

Department of English

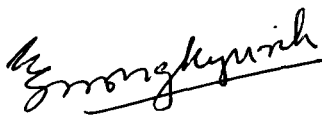
North-Eastern Hill University

Shillong: September 2004

DECLARATION

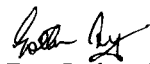
I, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, and that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis for the award of any previous degree to me or, to the best of my knowledge, to any body else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other university / institute.

This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.



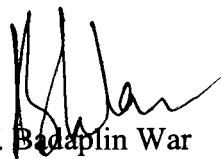
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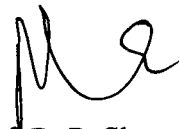
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I first tried to rediscover Soso Tham when the Welsh author, Nigel Jenkins, drew my attention to the need to translate his poetry into English. The rereading of his poetry strangely but strongly reminded me of A Book Called *Hiraeth*, compiled by Dora Polk and presented to me by its publisher, Sally Roberts Jones of Port Talbot. That was how the idea of using *hiraeth* to study the poetry of Tham was conceived. It is fitting, therefore, that I should first express my thanks to the two Welsh friends, especially to Nigel, who later sustained my “*hiraeth* project” by equipping me with all the relevant research materials from his country. *Diolch yn fawr*, Nigel and Sally.

But this thesis would not have seen the light of day without the inspiration and backing of Professor E. N. Lall of the Department of English and the late Professor Bevan L. Swer of the Department of Khasi, who originally guided my research as supervisor and joint supervisor respectively.

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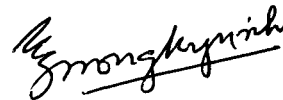
Dr. Esther Syiem of the Department of English, and Professor Badaplin War of the Department of Khasi, who took over as the official supervisor and joint supervisor, had been actively involved and enormously helpful. I sincerely acknowledge their capable and enthusiastic guidance.

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Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: The Nature and Range of *Hiraeth*, Its Relation to the Poetry of Soso Tham

The title of the thesis immediately raises three questions concerning *hiraeth*, Soso Tham, and the relation between the two. This introductory chapter will therefore endeavour to explain the questions one by one, by first explaining the nature and range of *hiraeth*, to be followed by an introduction of the poet, Soso Tham, and an analysis attempting to show how *hiraeth* is an essential feature of Tham's Poetry.

"*Hiraeth* is the word of a thousand footnotes," states Dora Polk, Welsh writer in exile, and an authority on Welsh literature of *hiraeth* (pronounced he-rye-th). In her compilation, *A Book Called Hiraeth*¹ (1982), Polk concurs with a majority of native Welsh speakers that *hiraeth* is "virtually untranslatable." However, she adds, "untranslatable doesn't have to mean incomprehensible" and this Welsh word, therefore, has been rendered into English as "longing" or "homesickness" with a caution about the inadequacy of these English equivalents.

A question may be asked, as to why are words like "longing," "homesickness" and "yearning" inadequate translations for *hiraeth*? There are quite a few possible responses to this question, and as many Welshmen before and after him, John Owen of Morfa Nefyn tries to analyse the complex feeling:

We shall begin by asking; what is hiraeth? We have all experienced it, but maybe we have never asked what it is. This is what I believe hiraeth is: a sense of loss for

*something, which a man once possessed, but is his no more. That is the difference between hiraeth and other things, which are similar to it, between hiraeth and desire or yearning. A man may desire something he has never had, and yearn for something he has no experience of possessing. A man who has never had ten pounds to his name may desire to become a millionaire. A man who was brought up in a small, plain cottage and whose cradle was rocked on an earthen floor between bare walls may yearn to live in a palace amidst splendid and expensive furniture. He has no experience of such a thing, but he may yearn for it... But these things are not hiraeth. There can be no hiraeth except where there has been loss.*²

Owen's analysis highlights the essential distinction between *hiraeth* and desire or yearning, and to a degree, answers the query raised. It is, however, far from definitive or exhaustive. Many would say it is not even satisfactory, for *hiraeth* is such a powerful and complex emotion that its true sense can be grasped only through its context, and its rich connotations be conveyed only through a variety of examples. There is no shortage of material for this purpose. "Some critics, such as Ernest Renan and Mathew Arnold, have taken *hiraeth* to be [so] characteristic of the Celts in general"³ that it has naturally become a major theme in the literature of Wales.

