

## **Mortality, Elegy, and the Imperishability of the Soul: Death, Memory, and Transcendence in the Poetry of Hari Singh Gour**

Dr Alka Sharma  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Humanities  
Sachdeva Institute of Technology, Farah, Mathura  
Email: [sharmaalka1998@gmail.com](mailto:sharmaalka1998@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

In this paper, a close reading of five poems by Hari Singh Gour will be undertaken on a sustained basis (Random Rhymes, 1892; 2024 Anuugya edition, ed. Laxmi Pandey) which form the most intensive part of the collection in the form of mortality, grief, elegy and transcendence: In Memoriam (To My Sister) (p. 65), Death (p. 30), On the Tomb of Tamerlane (pp. 32–33), “Hadrian’s Address to His Soul” (p. 38), and “On the Tomb of Fawcett” (pp. 41). With reference to the tradition of elegy found in classical antiquity in both the English Romantics and the Victorians, on neo-Platonic philosophy of soul and immortality, and on Indian conceptions of the persistence of the ātman after physical death, the paper claims that the death poetry of Gour represents a strict and emotionally direct meditation upon the question of what remains. The paper places the elegiac poetics of Gour and the poetry of Tennyson, Keats, Shelley and Matthew Arnold and pays due attention to the distinctly Indian aspect of his philosophical and aesthetic legacy. It contends that the most striking feature of the elegiac vision of Gour is that it never accepts the finality of death: in each of the five poems, death is not an end but a change, the transformation of the body into earth, of the individual soul into something that brings to life the natural world, of human greatness into something that lives or, more educatively, does not. The paper concludes that the death poetry of Gour is worthy of appreciation as a pioneer work in the genre of Indian English elegy.

**Keywords:** *Hari Singh Gour, Indian English poetry, elegy, mortality, neo-Platonism, Victorian poetry, ātman, Random Rhymes, colonial literature, transcendence*

### **1. Introduction: Recovering Gour’s Elegiac Voice**

Today Hari Singh Gour (1870–1949) is remembered, first and foremost, as the jurist, educationist and philanthropist who gave away his own fortune of two crore rupees in 1946 and established the University of Saugor (an act of institutional philanthropy nearly unrivalled in the history of Indian higher education) (Pandey, 2024, p.). What is much less generally known is that Gour was also a poet of great achievement, whose volume *Random Rhymes* (1892) is one of the earliest and most ambitious books of verse in English to be written by an Indian author. Published again, 131 years after a successful period of archival invisibility, in a new edition edited by Laxmi Pandey (Anuugya Books, Delhi, 2024), *Random Rhymes* has finally received the attention to critical analysis its promise has so long been waiting to receive.

One of the most striking accomplishments of the collection is that it has remained interested in mortality, grief and transcendence. There are five poems that have been especially chosen: “In Memoriam (To My Sister) (p. 65), Death (p. 30), On the Tomb of Tamerlane (pp. 32–33). Hadrian’s

Address to his Soul, p. 32–33), On the Tomb of Fawcett, p. 41)—taken, indeed, collectively, as a kind of philosophical series on the question of what outlives death, whether it is the individual soul, the reminiscence of national success, the soul of the natural world, or the history. The poem answers this question in a somewhat different way, using various formal devices and various schools of philosophy, yet when combined they form a consistent elegiac vision, the level of which is really impressive by its profundity and emotionalism.

The following paper reads these five poems as a continuous elegiac sequence, placing them in the great tradition of mortality poetry stretching back through Lucretius and Horace to the English Metaphysicals, the Romantics and the Victorians as it carefully considers the Indian aspect of the philosophical and aesthetic heritage transmitted by Gour. The main point is that Gour characterized the elegiac vision by not accepting death as the end: in both poems something lives on — in one it is the presence of the soul in the natural environment, in the other one it is the spirit that is independent of the body, and in both poems it is the moral testimony of the life well lived. This denial is not a simple evasion of sorrow, but a philosophically stated, emotionally deserved assertion that, according to the tradition of the English Romantic elegy as to the Indian philosophical idea of the ātman, death is a transition not a cessation.

The paper is divided into six sections. Section 2 provides the theoretical and historical contexts of reading the death poetry of Gour. The collection is emotionally and philosophically centred in section 3 which is entitled In Memoriam (To My Sister). Section 4 considers as a meditation on the impersonal power of mortality and its historical power, Death and On the Tomb of Tamerlane. Section 5 explores the texts Hadrian's Address to his Soul and On the Tomb of Fawcett as a pair of compliments on the immortality of the soul and the monument of a life of service to others. Part 6 views the elegiac poetry of Gour as it relates to the Victorian contemporaries and the Indian school of philosophy. Section 7 provides some concluding remarks as to the importance of Gour to the history of Indian English literature.

