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### **Grief and Poetry**

No one can argue that literature, especially poetry, does not often mirror the author's daily life and surroundings. The social and political contexts of the artist's life find their way into the material produced, either on purpose by referring to specific events, or on a more subconscious level, through the tone adopted, for instance. A perfect example of this process can be found in Irish Bardic poetry, for good reasons. Firstly, we have to keep in mind that the Gaelic poets were more than balladeers and minstrels. They occupied a very important and politicized position in Gaelic society, and through their material it is possible to glimpse the political events of the time and the fluctuations of fortunes. In a more metaphysical aspect, we could say that they represented Ireland's soul, meaning that the prominent state of mind of a specific period can be felt in poetry as a mirror of the collective psyche. Based on this idea, and considering that the seventeenth century saw the slow death of many of the Gaelic traditional ways of life, we will demonstrate that the Gaelic poetry of this era illustrates the five stages of grieving identified by Kubler-Ross.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross is a significant figure in the field of palliative care and is deemed as a pioneer in the study of the mourning process. It has to be mentioned that her theory of the five stages of grief is not unique and the number of phases identified vary

depending of the author and the culture analyzed. Maurice Eisenbruch, in his article “Cross-Cultural Aspects of Bereavement I: A Conceptual Framework for Comparative Analysis,” acknowledges this fact. He writes, “The differences of opinion about the number of stages traversed by the grieving person (three, four, or five) attest to the difficulty of assessing these stages” (287). Although Eisenbruch hints to a certain disagreement towards the number of phases found in the mourning process itself, specialists agree that there are “sequential stages of grief” (Eisenbruch 284). Kübler-Ross’s understanding of the phenomenon is used in our analysis of Irish poetry for very specific reasons.

Kübler-Ross’s first elaborated her theory of the grieving process in 1969, the year that saw the publication of the book, On Death & Dying. Between 1969 and 2004, the year of her death, she produced an important amount of research and literature on the topic, gaining credibility in the field of palliative care. Within this steady intellectual output, Kübler-Ross constantly updated her theory, following the psychological discoveries and adapting the explanation of the phases to modern values and realities.

Explanations of the five phases of grief are found in Kübler-Ross’s last book published, On Grief and Grieving (2004). The key element in approaching the framework elaborated by Kübler-Ross is that the various stages are not set in a specific order per se. In her book, she acknowledges the individuality of the experience of loss. Every occurrence of grief has its own characteristics and the five stages of grief theory is more intended to act as a guideline for people in the process of mourning than a precise sequence set in stone. The stages, she states, are “tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief” (7). Grieving

as inspiration for poetic creation is an acknowledged fact and analysis of material written by certain poets such as William Wordsworth in that context is frequent. Kurt Fosso, in his article “A ‘World of Shades’: Mourning, Poesis, and Community in William Wordsworth’s ‘The Vale of Esthwaite’” refers to “the powers of mourning and loss” as being the core of Wordsworth’s poetic creativity (631).

When analyzing bereavement poetry, authors usually focus on material written by a specific writer or written in a specific context, like keening poetry for instance. The fact that specific psychological states can be identified through the reading of a poet’s material is recognized by scholars and critics, as illustrated by Fosso’s remark on Wordsworth’s work. We have already explored how grieving is an individual experience following a loss. This loss, in relation with Kübler-Ross’s theory, is usually understood as the death of someone close. It is not, however, limited to human mortality and may be used in any situation implying a drastic change in one’s life. Keeping this idea in mind, one has to ask the following question: is there such a thing as collective grieving?

Maurice Eisenbruch, in his article “Cross-Cultural Aspects of Bereavement I: A Conceptual Framework for Comparative Analysis” discusses how the culture to which one belongs affects the experience of grief. Through his analysis of behavioral patterns observed in the context of losses, he mentions that the manifestations of grieving models, like Kubler-Ross’s theory, are not limited to the personal experience. He writes “... [The patterns of behavior] suggest the applicability of these definitions and patterns of grief and mourning to other experiences of loss, such as the loss of a homeland for a large group of people” (284). In his article, Eisenbruch explains how a parallel can be made between personal and collective grief, exemplified by an “excessive clinging to the past

culture” (299). He also writes that pathological manifestations of grief may be experienced by an entire social group in situations of loss such as uprooting (300).

