

THE PROJECT OF IMMORTALITY IN POETRY

By: Masulah
Dosen FKIP UMSurabaya

ABSTRACT

*The perennial problem for human beings is loss and decay. Life is fragile and transient and Death is as close as life. However, when man dies, as everyone must admit they eventually do, do they really extinct, that is, do they stay dead forever? Or as Job phrases it, "If a man dies, shall he live again?" There can be no doubt that the threat of mortality and the possibility of immortality have been always the foremost incentives to philosophical inquiry. It was Socrates who ascribes philosophy as basically a "meditation on death", a meditation on whether man is mortal or immortal. This paper will examine how poetry mediates about the problem of death (mortality) and the prospect of immortality as explored by Allan Tate in Ode to the Confederate Dead and John Keats in Ode to Nightingale and To Autumn. This paper will be starting with general overview of immortality in poetics. The Introductory section will address such questions as: How do human beings conceive the immortality of their existence through out the history? How do lyrics deal with the issue of immortality? What image does lyric try to preserve? How do some lyrics differ in their conceptions toward loss, decay, and death? Allan Grossman's **Summa Lyrica** is used as the starting point of the discussion. This section will review Grossman's guidelines on the dynamics of the poets and their creation: How a poet monumentalizes the persona and the voice through his creation and how his whole creation in turn creates a legendary figure of himself as a human being and as a poet, remembered and celebrated by the world. Further discussion will be focusing on Keats' To Autumn, and Ode to Nightingale, and Tate's Ode to the Confederate Dead. The discussion on these odes will address the issue of the media through which Death can be the agent of immortality rather than the menacing power of mortality.*

Key words: ode, persona, voice, immortality, loss, decay, death, productive function.

A. Introduction

It might be argued that the desire for immortality is characteristics of human nature. To cite Doran Doubleday, "Most men and women would rather be assured of eternal life than of anything else. If the privilege of living forever were marketable, it would sell at the highest figure of anything offered to mankind." (Doran, 1932). Civilizations come and go but the question of death and immortality insistentlly remains. It is a natural one and potentially present in human's psyche, easy to awaken and develop in particular moments. To pick up one example, in the moment of crisis, John Keats produces his *Ode to Nightingale* which expresses death but at the time betrays Keats' buried desire for immortality.

The problem of immortality has been the chief meditation of human being from ancient, medieval, and modern times. It was believed in and taught by religious men long before the era of monotheist religions. We see from the ancient civilization of Greece, Egypt, India, Persia, to the cult of modern philosophy, men never abandon the idea of human immortality. The idea of immortality has appeared either explicitly as a definite promises or dogmas in established and institutionalized religions like Judaism,

Christian, Islam, Buddhism, and others, or implicitly in the guise of metaphysical musing in the realm of philosophy and arts. Thus it is not surprising that the issue of death and immortality are one of the major themes of poetry, especially lyric poems.

Poetry has the ambitious project of preserving the image of *persona* or *person*. In Maeera Schrieber's words, basically "Poetics is against Death." (Schreiber, 2000). Taken literally, this simply means that because poetry will be read by people from generation to generation, the poet, the person, the voice in the poem, and the genre as well, will never cease to exist. In other words, it will be immortal. A probing discussion on these issues is presented elaborately in Grossman's *Summa Lyrica*. The following is a review of Grossman's idea of immortality in poetics.

B. Poetics and Immortality

1. The Historical and Social Immortality of Poetry

About death and the immortality of art, Grossman maintains that death is not the cause of closure in art, but a closural allusion and involved in a special way in all closural allusion. Death does secure meaning by putting an end to the freedom, that is to say, the indeterminateness, of the meaning intending in mind. Death is inside the fictional process. If death is inside the fictional process, the stopping of experience is just that sort of reduction which must intervene in the intelligibility of experience, for what that interest is worth.

On the historical and social immortality of poetry, Grossman maintains that poetry about the past is poetry about the present. The project of ode is in line with this view in that odes at some point preserve the membership of the dead (past) and the living

(present). Poetry in the present constructs the past in such a way to maintain this membership. A poem facilitates immortality by the conservation of names. Interestingly, the speaker, the object of speech, and the audience in lyrics are not named as in drama or prose. It is inferential and intuitive. Its voice is an orphan voice. The speaker in the poem can not go away, which is to say he can not die. The speaker person in the poem is the contingency of existence of the poem. The life across time of the poet in the history is a contingency of the poem.

