at Rydal"

and,

"Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree, which stands near the Lake of
 Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the Shore, commanding a beautiful
 prospect." (80-81)

Obviously Wordsworth is fascinated with the written word as inscribed in the
 book and also on physical monuments that commemorate place. Miller further
 defines the "linguistic moment" as one where Wordsworth, in the act of
 composing his poem, marks the place, for he

stamps his image on nature, inscribes himself on it,
 makes nature into emblem. In doing so he brings death,
 imagination, and human time into being, in the signs for
 them. (77)

Interestingly, in the "Essay upon Epitaphs, I," Wordsworth speaks of the importance of place and nature in burial customs. He admires the ancient Greek and Roman custom of burying their dead by the wayside, that is, in places surrounded by the "soothing influences of nature" rather than the contemporary custom of burying the dead close to their place of worship, "in the busy, noisy, unclean, and almost grassless church-yard of a large town" (Essay 54). Presumably he felt closer to his brother John near the quiet tarn where they had fished together than he would have if he had visited the graveyard in Weymouth, where John's body was eventually laid to rest. In a uniquely Wordsworthian way, he ties John forever to the particular locale where they'd been happy:

Here let a monumental Stone
Stand--sacred as a shrine;
And to the few who pass this way,
Traveller or Shepherd, let it say,
Long as these mighty rocks endure,--

As we have seen in "Essay Upon Epitaphs, I," Wordsworth is attracted to the idea of monumental stones, and his readers will immediately recognize the resonances from "Michael." Within that earlier poem, the monument to Michael, the aged shepherd who died with a broken heart, is an unfinished sheepfold, "a straggling heap of unhewn stones." Yet, there is another monument in the shape of the poem itself, which has immortalized Michael, Wordsworth and the unfinished sheepfold in the lonely dell near Green-head Ghyll. So too will John's memory forever be enshrined in the vicinity of the "Mountain track, that leads from Grasmere through Grisdale Hawes, where it

descends towards Patterdale" (PW 263). Though there is no actual "monumental stone" or "sacred" shrine as there would have been in less sophisticated days, there is a poem that commemorates both John and the spot. Thus we see that in the loss of his brother John, Wordsworth created an elegiac poem that both commemorates and immortalizes John and the "precious place" that inspired the poem, which becomes the *locus amoenus*. To the family, the place where they felt closest to John was in the country that he had loved and which Wordsworth immortalized (none of them ever saw fit to visit John's actual grave in Wyke-Regis). Instead of a physical grave-marker, the elegy, the words on paper, becomes the inscribed monument to the dead person, and the writing of it has served to console Wordsworth.

Wordsworth considered there were three purposes of monuments:

to preserve the memory of the dead, as a tribute
due to his individual worth, for a satisfaction to the
sorrowing hearts of the survivors, and for the
common benefit of the living. . . . (Essay 53)

In Wordsworth's own elegy, we see the last stanza of the poem proclaiming its intent to preserve John's memory,

--Brother and friend, if verse of mine

Have power to make thy virtues known,

and the fourth stanza pays a tribute to John's value as being one of "The meek, the brave, the good." I have endeavored to show that Wordsworth fulfilled the first two purposes for writing epitaphs according to the precepts stated in his "Essay upon Epitaphs, I." It seems that he probably also derived benefit from writing the elegy: by undergoing a catharsis that relieved his spirits

immediately, by enabling himself to communicate with John once more, and by immortalizing his own poetic skills.

We have explored how Wordsworth may have purged his own sorrow, but what remains to be seen is how Wordsworth became known as the Great Healer and Physician, who provided comfort "for the common benefit of the living." By the time of John's death, in his other poems of loss and gain, he had already written of finding consolation. One of the well-known qualities of Wordsworth's poetry is in his affirmation that there is "abundant recompense" to be found for losses. For example, from "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," we know how he handled the loss of his visionary powers. Wordsworth's poetry tends towards affirming that there is consolation to be had. In the Ode, his affirmation resounds with determination to "grieve not" but rather to find consolation in "what remains behind."

When he faces grief at the loss of his beloved brother, Wordsworth still seems able to find the strength to work through his mourning and find consolation for his loss. In these "Elegiac Verses," Wordsworth again affirms that "Peace built on suffering will endure." Wordsworth's constant claim throughout his poetry is that through suffering can be found peace. Later, in "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested By a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont,"⁶ he makes the claim that "A deep distress hath humanized my Soul" and suggests that because suffering humanizes one, it

⁶ While this poem is the more widely known of his elegies to John, I read this poem as being written to allay Sir George Beaumont's fear that he'd opened Wordsworth's wound by letting him see the picture of a shipwreck. Beaumont was Wordsworth's sponsor, and we know that he was concerned not to awaken "painful sensations" in him (qtd in Moorman 45).

brings peace. In her masterly reply to Lionel Trilling's reading of the Immortality Ode, Helen Vendler seeks to explain what Wordsworth means by "humanize." She considers that

all of Wordsworth's great poetry is the result of the
process of the humanizing of sense and the symbolizing
of interior experience. . . . (112)

Wordsworth's skill, Vendler explains, lies in his ability to transform abstract thoughts into concrete human experiences because "Everything in the world--everything--now reminds the adult Wordsworth of some aspect of human experience" (97). According to Vendler, the poem that Wordsworth writes bridges the gap between what we know and what we do not know, between what words can express and what they cannot say. Vendler considers that Wordsworth's skill as a poet comes from his ability to transform his own experiences into metaphors that speak to the human condition, and that he has bridged the gap superbly. Indeed, says Vendler, only by possessing this ability to create metaphors can one become a poet of Wordsworth's stature. She concludes that

to join the external world of sense-experience with the
interior world of moral consciousness is to become an
adult; that to express that juncture in metaphor is to
become a poet. (112)

In "Elegiac Verses," Wordsworth becomes humanized by contemplating a tiny, purple flower which becomes the symbol of comfort, that is "ministrant / To comfort and to peace." The flower, the Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), is one which Wordsworth believes that John would have loved

for its "modest grace," and in contemplation of it, Wordsworth becomes enabled ("humanized") to create a poem that will transcend John's death.

In this elegy, Wordsworth incorporates a few classical features but with a difference. He transforms the conventional shepherds into one humble "Sheep-boy" who disappears along with the buzzards, which must be the relics of a mourning procession. The traditional tribute of flowers becomes the solitary Moss Campion, perhaps more fitting to one who loved solitude. After the elegist goes down into the depths of loss in the traditional way, the nadir of despair is shown at the lines, "he who had been our living John / Was nothing but a name" in verse IV, and then he begins to find new values and recompense for loss after this point. As Vendler has pointed out, the success of Wordsworth as Great Healer depends on the "succession" of "wounds and cures"⁷ in his poetry (107). Here in this poem, the turn from the description of "wounds" to "cures" comes at the poet's sigh of relief in stanza V, ". . . oh, / Glad am I, glad that it is past." Wordsworth finds the sight of this tiny flower curative after he has reached the depths of despair. Then we note the triumphant turn of the vocabulary used in the affirmative stanza VI: the flower is "spangling a cushion green," just as stars spangle the dark skies. The poet's mood has swung from one of sorrow and weeping to one of joyfulness and affirmation. His voice rings out triumphantly: "We will see it [the flower]" and "The mountain will we cross." In one bound, Wordsworth has moved from the quotidian, from the tiny, humble flower, to the sublimity of high mountains,

⁷ Freud also refers to a bereavement as being like a "wound" in his essay, "Mourning and Melancholia."

and in this leap, we see the full extent of his healing. As Vendler has demonstrated in her essay, we can see in the Immortality Ode,

Wordsworth's instinct toward strength . . . shows
that the new emotion of resolve required a new scenery--
the sublimity of cataracts and 'the steep' and mountains
and winds, the majestic orchestration of trumpets, over
against the pipes and tabors of pastoral joy. (100-101)

Within the elegy, contemplation of this tiny flower leads to healing affirmation because it leads to thoughts of the sublime and enables Wordsworth to write out his grief. The elegy becomes the bridge between the wound of John's death and the cure that can be found in nature.

Moving from the semiotic properties of the poem, we can begin to analyze semantically how the poem addresses a universal human fear of death. Paul Ricoeur, author of *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, distinguishes the semiotic from the semantic elements of the text as being the difference between analyzing a text as a self-contained unit and as understanding the human condition by means of the text. By means of this poem, we can attempt to understand how the readers of Wordsworth's poetry, who were consoled by him, thought of death.

After Death

In *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, Michael Wheeler examines the theological questions associated with death, judgment, heaven and hell in the nineteenth century and shows how these concerns are reflected in literary works of the period. He comments on the

analogies that have been used to describe the dividing line between death and life-after-death: E. H. Bickersteth writes of a "veil," Pater's Marius refers to death as being the "fifth or last act of a drama," and contemporary biographer A. O. J. Cockshut similarly refers to the moment of death as "the curtain line, and the adumbration of the future" (26). Wheeler finds that Wordsworth is a poet who also mentions the "two-fold aspect"⁸ of death but does not address the problems engendered by the notion of an afterlife. Wordsworth, Wheeler adds, avoids all the problems associated with the future life that later Victorian writers will address with gusto, and he makes no statements about judgment; in fact, he "emphasizes human solidarity rather than resurrection" (48). Yet, even if Wordsworth is not theorizing about the possibility of future meetings in his elegy, it seems that he does regard death as a painful separation--the curtain or the veil has fallen between him and John.

According to Philippe Ariès, the view of death as a parting, a rupture, a break is entirely characteristic of the late eighteenth century (1977, 57-58). He explains that prior to the twelfth century people had been resigned to death as "the collective destiny of the species" which could "be summarized by the phrase, *Et moriemur*, and we shall all die" (1977, 55). However, after the twelfth century, our modern conception of self began to appear and people began to be more concerned about their own existence. Ariès sums it up as a concern with *la mort de soi*, one's own death (55). He points out that from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the theme of death began to include an erotic element in art and literature, and that during this three-hundred-year period, many examples of death and love, Thanatos and Eros, can be found in

⁸ William Wordsworth *The Excursion* (1814)

painting and in literature. The conjunction of the erotic and the macabre ("love scenes in tombs") occurs in much writing of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and indeed, Ariès adds, this conjunction is a prime ingredient of the Gothic and a characteristic of Romanticism.

He explains that during the eighteenth century, humans were less concerned with their own death than with the death of others; the descriptive phrase had changed to *la mort de toi*, the death of the other person (56). Whether the erotic element was present or not, in this period death begins to be thought of not only as something beautiful, but also as a severance of a relationship. Ariès explains:

Like the sexual act, death was henceforth increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent and beautiful world. Like the sexual act, death for the Marquis de Sade is a break, a rupture. This idea of rupture is something completely new. Until this point the stress had been on the familiarity with death and with the dead. (1977, 57)

We can observe that this severing happened in the Wordsworth family; the death of John broke up their happy family circle. In his letters, Wordsworth makes it clear that John's death is indeed a break and a rupture. In his reply to his brother Richard on 11 February 1805, as soon as they had received news of John's death, Wordsworth exclaims:

We wish you were with us. God keep the rest of us

together! the set is now broken. (Letters 540)

When describing the tragic shipwreck to James Losh on 16 March 1805, he adds: "For myself I feel there is something cut out of my life which cannot be restored . . . (Letters 565).

The way in which the Wordsworths dealt with John's death--seeing it as a severance--can be located squarely within the eighteenth-century tradition, as defined by Ariès. Death was seen as a rupture of the family circle; the final curtain had fallen for John, yet Wordsworth is not anxious enough to postulate theories of a future meeting. He does not theorize about the "adumbration" as the later Victorians will. The mourning observed by the family is also very much in the eighteenth-century tradition. Mourning had two purposes from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, Ariès explains; one purpose was to compel the family to demonstrate a sorrow that it might not feel; the other was to contain a genuine sorrow within proscribed boundaries (1977, 66). Thus, in cases of genuine sorrow, the bereaved could be protected from an excessive grief by imposing a social life on him or her which would include visits from the larger community. We see this happening within the Wordsworth family--in their many letters to friends and family, and in the visits from friends. Indeed, we recall that Wordsworth had asked Robert Southey to visit the "house of mourning" to help them dissipate their sorrow (Letters 542). Wordsworth's attitude to death and mourning is very much in the eighteenth-century tradition and we will see a change as the nineteenth century gets closer. Ariès points out that then "mourning was unfurled with an uncanny degree of ostentation" and would be "the most spontaneous and insurmountable expression of a very grave wound" (67). The change will signal a period where

the death of the other is feared more than one's own death, and death would be accepted less readily than ever before (67-68).

This chapter ends where it began. From the death of one man to his society's cultural perceptions of death, I have attempted to bridge the gap between the public act of mourning and the private writing of an elegy. Wordsworth's perception of death is in line with cultural perceptions of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries, and he finds consolation by working through his mourning, which is neither excessive nor repressed. In turn, he writes an elegy, which becomes the ultimate consolation for the loss of his brother, and which departs from the classical traditions in a peculiarly Wordsworthian way. Many critics have commented that Wordsworth's greatest poems are created out of loss, and Laurence Lerner, in *Angels and Absences*, speculates that the absence which pervades his poetry enables him to "introduce something new into English poetry." Indeed, Lerner adds, Wordsworth's "truest poetry is built on absence" (81).

Chapter Three

Emily Jane Brontë (1818-1848)

I sought, and soon discovered, the three head-stones on the slope next the moor--the middle one, grey, and half buried in heath--Edgar Linton's only harmonized by the turf, and moss creeping up its foot--Heathcliff's still bare.

I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.

(Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*)

Mr. Lockwood's words which end Emily Brontë's only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, serve as a fitting memorial of her life. The grey headstones, symbolic of the bereavements she herself had suffered as a young child, are a recurring image in both her life and works. From the upstairs window of Haworth Parsonage, where she lived for most of her life, one can see the graveyard and these signs of death, just as she would have seen them day in and day out. Gravestones were a continual reminder of the shattering losses that the Brontë family underwent: the mother, Maria, died in 1821; the elder two daughters, Maria and Elizabeth, both died in 1825; and in 1842, Aunt Elizabeth Branwell died. In September 1848 the only son, Branwell, died, and

Emily herself followed him in December 1848. Emily was a child of three when her mother died, and she had only attained the age of seven when her two surrogate mother figures, her elder sisters, died from tuberculosis.

Emily Brontë, who died at the age of thirty, is probably most known for her novel *Wuthering Heights*, although she also wrote poetry. The Brontë children all wrote from an early age and some of their childhood sagas about the fictional lands of Gondal and Angria have been preserved. Emily collaborated with Anne in their depiction of the land called Gondal, and many of her poems have speakers who are from this imaginary land, for she continued to write of this fictional world until her death. Brontë never wanted to see her work published and she reluctantly agreed to publish 21 poems only after Charlotte had coerced her. We know that she wrote her poetry in secret and that nobody in her family was aware of its existence until 1845 when Charlotte found it. Five years later, Charlotte described the event and Emily's reaction:

One day, in the autumn of 1845, I accidentally lighted on a MS. volume of verse in my sister Emily's handwriting. Of course, I was not surprised, knowing that she could and did write verse: I looked it over, and something more than surprise seized me,--a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, not at all like the poetry women generally write. I thought them condensed and terse, vigorous and genuine. To my ear, they had a peculiar music--wild, melancholy, and elevating.

My sister Emily was not a person of

demonstrative character, nor one, on the recesses
 of whose mind and feelings, even those nearest and
 dearest to her could, with impunity, intrude unlicensed;
 it took hours to reconcile her to the discovery I had
 made, and days to persuade her that such poems
 merited publication. (Brontë 3)

If we are to believe this account, then Brontë had been a secretive, almost
 obsessive, writer of poetry. Lyn Pykett, author of the study *Emily Brontë*,
 intimates that

In fact the subject matter of many of her poems,
 as well as the evidence of brief autobiographical
 statements, suggests that writing was not simply
 a genteel diversion for Emily Brontë but was the
 central activity of her life. (38)

Many biographers have observed that Brontë was depressed and unhappy when
 she was away from her beloved home and moors and that she only remained
 sane by writing and immersing herself in the fictional worlds that she created.
 For someone who had such a knack with written words, she seemed to fail
 abysmally in spoken communication. Biographer Juliet Barker notes: "There is
 no recorded instance of Emily having befriended anyone outside the family"
 (181), and reports of Brontë from her peers in the schools she attended reveal
 her to be a solitary, morose person who either could not or would not bother
 with the social graces of polite conversation. Eventually, attempts to educate
 her or socialize her petered out, and she was left alone to write and manage the

household. Even within her immediate family, she was seen as distant, for Charlotte's friend Ellen Nussey, commented on her remoteness:

She had very beautiful eyes, kind<ly>, kindling,
liquid eyes, sometimes they looked grey, sometimes
dark blue but she did not often look at you, she was
too reserved. She talked very little. (Qtd in Barker 194-95)

Writing about the world of her fictional characters seems to have been the "central activity" in Brontë's life and what kept her sane, but the subject matter of her work seems morbid, for her main theme is death and dying.

In *Holy Ghosts*, Irene Tayler agrees that most of Brontë's best poetry focuses on death. According to Tayler, Brontë is rewriting "urgent laments" that reenact her mother's death and, because she is trained in the Christian doctrine, Brontë transforms death into rebirth, or immortality (44). Thus, says Tayler, death scenes become the experience of transcendence, and the grave becomes a "center of burning desire that would suggest the metaphoric *petit mort* of orgasm" (30) in any writing other than Brontë's. Tayler refutes this metaphoric imagery in Brontë's writing; on the contrary she argues, "for Emily's speakers it is death itself that is sought with such reckless excitement and passionate specificity" (30). Analyzing Brontë's most famous poem "Remembrance," Tayler finds it to be an "urgent lament" that speaks of loss and a desired reunion with Brontë's mother and consistent with her other works that express a yearning for death (30).

Tayler explores the creative development of Brontë and she suggests that the deaths of mother-figures in Emily's early life were traumatic, but also instrumental in shaping her writing ability. Tayler uses the work of

contemporary literary theorists who argue that language is constructed over an absence, specifically the absence of the mother from whom we all separated as young children. Thus, words replace the absent Other. Tayler considers that this theory is directly applicable to the nature of Brontë's elegiacal poetry:

For Emily language was indeed constructed over a loss,
and quite specifically the loss of her mother. Emily's
mother weaned her, replaced her with a new baby
(Anne), grew painfully ill, and died--all by the time
Emily was three. Little wonder that the realms of
language and culture into which little Emily was then
emerging are darkened by loss. (25)

The poem "Remembrance" is dated 3 March 1845. Set in the world of Gondal fiction, the manuscript title, "R. Alcona to J. Brenzaida"¹ indicates that the lament was supposed to have been spoken by the Gondal heroine Rosina Alcona to her long-dead beloved, the emperor Julius Brenzaida. In *Holy Ghosts*, Irene Tayler points out that "the lament is surrounded by an entire network of poems expressing bereavement: it was for her [Brontë] a consuming topic" (30). Tayler argues that although the speaker Rosina is longing for her dead lover, the author Brontë is continually remembering her dead mother throughout her poetry and "defining the distance between the living and the dead" (31). She points out that the poem opens by associating Julius's grave with what is "cold, removed, and dreary--as we might expect"--but that by the end of the poem the grave has become "a center of burning

¹ This is the title of the poem in the *Gondal Poems* notebook. Brontë removed the Gondal names from the poem when she published it.

desire" and, instead, it is the living world that is empty (30). Tayler reads this poem as one that reveals a person unwillingly adapting to a world of loss, where even the rhythm of the poem opens it as a "slow-drummed dirge or death-march" (31). She points out how the speaker has managed to overcome grief: the bereaved speaker had "weaned" her "young soul" from yearning; she had learned to be "cherished" and "fed without the aid of joy." The speaker has "sternly denied" her desire for death and "checked" her tears in order to be able to exist in the world (31). Tayler argues that Rosina provides a mask for Brontë's own thoughts:

Rosina's words build a whole network of *double entendre* that aligns her grief with the poet's own long history of divisions, losses, and sorrows--from birth and weaning up to the present widening gap between her living self and the dreamy memory of her origins and mother. Now, as the poem has brought the speaker closer to the departed and thawed the frozen ground that divides the living from the dead, the urge is powerful to close the gap entirely, to rush into the grave and drink deep of the melted snows of that lost paradise, to die out of poetry into an ecstatic silence that transcends both life and art. (31)

Thus, Rosina is not merely a fictional woman wailing for her lover; she has become a universal figure of grief--the bereaved one who has never transcended the loss and never achieved consolation. Rosina had mourned for

"fifteen wild Decembers" while, according to Tayler, Brontë herself had been grieving for 24 years since the loss of her mother.