This claim gives credibility to our thesis and brings us to demonstrate how the seventeenth century may be understood as a period of loss for the people living in Ireland. Between 1601 and 1700, many events occurred that, in consequence, drastically changed the Irish cultural template. In regard to the state of traditional poetry, the Battle of Kinsale had a severe impact on the lifestyle of the professional poets. In regard to the poets, Foster writes, “This mainly hereditary caste [the poets] now faced ruin and, rightly or wrongly, they inscribed in their fall the defeat of an entire people” (242). Following the Flight of the Earls to the continent in 1607, Ireland saw its leaders fleeing to the continent, Spain more specifically.

The years 1606 and 1608 sees the first hints of the religious oppression towards Catholics that would be intensified by Cromwell with the plantations of Ulster, Derry and other counties who were confiscated from Catholic landowners and given to Anglican settlers (Foster 114-115). James I, in an original effort to encourage the conversion of his new subjects to Protestantism, “offered his approval for a systematic process of colonization in Ireland” (Foster 114). A slow abandonment of Gaelic culture and traditions occurred prior to the victory of Cromwell in 1650. Foster describes how the Irish landowners showed their endorsement of English culture “by adopting the English language, by supporting the spread of English law into their territories, by dressing after the English fashion” (116). The first half of the seventeenth century, via the few examples mentioned, may easily be understood as being the beginning of a culture’s slow death.

Following Cromwell victory in 1650, active oppression against the Irish-Catholics is found in Ireland, the most significant in relation to our topic being the Cromwellian confiscation of the lands owned by Catholics. Eisenbruch mentions how the phenomenon of collective grief may be observed in cases where a people saw the loss of its homeland and was uprooted. The deportation of the prominently Gaelic-speaking Catholics to Connacht by Cromwell's forces describes just such a situation. Ó Tuama and Kinsella write that "85% of Irish land was transferred into the hands of the new colonists and the old Irish aristocratic order disappeared" (xix). Much more happened during this time period, bringing the Gaels to a state of grief and depriving them of their autonomy as a result of their loss of freedom to practice their religion and traditions. This prohibition became especially prominent after the introduction of the anti-Catholic penal laws of 1695 (Foster 136-138).

The use of the five stages of grief in the analysis of the Irish poem, "The Lament for Art O'Leary" (Poems of the Dispossessed No. 62), is mentioned by Patricia Lysaght as she writes, "Recent work suggests that the five stages of adjustment to dying or to the death of a loved one, identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross ... can be recognised [sic] in Eibhlín Ní Chonaill's lament..." (74). The poem was composed by Eileen Dubh O'Connell, the aunt of Daniel O'Connell, for the funeral of her husband, Art O'Leary, who died in 1773. The lament is significant both on a literary and a sociological level as it closely follows the pattern of traditional Irish keening and includes a detailed description of a memorial service.

"The Lament for Art O'Leary," being divided in five parts, is very interesting because its similarity to Kübler-Ross's grieving sequence is observable. Keeping this

structural resemblance in mind, our analysis is organized in three phases. First is an explanation of one of the five stages of grief. Elements of the given phase are then identified within “The Lament for Art O’Leary.” Using the *caoineadh* as template, we conclude by analyzing poems found in Poems of the Dispossessed, which have been selected based on chronology to demonstrate the presence of Kübler-Ross’s model on a collective level.

