Chapter II

The Elegy, Its Definitions, Conventions and Modern Tendencies

In the previous chapter a reference has been made to Sharon M. Bailey’s statement, which refers to Requiem as an “elegy for Russia”. It is with the description of the poem as an elegy that one comes face to face with the problem that is at the centre of any serious evaluation of Requiem as a poem of mourning since there is no direct incident of death involved. The presence of some fundamental elegiac conventions in the poem such as “the pathetic fallacy, which is intimately tied to the theme of the universality of death, the progression from grief to consolation, and the ultimate resolution of the work of mourning” 1, provides all the more reason to attempt a study of the poem as an elegy. But before any in depth analysis can be made of the poem, it is necessary to first enter into a discussion of the nature of the elegy, its various conventions and modifications. This chapter, therefore, will discuss the Elegy — its definitions, conventions, and modern tendencies — and also a few samples of the different types of elegies. This will serve as an introductory discussion leading to the next chapter, which proposes to critically analyse Requiem as an elegy.

According to critics of the genre, “There are two possible definitions of the elegy…: one in its traditional sense and the other in
its broader, unconventional sense". The word elegy is derived from the Greek elegia, which means lament. "In the traditional meaning, the elegy refers to an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure. It is characterised by a powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration, and above all by the movement from mourning to consolation. In literature dirge, threnody, monody and lament are variations of almost the same theme. They are generally shorter versions of the elegy". It may be noted, however, that during the time of the early Greek and Latin writers the definition of the elegy also included "any type of serious, subjective meditation on the part of the poet, whether this reflective element was concerned with death, love, war or merely the presentation of information". Peter Sacks, a renowned critic of the elegy, further enumerates on the subject saying that the conventional elegy includes "exhortary martial epigrams, political philosophy, commemorative lines, or even amatory complaints". In England also the elegy has been employed by various poets not only for lamenting or commemorating the dead but in a variety of subjects. Such elegies include John Donne's Elegies and Chaucer's The Book of the Duchess. But after the sixteenth century, the term elegy carried with it the definition of a poem that speaks thematically of mortal loss and consolation and this is the form of the conventional elegy that has survived till today.
A definite form of the conventional elegy adopted from the Sicilian Greek poets Theocritus, Bion and Moschus, and popular among English poets is the pastoral elegy of which Milton's *Lycidas* stands out as a prime example. The pastoral elegy is also written "in dignified, serious language, and taking as its theme the expression of grief at the loss of a friend or important person". It employs a set of conventions introduced by Greek and Sicilian poets and developed at the hands of elegists, from Theocritus to Spenser and Milton. They may be listed as under:

- the representation of the dead friend as a shepherd to be mourned by the natural world, or pastoral contextualisation with its apostrophe and pathetic fallacy; the myth of the vegetation deity; the use of repetitions and refrains;
- the reiterated questioning and the outbreak of vengeful anger or denunciation; the procession of mourners; the passage from grief to consolation and the traditional images of resurrection, transfiguration, stellification and deification. Additional conventions can also be seen in the use of the images of flowers and light, the eclogic division within or between mourning voices, the question of contests, rewards, and inheritance, and the unusual degree of self-consciousness regarding the actual performance of mourning. This last feature relates to the need of the elegist to draw attention to his own surviving powers with a view to consoling himself.

The first among the conventions listed above is the representation of a dead friend as a shepherd. This convention is derived from the Greek
eclogue, which among many of its varieties also served as a dirge lamenting a dead shepherd. Usually the lamentation is performed by another fellow shepherd in a natural and rustic environment. This natural environment not only serves as a background but also plays an important part in the shepherd's mourning and this leads to one of the major conventions of the elegy. This convention is that of the pathetic fallacy.

This convention is derived from the rituals associated with the vegetation god. The personification of the vegetation god in these rituals as human or human-divine helps man to see his own image in nature and at the same time identify that image with its regenerative powers. On the other hand, as man identifies his image with the natural world, he also imposes his will on it so that a reversal of roles may take place whereby there is a reverse of man's submission to nature and its changing seasons. Sacks explicates that "instead of grieving over the inhuman operation of nature or time, a setting and process on which he is unavoidably dependent, man creates a fiction whereby nature and its changes, the occasions of his grief, appear to depend on him. The withering vegetation is now no more the cause of human grief but rather the mourner or even the effect of a human-divine loss".