## **2. Historical and Literary Context: The Elegy and Its Traditions**

The elegy — a poem of mourning and consolation — is one of the oldest and most philosophically charged genres in Western literary culture. From the Greek elegiac distich through the Latin tradition of Propertius and Ovid, the genre was associated with love, loss,

and the contemplation of mortality. It is in the English tradition, however, that the elegy finds its most sustained philosophical development: Milton's *Lycidas* (1638), Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), Shelley's *Adonais* (1821), Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850), and Matthew Arnold's *Thyrsis* (1866) constitute a tradition in which personal grief becomes an occasion for philosophical reflection on mortality, immortality, and the meaning of human existence (Sacks, 1985, p. 1).

The characteristic movement of the English elegy, as Peter Sacks has analysed it in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1985), is from grief through questioning to consolation. The elegist mourns, protests, questions the justice of the beloved's death, and eventually arrives — through a process that involves both emotional and intellectual work — at some form of acceptance or transcendence. This movement is never simply linear, and the greatest elegies are those that hold the tension between grief and consolation most honestly — that do not resolve too quickly into comfort but allow the full weight of loss to be felt before the consoling transformation is earned (Sacks, 1985, pp. 2–11).

The philosophical underpinning of the elegiac consolation varies significantly across the tradition. For Milton, the consolation is Christian resurrection; for Gray, it is the democratic universality of death and the dignity of obscure lives; for Shelley, it is neo-Platonic absorption into the One Beauty; for Tennyson, it is a hard-won trust that love must survive even when faith in personal immortality is shaken. What unites these different consolations is the insistence that something meaningful persists beyond individual physical death — whether the soul in a Christian afterlife, the works of beauty that outlive their maker, or the cosmic force of Love or Beauty into which individual existence dissolves (Ramazani, 1994, pp. 1–18).

Gour's death poetry engages with this tradition while supplementing it with resources drawn from Indian philosophy, particularly the Advaita Vedaānta understanding of the ātman — the individual self — as ultimately identical with Brahman, the universal consciousness that is beyond birth and death. The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s teaching that the ātman is eternal, unborn, and unslain — that the apparent death of the body is a transformation of form rather than an annihilation of substance — provides a philosophical framework for Gour's elegiac consolations that complements and enriches the Western neo-Platonic tradition (Radhakrishnan, 1948, pp. 105–112). This dual inheritance — Western elegiac tradition and Indian philosophical tradition — is what makes Gour's death poetry genuinely distinctive in the history of Indian English literature.

The immediate Victorian context for Gour's poetry is also worth establishing. Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), arguably the greatest elegy in the English language, was published four decades before *Random Rhymes* and had profoundly shaped the literary culture in which Gour was educated. Tennyson's questioning of personal immortality, his use of the natural world as a register of psychological and spiritual states, his movement from desolating grief to a tentative, hard-won faith that love must be eternal — all of these are concerns that Gour shares and engages. Matthew Arnold's elegies — "Thyrsis," "The Scholar-Gipsy" — with their characteristic note of cultural mourning for a world of meaning that has been lost, also provide relevant contexts. And Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnets, with their sustained meditation on the relationship between the beloved dead and the surviving lover, offer formal and thematic precedents for Gour's elegiac sonnets (Christ, 1984, pp. 63–80).

### **3. "In Memoriam (To My Sister)": Soul, Nature, and the Refusal of Death**

The most personal poem in the book and, perhaps, the philosophical and emotional core of it is called *In Memoriam (To My Sister)* (Gour, 2024, p. 65). It is written to a dead sister (the name is not stated) and the beginning of it is a direct and strong denial of the traditional language of death: "Nay, thou'rt not dead" (p. 65). This initial refusal is not biological refusal, but philosophical refusal: whatever death may have done to the body, it has not destroyed the presence of the sister, which still breathes life into the natural world through which the speaker moves.

The first quatrain of the poem creates the presence of the sister as a continuation of the poem using an image of the nature: "thy fairy-form is still shining, / In bowers, where lilies and chaste daisies grow, / The winds which make a minuet with the pines, / And court the Even gloom with soft smiles on thee" (p. 65). The wording used in this case is very sensitive and accurate. The presence of the sister is not a ghost, a spectre but an illumination, a radiance, which the speaker sees in the natural world. The flowers, the breeze in the pines, the fading of evening darkness: all these are represented as signs of the persistence of existence of the sister. The verb shine is significant: it does not mean only to be visible but an active radiating of light and warmth, a positive presence but not a faint trace.