The first stage identified by Kübler-Ross is denial. The Oxford English Dictionary defines this concept as “the denying of the existence or reality of a thing” (OED). Denial may be understood in two ways. If it relates to someone experiencing the upcoming loss, it may be interpreted, as worded by Kübler-Ross, to “look like disbelief” (8). The main idea behind the concept is an inability, at first, to appreciate the reality of the loss which could go as far as refusing the possibility of its actuality. In relation to the mourner, it does not mean that the person does not comprehend the death of his or her loved one. The denial mentioned is more in tune with the appreciation of the event than the death itself. Kübler-Ross explains “[t]his does not mean that you literally don’t know your loved one has died. It means you come home and you can’t believe your wife won’t come home at any minute” (8). An example can be found in the first part of “The Lament for Art O’Leary.”

The concept of denial manifests itself in three ways in the first part of Eileen O’Connell’s poem. The first segment, as Seán Ó Tuama points out in his book, Repossessions, mainly constitutes Eileen’s “memories of their lives together, immediate memories of the murder” (88). When put in conjunction with the stage of denial, the focus offered in the first section of the text is interesting. The emphasis on the past can be

understood as a way to avoid actualizing the event. The backward look is used as a way to embellish the memories recounted and avoid addressing the situation in the present:

When I saw you one day  
By the market-house gable  
My eye gave a look  
My heart shone cut (2-4)

By using an imagery common in love poetry, Eileen conveys an idealized depiction of her encounter with her husband. Reference to the past is prominent in most of this section of the poem and may be interpreted as a refusal to actualize the death of Art. This negation becomes obvious when analyzing the tense used in the narration. Eileen uses the past when recalling the qualities of O'Leary and the future when projecting the reaction of her children to the death of their father. She states, "[O]ur little pet Conchur / and baby Fear O Laoghaire, / they will ask at once / where I left their father" (38-45). The only stanza where she reacts on the immediate moment is when she issues the order, "My steadfast love! / Arise, stand up/ and come with myself..." (69-71). Here, the concept of disbelief inherent in the stage of denial is clearly present.

Establishing a parallel between the steps of grieving and the events of the seventeenth century, we will evaluate the period corresponding to the phase of denial, from approximately 1601 to 1620, as the social changes at that point are not yet obvious. The poem we will analyze is categorized as being transitional by Ó Tuama and Kinsella and is titled "You that are jealous and have a wife" (No. 6). Considering the traditional convention of the Bardic schools to refer to Ireland as a woman, the text takes a very interesting aspect when put in relation with the historical events of the early seventeenth

century, such as the Battle of Kinsale in 1601. The overall intention of the poet is to diminish his audience's preoccupations:

You that are jealous and have a wife

Go face the rain like other men.

If you want a hope of peace

Question not your woman's moods. (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 1-4)

Taking a political reading of the poem, one has to keep in mind that the social landscape of Ireland experienced many changes, with the crowning of James I in 1603 and the surrender of Hugh Ó Neill, the plantation of Ulster in 1606, and the Flight of the Earls in 1607. The above stanza addresses a sentiment of uncertainty expected during times of changes in power. Considering the many political transitions happening at that time, the poet's call for passivity is reminiscent of the refusal to appreciate the reality of the situation. The poet later says, "The wisest thing to be/ is a witless harmless fool" (15-16).

The sentiment of disbelief characteristic of the stage of denial is found in the third stanza:

Don't trust the sight of your own eyes.

Half of what you know, know not

Take proven news to be a lie.

Don't believe your own ears. (9-12)

Although the backward look found in the keening is not clearly present in the text, there is a similarity of tone with relation to time in both texts. Neither of the poems addresses the situation through the present. While "The Lament for Art O'Leary" negates the present by focusing on the past, "You that are jealous and have a wife" does so by

encouraging passivity instead of action. Both cases imply “the denying of the existence or reality of a thing” (OED).

The second stage of grieving is anger. While denial is a refusal to accept the reality of the loss, anger can be understood as the actualization of the death. The OED defines the concept as “The active feeling provoked against the agent; passion, rage; wrath, ire, hot displeasure” (OED). This phase may manifest itself in many ways, either by blaming an outside element or directing the responsibility of the bereavement towards oneself. Two components are constant – the realization of the loss and the revolt against it, characterized by blaming the situation on something or someone. The stages appear “as you accept the reality of the loss” (Kübler-Ross 11). The key point is acknowledging the permanence of the new situation.

