

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 1 January 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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The Portrayal of Death in Donne's "Death Be Not Proud" and Jaroslav Seifert's "The Mistress of the Poets": A Comparative Study

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John Donne 1572-1631

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Death – A Perennial Subject

This paper compares the differences in the approaches to death between John Donne's sonnet "Death Be Not Proud" and the Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert's "The Mistress of the Poets," and highlights the notes of defiance and glorification in the poems respectively. Whereas Donne challenges the might of death and admonishes it not to be proud, Seifert imbues death with such glorifications as "the lady of all pains," "the lute of lamentations," "the mistress of the poets," "the empress of all killing," "the younger sister of decay," and "an instant, a scratching of the pen." Death, a perennial subject in literature, is a dread for many. However, people's attitudes toward it vary. The poems in question necessitate a re-examination of our attitudes in the chiaroscuro of mortality and immortality.



Jaroslav Seifert 1901-1986

Death: Be Not Proud

Donne's imperative, "be not proud" is a foreclosure of death's depredations; a pointer to the futility of our undue dread. While he personifies death, he also divests it of its might insofar as its fancied supposition as being invincible is but a chimera. Thus what Donne focuses on is a metaphysical ratiocination foregrounded upon a studied dismissal of fear:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee

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Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, not yet canst thou kill me (1-4).

Disillusionment

In contradistinction to Donne's derision of death, making death defenseless, and reducing it to a phenomenon of utter inconsequence, Seifert presents a disillusionment of his imaginings as to the relative pleasantness of death on different occasions, or in different circumstances. Donne's attitude being critical, and the lines being acerbic, contrasts with Seifert's milder expressions.

Preferred Locale for Dying and Death

The locale of death in Seifert's poem, such as, "to die amidst spring blossoms," "to die at the Venice carnival," or to die "in bed at home" are presented at the backdrop of a romantic confusion, or a phantasmagoria of besotted choices. The poet's nostalgic remembrances of "Those foolish moments of first love," when one is "head over heels," led him to digress from the supposed beauty that could lie in dying "in bed at home." Thus a contrast relates to a difference between Donne's resentment and Seifert's covert predilection for death's seductions. Again, Seifert's wish to die "in bed at home" borders on an execution of a sort of pact with death to oblige him with a grant of wish. In no time, the poet is aware of the pain associated with death, but he invests death with a feminine grace:

But death is the lady of all pains
known to the world.
Her train is woven
from the rattle in the throat of the dying
and embroidered with the stars of tears (9-13).

An Acme of All Pains

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Seifert places death at the acme of all pains, but the apparent rancour is softened by imbuing it with a gracefulness, a slyness, characteristic of a lady. This resemblance, though not fortuitous, likens the features of death with the selfsame attributes accorded to a woman. However, Donne's appropriation of "rest and sleep," of which death is only a simulacrum, a travesty of no better grandeur, is further buttressed by the line: "And soonest our best men with thee do go."

Is Mortality Avoidable?

Donne's dismissal of death's self-proclaimed grandeur in extricating people from the miseries of life is strengthened by the poet's discovery of other sources, from which a rest, albeit transient, can be had. Concurrent with such satisfaction, there runs in the poet's argument a realization that mortality, however, is unavoidable. This acknowledgement is tantamount to a tacit submission to the might of death, but this submission, as it were, links with the idea of deliverance, which is possible only through death. Thus death serves as a conduit, a medium of transporting the dead to the higher, nobler realms. In this way, death makes extrication of the soul possible. However, Seifert's imagistic tableau in such expressions as "the rattle in the throat of the dying," and "embroidered with the stars of tears," in ascribing to death such qualities which pass from sinister affliction to the aesthetics of morbidity, is contrapuntal to Donne's acknowledgement. For Seifert, death is a veritable finality, an absolute closure, "the door to nowhere":

Death is the lute of lamentations,
the torch of the burning blow,
the urn of love
and the door to nowhere (14-17).