The convention of displaying anger or bitterness against nature and change subsequently results from the convention of pathetic
fallacy. Following man’s attempt in reflecting his grief in the withering of nature, the display of anger may also be studied as a representation of his attempted mastery and vengeance against nature and change. Sacks states that “by the sacrifice or mimed death of the personification of nature, man causes nature’s death, or at least brings on her deathlike mourning”. In this manner, man attempts to either direct nature to lament or curses it. Subsequently a relationship is drawn between elegiac cursing and grief, a relation found in most traditional elegies like Milton’s “Lycidas” and Shelley’s “Adonais”.

The matter of vengeance and cursing consequently leads to another elegiac convention, that of questioning. This convention, which is at times private and at times sharply interrogative, has been used throughout the history of the elegy. Its functions is to “set free the energy locked in grief and rage and to organize its movement in the form of a question that is not merely an expression of ignorance but a voicing of protest”. When the question is addressed to someone repeatedly, the convention turns into a therapeutic ritual, in which the mourner shifts the attention away from the object of loss or himself to the world outside and stops him from becoming completely ensnared in melancholia.

Apart from preventing the mourner from drowning himself/herself in sorrow, the convention of repetitive questioning
performs other functions as well. Firstly, it creates a sense of continuity as opposed to the discontinuity of death. Secondly, it acts as a protective shield against the unsettling shock of death. Thirdly, it creates a rhythm of lament with the repetitions of the words and refrains in order to keep the grief under control while keeping that expression in motion. Fourthly, it confronts the mind with the fact of death so as to achieve recognition of this fact and also to distance the mourner from the dead. Lastly, it invokes the spirit of the dead by repeating its name so that it almost replaces the dead and generates a sense of consolation. It may be noted that this act of repeated questioning either comes from one mourning voice or a division of this voice into many voices.

This division of the mourning voice makes up yet another important convention of the elegy. This division may be in the form of a distinction between mourners or it can be a division within the mourner itself. The purpose of such divisions in the mourning voice is to show the splitting and self-suppression inside the mourner that accompanies the first experience of loss. It also does the work of dramatisation where the mourners infuse ceremony to the rites and also reveal their work as survivors. Lastly, this division of voices acts as a confrontational device for the purpose of recognition of the loss by the mourner.
Another important convention is the movement of the elegy as it follows the ancient rites, which is seen as the passage through grief and darkness to consolation and renewal. The movement from grief and despair to consolation and renewal not only "mimed the death and return of the vegetation god but also represents the initiate's descent to and ascent from a crisis of mysterious revelation". ¹¹ More often than not, this revelation is seen in the resurrection, stellification or deification of the dead of which Milton's "Lycidas" serves as an ideal example: Another point to be added in connection with the movement from loss to consolation is that the movement is always accompanied with an altered sense of perception for the lost object. In the Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne, for instance, Apollo, having insulted Cupid, was cursed with an unrequited love for Daphne. In her flight from Apollo, Daphne flees to the banks of the river where she begged her father, Peneus, for release. When Apollo grabbed her, she turned into a laurel tree. However, the transformation of Daphne from nymph to a laurel plant did not serve any good to Apollo because even as he is able to finally hold the tree, "even the wood shrank from his kisses". ¹² It was until when Apollo found the significance of the laurel wreath in: "With thee shall Roman generals wreathe their heads..." ¹³ that the tree became a consoling substitute for Daphne and only then was he able to accept his loss.
The convention of the elegiac mythology is closely associated with the rites of the return of the vegetation god and its concept of immortality. It affirms man’s resurrection and establishes his immortality through the rebirth of nature. Nature’s regenerative powers and the principle of recurrent fertility become representations of this immortality. Sacks observes that “the vegetation god is, after all, the predecessor of almost every elegized subject and provides a fundamental trope by which mortals create their images of immortality”. The myth of Dionysus, son of Zeus, is an example of such myths of immortality. Dionysus was killed by the Titans who dismembered him and devoured him. In revenge Zeus destroyed the Titans and out of the soot of their remains, mankind was born. Sacks explains that the birth of mankind in such a manner invested in him the element of ingested divinity. Legend has it that Dionysus’ heart was hidden in a fruit basket and the survival of his heart enabled his rebirth through the union of Zeus and Semele, a mortal.

The image of light is also an important convention used in elegies. Several layers of meaning have been attached to it. The foremost is its significance as a source of energy that conquers darkness and outlasts mortal man. As Achilles mourned the death of Patroclus, his wrath produces “Around his Brows a golden Cloud she spread/ A Stream of Glory flam’d above his Head”. Other variations
of this image have been used by Milton and other conventional elegists.