Many other critics agree that Brontë was affected by the prevalence of death around her and that this morbidity manifested itself in the elegiacal quality of her poems. Hélène Cixous, a critical theorist, suggests that meaningful books are not written until the writer has confronted the death of a loved one. Writing becomes a way for the writer of asserting the fact that he or she is alive, not dead. In "The School of the Dead," she argues, "We comprehend that it is necessary to write, to no longer stop, since not dying and writing have been exchanged" (11). Cixous quotes from the French author, Thomas Bernhard, who began to write after the death of his grandfather and commented, "I existed only when I was writing" (11). Yet, she asserts, writing is not only a means of proving one's existence; it is a way of communicating with the dead, a work of love that writers must undertake. Cixous considers her own father's death, which triggered her first book, and analyzes how writers are continually wrestling with the concept of death. She concludes that "Each of us, individually and freely, must do the work that consists of rethinking what is your death and my death, which are inseparable" (12). It seems that Cixous believes that the writer must metaphorically kill the dead one, by writing of him or her, in order for the writer to be able to live. Yet, in doing so, the writer goes beyond a comfortable level, for he must plummet the depths of anguish and confront his own mortality. Cixous refers to this mental journey as the process of "ascending" a "descending" ladder:

To us this ladder has a *descending* movement,
because the ascent, which evokes effort and

difficulty, is toward the bottom. I say *ascent*
 downward because we ordinarily believe the descent
 is easy. The writers I love are *descenders*, explorers
 of the lowest and deepest. (5)

To Cixous, these writers are the ones whose books are worth reading, the writers of "extremity" who have taken themselves to the "extremes of experience, thought, life" (34). In other words, they have faced up to their own death. Maybe, like the medieval mystic Saint John of the Cross, these writers had endured the "dark night of the soul" before they were able to write. Cixous gives their fearless soul-searching a name:

Because what they reveal is audaciousness, which
consists in saying the worst, in writing the worst,
 making apparent, naming the worst. . . . So, what
 these 'people whose souls are already mature' do,
 as Clarice² would say, is to venture there where we
 don't have the strength or the means to venture, to the
 edge of our abyss: and then to describe it. (41)

While Cixous uses examples from writers such as Franz Kafka, Edgar Allen Poe, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky to illustrate her argument, the writer whose work resonates in my own mind is Emily Brontë. As already pointed out, Brontë, from a very early age, saw death. In Cixous' terms, she is "audacious" in that her main theme is death and loss, for she says and writes the worst.

² Cixous quotes from Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G. H.*, Trans. Ronald W. Sousa (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), p.3.

Brontë's only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, portrayed the worst side of human nature and confronted both the loss caused by death and the question of an afterlife. Maybe because of its uncomfortable descent into the abyss, the book had a terrible reception. In a Preface to the 1850 edition published after Emily's death, her sister Charlotte tried to explain the "rude and strange production" by saying that her sister did not write of the worst of her own volition:

The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master-- something that at times strangely wills and works for itself. He may lay down rules and devise principles, and to rules and principles it will perhaps for years lie in subjection; and then, haply without any warning of revolt, there comes a time when it will no longer consent to 'to harrow the vallies, or be bound with a band in the furrow'--when it 'laughs at the multitude of the city, and regards not the crying of the driver'--when, refusing absolutely, to make ropes out of sea-sand any longer, it sets to work on statue hewing, and you have a Pluto, or a Jove, a Tisiphone or a Psyche, a Mermaid or a Madonna, as Fate or Inspiration direct. Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption. (Brontë 12)

By mentioning the archetypal statues that are created by a writer's confronting the worst, it seems that Charlotte anticipated Cixous' argument. I would

suggest that Brontë's lifelong work of writing elegiac poetry, of confronting the abyss of death and loss, culminated in her novel, which was published in December 1847, exactly one year before she died. *Wuthering Heights* is notable for its orphaned children, for every child in the novel loses its mother. Brontë may be rewriting her own sense of loss because she too was orphaned at the age of three, and she may have confronted the enormity of death in her poetry and this novel. The process is painful, as Cixous explains:

It can also happen that an author will kill himself or herself writing. The only book that is worth writing is the one we don't have the courage or strength to write. The book that hurts us (we who are writing), that makes us tremble, redden, bleed. It is combat against ourselves, the author; one of us must be vanquished or die. (32)

It is unlikely that the pain of writing this novel contributed to Emily's death, which was from tuberculosis. It may not be too far-fetched, however, to remember Cixous' words--that writing an "audacious" book that confronts death and the afterlife wounds the writer. Juliet Barker, Brontë's most recent biographer, suggests that Brontë may have been writing another novel in the two years preceding her death and that Charlotte could have destroyed the manuscript after Emily's death, on the grounds that the new novel may have been even more controversial than *Wuthering Heights* (534). Whether that speculation is true or not, the existing corpus of Brontë's work consists of the Gondal fictions, the poetry, and her novel--all of which have a main theme of death and loss. According to Cixous, authors who confronted death, "emerged

wounded and enraged" from their "audacious" works, and she suggests the reason:

Because there is no God in their texts, even though
there may be some in their hearts. That's another thing.

There is no religion. There is the human. (41)

In *Elegy and Paradox*, W. David Shaw also suggests that Brontë mourned for her human losses. Shaw explains that mourners feel guilt because they have survived, and the remedy for their guilt is to ensure that the dead have "quiet graves":

Like many survivors of the holocaust, the mourner
has the awesome feeling that he is not worthy of
survival; he has not survived enough. It is therefore
important that in the elegist's imagination the ghost
who may feel pitched into a grave, like

Shakespeare's Banquo, whose death is somehow
undeserved, a source of guilt to the living, or even
painfully unfair, should be made to sleep well.

Paradoxically, the best way to forget the dead by
giving them a quiet grave is first to remember them.

Only a past that has been genuinely recollected can
also be forgotten. (216)

One wonders if Brontë were trying to give her dead "quiet graves." The phrase "unquiet slumbers" in Lockwood's speech quoted at the beginning of the chapter has always intrigued readers because of its ambiguity, for if one is dead, one is not merely sleeping. Brontë's preoccupation with death and what

happened after death was not uncommon; it was one that she shared with Victorian culture in general. The Victorians had a high mortality rate and appeared to find some consolation for the wounds of bereavement in the thought of an afterlife. Patsy Stoneman, in "The Brontës and Death: Alternatives to Revolution," describes Victorian culture as a "death-orientated society" in which the "predominant evangelical religion saw life as a vale of tears, a valley of affliction, a sore preparation for the life to come" (79). The bereaved obtained consolation from the idea that the dead were in a better place and that they would be reunited with them there. From this ideology, it was but short step to seeing life on earth as being imprisonment, a bondage from which only death could release one. In her study of Brontë's life and works, *Emily Brontë*, Lyn Pykett illustrates the "common imagery of bondage and restraint" with a stanza from a popular Wesleyan hymn:

Rejoice for a brother deceased,
Our loss is his infinite gain;
A soul out of prison released
And freed from its bodily chain.

Brontë's poetry often uses similar imagery of chains and dungeons to suggest that a soul is imprisoned here on earth and will be set free by death, as in the last stanza of poem #123, for example:

Thus truly when the breast is cold
Thy prisoned soul shall rise
The dungeon mingle with the mould--
The captive with the skies--

Pykett suggests, however, that Brontë's own obsession with death went beyond the orthodoxy of religion because she does not suggest reunion with the dead.

On the contrary, claims Pykett,

Brontë repeatedly explores the ironies and complexities of the experience of loss and grief. Both of these states are represented in terms of images of exile and alienation. Death itself is represented as a condition of permanent exile, but its very permanence is also an escape from life's constant change. (50)

Pykett, along with other critics, allows that Brontë's poetry shows death as a means to escape, the means of transcending the sufferings and bondage of mortal life. She adds that

Death is also constantly invoked and explored, not as the object of the suicide's desire (although it sometimes has this aspect), but as a kind of ideal--akin to the out-of-body experience of vision--a liberator from restriction, reconciler of contradiction, and restorer of self integrity. (69-70)

While Brontë is exploring death as a means of transcending loss and grief, she also sees the paradox inherent in the ideology of heaven as a "better place" to which one is released by death. One hundred and fifty years later, this paradox is still evident. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a medical doctor, psychiatrist, and thanatologist, who has been influential in starting the hospice movement in America, and in promoting the acceptance of death in a society that tends to

deny it, explains how society confuses the bereaved even today. In *Death Is of Vital Importance*, Kübler-Ross points out how we deceive children about death and thus make grieving harder for them. She says that many adults tell children that the deceased has gone to heaven, implying that the deceased has gone to a better place where there is no more suffering and pain. Yet, those same adults cry and mourn and thus show by their actions that the deceased has not really gone to a better place. Kübler-Ross points out this discrepancy between words and actions that makes acceptance of death and the healthy work of mourning hard to accomplish.

Brontë discusses this paradox in her poem "Faith and Despondency" dated 6 November 1844, where the two characters discuss faith and death.³ In this poem, the father grieves for the ones who have died before him:

For, lone, among the mountains cold,
Lie those who I have loved of old.
And my heart aches, in hopeless pain
Exhausted with repinings vain,
That I shall greet them ne'er again!

His daughter, Iernë, whose faith is stronger than his, tells him that, since "early infancy" she has thought about this problem and concluded that it is the living for whom we should mourn, for "this world's life has much to dread." On the contrary, the dead are gone to a better place:

Oh! not for them, should we despair,
The grave is drear, but they are not there;

³ Janet Gezari, editor of Brontë's poems, suggest that this poem owes something to Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," which is also a conversation about death and faith between an adult and a wiser child (225).

Their dust is mingled with the sod,

Their happy souls are gone to God!

The precocious child argues with her father and asks him why he does not believe his own philosophy:

For, if your former words were true,

How useless such sorrow would be;

As wise, to mourn the seed which grew

Unnoticed on its parent tree,

Because it fell in fertile earth,

And sprang up to a glorious birth--

Struck deep its root, and lifted high

Its green boughs, in the breezy sky.

The key to the child's argument is, of course, in the use of the subjunctive; if the father's words were true, then why would he grieve? The child, having found the flaw in the father's belief system, goes on to assert that she believes in a "blessed shore,"

that land divine,

Where we were born, where you and I

Shall meet our dearest, when we die;

From suffering and corruption free,

Restored into the deity.

This outward belief in a heaven where one would meet up with old friends was an orthodox Victorian religious tenet. It occurs in so much literature of the period, in the sentimentalized deathbed scenes, that one wonders if the Victorians were trying too hard to convince themselves that death was for the

best. Yet, in those times of high mortality, it must have been an irresistible consolation to think of the deceased as being in a better place.

In the nineteenth century, it was fashionable to long for a death that would lead to an afterlife which was Paradise. Philippe Ariès, who researched a thousand years of attitudes towards death for his seminal study *The Hour of Our Death*, finds that the nineteenth century (both in Britain and in France) represents a "turning point" in attitudes toward the afterlife (442). Christian belief in an afterlife offers heaven as a reward for the blessed and hell as a punishment for the wicked. Ariès claims that in the later Middle Ages the emphasis fell on hell, but by the nineteenth century, the emphasis had shifted to heaven. As a result, a new type of paradise was created, "which was not so much the heavenly home as the earthly home saved from the menace of time" (471). The function of this heaven is, of course, consolatory: religion as consolation tells us that the loved one is now in a happier state, and the bereaved will meet them there eventually. The Victorians discussed endlessly what heaven would be like. *Recognition of Friends in Heaven*, edited in 1866 by the Bishop of Ripon, collects many of the visions of the Anglican clergy and what they all have in common is that heaven will be a social venue. The Reverend Norman Macleod concludes:

It is unnecessary to prove what is assumed as so evidently true, and which I cannot really understand how anyone should doubt, and that is the recognition of our Christian friends in heaven. . . . What! shall memory be obliterated, and shall we forget our own past histories? (46-47)

The Reverend A. M. Aslane takes this elite party scene further and assures the Victorians that people will retain their own local dialects, so that one may discover where they come from and who they are. In order to retain the conventions of making new acquaintances, Jesus Christ will be there to perform introductions:

Go back to the time when Jesus, with his three disciples, went up into Mount Tabor, where Jesus was transfigured: the disciples did not know Elijah and Moses, for they had never seen them before, and how then did they come to know two worthies of a bygone age? I suppose the Saviour introduced the disciples to them, and if the Saviour condescended to introduce some of His people to others on Mount Tabor, do you not think that He will condescend on Mount Zion to do the same thing, or employ some of His angels, at least, to do it. (168)

When we read this material with post-Freudian eyes, we can see that this Victorian vision of an afterlife was a consolation that fulfilled their deepest wishes. We cannot turn back the clocks to evaluate whether the Victorians actually were consoled by the vision, but the matter was certainly promoted in literature and art of the period.

A worthy retort to the tradition comes from C. S. Lewis, the twentieth-century scholar, who has written a powerful account of his own work of mourning, *A Grief Observed*. Lewis had married a woman from a totally different background when he was fifty-eight, but after four years of intense happiness, she died of cancer. Lewis wrote: "Don't come talking to me about

the consolations of religion, or I shall suspect you don't understand" (28). He emphatically dismisses "all that stuff about family reunions 'on the further shore' pictured in earthly terms." Yet, Lewis was a Christian and he had a conception of an afterlife; he thought that communion with God would be unimaginably different from any experience that mankind has ever known. In this claim, Lewis allies himself with all the mystics who have had visionary experiences that articulate communion with the divine. Because the experience is ineffable, there are no words to describe it. Two main strategies, used by mystics in describing their communion with the divine have been the imagery of light and dark, and the negative way. The negative way, or the use of denials, is associated with St. John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystical poet.⁴ Mystical experience is considered to be communion with the Divine through complete abandonment of one's own personality. It is an experience in which the soul is said to leave the body and to return to it only with extreme reluctance.

Brontë is regarded by some as a mystic, and some of her poems contain descriptions of this communion with the divine. If she had these transcendent experiences, then it is hard to believe that she was convinced by the orthodox religious view of heaven. Biographer Stevie Davies tells us that:

The Evangelical Church of England clergyman's daughter
rejected her father's church and God in favour of the

⁴ Modern readers can find the use of denials as a path to spirituality in T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets." In the third section, "East Coker," several lines are adapted from Saint John's "The Ascent of Mount Carmel." Eliot proposes a new kind of journey, one that contradicts ordinary human notions, that is defined by overturning them:

In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy . . .

'God within my breast.' Refusing to teach at Sunday School and absenting herself from regular church attendance, she took a view of piety which varied from the cool to the contemptuous. (19)

Brontë's consolations came from mystical experiences and not from platitudes about a social heaven. An early critic, Caroline F. Spurgeon, focused on the mystical aspects of Brontë's poetry in *Mysticism in English Literature*:

[Emily Brontë] can have read little of philosophy or metaphysics, and probably had never heard of the mystics; she was brought up in a narrow, crude, and harshly material creed; yet her own inner experience, her touch with the secret of life, enable her to write the remarkable series of poems the peculiar and haunting quality of which has as yet scarcely been recognized. They are strong and free and certain, hampered by no dogma, weighted by no explanation, but containing--in the simplest language--the record of the experience and the vision of a soul.

Often compared to the mystical poets William Blake and Emily Dickinson, Brontë becomes more sparing with words as she tries to describe the ineffable experiences she has had and to mourn her loved ones. Unlike the writers who invoke the bromidic formula of consolation (the dead are in a better place), Brontë struggles with words to describe her feelings about death. A lack of faith in words is a concern that W. David Shaw sees as marking the beginning of the modern elegy. In *Elegy and Paradox*, he writes about the words that

elegists cannot find: "The language that betrays the elegist least is the language that is most elliptical, most broken by dashes and parentheses" (121). In these poems, the reader must pay special attention to the subtext--to what is not said. Shaw confirms that the poet's lack of faith in words is a modern phenomenon that distinguishes modern elegies from classical ones: "Their silences, evasions, and multiple time frames have almost nothing in common with the triumphal simplicities of 'Lycidas'" (145). Thus, says Shaw, dating from the Romantic era the elegy has changed to a form that speaks in silences. The convention of the classical pastoral elegy, such as "Lycidas," was that the traditional language and ancient symbols should exorcise the terror of dying. On the other hand, the modern elegy, suggests Shaw, transgresses the conventions by its displacement of language; thus "modern elegists seem deeper, more tremulous, than the melancholy of Milton, or Donne" (211).

Modern elegists face up to the fact that they do not know what death is, nor what happens after death. Shaw claims that the transformation of the classical elegy into the post-Romantic elegy was the difference between knowing and not knowing:

The strong mourners of classical elegy remind us that death may make all things new, and that only weak mourners are destroyed by it. The estranged and silent mourners of Romantic elegy remind us that nobody knows what death means. Mourners who profess to speak about its mystery are in danger of profaning it. (103)

Shaw sees the difference between the classical and the modern elegy as reflecting the new doubts and uncertainties that were becoming apparent in nineteenth-century society. For many people, consolation could no longer be obtained from theological explanations, so elegists seek refuge in silence. They leave white spaces in their work, or they insert dashes intended to bridge thoughts that the reader must interpret. Their lack of faith in language highlights their lack of knowledge about death. Shaw claims, "One legacy of the Romantic movement is that, because a truth expressed is nearly always a lie, the best elegies are one part speech to three parts silence" (143). He adds:

When elegies aspire to silence, they aspire to the integrity of a blank page or void. Since no poem can be composed entirely of pauses filled with words, zero values of disjunction and elision are most likely . . . To hear what they say we may have to linger over their dashes and caesuras, over the parentheses that Coleridge calls the drama of reason, or over their exclamations or splintered cries. (133)

In short, says Shaw, the "silent" post-Romantic elegists seem to "respond more powerfully and deeply" to deaths than do the classical elegists:

The boldest words in Dickinson, Rossetti, and Arnold are usually the words we do not hear; they form part of the elegy's subtext. The distance between these elegists and Milton is as thick as the distance to the next star. Their silences, evasions, and multiple time frames, even in a profoundly simple elegist like Wordsworth,

have almost nothing in common with the
triumphal simplicities of "Lycidas." (145)

Other critics also discuss the elegy in terms of its language of mourning and grief. Julia Kristeva, a literary critic influenced by Freud and Jacques Lacan, offers another explanation for the poetic breakdowns and dislocations of language, and for funereal rhythms. In her perceptive comments on the language of mourning and melancholia in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva explains how melancholy people become estranged from their mother tongue:

Speech delivery is slow, silences are long and frequent,
rhythms slacken, intonations become monotonous, and
the very syntactic structures . . . are often characterized
by nonrecoverable elisions. (34)

After reading Kristeva, it is interesting to recollect how Brontë was perceived as a solitary person, one who was estranged from friends and silent with family and who may have been melancholic.

Death becomes most terrifying when it hits close to home. In *The Thread of Life*, Richard Wollheim discusses how successful elegies work by creating "tremors." He distinguishes between death as an "impact" or as a "tremor" (237); for instance, the news of a friend's sudden death makes an impact whereas news that one's own self has a terminal disease sets up a tremor. As George Eliot's narrator in *Middlemarch* succinctly puts it:

When the commonplace 'We must all die'
transforms itself into the acute consciousness
'I must die--and soon,' then death grapples us,

and his fingers are cruel. (Bk.4, chap.42)

The successful elegy is one which sets up a tremor in its reader. According to Shaw, the tremor can be generated in two ways: "by creating the tremulous ripple effect of a verbal ambiguity or two-way meaning, and by transgressing a code" (210). He gives examples of these devices:

To generate a tremor an elegist may use late-breaking caesuras that signal closure or the skipping of a heartbeat, as in Ben Jonson's poem on the death of his son: 'Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy; / My sinne was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy'. . . . Tennyson often creates similar tremors of feeling by using two-way syntax or phrases that hover ambiguously between contrasting emphases. Is 'a glory done' in *In Memoriam* (121.4) a *glory* done or a *glory done*? (211)

Again using Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as an example, Shaw explains that what he means by "transgression" in modern elegies is the way in which they fail to use the conventional language and symbols:

Failure to deviate at all from an elegiac formula is found at its most extreme in an obituary notice. To read the words, 'Hallam, Arthur, on Friday, 13 September, suddenly in Vienna, son of the historian Henry Hallam,' might produce an impact. But they create none of the tremors of feeling we experience when reading *In Memoriam*. One way Tennyson's elegy produces its effect is by transgressing the convention that the traditional language and ancient symbols

of a pastoral elegy like 'Lycidas' should exorcise the terrors of dying. . . . That is why the melancholy of many nineteenth-century and modern elegists seems deeper, more tremulous, than the melancholy of Milton or Donne. (211)

In the light of the above arguments, I would suggest that Brontë's elegies are modern in both language and ideas. The language of her elegies exhibits ambiguity and the silences of white space and dashes. She proposes no conventional Christian platitudes of a happy, social paradise to "exorcise the terrors of dying." Instead, she is not afraid to declare her lack of knowledge of the whole process of dying, while she is prepared to endeavor to describe her visionary experiences that led her to communicate with divinity.