The second quatrain takes this naturalisation of the dead sister to the cosmic phenomena: "The full moon liveried in her argent light, / The stars in holy raptures tremulous beam, / The sweets

of hope, affectionate beauties sight, / And love sweet kisses, youthful fancy dream (p. 65). The presence of the sister occupies moon, stars, hope, beauty, love, imagination, etc. The use of adjectives is quite selective: “argent” (silvery), “holy,” “tremulous,” “fond” — all of these could indicate a certain attribute of soft, light transcendence that the speaker feels the natural world now that his sister has passed away. Her demise has not taken her out of the world but rather, ironically, scattered her presence on the world.

It is a familiar elegiacism — what the school calls the consolation of nature — but Gour treats the matter in an original manner. Where the dead Keats or Shelley (1821), is absorbed in the One Beauty, the abstraction, Gour is more consoled and in a more material way. His sister is not lost in an abstraction but is in the specific presence of the natural beauties of the lilies, the daisies, the moonlight, the starlight. This particularity of natural description is typical of the Indian poetic tradition that is focused on the specificity of the natural phenomenon as the means of emotional and spiritual expression (Lal, 1969, pp. 44–52).

The consolation is developed in the sestet of the poem by changing register: “Nay, woe-sights, silent-eloquent, / And everywhere where joy or wretched sorrow reigns, / Thy soul, as voice of inciting music flows / Unchangingly in hills and in vales, her presence still declares” (p. 65). The soul of the sister has come to be represented as music, that is, as a voice that wanders over the landscape and is heard in both sadness and delight. The term in silence eloquent is really a productive paradox: the presence of the sister can best be experienced in the silence, when words cannot say, but feelings can, and speak to one another. It is a typically elegiac paradox — the dead speak the most eloquently when not there.

The last couplet of the poem has a philosophically heavy conclusion: “To soul to soul, her kinly part, / And body till bespirited her soil possesses” (p. 65). This is the most explicit declaration of the philosophical stance of this poem: the soul is naturally constituted of other souls — it is structurally geared towards association and intercourse — and the body is also recycled on the soil on which it originated. A coinage like bespirited is doing a lot of philosophical labor: it implies that the soil is not just the vessel of the dead body but rather it is an animated spirit of a form of life that is living in it. The reincarnation of the body is not a disappearance, but a metamorphosis: the spirit penetrating into the soil returns to talk to those who loved it, through the world of nature.

This conclusion is based on the Indian philosophy of the continuation of the ātman after physical death and makes use of the vocabulary that is as much acceptable to the Western

elegiac tradition. In the Bhagavad Gita doctrine the ātman is immortal and not born and in the elegiac school of Shelley to Tennyson the beloved dead are absorbed into the forces of nature that are the life-givers of this universe. The poem by Gour contains both structures concurrently which give rise to an elegiac consolation that is philosophically more endowed because it seeks both traditions (Radhakrishnan, 1948, pp. 107–109).

#### **4. “Death” and “On the Tomb of Tamerlane”: Mortality as Force and Historical Fact**

##### **4.1 “Death”: The Impersonal Sublime**

The entire concept of death (Gour, 2024, p. 30) deals with its object in a completely different way: it is not the personal grief but the philosophical personification. The poem describes Death as a character that is running across a landscape, leaving ruins behind: “Swift through a field, burnt grass and flowers blow, / And pillar poplars sighing along, / With hastening steps, not yet quite adequately down, / But shaking slumbering daisies with a shower” (p. 30). Death does not come in to console, or to harvest here, but to act like a broad-swordsman, hastening along and falling everywhere, unrooted even sleeping daisies in its rush.

One of the most impressive images in the poem is the simile which follows: “Brusque, souse like falcon, cutting all that appeared / Green growing, first luxuriate in their prime” (p. 30). The analogy with the falcon where it leaps down and strikes its victim is a capture of the speed and the predatory nature of the action of death. The expression to erst luxuriate in their prime is a phrase used in elegiac sense, that is to lament the ruin of things in the very midst of their vigor, the classic theme of lamentation in the carpe diem odes of Horace, in the odes of the Romanticism of Keats.

The grammatical compression of the poem is its major formal conceit: Death moves before there is time to name what is taking place — All quick as he who rides a ridge he deem’d / Not fathomless, precipitate, ere Time / To say I go — he goes (p. 30). This syntactic imitation of the velocity of death — the sentence hastening on the occasion of capturing the dying moment — is a truly high-order formal effect. It does at the grammatical level what the poem is doing at the imagery level: the inability to arrest or even sense the moment of death.

