Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam: An* Anatomy of Lament

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It is clear that the most "compelling cause" of lament for Tennyson in In *Memoriam* (1850) is the loss of Hallam in that the poem is characterized by the depth of grief where the great grief is known to, is shared by, is consoled by, and the joy is sanctified by the spirit of the dear, dead friend. In *In Memoriam*, grief has corrosive, therapeutic, cathartic, regenerative properties. In the chequered path of the poem, we see a poet who broods, mourns, weeps, wails, doubts, despairs, resists despair, catches at hope and clings tenaciously to it. However, the lament in *Duino Elegies* (1923) is occasioned not by any personal loss but by an agonizing perception of the inadequacy and fragmentariness of human consciousness. The elegies encapsulate many of the dilemmas of the twentieth century and beyond, of which the loss of belief in a divinely sponsored universe, the struggle with industrialization, a preoccupation with war and death and the atomization of society are the important ones. The piercing allegories of modern life, the praise for a self-negating kind of objectless love, the brooding on death, the critically important role of the poet, the *Duino Elegies* is an architectonically arranged cycle of hymnic poetry, embodying and proclaiming an intensely felt personal process of experience. This essay examines the nature of grief in the poems and the poets' approaches to it. Regardless of differences in spatial, temporal and linguistic terms, both the works evince a good deal of similarities in their treatment of the majestic sadness.

Although the first 27 sections of *In Memoriam* enact the tension in the poet's mind at its acme and there is a gradual decline of grief from section 28 onwards, Tennyson's thought of a marriage with grief in section 59 situates the reader in an interesting, yet baffling place as to the poet's real attitude to grief:

> O Sorrow, wilt thou live with me
> No casual mistress, but a wife,
> My bosom-friend and half of life;
> As I confess it needs must be;
>
> O Sorrow, wilt thou rule my blood,
> Be sometimes lovely like a bride,
> And put thy harsher moods aside,
> If thou wilt have me wise and good. (1-8)

It would be appropriate to allude here to Section 3 of the poem where Sorrow declares the universe to be pointless, and striking the prevailing tone for roughly the first half of the poem: "O Sorrow, cruel fellowship, / O Priestess in the vaults of Death." Unlike section 3, in section 59, however, Sorrow is addressed more hopefully, in a marriage metaphor, which suggests the proper tone for the speaker's spiritual recovery in the second half of the poem. The varying phases of grief, in line with its episodic nature, demonstrate a rectilinear structure, even though the grief coils back and is straightened out intermittently in the poem. Tennyson's struggle to

mediate his loss with words highlights the melancholic character of the poem which interrogates the goals of proper mourning. As Irene Hsiao comments, "As the story of loss is pared into sectors of grief, series of ends, the lost object is transformed into a stone with a word carved into it. When the act of mourning is arranged into a series of stages, its progress is raised into a linear process. Dead and living join specified narratives which only touch and then terminate in divergent places. The story of mourning is a wish that the heart would abandon its circumambulation and replicate the forward impulse of time" (173-196). Quite likely, as it seems, in the Prologue, Tennyson deems his grief profane; an unbecoming failing which, though natural and human, is an impediment in the path of faith: "Forgive my grief for one removed."

Tennyson's Love-Grief chemistry runs in consonance with the bliss of inebriety where to be "drunk with loss" and "to dance with death" are ineffable feelings. The passion, "Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss, / To dance with death, to beat the ground" highlights the poet's almost pathological obsession with inalienable grief. The poet's resolve to fortify his heart against the onslaught of grief, "Thou shalt not be the fool of loss" functions as an existential imperative which, while suggesting the failure of all possible mechanisms in containing grief, does underscore a curious combination of resoluteness and helplessness in the face of grief. The poet feels, slumber, like many other things which could be taken recourse to, is but a futile attempt to avoid grief, and wonders how could his heart mourn for a loss when it scarcely knows what the loss is. An undercurrent of thanatos highlights the stupefaction caused by the death of Hallam, and the poet's self-possession to master grief is further betrayed by his surrender to it off and on:

To Sleep I give my powers away;
My will is bondsman to the dark;
I sit within a helmless bark,
And with my heart I muse and say:

O heart, how fares it with thee now,
That thou should'st fail from thy desire,
Who scarcely darest to inquire,
'What is it makes me beat so low?'