If we return to the poem "Remembrance," we can observe some of these techniques at work. Janet Gezari, the most recent editor of Brontë's poetry, calls "Remembrance" her "culminating poem of loss and mourning" (228). C. Day Lewis agrees as he analyzes the meter of the poem:

The line here is basically a pentameter: but it is pulled out of the ordinary iambic pentameter rhythm and given a different shape by three devices--by putting a stress on the first syllable of each line, by a marked caesura after the second foot, and by the use of feminine rhymes in lines one and three of each stanza. The effect of this rhythm I find extremely powerful, extremely appropriate. It is a dragging effect, as of feet moving in a funeral march; and andante maestoso: it is the slowest rhythm I know in English poetry, and the most sombre. (91)

As previously mentioned, Shaw considers both the caesura and the dash to be an indication of elliptical language, where the reader must pay attention to the subtext. In "Remembrance," Brontë evades language by the use of a dash, which presents itself as a boundary. The first line of the first stanza is addressed to the corpse: "Cold in the earth--and the deep snow piled above thee." This phrase is repeated in the first line of the third stanza, but there it becomes dislocated into a reflection about the dead by the speaker: "Cold in the earth--and fifteen wild Decembers." Poet Richard Hugo has called our attention to the sound of single-syllable words with hard consonant endings, words such as "cold" and "earth," and how they are a "unit of power" in English, "going off like rifle shots" (32). In Brontë's poem, the hard plosive phrase conveys the certainty of death, but it is followed by that sign of elusiveness, the dash. The reader thus feels the tension set up between what is certain and what is uncertain.

With this phrase, "Cold in the earth," the reader is located at the graveside, at the brink of death, but there the journey ends, for, after the dash, the speaker does not go down into the void which is death, but doubles back to the "deep snow" piled on the grave. There is spatial separation between the mourner and the dead, and obviously no way in which the speaker can communicate what it is to be dead. So, the speaker stays on the right side of the grave. Words have failed her. Later, in stanza three, the phrase with its emphatic first syllable sounding like a tolling bell, is repeated, but yet again the speaker edges away from the abyss that is on the other side of death. This time, the speaker separates herself temporally from the dead by using a dash as a boundary again and then retreating from the graveside of the present moment

to the past of "fifteen wild Decembers" ago. Unlike the elegists of earlier times, Brontë is unwilling to obtain consolation from orthodox nineteenth-century theology and venture beyond the grave to surmise what happens there.

On the other hand, Brontë appears to have obtained consolation for her "vale of tears" on earth by means of her visionary experiences. Most critics agree that her poetry, testing the limits of language, speaks of visionary experiences and of possession by a power that is at once master and slave. In "Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle," Brontë tells how this power, "a messenger of Hope," comes to her:

He comes with western winds, with evening's wandering airs,
With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars;
Winds take a pensive tone, and stars a tender fire
And visions rise and change which kill me with desire--

Brontë endeavors to describe the mystical joy that comes when she is visited, or possessed:

But first a hush of peace, a soundless calm descends;
The struggle of distress and fierce impatience ends;
Mute music soothes my breast--unuttered harmony
That I could never dream till earth was lost to me.

We see in this the now familiar dash and the use of the paradoxes of "mute music" and "unuttered harmony" that signify the incommunicable. Brontë, despite her many bereavements, achieved "peace" and "soundless calm" during the times when she could be alone and be visited by this "messenger."

In chapter two, we observed how William Wordsworth became consoled for the death of his brother by his revisiting a place that John had

loved and writing an elegy for him that immortalized the place, the man, and the poet. I would suggest that Emily Brontë achieved some measure of consolation for her unbounded grief by her mystical experiences and then by writing about these moments of divine communion. Maybe because Brontë had no faith in language (one poem asks the question "What language can utter the feeling . . .") or was not concerned to immortalize herself, she made no attempts to publish these elegies until Charlotte coerced her. Since poetry has traditionally addressed issues of spirituality, these elegies are not unusual, but the private aspect of them is unusual. Brontë's poems were solely for her use. Tayler suggests that the poems "might be called female speech, in being a mode of private introspection and retrospection contained within a room of Emily's own, shut away from the world of audience and the claims of community" (27).

Chapter Four

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

But death will not appal
One who, past doubtings all,
Waits in unhope.

(Hardy, "In Tenebris")

Peter Sacks has suggested that Hardy "welds the Romantic and the Victorian into modern words" (232), and with his *Poems of 1912-13*, Thomas Hardy, novelist and poet, leads us into the twentieth century. Whereas earlier nineteenth-century writers try to reconcile the physical reality of death and the hope of resurrection, Hardy in some of his more lighthearted verse examines the human need to visit the graves of the dead. In the familiar "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave," he mocks the notion that a grave serves as a memorial place for the dead. Even the dead woman's dog admits that he had "quite forgot" it was her "resting place" as he digs there for his bone. Yet, a year after this poem was published, Hardy's own wife had died and he sought to make sense of her death and the memories that flooded in. The volume of elegiacal poems that Hardy published after the death of his first wife are known both for their aesthetic qualities¹ and for the questions they pose. Scholars agree that

¹ For example, Edward Blunden refers to them as "impressive elegies" (*Thomas Hardy*, 137); C. Day Lewis claims that they are "some of the finest love poetry in our language" ("The Lyrical Poetry" 1951, rpt. in *Thomas Hardy: Poems*, ed. James Gibson and Trevor Johnson, 1979, 157); and Carl J. Weber in his Preface to Thomas Hardy, *Love Poems*, (1963, v), determines their status as being one of "the best three series of love poems in English."

Hardy was estranged from his wife by the time of her death and that his elegiacal poems commemorate the loss of the love they once had, rather than the death of Emma as a still beloved wife. A point of disagreement among scholars seems to be whether Hardy was merely indifferent to his wife at the time of her death, or whether he was more actively mean-spirited. Author of *Poetry of Mourning*, Jahan Ramazani finds that the elegies resonate with Hardy's "guilt, aggression, and narcissism" (48). John Bayley agrees with Ramazani and finds "self-accusation" and "self-reproach" in the works (65). Meanwhile, other critics such as Irving Howe and Jean R. Brooks tend to blame Hardy less for the failure of the marriage and suggest that his growing indifference to Emma resulted from a change in her.

The marriage of the Hardys, on 17 September 1874, was a late one for both the bride and groom, for both Thomas Hardy and Emma Lavinia Gifford were 34. They had met four years previously in St. Juliot, Cornwall, where Hardy, an architect's clerk, had traveled from London to assess the repairs needed by the parish church. Biographer Robert Gittings says, "There is no doubt at all that Hardy and Emma Gifford found themselves caught up in a love situation from the moment they met . . . all the evidence points to the truth that they were genuinely in love from the start" (133). Both weather and scenery contributed to the "magic," as Hardy later called it, of their courtship. The weather was unusually fine from 22 January through to August, and the abnormal drought conditions added to a "charged and dreamlike atmosphere" (Gittings 134). Hardy seemed to fall under the spell of Cornwall, which is a beautiful and romantic county steeped in Arthurian legends, and even in 1895,

when he and Emma were not getting along, he could still look back on this magical² period and describe Cornwall as being

the region of dream and mystery. The ghostly
birds, the pall-like sea, the eternal soliloquy of
the waters, the bloom of dark purple cast, that
seems to exhale from the shoreward precipices,
in themselves lend to the scene an atmosphere
like the twilight of a night vision.

(*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Preface, 1895)

In her own memoir, *Some Recollections*, Emma confirms the idyllic surroundings:

Scarcely any author and his wife could have
had a much more romantic meeting with its
unusual circumstances, in bringing them together
from two different though neighbouring counties
to this one at this very remote spot, with beautiful
seacoast, and the wild Atlantic ocean rolling in
with its magnificent waves and spray, its white gulls
and black choughs and grey puffins, its cliffs
and rocks and gorgeous sunsettings sparkling
redness in a track widening from the horizon
to the shore. (50)

² In a later poem, Hardy describes his Cornish experiences: "When I came back from Lyonesse / With magic in my eyes!"

Hardy quickly completed his work on the church restoration, but he prolonged his stay to spend more time with Emma. With Emma riding on horseback and Hardy walking beside her, they visited Beeny Cliff and looked down its sheer drop to the seal caves. Emma gives us a visual image of how she must have appeared to Hardy:

An unforgettable experience to me, scampering
up and down the hills on my beloved mare alone,
wanting no protection, the rain going down my
back often and my hair floating on the wind.
I wore a soft deep dark coloured brown habit,
longer than to my heels (as worn then) which
had to be caught up to one side when walking,
and thrown over the left arm gracefully and carefully
. . . a brown felt hat turned up at the sides.
Fanny and I were one creature, and very happy
both of us. She was a lovely brown colour too. (50-51)

In the subsequent editing of his journals before writing his biography³, Hardy did permit one reference to this day at Beeny Cliff to remain:

March 10th. Went with E.L.G. to Beeny Cliff.
She on horseback-- . . . On the cliff. . . .
'The tender grace of a day', etc. The run down

³ *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1891* (London, 1928) and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy 1892-1928* (London, 1930) published over the second Mrs. Hardy's name have come to be accepted by scholars as being a biographical work by Hardy himself. It seems that he wanted to leave a particular image of himself for posterity so he collaborated with his second wife in a deception that made the work seem to be biographical, an unmediated presentation of his life. Obviously, we now have to accept that it is an autobiography and subject to the distortions imposed by the image that Hardy wanted to project. He destroyed many journal entries and papers that did not relate to his projected image.

to the edge. The coming home. . . .

(*Life of Thomas Hardy*, I vol. London, 1962)

The quotation, which alludes to Tennyson's "Break, break, break," adds to our perception of Hardy's regret about his failed marriage:

Break, break, break,
At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me.

Their courtship, which included a mutual interest in poetry, continued for four years with Hardy visiting Emma two or three times a year until they married in London. Despite many promises, Hardy never took Emma back to Cornwall. Yet, after Emma's death on 27 November 1911 and apparently inspired by her memoir, *Some Recollections*, Hardy planned his own trip to the West country. He decided to revisit the places where they had fallen in love and wished to be back in St. Juliot by 7 March, the exact day he had first met Emma there. During this journey, poems poured from him and resulted in the *Poems of 1912-13*. Gittings suggests that Hardy must have carried *Some Recollections* with him, for many of these poems use phrases, scenes, and incidents that are taken from Emma's memoir.

Much biographical evidence suggests that Hardy's love for Emma turned into indifference. Gittings describes Hardy's apparent neglect on the day she died, for when a maid came to tell Hardy that his wife wanted to see him, he made a cold remark about her crooked collar before going upstairs to be with his wife during her final five minutes (149). Gittings asks:

The question remains how he could possibly

have ignored Emma's sufferings over so long a period. To everyone, he pretended that her death was sudden and unexpected. He softened every aspect of it in the autobiography he wrote a few years later, and excused himself. Even at the time, he wrote to Mrs. Henniker, 'Emma's death was absolutely unexpected by me, the doctor, and everybody . . . ' (149-50).

For several years, Emma had suffered great pain from impacted gall-stones. Gittings shows us that the maid had seen Emma's sufferings for a year and that Emma had discussed the possibility of a surgical operation with one of Hardy's American admirers who called on them. The chance of her death was not as unexpected as Hardy would have it.

Not only did Hardy appear to shut his eyes to his wife's suffering, but, according to Gittings, he suggested reasons for their estrangement that included Emma's madness and her snobbery towards his family. Emma seemed to have been given to delusions, but they could be accounted for by the acute pain of her illness, postulates Gittings, and the alleged snobbery may well have come from Hardy himself. He was very conscious of the class system. In his old age, Hardy drew up a genealogical table which omitted his close relatives (labourers, cobblers, bricklayers, carpenters, farm servants, etc.) but gave elaborate details of the professional men remotely connected to him as though to prove that he was related to educated people (Gittings 3).

Whatever the true account of Hardy's later estrangement from his wife was, there seems no doubt that he suffered remorse after her death. The

epigraph to *Poems of 1912-13* reads "Veteris vestigia flammae," a quotation from the *Aeneid* 4.23, where Dido confesses that her new love for Aeneas has rekindled the "traces of an ancient flame." As has been pointed out by many scholars, Hardy's use of the allusion is complex because it invokes Dido's subsequent betrayal by Aeneas, as well as Aeneas's future encounter with her mute form in the underworld. In *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks elucidates the relevance of this epigraph to Emma and the marriage:

Her death somehow rekindled Hardy's early
love for her; that love had long since been
betrayed or doomed by estrangement; and in
his elegies he will repeatedly confront her
'voiceless ghost.'

The precise wording of the quotation itself is of great interest. *Vestigia* means 'tracks,' or 'signs,' even 'footprints'; also 'stations' or 'posts'; and finally 'moments.' . . . To a great extent, Hardy's elegies will track down special stations or instants in his relationship with Emma, investigating traces of his wife and of himself and studying the nature of their persistence as a print or sign. . . . The word *flammae* is also intriguing, for it refers not only to fire--the blaze of passion, and the energy or light at the core of nearly all figures of consolation--but also to the ruin caused by fire.

The mingling of these oppositions accords with
 Hardy's offering of only the bleakest of comforts. (236)

Ramazani agrees with Sacks that the tension between the oppositional forces inherent in the elegies derives from Hardy's mingled feelings of grief and remorse; he claims that "Hardy may well be the first English poet to display fully the psychological burdens, anxieties, and contradictions that attend secular mourning and the act of writing about it" (49). Ramazani points out that Hardy represents his wife as being the instigator of his pain; she was the one who "closed her term here" and abandoned him--while he himself becomes a victim of her departure. Analyzing the poem "The Going," Ramazani further adds that "never in the canonical tradition of elegy had a poet vented such anger at the dead person for betraying him" (51).

In this poem, Hardy's recriminations veer between himself and Emma. He questions his own failures, "Why, then, latterly did we not speak?" but he also blames Emma for leaving him without "bidding goodbye." In his analysis of the last stanza, Ramazani sees the poet's inward directed anger turning outward again; "his masochism flipping over once more into sadism" (52) as he reproaches Emma for inflicting such an injury on him:

O you could not know
 That such swift fleeing
 No soul foreseeing--
 Not even I--would undo me so!

Seeing oneself as being abandoned by the deceased appears to be part of the work of mourning, yet Hardy's wound goes very deep. Like most bereaved people, Hardy questions the death of a loved one and asks "Why?" in this

poem, but he is also perpetuating the issues that haunt his biographers. When all evidence suggests otherwise, why does Hardy seek to promote himself as a caring husband, to whom Emma's death was totally unexpected? He seems to deny any culpability on his part as he addresses her:

Why did you give me no hint that night
That quickly after the morrow's dawn,
And calmly, as if indifferent quite,
You would close up your term here, up and be gone.

According to Hardy's biographers, Emma had been giving him more than a "hint"; she had been ill for several years and feared having surgery. While Hardy seems to be probing his wounds in these poems and working through his regret and grief, he does not appear to be fully honest with himself or with his readers because he is still denying his apparent callousness and indifference to Emma's suffering. When Peter Sacks analyzes "The Going" in *The English Elegy*, he also claims that this poem is an extraordinary work of mourning, for "In few other elegies has the poet gone so far to undermine his own identity or had to fight so desperately for his own survival" (244).

How does one survive a grievous loss? This dissertation seeks to explore how poets cope with their losses by writing elegies. It appears that the act of writing the elegy serves as a work of mourning for the bereaved, and the elegy itself both serves as a memorial and as almost a replacement for the dead person. The question of who will be the audience for these elegies seems to perturb modern writers. In the previous chapter, it was noted that Emily Brontë seemed unconcerned with audience and made no attempt to publish her elegiacal poems. Yet, her aloofness may be unusual. Contemporary American

poet, W. S. Merwin, encapsulates the whole dilemma in his fragmented "Elegy," which consists of one colloquial phrase that fades away in a half-hearted manner before even reaching a punctuation mark:

Who would I show it to (1970)

We find that, in the midst of his grief, Hardy is self-reflexively addressing the same question in "Your Last Drive" when he muses that Emma will neither know nor care about elegies for her:

Should you censure me I shall take no heed,
And even your praises no more shall need.

True: never you'll know. And you will not mind.

But shall I then slight you because of such?

Dear ghost, in the past did you ever find

The thought 'What profit,' move me much?

We can assume that Hardy is using "profit" in the sense of a literary gain rather than a financial gain, and a glance at the etymology of "profit" reveals a new meaning to his choice of word. Hardy is well-known for his exacting searches for words that have the precise meaning that he wants, and he probably knew that "profit" derives from the Latin *proficere*, to make progress. If the poet is writing elegies in order to work through his mourning, then with each poem he will "make progress" in this work, and thereby "profit" from it. Each time he articulates his grief, he will move closer to surviving it.

Hardy's decision to publish and thus make his elegies available to an audience is justified in his letter to Florence Henniker, dated 17 July 1914. He

explains that he intends to publish all the poems he had written since his last volume was published, and he does have a compelling reason for doing so:

Some of them I rather shrink from printing--
those I wrote just after Emma died, when I
looked back at her as she had originally been,
& when I felt miserable lest I had not treated
her considerately in her later life. However I
shall publish them as the only amends I can
make, if it were so. (Letters 284)

The elegies thus become a public penance, a cry of *mea culpa* from Hardy.

While Ramazani suggests that Hardy "represses the dangerous knowledge" that he is making poetic profit through Emma's death, I would contend that Hardy is troubled by this issue and reveals his dilemma in the poems. Hardy knows that he neglected Emma, and he is making the only amends he can make; he is publically confessing his guilt. In "The Upbraiding," Hardy rebukes himself through the voice of Emma: "Now I am dead you sing to me." In one sense, he is exchanging the work for the life, but he is very much aware of this.

It is becoming apparent that when writers grieve, they are compelled to work through their mourning by writing. They use words, the tools of their trade, to numb the pain, or to staunch the wound of bereavement, as Freud would put it. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, two of Hardy's Victorian contemporaries had been grappling with the words that express grief. Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish historian and essayist, was also finding obstacles in the way of his writing about his wife, Jane Welsh Carlyle, after her death. He too had neglected his wife while she was alive. Yet, after her death Carlyle is

stricken with remorse and deep grief at his loss. He explains the emptiness that he feels:

My one solace and employment hitherto is that of
 sorting up, and settling as I judge *she* would have
 wished, all that pertained to her beautiful existence
 and her: *her* advice on it all, how *that* wish starts
 out on me strangely at many a turn; and the sharp
 twinge that reminds me, "No!"

One's first *awakening* in the morning, the
 reality all stript so *bare* before one, and the puddle
 of confused dreams at once gone, is the ghastliest
 half-hour of the day;--as I have heard others remark.
 On the whole there is no use writing here. There is
 even a lack of *sincerity* in what I write (strange but
 true). The thing I *would* say, I cannot. All words are
 idle. . . . (*Reminiscences* 167)

Yet, even though they may be idle, words are all that poets have with which to
 mourn. Perhaps the most famous elegy of the nineteenth century, Tennyson's *In
 Memoriam* confirms the writer's wish to inscribe grief words on paper:

I sometimes hold it half a sin
 To put in words the grief I feel;
 For words, like Nature, half reveal
 And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,

A use in measured language lies;
 The sad mechanic exercise,
 Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,
 Like coarsest clothes against the cold
 But that large grief which these enfold
 Is given in outline and no more. (348-49)

Dennis Taylor, who has presented a series of articles which discuss the annotations in the books that Hardy owned, considers that *In Memoriam* had a "powerful influence" on Hardy (43). In Hardy's copy of *In Memoriam*, the above section of Tennyson's elegy has a marginal line drawn by Hardy to highlight the third stanza: "In words like weeds I'll wrap me o'er" (47). Taylor does not surmise why Hardy annotated this section, but he does suggest that Hardy tries to rewrite Tennyson's elegy in the *Poems of 1912-13*.