An example of revolt against the death of Art is found in the second segment of “The Lament for Art O’Leary.” It is exemplified in three ways in the text. The first manifestation of revolt relates to an altercation between Eileen and Art’s sister. Ó Tuama writes, in regard to the verbal battle between the two women, “This kind of battle between wives and sisters-in-law occurs in funeral laments as far back as ancient Greek times” (90). In the narration, the argument takes place after Eileen is found asleep during the night of her husband’s wake. In this episode, the two women first blame each other for Art’s demise. In the first stanza, the sister mentions how her brother would have been better served by another woman than Eileen:

Many fine-made women

From Cork of the sails

To Droichead na toime

Would bring you great herds

And a yellow gold handful

And not sleep in their room

On the night of your wake (80-87)

In this stanza, Eileen is attacked in two aspects, the first being that she married Art without her family's consent (Ó Tuama 85). The "yellow gold handful" hints towards the dowry Art would have received from the O'Connell family if they had agreed to the union. The second attack relates to Eileen's inability to fulfill her responsibility as wife when she fell asleep.

A second manifestation of anger is performed by the two women as they both say,

Long loss, bitter grief

I was not by your side

When the bullet was fired

So my right side could take it (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 106-109)

These two examples echo Kübler-Ross's comments concerning the way anger manifests itself. She writes, "Anger does not have to be logical to be valid" (11). The anger may be directed against others or oneself, and as illustrated by the poem, it may manifest itself by feeling responsible for the loss, although there's nothing that could have been done.

As has been mentioned, anger appears once the permanence of the situation can no longer be denied. In regard to Ireland's transition from a relatively independent territory to widespread British rule, the loss can no longer be denied following Cromwell's victory in 1649. The poem "A Shrewish, Barren, Bony, Nosey Servant" (No. 36), composed during the second half of the seventeenth century by Dáibhí Ó Bruadair,

illustrates this. In their introduction to Poems of the Dispossessed, Ó Tuama and Kinsella mention recurrent elements in Ó Bruadair's poetry. They write, "Ó Bruadair, in a few bitter lyrics, rails against the new proletariat emerging in his time" (xxvii). The poem may be interpreted on two levels, individual and collective.

On the first level, Ó Bruadair manifests his anger against the lack of respect now found towards his status of poet. He writes "A shrewish, barren, bony, nose servant/ refused me when my throat was parched in crisis" (1-2), expressing his discontentment with the woman. He references traditional aspects of the professional poets such as the power of satire – "If I cursed her crime and herself, she'd learn her lesson" (5), and the duty of genealogist – "The Law requires I gloss over her pedigree" (11). These references lead us to see the anger as a reaction aimed at the loss of significance of the role played by the poet at that point in comparison to the Gaelic traditional social system in Ireland. Foster mentions, in reference to the English newcomers and the poets, "Gaelic bards were perceived as a particular obstacle by the colonizers" (234), partly because of their political power, but also "because [the Gaelic bards] epitomized a cultural tradition which the occupiers hoped to destroy" (234). Keeping this observation in mind, one can easily read the poet's anger towards the servant as blaming the class she represents for the death of the traditions the bards "epitomized."

Moving on to the third stage of mourning, one must now discuss what is implied by the term "bargaining". As indicated by its name, the phase is characterised by the idea of negotiation and a desire to return to a time prior to the loss. Kübler-Ross comments that, at this stage, "We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt" (17). The loss is acknowledged but not yet accepted and a truce is attempted between the

mourner and the fatality. Many of the examples offered by Kübler-Ross in her book relate to prayer. These examples hint at a hope that the situation could be returned to its original state by an outside force.