The concept of poetic inheritance is one more addition to the list of elegiac conventions. There has always been a close relation between mourning and the act of inheritance throughout history. Margaret Alexiou, a critic on ancient Greek ritual laments, elaborates that among the Greeks unless one mourns he is prevented from inheriting. Inheritance also warrants a display or demonstration of greater strength and closeness by the heir to the dead than his rivals and that he should wrest his inheritance from the dead.

Apart from the conventions listed above the construction of the conventional elegy centres on the elementary images of weaving. This is done in order to create a ‘fabric’ that takes the place of the void. In “Lycidas” Camus dons a meticulously embroidered hem “inwrought with figures dim”. Tennyson, in In Memoriam, compares himself to a blind man winding the curls of children’s hair, or is seen playing with threads. The process of weaving, according to Peter Sacks, is related with the intention “of weaving a consolation” (P19), which is usually accomplished at the close of an elegy. He further adds that the task of the actual weaving of burial clothes and shrouds emphasise that mourning is a ritualistic and psychological action and not only a pastoral contextualisation.
A few samples of the conventional pastoral elegy are "Lament for Bion" attributed to Moschus, Bion's "Lament for Adonis" and Theocritus' "First Idyll". In England among the major ones are Spenser's "The Shepheardes Calender", John Donne's "Elegies", Milton's "Lycidas", P. B. Shelley's "Adonais", and Lord Alfred Tennyson's "In Memoriam". Among these "Lycidas" is considered to be the most renowned because of its close resemblance to classical elegies and its elaborate use of the pastoral conventions and should be examined more closely in connection with the conventions. James Holly Hanford in his essay The Pastoral Elegy and Milton's Lycidas, observes that Milton had been influenced by Theocritus' poem. These lines in "Lycidas", "Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep / Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?" seem to have been taken right out of Theocritus' poem as Thyris sings:

Begin, ye Muses dear, begin the pastoral song.
Thyris of Etna am I, and this is the voice of Thyris. Where, ah!
Where were ye when Daphnis was languishing; ... 

Hanford remarks that "Milton was familiar with it at first hand and consciously adopted it as one of the classical models for Lycidas". Another source of influence is the tenth eclogue of Virgil. Milton adopts his style of calling upon "various beings [to] come one after another to add their part to the lament". Moschus' Lament for
Bion is also considered to be yet another source of influence for its use of the pastoral convention of pathetic fallacy, in which nature participates in the poet’s grief. In fact “Lycidas” uses many of the conventions associated with the pastoral elegy. Firstly, Milton’s poem is occasioned by the death of his peer in Cambridge, Edward King and fulfils the basic characteristic of a traditional elegy, that is, a poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure. Moreover, the poet makes use of the figure of the shepherd to represent the dead friend. This further establishes the poem as a pastoral elegy. C. T. Thomas observes that pastoral poetry “was used in the Renaissance to tell the story of young poets and scholars disguised as shepherds”.

Some of the other conventions found inherent in Milton’s “Lycidas” are the procession of mourners, the movement from despair to hope and resurrection, the questioning of the nymphs, and the convention of elegiac mythology with allusions to the myths of Orpheus and Hyacinthus and the images of flowers. Another important feature found in “Lycidas” is the presence of allegorical didacticism. This feature is derived from Boccaccio, Petrarch and Spenser who used the pastoral elegy to express their political and religious views as well as the personal aspirations of the poet himself. The long section in “Lycidas” where Milton attacks the corrupt practises of the clergy is an example of such didacticism. Another section talks about fame and
alludes to the poet’s own poetic aspirations. Such adaptations of pastoral conventions from both classical and Renaissance elegists by Milton places “Lycidas” among the most prominent traditional elegies in literature.

These conventions, however, have evolved throughout the history of literature and have undergone extensive modifications over the centuries at the hands of elegists writing through the generations. The genre itself has undergone many revisions and has taken on new forms and possibilities. In the unconventional sense, for instance, the elegy has broadened its scope and “may refer to a poem of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life”. 18 In order to add on to the meaning of this definition, it may be necessary to include S. P. Sen Gupta’s view, who while quoting another critic has drawn a line of distinction between the ‘elegiac’ and the ‘elegy’. The elegiac, he observes, “is an extended version of the elegy and refers to poems having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life’s transience and its sorrows”. 19 These enumerations come out clearly in Sharon M. Bailey’s statement that, “while an elegy may be (and usually is) occasioned by death, it is more accurately defined as a poem about loss”. 20 Hence, it may be noted that the unconventional elegy has shifted its focus away from death, towards loss and melancholy.
A few examples of the unconventional elegy as identified by critics like M. H. Abrams are, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", Mathew Arnold's "Memorial Verses" and "Scholar-Gipsy", and Maria Rainer Rilke's "Duino Elegies". These elegies "may be said to occupy a position somewhere between the traditional and the modern elegy [as] their movement is always from praise to lament and then, to an attempt at consolation" by replacing sorrow with the hope of renewal although the attempt is not always completely successful. It is, therefore, understood that while the unconventional elegy still makes use of various conventions of the traditional elegy it does not always adhere to them entirely.