Immortality is the simultaneity of meaning and being. Immortality can be discussed only in relation to persons. But neither immortality nor persons are conceivable outside the community. Consequently, poetry reading engages the reader with the community in the interest of immortality of all persons. One of the functions of poetry is to bring people together. A special kind of relationship that poetry function comes into being when two people are engaged in a dialogue about the poems which they both have read. Poetry has inside it not only personal recollection but indeed also the profounder principle of the continuity of the whole human world. Poetry is a case of magnanimity of the self toward the other, the beloved, the hero, the god. Poet's main motivation is trying to win the immortality. For example, in his odes, Keats is trying to use poetic to confront the prospect of death and to preserve the image of the self or the beloved. In *Ode to Nightingale*, there is an awareness that Death will come to the speaker and to the person he is talking about.

2. The Preservation of Image in Poetry

One of the attractive sides of poetry is its function in the keeping of image of the per-

son in the world. Poetry from the ancient ages until this century is basically embarking the same task of preserving image. Ancient poets, for example, monumentalized the image of hero across the time. Most ancient cases of poet seem to be situated on the business of preserving the image of persons. While speaking of the hero, the poet is taking the great privileges of the heroes on behalf of his own personhood and thus makes himself hero.

Grossman suggests that poetry has been the media through which immortality is attained. Poem preserves its own image through its poetic devices such as rhythm, rhyme, figures of thought, lines, meters, foot etc. In many ways and through its various genres, poetry has been an important and compelling instrument in preserving the image of all involved in the realm of poetic: the creator, the person, the voice, the genre, and the audience. The communication between You and Me in lyrics, which is often regarded as the source of embarrassment of the genre, makes poems a universal business. It is a business of human sympathy, not just an exaggeration of feeling. Ode, elegy, and lament are written to preserve a particular image in a critical moment by celebrating and monumentalizing the triumphant moment of man or saving the last moment of a body's life. These genres are engaged in the effort to come to term with mortality. In ode, a poet is involved in the preservations of his own existence, the persona, the voice, and the genre. The speaker in ode tries to find solace at the face of death, monumentalizes the dying moment. In so doing he preserves the image of the speaker and the poet as well. Through the creation of elegy, the speaker is trying to survive after somebody's death while at the

same time preserving the image of the dead, and the genre.

When the poem and the person have been forgotten, when the poet is dead, and the voice is unheard anymore, what remains? Some poet will preserve the very look of the poem. This is what "visual poems" can do, as Spencer's *The Altar* and *Easter Wings*. The visual appearance of the poems presents itself. When Herbert has died, and the person or the voice of the poem has been forgotten and disappeared, the physicality of the "altar" will still prevail. John Hopkins performs the effort of attaining immortality through an extreme way: unity with God, as revealed in *Chariot Comfort*.

Cheer whom, though? The hero whose
heaven-handling flung me,

Foot trod

Me? Or me that fought him? O which one is
it each? That

Night, that year

Of now done darkness I wretch lay wres-
tling with (My God!) my

God.

This unity, finely touched upon by Nicole Walker, is attained by destabilizing the subject position of the Poet-self. She argues that in the poem, "Hopkins wants to bring God down to him, to insist the connection between himself and all things, between all things and God. . . . If Hopkins' poem is able to wrestle god down to earth (...) then God can be on the world of human being" (Walker: 2000). The simple logic then, man is mortal and God is immortal. If man succeeds in achieving unity with God in such a close encounter as "wrestling," there comes his immortality.

C. The Productive Function of Death in Allan Tate's *Ode to the Confederate Dead*

Allan Tate explores the reality of death and mortality in juxtaposition with Death's function in producing new life. The scene of the poem, or what he interestingly calls ode, is a solitary graveyard, but from stanza to stanza the image of death is put together with the prospect of growth behind it. The interplay between mortality and immortality has been dimly suggested even in the first stanza, "The headstones yield their names to the element, / The wind whirls without recollection./ Death might destroy men, and whirling wind sweeps away their existence, leaving no "recollection". But this thought is immediately interrupted with the early phase of life circle in the imagery of the piling leaves as can be seen below,

In the river through the splayed leaves
Pile up, of nature the casual sacrament
To the seasonal eternity of death;
Where the falling leaves are piling up

The dead might be forgotten, "without recollection," gone with the whirl of the wind, but it should be noticed here that "driven by the fierce scrutiny/ Of heaven/", the leaves "sough the rumor of mortality." Yes, the leaves are decaying, but they still doubt their mortality and seek for a way to survive in some way. Death is so "seasonal" and "eternal" that it becomes a natural reality, rather than an instrument of mortality. (We shall see later the same figure of death in Keats' *Ode to Nightingale*). The same juxtaposition is repeated in line 65 – 66, where ugly dead bones can be the source of prospecting growth.

