The Personal Lyric of Grief

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Do not cross the river, my lord
My lord did cross the river
Got drowned in the river
My lord, alas!

1. Grief and Its Cultural Manifestations

"Gong wu du he" [Do not cross the river, my lord] has moved its Chinese audience with its direct and desperate heart-cry of grief.[1] It is a Korean song recorded by a woman named Liyue, wife to a Korean boatman, Zigao. Zigao witnessed the tragic death of a Korean couple one morning. Ignoring his wife's shouts of warning behind him, a drunkard walked into a torrential river and was drowned. His heart-broken wife sang her grief aloud and threw herself into the river after her husband.[2] In this song of simple diction, emotions are incrementally augmented by the repetition of "my lord" (*gong*) and "the river" (*he*), which successfully produces a mounting dramatic tension. The cumulative effects of spotlighting the victim and the cause of the pathos vividly portray the pain of the singer, and the final sigh "alas" captures her helplessness and despair. This exceptionally brief utterance is one of the most condensed lyric testimonies of grief in Chinese literature.[3]

It was the American psychologist William James who once described grief as one of those "coarser emotions" that are universal to humankind, next to love, fear and anger (1065). As a literary motif, grief is most commonly associated with loss through death and the subsequent phase of mourning. As Neil Small notes: "Grief is the pain

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and suffering experienced after loss: mourning is a period of time during which signs of grief are made visible; and bereavement is the process of losing a close relationship" (20). While numbness, anger, despair, and even guilt are natural emotions connected with the experience of bereavement, grief is often described as a psychological illness, to be tackled by mental health practitioners, or as a problem to be resolved by psychologists.[4] According to Sigmund Freud's proposition in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), one can move out of grief by mourning (243-258). This withdrawal of libido from the lost object is a "long drawn-out and gradual" process, Freud contends, through which the bereaved historicizes the dead and gradually comes to accept the loss (256). Once the wounded ego is restored, allowing the person to reintegrate himself or herself into active life, a disengagement from the lost object takes place; once one has let go of the past, grief is then supposed to be cured.

Anthropologists and sociologists describe the varying mourning customs and death rituals as culturally instituted ways of channeling grief and putting it under social control. After distinguishing between grief and mourning—"Grief refers to what is felt, mourning to what is done"—Lyn H. Lofland, in her sociological study of emotion, highlights "the issue of just how deeply social arrangements penetrate into private emotion" and underscores "just how molded by culture and history even intimate internal experiences may be" (172-173). Similarly, Terry Eagleton has recently pointed out that what we can feel and how we express our feelings are often public rather than private affairs: "styles of feeling are shaped by our cultural institutions," he reminds us, and "expressive behaviour" is acquired by children through socialization (107). "Grief at the death of a loved one" is, for Eagleton, a "natural, universal feeling," one we have "because we are the kind of creatures we are"; but despite their universality, such feelings are nonetheless subject to cultural construction. "[B]ut what we make of that grief is a cultural affair," he thus stresses (107). The expression of grief in writing is no exception: indeed, through the world's different cultures a broad array of institutionalized forms and practices are exhibited. The English tradition, for instance, utilizes the genres of the obituary, sermon, epitaph, elegy, and requiem. Chinese culture distinguishes *lei* (elegy), *jiwen* (funeral oration), *aici* (lament), *diaowei* (condolence), *wange* (dirge), and *muzhiming* (epitaph). Far from being an individual's spontaneous expression of sorrow, the literature of mourning tends to be largely schematic and formulaic in terms of both language and structure. Yet despite their geographic, cultural and linguistic distance, it is not difficult to detect substantive convergences between the consolatory elegiac writing in the English and Chinese traditions, both of which have constituted the discourse of grief by a belief in transcendence or by impersonalization which allows the mourner to deny the finality of death and alleviate his or her sadness.

In Western culture the traditional consolation for the bereaved is death denial based on their faith in religion, art, or other means of honouring the dead. A customary method to ward off human fear of death is by transferring the notion of mortality to death itself. After the sleep of death, a Christian can survive and will come to

enjoy eternal life in God's kingdom. A prominent artwork illustrating this Christian faith is the magnificent oratorio of Handel's *Messiah*, which puts into performance of music and singing the quotations from the Bible. References to the divine promise of eternal life appears in Part III: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: / We shall not sleep, / but we shall all be changed in a moment, / in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. / The trumpet shall sound, / and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, / and we shall be changed. / For this corruptible must put on incorruption, / and this mortal shall have put on immortality" (*I Corinthians* 15: 51-53).[5] Ashes to ashes, earth to earth: the Christian fear of corporeal death is eased by the hope of and reliance on an afterlife. John Donne's famous argument that "Death be not proud" because "death, thou shalt die" in his Holy Sonnet X is a forceful assertion of this religious belief (440-441).[6] In addition, poetry itself establishes a kind of immortality for the loved one guaranteed by the poetic act; it is a promise commonly made by English poets of the sixteenth century, among them Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare. The epigrammatic vow in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18: "So long as men can breathe and eyes can see / So long live this and this gives life to thee" (Harbage 1456) is as comforting in an epitaph as it is in a love poem. Furthermore, the haloing effect of the cry "Long live the dead!" may also be a cure for sadness when the deceased is honoured for his sacrifice for a noble cause (for example, in the rhetoric of war) so that spiritual peace can be restored to the survivors. Whether it is a rebirth of the dead in God, an eternal life in art, or a name recorded in history, these forms of consolatory writing can never fully capture and represent the emotions of the griever; grief is often displaced in order to back up and propagate the varying discourses of religion, literature, and patriotism.

