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Elegy and identity

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ABSTRACT

Death often brings on a crisis in mourner identity. Expressions of grieg are often expressions of a loss or disruption in a mourner's sense of self. I study historical examples of the expression of disrupted identity, drawn from Renaissance and modern elegy, to argue that the relation between a formal criterion of personal identity and a subjective sense of self is mediated by historical views of the nature of persons.

RESUMEN

La muerte conlleva a menudo una crisis en la identidad del que está de luto. Las expresiones de dolor son frecuentemente expresiones de pérdida o de interrupción del sentido de identidad del doliente. Estudio ejemplos históricos de expresión de identidad rota, extraídos del Renacimiento y la elegía moderna, para defender que la relación entre un criterio formal de identidad personal y un sentido subjetivo del yo está mediada por concepciones históricas sobre la naturaleza de las personas.

I. INTRODUCTION

I wish to trace, from a certain standpoint in philosophical psychology, the mind's creative expression of grief through the medium of elegy, and, in particular, a singular feature of this expression: The death of a loved one seems often to disrupt the mourner's own sense of identity, and the expression of grief is consequently, in part, an expression of mourner concern about identity. Why should this be so? We find the connection

in elegy as distant in style and time as Ben Jonson's «On My First Sonne»[1] and Thomas Hardy's «The Going»[2]. In both poems, for instance, what might be called the raw cry of grief is a cry about the loss of self. Jonson wishes for a limited dissolution of identity:

O, could I loose all father now...

Hardy, on the death of his first wife, Emma, fears that he is already undone:

> I seem but a dead man held on end
> To sink down soon... O you could not know
> That such swift fleeing
> No soul foreseeing
> Not even I - would undo me so!

It is the connection between grief and mourner identity that this paper explores.

I approach this paper with a certain philosophical interest: the relation between a formal criterion of personal identity and that subjective sense of our own identity which we somewhat vaguely call a sense of self. Centuries long philosophical interest in the formal criterion of personal identity over time is, in part, generated by the fact of a sense of self, or as Bernard Williams puts the point: «There is a special problem about personal identity for two reasons. The first is self-consciousness- the fact that there seems to be a peculiar sense in which a man is conscious of his own identity[3].» It is extremely difficult to positively characterize a subjective sense of identity. But elegy displays its disruption and often its restoration, and we may, perhaps, from a study of elegy, better understand what is necessary to the untroubled sense of ourselves that we often naturally carry.

As mourner concern about identity is a sustained historical feature of elegy, I carry our this study through a comparision of two sets of elegies: one Renaissance, and the other post-Renaissance. In each section, I chose both a successful and an unsuccessful mourner, suggesting that a successful mourner is one who can resolve worries about identity. I begin with post-Renaissance elegy. In section III, I contrast Tennyson's successful mourning of Hallam in «In Memoriam A.H.H.»,[4] with Hardy's unsuccessful mourning of Emma in «Poems of 1912-13».[5] In section IV, I contrast Jonson's successful mourning of Benjamin in «On My First Sonne» with Henry King's unsuccessful

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1 Jonson, Ben: «On My First Sonne» in William Hunter, ed. *The Complete Poetry of Ben Jonson* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p. 20.

2 Hardy, Thomas: «Poems of 1912-13» in James Gibson, ed. *The Varorium Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy* (New York: MacMillan, 1979), p. 338.

3 Williams, Bernard: «Personal Identity and Individuation» in *Problems of the Self* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 1.

4 Tennyson: «In memoriam A.H.H.» in Jerome Buckley, ed. *Poems of Tennyson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), pp. 178-259.

5 *Op. cit.*, Hardy, pp. 338-358.

mourning of his wife in «The Exequy».[6] All these poems offer an exceptionally strong sense of poetic identity against which to test my concerns and the inclusion of Jonson's and King's Renaissance elegies lead to surprising conclusions about what subjective concerns about identity have historically involved. I mean these conclusions to show, minimally, that modern philosophers have been blinkered in their approach to issues of personal identity. We often make the mistake, through a continuous history of philosophical dialoque about a concept, of being blind to the discrete historicity of our own approaches. Literary studies challenge this ignorance.

The «peculiar sense» in which we are conscious of our own identities on the occasion of mortal loss, and what this might suggest about the possibilities for connection between a formal criterion of identity and a subjective sense of self are the sole and limited concerns of this study. I neither attempt to give a full account of the essential nature of persons, not do I commit myself to a particular formal criterion of personal identity. This study does suggest to me, however, that there might be an essential aspect to a theory of persons that accounts of personal identity overlook, and that this feature is differently manifested in various historical periods. As this study is, itself, very culturally and historically limited, the suggestion merely points to an area of potencial investigation. In section V, I summarize my admittedly speculative conclusions.

