

POETIC GRIEF-WORK IN WHITMAN'S "LILACS"

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ACCORDING TO James E. Miller, Jr., "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" depicts an emotional rehabilitation which involves Whitman's intuitive realization of immortality, his awakening sense that death "paradoxically bestows . . . a rebirth into a spiritual life."¹ But to the extent that this rebirth is viewed as the eternal life which awaits the dead, attention is drawn away from the Poet's progressive re-engagement with sensuous reality. The western star, for example, is allegorized into a sign of immortality – a reading which obscures its functioning within the Poet's self-dramatization. In contrast to Miller's reading, let us examine how the poetic framing of sense impressions stages a psychic drama in which inarticulate grief metamorphoses into self-aware mourning. In this view, the Poet's grief-work consists of a series of operations which ritually reappropriate the world, a world now tinged with a sense of death.

Freud's analysis of mourning in "Mourning and Melancholia" clarifies this process. In his terms, grief is characterized by a "clinging" to the lost object, by the continued investment of psychic energy in the dead.² At first, the bereaved loses "interest in the outside world," focusing solely upon the lost object and associated memories. The "work of mourning" necessitates the freeing of this bound energy so that the ego can become "uninhibited again."³ Over the course of time, "mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live."⁴ Eventually, the ego succeeds "in freeing its libido from the lost object."⁵ According to this analysis, mourning focuses more upon the obscuring and resurrection of the "soul," than upon the transfiguration of the "dead object."

Turning to Whitman's "Lilacs," we observe that the Poet has lost a part of himself. The "powerful western fallen star," obscured by a "black murk," indicates Lincoln's engulfment by death, but also the Poet's own emotional fixation.⁶ His idealized self-image – the star – had been invested in Lincoln as its fullest embodiment. When Lincoln died, that part of the Poet's soul which had been identified with Lincoln was eclipsed and sank down into the darkness. His task is to recover that lost piece of himself – to regain control of the psychic energy fixated in the lost object. As it is released, that energy will fuel the mourning which lies before him.

Unless he is able to diminish the "harsh and surrounding cloud that will

not free my soul," the Poet will suffer the permanent atrophy of his creative power. In order to liberate those aspects of his being that have become clouded and muted, he needs to recover a full sense of existence. His world has become constricted to a narrow range. Creative energy has become bound: "O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!" (l. 10). Similarly, time for him has become fixed and discontinuous—limited to an ever-recurring cycle of grief. The recovery of power will coincide with his ability to reassert connection with the natural world; for he needs to become unfixed from the dead past and to see himself as existing in a world of ongoing process.

Whitman's elegy begins with the sense that time has slowly started to move again. The opening lines establish a pattern of imagery which functions within human time as a memorial:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring. (ll. 1-3)

The Poet starts to clarify the formless dusk of grief by associating it with a specific season detached from the temporal flow: spring shall be the time of mourning. Both lilacs and western star gain their meaning from the temporal context of mourning. They are placed within the dramatic framework of elegy so that the Poet can manipulate them as signs of grief—thus objectifying his grief-work. "Now I know what you must have meant," the Poet affirms of the star; the process of temporal ordering makes sense out of the previously undefined chaos of grief. Circumscribing grief by identifying it with specific moments in time, the Poet gains control over his emotional environment. In the process, his dark cloud begins to shrink into a tractable image.

Instead of finding consolation in the immortality of the soul, the Poet is ultimately consoled by his ability to manipulate a series of images which focus the process of poetic grief-work. As Charles Feidelson explains, Whitman's "symbols behave like characters in a drama, the plot of which is the achievement of a poetic utterance."⁷ By articulating images around which his pent-up feelings can crystallize, he will establish the ritual dedication of poetry to death. Accordingly, the acts of placing a sprig of lilac upon the passing coffin and of bestowing "gifts" (poetic images) upon the "burial-house of him I love" reassert a creative power tinged by the "black murk" which has enveloped his soul. This reorientation of poetry to the emotional demands of elegy allows the recovery of music and light out of the dark recesses of the self. From imprisoned grief, there will be the release into perception "fresh as the morning" (l. 48), vital as the wind dappling "the breast of the river" (l. 85). F. O. Matthiessen has suggested that "Whitman's greatest act of pioneering was in helping the modern sensibility feel at home in the natural world."⁸ In these terms, the dramatic unfolding of this elegy enacts the reappropriation

of a sensuous world in which the Poet might dwell if he is able to reframe his voice, re-keying it to the somber tones of mortality.