Author of *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* Eric Griffiths sees that Hardy has a special need to find the words to talk about a failed marriage because one of the reasons for the breakdown was a failure to communicate between husband and wife. Griffiths makes an analogy between the words themselves and Hardy and Emma:

The idyll of possible return to the scenes of
 their first raptures is lodged within the wistful
 sobriety of that failed meeting of the words,
 words which sit, as it were, in sight of each
 other without being able to come out

with all they wish to say, like Thomas and
Emma Hardy, in fact. (227)

Joseph Brodsky, in "Wooing the Inanimate," attributes the search to "our poet's grief searching for an adequate form of expression" as he comments on Hardy's metrical diversity ("twenty-one attempts") in this series of elegies (354).

Borrowing from Hardy's own imagery, Brodsky describes the Hardys' marriage as "The Convergence of the Twain," a poem written by Hardy to commemorate the sinking of the Titanic. According to Brodsky, Hardy was the "Shape of Ice" that sunk the feminine ship who was of course Emma, and these *Poems of 1912-13* are the "Iceberg's lament for the vanished ship" (352). Like Griffiths, Brodsky sees the elegies as a salvage attempt which is "the by-product, naturally, of an excruciating self-examination," and which is also a "meticulous reconstruction of the casualty" (353). Because the poems are sincere attempts to record Hardy's regret and pain, Brodsky wonders whether they may be too moving and personal for some readers. Like Tennyson, who "held it half a sin / To put in words the grief," Hardy himself recognizes that he brings his grief to bear on his poetry and that he is exploring the relationship between art and experience. The poet can find the "measured language" with which to write his songs, but the guilt and the reproaches that he hears coming from Emma lead to a tension in the works. In fact, Ramazani considers that the aesthetic powers of the poems derive from this movement between "ironic self-questioning" and "desperate self-comforting" (49).

Throughout this dissertation, we can see that the questions raised by grief and the kind of answers that can be offered have not been permanently valid from age to age. In the twentieth century, the questions and answers are

now more complex and the answers more hesitant and speculative. The formulaic structure of the classical elegy has evolved from a structure that affirms and consoles into one that allows for elaboration of perplexity, fear, and hope, instead of consolation. The question of how Hardy will be able to work through his mourning without the traditional religious forms of consolation is considered by both Sacks and Ramazani. According to Sacks, who examines Hardy's final elegy "Where the Picnic Was," Hardy still needs some of the ritual quality of elegy, and in this poem the burnt circle of the spot where the fire was is a crucial emblem that indicates survival of the mourner (258). Sacks shows how the emblem works:

The charred stick-ends which "strew the sward"
as though it were a grave (again the diction is
archaic and ritualistic) are almost totemic
symbols, representing the burned-out, shortened
stumps of what had fed the fire. As such they
accord well with the nature of almost any elegy's
figure for survival. But apart from marking the
violence, the loss, and the refinement inherent to
the construction of such a figure, the branded
circle points to the *flammae*, the passion
and its ruin, of which these elegies have been
the vestige. Like the rocks, the circle is a figure
for the past and perhaps for the elegies themselves
--a harsh version of wreath or garland. (258-59)

Yet, Sacks considers, although Emma and the failed marriage are laid to rest in these elegies, the most important part of this poem is the survivor, Hardy. The poet achieves consolation by emphasizing his survival:

the elegist foregrounds himself as the survivor
on his grassy rise, making his last assertion of
persistent identity ("Yes, I am here / Just as
last year") and finally closing forever the eyes
of the dead. (259)

Ramazani, who considers Hardy's finest poetry to be about loss in a century when God cannot be counted on for help (47), suggests that consolation is achieved by both the writing of the poem and by Hardy's alliance of himself with the great procession of elegists who have gone before. Bringing some biographical knowledge to the same poem, "Where the Picnic Was," Ramazani explains that when Hardy affirms "Yes, I am here / Just as last year," he is remembering that exactly one year previously he had been presented with the Royal Society of Literature's gold medal.⁴ Ramazani reads this poem as being the poet's self coronation: "The poet crowned with laurel a year ago now crowns himself through the recollection of that event" (61). By doing this, suggests Ramazani,

Hardy joins himself to the poetic brotherhood
of dead precursors and living contemporaries
--a male band that frees him from wounding
dependency and assures him of his continuing

⁴ Presented by Henry Newbolt and W. B. Yeats on Hardy's seventy-second birthday at Max Gate.

poetic prowess. (61)

Thus, Hardy is adhering to the elegiac tradition in certain ways. Yet, suggests Ramazani, Hardy is also dissenting from the tradition because throughout the sequence he worries about the problem of making poetic gain out of his own personal loss (53). Ramazani further diagnoses Hardy's anxiety as being an emotion that is enmeshed with his guilt at not communicating with his wife while she was alive. Instead, says Ramazani, Hardy reaps profit from communicating with her now:

Reflecting that he would not have been able
to read his wife's face had he been with her
toward the end, he nevertheless suggests
that his inability to read her face becomes
in turn the condition of his *writing* on her
face now, when he retrospectively inscribes
it with his reverie of her unuttered words.

He could not

have read the writing upon your face,

'I go hence soon to my resting-place;

'You may miss me then. But I shall not know

How many times you may visit me there,

Or what your thoughts are, or if you go

There never at all. And I shall not care.

Should you censure me I shall take no heed

And even your praises no more shall need.'

(2:48-49)

His former blindness permits his new insight--his illiteracy, his literacy. Hardy demolishes the fiction that mourning might benefit anyone other than the mourner; the dead wife is benefitted not at all by his endless laments. (53)

What is interesting is that Hardy appreciates the moral distinction between writing a memorial to Emma, and profiting from that memorial. It seems that the modern poet will no longer be able to achieve consolation through writing elegies that place him in a long ancestral line because he or she will not be able to tolerate the thought that poetic gain can be derived from loss, that the work can replace the life. The "anxiety of influence" on poets may have been replaced by an anxiety about motivation, a desire not to be thought to profit from the dead.

Still, Hardy needs to write these elegies even though "You are past love, praise, indifference, blame," as he tells the ghost of Emma in "Your Last Drive." It is as though Hardy, like Angel Clare in his *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, has awakened too late to what he has lost; at last, when it is too late, they have come to understand life. If Hardy realizes that his poetic laments are too late to benefit Emma, then it would seem that he must be endeavoring to work through his own mourning.

Irving Howe, in *Thomas Hardy*, reads the elegies as being regretful about opportunities missed, and he sees that this acceptance is itself a consolatory device. Howe explains how Hardy works through his mourning:

He leaves behind him the treacheries of poetic
display and "expression": it is too late for vanity or
defense. What is left--and this forms the most
stirring motif in the whole group of poems--is the
moment of overwhelming relief when there is no
longer any need for self-deception and nothing to
claim for oneself but the truth of memory. This
surrender brings pain and through pain,
composure. (184)

Indeed, continues Howe, the elegies are more precious than poems of
mourning because they convey the raw pain of a man coming to terms with
what he cannot change; they are concerned with

the consequences of emotion, survival beyond
emotion: how a man lives through what it seems
he cannot, and how he learns not to tamper
with his grief and not even to seek forgiveness
in his own eyes. (185)

Thus, Hardy's admissions of failure to communicate with Emma come as close
to mourning as the poet can get. To emerge from our grief, Freud contended,
we have to work through these complicated feelings: then and only then, "the
ego becomes free and uninhibited again" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 250-
51). Freud's term "griefwork" is shorthand for this process, when a bereaved
person is encouraged to go back and work through anger, hostility, and pain. It
seems that Hardy is using the blank page as a space on which the battle with

loss can be fought, rather than merely inscribing his loss in a work of memorial.

The blank page is also a space where Hardy can recreate places and experiences which he remembers well. Just as Wordsworth, in the Lake District, went back to a glen where he had fished and been happy with his brother John, and Brontë interwove her losses with the Yorkshire moors, so did Hardy travel back to Cornwall to recreate his memories and experiences. When he was actually back in Cornwall, where he could remember Emma's youth and the magic of their romance, he was able to meditate about their times of glory. "The verses came," Hardy explained, "it was quite natural. One looked back through the years and saw some pictures; a loss like that makes one's old brain vocal" (qtd in Howe, *Hardy*, 181). It would seem that feelings of guilt and regret coupled with nostalgic memories, aided by a return to certain places, stimulated Hardy into producing the elegies in memory of Emma.

Ghosts have always been associated with places. We remember Yeats' play *Purgatory* where a ruined house is the site for an endless cycle of the same transgressions that keep being played over and over through eternity. Hardy was enthralled by such notions and confesses to Caleb Saleby in a letter dated 2 February 1915:

Half my time (particularly when I write verse)
I believe--in the modern use of the word--not
only in things that Bergson does, but in spectres,
mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, dreams,
haunted places, &c., &c. (Letters 297)

We know from Hardy's correspondence that he was familiar with Henri Bergson's work on time and space, and it is also clear that Hardy was familiar with Einstein's work on relativity. In "Drinking Song," he satirizes the theorists, Thales, Copernicus, Hume, Darwin, Cheyne, and Einstein, who have led to Victorian doubt. One verse sums up Einstein's Theory of Relativity:

And now comes Einstein with a notion--
 Not yet quite clear
 To many here--
 That there's no time, no space, no motion,
 Nor rathe nor late,
 Nor square nor straight,
 But just a sort of bending-ocean.

Obviously, when Hardy returns to Cornwall on his pilgrimage to replay his love affair, then the place conjures up the bygone times, and time becomes just like a "bending-ocean."

In *The Linguistic Moment* J. Hillis Miller perceptively explores this same element at work in Hardy's writing--an element where the author sees a place that is "so marked by passion that it will forever be associated with it" (295). Drawing evidence from Hardy's novels and poetry, Miller concludes that Hardy's universe is a "communication system" or an "immense web of signs" (307). According to Miller, signs are spoken or written words which are not emitted deliberately; instead, they are emitted unpredictably and fortuitously, and they form a part of the energy that Hardy personifies as the "President of the Immortals" (306). Miller considers that the gigantic communication system operates much like radio, television, sonar, and radar, and explains:

Hardy's poetry also belongs to this epoch of telepathy, telephone, television--far-feeling, far-hearing, and far-seeing. The most generalized description of Hardy's universe, it may be, is that it is a vast array of lines along which pass in every direction messages, voices, visions, in incoherent and proliferating multiplicity. (308)

In this universe, mankind does not consciously receive these signs; rather, one unwittingly receives signals that prompt certain actions and thoughts, so that when Hardy returns to Cornwall, he automatically receives the signals emitted by the familiar landscape and then retransmits them as the *Poems of 1912-13*.

Miller concludes:

For Hardy nothing dies or can die that has had the good or ill luck to inscribe itself in some way on matter, on someone's heart and brain, on paper or stone, on walls or utensils, on the landscape, or on the mere circumambient air. (314)

According to Miller, when Hardy returns to the scenes of his courtship, places such as Beeny Cliff become a text on which his past memories are inscribed, and which now emit signals to him.

In the poem "At Castle Boterel," Hardy himself probes the nature of imprints on the landscape. He is very specific about the place he has returned to, "a junction of lane and highway," and he sees "distinctly" the ghostly figures of himself and a "girlish form" climbing the road. This one moment in time was of such high degree that it became encoded into the landscape:

It filled but a minute. But was there ever
 A time of such quality, since or before,
 To the hill's story? To one mind never,
 Though it has been climbed, foot-swift, foot-sore,
 By thousands more.

Hardy spells out his theory in the next stanza as he widens the time span to include all the time there ever has been:

Primaeval rocks form the road's steepest border,
 And much more have they faced there, first and last,
 Of the transitory in earth's long order;
 But what they record in color and cast
 Is--that we two passed.

In stanza six, time past flows into time present as Hardy muses on the transformation of substance into phantom through "Time's unflinching rigour." The phantom that he has seen is the image of himself and Emma as they were, and now that the signal has been emitted to him and received by him, it seems to disappear.

In the final stanza, he reflects that he has seen the phantom figure for the last time because he will never return to this place, "love's domain," ever again. In other words, the memory of Emma and their courtship will die with him. Miller would disagree with Hardy on this point because the image has not faded; instead, it has now been transmitted to many readers of Hardy's poetry. His poetry emits a signal that is received by anyone who reads it, and, furthermore, the Cornish landscape will still evoke memories of Emma and

Hardy to those readers who visit their old haunts. Miller's "web of communication" continues without end.

Hardy's sensitivity to music and sound is well-known, and when he returns to his old haunts, he picks up these signals. In his own Bible, he had marked the verse I Corinthians XIV, 10: "There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of these is without signification" (Brown 130). It is therefore, not surprising that he should be haunted by the ghostly voice of Emma in "The Voice":

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
 Standing as when I drew near to the town
 Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
 Even to the original air-blue gown!

The poem's rhythm halts with the caesural question, the pause after "can it be you that I hear?" and the reader is left with the poet's insecurity and doubt. The poet has received the signal emitted by the passion that lingers in this place; he doubts whether it is Emma's voice, but still he is compelled to relive the passion that they had spent there. The poet transforms the signal into his verse. The voice calling to Hardy has conjured up the sign of a woman in her air-blue gown, with the sea breeze of Cornwall blowing around her. Yet this vision fades as the voice fades. In the third stanza, one hears only what is left of the voice trying to resurrect itself after forty-three years. It dissolves in the frequency of the sibilants, for the hiss of the breeze is stronger than this voice which Hardy strains to hear. He doubts whether he heard a voice:

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
 Travelling across the wet mead to me here,

You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,

Heard no more again far or near?

As the soft predominantly feminine rhymes in this poem break down into the awkward monosyllabic "Heard no more again far or near?" the reader senses the desolation of the one who waits and watches. In the final stanza, he falters and his desolation makes him unapproachable, for he is hedged in by misery. "Thus I" is isolated from the other words and provides for a heart-wrenching caesura before he continues to inscribe his pain:

Thus I; faltering forward,

Leaves around me falling,

Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward

And the woman calling.

The repeated sad vowel sounds of *or* and *all* seem to reinforce the emptiness and desolation. The rhythm has become heavy and stumbling and the final echo of the voice evaporates in the sibilants that have now been dislocated to the *th* sounds in *thin*, *through*, and *thorn*. Once again, we are reminded of the research of David Shaw and Julia Kristeva mentioned in the last chapter where it is demonstrated that the language of modern elegy is characterized by caesuras that create "tremors," funereal rhythms, and dislocations of language. Hardy's acute ear for sounds fails to distinguish between the voice of Emma and the voice of the breeze, and as he realizes the finality of Emma's going, his own language breaks down.

We see another breakdown in language, which is in marked contrast to the melliflence of the rest of the poem, in the poem "Beeny Cliff," when Hardy loses the visual image of Emma. On his return to Beeny Cliff, the

landscape transmits signals to him of their courtship there, where he would walk alongside Emma's horse. This poem begins gloriously with long flowing lines and a musical fluency that is enhanced by the heavy alliteration:

O the opal and the sapphire of that wandering western
sea,

And the woman riding high above with bright hair
flapping free--

The woman whom I loved so, and who loyally loved me.

Even in the third stanza when the ominous clouds break over the previously "clear-sunned March," they cannot obscure the vigor of this poem, for Hardy retains the magnificent musical rhythm:

A little cloud then cloaked us, and there flew an irised
rain,

And the Atlantic dyed its levels with a dull misfeatured
stain,

And then the sun burst out again, and purples prinked
the main.

It seems that by the time Hardy wrote this poem, he was coming to terms with Emma's death and felt that even the rain clouds that had broken over their marriage did not invalidate their original rapture. The word "irised," used by Hardy for its archaic meaning of rainbow, also brings to mind that Iris was the goddess of the rainbow along which she traveled to earth as messenger of the gods. An iris is also a flower of jewel-like colors, purple and yellow, that reflect the brilliance of the jewels in the first stanza. Yet, the iris is also part of the eye--the colored muscular diaphragm that surrounds the pupil and controls

the light that enters the eye. Hardy may have felt by this stage that he was seeing more clearly and that, like Angel Clare, his marriage was illuminated, albeit too late.

Stanza four heralds an affirmation, a heroic declaration that it may not be too late. Beeny Cliff still stands, and Hardy is defiant and courageous in his affirmation:

--Still in all its chasml beauty bulks old Beeny to the
sky,
And shall she and I not go there once again now March
is nigh,
And the sweet things said in that March say anew there
by and by?

After such polished and masterful poetics, the breakdown of language in stanza five comes as a shock to the reader. Hardy, who is known for his efforts to say exactly what he means, and who has proved his command of language in this poem, is finally at a loss for words. He realizes that he is left alone with his memories because Emma "neither knows nor cares for Beeny," and what is worse perhaps, he knows not where she is. The dash that is becoming familiar to us as a sign of language breakdown, the space where poets try to communicate the incommunicable, surrounds "elsewhere," the space where Emma is. Hardy's courage and defiance have collapsed and we sense that he cannot face his loss. The desolation inherent in this stanza contrasts vividly with the glowing visual images of the previous stanzas as Hardy realizes that he can no longer see Emma:

What if still in chasmal beauty looms that wild weird
 western shore,
 The woman now is--elsewhere--whom the ambling pony
 bore,
 And nor knows nor cares for Beeny, and will laugh there
 nevermore.

We see in these two poems that although the images come flooding in to Hardy and the words to describe them pour out of him, language ultimately fails him as first the voice of Emma dissolves into the wind, and next the sight of Emma is obscured by clouds.

One of the most specific poems that connects Emma with the Cornish landscape is "I Found Her Out There." The poet describes where he found her:

I found her out there
 On a slope few see
 That falls westwardly
 To the salt-edged air
 Where the ocean breaks
 On the purple strand
 And the hurricane shakes
 The solid land.

The second stanza emphasizes where the dead body of Emma is now; it is here rather than there: "In a noiseless nest / No sea beats near." Hardy seems to take full blame for the fact that "she does not sleep," for he claims "I have brought her here." Here is, of course, is the gloomy ground of Stinsford churchyard, a mile from Max Gate and Dorchester, where Emma is now buried. Emma's

ghost, however, like that of Catherine Linton, will not lie peacefully in a grave; it will return to the Cornish sea coast where Emma had been happy. In the grotesque image of the last stanza, Emma's remains creep underground to the place where she longed to be:

Yet her shade, maybe,
Will creep underground
Till it catch the sound
Of that western sea
As it swells and sobs
Where she once domiciled,
And joy in its throbs
With the heart of a child.

One feels with Hardy, that Emma will continue to haunt the places where she had been young, happy, and beloved.

"Last Love-Word," is the final poem of the sequence and it marks the end of Hardy's voyage of memories. He has evoked the memories of their courtship and transformed these memories into a volume of elegies, which work through his own conflicting emotions of grief, regret, and anger. Finally, his "grief-work" is complete. Hardy's language breaks down into apologies as he says a last good-bye to Emma and their "doomed" love:

This is the last; the very, very last!
Anon, and all is dead and dumb,
Only a pale shroud over the past,
That cannot be
Of value small or vast,

Love, then to me!

I can say no more: I have even said too much.

I did not mean that this should come:

I did not know 'twould swell to such--

Nor, perhaps, you--

When that first look and touch,

Love, doomed us two!

Hardy's revisiting of these places prompted some of the finest elegies in English, and it is fitting that he ends this collection when words finally fail him and he is "dumb" to tell of the loss of what once was. Yet, his grief has been inscribed in these poems, both in words and in the breakdown of language when words fail him, and the elegies and the landscape that evoked them will serve as a memorial for both Emma and Hardy.

Chapter Five

Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914-1953)

Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

(Thomas, "And Death Shall Have No Dominion")

Earlier chapters in this dissertation have considered the role that the writing of an elegy plays in mourning the dead. Traditionally, it seems that the writing of an elegy helps to purge the sorrow of the writer, and that the elegy itself becomes a compensatory memorial that commemorates both the dead and the writer. Elegies thus dramatize the psychological process that Freud terms "the work of mourning." Yet, modern poets are questioning the creation of an artifact that serves to replace the bereaved; they question the profit that ensues when an aesthetic work rises from the ashes of sorrow. Indeed, when we consider the nature of elegy, we realize that several problems arise for modern writers. There is the problem of self-consciousness: should the elegy be about the poet himself or be confined to the attributes of the dead? Then the modern poet wonders whether it is ethical to celebrate his own prowess with words and thus profit from writing of the dead. Above all, for the modern poet, what use are elegies? What consolation can be derived from elegies? In his poetry, Dylan Thomas wrestles with each of these questions.