In the section that inmediately follows, I briefly examine the views of two contemporary philosophers, Richard Wollheim and Thomas Nagel, who are particularly sensitive to issues of the relation between formal identity and a sense of self. They come to very different conclusions about the possible integration of these notions, and their theories provide useful markings to a range of options on this issue. However, at a deep level, they share a common and unquestioned commitment that this study means to bring into question.

II. FORMAL IDENTITY AND THE SENSE OF SELF: WOLLHEIM AND NAGEL

Wollheim and Nagel differ fundamentally over the degree to which our sense of self should be taken into account when formulating a formal criterion of personal identity. For Wollheim, an interest in the formal criterion for the identity of persons over time is one way of expressing an interest in the concept of a person as an object with a certain kind of future.[7] A minimal criterion for understanding a concept is that we be able not only to pick out but to reidentify the particulars that fall under that concept, showing that our understanding of this type of object includes an understanding of how the

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6 King, Henry: «The Exequy» in Ivor Winters and Kenneth Fields, eds. *Quest for Reality* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1960), pp. 58-60.

7 Wollheim, Richard: «On Persons and Their Lives» in Amelie Rorty, ed. *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

particulars change over time.[8] We can and do easily pick out persons for they are among the most unique of the world's particulars. Thus, although a philosophical commitment to a criterion of identity must meet the conceptual demands of a particular model, philosophical interest in the criterion of identity is not generally subordinate to this practical concern of actual reindentification.[9]

As our concepts often help us with identification, however, so the search for a formal criterion of identity tests and enlarges our understanding of a concept. Persons not only objectively have a certain kind of history and future, we also have a sense of our lives as unified and continuous in the face of often massive change and disruption. Attempting to isolate a formal criterion of identity over time both reflects this fact and may give us some insight into how this feeling of a unified life, in whatever degree we have it, is generated. This is the core of Wollheim's concern in «On Persons and Their Lives». Because he believes that «an account of personal identity is heavily constrained to do justice, as it goes, to a person's sense of his own identity»,[10] and believes that central to that sense is that a person leads a certain kind of life that has and seeks unity, he looks for a description of psychological continuity that is both creative of formal identity over time and creative of our sense of identity as continuous over time. I shall discuss Wollheim's offer more exactly in relation to post-Renaissance elegy.

Wollheim is centrally concerned with what it is to lead the life of a person. Thomas Nagel is more classically concerned with an explanation of mental phenomena within an objective theory of reality. He is skeptical about whether the subjectivity of the mental (a first person experience) is an adequate guide to the essential nature of persons considered generally and objectively (i.e. partly, at least, from a third person perspective) as the bearers of mental states. Nagel argues that no experience of psychological continuties can generate the notion of an underlying subject rather than presupposing it and that there is no simple introspectible subjective self otherwise that underlies these continuities. To put the point traditionally, Nagel accepts a Humean absence of a phenomenological self: «Being mine is not a phenomenological quality of my experiences.»[11]

Nevertheless, to ground the objectivity of our accounts of persons, it is minimally necessary to have some concept of the subjects of experience because it is neccesary to be able to conceive of experiences of which someone else and not myself is the subject. Arguing, partly by appeal to the completion of scientific concepts, that our ability to use the concept person does not entail or presuppose that the concept is complete or that introspection could complete it, and that there is nothing that would prevent the

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8 *Ibid.*, Wollheim, p. 301.

9 This is not to say that practical concerns including those of actual reidentification do not deeply *underlie* our theories of persons. A concern with persons as responsible for past actions may lead to a philosophical interest in memory, a concern for persons as political subjects may lead to a philosophical interest in rationality, and so on.

10 *Ibid.*, Wollheim, p. 303.

11 Nagel, Thomas: *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 37.

objective completion of a partly subjective concept, Nagel offers the empirical hypothesis that the essence of the underlying subject of experience is the functioning human brain as both «the bearer of mental states and the cause of their continutity where there is continuity».[12] On Nagel's view, the subjective properties of this subject brain, including psychological continuities, are evidence for personal identity, but not criteriological evidence. That is, the continued existence of the subject brain is in principle compatible with any amount of psychological discontinuity.[13]

Wollheim and Nagel, despite an obvious divergence in both focus and conclusions, share an unexamined premise. Wollheim holds that the same psychological mechanism is creative both of formal continuity and our sense of continuity. Nagel holds the view that the physical ground of formal identity is the cause of psychological continuity even though it need not always give rise to this continuity. That is, both locate the cause of subjective continuity simply, in a formal criterion of identity although Nagel's commitment to the demands of subjective identity in looking for this cause is quite weak. By 'simply' here, I mean both ahistorically, and as unmediated by any theories that persons might hold about themselves, and these are obviously connected omissions. Both philosophers ignore the possibility that a sense of psychological continuity is heavily mediated by beliefs or assumptions as to the nature of persons. This is to ignore one general option for the integration of formal and subjective identity that remains an option independently of a commitment to a particular criterion of formal identity, and it is to ignore how historial beliefs about the nature of persons influence our subjective sense of ourselves.