What shall we say of the bones, unclean?

Whose verdurous unanimity will grow?

Lines 76 – 79 give strong foundation on the whole notion of a life-in-death, or growth-in-decay. This "seasonal death" recurring through out the time in "eternity" leads up to the image of recycling mechanism we are familiar with in modern culture. Later, we find stronger hints of where the leaves are going.

We shall say only the leaves whispering
In the improbable mist of nightfall
That flies on multiple wings:
Night is the beginning and the end

While the man at "the gate" still sees "the leaves/flying, plunge and expire/ " and "whispering/In the probable mist of nightfall/ , " at the same time he comes to the realization that night "flies on multiple wing" and that it is "the beginning and the end"

Eventually the ode closes with strong images of new life emerging out of "decomposing" things.

Leave now,
The shut gate and the decomposing wall:
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush
Rout with his tongue through the hush—
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!

The abrupt gesture of closure "leave now," reiterates the idea of an *end* in the opening lines: that the "headstones" are gone with the whirling wind, and no more trace for "recollection." The "decomposing wall" in the second line discloses another prospects as previously suggested by the two-folded sense of "night" as the end of the beginning.

This closing stanza brings forth double implications. On one hand, the abrupt closural line "leave now" seems to suggest an acceptance and affirmation of death reality: Let bygones be bygones, that there is nothing more to say or to remember. But the line "Night is the beginning and the end" in the previous stanza is emphasized again immediately by the image of "decomposing wall." The word "decomposing" reminds us of the recycling mechanism in human life, which heavily depends upon the process of decomposing. Seen in this light, the closing stanza introduces the social, productive function of death which affirms human immortality. It suggests that men literally have the nature of eternity.

These images of "decomposing wall" lead up to the idea of recycle mechanism in our contemporary culture. In this mechanism, decay and death do not signify an end or mortality. In the process of decomposition, the elements and the chemical substances of the body have always existed in some form or another. Death is altogether a natural phenomenon which plays a useful and necessary role in the long course of life circle. The helping hand of death makes available the basic means of human living: Fuel, food, clothing, shelter, furnishing, all depends to a large extent upon the operation of Death. Coal and oil, for instance, originate from the decomposed organic substances. Wood for fuel, building and furniture comes from dead trees. The dead of plant life provides man with food in the form of vegetables, grains, cereals and fruits, and clothing in the form of cotton, flax, or crayon. The death of an animal brings the persons not only meat to eat but also fur and wool for clothing. The theme of life-in-death recurs in Keats's *To Autumn*, as we shall examine in the follow-

ing section.

As has been noted above, the last stanza of *Ode to The Confederate Dead* introduces the idea that man literally carries eternity in his nature. What I mean by this is that the basic elements of the body, say the chemical substances, as the law on Conservation of Mass implies, have always existed in some form or another and will go on existing forever. This is what Corliss Lamont refers to as "material or chemical immortality" which designates the absorption of the body by nature, the synthesizing of those elements into various forms of other substances and their release in the life circle. (Lamont, 1990). Thus, it might be said that in the closing stanza, the figure of death is given its productive meaning.

The very title of this poem, *Ode to the Confederate Dead*, itself evokes the social meaning of the dead. This ode, like many other odes, is intended to commemorate the dead fellows. But the occurrence of death brings homes to the man at the gate and to us the reader, the common destiny of all men. *The Confederate Dead* draws us together in the deep emotions of the heart and dramatically emphasizes the equality in our ultimate fate. The universality of death reminds us of the essential brotherhood of man. John Donne, as quoted by Lamont, puts it this way:

No man is an *Iland*, entire in its self; every man is a piece of the *continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a *Clod* be washed away by the *Sea* Europe is the lesse, as well as if *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Manor* of thy *friends* or of *thine owne* were; any man's *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; and therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls its tolls for *thee*

(Done: 1990).

