THE ELEGY AS A SEPARATE GENRE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: MILTON'S "LYCIDAS" AND DYLAN THOMAS' "FERN HILL"

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Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strengh in what remains behind.
William Wordsworth

INTRODUCTION

John Milton's "Lycidas" and Dylan Thomas' "Fern Hill" are quite different poems. "Lycidas" was written in 1637; in an age of religious controversies in which the Puritans took the offensive, turning the temper of the times towards violence and coarseness. Milton domintated this Puritan side of the contest and used Poetry as well as Prose to perform his duty. In his attempt to fuse into one the spirit of the Renaissance and of the Reformation, to unite the art of Antiquity with the moral ardour of the Bible, he shows in his poems an intermingling of the two elements: Paganism and Christianism, Nature and Religion.[1] "Fern Hill" was written in 1946, in an age of pessimism due to the trauma of the two world wars. Psychology, the attack on traditional Christian views, and the advance of Science as an agent of transformation of the world were also factors responsible for this mood that pervaded the literature

of the time and Dylan Thomas' work. However, his poems are famous for their sound effects, achieved by his magistral use of language. Nevertheless these two poems written in different form, in different ages, in different styles have something in common: both lament a loss, and it is in this direction that I have guided my work. The purpose of this paper is to analyse "Lycidas" and "Fern Hill" as elegies, and to compare the devices used by both authors in their composition.

THE ELEGY: LAMENT AND CELEBRATION

Elegy, from Greek elegia, means lament. According to the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, elegy is a "lyric, usually formal in tone and diction, suggested either by the death of an actual person or by the poet's contemplation of the tragic aspects of life."[2] "Lycidas" is a poem suggested by the death of a friend and "Fern Hill" is suggested by the poet's contemplation of time passing, lost childhood, indeed tragic aspects of life. "In either case, the emotion, originally expressed as a lament, finds consolation in the contemplation of some permanent principle."[3] The permanent principle that brings consolation to Milton is his assurance of ressurection, but Dylan Thomas is pessimistic. For him the process from childhood to adulthood is irreversible, there is no solution for it.

According to Coleridge, elegy "is the form of poetry natural of the reflexive mind which may treat of any subject, if it does so with reference to the poet himself. In a narrow sense, an elegy is a song of lamentation for the dead."[4]

The term elegy in Greek literature referred both to a specific verse form (couplets consisting of a hexameter followed by a pentameter line) called "distich form" and to the emotions conveyed by that form. Originally any poem in this form was known as an elegy if it concerned the dead, dealt with love, was a war song or a political satire. The Latin elegy was initially distinguished from other literary genres by the meter mentioned above, the tone of complaint, and themes related to love and death.

Many Renaissance poets who tried to write the quantitative verse of the classical distich failed , and the term was used in the 16th and 17th Centuries for poems with a variety of content, including laments. The connection between elegy and death was made clearer with the title of one section from Donne's An Anatomy of the World, "Funeral Elegy," but it was Milton's pastoral elegy "Lycidas" which helped to establish the elegy, a lament for the dead, as a separate genre in England. Although the boundaries between elegy and elegiac verse (meditative and reflexive verse) are sharp, a distinction is made between them.

There is no specific form by which an elegy can be characterized, because what defines an elegy, as we have stated, is tone and subject matter.

"Lycidas" is written in eleven verse-paragraphs with different number of lines in each. Sctructurally the first two paragraphs form the Introduction of the poem. In this part,although referring to Edward King's death, the poet sees the possibility of his own death. Paragraphs 3, 4, 5

and 6 form the first part in which the poet laments Lycidas death, regrets that the Muse could not protect him, and shows the first cause for his own pain: the chance of his own death before his work could be completed. Seventh and eighth paragraphs form the second part. In elegiac tradition, various persons come to visit the dead body: Arethuse, the fountain, Mincius, the river, Triton, Neptune, Hippotades (all of them personified). This part also shows, by denouncing the existence of bad priests, the second cause of Milton's pain: a quarrel with the contemporary English Church. The climax of the poem is at the end of this part, when Milton states his quarrel with life (a parallel to his quarrel with the Church). The third part consists of the ninth paragraph. It is like a link, changing the mood from terror into comfort. The conclusion of the whole poem includes the tenth and eleventh paragraphs. It describes Lycidas' ressurection and his going to heaven. Above all, this part "describes renunciation of earthly fame, the abnegation of self by the great egoist and the spiritual purgation of gaining one's life after losing it."[5]

"Fern Hill" is written in a very strict form. The poem is constructed by six nine-line stanzas, with only an infrequent rhyme. The stanza form is original and more easily understood after hearing. Sound and rhythm indicates which words and ideas are linked. The pattern is maintained: the corresponding lines in every stanza have the same number of syllables. Only in the sixth and seventh stanzas is there some relaxation. This elaborated sound structure is not maintained at the expense of meaning

but as a method of controlling sense. Concerning meaning, the structure of the poem does not consist of the usual technical devices but of the repetition in the last stanzas of motifs presented in the first ones. These are: the motif of careless mood of childhood, the motif of pleasure in this situation, and the motif of time's action, by which the situation becomes a fate.[6] They are not worked out with regularity, and their place and order are not formally observed.