The poem ends with the image of general transformation: Death dissolved changed; / Hills into cavernous chasms, foul deformed; / And still he restless bit with breathing breath, / And stung

whatever crossed his way he —fared death (p. 30). The geologic metamorphosis of hills into cavernous holes indicates that the work of Death is executed on the biggest possible scope — not only the death of separate organisms but also the metamorphosis of the physical environment throughout geologic time. It is the Lucretian image of Death as a cosmic agent of change, working on the same principles as the individual flower to the mountain range, but not destruction, but change.

#### **4.2 “On the Tomb of Tamerlane”: Power, Memory, and the Vanity of Greatness**

“On the tomb of Tamerlane” (Gour, 2024, pp. 32–33), and one of the most formally achieved. The poem reflects on the grave of Timur (Tamerlane), the XIV century conquering Central Asian ruler, whose empire stretched from the Mediterranean to India, and who is interred in the Gur-e Amir mausoleum at Samarkand. The poem starts with a typical appeal to the traveller: “Tread soft, pilgrim! this is sacred ground; / Beneath these gypsum monuments lay / The ashes of once great Tamerlane” (p. 32).

The word once carries so much weight in the beginning: Tamerlane was great, but this greatness is over. The irony of the poem is the opposition between the former strength of the conqueror — who, in a single shake of the earth moved whole kingdoms — who, in one shock, bound together to these the sacred land of Ind, / With chains of iron; and mocked her liberty to this day (p. 32) — and his present state of being ashes under a monument of gypsum. The political echo to an Indian poet of 1892 is simply too clear: the mention of the subjugation of India and the taunting of her freedom places the poem in the setting of colonialism and its traditions of imperial conquest.

The third part of the poem directly asks the sleeping conqueror: Thy monument / Which kingdoms lost — alone bore thy name — / Is stolen by inimitable Shah who dealt fame / To thy short memory (pp. 32–33). In the footnote the “envious Shah” is named as Nadir Shah, the ruler of Persia in the eighteenth century, who sacked Delhi in 1739 and took away the Peacock Throne. This historical allusion adds more weight to the poem regarding the vanity of earthly might: even the monument of Tamerlane — the physical embodiment of his greatness — has been desecrated by a later conqueror. Power is self-destructive; greatness is self-consuming.

The climax of the poem, which is satirical, is the supposed speech of the kings who have made pilgrimage to the tomb of Tamerlane: “Teach us, O Timur! how to hold the brand; / How shake the sovereign-sceptre over the world. / By power, or treachery, or sudden darts flung / at the

heady villains that resist, / Or secret vengeance of them that” (pp. 32–33). This is the list of oppressive means — might, betrayal, murders — but with all the irony of a cynic, and the answer of Tamerlane in the grave is shattering: “By all, but most by stab” (p. 33). It is not wisdom but the condensation of his tactics into their most savage form that the tyrant teaches us after his death.

The last couplet of the poem, namely, the line, “And here thy doom write on this lacquered slab, / Where fox doth seat, and screech-owls make their moan” (p. 33) is a piece of satirical deflation. Both the fox and the screech-owls are conventional symbols of sterility and omenousness, and the fact that they have made their home in the great tomb of Tamerlane can be made to figure the ultimate vanity of worldly greatness with brevity that does credit to the Augustan satirists. The doom of the tomb is not a document of greatness but a warning of the self destruction of power which is based on violence alone.

This poem presents an invitation to compare it with the canonical English poem *Ozymandias* (1818) by Shelley about the vanity of the power of the world and the demolition of the empires. The two poems are contemplations on a broken or rather disgraced monument to a great conqueror of the world; both find the ironic conclusion that the most eloquent monuments to the worldly power are the most eloquent after all (Shelley, 1818/1975, p. 103). Where Shelley is more abstract in his poem — the frown and sneer of cold command is the only concrete description of the sculptor — Gour is far more historical and politically precise, and her poem on power has a distinctly Indian echo.

## **5. “Hadrian’s Address to His Soul” and “On the Tomb of Fawcett”: Soul and Service**

### **5.1 “Hadrian’s Address to His Soul”: The Classical Inheritance**

One of the most strictly focused poems in the collection is “Hadrian’s Address to his Soul” (Gour, 2024, p. 38) — a loose translation or adaptation of the well-known five lines poem of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (76–138 CE), which the dying emperor was addressing to his own soul as he was approaching death. Many English poets, such as Alexander Pope, Matthew Prior and Lord Byron, have translated and copied the Latin original, *Animula vagula blandula*. The most condensed version of the poem in the collection is that by Gour, who in Little wav’ring winsome sprite / The guest and comrade of this clay / To what land wandering thou / Wan, rigid, bare away / No more as customed gay (p. 38).

