The Adversity of Dying: The Romantic Imagination of Graves, Epitaphs and Resting Places

Nature’s power is all consuming. Grief, in the eyes of the Romantic poets, can be counselled by the reminder of nature’s potency; in a world governed by the rhythms and cycles of nature, the futility of the conscious human life is thrown into relief. I argue that Smith, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley draw attention to the aphorism that nature will eventually consume all, and that very process is sublime. Death, as the unknown, is to be feared, though poetry can work to allay the adversity of this fear. Edmund Burke’s influential 1757 treatise of Sublimity epitomises this poetic concern: ‘whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger […] is the source of the sublime; productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’. Prior to Keats’s death in Rome 1821 he spoke to his friend Joseph Severn, expressing that he didn’t want his name to appear on his tombstone, but rather, ‘Here lies one whose name was writ in water’. This famous line illustrates the Romantic preoccupation with the tombstone and the epitaph—many contemporary graves in fact include poems, and conversely, many of the shorter poems (particularly those by Wordsworth in common measure), could well be treated as gravestone epitaphs in their own right. The poem-epitaph is a way coping, of course, with the adversity of loss and grief. Here, I investigate this relationship with my own field research in the ideal location of West Norwood Cemetery in South London, as well as literary analysis of suitable poems.

Charlotte Smith’s sonnet, ‘Written in the Church Yard at Middleton in Sussex’ reflects adversity through natural elements. The turbulent sea wildly takes over the grave, leaving it ‘mingled’, disrupting the tranquillity of the dead. The elements break ‘the silent sabbath of the grave’: opposition is incessant from the warring factions. However, there is a brilliant peace in nature’s command, as Smith uses the sabbath day as an oxymoron to the belligerent elements. This evokes something of Empson’s fourth type of ambiguity through the clashing of the resting sabbath and the battling nature as ‘alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author’. Smith’s speaker’s mind is awash with alternative meanings here. This particular poem is inspired by the late restoration poet Thomas Gray the author of ‘An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ (1751). Gray’s elegy also has a philosophical outlook on death; therefore, it is safe to assume that this preoccupation with death was coming into vogue through the mid eighteenth century, preceding, of course, the gothic (though the gothic certainly produced no sweet epitaphs).

The ‘Lucy Poems’ are undeviating in the portrayal of the Romantic’s captivation with death and nature. The fifth poem is as follows:

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Nature is essentially amalgamated with Lucy. Her deceased body returns to the earth, restoring to her to initial creation. She is ‘rolled round’ by the inevitability of earths course. There is a sense of the elements coming together to withdraw her remains—the polysyndeton listing of ‘rocks, and stones, and trees’ suggest a constant abundance of natural power. In comparison, Lucy is weak, deaf and blinded, no longer autonomous but left to earth.

Keats in ‘Ode on Melancholy’ also accepts death through nature. He writes ‘she dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die’, he is resolute in the inevitability of passing, that all human beauty must end. The caesura reflects his elongated thought, perhaps resembling acceptance of her passing. Shelley, in ‘Mont Blanc’ (1816), exposes the gulf between the living world and afterlife, questioning ‘Has some unknown omnipotence unfurl’d the veil of life and death?’ Shelley is considering the alpine landscape when he writes, the natural world forces thoughts of the ‘everlasting universe’ and the speaker’s own existence. The mountain’s great force brings about that frightening, sublime emotion Burke investigated as ‘astonishment’ through being confronted by such irresistible forces. This poem is clearly a response to Coleridge’s ‘Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni’, 1802 which comments on the same vast mountain, ‘worshipped’ by the speaker through its velocity—divine through the alluring landscape. Therefore, Romantic poets are seen to believe that nature inspires awe and sublimity through its potency.

The research I took out at West Norward Cemetery certainly shows poetry intertwined with epitaphs. Jane Matilda’s grave has the folk poetic prayer ‘A light from our household gone, A voice we loved is stilled…’. The popularity of this devotion poem throughout the Romantic era is shown through another two graves sharing the inscription, with dates ranging through the long eighteenth century.

Walker’s epitaph (below) reminds me of Keats’s ‘Endymion’. The direct address, ‘whoever thou art’, along with the imperative ‘stand for a moment and think’, arrests the passing reader. The dead are in eternity, preferable through its unvarying environment. The living are on the ‘brink’—a dismal statement through suggesting that we never know when it is our time. Walker in comparison, is at peace. Keats ‘Endymion’ is similar through the power placed upon the ‘mighty dead’. Keats writes

We have imagined for the mighty dead;  
All lovely tales that we have heard or read;  
An endless fountain of immortal drink,  
Pouring unto us from the heaven’s brink.

There is this beautiful peace reflected through the ‘immortal drink’, pleasant through the aquatic imagery presenting vitality—which is intriguing as there is no life supposedly after death. Perhaps the water source connects to a source of inspiration, and that is where
sublimity emanates. The ‘lovely tales’ evoke feelings of nostalgia through the tales of the afterlife being endless, the lack of knowledge of the afterlife is not seen as threatening or daunting but rather seraphic; Keats reflects an irrefutable divinity through ‘heaven’s brink’. Thus, Keats delineates we can evaporate troubles through seeing nature’s consumption of humans as innate—and that in itself is glorious.