In Chapter II and elsewhere in her book, Polk displays selective samples aimed at shedding more light on the chameleon nature of *hiraeth*. Quoting from the "best-loved utterance of *hiraeth*," the stanzas sung to the harp throughout the centuries, Polk declares that the "intensity of the emotion comes through even in translation, differentiating it

widely from mere sentimental nostalgia.” The stanzas, from “*Hiraeth*,” translated from the Welsh by Aneirin Talfan Davies, are quoted in full:

*Tell me, men with wisdom gifted,
How hath hiraeth been created?
Of what stuff hath it been made,
That it doth not wear or fade?*

*Gold and silver wear away,
Velvet too, and silk they say;
Weareth every costly raiment:
But hiraeth is a lasting garment.*

*Now a great and cruel hiraeth
In my heart all day endureth,
And when I sleep most heavily,
Hiraeth comes and wakens me.*

*Hiraeth, hiraeth, O! depart!
Why dost thou press upon my heart?
O! move along to the bed side,
And let me rest till morning tide. (P 13)*

On the authority of this sample, *hiraeth* is undoubtedly vastly different from “mere sentimental nostalgia,” which comes and goes as a wave in the sea of feelings, depending

on its turbulence and calm. Clearly *hiraeth* is no ordinary mood. It is a baffling sentiment, something fixed and permanent in the soul of man. It is a “lasting garment” that cannot be peeled off once put on; a terrible, inerasable scar that man has to live with day in and day out; a disease that can neither be cured nor endured; “a great and cruel” emotion that makes a mockery of the old Welsh proverb: “Time soothes all longing.” (P 61)

The emotional range of *hiraeth* is truly amazing. One has only to glance through the contents of Polk’s book to comprehend the vast sweep of its territory. There is a *hiraeth* for place (hearth and village, the homeland, its sacred soil and beauty); for one’s language; for cultural institutions and values; for person (loved ones left or lost, the dead); for youth; for a mythic and legendary past; for a heroic or golden age; and for a Celtic otherworld.

In all these the pervading tone is one of profound yearning. But because forlorn yearning, as Polk says, “can modulate into hopelessness and thence into ultimate desolation and despair,” (P 101) there is an even more pervasive tone of bitter mourning throughout. The following poem will serve as an illustration:

*To think of my lost young days, this is my sorrow,
Keening deep to my heart like a flighting arrow.
I cry to my Lord to raise me, to succour me,
O weary must be my days!
Sure to its grave youth flieth and is gone;
If it was brave, now are the brave days done;
My thoughts have dying ways, but though all die
Still love revenging stays.*

*Cast from my lips afar is the spirit of song,
Music of joy, my living delight so long.
Ifor, my wisdom, where is he with his fame?
Or Nest, my refuge, his noble and fair young dame?
Where in the woods is Morvyth, my darling fled?
They all lie dead in the mould.
But here I linger, old and in heaviness
Bearing my woeful burden of cold distress.*

*No more I sing, nor try what should be sweet
Of the wild wood, the vetch or tares in the wheat;
I hope no more of the gleaming woodland dale,
Cuckoo at dawn, dusk or the nightingale,
Nor yet a kiss of my love, nor speech of hers;
She neither speaks, poor tender child, nor stirs.*

*A spear-thrust in my breast is old, old age,
Love of fair women leaves for a heritage
That, that still wounds which no balm can assuage,*

Sorrow to think on now.

*My strength ebbs fast, like chaff before the wind
It fleeth, nor can death wait far behind,*

Ghostly and pale of brow.