In the Chinese cultural tradition, too, there are both ethical as well as political dimensions to mourning rituals that govern the expression of grief. In pre-modern times people showed a certain hesitance to accept the fact of death. A person's last breath was followed by a three-day soul-calling rite. Miranda Brown explains that this tradition was "rooted in the belief that a person's spirit could temporarily wander off from the body; if the spirit could be coaxed into returning to the body, death could be averted" (11-20). After this waiting period and the funerary rites, the chief mourner was expected to observe a "three-year mourning" practice.[7] To Chinese people, filial piety is paramount among all virtues. Proper observance of death rituals serves the dual purpose of simultaneously confirming one's loyalties to family and to the state. Confucian teaching has encouraged an outlook that treasures leading a moral life on earth more than speculating about what will happen after death. As Brown's study of stele inscriptions in the Eastern Han period (25-220) shows, "eulogists focused on the experience of loss, perhaps because the life to come was not celebrated"; and most eulogists believed that "the dead lived on in communal memory as moral exemplars" (Brown 17). Wen Tianxiang's (1236-1283) poem, "*Guo Lingding Yang*" [Passing the Lonely Ocean], is an explicit statement of this belief. A national hero of the Song Dynasty in thirteenth-century China, Wen was captured by the invading armies of

Kublai Khan. He declined the invader's invitation to serve the Yuan emperor and was held for four years in the military prison before he was executed in 1283. During the captive years, he contemplated his imminent death and wrote: "Nobody in history ever escapes death / May my loyalty in the annals shine" (Huang 73; lines 7-8). Admitting his fears and dejection, he preferred death to treason in the hope of being remembered in the generations to come. Thus for Chinese people glory and fame in earthly terms replace the Western religious solace.

Furthermore, grief can be alleviated by depersonalization. Daoist belief helps the Chinese to integrate human existence into the natural cycle. A well-known illustration of this belief is the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi's (369-286 BCE) response to his wife's death by singing and drumming on a pot. He rejected mourning because he saw the event in the context of natural transformation: "I peered back into her beginnings; there was a time before there was a life…Now once more altered she has gone over to death" (Graham 123-124). To overcome the sadness of the loss, a wise poet like Su Shi (1037-1101) would resort to an explanation based on cosmic phenomena: "Grief and joy, separation and reunion are for man; / as clouded or clear, waxing and waning are for the moon. / Never is consistency found in this world" (Hu 63-64).[8] There is no use mourning over changes that are part of nature–and by the same logic, human sorrow over death is transcended. Depersonalization is also a dominant theme in the Confucian discourse of emotions. Once a cultured man has reached the age of forty, Confucians maintain, his mind will not be moved (71-72). Confucian teachings emphasize "equanimity," which refers to the recommended attitude towards human crisis situations derived from a detached perspective.[9] Comparable to the Chinese cultural practice that monitors emotional stability is the Stoic way of life in the West, which has its origin in the Greek notion of "*eupatheia*": "as Zeno puts it", Ludwig Edelstein observes, "*eupatheia* is the easy flow of life; it is a constancy of feeling, Seneca maintains, characterized by equanimity" (4). For the Stoic sage, "nothing matters except his own tranquility, his freedom of mind, his own internal calm" (Edelstein 4). The Stoics admire a quick release from emotions because, to them, emotions are conceptual errors conducive to suffering, and the "ability to stop feelings (or break attachments)…when practical intelligence calls for it, is a survival trait" (Becker 145). Therefore by shaping their perception and knowledge in a rational way, the Stoics can distance themselves from all passions and suffering, and mould their emotional states by use of the right spirit (Edelstein 95-98).

2. The Personal Lyric of Grief

Different manifestations of grief over death often find their ways into literature. Grief poetry is one dominant literary form of bereavement across many cultures and it can be roughly divided into two categories: the institutionalized forms and the personal lyric. The elegy in the English culture or the *lei* in the Chinese represents the official

form of grief poetry which constitutes an integral part of death rituals. Yet in some exceptional cases, grievers might break away from the formalized elegiac mode to express their emotions in various lyrical forms.