III. THE REMAKING OF MEMORY: TENNYSON AND HARDY

Richard Wollheim believes that the long tradition of philosophical defence of memory as the criterion for personal identity has mislocated the property of memory that is creative of both objective and subjective identity, a property which he terms 'mental connectedness'.[14] To put the point most simply, Wollheim's thesis is that experiential memory, that is, memory from the point of view of the person whose memory it is, ties a person not only to their past, but to their future as well:

> A mental event is assigned to a person because of its relation with some earlier event in his life: and, when this happens the relation ensures that the later event is a carrier of the influence of this earlier, an influence that then pervades the person so that his biography is bound together even as it unfolds.[15]

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12 *Ibid.*, Nagel, p. 40.
13 *Ibid.*, Nagel, p. 38.
14 Wollheim, pp. 304-305.
15 Wollheim, p. 305

Experiential memory carries its influence forward into a person's future by virtue of its phenomenology.[16] That is, I not only remember the content of my past, but, in remembering, feel now as I did then, and this phenomenon constantly shapes and reshapes the kind of person I am. I face my future through the continual causal influence of my past, and because of the complexity of this causal link -past to present, present to future through the past - the mechanism of experiential memory creates my subjective sense of my life as continuous and mine, and, postulates Wollheim, is the objective criterion of personal identity as well.

This much seems true: memory, more than any other psychological mechanism, equips us to live the life of a peson, for it is by memory that a person comes to learn how to deal with a future - that is both like and unlike the past and comes to expect such a future. Mortal loss disrupts the function of memory because it removes the very possibility of recurrence that person of whom we have the memory will never be reencountered and grief is an expression of this rupture. It appears then that a mourner must somehow reshape the memories that lead naturally to expectation to deal instead with utter absence. I would like to point to two sections of Tennyson's «In Memoriam» as an illustration of the forceful applicability of Wollheim's theory to elegy.

Tennyson's long process of mourning for his friend Hallam is posted in Sections VII and CXIX of «In Memoriam»[17] by the rupture and reshaping of a particular memory: visiting Hallam at his home. In Section VII., Tennyson relives, without attempting to reshape, this memory. Althourgh the «dark house» and «the long unlovely street» of Section VII acknowledge the occasion of mourning, there is still a nearly breathless expectation for the greeting touch, as so many times in the past, of Hallan's hand. The abrupt severing of this expectation, by the thought of his permanent absence:

> A hand that can be clasped no more

is expressed by a failure of both representation and will towards the future. There are no words to complete the experience of loss, and although there is objective recurrence within the stanza, as «The noise of life begins again», the disruption of the function of this particular crucial memory of Hallam leaves Tennyson utterly unable to face the future:

> And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
> On the bald street breaks the blank day.

In an early section of the elegy, Tennyson's will cries out: «Thou shalt not be the fool of loss», and wearying years and stanzas later, Tennyson is not. In Section CXIX, Tennyson again movingly relives the memory of his visits to Hallam. The experience is

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16 *Ibid.*, Wollheim, pp. 308-309.

17 *Op. cit.*, Tennyson, pp. 182-3 and 249-50.

this time alive with joyful expectaction, a new phenomenology, and a vigorous sense of self:

> I come once more; the city sleeps;
> I smell the meadow in the street;
> I hear the chirp of birds; I see
> Betwixt the black fronts long-withdrawn
> A light blue lane of early dawn,
> And think of early days and thee.

This section explicitly signals that Tennyson has managed to reshape the function of his memories of Hallam into a renewed source of strength and expectation. Hallam is again «thee», no longer «a hand that can be clasped no more», and through recovering his connection to Hallam, Tennyson has recovered his sense of self. We feel his mourning is complete.

What interests me, particularly, is the stategy by which Tennyson mounrns. He remakes the function of his memories, in part, by reliving the experiences that have given rise to memory, thus altering the phenomenology that remembered experience will carry into his future. The causal influence of the past is both complex and manipulable. I can reshape the very memories that influence me by reliving my memory experiences, and in post-Renaissance elegy, this seems to be a common strategy for mourning through the resources of memory. It is not, however, always successful.