(“The Bard Last *Cywydd*”) ⁴

Of course, there is more to *hiraeth* than yearning and mourning. Though the sufferers experience it as an ever-present “sickness whose symptoms are a lump in the throat and hollowness in the stomach,” (P 35) yet because it relates directly to their divergent traits, it can generate in poetry, a tone that “is sometimes light-hearted, sometimes laden, sometimes restorative, sometimes draining.” (P14) These short translations will serve as further illustrations:

1. *Sometimes the old people go by, leaning on their sticks, and there, with caps and smokes and warmth and hiraeth, they remember the revelry of old.* (P 15)

(T. Glynne Davies: “*Marged*”, translated by Gwynn ap Gwilym)

2. *Hiraeth has got me between my two breasts and my two brows: it presses on my breast as if I were nurse to it. I shall make a ship out of the oak of love, and its mast from the wood of experience, and I shall put hiraeth on it to sail away from wave to wave to the country of its choice.* (P 15)

(Traditional harp stanzas, Translated by Gwynn ap Gwilym)

3. *All civility is vain amusement— as is all thought,*

*all social gathering
everything, indeed, except hiraeth,
has too soon gone away from me. (P 15)*

(Translated from a Welsh *englyn*⁵ by anonymous young women in Denbighshire)

Besides the complexity bred by the conflicting personalities of its sufferers, the nature of *hiraeth* has been rendered more convoluted by its evolution, over the centuries, into a major literary concept whose circle of influence is ever expanding, and therefore, whose old meanings keep taking on new implications. In *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*,⁶ the author, Wilfred L. Guerin, et al recommend the study of a concept in the light of “the history of ideas” as the best approach to the understanding of its full range of meanings. They say:

For example, the concept of revenge as found in certain Renaissance English plays can be tied directly to the study of Seneca in the universities of the sixteenth century and thus to the rise of interest in classical Greece and Roman during the Renaissance. Such a consideration must deal simultaneously with an idea, with historical developments, and with the contents of literature. (P 315)

These authors quote from Stanley Edgar Hyman,⁷ who defines the history of ideas as “the tracing of the unit ideas of philosophies through intellectual history” and who posits that just as this history “finds its chief clues in literary expression, literary criticism can draw on it for the philosophic background of literature.” They as well as Hyman credit Arthur O. Lovejoy as the father of this branch of study. In the introductory chapter of his classic *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*,⁸ Lovejoy

differentiates a unit idea from the compounds whose names usually end with “-ism: idealism, romanticism, rationalism, transcendentalism, pragmatism, and the like.” Among the principal types of ideas, that which most concerns Lovejoy is described by him as follows:

... any unit-idea which the historian thus isolates he next seeks to trace through more than one—ultimately, indeed, through all—of the provinces of history in which it figures in any important degree, whether those provinces are called philosophy, science, literature, art, religion, or politics... [The history of idea] is concerned only with a certain group of factors in history, and with these only insofar as they can be seen at work in what are commonly considered separate divisions of the intellectual world; and it is especially interested in the processes by which influences pass over from one province to another. (P 15-16)

Lovejoy emphasises that literature should be studied

chiefly for its thought-content, and that the interest of history of literature is largely as a record of the movement of ideas.... [It] is by first distinguishing and analyzing the major ideas, which appear again and again [in literature], and by observing each of them as a recurrent unit in many contexts, that the philosophic background of literature can best be illuminated. (P16-17)

By so postulating, Lovejoy singles out the need for seeing the relationship between an idea of philosophy and an idea of literature and is, therefore, of central importance to the study of *hiraeth* as a literary concept. Tracing the origin of this concept, Polk observes that the “fountainhead of the literature of *hiraeth* lies in Wales’s ancient elegies and lamentations.”(P 11) On the same subject, Meic Stephens ⁹ writes:

The elegiac note has been struck in Welsh literature since the time of the Cynfeird¹⁰ and it is heard so often in The Mabinogion,¹¹ in cywyddau¹² of the medieval period and in folklore, that it may be regarded as a motif as common as the themes of the Otherworld (Annwn), the Waste Land, the Devastated Hearth and Lost Time. It has been argued that the military and political defeats of the Welsh may explain why their literature looks back to past glories and forward to the return of national heroes, as in the legend associated with Arthur and other forms of the cult of Y Mab Daro-Darogan.¹³ A similar sentiment has been detected in attempts to found a new Wales in America. It was certainly a factor in the experience of those Welsh writers, such as William Williams (Pantycelyn) [famous hymn writer] and William Thomas (Islwyn), who yearned for the glory of heaven and those others who, under the late influence of Romanticism, hoped for a redeemed humanity and a better world. The theme has new complexities in Anglo-Welsh literature of the twentieth century, especially in the work of those writers who have lamented the loss of the Welsh cultural heritage. (P 8)

But it is Tony Conran, who is widely acknowledged as the most accomplished translator of Welsh poetry into English, who provides the most detailed account of the evolution of the poetic concept of *hiraeth*. Writing in his comprehensive and influential introduction to *Welsh Verse*,¹⁴ he goes farther back than the military and political defeats of the Welsh and traces it to the Welsh poetry of praise, which had its roots in the primitive time of Indo-European magic, much before the sixth century. He says:

The Welsh [poetic] tradition started in the sixth century... But it had its roots much further back, in primitive Indo-European magic concerning the making of

kings. The poet was one who, at the coronation of the king and at his funeral, and at sundry important events in between, chanted the praises of the king, invoked ancestral strength and piety, and unified (in a kind of communion-rite of song) the whole tribe around its leader. (P 24)

According to Conran, the poets of praise later transcended the “magical content” and in the process moved away from “king-making” so that friendship became the dominant context of their art. The poetry of this period, he says, exhibited the Welsh “unique vision and enactment of the good life.” He adds:

... the dominant theme, the over-riding symbol of that good life, is always the hospitality extended by the great to the small... It is a personal relationship that is at its centre, the relationship of the lord as host to the poet as guest: and in its origin, this was a relationship of tribal king to tribal bard, or poet-priest. (P 25)

With friendship and “personal relationship” coming into play, it is only natural that praise should be elevated to the emotion of genuine love and sink to the emotion of lament whenever tragedy strikes. The *prifardd* or chief poet, though “too proud to beg, too traditional to flatter,” (P 25) must perforce, mourn the misfortunes or death of his host because the very survival of his poetry depends to a large measure on the continued prosperity and survival of the host. This is nowhere more applicable than to Welsh love poetry. A house-poet, Conran remarks, was required to sing songs to the lady of the house and female relatives of the tribal king. This would naturally be an inducement to sing songs of love and praise, in other words, to eulogise the noble ladies to capture their interest. As a poet, he also had to write their elegies when they died. But to do this, the poet must feel sincerely so that he may empathise and pack his song with all the pangs of

sadness and pain that could be felt by those near and dear to the dead. And this, Conran believes, was how *hiraeth* had made its first appearance in Welsh poetry—not merely through praise and lament, but essentially through love— for there can be no real praise or lament where there is no love.

From here Conran moves on to how Christianity had “degraded the old gods and heroes to the level of shadows and things that go bump in the night.” (P 29) This in turn led to poets like Aneirin (late sixth century) and others to bemoan the passing away of pagan culture. In one lyric, quoted in Conran’s introduction, the anonymous poet, swayed by a *hiraeth* for “kinsfolk gone to rest,” even “seems to equate Christ with the miseries of life.” (P 30) He laments:

In the fine treetops when cuckoos sing,

My sadness is greater:

Smoke smart, manifest sleep-lack

For my kinsfolk gone to rest.