Thomas first experienced the death of a loved one when his aunt, who owned the immortalized Fern Hill farm, died on 7 February 1933. Three days later (possibly on the very day of the funeral), Thomas drafted¹ a poem which was later to become famous. The draft version of this elegy astounds the reader with its bitter, ironic tone. I will quote the first version in full in order to demonstrate the rage that Thomas displays at his aunt's funeral. Even in this early elegy, drafted twelve years before his other display of unwillingness to comply with tradition, "A Refusal to Mourn, the Death By Fire, of a Child in London," Thomas is bitter and cynical about the rites of mourning that take place at a funeral: the "grave" truths that are presented in the face of death. In this early draft, he shows that the consolatory space of the funeral and burial scene is ineffectual for him, as he generalizes the death of his favorite aunt into a refusal to mourn at all:

After the funeral mule praises, brays,
Shaking of mule heads, betoken
Grief at the going to earth of man
Or woman, at yet another long woe broken,
Another theme to play on and surprise
Fresh faults and till then hidden flaws
Faded beyond ears and eyes,
As [he or she], loved or else hated well,
So far from love or hate[,] in a deep hole.

¹ From 1930-34, Thomas copied around two hundred poems as he finished them into four manuscript notebooks. He came to think of these poems as first drafts and explained to Henry Treece in 1938: "I have a great deal of material still, in mss books, to shape into proper poems; and these I will include . . . in future published books" (*Letters* 310). The notebooks are now held in the Lockwood Memorial Library of the State University of New York at Buffalo, and have been edited and published by Ralph Maud (*The Poet in the Making*, 1967).

The mourners in their Sabbath black
 Drop tears unheeded or choke back a sob,
 Join in the hymns, and mark with dry bright looks
 The other heads, [bent], spying, on black books.

Death has rewarded him or her for living,
 With generous hands has slain with little pain,
 [Wounded with a sharp sword,]
 And let the ancient face die with a [smile].

Another gossips' toy has lost its use,
 Broken lies buried amid broken toys,
 Of flesh and bone lies hungry for the flies,
 Waits for the natron and the mummy paint[,]
 With dead lips pursed and dry bright eyes,
 Another well of rumours and cold lies
 Has dried[, and one more [joke] has lost its point.]

(Poem 6, February 1933 Notebook qtd in Maud 168)

In this vehement diatribe, Thomas seems more concerned about the hypocrisy of the mourners than about the loss of his aunt; they are at the funeral service to "spy" on whoever else is mourning, and while he has lost an aunt, they have lost only a source of gossip. Funerals and clothes of mourning are symbols that help some bereaved come to terms with death, but not Thomas. He sees the outward signs of mourning as being merely hypocrisy and pretense.

While Thomas is denouncing the other mourners, he is denying his grief and thereby refusing to mourn. Yet, his anger at these other mourners who did not appreciate his aunt's real virtues may well mask his sorrow.

Psychologists have long affirmed that anger is one of the manifestations of bereavement. Certainly, it seems that although Thomas is metaphorically describing his dead aunt as "wounded" and "broken," it is in fact he himself who is wounded and broken. As a young man of nineteen, he refuses to be broken by death and to mourn for his dead; yet I suspect this is merely a show of bravado, a refusal to cry in the face of loss. In this poem, he has displaced his own wounds onto the corpse. The "wounded" and "broken" corpse lies waiting for its "mummy paint" and preservative of natron, yet surely the natron, a mineral which is found in salt deposits, will hurt and sting the wounded.

We see the same bitter and angry facade, that in reality hides Thomas's pain, exhibited to his friend Trevor Hughes in February of 1933 when he first learned that his aunt was dying of cancer of the womb. Thomas wrote Hughes a letter boasting that he cared nothing for her death:

This is a well-worn incident in fiction, & one that has happened time after time in real life. The odour of death stinks through a thousand books & in a thousand homes. I have rarely encountered it (apart from journalistic enquiries), and find it rather pleasant. It lends a little welcome melodrama to the drawing room tragicomedy of my uneventful life. After Mother's departure I am left alone in the house, feeling slightly theatrical. Telegrams, dying aunts, cancer, especially of such a

private part as the womb, distraught mothers &
unpremeditated train journeys, come rarely. They
must be savoured properly and relished in the right spirit.

Thomas does realize that he is posturing and he goes on to comment on his own insensitivity:

But the foul thing is I feel utterly unmoved, apart, as I
said, from the pleasant death-reek at my negroid
nostrils. I haven't, really, the faintest interest in her or
her womb. She is dying. She is dead. She is alive.
It is all the same thing. I shall miss her bi-annual postal
orders. That's all.

To a young and ardent writer, it may have seemed pretentious to mourn for one old woman in a century when mass deaths were becoming commonplace. Not only, however, does mourning seem anachronistic to the young writer, but as a modernist influenced by Joyce, Thomas dissects and questions his own feelings:

Am I, he said, with the diarist's unctuous, egotistic
preoccupation with his own blasted psychological
reactions to his own trivial affairs, callous & nasty?
. . . There must be something lacking in me.
I don't feel worried, or hardly ever, about other
people. It's self, self, all the time. (*Letters* 13)

Thomas's concern with his own self continues to dominate his poetry and pervade his elegies. As a twentieth-century writer, he will ponder the role of

the writer in his own writings, and each elegy will be a self-reflexive reaction to death.

The writer of elegies has a special problem. An elegy is not a discreet epitaph; in order to survive, it must loom large enough to fill in for the absence of the dead one and haunt the living. Like the other elegists we have examined, Thomas too will feel that he must shape a memorial in words. Yet, while Thomas recognizes the necessity of hewing a memorial, he seems to criticize his own large style. In the self-criticism of his own letters, he is exhibiting modernist tendencies toward self-reflexivity and also questioning the need for poetry, and elegy in particular.

The need for elegy remained and continued to haunt Thomas. Five years later, in 1938, Thomas succeeded in revising this elegy commemorating the death of his aunt into "After the Funeral (In Memory of Ann Jones)." The revised elegy, which is now assigned to his aunt specifically, tells of a young boy awakened to the "morning smack" of the gravedigger's spade opening the grave on the morning of the funeral. The boy is Thomas himself, and we see and hear the funeral through his perceptions. The customary rites of mourning have been observed: the mules, who presumably pull the wagon that carries the coffin, have their hooves muffled and are blinkered, and then comes the feast for the visiting mourners. Then the poet self-consciously depicts himself standing alone "with a stuffed fox and a stale fern" writing his elegy, "for this memorial's sake." The long parenthesis in the middle of the poem, which Thomas added to the final version, questions why he is writing an elegy. Thomas mocks himself for his temerity in posing as her druid, and he mocks his propensity for larger-than-life language in his hyperbolic eulogy for Ann.

Yet, as a poet, he obviously needs to memorialize this woman whom he had loved in his own way:

(Though this for her is a monstrous image blindly
Magnified out of praise; her death was a still drop;
She would not have me sinking in the holy
Flood of her heart's fame; she would lie dumb and deep
And need no druid of her broken body).

Even though Ann would not have wanted him to elegize her and it will do her no good, Thomas feels he must become "Ann's bard" and "call all the seas to service" to sing her praises, just as his poetic predecessors had. Only the bard who has the gift of words, and one who happened to know the real Ann can perform this last rite for her. He alone can sing of her virtues, her "singing" love and "scrubbed and sour humble hands." He alone must sing her praises because the hypocritical mourners mentioned in his draft elegy do not know the real Ann. We note how Thomas the poet has matured immensely in the five years that elapsed between the death of Ann and his first angry outpourings and his now completed elegy to her. From a boy poet whose anger and bitterness about death manifested itself in cynicism about the hypocrisy of other mourners, Thomas has matured into a poet who realizes the need to elegize his dead. Elegies are needed to remind us of what we have lost.

The revised version of this poem stays within the bounds of traditional elegy, particularly with its water images. Once we know, however, that the poet has transformed a spontaneous poem into this more polished elegy, readers must wrestle, along with the poet himself, with the nature of grief and mourning. If funerals, according to Thomas, are artificial occasions that

produce dissembled grief (as in the initial draft of this elegy), then by waiting five years to produce the memorial to Ann Jones, Thomas has shaped his sorrow into a work of art. The revised poem may be "emotion recollected in tranquillity" and is a far cry from the letters that proclaimed that he had not "the faintest interest" in Ann or her dying. As a more mature poet, Thomas now feels the need to record the drama of Ann's death and to immortalize her in his poem. In other words, he wants to make his aunt's virtues survive longer than the traditional speaking well of the dead that occurs around the grave. The mourning symbols that occur at the graveside--"teeth in black"--do not suffice for the poet, for he considers this grief to be hypocrisy produced by the trauma. Yet, as a poet, Thomas must also use words as symbols to commemorate his dead. He wants his elegy to stand as a "monumental / Argument of the hewn voice," like a marble figure over Ann's grave.

In the earlier chapter on Wordsworth, we saw how Wordsworth was interested in epitaphs as they had first originated in stone, and how the words inscribed on a page came to replace the words inscribed on a gravestone. Thomas is also interested in the use of words as a symbol for a memorial stone. The "skyward statue" becomes an image for the poem itself, which is "carved from" the reality of the corpse's "seventy years of stone." (Interestingly enough, it seems that Thomas may have more of the "egotistical sublime" about him than Wordsworth did, for he thinks that only his own mourning stems from genuine grief.) At last, after five long years, Thomas hews his own memorial to Ann by completing his elegy, and presumably achieves a sense of closure as his work of mourning is completed.

Freud says that the bereaved must work through their mourning in stages of griefwork, and obviously Thomas's first stage was the feeling of anger. Maybe it was anger because the unworthies who gathered like crows around Ann's grave were living, while she herself was not. Thomas, who claimed to have been influenced by Freud, insisted that

Whatever is hidden should be made naked. To be
stripped of darkness is to be clean, to strip of
darkness is to make clean. Poetry, recording the
stripping of the individual darkness, must,
inevitably, cast light upon what has been hidden for
too long, and, by doing so, make clean the naked
exposure. (Thomas, 1954)

It seems that hearing of his aunt's death shrouded Thomas in the darkness of an anger that apparently took five years to dissipate. Maybe Thomas would say that mourning does not begin at the graveside, for black funereal clothes and pious remarks about the bereaved do not constitute mourning. Before he could distance himself enough to shed his anger and bitterness and compose "After the Funeral (In Memory of Ann Jones)," Thomas had to wait for five years to truly undergo the "stripping of the darkness."

The anger and refusal to feel sorrow that is apparent in Thomas's letters of 1933 and his initial version of the elegy to Ann give us an insight into what is commonly known as his "anti-elegy." Thomas stakes his claim to the twentieth century non-traditional elegy in "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" (1945). Once again, he refuses to show that he is affected by death as he states his refusal to mourn. This time, however, he is

refusing to mourn because to do so would be to make both political and poetic gain out of the vast number of deaths of the Second World War. In this defiant stance, he has the precedent of the poets of World War One standing behind him. Thomas's outrage about World War II is dislocated into this elegy for someone not personally known to him, an unknown girl killed during the bombing in London. Her death is used as a metonymic substitute for the almost nine million civilians who were killed during the war,² just as the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior³ was used to symbolically represent all the combatants who were killed in the previous world war. The girl who had been killed was just one of many who died unnecessarily.

How could one provide consolation for this unimaginable number of deaths? Maybe Thomas is not refusing to grieve for the many war deaths, but instead is refusing to mourn in a way that will make their deaths seem justifiable. Similarly, during the First World War, Wilfred Owen had been seized with the same anger about the way in which the survivors were consoled for the deaths of their loved ones. Media and government propaganda had created an ideology that made death in a patriotic cause glorious until Owen's poetry and writings from the front line exposed the old lie that made death for one's country seem "sweet and fitting."⁴ Owen had refused to be a part of creating a fictional world where there were heroes who gloried in dying for

² Civilians killed during the war include: Germany 780,000; UK 92,673; Soviet Union 7,000,000; Japan 672,000; USA 6,000 ("World War II." *Macmillan Encyclopedia*, 1985.)

³ The body of an unknown British soldier of World War I brought home from one of the battlefields of the Western Front and buried in Westminster Abbey. Part of the inscription on the gravestone reads: "Thus are commemorated the many multitudes who during the Great War of 1914-1918 gave the most that man can give, Life itself . . ."

⁴ Both the propaganda and the reaction of the War Poets has been well documented. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* is an excellent starting point.

their country, and in the Preface to his elegies, he asserts that his poems will not be consolatory and will not glorify the dead:

This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is
not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything
about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion,
or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no
sense consolatory. They may be to the next.

All a poet can do today is warn. That is why true

Poets must be truthful.

Thomas, one of the next generation who had read and admired Owen's work, gave a lecture about Owen's poetry and commented:

It was impossible for him to avoid the sharing of
suffering. He could not record a wound that was
not his own. He had so very many deaths to die,
and so very short a life within which to endure
them all. (Thomas, 1960, 80)

Thomas empathizes with Owen's first-hand suffering:

And his intense pity for all human fear, pain, and
grief was given trumpet-tongue. He knew, as surely
as though the words had been spoken to him aloud,

as indeed they had been though they were the words
 of wounds, the shape of the dead, the colour of blood,
 he knew that he stood alone among men to *plead* for
 them in their agony, to blast the walls of ignorance,
 pride, pulpit, and state. (Thomas, 1960, 79)

Influenced by Owen and the war to end all wars, Thomas could not write elegies for yet another six years of war dead; hence his refusal to mourn. The last line of Thomas's elegy for the dead of World War II has puzzled many readers. "After the first death, there is no other" has sometimes been read as illustrating a Christian vision of an afterlife, yet it would almost seem that Thomas is elaborating on his own words about Owen. Owen, in World War I, metaphorically died many deaths as he saw his comrades die. Thomas, after World War II, is observing that once one has gone through the grief and anguish of one death, one is almost immured from further pain. One tragic death in wartime is enough. One does not need to undergo nine million deaths to feel the horror.

Thomas is continuing this anti-elegiac tradition started by the War poets. Many explications of Thomas's "A Refusal to Mourn, the Death by Fire, of a Child in London" lay emphasis on the time sequence he invokes, that he refuses to mourn *until* the coming of the "all humbling darkness." With the work of the War Poets ringing in one's ear, however, it is hard to miss the significance of *what* Thomas refuses to mourn, rather than when he chooses to mourn. He refuses "to mourn / The majesty and burning of the child's death" because, quite simply, there is no majesty in a child's death. After the War Poets had introduced the realism and horror of warfare to the literati, how

could anyone write an elegy that lauded the grandeur of death? Thomas is no longer the callow boy who boasts that death does not affect him; now, he will mourn and grieve, but he will do so in his own way, rather than joining the black-coated professional mourners around the grave. Thomas refuses to join the long line of his poetic predecessors who have publicly mourned the dead. By vowing that never will he "sow" his "salt seed" to elegize "innocence and youth," Thomas is declaring that he will be as truthful as Owen was, even though Owen's warning had not been effective. So, Thomas's refusal to mourn becomes an elegy for the dead of World War II even as it becomes an elegy for Owen and the dead of World War I. Lives lost in war cannot be elegized adequately, even though the "salt" words may sting the wounded reader into thinking about the nature of elegies.

There are several reasons why Thomas claims he is refusing to mourn for the war dead in poetry. (Although, of course, he is doing what he says he will not do.) Not only does he refuse to become a public elegist who profits from the subject of death and grief, but he is causing us to question the nature of the elegy. One of its traditional functions is to console, and consolation has been usually achieved by a combination of death being portrayed as glorious as well as being the doorway to an afterlife that will be still more majestic. With the roll-call of mass deaths in the twentieth century, however, it is easy to see why these ways of coping with death no longer work. The tolling of the bell is relentless for those who died in World War I, World War II, and the Holocaust, together with wars in Vietnam, Korea, and the Falklands. How could one provide consolation for this unimaginable number of deaths?

Thomas's refusal to mourn publicly can be read as a refusal to create a work of art that will replace the dead and as a denial of consolation. He is not the first writer to question the place of mourning in a Christian death.⁵ For instance, if one believes in the Christian concept of resurrection, then mourning is obviously inappropriate. For instance, seventeenth-century poet Ben Jonson, who wrote the famous elegy on the death of his own son, commented in another poem, "Of Death,"

He that feares death, or mournes it, in the iust,
Shewes of the resurrection little trust.

So, Thomas's refusal to inhabit the poetic space of mourning is not unique, and neither is he completely dislocating the elegiacal conventions. In *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks has documented the generic conventions⁶ of the river gods recalled by the mention of the Thames, and the "imagined community of the dead that 'robes' the daughter in friendship" (306). In short, by the very writing of this elegy, Thomas is in fact mourning the dead child in a relatively traditional way. What we can say is that, in keeping with twentieth-century lack of faith, his refusal to mourn can be seen as a refusal to be consoled, or to provide consolation. Mourning itself cannot be controlled, for it is an involuntary feeling of being troubled or feeling sadness about loss. The public symbols of mourning, however, are subject to the influence of time and place, and Thomas is free to reject both the graveside symbols of mourning and the lies that could be inscribed in elegy, such as the "majesty" of death. On the

⁵ G. W. Pigman documents English "rigorism" that "prohibits and condemns all grief for those who have died virtuously and are in heaven" (*Grief and the English Renaissance Elegy*, 1985, 27)

⁶ Sacks, however, fails to mention that Thomas's river is "unmourning."

contrary, he will tell the truth, rather than "blaspheme," and he will refuse to console in the time-honored ways. Instead, Thomas's images of mourning include the "salt seed" that is both sterile and fertile. In the title of his poem, Thomas is both refusing to conform with mourning custom and write a traditional elegy, and he is refusing to be consoled and move on to "pastures new." In other words, he is resisting all traditional ways of coping with death. The end of the poem brings further ambiguity: "After the first death there is no other." The "first dead" could be that of Adam, Eve, Jesus, this child, or anybody. That "there is no other" death after the first could mean that death is followed by perpetual life, in Christian heaven or reincarnation, or it could imply that death is simply death. There is no other because once you are dead, you are dead for good.

If one is consoled by believing that death is merely a gateway to a better life, then death can be seen as a welcoming visitor, rather than as the grim reaper. The idea of death as homecoming goes back a long way, as when Jonson finds consolation in rejoicing that God had lent him his son for seven years. Phillippe Ariès, in his survey of western ways of dying, documents the way in which death is seen as a reward for living a good life and how that idea consoles the bereaved. Yet, with the advent of the twentieth century and the disappearance of God, this consolation was dead. The War Poets dispensed with consolation and announced that death does not come gloriously or sweetly, and modern writers continue to show only the bleakness and the ultimate void of death. Thomas refuses to play along with writing a "grave truth" (he will not utter one of the platitudes spoken around the grave, or fabricate an epitaph that follows the time-honored principle of speaking well of

the dead). Indeed when Thomas says he will not "murder / The mankind of her going," he is arguing that it would be tantamount to killing humanity itself if one created a fictional world where death was portrayed as glorious. On the contrary, it is mankind and living that is magnificent, not death. Like the ever-flowing "riding Thames," mankind must go on living and celebrating life.

As is evident in his celebration of life in "Fern Hill," Dylan Thomas loved life and revelled in the power of words. He had been taught to love the sound of words by his father, D. J. Thomas, who taught English in the local grammar school. He read Shakespeare to the young Dylan, long before the words had any meaning to a child, and taught him to glory in the sounds of the language. Thomas himself attributes his becoming a poet to the sound of words:

I should say I wanted to write poetry in the
beginning because I had fallen in love with words.
The first poems I knew were nursery rhymes,
and before I could read them for myself I had
come to love just the words of them, the words
alone. What the words stood for, symbolized,
or meant, was of very secondary importance;
what mattered was the sound of them as I heard
them for the first time on the lips of the remote
and incomprehensible grown-ups who seemed,
for some reason, to be living in my world.

(Poetic Manifesto, 1951)

In 1951, with his father dying of cancer and almost blind, Thomas composed the famous "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" as a fitting tribute to the man who had read to him and taught him the force of words. In a letter to Princess Caetani, one of his sponsors, Thomas commented:

The only person I can't show the little enclosed
poem to is, of course, my father, who doesn't
know he's dying. (*Letters* 800)

After a long and valiant struggle, the elder Thomas died on 16 December 1952. He spoke his own epitaph before he died, as Thomas described to his friend, Alfred Janes:

Poor old boy, he was in awful pain at the end and
nearly blind. The day before he died, he wanted to
get out of bed & go into the kitchen where his
mother was making onion soup for him. Then,
a few hours afterwards, he suddenly remembered
everything, & where he was, & he said, 'It's full
circle now'. (*Letters* 860)

The powerful "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" that Thomas had composed just before his father died is much anthologized and commonly known as an elegy, yet it has much in common with the angry outburst of the nineteen-year-old's frustration and rage at the death of his aunt. From the evidence of his spontaneous outpourings, it seems that Thomas himself cannot bear to have death steal his loved ones from him. In this poem, his mature style keeps his rage within the disciplines of the strict form of the villanelle, yet his frustration is evident. The repeated refrain "Rage, rage against the dying of the

light" can almost be Thomas's own war cry, for he is the one who is angry.