Like many funeral rites, the elegy is usually discussed in Anglo-American literature in relation to its service to and function for the mental health of the mourner. G.W. Pigman, for instance, has observed that in English cultural life the elegy performs "an abbreviated process of mourning from praise and lament to consolation and recovery" (45). A paradigm of the elegy in the English tradition, Milton's *Lycidas*, follows the structure of prayer to the Muses for divination, collective lament for the young man's demise, recollection of the idealized past, and finally, after Milton's self-doubt and self-interrogation, restoration of Lycidas among the saints in a transcendental vision. As Ralph Houlbrooke has noted, in a dominantly religious age the death of the loved one was regarded as "a loss transformed into a blessing" because the bereaved were "chastened, cast down, and then lifted up by God's hand," with some feeling "ultimately strengthened by the losses they had endured" (244). Like the English elegy, *lei* in the Chinese tradition aims to sum up "the virtuous conduct of the deceased and immortalize it…To read an elegy before the dead and to confer upon him a posthumous title is a ceremony of very great importance" (Shih 127). Chinese mourners seek consolation by honouring the dead through performing funeral rites and creating monuments to their memory. In general, the ritualistic discourse of grief attempts to turn the loss into either a blessing or an inevitable, universal experience by guiding the bereaved through a psychological process of first confronting death, then grieving for the deceased and finally, developing faith in the loved one's afterlife or fame in posterity. Thus, different cultural expressions of grief come to serve the same purpose, namely to help the mourners retrieve a more balanced everyday life.

Scholarship about grief writing has largely focused on the various cultural meanings of death, and the consolation of the bereaved achieved by mourning rituals. Various social, psychological, religious, and philosophical orientations underlie the traditionally instituted modes of expressing grief. To avoid the specialized usage of the term "mourning" in anthropology, which "restricts mourning to the public act of expressing grief…[which] is always in some degree culturally determined," John Bowlby, like Lofland, finds it necessary to distinguish this public kind of mourning from the more internal variant, "an individual's spontaneous responses," which he terms more narrowly "grieving" (17). In this paper I aim to provide a critical analysis of grieving in lyric form as an individual's private mode of bereavement that departs from public rituals. By combining insights from social sciences and linguistic theory with literary criticism, this study seeks to establish the degree to which the personal lyric, which differs significantly from the formalized elegy, allows one to address and accommodate grief in an equally effective way.

To write a personal lyric of grief is to surrender to the overwhelming emotion and be possessed by it. As C. Day Lewis has put it: lyric's "complete truth to feeling" lies

in the "purity or singleness of feeling—and of feeling so compulsive that the poet has no need to argue or comment or be clever about [the feeling]" (133). On lyric poetry's performative functions for both the poet and his or her audience, the contemporary poet-critic Gregory Orr has expressed his conviction that poetry can help a person better to handle traumatic experiences: "the personal lyric has the power to restabilize the disturbed self" (678). "In the realm of poetry where statement is event, where saying is being," he goes on, "language more precise than the finest chisel performs its own miracle" (Orr 680), helping the bereaved to restore his or her balance in life.

Lyric grief is a performance of bereavement without stoic withdrawal from confessional candour, which is considered by both psychologists and psychoanalysts conducive to a person's psychological equilibrium and well being. Both Freud and Bowlby argue that the public disclosure of grief serves to purge the suppressed emotions and heal the wounded ego. James W. Pennebaker confirms that: "[i]n the psychological and medical literatures, there is overwhelming evidence that traumatic experiences provoke mental and physical health problems. A central tenet of most psychotherapies is that talking about these experiences is beneficial" (3). It has become accepted wisdom among social psychologists that to allow the client to translate his or her experiences into language is an important part of the therapy, and writing lyrical poetry is one manifestation of this kind of translation of grief into language.

In the following sections I will analyze the personal lyric's cathartic and therapeutic functions for the bereaved. On the one hand, the personal lyric is a performative utterance that often helps the mourner purge the emotion more quickly. In the case when grief is mixed with guilt and anger, it can give rise to emotions so strong that they can drive poets to choose unconventional forms of lament that challenge a culture's orthodox religious or cultural attitudes towards death. On the other hand, some poets encounter aphasia when confronted by sorrow so deep that it is beyond verbalization; in such cases, a sigh or an interjection can abbreviate a lyrical outburst of the most intense sort.

3. Performing Sorrow

In many cultures the death of a fellow being is one of the important social occasions to validate and reinforce a society's key values and religious beliefs. When Robert C. Evans analyzes grief in English poetry, he notices that both Jonson's "Elegie" on Venetia Digby and Donne's on Lady Markham "concede the loss of a valued individual while also conveying a strong sense of social continuity, particularly by reaffirming their culture's most important values" (65). Both elegies encourage the audience to "ponder the deeper meanings of existence" and "to search for coherent connections between past, present, and future" (Evans 65-66).

However, grief is sometimes more poignantly expressed in a poem when it attempts

to articulate the mourner's broad range of emotions without working towards ultimate consolation. Drawing from Freud's ideas in "Mourning and Melancholia," Jahan Ramazani argues that "melancholic" mourning in modern elegies "is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent...[and these elegies] refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself" (4). To confront the vexed experience of grief and the non-transcendental fact of death, the bereaved may look for a displaced activity to unsaddle himself of the overloaded emotions.