In hill, in dale, in isles of the sea,

Wheresoever one may go,

From blest Christ there’s no escaping. (P 30)

But the most significant propagation of *hiraeth* and therefore, its true beginnings, as Stephens had pointed out, seems to have taken place during the “heroic age” of Taliesin (late sixth century) and Aneirin and the saga literature of the period that follows. First, Conran relates, Taliesin sang death songs for Welsh tribal chiefs and then Aneirin produced his magnum opus, *The Gododdin*, a poem comprising a series of heroic elegies

commemorating the bravery and death of the warriors of the Welsh chief, Mynyddawg Mwynfawr, in their disastrous attempt to “recapture from the English the natural stronghold of Catraeth (... Richmond-Catterick in Yorkshire).” (P 113)

Overlapping with the “heroic age,” Conran states, was the “saga-literature proper, composed in the ninth and tenth centuries about events that took place in the sixth and early seventh—that is, during the heroic age itself.” (P 34) During this time the Welsh were cut off from compatriots in the north of England and in Cornwall. By the ninth century, they were almost completely driven out from these areas, and in their exile, they turned to the stories of their old homes, “ in Rheged, Elfed, Gododdin and the rich lands of Eastern Powys,” (P 34) roughly corresponding to Cumberland, Yorkshire, south-east Scotland and Shropshire respectively.

It is no wonder, therefore, that this saga-literature should be saturated with a feeling for the past. Conran observes, “A good deal of it is lamentation of one kind or another. Sometimes it is personal lamentation, either for the death of a loved one or, as in Llywarch’s famous complaint of old age, for the speaker’s own changed state” (P 35) and the loss of his sons, Llawr and Gwen. Quotations from the second sequence of “Llywarch The Old”¹⁵ will clarify the point more effectively:

Old age is mocking me

From my hair to my teeth

And the knob that youth loves. (P 125)

There comes to me neither sleep nor mirth

Now that Llawr and Gwen are dead.

I'm but a querulous corpse, being old. (P 126)

Conran amplifies, “Perhaps even more typical, however, is the lament for a ruined house that the loved one has died defending.” (P 35) Here the loss is by no means merely personal. The halls of chiefs were looked upon as tribal centres and their overthrow, therefore, is the collapse of an entire society. It is in this manner that the Welsh saga-poetry, “stark in texture, tragic in conception” (P 34) came to be identified with ancient Welsh songs of lamentation, the most fecund spawning ground of *hiraeth* literature. But as we have seen, the lamentation raised here is not so much for one person’s death as for the ending of a way of life. In this, the saga-poems depart drastically from mainstream, traditional elegies. Conran calls them “half-tragic, half-elegiac” (P 35) and in so doing, he unwittingly but firmly places them and *hiraeth* in the great unconventional elegiac tradition of Thomas Gray, Matthew Arnold, Rilke and other poets of the graveyard school of poetry like Robert Blair, Thomas Parnell, and Edward Young.

Looking back to past glories and forward to the return of national heroes and the heroic age, adds a new dimension to the concept of *hiraeth*—didacticism. Methodism, Conran reports, had swept through eighteenth century Wales like wildfire, destroying in its wake all that was considered pagan and cultural. The Methodists, in their passionate faith in the salvation from Christ, brought “dancing, harp-playing, public houses, even long hair” under their indictment “as dangerously profane and irrelevant pleasures. Minstrels and strolling players, last heirs of the tradition, were particularly attacked.” (P 69) In the process, the Welsh lost much of their cultural heritage as a Celtic nation. But then, Conran reveals, the old Celtic civilisation fought back “in the work of the antiquaries and scholars, men who first collected and then tried to understand the great

legacy of the past.” (P 73) It was out of the desire to rehabilitate the past as high culture or at least as interesting primitive lore, he says, that these scholars and some poets of the period and after, that is, the period of the great Romantic Revival, turned to legendary heroes and Celtic mythology to provide moorings for Welsh social and cultural life during the violent cultural changes brought about by new industries, the rapidly increasing Anglicisation and evangelisation. There were speculations about the Druids; attempts to rediscover Welsh literature of the Middle Ages; and efforts to establish a national annual festival of poetry and music, known as *Eisteddfod*.¹⁶ But the most important achievement of this movement was the re-appropriation from the English of the legend of King Arthur by a North Wales journalist called T. Gwynn Jones (1871-1949), who won the chair at the Bangor National *Eisteddfod* of 1902, with his poem “*Ymadawiad Arthur*” or “Arthur’s Passing.” Conran says in his introduction that “*Ymadawiad Arthur*” tells very much the same story as Tennyson’s “*Morte D’Arthur*”:

When Bedwyr is told to throw Arthur’s sword into the water, he is reluctant to do so— what will save the Welsh people now? The gesture has symbolic force: it is not through force of arms that Welsh deliverance will come. The maidens of Afallon enter to take the wounded king away and Bedwyr asks to join him in the boat, united in death as he had been with his master in life. (P 78)

Here *hiraeth* takes the form of agonising pain as the everlasting leave-taking between master and faithful warrior nears. Addressing the maidens of Afallon, in the poem, Bedwyr gives tongue to a poignant sense of loss and the difficulty of unshackling himself from a nourishing lifelong relationship:

*"Sooth, if you would," said Bedwyr, "to me
 He has been so dear— I will not part from him!
 Together we fought in battle—together
 To go in the moment of death would be right." (P 258)*

But immediately after that it brightens and swings to one of confident hope and anticipation. Conran comments that the Welsh people— of whom Bedwyr is the representative— are told in the poem that they must wait. Bedwyr's role is that of a witness. Arthur will not die. As he is seated in the boat and already sailing to Afallon, his tone changes. He speaks as an oracle, one of the undead, like one of the severed heads that the ancient Celts used to worship. He tells Bedwyr to endure:

*... "Be brave, be impeccable!
 Endure challenge, be cheerful!
 I go to the summer world
 Of Afallon, to recovery.
 But I'll come back to my land
 Once more, bring her victorious
 When her time is come, the day
 She's honoured among nations
 Though now she's wounded and sick,
 ...
 All our custom pass from mind
 And our truth, too, forgotten;
 Our land know treason, and foes*

Make desolate her honour;

...

But from the pain of it, world

Shall shout again for gladness,

Shall come back, back forever

To the holy Age of Youth.

When the Day at last cometh,

My bell sounds, I'll grip my sword,

And a second time bring honour

To our nation and our tongue." (P 258-59)

For the Welsh, King Arthur represents the central myth of their civilisation. He was a leader who did not die, who will rise again at some future date, who will return from Afallon to lead his people to victory. According to Conran, Afallon is

... one of those island Otherworlds so common in Celtic mythology, the home of the ancient gods, the land of eternal youth where old age, sickness or grief never come. Secondly, it is some sort of Platonic country of eternal ideas, where the ideals of the race never die and no one suffers the attribution of lost faith or broken heart. But thirdly, Afallon represents the continued possibility of change. In an extraordinary stanza Gwyn Jones identifies Afallon, the Otherworld, with what really protects Wales, the "breath of life to the nation," the source of energy, for those who want reform, and a basis for always wanting to hope. It is from this source, the poem is saying, that Arthur will return. (P 79)

By dwelling on Afallon, Conran declares, Gwyn Jones is not merely re-appropriating Arthur, a Welsh leader who is talking of a nation that is Wales. He is in fact, turning the legend into an instruction for the benefit of his compatriots that there is, even in these allegedly heathen and barbarian ways, such a thing as God, spiritual life, a blissful otherworld and a “second coming.” The poet, he says, seems to be proposing that Methodism is not the only hope for Wales and its people, and in so doing, outfits the poem with a *hiraeth* that looks forward, that hopes, anticipates and teaches.