In Section 6 this reframing begins as the Poet dedicates the sensuous richness of lilac to the work of mourning. Having created a lilac-poem in Section 3, he detaches and uses that composition through the sign "lilac" which he offers to the passing coffin in a sacrificial gesture. This ritualistic manipulation of "lilac" allows him to gain control over a sign associated with his grief. The act of offering it to the dead provides a "handle" to what had been an undifferentiated emotional state:

. . . . I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death. (ll. 52-54)

This libation of broken sprigs enables the Poet to recognize beauty's entanglement with death; for imagery characteristic of Whitman's earlier "leaves" is dedicated to mourning.

When the thrush appears in Section 9, the Poet confronts openly the extent of his emotional fixation:

Sing on there in the swamp,
O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,
I hear, I come presently, I understand you,
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,
The star my departing comrade holds and detains me. (ll. 66-70)

Listening to the thrush, he begins to understand more fully that he must sing a carol of death which will turn his poetic gifts toward grief-work.

In Section 11, the Poet continues that process by bestowing poetic gifts (images of the world's beauty) upon the "burial-house of him I love." This gesture allows his fullest strain of utterance—his celebration of the world—to enter the poem as an adornment of the dead:

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?
And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?
Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid
and bright,
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking
sun, burning, expanding the air,
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves
of the trees prolific,
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with
a wind-dapple here and there. . . . (ll. 78-85)

The poignancy of these images is that this world—in all of its brilliance, its glow, and its beauty—is given to death. Section 14 extends this poetic sacrifice, as images of the world's life and light are given over to darkness. The "many-moving sea-tides," "the summer approaching with richness," the streets' "throbbings" are all obscured:

Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the
rest,
Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,
And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death. (ll. 117–119)

Like the ritual giving of the world's beauty to the "burial-house," this later passage also reenacts the darkening of the Poet's existence. Both actions are ritualized gestures. Like the laying of flowers on a grave, they function as symbolic repetitions of the original facts of death and grief. While the mourner cannot maintain control over human mortality, he can learn to discipline his reaction to death by staging reenactments of his response to that loss. The sacrifice of flowers—or, in this case, of images designating existence before the beloved's death—allows the exercise of a willed renunciation. In this way, the mourner gains emotional leverage over grief; for each act of sacrifice forms part of a ritual drama which he directs.

Once the darkening of his world by grief has been reenacted, the Poet is able to confront the "knowledge of death" and the "thought of death," two companions who accompany him on a descent into the "deep secluded recesses" of the self:

And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands
of companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the
dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still. (ll. 122–125)

This journey orients the Poet toward the depths within the mind where his creative energies have been imprisoned. It seems significant that the site of poetic energy must be identified before that bound energy can be released into song. Only after that "burial-place" has been named does the thrush's song finally emerge to be "tallied" as the "voice" of the Poet's own "spirit."

Mediating between unexpressed grief and conscious mourning, the thrush presents itself as an "other" which the Poet recognizes as his own reflection. The song of this "double" teaches him that poetry must celebrate death, as well as life:

*Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,*

And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death. (ll. 139–142)

Once nurtured by “the breast of the spring” (l. 26) and “the breast of the river” (l. 85), the Poet now learns from the thrush of that other “mother always gliding near with soft feet” (l. 143). Ultimately, this image of death as a “Dark mother” (l. 143) and “strong deliveress” (l. 147) becomes a symbol of archetypal dimensions. “No longer is the speaker a mourner trying to reconcile and prepare himself for his own death,” Evelyn Hinz argues, “but he has become a child awaiting reunion with his mother.”⁹ Edwin Haviland Miller takes the appearance of this maternal archetype one step further by relating it to the disappearance of the western star. Whitman’s Poet, he suggests, loses contact with the “father” as he grieves for Lincoln—he has been phallically wounded.¹⁰ This loss leads to a regression in which the Poet retreats to an “infantile Eden where he is the exclusive possessor of the mother.”¹¹ Ultimately, this “absorption in the mother” culminates in a rebirth to new poetic strength: “a new self emerges in a new-old return to the source of life, the mother: and a poet is born.”¹²