At the news of death, some let their grief overflow freely in tears and words; others suppress their immediate emotion and revisit it at another time in recollection. Whether as an immediate or a deferred form of expression, the personal lyric of grief is an utterance that performs the emotion it refers to. Grieving is that "something which is *at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering*" (Austin 60). The purge of grief is being done by speaking of it, indicated by William Wordsworth in his lines: "To me alone there came a thought of grief: / A timely utterance gave that thought relief, / And I again am strong" (Butt 180).[10] Like Wordsworth, many poets openly admit the performative function of grief writing. Alfred Tennyson has explicitly indicated a similar purpose of composing his book-length lyric sequence *In Memoriam A.H.H.*:

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 rain,
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.
(Ricks 322, Poem V)

These self-referential and self-critical stanzas explain the close connection between grief and its lyric expression. Tennyson wrote these poems as a means to cope with the loss of Arthur Henry Hallam, his dearest friend who died at the age of twenty-three in 1833. Despite its length, the poet knows that what *In Memoriam* could give is but an inadequate outline of his sorrow. It is only by an ultimate promise of renewal that Hallam's presence is restored in poem CXXX. Hallam is the air, water, and the rising sun, and with "diffusing power" he dwells "in star and flower," "mix'd with God and Nature" (450-451). Reading Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as "a course of psychosexual exercise" of erotic desire, Christopher Craft sees the poem refusing "to complete its work of mourning; refus[ing], that is, the work of normal (and normal-

izing) substitution" (153, 170). What makes *In Memoriam* depart from the elegiac convention is, according to Craft, that the poem "remains at its end what it had been at its beginning—a desiring machine whose first motive is the reproduction of lost Hallam" (170). Completed fifteen years after Hallam's death, the sad mechanic exercise in the 131 lyrics will not end even when the sequence comes to a close, enveloped by a prologue and an epilogue. The void can only be partially and temporarily filled by the artistic resurrection of the deceased in writing.

Yuan Zhen (779-831) wrote a series of poems after his wife's death; the most famous is the trio, titled "*Qian Beihuai*" [Dispelling Sorrow] (Su 93-94). Wei Cong married Yuan at the age of twenty and died of miscarriage at twenty-seven. The seven years of their married life saw the ebb of Yuan's career and the couple suffered from poverty and hardships. Yuan's poems give details of how Wei pulled him through the lean years by pawning her dowries: "To find me clothes you searched through the wicket baskets / To buy me wine you sold your hairpin of gold / … / Today with a salary over a hundred thousand / All that I can do for you is a temple sacrifice" (Poem 1, lines 3-4 and 7-8). Like a conventional *lei*, Yuan's poem sums up the virtuous conduct of the deceased. Juxtaposing the past with the present, Yuan's recollections of his wife's selfless love for him make his poems an emotional wringer. "Years ago we joked about dying / And now it happens before my eyes / … / This is a regret everyone must suffer, I know / But not as couples poor and lowly have it in ways a hundredfold" (Poem 2, lines 1-2 and 7-8). There is no silver lining behind death because to Chinese people, the end of a relationship in death is final: "In the same grave we may lie / In a meeting after death we have little faith / Yet my eyes will remain open in the nights to come / To repay a life you bore with knitted brows" (Poem 3, lines 5-8).[11] The death of the beloved cannot be simply generalized into a universal experience. What the poet could do is to relive the precious moments with his wife in his memories; nonetheless the regret is everlasting.

In contrast some mourners may experience a change of emotions from sorrow or melancholia into violent ones such as indignation and anger. For example, grief transmuted into rage becomes performative in W.H. Auden's poem "Stop all the clocks" (92).[12] The poet's surprisingly egoistic and provocative utterance in imperatives is distinctly different from the conventional elegiac tone. The poem begins with the speaker's annoyance with the urban roar and he commands time to freeze and the world to stand still so that everyone will pay heed to his announcement: "He Is Dead." God's grace and mercy find no place in this protest. Instead, rage and blame grow out of the sudden loss of the beloved. Without offering a religious answer to grief, the poem ends in an unorthodox denial of meaning of life after the loved one's death. Despite the unusually angry tone and discomforting ending, Auden's modern elegy in fact observes the ways in which the English poetic tradition normalizes and ritualizes grief. It extends the funeral convention of dress code to birds and traffic policemen on duty. Staging the funeral rites like a film director, the speaker expects every living creature to join the procession of mourners and demands an absolutely

quiet, solemn atmosphere when the coffin is brought in. In a melodramatic way the dead is eulogized as the centre of the world. For its anti-consolatory violence and quasi-conventionality in social etiquette, Auden's paradoxical approach in this poem of bereavement makes it an accessible example of modern funeral blues for the faithless generation. "Stop all the clocks" has actually appeared in various forms of public performance of grief.[13]

Comparable to the sudden death of a lover, a child's death is a particularly unsettling experience that easily undermines one's religious faith. Even when infant mortality was high in pre-modern days, the loss of a child often overwhelmed parents with pain and compelled them to ask questions of God and His mercy. Ben Jonson's dirge "On My First Daughter" for his six-month-old daughter who died in 1593 harks back to a convention that attempts to inspire religious consolation:

> Here lies to each her parents' ruth,
> Mary, the daughter of their youth:
> Yet, all heaven's gifts, being heaven's due,
> It makes the father, less, to rue.
> (Hebel & Hudson 498)

Instead of being distraught, parents are reminded of their duty to surrender the girl willingly to God. By accepting the divine design, the father found some degree of peace thinking that his daughter's soul is safe in heaven. Yet in another dirge, "On My First Son," which Jonson wrote ten years later for his seven-year old son Benjamin, the tone is extremely discomforting.

> Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
> My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
> Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
> Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
> Oh, could I lose all father now! For why
> Will man lament the state he should envy?
> To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,
> And if no other misery, yet age!
> Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say, Here doth lie
> Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.
> For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such
> As what he loves may never like too much.
> (Maclean 7)

Jonson was emotionally attached to his boy and invested high hopes in him. Benjamin's death made Jonson feel that he has lost a part of himself: the right hand being a metonymy for his poetic talents and the bliss of fatherhood referring to the passion that underlies his creative writing. In great bitterness he declared that he would never love like this again because of the pain such love will cause once it is gone. This acutely moving poem ends not in religious solace but in a sense of futility—a negation of love and hope in life.

Close to Jonson's poignant experience, Friedrich Rückert lost his only daughter and his youngest son in the same month in December 1833. In an outpour of grief, Rückert wrote a group of 425 poems in the six months following their deaths. To Karen Painter, Rückert's poems "became singular, almost manic documents of the psychological endeavour to cope with such loss. In ever new variations Rückert's poems attempt a poetic resuscitation of the children that is punctuated by anguished outbursts. But above all the poems show a quiet acquiescence to fate and to a peaceful world of solace" (174). Rückert was slow to accept the fact that the children had left him forever. Vividly the poet describes his illusion of feeling their presence nearby– the daughter is still hanging around with her mother:

When your mother
steps into the doorway
and I turn my head
to see her,
my gaze does not alight
first on her face,
but on the place
nearer to the threshold:
there, where
your dear face would be
when you would step in
with bright joy,
as you used to, my little daughter.
(Poem 3, stanza 1)

At times, the children's absence is assumed to be temporary: "Often I think that they have only stepped out/and that soon they will reach home again. / The day is fair —O don't be afraid— / They are only taking a long walk" (Poem 4, stanza 1). These pathetic yearnings of the listless, grief-stricken father are impressive. The heavy blow of losing the loved ones causes a psychological upheaval to the parent comparable to a storm in nature.

In this weather, in this cruel storm,
I would never have sent the children out:
They were carried outside—
I could say nothing about it!

In this weather, in this roaring, cruel storm,
they rest as they did in their mother's house:
they are frightened by no storm
and are covered by the hand of God.
(Poem 5, stanzas 4-5)

Rückert's poems encapsulate mixed feelings of grief, regret, and despair. There are moments of self-blame, such as that occurs in this poem, revealing the father's regrets for having let the children out and causing them to die of scarlet fever. The pain-

ful introspection progresses towards a resigned acceptance of fate and the lament resolves into a prayer for a peaceful rest under God's care.

Like Auden's "Stop all the clocks," five of Rückert's poems were chosen and set to music by Gustav Mahler for his monumental song cycle, *Kindertotenlieder* [Songs on the Death of Children].[15] From a communicative point of view, the sad mechanic exercise of grief writing helps individual poets restabilize the disturbed self but when these lyrics are performed in public they serve a social function commonly achieved by death rituals. Jenny Hockey's research into the modern expert management of the post-mortem events shows the "performative aspects of professional ritual" as families and other observers participate in "the representation of death, which the 'expert' organization or individual is seeking to stage" (194). This professional takeover of staging the death ritual—the repetition of the formulaic speech and action—is accepted by the mourners because the funeral director takes all the pressure off by acting on their behalf. In a similar way, when a personal lyric of grief is staged (such as Auden's and Rückert's poems), it can turn into a public performance of private anguish that is therapeutic to the audience.

Although the Chinese in their literature of mourning do not resort to any religion for consolation, unexpected cases of death not decipherable by cultural wisdom have induced some poets to express their grief in rather unconventional forms. For example, deep sorrow aroused by the death of young children challenges the Chinese philosophical orientation because the premature demise of an innocent child cannot be explained away by the law of nature. Funeral songs for children, however, seemed to fall outside the decorum of Chinese mourning practices since elegies were not normally written for a person so junior in age. However, it is thanks to Cao Zhi (192-232) and the elegies he wrote for his two daughters, "*Jinhu Aici*" [Lament for Jinhu] and "*Xingnü Aici*" [Lament for Xingnü], that a new dynamic subgenre of elegiac writing dedicated to a lost child was set in motion.[16] Infant mortality was not too rare an experience in ancient times, but Cao nonetheless deeply mourned his baby daughter who did not live till she could talk:

