

# Is There Life after Elegy?

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For the last twenty years or so, the elegy has been at the heart of American poetry. This was underscored for me by an article in the current issue (Spring, 1982) of *Field*, "Eden And My Generation" by Larry Levis. In it he writes of "the connoisseurs of loss" when discussing contemporary poetry. He says, "It is as if the whole tradition [of alienation and isolation] has become, by now, shared, held in common, a *given*—or as if the poems confer the same sort of loss upon all of us, not only upon the privately suffering poet." A young poet visiting the Twin Cities recently said to me, "Whatever happens to my poetry, it will always be elegiac." Of course, there are many other strands in American poetry, but the elegy is the one overriding context out of which all else emerges.

It's interesting that in a country and a culture that has suffered comparatively little (to Eastern Europe, say, or to South and Central America, Ireland), so many middle-class poets find, as their poetic touchstone, the elegy. Certainly this has been true for me during the last ten years. I could most fully give myself to the writing of a poem when it concerned itself with loss or failure, as if the only truly authentic parts of myself were those activated by loss and suffering. Consequently many of my best poems (as well, I think, of many other North Americans during the last twenty years) are elegiac. Most of the current interest in historical personae poems is also elegiac, the sense of loss being transposed to another century and/or culture.

Why is it that the poets of Eastern Europe, to take a particularly glaring example, who have gone through so much over the last forty-five years (famine, genocide, invasion several times over, destruction on an almost unimaginable scale) produce a poetry which, while it includes the elegiac, is by no means limited to it? Even Milosz, perhaps the most elegiac of them all, in his recent poetry seems to be moving away from the poetry of loss. (In any case, his poems of loss are

often angry rather than sad, the tone not so much elegiac as a strange mixture of bitterness and remoteness). These poets are funny, joyful, mysterious, ironic. I'm thinking of work as different in tone (not to speak of culture, language, and sex) as Miroslav Holub's, the Czech poet, and Wislawa Szymborska's, the Polish poet. (The *Field* translation series has published two recent books by Holub, and Princeton University Press and *Quarterly Review Of Literature* have published Szymborska.)

The only period in our own country even roughly similar to what Eastern Europe has been through over the last five decades was the Civil War. One of our greatest poets, Walt Whitman, lived and wrote through that period. While many of his poems are elegiac, his overall tone is far more wide ranging—humorous, ecstatic, erotic, political, mysterious—than what most of us are doing today in this country.

Why do we so often feel we are most alive when we are suffering through a loss? Why do our poems often sound trivial, or at least strained and falsely cheerful, when we leave the elegy behind?

One (leftist) political explanation might be that middle-class poets unconsciously sense the end of an era (capitalism/liberal democracy), are afraid of change, sense it as the loss of their values, the destruction of what they believe in.

Another political explanation is that poets sense—some consciously, some unconsciously—that we are heading toward nuclear destruction, and their poetry reflects that loss even in nonpolitical poems.

Another possible explanation: Over the course of the last two centuries, "to suffer" and "to be sensitive/poetic" have been formed into an equation so widely accepted it has become cliché. How dare we poets take our eyes off the sadness and the loss, even if for a moment.

Also: grief and sadness, as expressed through the elegy, imply the putting of something to rest, working through it to put it behind oneself. But joy, happiness, the erotic, mystery imply new beginnings, risk, openness toward the future, rather than a memorializing of the past.

Good poets, thank God, repeatedly get around all this by writing poems that are at once elegiac and open, funny and sad, stark and luxurious. Recent examples of such work (wildly elegiac and wonderfully

funny) can be found in abundance in *This Journey* by James Wright (Random House) and Charles Wright's *Southern Cross* (Random House).

In my own work, I feel a new interest in exploring worlds that include the elegiac, but are not limited to it. My wish for my poems is that they will become more inclusive in some of the ways I've described, that they will not satisfy themselves only with grief and sadness, but that they will let themselves be surprised in ways that I can't even imagine.