

The Rhetoric of Loss:
Dryden's Elegy upon the Death of Lord Hastings

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A gifted and versatile genius, Dryden lent his support to the emerging literary culture and through his practice showed how a writer should tune his art to new realities and at the same time maintain his distinctive and independent status. He aligned himself with the political establishment without compromising his freedom. He became the public writer par excellence, participating in the raging political controversies, championing the causes of stability and enlightenment and attacking the forces of chaos and obscurantism. True in his choice of values he was a Restoration man and the vehemence with which he incorporated these values in his writings illustrate his emotional identification with those values and the conviction with which he composed his elegies, eulogies and satires. Dryden's identification with a certain set of values was in keeping with the ideological orientations of the age. No other age has so openly championed any one set of values and inevitably it affected all areas of representation whether aesthetic or social. Politics has a deep relationship with literature, for as a vehicle of ideology, it defines "all those systems of representation (aesthetic, religious, judicial and others) which shape the individual's mental picture of lived experience". (Selden 1985: 43)

With grief as its central aesthetic emotion, elegy has the peculiar advantage of arousing a universal sympathetic response. Generally elegy is written to mourn the death of someone either very dear to the poet or to articulate the poet's meditations on the ephemeral nature of the earthly existence. By its very nature, the elegiac form is most suited to express a pathetic mood. Elegy which has been traditionally used as an occasion for generalized meditation on death stood modified during the Restoration period. The funeral verse in the Restoration period which was

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occasioned by the death of not only kings and princes but also by the poet's own kinsmen was a form of tribute to a person who symbolized some important public virtue which needed to be remembered and recorded for the benefit of a degenerate age. The Restoration poets introduced various modifications in the traditional mode. For example very few pastoral elegies were written during this period. The form was discarded because it presented the truth in a needlessly elaborate manner. Most often pastoral elegies begin with lamentation and end with consolation. The pastoral paraphernalia often tends to minimize the element of grief in it but in Dryden's elegies, there is no attempt to isolate the emotion of grief from the concreteness of fact. Even those elegies which Dryden was commissioned to compose have extremely moving passages but he does not set out to offer consolation by referring to the immortality of the human soul or by treating death as the beginning of a better and happier life. Even when he offers an apotheosis, it is entirely in terms of the Christian theology which does not minimize the sense of pain or grief.

Among Dryden's independent poems, the largest number comprises elegies and epitaphs. This fact has often been ignored by critics and historians. Most studies of Dryden's poetry identify his poetic oeuvre with his satires, treating his panegyrics and other poems as the by-products of a genius which was primarily satirical. The reason for this is not far to seek. The neo-classical period in English literary history which was inaugurated by Dryden is almost always identified with the satire. Even T.S. Eliot and Mark Van Doren hardly go beyond Dryden's satirical poems. In fact, the Arnoldian dictum that the neo-classical period was a period of prose and wit, singularly lacking in the warmth and luxury of genuine creative imagination, has more or less continued even now. The Restoration period did not look upon literature as self-expression; the socio-political turmoil's of the period could not allow a literature which existed only as a source of amusement and entertainment. The Restoration writer found himself living in surroundings which were charged with various kinds of controversies. The civil war which had ushered in a brief period of Republicanism was in fact a symptom of these controversies reaching a high political pitch. Republicanism did not last long and the Restoration of Monarchy in 1660 did not end these

controversies. The writer could not escape these controversies if he wanted to make an honest appeal to his contemporaries. The writer and the reader shared the same ethos and the poet was expected to mirror this ethos in his writings. In this process older values and ideals had of necessity to be modified. Values such as nobility, rank and glory which had been enshrined in the Elizabethan verse were now viewed in a new perspective which was based on honesty. Honesty was something which was valued in public life and the poet as the chief spokesman of public life had to cultivate this ideal himself. The three major kinds of poetry- panegyric, satire and elegy were deeply affected by the Restoration ethos. Each of these kinds was concerned with the ideals of conduct and also the reality of the situation in which these ideals were to be maintained.