As in all the elegies, lament and celebration sound throughout the poems.

In "Lycidas" we have lament for the friend's death, and celebration for the assurance of his ressurection. In "Fern Hill" the poet celebrates life, childhood, the age of innocence and happiness, and laments death, the loss of childhood.

Milton's poem, as many modern elegies which found their models in the subject matter of pastoral laments, mourns King's death within the traditional framework of the Pastoral Elegy, a literary convention dating back to the Greek Theocritus, but especially indebted to Virgil's Eclogue that laments the death of the Roman poet Gallus. The essence of the pastoral convention in literature lies in its use of the restricted world of shepherds to comment on the complex universal world. The poet reflects the real world in the mirror of the shpherd's life. The various elements that constitute a Pastoral Elegy (Invocation,

Statement of Grief, Inquiry into the causes of death, Sympathy and weeping of nature, Procession of mourners, Lament, Climax, Change of mood, and Consolation) are all present in "Lycidas."

Following this traditional convention of the pastoral, elements of nature appear, not only mourning the death of the shepherd as in the fourth paragraph but also accepting death as a fact. Milton says that all nature is mourning: desert caves full of wild rhyme, woods and the gadding vine; he says that the willows and hazels are sad; and predicts destruction by saying that roses, herds and flowers will be destroyed as Lycidas.

Nature in Thomas' poem is not used as an element of the pastoral but as a metaphor which helps to build a line from innocence to experience. In the first two stanzas the farm scene suggests sunlight, happiness: Thomas talks about "apple boughs above youth and easiness," "starry night and trail with daisies and barley." At the end, the farm cannot be re-visited, it is "for ever fled from the childless land."

In any age, the college days of a young man are thought to have something like a pastoral quality — from mature life men look back at that time as being more care-free, and at their relationship then as having been more generous, disinterested, and comradely than now. Milton says that he and King were "nurs'd upon the self-same hill." Although Thomas is not referring specifically to college days but to his childhood, he says in a vivid tone, looking back towards this age, that he "was young and carefree."

In "Lycidas" the poet is not sepaking in his own person but in the guise of a shepherd or "swain." Lycidas is the name of a shepherd in Theocritus' Idyll and also a speaker in the Ninth Eclogue of Virgil. The fictional nature of the pastoral was always taken for granted: nobody was supposed to believe that the herdsmen were real, and in charge of actual flocks. But fiction engaged men's imagination because it fulfilled a real human desire while speaking about simplicity and innocence, youth and beauty, love and art.

Although in "Fern Hill" the poet does not speak in the guise of a shepherd, he also praises the fictional nature of childhood, also with its characteristic simplicity and innocence, youth and beauty.

Milton speaks of King's death and rebirth evoking death and rebirth or young gods and mythological figures such as Satyrs, representing luxuriant forces of nature, and Fauns who dance symbolizing the act of creation. The direct reference to Orpheus may be understood at least in two ways since he symbolizes the poetic genius: The poet states that even he,a poet, could not be prevented from dying; on the other hand Orpheus' head, floating,suggests a terrible comfrontation with death. Amaryllis and Neaera symbolize the sensualist side of man, the part that is mortal, and Fury, the "Fate," who "cuts man's life," reminds him of his mortality. Then Apollo, the sun-god, appears as a symbol of inspiration, reminding man of his

immortality. Apollo is also seen as a Christ figure and as the first allusion of non-pagan mythology. From this point in the text the figures that appear always stand for immortality: Arethuse (symbol of perfection and virtue), Neptune (god of fertilizing waters) and Hippotades (god of the winds, representing movement, life). So towards the end of the poem, terrible images suggesting death (beheaded Orpheus, Amaryllis, Neaera, Fury) give way to images suggesting life (Apollo, Arethuse, Neptune, Hippotades, etc.). Little by little, as the poem moves towards its conclusion, pagan and Christian elements are mingled. The sudden introduction of Christian personages fulfils the purpose of attacking the corrupt clergy of the time. Milton makes biblical allusion such as John X, 1 to compare priests' activities to a robber's "creeping and intruding, and climbing into the fold." In the last two paragraphs, pastoral images give way to Christian ones, and many of them are related to ressurrection: Lycidas is not sunk, but "mounted high" like Christ who "walked the waves" (Mat. XIV, 26). The "nuptial song" (Rev. XIX, 19) is referred to symbolizing the union of silence and song, of death and eternal life. The biblical allusion in the passage: "and wipe the tears for ever from his eyes" refers also to ressurrection, when God will finish up all suffering (Rev. VII, 17 and Rev. XXI, 4). Only in the last lines, Milton returns to the pastoral tradition referring to the song of the "uncouth swain."