D. The Richness of Death in John Keats' *Ode To a Nightingale*

Ode To a Nightingale opens with the heavily accented syllable "My heart aches", which marks mode of heightened awareness. Facing death, the speaker in this ode, like many people in the same situation, has renewed a sense of wonder of the world – a feeling heightened by the prospect of an ending. A profound paradox is strongly suggested here: that sense of mortality increases one's sense of beauty. At the highest moment of this sense of beauty, the speaker might come to an epiphanic moment, the vision and unity with God. The speaker, like that of in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Skylark*, is listening to an unseen bird whose location he can not determine. It is in "some melodious plot/ Of beachen green, and shadows of numberless." But it sings of "summer in full-throated ease." The effect of its song is so deathly that his heart aches deathly too. It is not the sound of the song alone but also the speaker's empathy with the bird which produces this effect. He is not envious but is "too happy" in its invisibility and joy, "fade away into the forest dim."

Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget

What though among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret

But the flight is not what he likes it to be. It can not take him away from the reality.

Away away! For I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,

Though the dull brain perplexes and re-

tard:

Already with thee!

Suddenly by the act of writing the poem, the speaker is united with the nightingale. The wings of Poesy are "viewless" because the flight is too high for a vision of the earth to be possible. In the ecstatic cry of "already with thee!" Keats enters the inner world of his creative process, a highest state of feeling which Feuerbach calls as "God" (Feuerbach: 1932). He claims that, "God is the unity of I and You. The highest feeling of subjectivity of man abstracted from himself. Sympathy is the prime expression of suffering held in common between I and You." It is interesting to note that what seems to be the death impulse in this ode is juxtaposed with "immerse with the immortal." A hint of death wish is apparent in these lines

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,

Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,

But in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet

The "soft incense hangs upon the boughs" and the darkness is "embalmed." The metaphorical hemlock, "My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk," adds overtones of death. The sixth stanza foreshadows the culminating moment of desire for self annihilation, desire for death. This seems to be anti-immortality, but we shall observe later that it is the poet's way of attaining life-in-death rather than death – in – life, the strategy of which is repeated in *To Autumn*

Dreading I listen; and, for many a time

I have been half in love with Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,

To take into the air my quite breath.

In the thought of “easeful death, that is” “To cease upon midnight with no pain,” there is the desire for self-transcendence. The bird continues to sing and provokes the speaker’s jealousy in its immortality. An unbridgeable abyss seems to open up between immortality and the poet.

Though was not born for death, immortal bird!
No hungry generation tread thee down

How can he at the face of death attain the immortality? The strategy then depends upon not letting Death come and defeat. Don’t let Death stop “for him”, because he “could not stop for it” himself. He says he can summon Death and come to term with it through poetic creation, “Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme.” The wish to surrender to death is mixed with the engagement on imagination and poetic creation. The speaker of the ode emphasizes how death is not the root of evil and the biggest enemy of man.

The darkness in fact leads to the thought of death and the poet begins to assume a deathly quietness and caught up in the desire to die.

Now more than ever seems it rich to die
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,

However, together with that desire, there is awareness that the wish produces a strong motive for ode, a vehicle for another existence after physical death.

In the following lines, we could find the delicate conjunction of the ideas of death and the term “rich”,

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul
abroad

In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in
vain—

To thy high requiem become a sod

He listens to the bird’s own darkness, to the ecstasy of the bird’s song. The poet is blinding himself in the glory and richness of Death, the “mother of beauty”, the supreme moments of man’s yearning for immortality in mortal moment. In this stanza, the boundaries between life and death, being and non being seem crumbling.

The poet says that he has frequently invoked Death under his “soft names.” Calling on Death to take his breathing spirit “into the air”, he ascribes the Death as “muse” that he has called upon in “many a mused rhyme.” This exhaling of death is equated with the process of composing a poem. Furthermore, in the communion of the darkness out of which the song of nightingale emerges, it seems rich to die since he is already “more than half in love” with death. He has reached the height of life experience. He does not want to degrade this ecstasy into an ordinary consciousness since it would be a pain, while all he wants is “to cease upon the midnight with no pain,” attended by the “requiem” of the bird’s song.

The nightingale itself is pouring from its souls an ecstasy and transcends the division between life and death; the bird lives, but its breath (its spirit) is taken into the air to set the ecstasy as freely as possible. The speaker intimates his prospective mortality with the bird’s immortality. And in his most exultant self-surrender to the song of the

immortal creature, he might find his immortality.

Though was not born for death, immortal bird!
No hungry generation tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:

The closing lines of the same stanza hint a final presage of the coming loss, the shattered union between the poet and the song. The tolling of “forlorn” throws the poet back to the isolation to his “sole self.”

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my soul self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well

Then the song fades away with the unseen flight of the bird,

Pass the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep
Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem
fades(...)

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: —Do I wake or sleep?