Dryden wrote his first elegy while still at Cambridge. During his Cambridge years the political condition was extremely unstable. Cromwell's forces were rampaging through the country and the Royalists were being hunted and executed. Dryden's response to these executions is not known nor do we know about the nature of his political allegiance in those days. It was at this time that a young and enthusiastic Royalist, Lord Hastings died on the eve of his wedding. A number of poets composed elegies in Hastings's memory and Dryden's poem was included in a memorial volume called **Lachrymae Musarum**. This is the first poem which gives us a glimpse into Dryden's response to public events and his assimilation of his literary education. Though weak in versification and derivative in imagery and conceit the organization of the material and the overtly rhetorical style of the poem do give us some hint about Dryden's later works. The poem suggests that though quite young Dryden was able to organize his poem around the universal theme of death and the connection of that death with the prevailing political events. The poem is built round three basic ideas. The first is the irony that death should fall upon the young while the old survives. The second idea is of beauty powerless against the inexorability of death and the third idea is that of learning which has been nullified by the untimely death. The poem opens with a series of questions which are not entirely rhetorical in nature and which bring out the disillusionment and frustration of the poet occasioned by Hastings's death.

*Must Noble Hastings Immaturely die,
 (The Honour of his ancient Family?)
 Beauty and Learning thus together meet,
 To bring a Winding for a Wedding-sheet?
 Must Vertue prove Death's Harbinger?
 Must She,
 With him expiring, feel Mortality?
 Is Death (Sin's wages) Grace's now ? shall Art
 Make us more Learned, only to depart ?
 If Merit be Disease, if Vertue Death;
 To be Good, Not to be, who'd then bequeath
 Himself to Discipline? Who'd not esteem
 Labour a Crime, Study self-murder deem?²*

(Dryden "Upon the Death of Lord Hastings" 1910:11.1-12)

Against the background of these questions in which virtue, grace, art, discipline, labour and study have been questioned, there follows a couplet which seems to invalidate these questions. From the elegiac mood Dryden shifts his focus to criticize the ignorance and impudence of his own generation:

*Our Noble Youth now have pretence to be
 Dunces securely, Ign'rant healthfully.*

(Ibidem: 11.13-14)

This couplet relieves Dryden's gloom because Hastings was an uncommon young man who continued to acquire graces and virtues, beauty and learning unmindful of the fact that these qualities were no longer in use. Dryden praises Hastings's mastery over languages and proceeds to compare him with Alexander who had conquered men but not their languages. Thus the comparison is entirely to the advantage of Hastings. Hastings was a young apostle who was eager to conquer all Europe not with arms but with learning. This comparison connects the poem with the contemporary situation where Republican soldiers were hunting down Royalist scholars and poets and trying to prove that the sword is mightier than the pen. Hastings is transformed into a super-human creature and though such descriptions are highly exaggerated, they are perfectly in consonance with the traditional elegiac conventions:

Heav'ns Gifts, which do, like falling Stars, appear

*Scatter'd in Others; all, as in their Speear,
Were fix'd and conglobate in's Soul, and thence
Shone th'row his Body with sweet Influence;
Letting their Glories so on each Limb fall,
The whole Frame render'd was Celestial.
Come, learned Ptolomy, and tryal make,
If thou this Hero's Altitude canst take;
But that transcends thy skill; thrice happie all,
Could we but prove thus Astronomical.*

(Ibidem: 11.33-42)

In his scholarly attributes Hastings is made out to be an accomplished Renaissance man and Dryden clearly suggests that the Renaissance ideals are no longer valued by the mobocracy which has been unleashed by the new Republicanism. Dryden transforms Hastings into a new star and lavishes on him the typical Royalist images such as those of morn, noon, ray or sun. These Royalist images are reinforced even in the passage about smallpox which had killed Hastings. It is obvious from these lines that Dryden's grief was not only personal but it had sufficient general appeal. In a bid to widen the emotional scope of the poem and remove it from the centrality of the personal Dryden takes care to insert passages and lines relating to some general intellectual or political problem of the Restoration period. The most important of such insertions is his dramatisation of the old-young theme.

The young Hastings's intellectual ancestry included such revered name as Seneca, Cato, Numa and Caesar who were learned, virtuous, pious and great and who through the rare combination of their uncommon gifts accomplished a universal metamorphosis. They were all allowed a full course of their lives. In Hastings all their gifts had congregated and had he been allowed to live as long as they, he would have gone far ahead of them in matters of intellectual achievements. The pre-Restoration period belonged to the youth. The average Royalist of those years was at least ten years younger than the average parliamentarian and the Civil War was seen by many as a generation war in which grey-haired Puritan generals, left gay young blades dead on the battle field. True that Hastings had not died on the battle- field but Dryden likens his death to that of a hero. His grief at Hastings's death did not diminish his anger over the indiscriminate slaughter of the young by the Puritans.