The didactic vein in *hiraeth* writings ran on, and there were poets who implicitly or openly exhorted their countrymen not to ignore those indigenous cultural values that had bound their nation together for centuries, in their enthusiasm to embrace and propagate the new values of the Methodists. As a matter of fact, this tension in Welsh social and cultural life persisted into the early twentieth century, and we find poets like Waldo Williams (1904-71) bemoaning the collective amnesia of his people. In one of his most famous lyrics Williams remembers the “forgotten things” of the past and thus exhorts the readers to remember them as well:

Like the foam of a wave that breaks on a lonely shore,

Like the wind's song where there is no ear to hear,

I know they call in vain upon us—

The old forgotten things of human kind.

The achievement and art of early generations,

Small dwellings and great halls,

The fine-wrought legends scattered centuries ago,

The gods that no one knows about by now.

And the little words of transient languages,

They were gay on the lips of men,

And pleasant to hear in the chatter of little children,

*But no tongue calls upon them by any longer.*¹⁷

But while Methodism stamped out many aspects of Welsh pagan culture, it also inspired a new brand of *hiraeth* and added a spiritual dimension of a different kind to it. And while folk art nearly received a deathblow at the hands of the Methodists, two new arts, according to Conran, emerged from Methodism itself. The sermon, “the ministry of the word,” (P 69) was the first. “The preachers were the new heroes, the new prophets of Israel, leading God’s people from their exile.” (P 69) The second and the more durable was the hymn, the outpouring of the poet’s souls not towards man but towards God and the supernatural. In her book, Dora Polk¹⁸ points out that the Welsh religious revivalism, which was largely a reaction to social and economic ills, had produced many hymns of *hiraeth*, that is to say, religious lyrics with a form of forward-looking *hiraeth*, which is more personal than social. Polk calls this spiritual *hiraeth*, “the yearning for an Ideal Homeland beyond the precincts of this world.” (P 113) For the hymn-writers, however, this “Ideal Homeland” was not Afallon, but the Biblical Kingdom of God. William Williams Pantycelyn (1717-1791), hailed by Conran as “the greatest lyric poet in Welsh,” (P 70) has this to say in one of his famous hymns appearing in Polk’s compilation:

Hiraeth is in my heart

*To get the beautiful taste
 Of conquering the passions which till today
 Went against heavenly grace;
 This is the very lovely gift
 That I am seeking morning and noon.*

*I see the high hills
 Of precious deliverance;
 Oh, that I might attain them
 Before the afternoon sun goes down;
 That is my cry toward heaven;
 Gentle Jesus, hear it. (P 114)*

Hear the poet's *hiraeth* is not merely looking forward to a conquest of the blighted passions of the flesh, or an escape from them to the tranquillity of "heavenly grace." The poem actually attains the fervour of apocalyptic intensity and *hiraeth* itself takes the shape of a prayer, a feverish appeal to Christ for promise, peace and paradise.

As Stephens had stated in *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales*, a similar sentiment of forward-looking *hiraeth* has been detected in the writings of Welshmen in America. Polk explicates:

Over the past few centuries impoverished Welshmen emigrated to America in droves. A forward-looking hiraeth for freedom and security that the new land represented competed with the desolate hiraeth of life-long banishment from the cherished land. (P 50)

Fitting illustrations of this forward-looking and desolate *hiraeth* can be found in Goronwy Owen's ¹⁹ "Elegy on Lewis Morris" and his *hiraeth* for Anglesey, quoted by Polk in her book. Having looked forward to a life in America, a land of promise and dream fulfilment, away from the crippling poverty of his country, Owen laments in his elegy:

It was a sad journey my coming to this country (Virginia).