While the old sick man may well have wished to die and end his pain, his son would call upon all his vital forces to keep his father alive. It is Thomas who rages against death, rather than his father. The vital life force, "the force that drives the green fuse," is burning out and Thomas cannot bear it. He mourns for the "wise men," the "good men," and the "wild men" who have not finished their achievements here on earth.

Again in this poem, Thomas puns with the word "grave." A grave (from the Old English meaning "to dig") is the last resting place of the dead, but it is also a serious and solemn matter. In an archaic meaning, the word also means to engrave or to carve, and to fix firmly in the mind. In this elegy about the loss of life, Thomas uses the word to describe both men who are serious and those who have one foot in the grave. Yet, he is also "graving" these people who have died--his aunt, his father, and the many who died in the war, in our minds. His poetry is "graving" the dead because as a bard it is his duty to memorialize his dead in words and thus to fix them firmly in the mind.

While the death of his aunt caused Thomas to first write a draft elegy and polish it into the finished version five years later, the process of this poem followed a different pattern. The dying of his father inspired a powerful and technically skilled poem, but later the death of his father inspired a fragmented elegy. Thomas himself died before this elegy was completed. Although he was sick and worried about money, Thomas's grief over his father's death seems to be acute as he grappled with the elegy towards the end of his own life the following year. "Elegy" was left unfinished--the last thing he was working on--

and Thomas's friend and fellow-poet, Vernon Watkins, pieced the fragments together of what is a poignant record of his mourning for his father.

In "Elegy," as in the first draft of "After the Funeral," again we have an image of a broken victim of death. I have mentioned that Thomas finds his way into most of his poetry, and again it seems that he is the broken figure. He tells that his father "longed for his mother's breast" yet it is Thomas himself who is said to have craved maternal affection until the end of his life.⁷ If one of the great themes of literature is the death of fathers, or of living up to the standards set by a father, then Thomas seems to feel inadequate to his father, who had never cried. By way of contrast, the bard's own pain and crying is audible through his poetry. Although Thomas tells how his father "cried as he died," throughout life his father had always been "too proud to cry" and able to "hide the tears out of his eyes." Thomas himself cannot hide his emotion; in both "Elegy" and "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night," he reveals his love and admiration for his father and his deep pain. The last line, "Until I die he will not leave my side" has an extra poignancy when we recall that Thomas only lived eleven months longer than his father.

It is perhaps unfair to evaluate an elegy that is unfinished, especially when we know how much Thomas reworked and edited his poetry, but this one exhibits the one striking feature of all Thomas's work about death in that it makes frequent use of the words "dark," and "light." Darkness can, of course,

⁷ Many biographers have commented on how Caitlin had to mother her husband. For instance, George Tremlett records how Caitlin would put her husband to bed with "a bowl of milk with bread cut into squares" whenever he had a hangover (24). Tremlett also notes that Thomas approached a "full-breasted student" at Harvard and told her: "I would like to take you back with me to Wales, that I might suckle at your paps" (142). Andrew Sinclair comments that Thomas may have invited his parents to live with them in Oxford so that they could give him "the final mothering and spoiling which he always needed" (150).

relate to the lack of sunlit hours on the day of his father's death (which occurred shortly before the winter solstice), to his father's lack of sight, and to Thomas's own feelings. Although the light goes out of his father's eyes, Thomas hopes he will lie "lightly" on the "last, crossed / Hill." One of the ways of attaining consolation has traditionally been through religion, and since Thomas's death, a main debate among critics has been whether Thomas was a believer or not. Critics generally agree that, like James Joyce with his Irish Catholic upbringing, Thomas rebelled against his Welsh Nonconformist heritage, yet was unable to escape it. According to William York Tindall, in *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*, Thomas and Joyce both have the idea of writer as priest. William T. Moynihan agrees that Thomas uses Biblical symbolism much as Joyce does, more or less independently of his degree of Christian belief. "He cared nothing for Christ in a theological sense," says Moynihan, "but he cared very much for Christ as symbol" (38). Fellow poet W. S. Merwin qualifies Thomas as a religious poet, but adds, "A religious artist is primarily a celebrator. A celebrator in the ritual sense: a maker and a performer of a rite" (Brinnin 59). What Thomas celebrates is "Creation, and more particularly the human condition" (59). Merwin seems to have accurately perceived that Thomas feared death as an awesome force:

In both man and the world he will perceive a force
of love or creation which is more divine than either
man or the world, and a force of death or destruction
which is more terrible than man or the world. (74)

To counteract this "force of death" and darkness and achieve some measure of consolation, Thomas would have had to invoke the corresponding force of love

and lightness in his poetry. He thus uses Christian terminology as a counter force to the dark unknown, whether he himself believes in the theology or not.

Thomas commented on his beliefs in the Note to the *Collected Poems*:

I read somewhere of a shepherd who, when asked
why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual
observances to the moon to protect his flocks,
replied: 'I'd be a damn' fool if I didn't!' These poems
with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are
written for the love of Man and in praise of God,
and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't.

In this last elegy, Thomas claims that he is "not too proud to cry and He and he / Will never never go out of my mind." The first "He" obviously means God, but nowhere is Thomas consoling himself by the thought of resurrection. On the contrary, he is at pains to assert that his father will live on only by "Walking in the meadow of his son's eye." Even when Thomas uses the crucifixion image of a "crossed Hill" where his father might lie "at last," it is a heartfelt wish rather than a certainty. The juxtaposition of "at last" with "on the last" is a clever allusion to God as a great shoemaker who will repair the broken body of his father on a wooden form. Thomas hopes his father will weigh "lightly" when the scales of "darkest Justice" are invoked at the Last Judgment.

The religious allusions do not convince us that Thomas is gaining consolation from the thought of a good death and a Christian resurrection; rather, the poem convinces the reader that Thomas sees that his father's virtues will only live on in his own memory (just as he was convinced that only he

could appreciate the virtues of Ann Jones). When Thomas indicates the old man feared "the world going out without a breath," he is giving a perspective of death as seen by the dead, just as the world stops spinning for the little boy who sleeps in "Fern Hill."⁸ Yet, Thomas is proclaiming himself as the bard who will transcribe the old man's breath and immortalize him in this elegy. Speaking for his father, he tells us that

He cried as he died, fearing at last the spheres'

Last sound, the world going out without a breath.

The music of the heavenly spheres may not be heard until Christ is born again, but D. J. Thomas will not leave the world without a breath. His expiration will inspire his son to create an elegy for him, a memorial that will last longer than either of the mortal men. The old man has not gone gently into the good night; he has gone bravely and proudly, and Thomas will record his virtues for posterity.

Vernon Watkins, who edited the unfinished manuscript, notes that Thomas left sixty pages of manuscript work about this poem. It seems that the main thrust of his intention was to record the following characteristics of his father:

(1) Although he was too proud to die, he *did* die, blind,
in the most agonizing way but he did not flinch from death
and was brave in his pride.

(2) In his innocence, and thinking he was God-hating,
he never knew that what he was was: an old kind man

⁸ Thomas views sleep and death as the end of noise and activity. One could compare Emily Dickinson's dead persona in "I heard a fly buzz when I died," who exits after recording the last sound.

in his burning pride.

(3) Now he will not leave my side, though he is dead.

(4) His mother said that as a baby he never cried;
nor did he, as an old man; he just cried to his secret
wound and his blindness, never aloud.

(Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 1978, 171)

"Too proud to die" is an interesting choice of words that seems to indicate that Thomas thought although his father hated to be "broken and blind," he would have perceived dying as taking the easy way out and quitting his life of pain, a life in which "all his bones were crying." Biographer George Tremlett records how Thomas had watched his father slowly dying from cancer, and was said to be distressed at the way in which his father was "physically shrinking" while "his pride and intellect remained intact" (153). Perhaps, in his elegy Thomas is choosing to immortalize the qualities that his father had which he most admired, for Thomas himself chose alcohol as a means of avoiding his own misery. Thomas must have felt that he did not possess his father's stoicism.

Not only can we see that the virtues which Thomas records are ones which he may have admired because he did not have them, but the poet himself is both narrator and participant in the dramatized scene of dying. Just as in "After the Funeral," he fixes his poetic gaze on the sorrowful figure left alone in the room of death in the "muted house," so, too, in these poems to his father, Thomas's gaze is on himself as bereaved mourner. In these elegies, it seems that Thomas reveals more of himself than he does of the dead. We see his anger at the outward symbols of graveside pseudo-mourning, his raging at death itself, and his concern not to provide compensatory consolation for the

war dead. Thomas's questioning of both the elegy as a vehicle of consolation and the graveside rituals of death seem to provide a link between the issues that the War poets had posed and the questions that the contemporary poets who succeed Thomas will raise. What is now commonly known as the "anti-elegy" has gained ground since the early part of the century.

Chapter Six

Seamus Justin Heaney (1939-)

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

(Louise Glück, "The Wild Iris")

The voice of the dead was a living voice to me.

(Tennyson, "In the Valley of Caunteretz")

Seamus Heaney comes from a rural background where his forefathers farmed a fifty-acre farm and also worked as cattle dealers. Heaney's life began on 13 April 1939, on the farm called Mossbawn, in the townland of Tamniarn, County Derry, Northern Ireland. In addition to being reared on a farm and thus being in close contact with the earth, growing up in war-torn Northern Ireland ensured that Heaney became familiar with violence and death from an early age. The eldest of nine children, Heaney saw one of his brothers beaten up after attending a republican meeting, and he grew used to frequent road blocks that interrupted his journeys and to living among neighbors who were acting as B-Special constabulary. Now, Heaney is a well-known poet, lecturer, and critic who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. His work is notable for a quality that he admires in fellow poet Czeslaw Milosz:

the wonderful sense of loss of what is most cherished,

and the way he can turn what would be a poem of
 personal nostalgia into a symptom of great cultural
 and historical change, without portentousness.
 That move from personal lyric lament to visionary,
 tragic lamentation.

Being part of a culture where the rituals of death were not shied away from and
 where mourning was loud and public in the form of a wake, Heaney's own
 tragic lamentations started early.

This dissertation considers the question of why, in a secular and visual
 age, poets continue to write elegies as lamentations for their dead. As a
 contemporary poet, Heaney has one answer for this question in his "Funeral
 Rites," when he speaks for the human tribe and cries that "We pine for
 ceremony / customary rhythm." It seems that in order to deal with death, we
 need to undergo certain rituals and ceremonies of closure. In this poem, he
 laments the passing of the age-old rituals that permeated the deaths he
 experienced as a child, when he had been first initiated into the rites:

I shouldered a kind of manhood
 stepping in to lift the coffins
 of dead relations.

Now that he is an adult, however, his modern society has no time for prolonged
 mourning ceremonies; instead, he sees violently-killed victims who do not
 receive "the temperate footsteps of a cortège, winding past each blinded home."
 This poem thus becomes an elegy for rituals that our culture has lost, and
 Heaney suggests that he would like to turn back the clock:

I would restore

the great chambers of Boyne,
prepare a sepulchre
under the cupmarked stones.

As it travelled on its last journey to the sepulcher, in these modern times the corpse would be accompanied by a funeral procession of "family cars" and the dirge would be "the muffled drumming / of ten thousand engines." For his dead, Heaney would prepare a "sepulchre," a cave with its doorway blocked by a stone that is one of the earliest places of entombment. Interestingly, much of Heaney's work involves communing with the dead, and so in this poem, we are reminded of the Christian Easter resurrection. In this early poem that shows his nostalgic longing for the sepulchers of the past, he foreshadows much of his later work wherein he, the poet, metaphorically digs up the dead, resurrects them, and listens to their stories. In "Digging," he proclaims his desire, as a poet with a background of farming, to use his pen to dig metaphorically as his forefathers had literally dug with spades in the "soggy peat" for potatoes. Heaney's digging unearths the dead, which he then exhumes to analyze and dissect. Many of Heaney's poems are inspired by the exhumation of the Bog people, who were ritually murdered thousands of years ago and who are now on display in glass cases in museums. Heaney's poems thus become a conversation with the "cured" and preserved corpses of prehistoric times and the decomposing corpses who represent the dead of his own lifetime. This chapter will examine how Heaney resurrects the dead in order to tell of their lives, for only by speaking for them can he justify writing poetry about the dead.

While Heaney regrets the loss of traditional funeral rites in modern society, some critics would attribute his need for public mourning to his Roman Catholic upbringing--a need that is denied in a repressive Protestant theology. As a Roman Catholic poet, Heaney is thus sanctioned to mourn on two counts, both his religion and his vocation. Peter Sacks, in *The English Elegy*, confirms that mourning is an age-old ritual that lies at the heart of the elegy (326). Sacks dates the provenance of the religious freedom to mourn back to Christ's words as recorded by St. Matthew: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." These words were in turn translated into Latin, *Beati qui lugent, quoniam ipsi consolabantur*, and repeated by Thomas of Aquinas, and then later used by Dante in *Purgatorio*, where the Angel of Zeal affirms "that those, who mourn, / Are blessed, for that comfort shall be theirs" (XIX, 49-51, trans. Henry Francis Cary). Heaney himself sees that his formative years were filled with lamentation, for his childhood did not lack reason to mourn and he was surrounded by the rituals of death:

My childhood was full of death: only the first couple of times scary and strange. Two of my grandparents, and lots of granduncles and aunts died when I was quite young and I went to the wakes and funerals. Then, since I was the eldest, in my early teens I used to represent the family at some funerals and the sight of a corpse and the whole ritual were quite common to me. . . . I'm certain all those funerals and corpses had some definite effect, and I remember after writing "The Tollund Man" I began to think if I were to go to an analyst, he would certainly link the outlined and

pacified and *rigor mortis* face of the Tollund man with all
that submerged life and memory.

Helen Vendler agrees that the long catalogue of deaths in Heaney's life is a step on the way to what Keats called the "vale of soul making" (1988, 162). The prevalence of death, a religion steeped in ritual, and an innate sensitivity were factors that led to the making of this poet. Among the close deaths that Heaney suffers and later elegizes are those of a cousin murdered by Protestants, a college friend shot by terrorists, a little girl whom Heaney first loved, an invalid relative who died young, two schoolmasters, an archaeologist friend who died young, and his four year-old brother. Not all bereaved people mourn in words though, and the fact that poets can mourn eloquently sometimes presents a problem to them.

Heaney discusses the dilemma presented by eloquence in *The Government of the Tongue*, where he tells of an evening in Belfast, in 1972, when he and a friend, singer David Hammond, were to make a tape of songs together. As they traveled to the recording studio, however, the city suffered from some bomb explosions in which many were injured, and Hammond felt unable to sing that evening. Explains Heaney,

the very notion of beginning to sing at that moment
when others were beginning to suffer seemed like an
offence against their suffering.

He could not raise his voice at that down-cast
moment. (xi)

The reality of what happened that evening, when Hammond's voice was silenced by suffering, is transmuted by Heaney into an analogy of the poet's

existence. According to Heaney, the poet is one who suffers from the continual conflict between Art and Life, which formed him, and he feels the need to choose between them. In Heaney's own case, he calls the shaping influences Song and Suffering and clarifies: "What David Hammond and I were experiencing, at a most immediate and obvious level, was a feeling that song constituted a betrayal of suffering" (xii). To illustrate his point, Heaney adds that Nero, who fiddled while Rome burned, has been seen as an example of "human irresponsibility, if not callousness" (xii). Yet, asks Heaney, what of a poet such as Wilfred Owen, whose work was meant to "outrage rather than console" (xii) and who could not have written as he did without witnessing the suffering on the front line? Such poets are writing not to entertain, but to inform and teach. In fact, Owen has now become what we term a "poet as witness" (xvi) to suffering. Heaney omits to mention that there is an even earlier legend than Nero of a traditional symbol of one who sings despite suffering. The nightingale sings all the more sweetly because of Philomela's suffering, for when her tongue was cut out to silence her, Philomela sang to tell of her pain.

This dissertation explores the ways in which poets act as witnesses to their own suffering. In order to write elegies, they have needed to experience death in order to write about grief. Yet, how poets reconcile this marriage of "song and suffering" is a problem because all too often they are embarrassed by seeming to profit from their work. In the face of tragedy, they refuse to be named Nero. We saw Hardy's reluctance to profit from his wife's death; we saw Thomas's refusal to mourn the dead child by way of a customary elegy; and we now see Heaney's grappling with this same problem. Indeed, Heaney sees the

conflict between "song and suffering" as one that manifests itself particularly in twentieth-century poetry written by survivors of "Nazi horror and Holocaust" (1989, xviii). Yet, song and poetry add goodness to a world in sore need of such qualities, concludes Heaney, and may be enjoyed "provided that true penitence, namely an abjuration of poetry as self indulgent ornament, has occurred" (1989, xix). In short, Heaney affirms the Keatsian dictum that beauty is truth, and truth is beauty (1989, xx). Yet, what is the good of poetry? What consolation do elegies provide? Heaney answers that:

The achievement of a poem, after all, is an experience
of release. In that liberated moment, when the lyric
discovers its buoyant completion and the timeless
formal pleasure comes to fullness and exhaustion,
something occurs which is equidistant from self-
justification and self-obliteration. A plane is--
fleeting--established where the poet is intensified
in his being and freed from his predicaments. (1989, xxii)

According to Heaney, poetry can thus be as "redemptive and possibly as illusory as love" (1989, xxii) and the writing of it achieves catharsis for the poet. Having justified his writing "songs" which are a product of "suffering," Heaney thus sanctions the work of the poet in the latter half of the twentieth century, and in particular the work of the elegiac poet.

Writing a poem in what Brecht said are "the dark times," the poet may feel as though he is fiddling while Rome burns, but what else can a poet do? Poets are people of words; writing is what they do. Sometimes they can put into words what less gifted people cannot. Heaney is one of several modern

poets who seek to define the poet's role in contemporary society. In her cycle of poems, "Requiem," Anna Akhmatova, a Russian poet, tells of an incident that happened to her during the 1930's. The 1930's were "dark days" for Russians as they endured Stalin's purges and "cleansings." Stalin's secret police swept down in the night and arrested countless people, many of them students, for "counterrevolutionary terrorist activities." These prisoners were often never seen again, yet their families would stand for hours outside the prisons in order to hand over a package for someone who may in reality have been dead. Once a month they were permitted this intangible link with the imprisoned. Akhmatova waited in line with the thousands, and in the short prose piece "Instead of a Preface" that introduces "Requiem," she describes the time spent waiting by anxious women:

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent
seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad.
Once, someone "recognized" me. Then a woman
with bluish lips standing behind me, who, of course,
had never heard me called by name before, woke
up from the stupor to which everyone had
succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke
in whispers there): "Can you describe this?" And I
answered : "Yes I can." Then something that looked
like a smile passed over what had once been her face. (213)

Akhmatova knew that it was her bardic duty to witness this suffering; she knew that, ultimately, words are all that people have.

Heaney is also a bard who has licensed himself to write of suffering, and he seeks to commune with the dead about the pain and injustice they have suffered. He digs down into their graves and speaks for them. We all long to communicate with the dead. Death is still the great mystery, and the fear of death leads many into investigations about what happens on the other side of the doorway. The Victorians preferred to view the door as more of an ethereal veil or curtain through which their dead could be dimly glimpsed communing together. Heaney, in true scientific manner, prefers not to commune with intangible spirits, but to look for evidence in the corpses themselves. He is fascinated by the Bronze Age bodies found preserved in the peat bogs and he approaches the "cured" corpses as a forensic pathologist would, seeking clues to the lives they have led.