This experience leads Dryden to express his anguish through a series of questions towards the end of the elegy. After referring to the classical lineage of Hastings Dryden articulates this anguish :

*Must all these ag'd Sires in one Funeral
Expire ? All die in one so young, so small?
Who, had he liv'd his life out, his great Fame
Had swoln 'bove any Greek or Romane name?
But hasty Winter, with one blast, hath brought
The hopes of Autumn, Summer, Spring, to nought.
Thus fades the Oak i' th' sprig, i' th' blade the Corn;
Thus, without Young, this Phoenix dies, new born.
Must then old three- legg'd gray- beards, with their
Gout,
Catarrhs, Rheums. Aches, live three Ages out?
Times Offal, onely fit for th' Hospital,
Or t' hang an Antiquaries room withal;
Must Drunkards, Lechers, spent with Sinning, live
With such helps as Broths, Possits, Physick give?
None live but such as should die? Shall we meet
With none but Ghostly Fathers in the Street?*

(Ibidem: 11.73-88)

Such a pessimistic vision coming as it does from the pen of a young undergraduate is a testimony to Dryden's perceptive insight into the maladies of his age which was to acquire significant dimensions in his later and more mature poems. These lines anticipate the terrible closing lines of Pope's *Dunciad* in which the poet is engulfed by a vision of universal collapse and darkness. Dryden leaves the reader in no doubt that the vein of satire in a poem of grief was a deliberate act and that elegy does not only mourn the loss of nobility and virtue, it also expresses a mood of anger at the declining of the values:

*Grief makes me rail; Sorrow will force its way;
And Show'rs of Tears, Tempestuous Sighs best lay.
The Tongue may fail; but over- flowing Eyes
Will weep out lasting streams of Elegies.*

(Ibidem: 11.89-92)

Had Dryden concluded his poem with these lines nothing would have been taken away from its compact structure. But he does not stop here. The last sixteen lines of the poem are

addressed to Hastings “virgin-widow” and are in the nature of a consolation which was traditionally an essential part of an elegiac poem. The consolation itself is couched in typical Restoration language. He asks her to take consolation in the fact that Hastings has been vouchsafed a superior life and by this he has been saved from the contaminations of the period. Through his superior existence he would be the grand-sire of a far numerous progeny than would have been possible in his earthly existence. He would be a model of virtue, knowledge and worth and thus would be emulated by others. This method of Platonizing the emotion of grief was in accordance with the prevailing condition. Dryden does not offer sentimental religious ideas in a conventional manner. He urges her to consummate her marriage by transforming Hastings into an ideal. Dryden has done the same thing himself and he asks Elizabeth to follow his example. When Hastings is enshrined into a work of art and is deeply embedded in the sacred memory of his virgin widow he will become an everlasting example and cast his radiations on England which is torn by the civil war. The poem closes with a befitting reminder to Elizabeth:

*Erect no Mausoleums: for his best
Monument is his Spouses Marble brest.*
(Ibidem: 11.107-108)

Hastings is finally liberated from Space and Time. Memory and poetry would perpetuate his existence. Though Dryden does not directly refer to the platonic idea of the immortality of the soul, the apotheosis does contain similar overtones.

“Upon the Death of Lord Hastings” is, as has been pointed out earlier, the first extant poem of Dryden. The foregoing analysis of the poem brings out Dryden’s awareness of the private and the public worlds and his capacity to fuse them into unified artistic structure. Though the theme of power is not articulated in a succinct and unambiguous manner, there are enough suggestions in the poem to make the reader aware that Dryden utilized this personal occasion to offer his reflections on the nature of the time. In 1659, when he condoled the death of Oliver Cromwell, he exploited this vein in an aesthetically more mature and satisfying manner. As a pre-Restoration poem, the

one on Hastings attempts to achieve a balance between action and character. Although the element of action is insignificant in the poem as it is made up of a series of meditations, it does possess development and the poet does not solely concentrate on Hastings's personal attributes. He glorifies Hastings but the larger society is also given its due share.

REFERENCES

1. Selden, Raman 1985. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Kentucky ; Kentucky University press.
2. Dryden, John 1910. *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. John Sargeant. London: Oxford University press. All subsequent quotations from Dryden's poetry will be from this edition and will quote line numbers.