Although very short, the philosophical meaning of the Address of Hadrian is important to the collection of meditations concerning death and transcendence. This seat of its image, the soul as a little wavering winsome sprite which is the guest and companion of the body, is neo-Platonic, in a Roman key — the soul is not the body, but is only in it as a guest, who will hereabide but will ultimately fly away to an unspecified place. There is no response to the question “To what land wandering thou” and the refusal of the response is in itself significant: the poem recognizes the actual uncertainty of the next stage after death, and it does so with the lightness — wav’ring, winsome — which is not only formally correct to the Hadrianic original but also emotionally true to the oddity of the situation the soul will find itself in.

The final opposition — Wan, rigid, bare — away / No more as customed gay (p. 38) — has been brought to the physical changes of death in an economical manner. The three words — wan, rigid, bare — are used to characterize the body following the departure of the soul: pale, stiff, empty. But they, too, in their turn, suggest the preceding attributes of the soul: warm, mobile, dressed in vitality. It is the gayness of the soul, its animation of the body, on which death takes away, leaving the body (the clay) empty and cold. It is a reflection upon the soul-body connection which is based on the Platonic tradition but written in the straightforwardness and simplicity that defines the finest classical epigrams.

## **5.2 “On the Tomb of Fawcett”: The Monument of a Life Given to Another**

The most overtly ethical reflection on the issue of mortality in the collection is entitled On the Tomb of Fawcett (Gour, 2024, p. 41), and in a sense the most original addition to the genre of elegies. Henry Fawcett (1833–1884) was a famous British economist, politician and social reformist, who became known due to his advocacy of interests of the working classes, rights of women and rights of Indians in the British Parliament. Fawcett, who had been Postmaster-General under Gladstone, and who had been blind since the age of twenty-five after sustaining a gunshot wound, was an upright and progressive politician. His tomb in Salisbury Cathedral is, however, as the poem tells us, a comparatively small one, — “cumber’d with no gorgeous shrine” (p. 41).

Instead of describing the burial-place of Fawcett with stone and marble, the very beginning of the poem shows that this monument turned out to be a living tribute of natural beauty: “Still silent, cumber’d with no gorgeous shrine, / He lies alone, and has no company / But of the lingering iris, or woodbine / And daisies which here live eternally” (p. 41). The opposition to On the Tomb of Tamerlane is also intentional and sharp: at the wonderful tomb of Tamerlane,

which now dwells foxes and screech-owls, the symbols of death, Fawcett also has the simple grave that is constantly adorned with living flowers that live forever. The moral comparison is obvious: the man that served other people is served in his death by the eternal activity of natural beauty; and the man that served only his own forces is surrounded by the reminders of rottenness.

The second movement of the poem also brings a mysterious sound: “oft the voice of music silence-led / Music is it? — Some sweet music never heard / Heard wafts the souls to thoughts naught words may” (p. 41). This sound, which can be described as unidentifiable, pre-linguistic, and heard only at the moments of silence, is the figure of the poem that the presence of the spirit of Fawcett. Similar to the sister in *In Memoriam*, the existence of Fawcett as a post-mortem is represented through the music: the sound which spreads the souls of the viewers to the thoughts that cannot be expressed in words. The very wording “naught words may” is both syntactically condensed and philosophically pregnant: whatever is the thinking the music triggers, it cannot be stated by language, in its strict sense: it is ineffable.

As the end of the poem shows, this is what is actually monumental about Fawcett: “He lived to man and felt through his own soul, / And saw whilst darkness-closed obedient / To other false phantoms liv’d. The whole / Place breaths his spirit. ’Tis his monument, / And flowers his epitaph that marks his goal” (p. 41). The difference which Gour here makes is philosophically accurate: his public service was not a discharge of duty, but rather the expression of true moral feeling, which Fawcett did in his own soul. He perceived what those, who are submissive to some phantom (convention, self-interest, complacency), could not see or preferred not to see. He does not make his monument however a shrine of stone but the living spirit of the place itself: “The whole / Place breaths his spirit.”