Consider:

> Never to bid good-bye,
> Or lip me the softest call,
> Or utter a wish for a word, while I
> Saw morning harden upon the wall,
> Unmoved, unknowing
> That your great going
> Had place that moment, and altered all.

The utter absence of Emma in «The Going», the first of Hardy's «Poems of 1912-13», is as devastating for Hardy as the loss of Hallam for Tennyson, but the possibility for successful mourning, and the repair of Hardy's undone self, is far more tenuous. Hardy cannot remake the function of his memories of Emma, for they are not trustworthy as memory, and Hardy's poetry powerfully displays how dependent modern mourners are on memory as a resource.

Memory claims are parallel to knowledge claims in that they imply that the remembered event actually took place, and their assurance of this is our connection to our past. But we may have no real check on the veridicalness of memory. We may discover that a remembered event did not take place, or that although it took place, we were not

present. Coming to believe either of these will cause us to withdraw a memory claim. But suppose the event did take place, and suppose we were there. We may still have no reliable criterion distinguishing memory from other similar mental events, particularly constructed memory, or memory that is in part fantasy. I think this is a relatively common phenomenon with distant memory. When loss disrupts the function of a memory by absence, and requires us to remake the function of this memory in order to repair our sense of self, the phenomenon of unreliable memory can become a crisis. It throws our sense of connection to our past into critical doubt:

> I look behind at the fading byway,
> And see on its slope, now glistening wet,
> Distinctly yet
>
> Myself and a girlish form benighted

The subjective point of view of early memory is always compromised by our very aging as we visualize, as well as remember, our younger selves. Are these lines from «Castle Boterel» memory of partly fantasy? The poem leaves a single figure on the slope. Is it Hardy or Emma? Hardy's long estrangement form Emma is well-known biography, and the double absence of death and estrangement, repeated often in these elegies, leaves Hardy with vivid early memories of courtship and the «dark space» of the estranged years. Hardy's memories of Emma are unreliable, and in «The Spell of the Rose», the ghost of Emma in age accuses him of «mis-vision».

Hardy must remake the function of his early memories of Emma to repair the ruptures of self caused by her death. But his only check on these memories is through the person who shared them. Were Emma alive, we suppose she could lead him to the past. «Rain on a Grave» and «I Found Her Out There» affirm that Emma's life has exhibited the continuity, completeness, and connection to the past that Hardy's has lacked. But Emma is gone and cannot lead him back and he has few memories of the older Emma through which to travel. Hardy persistently calls on Emma for aid («What have you now found to say of our past —»), acknowledging that his project is nearly hopeless. His disrupted sense of identity through the real disruption in the function of memory, as well as the cause of Hardy's inability to repair this disruption, form the powerful end to «The Going»:

> Why, then, latterly did we not speak,
> Did we not think of those days long dead,
> And ere your vanishing strive to seek
> That time's renewal? We might have said,
> 'In this bright weather
> We'll visit together
> Those places that we once visited.'

Well, well! All's past amend,
Unchangeable. It must go.
I seem but a dead man held on end
To sink down soon.... O you could not know
That such swift fleeing
No soul foreseeing —
Not even I — would undo me so!

The strong, nearly frightening, fantasy element to Hardy's memories of Emma, suggests that his memories are not functioning properly in his psyche long before Emma's death drives him to a crisis. Wollheim reflects that «where memory fails to make the past properly available and assimilable within the present» it assumes the role of other psychic mechanisms, sometimes perception, sometimes desire, always with fantasy to mediate.[18] Hardy's renewed desire for Emma and his frequent visions and imaginings of the Emma he courted suggest a serious discontinuity in Hardy's relation to his past. He seems to recognize this, and in a lovely poem from Moments of Visions, «The Shadow of the Stone», puts the project of repairing this discontinuity to ambiguous rest:

Yet I wanted to look and see
That nobody stood at the back of me;
But I thought once more: 'Nay, I'll not unvision
A shape which, somehow, there may be.'
So I went on softly from the glade,
And left her behind me throwing her shade,
As she were indeed an apparition —
My head unturned lest my dream should fade.[19]

Hardy's dating of the poem has been revised from 'From old notes' to 'From an old note' to, finally, 'Begun 1913: finished 1916'. He has brought closure on his past without its restoration or repair.

Memory has tantalized philosophers from the time of Locke as being somehow essential to personal identity. As we experience memory, it offers the hope that, in some sense, we feel ourselves to be what we essentially are and that a disrupted sense of subjective identity has something to do with an objective criterion of identity. However, the conspicuous absence of memory as a resource for reestablishing personal continuity in the Renaissance elegies that follow, leads me to suggest, instead, that memory is important to our subjective identity precisely because we now broadly assume that psychological continuity formally guarantees the continued identity of

18 *Op. cit.*, Wollheim, p. 314.
19 *Op. cit.*, Hardy, p. 530.

persons. It is always difficult to know what sorts of views of ourselves we implicitly hold. What our beliefs are is primarily evidenced in how we behave, and we have little distance from our own actions. I thus now turn to Renaissance elegy to increase the plausibility of my thesis.