Nurtured in the cradle,
A smiling child before she could speak
Not reaching a year old she died.
How can this be a penalty from heaven?
The blow must be caused by my sins–
How innocent and delicate my child is!
Deprived of her parents' care
Into the earth her body disappeared.
Against the cosmic infinity
How does a human life measure?
The timing hardly matters
Except a term soon to expire

("Lament for Jinhu")

Cao's prototypical mourning poem from a parent to a child departs from the ritualistic elegy because it mixes shame and guilt, in lieu of honour, with sorrow. For his girl there was no posthumous title to confer, nor was there much to take stock. Unresolved doubts as to how a child could have provoked heaven to pass such a fatal sentence can only be repressed by admitting that her father must be the culprit, and he is now punished by this eternal loss (cf. Wang 324). While there is a slight tendency to philosophize about human mortality in this poem, Cao's lament for his second daughter's death two years later ends in a helpless appeal: "Knowing that the loss is final / I cannot help my overwhelming sorrow / No stairs are there to reach the heaven above / To whom shall I speak of my regrets?" ("Lament for Xingnü," lines 7-10). Trapped in guilt and anger, Cao's two poems do not give rise to a sense of ultimate harmony as required by the elegiac convention. The stark reality of eternal separation from the daughters cannot be evaded by the language of abstraction.

4. To Voice the Ineffable

Other than purging grief through complaints and self-accusations, a bereaved person's conscious restraint over his or her emotions may result in an unusual tranquility which seems out of place in an elegy. Informed by the Confucian teaching of "sorrow without excess," most Chinese poets tend to refrain from showing open or prolonged grief. A poignant point for comparison with elegies for children cited above is Wen Yiduo's (1899-1946) "*Yexu*" (Maybe), a funeral song for his daughter. Without mentioning death explicitly, grief is expressed less through blame than through blessing. The lyric takes the form of a lullaby that begins with a euphemistic substitution of sleep for death:

Maybe you are really worn out from crying
Maybe, maybe you wish to take a nap
So let me ask the owls not to cough
Frogs not to croak, and bats not to fly

Forbid the sun to brush your eyelids
Forbid the wind to comb your brow
Nobody is allowed to wake you
Let me shelter you with a canopy of pine leaves

Maybe you are listening to the worms stirring in the soil
Or to the new grass drinking
Maybe the music you hear
Is much sweeter than human quarrels

So you first close your eyes
I will let you sleep, I let you sleep
I will gently cover you with the yellow earth

Let me ask the little incense paper to fly slowly.
(Sun & Yuan 140-141)

In Wen's song, there is no lament. The father turns the daughter's premature death into a blessing because it saves the child from human sufferings during the period of political volatility. The poet sings his child to sleep in the shade of an old pine tree.[17] Neither curses nor quarrels will reach her, and she will hear only the natural music orchestrated by stirring worms and sprouting grass. Here, the burial rites are transformed into bedtime rituals for a child. The tone is subdued and the mood tranquil, but the pain of loss is as deep as that expressed in the Korean wife's song for her drowned lord.

If Wen Yiduo's lullaby assuages the father's grief by transposing his daughter's death into a peaceful sleep, William Wordsworth too attempts to evade Lucy's demise by letting "a slumber" seal not only the mourner's spirit but also the maid's senses from the "touch of earthly years" (Butt 136). But when the intensity of grief and regret mounts, the despondent concealment of human feelings and fears will not hold. Written in 1799, in the same year when the other Lucy poems were produced, "She dwells among the untrodden ways" shows the outburst of the ineffable sorrow in an interjection:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Besides the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!
(Butt 138)

When analyzing the ways of speaking grief in English poetic culture, Margo Swiss and David A. Kent borrow Frances Batycki's use of *aporia* as a rhetorical equivalent to the emotion: "During the passage from speaking to writing grief, the writer may be seen as parenthesized within an aporetic space in which she or he is compelled by reason to comprehend the loss. Since grief disrupts all routine and preconception, provoking unanswerable questions, the griever compulsively interrogates and reviews the experience, asking why the bereavement must be sustained and how its consequences are to be endured" (Swiss & Kent 6). Besides suggesting difficulty in articulation, aporia also refers to the hesitation of the speaker. In this poem, Lucy's loveliness and loneliness predominate the content. The emotions of pain and sorrow

are held back in the preceding ten lines until the profound loss weighs down with a funneling effect and overwhelms the speaker. He cannot help but betray his deep well of grief by rupturing the penultimate line with a caesura and an interjection "oh." The alienation from "She" that opens the poem leads to the exclamatory confession of an utterly altered life for "me" that summarizes all his grief. The finality of her demise, that "she is in her grave," brings to the surface the fact that the eternal separation can no longer be glossed over.