Something it is which thou hast lost,
Some pleasure from thine early years.
Break, thou deep vase of chilling tears,
That grief hath shaken into frost!

Such clouds of nameless trouble cross
All night below the darken'd eyes;
With morning wakes the will, and cries,
'Thou shalt not be the fool of loss.'

Lines 1-4 make the division of the self apparent, and the subject surrenders his will to sleep and only then begins an internal dialogue with his heart, addressing it as a localized region of loss. As Hsiao goes on to write, "Classically manifesting psychosomatic illness, the low-beating heart bears all suffering to shield the questioning mind from the lost object. The sleep-suppressed will thus reveals itself as the will not to know and upon wakening berates the mind for its nocturnal interrogation, sternly forbidding the subject to become "the fool of loss." In the phrasing of the

reproach, the will maintains the subject's ignorance by referring to a generalized loss, persisting in the refusal to name the "something" which has been "lost," amorphously passed over as "some pleasure" or "clouds of nameless trouble" (173-196).

It is significant that the poet is aware of the possible desecration of the grandeur of grief by the verbalization of the inexpressible. Therefore, far from giving "that larger grief" a verbal vent, he would rather revel in the ingestion of that sadness where the distinction between "the lesser grief" and the "deepest grief" serves only to highlight the inadequacy of the former and the built-in strength of the latter. Thus, when the poet suddenly springs up to a ratiocination of his grief as "private sorrow's barren song," he gives an inkling of recuperation from the scarifying grief for the realization of a greater good. Ultimately, grief awakens in the poet a necessity of love, which finds expression in section 27 and is asserted again in section 85: "'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all."

There is no denying the fact of the gradual attenuation of grief in the second part of the elegy, but there is still the grasp of that perceptible, coercive grief from which the poet cannot make himself free. Contrary to it, he ballasts his reasons to grieve because therefrom he derives his strength to live. When he writes, "Who show'd a token of distress? / No single tear, no mask of pain: / O sorrow, then can sorrow wane? / O grief, can grief be changed to less?," he seems to demonstrate a conviction built upon a resolution that he shall not cease to grieve.

Thus, Tennyson's perception of a built-in strength in his grief is suggestive of his rationale for luxuriating in its excesses. The strength "reserved" in grief stems from its power to both sadden and enlighten, which while making the poet lugubrious does make him "see into the life of things." Tennyson's attitude to grief is that of an optimist, a rational thinker whose vision is not jaundiced by frantic philosophizing; rather ennobled by sound judgement and perspicacity:

> And so my passion hath not swerved
> To works of weakness, but I find
> An image comforting the mind,
> And in my grief a strength reserved. (section 85, 49-52)

However, alhough the lines in section 105, "No more shall wayward grief abuse / The genial hour with mask and mime" run counter to the realization achieved in the lines of section 85 just quoted, yet the word "wayward" holds the key to an understanding of Tennyson's banishment of the stymieing grief in whose luxury he was basking before. The poet further wishes for or enjoins a dismissal of grief that hinders clear thinking and frustrates greater realizations: "Ring out the grief that saps the mind." Tennyson ends section 108 and begins section 113 with a common line "'Tis held that sorrow makes us wise" only to summarize what he has said before. This expression demonstrates Tennyson's apparent ambivalence toward grief, but contains a great truth insofar as wisdom ensues from sorrow. In essence, Tennyson's attitude to grief is not affected by a partisan colouring of a demented mourner; rather it is held up *against* such thoughts to highlight its positive outcomes.

Like Tennyson's line, "And in my grief a strength reserved," Rilke's expression: "we for whom grief is so often / the source of our spirit's growth" (The First Elegy) underlines a similarity of approach toward grief, marked by a similar philosophical rigour. Both reckon the

formative, regenerative properties of grief. An inquiry into the nature of Rilkean grief in the Duino elegies points, at the outset, toward a perception of helplessness which the speaker feels when he suffers angelic nonchalance. If the speaker cannot but have the misgivings that he will not be heard despite his cry; and further, that there is no provenance of solace, he is also quite sure of the cause that "we are not really at home in / our interpreted world."