For instance, in "The Grauballe Man," Heaney peers into the depths of the Bronze Age man's body--through the "vent / of his slashed throat," and the murdered warrior becomes reborn in Heaney's description of him. In a lecture, "Feeling into Words," Heaney explains how he read P. V. Glob's book, *The Bog People*, and then made a vow to go on pilgrimage to see the preserved bodies found in the bogs of Jutland. His vow to "assist at the enshrined head" of the Tollund Man (1980, 59) presumably uses "assist" in all its senses of the word, for Heaney will not only be present and stand by the corpse, but he will give help by becoming the poetic voice of the long-dead Bronze Age people. In "The Grauballe Man," he describes the corpse in terms of a fetus, a babe newly born from the peat bog, whom Heaney will then transmute into a work of art, just as the "tanned and toughened corpse" has almost been transformed into a cast figure similar to the one of the Dying Gaul. In this poem, Heaney asks

"Who will say 'corpse' to his vivid cast?" as he resurrects the Grauballe man through his words. The word "corpse" seems inadequate for what is now a figure comparable to the cast of the Dying Gaul. In Heaney's eyes, beauty has emerged from a violent death. Just as Heaney is creating artifacts through suffering and death by means of his poetry, so has the "hooded victim" become transformed into a work of art through being immersed in the peat bog. This once-living warrior has become an inanimate museum piece compared to "bog-oak" and "basalt egg."

In another poem about these bog people, "Punishment," Heaney describes the female corpse again in terms of "amber," and "oak-bone," thus showing that the body has become a work of art through preservation in the earth. This time, however, Heaney poses the questions that make us think about violence in society today. While he admits that the "little adulteress" was merely the "poor scapegoat" of the tribe, he confesses

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

By broadening the experience of the Bronze Age victim to that of some victims in Northern Ireland today, Heaney is speaking for all scapegoats of ideologies.

By digging into their pasts and analyzing and describing these exhumed bodies, he has "let down a shaft into real life" (1980, 41) with his poetry.

In "Kinship" the poet-pathologist explains how he reads the "inhumed faces / of casualty and victim" and describes his surgical procedures: "I step through origins." Observing Heaney's inquests on the dead, we cannot forget that he is the descendent of those who wielded spades and shovels. His metaphoric turf-spade enables him to dig into the "melting grave" that is "the vowel of earth." He realizes his relationship to all the dead that have gone before:

Kinned by hieroglyphic
peat on a spreadfield
to the strangled victim,
the love-nest in the bracken.

Using the style of the Anglo-Saxon kennings, Heaney describes the earth, that contains such a treasure trove of memories hoarded by the dead, as

Earth-pantry, bone-vault,
sun-bank, embalmer
of votive goods
and sabred fugitives.

Insatiable bride.
Sword swallower,
casket, midden,
floe of history.

In this poem he describes how he finds a "turf-spade" which he uses to "disturb" the "love-nest." Thus, the poet digs into the earth, exhumes the bodies and tells their stories. Once again we see that Heaney is struggling with the concept of his making poetic profit from death and resolving his conflict by ensuring that he is the voice of suffering. In the voice of the victim he asks Tacitus, the Roman chronicler, to

Read the inhumed faces
of casualty and victim;
report us fairly
how we slaughter
for the common good

and shave the heads
of the notorious,
how the goddess swallows
our love and terror.

Heaney's task of digging fits him for the role of the archetypal hero figure who journeys on a quest to discover the dead and returns alive after speaking with them. Through his pen he not only digs deeply, but he visits the underworld where the dead reside and he speaks for them. He bears witness to their suffering as well as to the suffering of those who remain. Like the naturalist he was as a boy, Heaney still retains the mind of a scientist who exhumes bodies and subjects them to dissection and forensic analysis, trying to hear what the corpses tell him. Like the dead of Eliot's "Little Gidding," Heaney's dead can tell him things they had no voices for when living. The dead

have tongues to speak to the bard who will record their suffering in his song, and they want him to articulate the reasons for their wretchedness.

In "The Casualty," a more recently murdered fisherman friend instructs the poet to "Puzzle me / The right answer to that one." While living, he had not understood poetry--found it "incomprehensible"--but now that he is dead, he asks the "educated" poet to speak for him and try to answer this question. The fisherman had been out later than a curfew set by the IRA when he was "blown to bits." As an independent, free-thinking man,

he would not be held
At home by his own crowd
Whatever threats were phoned,
Whatever black flags waved.

The question that Heaney asks is, of course,

How culpable was he
That last night when he broke
Our tribe's complicity?

Unfortunately, Heaney has no answers. He can only inscribe with his pen the questions that visiting the dead raise in his mind. In the last few lines of the poem, Heaney describes his friend's fishing trips as being his "proper haunt / Somewhere, well out, beyond . . .," and the poet's ellipses tail off into the white space confirming the reader's impression that Heaney has been communing with a ghost. After the white space, this impression is confirmed by the address to the "Dawn-sniffing revenant." Just as Hamlet's ghost seeks revenge, so too do Heaney's ghosts come back to haunt him, seeking justice and a hearing.

Other writers have visited the dead and told their stories. In a published talk, "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet,"¹ Heaney admits to being strongly influenced by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which is a series of encounters with the dead, who offer explanations of their fate. Heaney explains what he finds intriguing in Dante's work:

The main tension is between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self. I hoped I could dramatise these strains by meeting shades from my own dream-life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world.

In Heaney's work, he meets the shades who speak to him and offer memories and explanations, but, in a secular age, they never give hope of a resurrection to a better life. In "The Digging Skeleton," Heaney translates a poem from Baudelaire that imagines human misery persisting beyond the grave, and he translates Baudelaire's word for the dead, *forçats* (hard laborers), into the chillingly appropriate "Death's lifers." Heaney's dead have not passed on to a better world; they are there to be dissected and analyzed in order to give clues about the bleakness and labor of life. Yet, if he is relentlessly pursuing the meaning of life and death with his questioning elegies, he is also providing consolation in an age when the words of comfort have been sterilized. Sacks explains how "the issues of justice and of judgment become prominent precisely when the inherited fictions and modes of consolation have grown weakest" (310). Maybe by ruthlessly looking at the bare bones of the dead and

¹ An uncollected essay published in the *Irish University Review*, 15:1, Spring 1985, 5-19.

recording their innocence, Heaney is able both to gain solace and give consolation that their lives have not gone unnoticed.

Although Heaney's attention is focused on the bodies of the dead and in the telling of their stories, in one poem he seems to place more emphasis on the earth itself. In "The Tollund Man," he venerates the bog itself that held onto these bodies, and he personifies the rapacious goddess holding fast to her prey:

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body.

"Torc" is a powerful word-tool for Heaney to use in showing the power of the earth goddess, for it connotes a force that is strong enough to rotate and hold onto its victims, as well as a necklace worn by the ancient Britons who first farmed the land. The earth itself is also portrayed as a sexual predator who eats up her victims, as well as becoming a birthing medium through which the corpses are reborn. Somehow, one never thought of the earth holding fast to its dead until Heaney showed how the bog held and preserved its casualties until they were exhumed.

On the contrary, the fear of ancient tribes was always that the dead would return and haunt them. In an effort to store them out of sight, humans have buried their dead since the time of Neanderthal Man, and anthropologists find that the need to cover a corpse with earth seems to mean more than hygiene; it is a sacred ritual that returns the body to earth. For instance, the ancient Greeks believed that the dead person's ghost could not enter the

Underworld² until the body had been covered; hence, Sophocles' tragic heroine Antigone insists on sprinkling earth on her dead brother's corpse despite being forbidden to do so, thus giving him a symbolic burial. Christian eschatology incorporated this belief so that only people who had been given a decent burial and whose graves had not been violated were sure of resurrection on the Last Day. The returning of a body to earth also suggests the first vegetation myths which incorporated a ritual sacrificial killing--the spilling of blood on the earth--which would ensure fertile harvests for the living. The Celts interred their dead in earth mounds, which were a recreation of the underworld.

Historian Nigel Pennick explains:

The otherworld is a symbolic realm . . . Those who go inside the mound leave the world of the living and re-enter the womb of Mother Earth. At death, part of the human spirit goes into the otherworld to be regenerated and reborn; the goods are taken into the fairy kingdom; and the mound serves as a memorial to the life of and deeds of the departed, a landmark for travellers and a stopping place for the devout. (88)

Heaney's landscape, Ireland, is filled with burial mounds and other places that are animated by spirits. These stones, springs, mountains, islands, and trees house a *locus amoenus*, a place-soul, which consists of the essential personality of a location that has arisen because of the imaginative acts that

² In Greek mythology, the Underworld is the realm of Hades and his wife Persephone where souls endured a bleak eternity. The earliest extant description of Hades' kingdom comes in book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*, where it is described as a grim shoreline of Oceanus. Later writers situated it underground.

have been performed there. Perhaps T. S. Eliot sums up the modern explanation of the *locus amoenus* that exists in sites where worship has taken place for centuries when he characterizes a place of sanctity:

You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for when living,
They can tell you being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language
of the living.

("Little Gidding," I)

Heaney too understands that, in his role as the bard who speaks for the tribe, he must venture into the sacred places of the dead to converse with them and become their organ of speech. We note a different stance here from, say, that of Emily Brontë, whose personae stayed on this earthly side of the grave.

On the other hand, Heaney ventures to open the sepulcher, or dig down into the grave to find his inspiration. The title of his collection of poems *Door into the Dark* could almost sum up Heaney's mission as a poet. Indeed, as he comments himself about this collection:

Words themselves are doors; Janus is to a certain extent
their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and
associations and forward to a clarification of sense and
meaning. (1980, 52)

It seems that Heaney can reveal the feelings of the dead and can unlock the doors that silence them through the medium of his poetry.

Both the sacred landscape, the *locus amoenus*, and the doorway are important images in most mythologies. A sacred place serves as a gateway to the divine through which the soul must gain entrance through a portal of some kind, a door or a gate. For example, in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, the *ka* (vital life force) and *ba* (soul) must travel through seven gates before they reach the portals of the House of Osiris (Turner 13). Virgil's map of hell shows a crossroads leading to two portals, the Gate of Ivory and the Gate of Horn (Turner 38). Dante married the classical Hades with the Christian hell in his *Inferno* and inscribed the Gate of Hell with the following warning:

Through me the way into the suffering city,
Through me the way to the eternal pain,
Through me the way that runs among the lost.

.....

Abandon every hope, who enter here. (Canto III, 21)

Many contemporary poets also use this image of a portal to show the barrier between darkness and lightness. The dead (either physical or spiritual) must pass through a door into darkness before light and redemption can be attained. For example, Heaney's friend, the poet Ted Hughes, describes Sylvia Plath's descent into mental illness and suicide as a journey through a writing table he had constructed for her out of an elm-plank "roughly-cut for coffin timber." In "The Table," Hughes explains that the writing table became a door for Plath to descend into the darkness of the underworld. He apologizes:

I did not

Know I had made and fitted a door
Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave.

(*The Birthday Letters*, 1998, 138)

Like his predecessors and contemporaries,³ Heaney too uses the symbol of a door leading into darkness. His use of "sepulchre" in "Funeral Rites" indicates Heaney's affinity for the symbolic cave in which the dead are interred. Only when the entrance stone is removed "from the mouth" can light flood into the cave. Opening the door that leads downwards into the grave is a way in which Heaney can "dig" with his pen. Like any mythic hero undergoing a ritual elegiac descent he can exhume the dead and find out what they have to tell him before he begins his voyage back into the consolatory and redemptive light. Then, as a poet, he can act as witness for the tribe and tell of what he has found.

In the elegy written for his mother, "Clearances," Heaney voyages into the underworld and opens the doors into several chambers, in one of which he sees his dead mother reunited with her father. It seems that the *locus amoenus* where he can find the spirit of his mother is in the domestic places where she reigned: a kitchen where "polished linoleum shone," and "brass taps shone;" and the "kettle whistled." His mother's domestic habitat is where he finds the entrance to being able to commune with her dead self. Of course, by elegizing his mother's quotidian life and locating her in the domestic sphere, Heaney is

³ There are many more examples of the door or gateway as point of entrance to the underworld. For example, Tennyson's "In Memoriam" contains vivid imagery of the mourner who stands by the door of a dark house, and editor Christopher Ricks points out precedents in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and in Latin poetry (Tennyson, 352). Sacks makes a compelling argument that the spatial position of the American elegist is always "outside" the door, and thus "marginalized," "dislocated," or "expelled" from the site of mourning. He cites examples from the elegies of Dickinson, Whitman, Tate, Lowell, and Clampitt (313).

subverting the traditional elegy, which would have ennobled the dead and placed her (or more likely him) in a pastoral setting.

Ancestral memories become revealed to him, as well as his own memories of being her young son, as he becomes the voice of his dead mother and recounts her story. In this cycle, he has chained eight sonnets together with a nine-line prologue that emphasizes his mother's role in teaching him how to live. She taught him that provided "you got the grain and hammer angled right," then it was easy to hew coal. She taught him "to hit," "to loosen," and above all "to face the music." He implores her spirit now to teach him to listen, "to strike it rich behind the linear black." Like the peat that his father taught him to dig, coal is also a layer of decomposed vegetation. Heaney seems compelled to explore these layers that lie beneath the earth's surface and find fuel for his poetry. As his miner's hammer hits the coal along the grain, he knows that he must listen carefully. What he hears on this journey into the Underworld are the voices of his ancestors, the ones who formed his mother. The first sonnet links the past with the present by telling the story of his great-grandmother, who became a "turncoat" because she married a Protestant. The stones that were thrown at her "keep coming" at the narrator, and we remember that Heaney himself has been reviled for appearing to sympathize with the Protestants of Northern Ireland. In the second sonnet, it seems that the spirit of Heaney's mother has opened the door into another chamber, "Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead," where her father used to live. He welcomes his daughter, who has returned like a homing pigeon, and together they sit down in the "shining room." Having returned his mother to the land of her ancestors, Heaney is free to return to the more recent past and remember the good times

when they were mother and son together at home. He and his mother were "never closer" than when peeling potatoes together, but as he became educated, a rift grew between them. She would lapse into the dialect, with its misplaced parts of speech ("You know all them things") in order to "challenge" him. Challenge what? Probably his filial devotion because he too would then prove his loyalty by saying

naw and aye

And decently relapse into the wrong

Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.

If mother and son were "kept at bay" by grammar when she was alive, now that she is dead, they can communicate without words, and he, the eloquent poet, is free to tell her story in standard English.

Another household chore that tied mother and son together was the removal of clean sheets from the outdoor laundry line. Together, as they stood in the wind folding these large, flapping sheets, they seem to be in an intricate dance, "In moves where I was x and she was o." Yet, the sheets are more than bed linen; they are made from "ripped out flour sacks." Flour is a commodity that has been scarce enough to be a cause of many historical struggles, notably the Peasants' Revolt, the French Revolution, and the Irish Famine. By sewing flour sacks into a sheet for the marriage bed, Heaney's mother is overcoming the past tribulations to create a space in which procreation can take place, and a new generation that includes Heaney himself can be born. Heaney thus loads the imagery of these bed sheets with the weight of the births and deaths that occur in a marriage bed, with the winding sheets that serve as a shroud, and

also with the paper sheets on which he is recording his memories. It seems as though his mother reminds him from the grave not to let the past be forgotten.

The last two sonnets reiterate Heaney's sense of the past being carried forward in the genes. Around the deathbed, as his mother's "pulsebeat was abandoned," the mourners were left with an empty space, but the space "had been emptied / Into us to keep." Thus, we see that Heaney is given the gift of words, the vocabulary that had almost come between them, to tell of their lives. The absence of his mother leaves a space like that left by the felling of the huge chestnut tree; not only is the space empty, but it is silent. Yet, the image of his dead mother as a "soul ramifying" keeps Heaney firmly rooted in the ground. If her soul can branch out and become the node of the family tree, her life will not be silenced.

Heaney visits the dead in another *locus amoenus* in "The Strand at Lough Beg," written in memory of his cousin Colum McCartney. Summoning Dante as a model, Heaney uses lines from *Purgatorio* as an epigraph for his own pilgrimage:

All around this little island, on the strand
Far down below there, where the breakers strive,
Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand. (I, 100-103)

Heaney's Irish location, at Lough Beg, is a "pilgrim's track" pinpointed as being "towards Newtownhamilton / Past the Fews Forest." It is a place where Sweeney,⁴ the seventh-century pagan king, was chased by "a demon pack /

⁴ In the Introduction to *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney explains that Suibhne, the legendary king in the Middle-Irish poem *Buile Suibhne* has a topographical relationship with himself, for Heaney knows his area of Northern Ireland (south County Antrim and north County Down) intimately.

Blazing out of the ground." Heaney wonders what "blazed ahead" of his cousin. Was it "a faked roadblock," or a car tailing him that suddenly flagged him down? Lough Beg had been a place from where Heaney's cousin used to fetch the cows home, and is a scene of their boyhood explorations. This location, which becomes a *locus amoenus* where two men had found happiness in their youth, and one to which the poet returns to elegize his dead friend, recalls the scene to which Wordsworth returned, where he and his brother John had fished together. In both cases the poet returns to a scene of former happiness where he can achieve a sufficient catharsis to write an elegy for the dead. Hardy, too, revisited Cornwall as a *locus amoenus* where he and his wife had been happy together. Yet, in Heaney's case, it seems as though release is not obtainable. The image of his cousin's violent death is superimposed over that of the gentle boy who was scared by the sound of the guns of the duck shooters, so that the place of past happiness becomes the place of present agony. Heaney speaks directly to the ghost of his cousin, whom he finds on his knees "with blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes." Heaney describes how he performed the mourning rites and laid out the dead body:

Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
 And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
 To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
 Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud
 I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.

Like the modern day Catholics who resent the intrusion of the British in Ireland, Sweeney resented the evangelical and imperialist intrusions of the Christians. In his fury, he attacked St. Ronan Finn, but Ronan cursed him into becoming a bird who would flit from tree to tree for the rest of its life. For Heaney, Sweeney seems to be the prototype of the Irish exile or wanderer.

With rushes that shoot green again, I plait

Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

Once again, Dante's *Purgatorio* is the tutelary presence in this elegy. In Dante's poem, Virgil, the poet's guide, washes the grime of Hell from the poet's face before he moves on to the next stage of his journey and enters Purgatory.

Heaney performs the same ritual of purification on the body of his murdered cousin, and then he goes on to use the native Irish rushes to "plait green scapulars to wear over your shroud."

In this elegy for his cousin, while Heaney is visiting a pastoral *locus amoenus* and asking the traditional questions about what happened in order to compose a classical elegy, he is also subverting the tradition. For instance, in classical elegies, all nature mourns the deceased; whereas in this one, the cattle seem uncaring as "they turn their unbewildered gaze" to the poet and his ghostly visitor. Even the lake itself is not in mourning. In a wonderful image comparing the Lough to a sword, we see that the sword is not unpolished and dull, but instead it "half shines" because its "edge" is "honed bright."

"Station Island" is Heaney's largest and most-frequented *locus amoenus*. The actual place is, according to Heaney,

set upon an island of that name in Lough Derg in
County Donegal. For centuries it has been the site
of a pilgrimage which involves fasting, praying, and
going barefoot around the "beds"--stone circles
believed to be the remaining foundations of early
monastic buildings. Each unit of these penitential
exercises is called a "station." (1990, 263)

In "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet," a published talk about "Station Island," Heaney says that it was partly the anxiety caused by numerous earlier literary pilgrimages that turned him to Dante's meetings with ghosts in the *Purgatorio* as a model for his own poem. The poet himself undergoes an imaginary penitential exercise on this island as he enters into the Underworld and makes a pilgrimage to visit with the dead. His communion with the dead causes the poet to perform an autopsy on himself and examine the previous poems he has written to elegize those dead. A central passage from "Envies and Identifications" explains how Heaney regards his voyages into the grave and his communions with the dead:

I hoped that I could dramatize these strains by
meeting shades from my own dream-life who
had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world.
They could perhaps voice the claims of orthodoxy
and the necessity to recognize those claims.
They could probe the validity of one's commitment.

Thus, we see that the poet is still worried about reconciling "song and suffering" and performing the same ruthless examination on his own life that he does on others. The revenants in the poem become his advisors, from beyond the grave, who will comment on his responsibilities. In section VIII, Heaney is confronted with the ghosts of Tom Delaney, his archaeologist friend who had died at the young age of thirty-two, as well as his cousin, Colum McCartney, whom he had elegized in "The Strand at Lough Beg."

In this poem, Colum McCartney appears as a "bleeding, pale-faced boy, plastered in mud," who reproaches the poet. Like Hamlet's ghost, he seems to

want revenge, or maybe he simply wants justice. Obviously the poet is haunted by guilt as he imagines McCartney's ghost saying to him:

You were there with poets when you got the word
and stayed there with them, while your own flesh and blood
was carted to Bellaghy from the Fews.
They showed more agitation at the news
than you did.

Heaney tries to apologize and explain to his cousin who has returned from the grave to accuse him:

'But they were getting crisis
first-hand, Colum, they had happened in on
live sectarian assassination.
I was dumb, encountering what was destined.'