IV. THE ABSENCE OF MEMORY: JONSON AND KING

Ben Jonson's «On My First Sonne» and Henry King's «The Exequy» confirm that the relation between the expression of personal grief and concern about mourner identity is intimate: a part of the occasion of such grief that reaches back past the worries of an isolated and fragile modern ego, but bring into question modern approaches to personal identity that locate a sense of self in psychological continuity. Jonson's and King's disruptions of identity have rather to do with concern about the direct power of the self:

> Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
> My sinne was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy,
> Seven yeeres tho'wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
> Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
> O, could I loose all father now. For Why
> Will man lament the state he should envie?
> To have so soone scap'd worlds, and fleshes rage,
> And, if no other misery, yet age?
> Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd say here doth lye
> Ben. Jonson his best piece of poetrie.
> For whose sake, hence-forth, all his vows be such,
> As what he loves may never like too much.

Jonson is a man whose sense of himself is securely role-bound. His roles seem constitutive of his subjective sense of identity and Jonson's well-defined sense of self appears to provide the resources for successful mourning. The personal expression of grief in line 5 is followed hard upon by an objective lament on the harms of the world, by a benediction putting the son to rest, and by a determination towards the futures through the assignment of a task to the dead son. The lament is in the role of Christian, the benediction —Christian and father, the assignment of task— father and poet.

By the last three lines of the poem, Jonson has established a considerable controlled distance between mourning father and dead child. The final line is in a voice twice removed from the poet's. It is a line from Martial to be spoken by the son Benjamin.[20]

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20 I am indebted to Peter Sacks *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 125, for this notation.

The words given to the child are to be spoken to others at a future time. They are not addressed to Jonson and will not renew his grief. Role-bound and powerful, Jonson's identity seems to govern this poem. This should alert rather than blind us to the crisis of self-definition provoked by the death of his son Benjamin. The cry of grief in line 5 is expressed as the wish for dissolution of his sense of himself as a father, and this highly controlled elegy is the occasion for a critical reassessment of the ground for the poet's sense of self.

Renaissance elegy offers the opportunity of studying, at some distance, subjective identity in a context where important doctrines about the nature of persons were held explicitly as fundamental popular belief. Christian doctrine proffers a clear formal criterion of identity: What makes a person that self-same person over time, and what gives unity to the person's life is the persistence of the individual soul. The Christian soul is immutable and immortal, but as an identity it is the creation of God and is preserved by divine power. Christians have agency over their actions, but that they are, and moreover who they are —their unique capacities and responsibilities— are a divine gift. Thus, both the persistence of the self and its fundamental source of unity and continuty in assigned roles are guaranteed but beyond the effect of human agency. What sort of sense of identity will belief in divine guarantee as a formal criterion be partly creative of? The sense that lives have reliable unity outside the control of human agency and equally outside the viccissitudes of fate guide concerns about identity through a subordinate concern about the power of the self.

We should first note that the survival beyond death of the Christian soul, the core of the Christian person, make possible at least two consoling features of Christian elegy: a direct address to the dead and a wish for self-dissolution. Jonson has the luxury, brutally absent for Hardy, of a direct address to he dead as dead and in the grave with no necessity of an imagined or even remembered figure. Jonson's poem is spoken to his son —that very same boy, now dead— and the continuity of relationship permits Jonson the comfort os saying goodbye (line 1) in a tone that, while formal, has the intimacy of sustained relation.

The delicate tone of grieving intimacy initiated by the rechristening of the son on his death is carried throughout the opening couplet by a repeated addresss in the last foot of each line. Peter Sacks, in *The English Elegy*, gives the following sesitive gloss:

> What is the effect of the couplet's identically delayed caesurae if not to give the last foot in each line («and joy», «loved boy») a fragile and tragic detachability? Benjamin is thus presented as a vulnerable exposed and indeed severed extension of Jonson's «line». Also, if one listens carefully, the last words in each line sound almost like echoes, although they repeat no particular sound within their lines. They have the sad aftersound of echoes, of something cut off but lingering.[21]

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21 *Ibid.*, Sacks, p. 120.

The image of the loved and lingering child sets off the cry of grief in line 5:

O, could I loose all father now...