This poem gives the sense of the human making the choices of human self, aware of its deathly nature, and yet having the will to celebrate the imaginative richness of mortality. I would argue that in the “imaginative riches of mortality,” the poet, the person, the audience, and the genre itself, all find their immortal existence.

E. Embracing Death in John Keats’ To Autumn

To Autumn does not directly discuss human death. Death is not mentioned not be-

cause of the speaker’s anxiety about it but because he has come so fully in grip with it. It has come to the status of certainty and therefore needs no discussion. The speaker’s awareness and acceptance of death occurs at such a fully integrated level of consciousness that the outer world is free of death satin, but still bears death’s signature. The transient Time is moving, day to night, Spring towards Autumn. Nuts, fruits, and flowers are ripe and go overripe through the season. The “ripeness to the core” signifies the fullness of life. And what comes with the fullness is the inevitable death. But it is simply because death is always implicated in life, the life takes its special beauty.

There are details of immense closures in *To Autumn*: the “plump....hazel shells,” the “full grown lambs,” the “gathering swallows,” and the apples about to fall off the tree or to be pressed into cider. But even when the apples are going to the “cider press,” the sense of ending is intricately tied up with a sense of juicy life. Out of their damage in the cider press, the apples will give life to human being. The menace of Death is also undermined by the softening of its figure. The Autumn is “Drow’d with the fume of poppies” whose hair is “soft-lifted by the winnowing wind.”

Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind
Or on a half-reaped furrow sound sleep
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while
thy hook

Death will eventually come but by accepting and embracing it the speaker discovers again the paradox that “death is the mother of beauty.” This poem restates the theme

explored in Tate's *Ode to the Confederate Dead*: that the best antidotes to the thoughts of personal extinction is to fully understand the naturalness of death and its indispensable place in the life process. The voice of *To Autumn* is the resignation to death, a complete rendering of feelings in the face characterized by peace and dignity. With a heartbreaking intensity, the voice embraces both life and death. It shows that the acceptance of death involves beauty.

The day in the autumn may be dying but Death is figured forth as blossoming: "barred clouds blooms the soft dying day? And touch the subtle plains with rose hue." The speaker previleges Autumn as much as Spring, saying that Autumn has music just as Spring does.

"Where are the songs of spring?" "Ay, where are they?"

Think not of them, thou has music too."

Autumn or the reality of death is to be accepted by itself without any musing of the Spring or rebirth. This is a complete acceptance and embrace of Death. That way the ending of the day is not "ending" at all. The Autumn in the ode is full flowering and has its own "fruitfulness." *To Autumn* enlarges upon the thought that the acceptance of death is a path for another life. Death must come into being to open the alley for the unborn generation, for the seeds to experience the joys of living. Using biographical sources to read this ode, we might see Keats reaches his epiphanic moment which enables him to look at Death in the face with grace and dignity.

F. Conclusion

This paper has examined how poetry mediates about the problem of mortality and

the prospect of immortality. As explained by Allan Grossman in *Summa Lyrica*, poetry has its own historical and social immortality. In their own way, poets bargain with the mortal reality of their existence, that they, as any other living thing, will decay and disappear one day and be forgotten. With this reality at the background, they utter the universal psyche of human being to be immortal. Through his poetic creation, a poet monumentalizes the persona and the voice of poem and creates a legendary figure of himself, remembered and celebrated by the world.

Tate's *Ode to the Confederate Dead* explores how Death has its productive function through the image of recycling mechanism in the "decomposing wall." Death is figured out as a natural phenomenon playing an indispensable role in the course of life circle. In Keats' *Ode to Nightingale* the issue of death is presented in close juxtaposition with the theme of immortality. In the poem, death is finely described as having its own richness. In his exultant surrender to his immortal fate, the speaker in the poem finds his immortal existence. In *To Autumn*, Keats demonstrates similar efforts to undermine Death's menace. The poem underscores that the best antidotes to the menace of Death is to fully understand its naturalness and its indispensable role in the life circle. There is a complete resignation to Death such that the path for another life is widely open.

References

- Lamont, Corliss (1990), *The Illusion of Immortality*. (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company).
- Grossman, Allan (1992), *The Sighted Singer*. (London: John Hopkins University Press).

- Feuerbach, L (1957), *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper Torchbooks)
- Fergusson, F et al, eds. 1996 *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*.
Doubleday, Doran (1932), *The Problem of Immortality* (London: Mac Milan)
- Shreiber, Maeera (2002) English 6260 *Studies in Literary Traditions : Lecture*
- Walker, Nicole (2002) English 6260 *Studies in Literary Tradition: Lecture*