When Terry Eagleton examines emotions in poetry, what he says about fear can also apply to grief: "A poem can be the *occasion* for an emotion" (113). In murmurs of a quivering voice or aphasia, grief "is present in their [mourners'] bodily activity in the same way that a meaning is present in a word" (Eagleton 114). Artistic use of interjections such as "oh" in Wordsworth's poem or "alas" in the Korean song vividly epitomizes the profundity of loss that resists discursive analysis. Contrary to Shand's argument that expressions of the urge to recover the dead indicate the bereaved person's admission of weakness and need for assistance, the eruption of an overwhelming sorrow empowers many poets to write about their yearning (314-318). In some poems speechlessness becomes a paradoxical mode for expressing grief. The following two examples about a poet's recollection of his deceased wife illustrate this tendency.

The irreparable disjuncture of the present and the past brought about by death creates in the mourner feelings of regret and despair that cannot be translated into words. The poet confronts grief and looks deeply into the pain experienced at the time of his wife's demise, in the present and the future. The immense weight of loss does not diminish with time. Thomas Hardy's *Poems of 1912-13* has been widely recognized as perhaps the most impressive examples of both elegy and love poetry in English, and about a dozen of them were written for his long estranged wife, Emma, in the year following her death. While critics have focused their attention on Hardy's introspection of the complex guilt over the wrecked marriage with Emma in these elegiac poems, "A Night in November" (1913), a little discussed poem, exhibits the poet's emotions in a simple, direct way:

I marked when the weather changed,
And the panes began to quake,
And the winds rose up and ranged,
That night, lying half-awake.

Dead leaves blew into my room,
And alighted upon my bed,
And a tree declared to the gloom
Its sorrow that they were shed.

One leaf of them touched my hand,
And I thought that it was you
There stood as you used to stand,

And saying at last you knew!
(Gibson 586)

Rather than dwelling on the memory of Emma in her youth in such poems as "Places" and "After a Journey," Hardy here projects the bereavement onto the leaf-shedding tree. Obsessed with a guilt that prolongs his grief, he seeks a tender reunion that is beyond the "love, praise, indifference, blame" mentioned in "Your Last Drive" (1912). What the speaker can describe is only the communicative situation, but the meaning and emotions shared by the couple remains ineffable. In William W. Morgan's opinion, in these poems for Emma Hardy gives up "the philosophic validity of the Christian consolation" and traces an emotional progress in a "measured and slow movement from regret to the hope of forgiveness" (503). The final reconciliation, in a wordless emotional comprehension, appears to be the best consolation to the embittered mourner.

Like Hardy's poem, Su Shi's "*Jiangchengzhi*" [A Dream—to the tune of *Jiangchengzhi*] is also a poem expressing grief for the deceased spouse. Parallel to Tennyson's lyric sequence for Hallam, "A Dream" traces the poet's progress of grieving for a decade. The poem begins with the speaker pondering over the present sorrow and his return to the past, it ends with an anticipated future of melancholic yearning:

Ten years apart, parted between life and death—
Without thinking about it, yet nothing will I forget
A thousand miles away lies the solitary grave
To whom can I speak of my sorrow?
Even if we do meet, how could you recognize
This frosty hair, and weathered face

In a dream I saw you at our window
Doing your toilet as usual
In silence we looked at each other
With eyes misty in tears
Year after year, at the heart-breaking place—
In the moonlight, a hillock of pines.
(Hu 60)

The first part of the poem states the plain fact about an unbridgeable distance between the couple temporally separated by ten years and physically by life and death. Ten years have passed and the poet is conscious of how time has altered his countenance. Any illusory chance encounter with his lost wife, like Hardy's, is thus ruled out: "she will not be able to recognize me," he fears. Here, the gloom that affirms the finality of death works even more relentlessly than in Hardy's poems.[19] In classical Chinese love poetry, the most intimate moment is captured by a husband watching his wife do her toilet in the boudoir. When this scene is evoked in the second part of the poem, the couple can only gaze at each other without uttering a word. In the two communicative situations, the pain arises from the impossibility of speaking to the beloved. Built upon a man's fond memories of his wife, and his loving and grieving beyond the

usual measure of mourning, the poetic strength of the poem lies in the moments of imaginary vision rather than conversation. The last part of the poem is totally devoid of humans: "In the moonlight, a hillock of pines." The scenic ending may point to the past, present as well as future. Su Shi's poem does not perform a healing act by idealization. Tears and sighs seem to subside in the poem, but time does not bring the bliss of oblivion. What will remain is a perpetual longing gaze.

In contrast to the Confucian teaching of impersonalization and equanimity, a cultured man might not easily put his grief behind him. At the age of forty Su Shi wrote this personal lyric which confessed that he was still disturbed by a loss that had happened ten years earlier. Readers will undoubtedly want to read this extraordinary degree of suffering as a result of the strength of lost love. Rebelling against the cultural inhibition, the passionate expression of unappeased grief makes Su Shi's "A Dream" a most moving love poem within classical Chinese literature.