However, Rilke's attitude to grief is not spoiled by the rancour of frustration; rather it is chastened and sublimated by a capacity for diagnosis. His poetic task, thus, involves an examination of the ontological problems. In *Duino Elegies*, a fusillade of apparent imperatives from Rilke is, in fact, the poet's impassioned entreaties, "Don't you know yet? Fling the emptiness out of your arms / into the spaces we breathe." Rilke's reference to the "springtimes," "the star," "the wave," "the violin" in the First Elegy in respect of their wish for appreciation vis-à-vis our incapacity to respond to them is a fit occasion for his melancholy. When he asks, "But could you accomplish it?," he is prepared for an answer in the negative, which is bound to be, since we are "always distracted by expectation." That which exacerbates his grief is his conclusive apprehension that "there is no place where we can remain." The poet despairs at our inability to execute the "mission," and bewildering estrangement from divine succour, and while he does so, he wishfully longs for the blessedness of the early departed who enjoy not only the liberation from mundane miseries, but also lose its joys: "those who were carried off early no longer need us: / they are weaned from earth's sorrows and joys." With semantic subtleties, the poetic persona expresses tacit desire for the earthly, and equates the early departed with the angels who frustrate us with their indifference.

Rilke's systematic examination of our problems encompasses each and every aspect of our existence where we founder and fail. However, it would be erroneous to say that Rilke addresses all what he has to say in the elegies *only* to the modern man; rather the whole gamut of human experiences taken up by him is typified by a universal "we." Plagued at the back of his mind by the indifference of the angels, Rilke probes into the root of our radical insufficiency and weakness:

> But we, when moved by deep feeling, evaporate; we
> breathe ourselves out and away; from moment to moment
> our emotion grows fainter, like a perfume. Though someone may tell us:
> "Yes, you've entered my bloodstream, the room, the whole springtime
> is filled with you…"---what does it matter? He can't contain us,
> we vanish inside him and around him.

The poet desires that we discover "a pure, contained, human place" which, while striking a spatial chord, offers up possibilities for inner growth with spiritual dimensions. When we chart the movement of the poet's grief in *Duino Elegies*, we see it reaching the crescendo in the Eighth Elegy, but there are other instances where Rilke grieves over certain crucial problems, as in the Third where he is dismayed to visualize the circumscription in relation to the image of a "mother" that conjures up the poet's childhood nightmares:

> Yes, you did frighten his heart; but more ancient terrors
> Plunged into him at the shock of that feeling. Call him…
> But you can't quite call him away from those dark companions.

> Of course, he *wants* to escape, and he does; relieved, he nestles
> Into your shattering heart, takes hold, and begins himself.
> But did he ever begin himself, really?
> Mother, you made him small,…
> …….
> Ah, where are the years when you shielded him just by placing
> Your slender form between him and the surging abyss?

An important facet of Rilke's approach lament relates to pinpointing existential problems. In the Fourth Elegy, he berates the lovers who have reduced their relationship to a charade, which is why they had already incurred the poet's displeasure in the Second Elegy as to an exigent need to understand their true self: "lovers, *are* you the same?"

Rilke's somber meditations are engendered by umpteenth reasons for sadness, where the elegies are precise enumerations of the reasons. "We are not in harmony," writes Rilke in the Fourth Elegy, and the reasons ascribed, among many, are: (1) "we force ourselves abruptly onto the wind / and fall to earth," (2) "Flowering and fading come to us both at once," and (3) "we never know / the actual, vital contour of our own / emotions." What Rilke condemns is our hollowness with which we pathetically play our part in the tawdry carnival of our adult life that is bereft of candour and innocence. Rilke's nostalgic longing for the bliss of the childhood stands obverse to the insinuating hysterics of the adult pleasures cankered by pretence and deceit.