The last image is the most beautiful and most sounding line in the collection — the epitaph of the writer is called flowers his epitaph. The perennial flowers that bloom around the tomb of Fawcett are not only his memorial, but the sequel of what his life accomplished: they are not only growing and blooming, but they are evidently beautiful, like the naturally beautiful flowers, and they are the mark of his goal, of where his life was aimed, which the inscription could not have done as eloquently. And this is the fullest consolation of the elegiac tradition — the death of the good man does not bring harm to the world, it makes it richer, and the world of nature itself turns out to be the monument of a good life.

Individually, the very fact that Gour wrote an elegy to Fawcett, a British politician writing in 1892 in India, is a notable one. Fawcett was among the limited numbers of the British Parliament members who never hesitated to represent Indian rights and interests and resisted paternalistic racism of most of the colonial policy. The passing of this great man in 1884 came as a real loss in India: a mouthpiece of the Indian interest in the metropolitan political system was gagged. The elegy to Fawcett by Gour is thus not just a personal eulogy, but a political one: it is a statement that the measure of the worth of a human life is not the loftiness of his power, but the service of his life, which is a measure which, in its turn, accuses the imperial power, in which Fawcett had served, and which, in its own person, he had also rebelled against.

## **6. Victorian Elegists and Indian Philosophy: A Comparative Reading**

### **6.1 Tennyson's In Memoriam and Gour's Elegiac Consolation**

Comparison of the elegiac poetry of Gour and the *In Memoriam* A.H.H. (1850) by Tennyson is not only inevitable but also educative. Both poems are authored as part of the process of personal bereavement; Tennyson of his best friend, Arthur Henry Hallam; Gour of his sister; both of them use the incidence of bereavement as a platform where they can contemplate philosophically the issues of mortality, immortality, and the continuance of love as a phenomenon after death. They are both disturbed by the seeming lack of concern of nature to the sufferings of humanity, what Tennyson had widely known as Nature, red in tooth and claw (Tennyson, 1850/1973, Canto 56, l. 15) — and they both demand a philosophically upright consolation and not a sentimental one.

However, the distinctions are as educative as the similar ones. The mourning of Tennyson is long and excruciating: *In Memoriam* is seventeen years of mourning and every variation of faith and doubt is exhaustively and psychologically honest. *In Memoriam* by Gour, on the other hand, is full of swiftness and assurance that the statement of loss is followed by the assurance of the presence of the sister in the natural world. This variation in register of emotion is not a failure in the poem by Gour — it is a manifestation of another school of thought. In place of the consolation which Tennyson bases in a Christian eschatology shaken by the findings of geological science and Darwinian biology, Gour bases his consolation on the Indian philosophical tradition of the immortality of the soul, the *ātman*, in which the continuation of

the soul even after physical death is a philosophical given rather than a religious assertion (Radhakrishnan, 1948, pp. 108–110).

## **6.2 Shelley, Keats and the Romantic Elegy**

The most directly precursive Romantic elegy in the approach of Gour in the strategy of elegia that is used in “In Memoriam” is Shelley’s Adonais (1821) written in honor of the death of Keats. The poem by Shelley shifts between the sorrow and the pastoral comfort to the neo-Platonic resonance: the dead Keats is sucked into the One Beauty, the universal law of which all personal beauties are just temporary manifestations. The penultimate stanza of the poem, the most famous one, is the following one: The One is, the many change and pass; Heaven light always shines, The shadows of the Earth fly (Shelley, 1821/1975, Stanza 52, ll. 460–461) — gives a neo-Platonic consolation whereby the individual death is not a loss but a rejoining with the source.

In Memoriam by Gour builds up on a similar movement, except that it has a less cosmic and more intimate focus. Where Shelley’s Keats has become an abstraction, engrossed in the white glory of Eternity, Gour has her sister, the lilies and daisies of her bower, the moonlight, the starlight, the voice of music way through the hills and vales. Such particularity — this demand on the specific beloved instead of the abstract beautiful — lends the elegiac consolation of Gour a certain personal softness which is occasionally wanting in the more pompous poem by Shelley. It is more akin to the feeling of Keats of his own elegiac instincts — the affinity to the beautiful particular as opposed to the transcendent universal — than to the abstractionism of Shelley.

## **6.3 The Bhagavad Gītā and Immortality of the Ātman**

The Indian philosophical tradition gives Gour consolatory materials which supplement and to an extent surpass the resources provided by the Western elegiac tradition itself. The teaching of the Bhagavad Gītā on the ātman — the individual self or soul — is pertinent directly to the interpretation of the philosophical system of In Memoriam and Hadrian’s Address to His Soul. The teaching of Krishna to Arjuna in the Gītā is adamant that the ātman is immortal, undying, and undefeated: “Nor was the spirit ever born; The spirit shall never cease to be; / Nor was there a beginning of time: End and Beginning are dreams” (Arnold, 1885/1993, 2.20). And this is exactly what the philosophical statement that Gour has used in his elegy to his sister is: Nay, thou art dead.