Such variation from the traditional conventions is seen in the choice of themes, which these poets employ. For instance, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" mourns the passing away of the forefathers into obscurity and the possible early death of the poet himself. Sen Gupta is also of the opinion that Arnold's "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Memorial Verses" are elegies but do not lament the death of an individual. He further explains that the tone of the poems is elegiac whereby the poet grieves over a decadent age, the death of religious faith and of treasured values of life. Similar adaptation in theme is also noticed in the elegies of Rilke whose "Duino Elegies" emerge from a grieving over a "protracted personal crisis".
These elegies are also unresolved in the act of mourning, which is seen in their resentful anger against the living. Gray shows his anger by a denouncement of his times. Arnold on the other hand directs his anger towards the destruction of man's intuitive powers by a materialistic society. Even their consolations, although not anti-consolatory, are inconclusive and insufficient. Arnold tries to find some consolation in the resigned acceptance of harsh realities and Gray hopes to find it in the lap of the common mother and the bosom of his father, who is God. These consolations, although seemingly comforting in nature, do not actually point towards any form of regeneration or transcendence, which leaves one to believe that the mourner is still enmeshed in his own grief. But then Zahan Ramazani, an authority on the modern elegy, is of the opinion that "consolation may no longer be an important "criterion by which to judge" the elegy, since many of the weakest are merely consolatory and many of the strongest...are poems less of solace than melancholia, less of resolution than of protracted strife".  

To elaborate on the nature of the unconventional elegy, a brief discussion of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" will be done. As mentioned earlier, this poem does not mourn the death of any particular person. However, after critically assessing the poem, Sacks agrees that "Gray's poem is, of course a poem of mourning [and it]
mourns a particular death over and above those of the obscure villagers".\textsuperscript{23} It is important to understand that “particular death” here refers to the poet’s vision of his own death, “a projection that includes a local swain’s account of the poet’s life and burial, together with a presentation of the epitaph written by the poet himself”.\textsuperscript{24}

The poem itself opens with the poet’s “solitary courting of prophetic vision” of a rustic landscape at dusk and progresses into a reflection of the “rude forefathers of the hamlet” and their traditional pastoral life, away from the “ignoble strife” of a rich materialistic society. In contemplating the passing of the age, the poet is roused with moral ideas about “the way in which the villagers are deprived of the opportunity of greatness; and by contrast, with the crimes inextricably involved in success as the ‘thoughtless world’ knows it, from which the villagers are protected”. As a result, the poet contrasts the life of the poor and the rich, their virtues and their vices and forbids the mockery of their simple rustic lives as wealth, power and arrogance become useless because in the end “The paths of glory lead but to the grave”. From here the poem then turns to a contemplation of life and death and “a preoccupation with the desire to be remembered after death, a concern which draws together both rich and poor, making the splendid monuments and the “frail memorial” pathetic".
Lament in the poem arises from the poet’s sensibilities about the loss of a way of life, which the forefathers would not be able to experience anymore since they are “forever laid” in the country churchyard and which the poet will not be able to see anymore because they remain in obscurity only in the “short and simple annals of the poor”. While grieving over the loss of pastoral life, the poet finds consolation in the very obscurity that his forefathers have been left to repose. According to Hough, a renowned critic, obscurity has its own advantages, in which “the narrow lot of the villagers circumscribed not only potential virtues, but also potential crimes — forbade them the brutality of a conqueror or the venality of a court poet”. Hence, the poet finds consolation for the “madding crowd’s ignoble strife” in the obscure life of the villagers. In a way this also acts as a defence against the alteration to life caused by death. Sacks elaborates on this by saying that “Gray marshals a defence of obscurity at large [by] revealing it as the necessary condition of the dead. His praise seems to extend, therefore, to those who live in such a way — obscure and silent — as to suffer the least alteration by death. Hence, too, “they kept the noiseless tenor of their way”.