Benjamin is already lost; it is Jonson's identity as a father that remains. It functioned primarily in relation to his son; now this remainder is the locus of his grief. A second consoling feature of Christian elegy, however, made possible by the effect of the Christian view of the self on one's own sense of one's identity, is the possibility of expressing a wish for dissolution secure in the faith that one's identity remains. In modern elegy, the impulse to dissolution becomes the threat of real possibility.

Nevertheless, that Jonson's identity is not under his agency, but is bestowed and preserved by God, gives rise, in this elegy, to a crisis in self-definiton, for it brings into question the power of the roles by which he, in part, defines himself. His Christian faith determines that his felt power as a poet is brought into critical conflict with his lack of felt power as a bereaved father. Jonson represents this conflict by a second punning trope. Benjamin, as well as being the child of his right hand, is his best piece of poetry or making. Jonson's pride in his craftsmanship as a poet, and sense of himself as above all a creative individual, is incompatible with his Christian obligation of humility in acknowledgement that creativity is a gift of God's power. The death of Benjamin brings this tension to painful consciousness. His son, over whom he felt creative power as evidenced in the naming, was, in truth, only lent him. His pride in his own power has been sin, and Benjamin is «exacted» as the price of his father's pride.

Jonson's gentle simply stated benediction of lines 11 and 12 forces the problematic of the poem. The son is again addressed directly and given a task. The assignment of the task through parental command and the content of the task —the boy is to identify himself to those who ask and identify himself as a lasting work of his father's crafts-manship— are Jonson's powerful use of his own creative identity as father and poet to sustain forever the identity of his son. And at the same time we are asked to draw back from the text and see how fine a poet Jonson is in the construction of these lines and that his son has indeed been preserved. The success of the son's task depends on the power of Jonson's self-definition. Yet identity is both created and preserved by God, and Jonson's false pride in his own power may have killed his son. The claim to real power to try and preserve him is the same false sense of power that destroyed him. How can it now work the positive magic Jonson asks of it? Jonson's final vow is an expression of poetic and Christian brinksmanship bordering on paradox. Has this poem been both skillfully enough executed but executed with sufficient humility to preserve his son, or has Jonson sinned again in remaking his son in this poem? If so, all it can ever do is remind him of the horrible consequences of his own pride.

Jonson's need for a strong enough identity to preserve the identity of Benjamin, independently of the Christian guarantee of that identity, exposes an elegiac concern with the power of the self the reasons for which lie deep in human psychology and which the Christian view of formal identity renders problematic. Jonson's Christian

beliefs, by providing him with the formal criterion of an enduring soul, leave him assured that his own identity and continuance are unthreatened, and this assurance does contribute to his subjective sense of identity. At the same time his Christian beliefs ground a subjective feeling of powerlessness —the preservation of identity is beyond human agency. Finally, Jonson's 'felt' or subjective sense of who he is remains equally and competitively grounded in his creative powers, both as father and as poet. The tensions between Jonson's Christian acknowledgement of his powerlessness and his subjective sense of his identity in terms of his dual roles as 'maker' are pushed to a crisis by the occasion of his son's death and much of the power of the poem results from the superbly controlled presentation of this crisis.

I now wish to pursue, relatively briefly, through an examination of Henry King's moving but poetically uneven elegy for his wife «The Exequy», the Christian sense of the powerlessness of self provoked, on the occasion of mortal loss, by the need to preserve the identity of the dead through the strength of one's own identity. King's poem is dominated by the need to either preserve his wife or dissolve himself, and his felt inability to do the former determines his desperate wish for the latter. Jonson preserves Benjamin through the power of his own identity as a poet and is a successful mourner. King cannot preserve his wife through the power of his identity and is an unsuccessful mourner.

The «Exequy» shares many formal features with Jonson's elegy. The dead person is addressed as dead and in the grave («Sleep on my love in they cold bed»), is bidden farewell («My last good night!»), and is given a task («Stay for me there») that is dependent on the poet's agency («I will not fail»), but none of these elegiac strategies are successful. The first third of the poem finds King, in a long melancholic deferral, unable to even confront his topic. The second section of the poem is especially interesting as King, despite the incantatory repetition of the word 'thee' fails four times to go on to discuss his wife. Nor does the poem end with conviction; we suspect King will be re-emerged in melancholy as soon as our eyes are lifted from the page.

The pathos of «The Exequy» is in part a consequence of a philosophical aspect of Christian identity which apparently does not trouble Jonson: the necessity of embodied form, hence matter as well as form, for individuation. The soul, the core of identity, survives death, but the dead person does not regain fully individual identity until the resurrection of the body. King's relation to his wife has been sexual rather than paternal («my Bride») and the loved body of King's wife is now dust. She is a painful absence in this poem, and the possibility of reunion on resurrection day a consolation so remote in time that to think of it is merely to renew absence. King will try to join her in the grave instead.