More philosophical background is given in the tradition of Advaita Vedaānta which evolved out of the Gītā by Adi Shankaracharya (c. 788–820 CE). The individual ātman in Advaita is finally the same as Brahman — the universal consciousness which is the basis of all existence. Individual death, in this point of view, is the disintegration of a provisional bondage: the ātman goes back to its origin in Brahman, as a wave goes back to the ocean. This system of philosophy sheds light on the last couplet of *In Memoriam* — For soul to soul, her related part, / And body till bespirited her soil possesses — which cannot be completely explained by the Western neo-Platonic tradition. The soul of the sister gets its relative element in the souls of other people since in the very bottom all souls are identical (Radhakrishnan, 1929, pp. 522–535).

In her preface to the 2024 edition of the collection of articles titled *Random Rhymes*, Laxmi Pandey notes that the heart of Gour was as large and deep as the ocean [sāgar], full of human sensibilities, and that within it lay the non-duality [advaita] of Ganga of love and Saraswati of knowledge (Pandey, 2024, p. 1). This is a Hindi-written description which brings out into the open the Advaitic aspect of the intellectual and emotional world of Gour — that is to say, the feeling that love and knowledge are not distinct faculties but part of the one and the same consciousness. That Advaitic sensibility bears itself through the elegiac poetry: the comfort of the world of the soul which is found in the *In Memoriam* is ultimately based on the Advaitic perception that the boundaries between individual souls, between souls and the natural world are not absolute as they seem.

## **7. Legacy and Significance: Gour’s Place in the Indian English Elegiac Tradition**

The discovery of the death poetry of Gour by Pandey in his 2024 book, *Random Rhymes* is a phenomenon of true value to the history of Indian English literature. The five poems discussed in this paper are a philosophical chain of breathtaking unity and profundity — a chain that wrestles earnestly with the biggest questions human beings encounter: what death is, what lives beyond death and what makes a human life worth living as death approaches.

The contribution made by Gour to the Indian English elegiac tradition is unique in a number of ways. To begin with, his bi-cultural involvement of Western and Indian philosophical traditions results in an elegiac poetics which is bicultural indeed, not only in the superficial sense of hybridity but in the more profound sense of the level of philosophical argument. The comfort of *In Memoriam* is accomplished both in the context of the neo-Platonic elegiac

tradition of the West and the Indian Advaitic conception of the immortality of the ātman; neither of these can be fully relied upon to explain the success of the poem. Second, what makes the elegiac vision of Gour interesting is its ethical gravity: the comparison between the poem on the tomb of Tamerlane and the poem on the tomb of Fawcett is not a formal exercise but a prolonged moral argument concerning what is a worthy life of human beings.

Third, and possibly the most significant one, is the fact that Gour employs an emotional authenticity in his elegiac poetry. The personal sorrow of *In Memoriam* is not a show, but a sentiment; the satire of *On the Tomb of Tamerlane* is not an exhibition, but an honest moral outrage; the tenderness of *On the Tomb of Fawcett* is not a general hymn, but an identification of the very individual qualities. This sincerity, this insistence on the fact that poetry must speak out of real experience and real conviction, is what renders the elegiac poetry of Gour of everlasting interest and power to capture our attention more than a century after it was composed.

Meenakshi Mukherjee (1971) has contended that negotiations which most fruitfully mediate between its Western and Indian literary traditions are the most important in Indian English writing. The elegiac poem of Gour is an example of this fruitful negotiation in its most successful form: it appeals to Gray and Tennyson and Shelley, to the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Advaita Vedaānta*, to classical Latin epigram and Sanskrit philosophy of the ātman, to come up with an elegiac vision that is more than its ingredients. It was the Scotsman which, in its review of the former collection of Gour, spoke of the peculiar Oriental solemnity of his verses (Gour, 2024, p. 20); it would be truer to say that what we find in the elegiac poetry of Gour is not solemnity, but wisdom — such a blend of intellectual seriousness, emotional sincerity, and philosophical profundity.

The editorial note by Pandey is a hopeful statement that the literary legacy of Gour would be preserved by the future generations: “this chain should continue” (Pandey, 2024, p. 11). The following is one of the contributions to that chain. The death poetry of *Random Rhymes* poses the questions most important to human beings — about loss, grief, survival, and the meaning of a life — and answers them with a philosophical rigour and emotional graciousness which are not only worthy of preservation as historical curiosities but to be regarded as immortal additions to the canon of English poetry.