> Oh hours of childhood,
> when behind each shape more than the past appeared
> and what streamed out before us was not the future.
> We felt our bodies growing and were at times
> impatient to *be* grown up, half for the sake
> of those with nothing left but their grownupness.

In the Sixth Elegy, Rilke's juxtaposition of our hauteur with a plausibly botanical phenomenon—the pure dynamics of the fig-tree—seems to dismantle our façade of self-importance which arises because "we still linger" and because our pride is "in blossoming" where "we enter the overdue / interior of our final fruit and are already betrayed." Rilke exposes our pride that is but a paltry thing in comparison to the fig-tree's complete omission of its blossoms. The "pure mystery" referred to in relation to the fig-tree is alien to man who cannot dispassionately sustain its operations. The pure work ethic of the fig-tree characterized by the quality of its making every action "unproclaimed" serves only to lay bare our smugness and languorous stasis following any achievement. The poet's grief gathers a wider ambit since it addresses every possible issue concerning human existence. As in the Seventh Elegy, for example, the lament touches a metaphysical plane and necessitates inner transformation as integral to the revelation of happiness: "even the most visible happiness / can't reveal itself to us until we transform it, within." Despairing at the replacement of the aesthetic by the cerebral where "the external / shrinks into less and less," the poet is skeptical of the progress of the "cerebral" at the cost of the spiritual or the aesthetic, and decries in the following lines:

> Our age has built itself vast reservoirs of power,
> formless as the straining energy that it wrests from the earth.
> Temples are no longer known. It is we who secretly save up

these extravagances of the heart. Where one of them still survives,
a Thing that was formerly prayed to, worshipped, knelt before—
just as it is, it passes into the invisible world.
Many no longer perceive it, yet miss the chance
to build it *inside* themselves now, with pillars and statues: greater.

Rilke's lament in the Eighth Elegy, the most despairing one in the entire cycle, is occasioned by the lurid contrast of "the Open" (das Offene) with the created world—the former enjoyed by the animal and the latter crafted by us to languish in circumscription. Rilke's aim being the poetization of "the Open," in the Eighth Elegy, his emphasis is on the whole of the human condition and its problematic nature. The Elegy defines most precisely, both in thought and in poetic word many concepts central to the understanding of the cycle. A study of lament in the Duino elegies necessitates an examination of the Eighth Elegy, which encapsulates the themes of the elegies and enacts Rilke's poetic mission. The first line introduces two basic concepts: "die Kreatur" and "das Offene," which permeate the entire elegy ("With all its eyes the natural world looks out / into the Open"). With the picture of Kreatur, Rilke highlights a natural state of being that is further predicated by the second term das Offene, describing the particular perception or consciousness of this type of being. The animal's open, unbounded world is its realm of consciousness which is contrasted to the human perception marked by a profound sense of temporality. Rilke is skeptical of our predilection for the introversion of our consciousness so that we do not see "the Open, which is so / deep in animals' faces. Free from death." That is why we are away from life; what lies before us is death: "We only, can see death; the free animal / has its decline in back of it, forever, / and God in front, and when it moves, it moves / already in eternity, like a fountain."

The poet disapproves of the human subject's perception of the world in relation to its own existence and own self-imposed boundaries, an existence which is never lived from within the world, rather across from it. The implication pertains to a particular spatial distance, which is relative or at least determinable according to the human subject, but which does not necessarily encompass all possible orientations toward the world. Contrary to this perception, the animal is "open" and is not restricted by its consciousness and mode of operation. Rilke's expression of temporality in terms of spatial imagery is used not merely as a poetic device but as a means of reflecting spatiality in relation to human perception. Rilke wonders and grieves as to why "Only *our* eyes are turned / backward," and

Never, not for a single day, do *we* have
before us that pure space into which flowers
endlessly open. Always there is World
and never Nowhere without the No: that pure
unseparated element which one breathes
without desire and endlessly *knows*.