Assimilating the bird’s song, the Poet breaks through momentarily to the “other side”—as the darkness hidden within the brightest light comes into view. Just as day alternates with night in an endless rhythm, life—he comes to realize—takes on definition through its antithesis, death. Without death as a final “outlet” from labor, life itself would lack both contour and meaning. Existing within time as a temporal being, man must die—this new awareness of mortality fixes the Poet’s attention, not upon eternity, but upon the rich variety of a poignantly impermanent life. Denying death, the Poet had reduced his existence. Dissolving this fixation in grief, the thrush’s song teaches him to live again, but to live as a mortal being. Thus, while the bird’s song offers hints of eternal life after death, its most immediate effect is to awaken the Poet to poetic expression of death’s unavoidable presence. Recognizing now that his voice must rise from death and darkness, as well as from life and light, he starts to liberate the creative energy which had been swallowed.

Section 15 represents this release of grief into expansive vision: “my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed, / As to long panoramas of visions” (ll. 169–170). But what the Poet sees is not the soul’s immortality; there is no joyful glimpse of paradise. Instead, he openly confronts and expresses the nation’s grief which had been piled up with the corpses left by the Civil War:

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not,

The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd. (ll. 176-183)

This passage offers remarkably little spiritual consolation. The focus is upon the living, the mourners who remain. At this point, Lincoln's death becomes the occasion for more than personal grief, for more than a nation's grief at the loss of a beloved President. The black cloud enveloping the Poet and the country is occasioned by more than the loss of one man—it symbolizes the loss of thousands. Fourteen years later, in his lecture on the "Death of Abraham Lincoln," Whitman explicitly makes this connection by interpreting Lincoln's assassination as the "emblem and centre, for the loss of all the soldiers—aye and all the civilians too—whose death resulted from the war."¹³

In the concluding section, the Poet moves beyond mourning, placing his elegy into a temporal perspective which frees him from the present moment:

Passing the visions, passing the night,
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,
Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my
soul. . . . (ll. 185-187)

His poem is now seen by him as "Victorious song, death's outlet song" (l. 188), as a work "bursting with joy, / Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven" (ll. 190-191). Moving no closer than this to explicit religious consolation, the Poet focuses the concluding lines upon the images which gave definition to his mourning. He retains those "retrievements out of the night" (l. 198) as mementoes which will continue to register for him the occasion of this elegy. Having regained a time which flows again, he now imagines a future in which these images will remind him of "the dead I loved so well" and of "the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands" (ll. 203-204). Finally, the black cloud of unconscious grief shrinks to a manageable blot of darkness—haunt of the hermit-thrush—half-inviting him into its somber recesses, into "the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim" (l. 206). His poetic voice regains a source which resonates with mystery, but a source distinct from the overpowering darkness of grief.

In summary, Whitman portrays poetic grief-work as a progressive recovery of artistic control. By shrinking grief to a manageable moment in time, the Poet begins the dedication of his poetry to the process of mourning. This shift is facilitated by the ritualistic offering of poetic images to death. As he learns to manipulate images associated with his grief, the Poet is able to confront and assimilate the fact that his voice must be transfigured into tones corresponding to the thrush's song. At this point, the Poet becomes "uninhibited again," able to declare "the object to be dead" (to return to Freud's terms). This acceptance of death leads to the poem's climax—a vision of the

country's grief at the Civil War dead. Finally, the Poet's return to emotional freedom is marked by his capacity to memorialize the mourning process which he has just completed. By the end of his elegy, his grief has been reduced to a set of counters which he can move at will. By turning the primary symbols of his poem into mementoes, he demonstrates the liberation of previously fixated energy. The Poet's work is finally complete when he can place those symbols of grief within the context of an ongoing life-process.

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NOTES

- 1 James E. Miller, Jr., *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 111.
- 2 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1966-1974), 14:244.
- 3 Freud, p. 245.
- 4 Freud, p. 257.
- 5 Freud, p. 252.
- 6 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), p. 329. Subsequent references to this edition will be indicated by line numbers in parentheses.
- 7 Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 22.
- 8 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 622.
- 9 Evelyn J. Hinz, "Whitman's 'Lilacs': The Power of Elegy," *Bucknell Review*, 20 (1972), 52.
- 10 Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), p. 189.
- 11 E. H. Miller, p. 192.
- 12 E. H. Miller, pp. 192, 197.
- 13 *Walt Whitman's Memoranda During the War & Death of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 1 of the facsimile reproduction of "Death of Abraham Lincoln."