In regard to “The Lament for Art O’Leary,” this stage is an interesting one, the bargaining pattern being slightly more abstract in its manifestation. In this segment, Art’s demise is acknowledged when Eileen refers to the “ugly traitor Morris, / who took the man of my house” (131-132). An example of negotiation is found in the fourth stanza of the segment as she addresses Art:

Rise up now,  
Put on your immaculate  
Fine suit of clothes,  
Put on your black beaver  
And pull on your gloves. (151-155)

This scene may be understood in two very distinct ways. By telling her husband to put on his clothes, Eileen may be understood as making a last attempt to negate death. The following lines, in which she tells Art to “take the narrow road Eastward” (158) would be seen as a last opportunity for Eileen to avoid facing the ultimate finality of the situation. Another interpretation can be made in view of Kübler-Ross’s comments concerning this step of the mourning process. She writes, “After death, bargaining often moves from the past to the future. We may bargain that we will see our loved ones in heaven” (20). The main point found in this statement is that the negotiation may include the other world.

In ballads such as “Thomas the Rhymer,” the narrow road is often used in conjunction with the road to heaven. Keeping this idea in mind, it gives the genealogical

information in the fifth stanza a very interesting tone. The fact that Eileen's bargaining may relate to her husband's comfort in the afterlife more than a return to his existence is enforced by the following verses: "My love, and my beloved! / not my people who have died" (164-165). She does not address Art as part of the living at this point, although the last line of the segment illustrates the desire to return to the past: "For I thought myself / when I bought your uniform / the world could not kill you" (201-203).

Both Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's depiction of the stage of bargaining and our own analysis of "The Lament for Art O'Leary" reference what could be called religious thought, in which there may be negotiation with the divine to return to the past situation or to receive help in the process of coping. Keeping in mind how uprooting is seen as a good example of a community's losses in regard to collective grieving, the poem now discussed relates to the Irish-Catholics' exile to Connacht in 1652-54. The poem "Exodus to Connacht" (No. 31), written by Dorcha Ó Mealláin, translate both the concept of bargaining in hope of regaining what is lost and the underlying religiosity found in the phase itself. The plea for help is obvious in the first stanza of the poem: "In the name of the father full of virtue / in the name of the Holy Ghost in power" (1-2). In this example, the bargain appears to be faith in God and the Catholic Church to survive the loss. To convey this message, the poet makes a parallel between Israel and Ireland: "Identical their God and ours" (41). The concept of bargaining is found in two ways. Firstly, the prominence of religious figures within the poem, such as "Sweet Colm Cille" (9) and "Michael of miracles" (5), translates the expectation for the Irish to receive help from such figures. The poet also uses the example of the Biblical exodus to enforce the

plausibility of divine help: “Moses got what he requested, / religious freedom --- and from Pharaoh” (39-40). The negotiation itself is stated clearly in the last stanza:

God who art generous, O Prince of Blessings,  
Behold the Gael, stripped of authority.  
Now as we journey Westward into Connacht  
Old friends we'll leave behind us in their grief. (49-53).

As can be observed, the expectation of being brought back to a state prior to the loss in exchange of a given action can be found throughout the text.

Moving on to the fourth step of mourning, we now discuss despair. This phase can be seen as a transition of the experience from being centered towards the past to being oriented in the present. Kübler-Ross writes “Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level” (20). The main difference between the previous stages and this one is the fact that, while the three first stages refuse the acceptance of the loss and focus on the past, at the fourth step of the process the inevitability of the loss can no longer be denied.

In “The lament for Art O’Leary,” Art’s sister acts as narrator of the fourth segment and, as explained by Seán Ó Tuama, includes “a vision she had which portended evil, and of a plague in Cork city which caused the death of her retinue” (95). This section of the poem stands out from the others in part because of the darker tone adopted:

Were it not for the smallpox  
And the black death  
And the spotted fever  
Those rough horse-riders

Would be rattling their reins (213-217)

The reference to “smallpox,” “black death,” and “spotted fever” are imagery easily connected to the idea of desperation. It may also relate to the state of misery found in Ireland at the time of the poem’s composition. The concept of fatality is prominent in Art’s sister’s discourse: “Our white mansion had fallen, / the Gaortha had withered, / our slim hounds were silent” (226-228). This imagery is interesting as it is reminiscent of the connection between nature and kingship, in which nature mourns the death of the ruler. In regard to despair, it strengthens the lack of hope inherent in the concept.