As for the expression "Only *our* eyes are turned / backward," Rilke uses the mirror image of this metaphor in describing his experience of "reaching the other side of Nature." In examining our deprivation of "that pure space" which is the realm of the flowers but farther from us, Rilke wonders why we do not have the gay abandon of the animal in terms of its ability and naturalness to operate in "the Open," and the endless, uninhibited efflorescence of flowers. Rilke

places man in stark opposition to the animal who possesses a greater capacity to feel the boundless and further strikes an ironical note by saying that if the animal had our kind of consciousness, then it would wrench us around and drag us along its path. Rilke's singular aim in depicting the animal lies not in glorifying what is beastly, but scarifying the supposed superiority of man which is no match with the innocent, yet pure, boundless "vast gaze" of the animal:

> But it feels its life as boundless,
> unfathomable, and without regard
> to its own condition: pure, like its outward gaze.
> And where we see the future, it sees all time
> and itself within all time, forever healed.

The superiority of the animal gathers more strength when the animal's "vast gaze" serves as the benchmark of unstinted outwardness to the natural world even while one is nearing death. As Rilke writes, "For, nearing death, one doesn't see death; but stares / beyond, perhaps with an animal's vast gaze."

The intricate pattern of Rilke's grief in the Eighth Elegy incorporates diverse elements like mysticism, death, fate and memory and all this is dramatized to generate in man a capacity for, or to pave the way for, the experience of the beyond. As for fate, Rilke writes, "That is what fate means: to be opposite, / to be opposite and nothing else, forever." Rilke's reference to fate, "which is silent about us" underscores an apprehension of the almost unchangeable condition of man in terms of his apparent incapability to be expansive like the animal. Again, Rilke makes a curious juxtaposition of escape and longing in the Ninth Elegy where "escaping from fate" is set against "keep longing for fate." In a sharp twist to this juxtaposition, Rilke finds a common inextricable malaise that plagues both the animal and the human:

> Yet in the alert, warm animal there lies
> the pain and burden of an enormous sadness.
> For it too feels the presence of what often
> overwhelms us: a memory, as if
> the element we keep pressing toward was once
> more intimate, more true, and our communion
> infinitely tender

The preponderant impact of memory lies in the fact that apart from providing a kind of bridge between past, present, and future; memory serves as an expression of the process of internalization and appropriation of past experience into our present consciousness as a kind of eternalizing of experience. The expression, "the pain and burden of an enormous sadness" is associated with memory since it baulks the movement and afflicts the mind with insuperable anguish. Rilke is dismayed to find the pointless scurry that impels us for departure, a kind of hastening that is apparently bereft of any cause or purpose. He wonders, "Who has twisted us around like this, so that / no matter what we do, we are in the posture / of someone going away?" The expression in the last part of the Elegy, "forever taking leave," which while connoting the answer to the previous question in the negative, points at how we have foisted upon us the banal exigencies, the meaningless hurry, the mad pursuit which in turn have "twisted us around." Rilke's resentment points at our systematic manoeuvre toward a corrosive, narcissistic inwardness:

And we: spectators, always, every where,
turned toward the world of objects, never outward.
It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down.
We rearrange it, then break down ourselves.

In continuation of the elegiac mood of the poet, the Ninth Elegy offers possibilities for us being needed. There is no more the oppressive indifference of the angel, no more the miasma of neglect since "everything here / apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way / keeps calling to us." But we frustrate ourselves of the experience: "Us, the most fleeting of all." Rilke's lament in the Tenth Elegy highlights the genuine suffering inherent in the human predicament and he suggests it by the metaphor of the evergreen leaves. As Torsten Pettersson writes, "It is not irreconcilable with his anguish in the first six Elegies, which may now be seen as a genuine existential experience, though one that should be embraced rather than resisted. But the appreciative conception of suffering clearly undercuts the attempt to transcend it in the Seventh and Ninth Elegies" (731-743). Yet an undercurrent of grief persists in the poet:

How we squander our hours of pain.
How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration
to see if they have an end. Though they are really
our winter-enduring foliage, our dark evergreen,
one season in our inner year--, not only a season
in time--, but are place and settlement, foundation and soil and home.
(The Tenth Elegy)