In "Fern Hill" the myth of Eden appears in the first stanza, when Dylan Thomas describes his "golden age" and uses

words such as "apple boughs" as images of Paradise, of Eden. Here everything is lilting and brilliant and he, then a child, was like a prince, "honoured among wagons," and like a lord, "having trees and leaves." The Fall has not yet disturbed the Paradise in the fourth stanza, when the poet refers to the virgin (maiden) and to Adam, the figure of innocence, the first "man conceived as a vast representation of the power of the Universe."[7] The world appears glorious to the boy as Eden did to Adam. Fall appears in the last two stanzas; although all is still gentle and melodic, terror has become overwhelming as death, represented by the "chains", "the shadow of my hand" and the "childless land."

The line from innocence to experience, referred to previously, can be supported by the idea of time in "Fern Hill". In the first stanza, time is kind and permissive. It does not matter for the boy. "Once below a time" connotes a child's unawareness of immortality, of the time passing. In the second stanza, time shows "his" power, letting him "play and be golden," although the child is still ignorant of time and mortality. In the fifth stanza, a taint of awareness begins to appear when time allows some song before "the children follow him out of grace." Evil is suggested when time "would take the child up to the loft." But in the last stanza, time makes the child wake to a "farm forever fled from the childless land," that is, awake to death, to adult and experienced life, aware of his

being mortal. Time has passed, he is an adult,death is close.

Time in "Lycidas" is worked out in a very different way. Cyclical life, death and rebirth, may be supported by the use of time in the poem. In the first paragraph, the idea of past time is clear with a tone of sorrow for everything having been ended before the adequate hour, like "berries plucked crude" and "leaves shattered before the mellowing year." The second paragraph shows present time, the author's awareness of his present life and his future death, expressed by the feeling that a "gentle muse may favour" his "destined urn." The third paragraph gives the idea of movement of time, of progress of time through images of growth and maturity, and also through allusion to progress of a day (morn, noon, night) culminating with the rise of the evening star. In the fourth paragraph with a tone of despair reflected by images of destruction such as "canker," "worm" and "frost," the terrible sensation of a future death is implicit. The eighth paragraph begins in a tone of despair with a question against time: Why must man go unready? But in the tenth paragraph a tone of hope arises: "Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more, for Lycidas, your sorrow is not dead," and the image of sunset, of the sun "sinking in the ocean bed," helps to limit time. This tone of hope grows in lines 179-181 with the promise of eternity implicit in the continuity of "sweet societies singing and singing" and in the everlasting comfort suggested by God wiping "for ever the tears from his eyes." At the end of the poem, after having performed

his duty of mourning his friend, the poet turns back to life and to his future purposes: "Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new."

"Lycidas" is an elegy written as a lament to the poet's friend who was drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish seas, "Fern Hill" is an elegy in praise of the poet's lost youth, but the particularity of the cause of grief in both poems is lost in a sorrow which speaks for all men, in a universal feeling. In "Lycidas", Milton associates King's death, and implicitly his own death, with a long tradition in which the deaths of young men had been lamented. He does not try to achieve a personal expression of feeling, but a universal emotion, a pathos of untimely death. In "Fern Hill," the nostalgic remembrance of a child's farm holiday is only the starting point. The poet is overtaken by this memory and his words become a vehicle for expressing not only homesickness but a universal longing for lost youth, a universal and human desire for life.

CONCLUSION

"Lycidas" and "Fern Hill" present lament in several tones: sadness, longing, despair, complaint, sorrow, etc., which are expressed through images of night, darkness, decay, shadow, sleep, etc. Celebration is found in both poems: "Lycidas" celebrates King's future ressurrection and "Fern Hill" celebrates the poet's Golden Age. It is presented in tones of

vividness, hope, happiness, joy, etc. through images of light, birth, music, movement, sound, etc. which stand for life, either in form of rebirth or in form of childhood. But indeed what these two poems lament and celebrate is not restricted to personal experiences. Above all, they speak about lament and celebration in a universal way. What they lament is not Lycidas' death or the lost farm, but universal death and loss. What they celebrate is not only Lycidas' ressurection or the lilting farm of Thomas' boyhood. They celebrate life in a universal way. Both poems may be defined as elegies. Myths and time were worked up in both poems to reinforce the idea of the main elements of all elegies which have been pointed out: lament, celebration and universality.

NOTES

[1]Cf. Emile Legouis, A Short History of English Literature, (Oxford: At the Clatendon Press, 1971), p.165.

[2]Alex Preminger ed., Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 215.

[3]Ibid., p. 215.

[4]The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature, Dorothy Eagle rev., (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 168.

[5]E.M.W. Tillyard, Milton, (Penguin Books - Chatto & Windus, 1968). p. 74.

[6]C.F. Derek Stanford, Dylan Thomas, (London: Neville Spearmen, 1954), pp. 111-112.

[7]J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 4.

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