The painful contemplation, in section four of the poem, of the distance in time between death and reunion, and the final rise in power as the soul finds imagined bliss in mutual reembodiment, releases King from melancholy into grief and what follows, in section five, is the most moving statement of the poem:

Mean time, thou hast her, earth: much good
May my harm do thee. Since it stood
With Heaven's will I might not call
Her longer mine, I gave thee all
My short lived right and interest
In her, whom living I loved best:
With a most free and bounteous grief,
I gave thee what I could not keep.

King, like Jonson, feels a fierce need to preserve the dead by the strength of his own identity, but lacks the felt power to do so; at least such is my hypothesis, for what I hear in these lines is the assertion of subjective identity as the brute and nearly contentless 'I' and 'mine' that is all King's sense of self seems presently to amount to. But what is explictly, doubly, asserted, is that his wife is not his: she is God's and even the earths's before she is King's. We feel the earth's powerful, grasping possessiveness in «thy Dooms'-day book», «thy Casket», «thy reckoning» and «thy trust», but King will not allow the earth direct possession of his wife. Lacking agency, however, he is driven to hold the earth accountable to God for her safe return:

Be kind to her, and prithee look
Thou write into thy Dooms-day book
Each parcel of this Rarity
Which in thy Casket shrined doth lie:
See that thou make thy reckoning straight,
And yield her back again by weight;
For thou must audit on thy trust
Each grain and atom of this dust,
As thou wilt answer Him that lent,
Not gave thee, my dear Monument.

These nearly evenly paced, unbroken lines build a steady rhythmic force to the final denial of the earth's possession of King's wife. But his own possession is not now of a wife but a monument - this is all he can guarantee in painfully acknowledged contrast to the dissolution into grains of dust that is now her real bodily condition. King spends the rest of the elegy wishing for a dissolution that will allow him to join his wife. This too is beyond his agency as the forceful but awkwardly mixed troping of a march and drift towards the grave signal.

V. CONCLUSION

This study of the disruption of subjective identity occasioned by mortal loss conclu-

des with a puzzle, two observations, and a suggestion. The puzzle and the suggestion have to do with philosophical work on persoanl identity and I move from one to the other through the observations that this study of the elegy suggests. And so, first, the puzzle.

What is meant by the claim that we have a sense of ourselves and our lives as continuous and/or unified? For those who have not despaired of the project entirely, it is a claim about subjective continuity that continues to motivate or strongly influence the search for a formal criterion of personal identity. Even Nagel's weak commitment to the integration of subjective and formal identity leads him to propose a physical criterion *only if* it could ground continuties where these continuities exist.[22] Yet all philosophers agree that the subjective self is not a simple, introspectible impression of my experience, and many philosophers, including Nagel, have argued convincingly that the psychological continuities I assign to myself or others assume rather than ground the self as the persisting subject of experience.

Experiencing a sense of self as continuous or unified does not necessarily imply that we continuously experience a sense of self. This is my first observation. Memory (or other mechanisms of psychological continuity) may well equip us to live the life of a person but need not create a continuous subjective sense of this life or of the self. Elegiac concern about identity suggests that the «peculiar sense» in which we are conscious of our own identity may be that we *become* conscious of it when we feel it to be threatened. Perhaps we only *experience* a sense of self in its disruption. These moments meet the intuition that I have a subjective sense of my identity as continuous and mine, for trauma, in disrupting my sense of self and bringing it to consciousness, makes apparent the ground of the underlying continuity necessary to its untroubled and unconscious strength. I have a strong sense of myself as continuous because, on occasion, I feel my identity as disrupted but persistent, nonetheless.

Secondly, what form a sense of threatened identity takes will be, at least to some extent, mediated by our historically bound assumptions about the objective grounds of self continuity. To be a person is, in large part, to live the life of a person, and what form this life takes, including its peculiar subjectivity is deeply historically conditioned.

Different assumptions about the objective grounds for personal identity give rise to a different sense of self in the elegies examined. Jonson and King, as devout Christian elegists, are concerned about the power of the self, not its persistence. This latter they believe to be beyond their agency, but the roles by which they define themselves are also beyond their agency. The impotence of the roles of father and husband on the occasion of mortal loss give rise to a crisis in self definition and a wish for dissolution secure in the sense that identity remains. For King, this security is also grounds for despair. Tennyson and Hardy have a more fragile sense of self. We see the beginnings in Tennyson and the crisis in Hardy of a sense of self mediated by the assumption that there is no objective ground for personal identity outside of the continuity and unity

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22 *Op. cit.*, Nagel, p. 40.

that we can makes for our lives psychologically. When relation to the past is disrupted by death, these poets pursue a common elegiac strategy of attempting to relive memory experiences so as to alter the phenomenolgy of memory into a renewed source of continuity that binds their past to their future. Tennyson overcomes the «blank day» that Hallam's death leaves. Hardy cannot repair the function of memory and settles for fantasy.