The Tenth Elegy is significant for the element of bleakness that characterizes Rilke's grief. The poet's visualization of "the streets of the city of grief" as "alien" is built on a combination of the disparate phrases which conjugate rather metaphorically as in the expression, "in the false silence formed of continual uproar." What Rilke intends to highlight is not how we try to mitigate or avoid our miseries, but the degree to which we prostitute ourselves to distractions, made available by and to us, which are but a travesty of our greater purposes. Thus the aim lies in showing the reality in its nakedness and thereby to desist us from undertaking such ludicrous ways to regale ourselves in our "market of solace, bounded by the church with its ready-made consolations." In the Tenth Elegy, he once again pictures the hate and the indifference of the angels who would "stamp out" such markets created by us. Rilke's tacit reference to the indifference of the angels seem to be somehow condign for us because we are blighted by our insufficiencies and limited consciousness—we are the hapless denizens of the city of grief whose "edges are curling with carnival." The poet strikes a verisimilitude between us and our city, which well-nigh typifies a broader spectrum, in order to harp on selfsame inwardness by which both are limited. Sure of the foregone fiasco that characterizes our sordid attempts, the poet imprecates us for our venal, mercenary obsessions:

For adults only
there is something special to see: how money multiplies, naked,
right there on stage, money's genitals, nothing concealed,
the whole action---, educational, and guaranteed
to increase your potency……

As for the reference to the "market of solace," which is a very disparaging image used by Rilke, the poet makes his points clear in his letter to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crouy, January 6, 1923:

> I reproach all modern religions for having provided their believers with consolations and glossings-over of death, instead of giving them of the means of coming to an understanding with it. With it and with its full, unmasked cruelty: this cruelty is so immense that it is precisely with *it* that the circle closes: it leads back into a mildness which is greater, purer, and more perfectly clear (all consolation is muddy!) than we have ever, even on the sweetest spring day, imagined mildness to be (Mitchell 332).

Rilke's introduction of the image of a personified Lament (Klage) in the Tenth Elegy again emphasizes "the first condition of timeless equanimity" that characterizes "those who died young." The young dead or the early departed ones already referred to in the First Elegy (Line 63) gets buttressed up here not to underline Rilke's covert penchant for necrophilia or for the theme of early death, but to highlight instead the degree of fulfillment that is the prerogative of the early departed. Rilke's reference to them is significant in relation to his approach to grief insofar as it relates to Tennyson's lament over the death of Hallam who *also* died young, thus offering a classic basis for comparison. Rilke, in a letter to Magda von Hattingberg, February 16, 1914, explains his rationale for exalting the young dead:

> In Padua, where one sees the tombstones of many young men who died there (while they were students at the famous university), in Bologna, in Venice, in Rome, everywhere, I stood as a pupil of death: stood before death's boundless knowledge and let myself be educated. You must also remember how they lie resting in the churches of Genoa and Verona, those youthful forms, not envious of our coming and going, *fulfilled within themselves* (italics mine), as if in their death-spasms they had for the first time bitten into the fruit of life, and were now, for ever, savouring its unfathomable sweetness (Mitchell 318-319).

Rilke's dramatization of traversing the landscape of Lament by the youth with one of the elder Laments and their conversation in the Tenth Elegy is a metaphor for a similar landscape we inhabit where "the tall trees of tears," "the fields of blossoming grief," "the herds of sorrow, grazing," "the solitary cry" unite to display a panorama of irremediable lament. Of course, he does not end the elegy with despair as he transports us from "the land of grief" to "the fountainhead of joy." However, his grief still persists, and he regrets at our conception of happiness:

> And we, who have always thought
> of happiness as *rising*, would feel
> the emotion that almost overwhelms us
> whenever a happy thing *falls*. (The Tenth Elegy)

Rilke's lament, like Tennyson's, touches higher, impersonal planes, and addresses issues of universal concern. His grief, however, is not the elegiac effusions of a passive observer; rather the mission of a poet who is aware of his task. A comparative study of the nature of lament in the poems reveals an autotelic nature of grief in that it is sustained by the poets' own catharsis.

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