As to the poet’s own “sense of waste and frustration, which no longer appears as personal inadequacy, but as part of what must inevitably happen in all human life and all nature”, the reflection of
his personal anguish — his death and the waste that his poetic talent will succumb to — as an inevitable natural event enables him "to bear his own disappointments by seeing them in the wider setting of which they are a part". However, this effort in looking for consolation in the poet's own protracted anguish is not complete since humans will still have to resign themselves to the possibility of waste and death. The real consolation comes with a realisation that the final solution to such inequities and problems lay outside the realm of human contemplation. According to Gray himself, this force is God who, alone makes the final judgement and who can also make right all the wrong, either committed by humans or a result of natural injustice. Subsequently, the poet wishes to be left in peace on the lap of mother earth and in the hands of his God as the Epitaph writes:

No further seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose,)
The bosom of his Father and his God.

("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard")

It is also in the epitaph that Gray's desire to be remembered is fulfilled. But the final resolution does not rest so much in erecting a tombstone as in the script inscribed on it. This means that for the poet language is the only guarantee of remembrance and one that can assure the
immortality of his identity. From the above discussion it may be reiterated that the poem, although lacking the characteristic of a traditional elegy, is primarily elegiac in nature as it mourns the death of an age and the poet’s own sense of waste and death. The poem, however, has adapted well to the conventions of pastoral imagery, the deliberation on grief and the movement from such grief to consolation and remembrance, in spite of its marked departure from the traditional elegy in its treatment of the theme.

The movement of the unconventional elegy away from its predecessor has broadened the scope for further modifications, which in turn constitute the modern tendencies that Ramazani talks about in his book, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. In this book, Ramazani defines the scope of the modern elegy that it “permeates a wide range of poems about war, love, race gender, meditation, the self, the family, and the poet”. He elaborates that “the poetry of mourning for the dead assumes in the modern period an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and scepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before”. (POM p. 1) As a result, one major distinction between the modern elegists and their predecessors is that they “tend to enact the work not of normative but of ‘melancholic’ mourning – a term I adapt from Freud to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent”. (POM p. 4)
They attack the dead and the self, their work and tradition and they discard such traditional ideas of consolation as rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself. He further adds, "...modern elegists ‘practise losing farther, losing faster’, so that the ‘One Art’ of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it". (POM p. 4)

However, despite the marked change in the mood of the modern elegist, Ramazani notices the use of a number of “ancient elegiac tropes, structures, and even consolations” in modern elegies. At the same time, this incorporation of traditional conventions into the modern context of the elegy is not without any conscious effort at sifting, or violating its norms and even at times trespassing its limits. In the words of Ramazani:

They conjoin the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure, and imagery of the genre. The apparent oxymoronic term “modern elegy” suggests both the negation of received codes (‘modern’) and their perpetuation (‘elegy’) – a synthesis of modernity and inheritance that is especially fruitful for the poets like Hardy, Stevens, Hughes, and Plath, who neither rehash nor neglect literary traditions. (POM p. 12)

The modern elegists not only rebel against set norms of the traditional elegy but simultaneously regain them through rebellion. Hence, “the modern elegy more radically violates previous generic
norms than did earlier phases of elegy: it becomes anti-consolatory and
anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional
and sometimes even anti-literary”. (POM pp. 1-2)

Thus it has been seen that the elegy as a genre has not remained
static but has evolved with the times, has broadened its range and even
changed the contours of its movement, which had traditionally
progressed from praise, to lament and consolation. These evolutions
should prove useful in examining Requiem as an elegy.
Endnotes


2 See Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, “Hiraeth, Soso Tham and the Elegiac Tradition”, *Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham (A Study of Tham’s Major Poem, Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynniew Trep and Related Poems)*, diss., North-Eastern Hill University, 2005, 32. The dissertation has based this definition on the following books:


5 See 2c above.
6 See 4 above. 321.
7 See 3 above.
8 See 2c above. 20-1.
9 Ibid. 21.
10 Ibid. 22.
11 Ibid. 20.
12 From Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as appeared in Sacks'. 4.
13 Ibid.
14 See 2c above. 26-7.
16 See James Holly Hanford, "The Pastoral Elegy and Milton's Lycidas", *PMLA* Vol. 25, No. 3 (1910) 408.
18 See 3 above. 3.
19 Ibid.
20 See 1 above. 328.
21 See 3 above.
22 See 2d above. 226.
23 See Sacks, "Jonson, Dryden, and Gray". Details as 2c above. 133.
24 Ibid.
26 See 23 above. 135.

27 See 25 above. 15.

28 See 2d above. The quotations thereafter are taken from the same source.