A Symphony of Sadness

Seifert's lugubrious portrayal of death coupled with its orphic associations heightens a symphony of sadness which underscores our perception of grief coterminous with reasons to delight. As Seifert sees, death being "the lute," "the torch," "the urn," and "the door," aligned with

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“lamentation,” “burning blow,” “love,” and “nowhere” respectively, it does not seem to bear in Seifert’s lines any brunt of challenge or indifference, as in Donne’s, but manifests the speaker’s glorification of its prowess. Donne’s coruscating metaphysical argument belittling death’s swagger runs in line with his categorical enumeration of such factors that could cause death, better than the “stroke” of death. This frustrates death’s singular privilege to “make us sleep”:

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with prison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep well,
And better than thy stroke; why swell’st thou then? (9-12).

Donne effects a bathos as for the masterly dimensions of death by making it subservient to the varied ways of dying. The poet’s constant effort to deflate the pride of death stands as a contrast to Seifert’s apotheosis of death as “the mistress of the poets.” Further, it is interesting to note death having masculine dimensions in Donne’s, contrasted with the attributing of feminine characteristics in Seifert’s. However, Seifert lets the poets traverse difficult paths to find this “mistress”:

Sometimes death is the mistress of the poets.
Let them court her
in the stench of dead flowers,
if they can bear
the toiling of the gloomy bells
which are now in the march,
stamping through bloody mud (18-24).

Death and Rebirth

Donne’s vision of a rebirth, which is possible only by death, is founded upon the prospects of a reawakening: “One short sleep past, we wake eternally.” This, however, does not hint at a cycle of birth and rebirth, but an extinction from that. The poet’s comparison of death with “One short

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sleep” relates to an eternal waking, referring to an attainment of a higher degree of consciousness or realization. This is further related to what he writes as “soul’s delivery,” a concept which resembles the Buddhist concept of nirvana. Donne refers to this state as a condition where “death shall be no more.” This has selfsame echoes in Seifert’s lines:

Death slips into the female body
with its long narrow hand
and chokes the infants under the heart.
True they may go to paradise,
but still all bloody (25-29).

Feminine Aspects of Death

References to the feminine aspects of death do again surface in these lines, albeit with a macabre image of strangling. Not just this, but in the poem’s succeeding lines too, Seifert addresses death with feminine references: “the empress of all killing,” and “the younger sister of decay.”

Although it apparently looks like glorifying death in majestic and tender terms, it does also show the poet’s dread towards it. Seifert’s aesthetic treatment of death contrasts with Donne’s derisive approaches, but Donne’s challenge is nevertheless fraught with an element of fear. This is qualified by a paradox: “death, thou shalt die.” While Donne refers to the death of death, he also refers to the deathlessness of all, which signifies life for none. Since none shall die, following the death of death, and further, immortality in physical terms being improbable, the employment of such a paradox leaves the reader in a perplexity as to its abstruse significations.

Poetic and Grim

Compared to Donne’s ratiocination in the mortality-immortality matrix, Seifert’s portrayal of death is grim but poetic:

Death is the empress of all killing
and her scepter
has from the origin of the world

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commanded the horrors of war...

Death is the younger sister of decay,
the messenger of ruin and nothingness,
and her hands
push upon everybody's breast
the burden of the grave (30-38).

Royal Features of Death versus Gruesomeness of Death

Seifert's simultaneous portrayal of death, with royal features, and combining with it references to its gruesomeness, are unlike Donne's, in which the lethal execution of death suffers subservience. In a way, both Donne and Seifert acknowledge the might of death and the mortality of all, but Donne's belief in, or references to the fact of immortality in the poem is expressly underscored than that of in Seifert's. Whereas Donne defies death, Seifert deifies it, with a blend of playfulness and awe. However, in neither poem, the speaker condescends to pathetic surrender. The death of death envisaged by Donne finds a similar note in Seifert's where death's power is dealt with a dismissive note:

But death is also just an instant,
a scratching of the pen
and no more (39-41).

Submission to the Fact of Death

A comparative study of the differences in their approaches to death reveals a degree of similarity of submission to the fact of death, but Seifert's attribution of some feminine, aesthetic, royal features to death find no similar grandeur in "Death Be Not Proud." While Donne highlights the mortality of death vis-à-vis the immortality of the soul, in a brilliant argument that enervates death of all its importance and power, Seifert's glorification of death is a veritable submission to death; an acknowledgement of the fact of mortality.

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