Nagel is, I believe, correct, even if for perhaps the wrong reasons, to think that a particular type of subjectivity is no real guide to a formal criterion of identity. He does not, however, realize that if we were to believe that the formal guarantee of our identity was the persistence of the subject brain, this too, would eventually influence our subjective sense of ourselves as persons. But this general analysis of the historically bound nature of subjective identity appears to make a sense of self so mediated by *assumptions* about the nature of persons that it could be no guide whatsoever to an objective criterion of personal identity. A conclusion this strong would be at some odds with the suggestion that the fact that mortal loss gives rise to concerns about identity transverses historical periods and that this sense of ourselves in disruption is some genuine guide to grounds of underlying continuity. This brings me to my suggestion.

That grief is often expressed as a concern about mourner identity seems like a fact in some ways so obvious that we may forget to wonder why this is so. Why should the end of another's life disrupt my sense of self? The death of someone may shock or prod us into facing our own mortality, but this is not the phenomenon this study has tried to isolate. Deep personal grief does not typically give rise to concern about identity as fear of death. King would welcome death; is there any real reason to doubt his sincerity? The death of someone may cause us to reflect on what it is to be a person and what it is to live the terminal life of a person, but this reflection may be objective and calm throughout, and so, once again, it is not the phenomenon I wish to isolate, not the cry of grief as a cry of doubt about the self that we find in Hardy and Jonson.

The experience of any strong passion can lead to a sense of powerlessness. If I am jealous or very much in love, my whole being seems to rest in this state, and this may make the outcome of the situation I am involved in seem critical to my life in ways that overwhelm my confidence in my ability to control my life. There are two points here to be made about grief uniquely: Grief is a passion encountered, for many of us, late in life, when our sense of ourselves is not only developed, but rigid. We practise anger from the time we are children but if we lead lucky lives, we experience little grief and late. If any strong emotion has the capacity to disrupt our confidence, we can expect grief to be often devastating. Secondly, our natural response to powerlessness is denied us with grief. When a strong passion threatens our confidence, this usually gives rise to a desire to recover power through action directed at the source of the emotion. But the source of grief is mortal loss and there seems to be no source-directed action by which we may restore our power. Nevertheless, all four poets studied take action through their poetry, and we need to pay attention to the character of this action. It is one of attempting to preserve their relations to those they mourn, and what is required for this

preservation determines both the unique and common elegiac stategies of these poets.

To sustain relation, each poet must be sure that the identity of the person mourned is itself sustained, and sustained in such a way that a particular type of relationship is possible. In Renaissance elegy, the identity of both the mourner and the mourned are preserved by divine guarantee, yet this guarantee does not necessarily sustain identity in such a way as to preserve relationship. This gives rise to mourner concern about identity as doubt about the power of the self to complete this act of preservation. Jonson's as a poet is sufficient to guarantee the sustained identity of Benjamin as his son —his creation— although Jonson takes this action in full knowledge that he sins in doing so. King would perform a similar action to sustain his relation to his wife but lacks the power to preserve her identity as his bride.

For Tennyson and Hardy, the same poetic action is more complex. Tennyson is still a Christian poet, but his grief at Hallam's death unsettles his faith. Tennyson must maintain his relation to Hallam partly through memory, and this requires that he alter the phenomenology of memories which confront him initially with Hallam's utter absence. Hardy cannot reshape his memories of Emma to sustain his relation to an elderly wife from whom he has long been estranged, for his vivid memories are of a young Emma.

Thus, my suggestion is that mourner concern about identity is a doubled concern. We preserve our identity through our relations with others and this requires that their identity is preserved in relation to us. The modern and secular mourner's felt inability to sustain another's identity may bring on a crisis of the self that has memory as a distinctive focus, but I suggest this is a historical matter. What seems arguably ahistorical is that our lives are relational and that the untroubled sense of ourselves that we seem so naturally to carry, is, in large part, carried for us by our relationships. Philosophical concerns about formal and subjective identity operate at an abstract and general level, but insofar as I have a sense of myself, even in its disruption, this is a sense of the particular person that I am. People become who they are in relation to particular others and it is a loss of these individuals that creates a crisis in a sense of self. This is a common theme of elegy and it requires that philosophers pay more attention to the relational aspects of formal and subjetive identity.[23]

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THEORIA

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