He describes his response:

'I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough beg
and the strand empty at daybreak.
I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake.'

The ghost, however, will not be placated by Heaney's excuses. He represents all the agonizing Heaney has ever done about the poet's dilemma of fiddling while Rome burns. Should the poet convert suffering into an artistic song? McCartney's ghost relentlessly accuses Heaney of writing only of his feelings, rather than bearing witness to the injustice:

'You saw that, and you wrote that--not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head

I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
 who now atone perhaps upon this bed
 for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
 the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
 and saccharined my death with morning dew.

Heaney's stance in this elegy, which is itself a denunciation of elegies, is that of the postmodern poet who expresses grave doubts about his motivation for writing. The tradition of elegy writing has included Milton's "uncouth swain" who could "warble his Doric lay" on the death of Milton's friend, Edward King, and then end his rituals of mourning by departing for "fresh woods, and pastures new." Arnold's elegy, *Thyrsis*, on the death of his friend, Arthur Hugh Clough, also includes an imperative to "Roam on! The light we sought is shining still." Heaney, however, cannot accept that his ghosts are accepting his mourning tribute and sanctioning him to reap poetic profit from their deaths. Rather the ghosts of all the dead seem to clamor in his head urging him to tell their stories and seek justice. Although Heaney's elegy for his cousin, "The Strand at Lough Beg," contains most of the traditional components of elegy (a history of past friendship, a questioning of destiny, a laying-on of flowers), these are no longer consolations for the postmodern poet. We noted how Dylan Thomas, following in the tradition of the War poets, refused to sweeten death, and now Heaney is refusing to "saccharine" death.

"Station Island" is a *locus amoenus* that acts as a door to the underworld where Heaney can meet the spirits of all the dead he has ever known. The poet describes the experience as one where "the field was full / of half-remembered faces." He sees that his poetic duty is to "dig" into their

graves, commune with them, and tell their stories, for as the dead tell him, "We are earthworms of the earth, and all that / has gone through us is what will be our trace." For, Heaney, however, merely telling his audience about the dead is not enough; the unresting inhabitants of Station Island will allow him no peace until he has examined his own conscience as well.

For example, section VII of "Station Island" describes the brutal killing of a man with whom Heaney had played football in his youth, the victim of a sectarian murder. As Heaney exhumes this description of the circumstances of his friend's death, he is compelled to confess his own ambivalence toward politics. It seems that Heaney mourns his own lack of taking a stand in Irish politics. In the best tradition of the unhealed dead who visit the living, Heaney's interlocutor is a gory corpse whose "brow / was blown open above the eye and blood had dried on his neck and cheek." This wounded narrator tells how he was woken up "in the small hours" and asked to open his shop by "two customers." After that, his last recollection of life was "the stale smell / of cooked meat or something." Heaney interrogates him, but the dead man knows nothing about his assailants, except

'They were barefaced as they would be in the day,
shites thinking they were the be-all and the end-all.'

In an attempt at posthumous comfort, Heaney assures his friend that the assassins had been caught and put in jail, but then he realizes that not only is consolation futile, but his own role as poet is trivial. In a disturbing confession that he blurts out, Heaney pleads for forgiveness:

'Forgive the way I have lived indifferent--
forgive my timid circumspect involvement.'

This section of "Station Island" had opened with the poet, like Narcissus, gazing into the water. Unlike Narcissus, however, he does not like what he sees. Heaney does not seem at ease with being a poet in the late twentieth century--especially a poet whose mission is to exhume the dead and elegize them by telling their stories. His elegies, while starting off with the customary elements, seem to decompose into "anti-elegies" that serve to mock the poet's role rather than gain him the laurel wreaths of poetic profit. This contemporary poet does not write elegies easily. He seeks to question his own motives in composing songs about suffering, and the only way he can sanction this act is to become the voice of the dead and tell their stories for them. Thus, his elegies are not so much expressions of his grief but rather they become true memorials for the dead.

This chapter began with Heaney's anecdote about his friend, David Hammond, who was unable to sing while others were suffering the effects of bomb damage. It therefore seems appropriate to end with the final section of "Station Island," where, after voyaging through the underworld and meeting with the shades of the dead, the narrator's guide tells him: "You've listened long enough. Now strike your note."

Chapter Seven

Melting Melodious Words

Melting melodious words, to lutes of amber.

(Herrick, "Upon Julia's Voice")

Follow, poet, follow right

To the bottom of the night,

With your unconstraining voice

Still persuade us to rejoice.

(Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats")

This dissertation has explored how five poets elegized their dead in the period from 1805 to the present. While all five of these writers use the blank page as uncharted territory on which their own particular sorrow can be mapped, their methods are different, and their struggles yield different kinds of triumphs. Common to each one is the way in which grief is surmounted by the process of writing an elegy. Although the conventional subject of an elegy is the search for consolation, it is the very process of ordering grief into a work of art that becomes the consolation. In each case the finding of form coincides with the defeat of grief.

The study shows that although the elegy could have become an archaic genre during the last century, just as many funeral customs have, instead it has evolved into a new form. The form of the modern elegy may or may not

include some of the expected conventions but it will certainly offer no consolations. Instead, the modern elegy poses unanswerable questions, and it tends to be a self-reflexive poem in that the poet will be aware of the merits of his writing an elegy. The style of the elegy has become increasingly minimal as poets have realized that although words are all we have, they sometimes fail to bridge the gap between the living and the dead.

The study starts with Wordsworth, who spanned the gap between his dead brother and himself when he revisited a spot where they had been happy together. This locale precipitated his memories and the consequent flood of healing tears that enabled him to write an elegy. In Wordsworth's letters, we saw that he went through the whole sequence of mourning documented by psychologists: numbness, yearning and searching, anger, a desire to preserve everything the way it was before the death, and a growing identification to the point where he felt that John was within him. When the grief work was completed, Wordsworth completed his elegies to John without any compunction or second thoughts about doing so. As a poet, it was expected of him that he would write elegies. Wordsworth's elegy includes some of the traditional conventions of elegy, but with slight modifications, as in the substitution of one shepherd-boy for a mourning procession, and one solitary Moss Champion for a tribute of flowers. In the time-honored custom, he both achieves consolation and creates a lasting memorial to John, and, of course, himself.

This poem of Wordsworth's departs very little from the genre until we consider the nature of the consolation that the poet reaches; rather than the poet finding consolation in the typical after-life, Wordsworth adds nature as the

consoling element. Nature, in the form of a tiny flower and a sublime mountain, helps the bereaved poet to find solace, much as they had done in times of his other losses. Interestingly, although the poet later became a conventional churchman and revised his autobiographical "The Prelude" to portray a more orthodox religion, he does not seem to have revised these elegies in the same manner, and the consolation is still depicted as coming from nature. (In any case, the record of his recovery as shown in his letters would substantiate that it was the tarn that healed him, rather than the church.) What is singular about Wordsworth's elegy is that his private writings document his progression through the work of mourning and pinpoint the moment when he reaches his nadir and then becomes free to write again. In this documentation of his emotions, we can see exactly how a poet comes to write an elegy even though he has a heavy heart.

The next poet, Brontë, is a much more private person than Wordsworth, and we have no records of her thoughts. On the contrary, evidence has to be pieced together from her fictional writings and the sparse biographical details that are known. Although death plays an important part in them, her literary works were never intended for publication. Death seemed to pervade Brontë's life as she looked out from her window onto the gravestones of her mother and sisters, and she spent much of her short life in mourning. Brontë's life reminds us of how funereal conventions have changed since Victorian times. Now, the dead are taken to be laid out by strangers in a funeral parlor, and dying (as well as birthing) functions have been removed from the home. For Brontë, the dead must have remained as almost part of the family much as for the little girl who argues with Wordsworth in "We Are Seven." Unlike Wordsworth, Brontë did

not try to immortalize her mother or sisters, but she seemed to face up to death by writing of it, thus using words to fill the spaces left in her life. Despite being immersed in a churchgoing household and Victorian funeral conventions, Brontë creates a different form of elegy and anticipates modernism. While scorning the religious consolation of an afterlife, and in one poem debating the hypocrisy of mourning for those who are passing on to a better life, Brontë consoles herself through her mystical experiences. She, too, has a strong connection with nature and its healing powers.

Brontë's contribution to the elegy form is her modernist lack of faith in words, and her refusal to mask what she feels in fabrications. On the contrary, her poetry is remarkable for its use of silences, caesuras, dashes, parentheses, and ellipses. Departing from the traditional elegy that exorcised the fear of dying with language and ancient symbols, Brontë displaces language in her attempt to confront death. She accepts that we do not know what happens after death and bravely refuses to fill the space with empty words. Whereas readers are used to paying attention to the pauses and silences in modern works such as those of Samuel Beckett, they will find that Brontë's subtext is rewarding in the same way. The ambiguity of Brontë's elegies together with her refusal to propose any kind of consolation anticipate the form of twentieth-century elegies.

In his *Poems of 1912-13*, Hardy shifts the focus of the elegy directly onto the poet and his own doubts about writing and publishing elegies. In a letter, he explains that his purpose is to make "amends" to Emma for being "inconsiderate" during her lifetime. In effect, what these elegies do is to reveal the story of a marriage that had turned sour, and Hardy is not only reminiscing

about their early courtship, but revealing that neither of them was perfect. Thus the elegy has seen a remarkable change since John Wordsworth's death was idealized as being a good death because he died with "fortitude." On the contrary, Hardy portrays his marriage with all its faults and in so doing he creates a sequence of elegies that read almost like a novel. Hardy is working through his mourning without traditional forms of consolation; instead, he reveals his perplexity, hope, and fear in a way that says to his readers, "You too may go through this experience." After reading them, one feels the need to open up communications quickly, before death makes it too late.

Hardy's anguish has manifested itself in the twenty-one different metrical forms in the collection, a necessary step toward defeating his grief. The language of his poems is replete with the breakdowns that include caesuras, dashes and unanswerable questions. What Hardy also adds to the modern elegy is a concern about making poetic profit from these elegies. This dialogue about the ethical question of profiting from sorrow will arise in most modern elegies, and it is of course an essential issue in the War poetry that was written a few years after Hardy's collection.

By the time Thomas is writing his elegies, the conventions of the modern elegy have almost been defined. Poets have accustomed readers to cynicism about idealization of the dead and consolation, and also to a style of writing that works through several issues as well as memorializing the dead. Indeed, Thomas's elegies reveal much about himself and his own tensions. For instance, his "Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" evokes a concern of modern elegists that "any further / Elegy" would "blaspheme" the girl. Thomas's refusal to mourn in the poetry of mourning

anticipates what is probably a more convincing refusal to mourn by contemporary poet Geoffrey Hill. In "September Song," Hill ridicules the worth of his own elegy for a child who died in the Holocaust:

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

The other contribution that Thomas makes to the elegy form is to finally vanquish the idea of the good death. In the famous villanelle to his dying father, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," Thomas rages his anger at a grim reaper who cuts men down before they have finished their work on earth. It seems that by mid-century elegists are free to write when they reach the anger stage of mourning, rather than waiting until the acceptance stage. While the dying may still die bravely, the modern elegist need not show fortitude in the face of death.

Finally the study turns to Heaney, one of the most widely-read modern poets. Heaney is also concerned about the ethical dilemma of creating art from suffering. Nevertheless, he postulates that as a poet he must record the particular horror that he describes, for the horror must be acknowledged to have happened. Heaney laments for the dead by speaking for them, by making a trumpet call of their concerns. In one sense, we have returned full circle to Wordsworth's concern that his brother would not be forgotten. Like Wordsworth, Heaney creates memorials to the dead with his poetry even though his tributes to the dead are written with modern questioning and skepticism. Wordsworth prophetically said in his "Essay on Epitaphs I," that

mankind has the need to mark and record the lives of its dead, and at the end of the twentieth century, Heaney affirms the poet's duty to do just that.

What is new about Heaney's elegizing is the mythology that he has created, one that includes allusions to previous writings about the dead (notably by Dante) and also initiates the Bronze Age dead into the western literary tradition. Concerned with the whole global tribe, Heaney seeks to bond together all who have ever died, regardless of faith or age. Like the other poets in this study, he himself has a strong bond to his birthplace and consequently Irish mythology and place resonate in his writing. It could be said that Heaney has resurrected the elegy, making it a best-selling art form that speaks to people in tones they need to hear. Heaney has no doubt that people need to mourn for what they have lost, and his poetry fulfills this universal need. In an age when death tends to be ignored, Heaney is the prophetic bard whose work echoes his cry that "We pine for ceremony / customary rhythm."

The elegy continues to be a preferred genre; it serves a function of catharsis for the bereaved, and for readers who know that they too will suffer loss. In W. H. Auden's famous elegy to Yeats, the poet sees that "the seas of pity lie / Locked and frozen in each eye," and he feels that his task is to encourage the "healing fountain" to start by melting the ice. Elegies may serve as the necessary salt that melts the ice, and the receptive audience will be "men and women, / Who, one day, will feel as I do now," as contemporary poet Douglas Dunn says in "The Stories."

Chapter One shows how the need for mourning transgresses social mores; in other words, in contemporary times when people are denied the healing rituals and conventions of mourning, they tend to sublimate their grief

until it can emerge in a socially acceptable way through their public mourning for prominent figures. This type of public mourning includes the need to immortalize the dead by constructing monuments to them. Poets, of course, have always immortalized their dead by creating elegies, yet the last few years has seen the publication of several works of elegy sequences created as tributes to the poets' wives. While this is not a new concept--we have Hardy's poems of 1912 as a precedent--it does seem remarkable that readers are eager to purchase such somber poems.

When we consider that Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 1985 and also appeared in the *Sunday Times* bestseller list, it appears that a need is being met by elegiacal writing. Dunn's wife, Leslie Balfour Dunn, died of cancer in March 1981, at the age of 37. In 1985 Dunn's *Elegies* were published. The collection records the couple's married life, the illness and death of the wife, and the aftermath of that death in the husband's life. In "The Stories," while paradoxically writing the stories of their life together, Dunn questions his need to write elegies:

Why grieve like this? I loathe my bitter, scorning wit,
This raffish sorrow artficed by stories.

Not only is the writing of elegy a problem for the poet but critics argue about the difficulty of reading such intensely personal elegies. The difficulty is not in the poems, but in a feeling of awkwardness on having to evaluate them. What is the reader doing in enjoying such poems wrought from grief? Should not the details of a relationship be left to those whom they concern, rather than an anonymous audience? In defining the achievements of poets who have written elegies, the challenge is to define dissatisfaction with the collection in

terms that respect the honesty that has been portrayed. Like D. H. Lawrence, we tend to feel that "critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form . . . is mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon" ("John Galsworthy," *Phoenix*, 1978: 539). Yet, in contrast to elegies of the past, the unsettling power of modern elegies might seem to lie in their artlessness, in their unflinching honesty, and the way they undercut any consolation.

Another contemporary poet, Donald Hall, leaves us in no doubt about his integrity. When his wife, Jane Kenyon, died of leukemia in 1995, Hall had thought he would be left without comfort, but he too managed to find the strength to overcome his grief by writing a collection of elegies, *Without*. In a candid interview with Carolyn White, Hall explains his motivation:

I had a dream--this was about a year after her death.
At the end of the room, the bedroom, there were shelves
like bookshelves, and all throughout them were tiny corpses
--all of Jane--and I hadn't buried them yet. And they were
all very small, like dolls. They were like mannequins. And
I think she is smaller now. She shrinks. She shrinks. You
can resist it, but it happens.

Hall's collection consists of poems that he wrote while sitting by Jane's sickbed and later revised, followed by elegies that are letters to Jane, written after a period of silence in the wake of her death. Hall explains, "I wrote to her every morning. It kept me out of bed. It was a reason to wake up."

Hall is frank about his work of mourning. He details the process of his recovery:

And the first year was far less horrifying than the second.

Then it was howling time, absolute howling time, as if howling was something to do about it. . . . I screamed my head off. . . . Then when I was coming out of the depression I wrote furiously, and none of those poems have been printed, they're under revision. I was in a murderous rage and I was rapid-cycling--you know I sat in the blue chair, and five-percent of my mind was watching the rest of me go from abject despair to a moment of elation to the desire to murder the world. And when TWA 800 blasted out of the sky I cheered and applauded, and that's scary, horribly scary.

What precipitated Hall out of his rage and misery was the power over words. He was able to revise the poems he had written while his wife was dying, and then to address poems directly to her as though she were still by his side.

Over the last two hundred years, we can see a cultural change that has swung from Wordsworth to Hall. Wordsworth's record of grief was confined to his private journal and a more formal elegy that was eventually crafted; whereas Hall feels comfortable enough to detail his mourning process and his anguish within the published elegy itself. When discussing Wordsworth's grief, I do not know how far my conclusions have been an attempt to recover ways of feeling and thinking that belong to the early nineteenth century and how far they have been about what these poems say to readers today. On the other hand, a modern reader can experience and relate to the death of a close relative through Hall's elegies, for contemporary poets give us firsthand accounts of the process of creating songs from suffering.

Finally, yet another sequence of elegies has just been published to illustrate my contention that the age-old songs of loss and mourning thrive in this secular and visual age more than ever before. *Birthday Letters* (1998) is a collection of elegies by England's poet laureate Ted Hughes. Thirty-five years after his wife Sylvia Plath's suicide, Hughes has broken his silence to reveal the life they shared. When Plath killed herself on February 11, 1963, she became a symbol of destroyed genius, and Hughes was left to carry the burden of public reproach, with accusations of neglect, selfishness, and disloyalty. Like that of the Hardys, the marriage had grown cold and indifferent, yet Hughes had maintained his silence and refused to speak of their life together. It now seems, however, that since Plath died Hughes has been writing elegies, and like Hardy, he portrays vignettes from their marriage. Dedicated to their children, Frieda and Nicholas, *Birthday Letters* consists of poems, apart from two, that are addressed to Plath.

"Visit," where Hughes records his shock on reading Plath's "actual words" in her journal, resonates with the echoes of Hardy's selfsame voyage and his haunting by the voice of Emma. Hughes describes his own haunting:

The freezing soil
Of the garden, as I clawed it.
All around me that midnight's
Giant clock of frost. And somewhere
Inside it, wanting to feel nothing,
A pulse of fever. Somewhere
Inside that numbness of the earth
Our future trying to happen.

I look up--as if to meet your voice
 With all its urgent future
 That has burst in on me. Then look back
 At the book of printed words.
 You are ten years dead. It is only a story.
 Your story. My story.

Hughes' elegies are clearly untraditional in their bitter tone that reproaches Plath for killing herself and bereaving Hughes and her children. He seems almost to have identified with the dead Plath to the extent that he takes on her persona and continues the angry, reproachful poems she had written to her dead father. Yet, the elegies also contain all our cultural visual images of loss. Hughes pulls out all the stops as he reincarnates both literary images of Heathcliff scrabbling at Cathy's grave and Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman" in "Life After Death." In this plaintive lament, he describes first their son's and then their daughter's reaction to Plath's desertion:

Your son's eyes, which had unsettled us
 With your Slavic Asiatic
 Epicanthic fold, but would become
 So perfectly your eyes,
 Became wet jewels,
 The hardest substance of the purest pain
 As I fed him in the high white chair.
 Great hands of grief were wringing and wringing
 his wet cloth of a face. They wrung out his tears.

.....

Day by day his sister grew
 Paler with the wound
 She could not see or touch or feel, as I dressed it
 Each day with her blue Breton jacket.

This reproachful elegy, poignant enough to wake the dead, ends with haunting imagery of the wolves who sing to console the three bereaved:

As my body sank into the folk-tale
 Where the wolves are singing in the forest
 For two babes, who have turned, in their sleep,
 Into orphans
 Beside the corpse of their mother.

Our forefathers believed that if a man saw a wolf before the wolf saw him, he became dumb, at least for a time. As the man who saw the wolf, for a while Hughes became dumb to tell of his grief, but these elegies reveal that his voice did return. As a musical term, "wolf" indicates a discordant note. The song sung by Hughes reveals the jarring of his life since Plath died and emphasizes that elegies are still needed. Through these lyrical elegies, Hughes provides a link in the chain of grief that has stretched over the centuries. Each of his elegies resonates with the archetypal images we associate with death and loss.

There remains much work for scholars in finding these patterns of loss that echo from the past and still provide a necessary song today. The evolving form of the elegy will offer literary critics much ground for debate in the future. Rather than becoming an archaic form, the elegy is alive today. Its melody not only lingers on, but perhaps transcends the ancient Greek songs of loss.

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