Bearing in mind that despair is “a state of mind in which there is entire want of hope” (OED), it is at the beginning of the eighteenth century that Ireland reaches this point, with the failure of the house Stuart to regain the throne of the British Isles (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 155). The poem “No Help I’ll Call” (No. 53) illustrates Ó Rathaille’s loss of hope in any intervention from the house of Stuart in Ireland. Symbols attributed to death are found in the poem: “No help I’ll call till I’m put in the narrow coffin” (1). This conveys the idea of hopelessness connected to the concept of despair. Ó Rathaille’s work can be understood as both an individual and social lamentation. He writes, “Our land, our shelter, our woods and our level ways / are pawned for a penny by a crew from the land of Dover” (7-8). These two lines hint towards the state of misery found in Ireland at that point in time. The despair of the poet is more obvious in the following stanza:

Incessant my cry; I spill continual tears;

Heavy my ruin; I am one in disarray.

No music is nigh as I wail about the roads. (13-15)

As mentioned in the description of the stage, its distinction relates to the fact that it actualizes grief. The poem translates an overwhelming interpretation of the loss, leaving nothing to the poet but to go “[into] the grave with [his] cherished chief” (27).

The last stage identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is acceptance. She specifies in her book that this stage does not imply the cessation of pain towards the loss. She writes “This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality” (25). It implies the actualization of the loss with a forward look, contrasting with the backward look found in the three first stages and focus of the moment and loss that characterised the phase of despair.

The fifth segment of “The lament for Art O’Leary” can easily be considered as the shortest element of the poem. The forward look is evident in the second and third lines of the text, as Eileen addresses her late husband:

Your corn-stacks are standing,

Your yellow cows milking

Your grief upon my heart

All Munster couldn’t cure. (2-5)

The acceptance of the new situation is exemplified by the fertility of the farm. Nature has ceased to mourn Art’s death and life continues. Eileen’s reference to her grief echoes the idea that acceptance does not take the pain of the loss away, but it brings the individual to a point where he or she can accept to go on. This acceptance is found in her reference to her son entering “...that school / not for study or for music / but to bear clay and stones” (285-287).

Although short, the poem “I am Raifteirí” (No.65), written by Antoine Ó Reachtabhra is a good example of the stage of acceptance. The state of peace reached by the blind poet is hinted as he writes “I am Raifteirí, the poet, full of courage and love / my eyes without light, in calmness serene” (1-2). The reference to his “eyes without light” in conjunction with serenity implies that Raifteirí accepts his sightlessness. The forward look mentioned in our explanation of the stage of acceptance is illustrated in the text as Raifteirí relates “taking my way by the light of my heart / feeble and tired to the end of my road” (3-4). The concepts of a way and a road both relate to the idea of moving forward. They also allude to the fact that he is facing his own mortality. This interpretation is strengthened by the closing line which describes him “performing music to empty pockets” (6). Although it refers to the absence of patrons to finance the poets, the poem illustrates how the poet, by accepting his state, manages to overlook the difficulties of his profession and, to some extent, perceives music as being its own reward.

It is clear from this examination that art and poetry can be used to understand an individual psychological state of mind. Based on the concept that artists and writers are influenced by their surroundings, analysing the literary material of a given culture based on a psychological model makes a certain sense. Using a metaphor inspired from nature, one could easily say that a forest is nothing more than the sum of all its trees. These works show that human collectives follow a similar pattern; a community, although comprised of a multitude, will still echo the emotions experienced by its individuals. Therefore, it is not at all surprising to see grief expressed in Irish writing, as it is a nation that has experienced great oppression.

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