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Diverging from the institutionalized forms of grief writing for mourning customs, the personal lyric performs grief and expresses the poet's emotions unpretentiously. Whether it is Su Shi's subdued but protracted grief, Auden's indignant protest, or the loud cry "My lord, alas!" in the Korean song, without appealing to faith of any kind, the lyric poem speaks to the reader through its emotions alone. The poems discussed here illustrate the ways in which the bereaved confront grief, rather than gloss over it, trivialize it, or explain it away. Some poets have loosely followed the elegiac convention, but many have aborted the traditional forms of religious consolation or reasoned wisdom. It is only by admitting that despite everything the loss still hurts that grief can be uttered. To mental health professionals, their prolonged bereavement might appear to be pathological cases for clinical investigation. Yet to readers of literature across cultures, such masterpieces of poetry involve a poignant expression of grief, which at times perform a repressed emotion for the audience too. Given their diverse religious and cultural origins, these poems underscore that the universal impulse to grieve is often too strong to be reined in through traditionally instituted modes. Here there is little need for theological reflection or philosophical abstraction, nor for scientific or medical diagnosis—the personal lyric, with its brevity and intensity, fully speaks to our emotions, pure as grief.

Notes

1. Unless stated otherwise, the English translations in this paper are mine.

2. The Chinese song was titled "*Konghou yin*" and collected by the Music Bureau in Han Dynasty (207 BC–AD 220). See Guo. The song is an exceptionally short lyric of 16 characters (*Gong wu du he / gong*

jing du he / *duo he er si* / *dang nai gong he*), and was sung with the accompaniment of *konghou*, an ancient stringed instrument. For the background of this song, see Cui.

3. In Yang Mu's opinion the dramatic tension in this poem is comparable to that found in Greek tragedy. A brief narrative though it is, the poem accomplishes the unity of action exhibiting the causal connection between a beginning, a middle and an end. The single conflict is highlighted by the three appearances of "my lord" (*gong*) and "the river" (*he*). The warning against crossing the river in the first line works like the advice Tiresias and Jocasta gave to Oedipus against his investigation in *Oedipus the King*. The lord's ignorance of his fatal action leads to his downfall and the "recognition" in the third line confirms the catastrophe. The concluding interjection "alas" serves the cathartic function of purging the audience's pity and fear. For a full discussion, see Yang 3-37.

4. By the stage and task approach, mental health practitioners try to cure grief by the tasks of mourning (Small 29-33). With the concept of "grief work," psychologists devise specific tasks to achieve during grieving in order that the bereaved attains a better adjustment to the loss. See Archer 108-129.

5. Quoted from Part III of *Messiah, an Oratorio*. http://www.messiahed.com/Information/about_The Messiah/Libretto/libretto.html

6. The quotes are from Donne's Sonnet X (lines 1 and 14) in the section of "Holy Sonnets (Divine Meditations)" in *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* 440-441.

7. This actually does not mean a full three-year period. Norman Kutcher sees it as a mourning that "lasted into the third year." See Kutcher 16.

8. The lines are translated from Su Shi's poem "*Shuidiao getou*" [To the Tune of *Shuidiao getou*].

9. Confucius's commendation on the *Book of Songs* as poems that express pleasure and sorrow without indulgence has served as a yardstick for emotional restraint in life as well as in literature.

10. These three lines are quoted from William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (lines 22-24).

11. Here "a meeting after death" refers to the belief of transmigration in popular Buddhism in China. Through transmigration, humans who die may be reborn into either human or non-human forms in the next life until they attain nirvana and are liberated from the cycle of earthly existence. Yuan Zhen's trio was translated by Witter Bynner into "An Elegy" (I, II, and III). See Bynner 177-8. Chung Ling argues that Kenneth Rexroth's poem "The Dragon and the Unicorn" was directly influenced by Bynner's translations of Yuan Zhen's poems. See Rexroth 261 and Chung 103-133.

12. "Stop all the clocks" is poem IX in the section "Twelve Songs" in *W.H. Auden's Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (92).

13. A well-known example is the reading by John Hannah in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Information about the other appearances of the poem can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funeral_Blues.

14. The English translations of Rückert's poems from German are Emily Ezust's. http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/assemble_texts.html?LanguageId=7&SongCycleId=107

15. Friedrich Rückert did not intend to publish these poems. Between 1901 and 1904, Gustav Mahler chose five of Rückert's poems and set them to music for his song cycle, *Kindertotenlieder*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kindertotenlieder

16. According to the research of the Japanese scholar Goto Akinobu, grief writing in Tang poetry shows that Cao's innovation has precipitated a considerable corpus of elegies dedicated to children (351). As for Cao's two poems, see Cao 627.

17. Although this is also a typical Western consolation argument, there is no hope for the child to rise again in an afterlife in Chinese culture.

18. Su Shi's wife, Wang Fu, died in 1065 and the poem "A Dream" was written in 1075. To psychologists, when this kind of mourning in its "scope, intensity, and tendency" persists and the person suffers from the conditions of chronic stress it is symptomatic of pathological mourning (Bowlby 34-36).

19. According to Lofland's theory, Hardy's and Su Shi's poems show that "through such hallucination or fantasy or memory, a strong sense of the loss is maintained" by the bereaved (180).

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