## 8. Conclusion

The paper has discussed five poems of Hari Singh Gour in his book *Random Rhymes* (1892) which are the most continuous exploration of the themes of mortality, elegy, and transcendence in the collection. In *Memoriam* (To My Sister), *Death, On the Tomb of Tamerlane*, *On the Tomb of Fawcett*, *Hadrian's Address to my Soul*, and *On the Tomb of Fawcett*, are a philosophical sequence, which approaches the question of death and what survives it in various ways: personal grief, impersonality of the cosmos, historical irony, classical concision, ethical eulogy.

The paper has placed these poems in the long tradition of the Western elegiac poetry — of the classical tradition of Lucretius and Horace, as well as of the English Romantics (Shelley, Keats) and of the Victorian (Tennyson, Arnold, Rossetti) — and has been mindful to the specifically Indian philosophical aspects of the consolatory vision of Gour, specifically the Bhagavad Gītā doctrine of the ātman. It is not only additive but truly synthetic: the elegiac consolations which Gour succeeds in obtaining in these poems operate at once in both systems: and the union of the two systems yields a philosophically higher product than either school can accomplish independently.

The death poetry of Gour is worth mention as an early work to the Indian English tradition of elegiac verse. It is work which reflects thoughtfully on the questions it asks, work which resorts to extensive and thorough reading in both the Western and Indian worlds and work which is written out of real personal and moral conviction. The rediscovery of *Random Rhymes*, which was made possible by the dedication of Pandey to the literary legacy of Gour, allows the scholars and readers to experience this work anew and to see in it a voice that has long been silent: the voice that, as Gour wrote in *Memoriam*, still declares its presence, even to this day: voice that sends, as it were, through hills and vales, voice of exciting music sent.

## References

Arnold, M. (1866). *Thyrsis: A monody*. In *New poems*. Macmillan.

Arnold, E. (1993). *The song celestial or Bhagavad-Gita*. Buddhist Publishing Group. (Original translation published 1885)

- Bhagavad Gītā. (1993). (E. Arnold, Trans.). Buddhist Publishing Group. (Original work composed c. 200 BCE–200 CE)
- Christ, C. T. (1984). *The finer optic: The aesthetic of particularity in Victorian poetry*. Yale University Press.
- Gray, T. (1751). *Elegy written in a country churchyard*. Dodsley.
- Gour, H. S. (2024). *Random rhymes* (L. Pandey, Ed.). Anuugya Books. (Original work published 1892)
- Keats, J. (1820). *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and other poems*. Taylor and Hessey.
- Lal, P. (1969). *The concept of an Indian literature: Six essays*. Writers Workshop.
- Lucretius. (1951). *On the nature of the universe* (R. E. Latham, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work composed c. 50 BCE)
- Milton, J. (1638). *Lycidas*. In J. Milton, *Justa Edouardo King*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mukherjee, M. (1971). *The twice born fiction: Themes and techniques of the Indian novel in English*. Heinemann.
- Pandey, L. (2024). *Dāyitvapūrti kā prayās [An attempt at fulfilling responsibility]*. In H. S. Gour, *Random rhymes* (L. Pandey, Ed., pp. 9–12). Anuugya Books.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1929). *Indian philosophy* (Vol. 2). Allen & Unwin.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1948). *The Bhagavadgita: With an introductory essay, Sanskrit text, English translation and notes*. Allen & Unwin.
- Ramazani, J. (1994). *Poetry of mourning: The modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rossetti, D. G. (1904). *The house of life: A sonnet sequence*. Ellis and Elvey. (Original work published 1881)
- Sacks, P. M. (1985). *The English elegy: Studies in the genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Shankaracharya, A. (1965). *Vivekachudamani* (S. Madhavananda, Trans.). Advaita Ashrama. (Original work composed c. 800 CE)

Shelley, P. B. (1975). Adonais. In D. H. Reiman & S. B. Powers (Eds.), *Shelley's poetry and prose* (pp. 388–406). Norton. (Original work published 1821)

Shelley, P. B. (1975). Ozymandias. In D. H. Reiman & S. B. Powers (Eds.), *Shelley's poetry and prose* (p. 103). Norton. (Original work published 1818)

Tennyson, A. (1973). In memoriam A.H.H. In C. Ricks (Ed.), *The poems of Tennyson* (pp. 859–988). Longmans. (Original work published 1850)

Viswanathan, G. (1989). *Masks of conquest: Literary study and British rule in India*. Columbia University Press.