A hundred times I have talked about and pined for

The foam-washed shores of lovely Gwynedd [Welsh town]. (P 50)

And again in his *hiraeth* for Anglesey:

Great is my grief for her,

Anglesey is like Zion to me;

My life will not be comforted

Without Anglesey, despite every song or chord. (P 50)

In one of his sermons, John Owen of Morfa Nefyn ²⁰ describes the ambivalent *hiraeth* of the poet:

It matters not how much singing or how much dancing there may be, says Goronwy, my soul's lament for Anglesey will not be silenced. Why for Anglesey? It is quite a commonplace and unromantic land, its bones protruding through its flesh in many a place. It has no expansive, fertile valleys, or romantic dales, or wide rivers, or high mountains. Why should the poet bruise his soul with hiraeth for Anglesey? Ah! It was in Anglesey that he was born and raised, it was there that his mother taught him to talk, it was there that the paths were which he had walked as a child. And he had to leave Anglesey for Liverpool and London and

America without ever seeing his dear old country again, and hiraeth for it remained a terrible bitterness in his soul. (P 50)

In contrast to this, Polk reveals that there are in Welsh literature, writers who have been described as “advocates of anti-*hiraeth*.” (P 109) She notes that Wales had not been impervious to the twentieth century spirit of scepticism. Some of these writers believe that redemption cannot come from these wide swings between hope and despair, nor from a sentimental fixation on the past on the one hand, and an impossible ideal on the other. In “A Welsh Wordscape- II” Peter Finch ²¹ solicits his countrymen for a realistic appraisal of the present:

*A history is being re-lived
a lost heritage
is being wept after
with sad eyes and dry tears.*

*A heritage
that spoke beauty to the world
through dirty fingernails
and endless alcoholic mists.*

*A heritage
that screamed that once,
that exploded that one holy time
and connected Wales*

*with the whirlpool
of the universe.*

*A heritage
that ceased communication
upon a death, and nonetheless
tried to go in living.*

*A heritage
that is taking
a long time to learn
that yesterday cannot be today
and that the world
is fast becoming bored
with language forever
in the same tone of voice.*

*Look at the Welsh landscape,
look closely,
new voices must rise,
for Wales cannot endlessly remain
chasing sheep into the twilight.*

In a much more subtle, though more penetrating and sympathetic statement, R.S. Thomas asks for very much the same thing in his poem: ²²

To live in Wales is to be conscious

At dusk of the spilled blood

That went to the making of the wild sky,

Dyeing the immaculate rivers

In all their courses.

It is to be aware,

Above the noisy tractor

And hum of the machine

Of strife in the strung woods,

Vibrant with sped arrows.

You cannot live in the present,

At least not in Wales.

There is the language for instance,

The soft consonants

Strange to the ear.

There are cries in the dark at night

As owls answer the moon,

And thick ambush of shadows,

Hushed at the fields' corners.

There is no present in Wales,

And no future;

*There is only the past,
Brittle with relics,
Wind-bitten towers and castles
With sham ghosts;
Mouldering quarries and mines;
And an impotent people,
Sick with inbreeding,
Worrying the carcase of an old song.*

Both these poets seek to draw the attention of the Welsh people away from the past to a fruitful assessment of the present. The all-pervasive tone in their poetry is one of self-irony and even mockery. Finch mocks those people who are preoccupied with the past because he thinks they are not even attempting to learn lessons from it. They are people who have “ceased communication / upon a death and nonetheless / tried to go on living” like a bunch of somnambulists. But the people are not the only ones who become the target of his cavilling tongue. The heritage itself is slandered as one that glorifies its own beauty “through dirty fingernails / and endless alcoholic mists.” This heritage is a blind one. It cannot even differentiate between “yesterday” and “today.” The poet, therefore, exhorts his contemporaries to examine present realities very closely and map out their future course accordingly.

Thomas is much less bellicose. In fact, he displays no anger, except sadness that his people are so completely unaware of the present. “To live in Wales,” he says, one must be conscious of what is taking place in its social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual life. But the Welsh, he laments, are only interested in harping on the past and its

glories. The glories of the past, however, are irrecoverably lost and the past itself is like a “thick ambush of shadows,” offering no enlightenment. The people are groping in the dark. They become impotent and are unable to cope with current or future needs.

For these poets and others like them, the real cause of regret is the people’s morbid obsession with the past, rendering them helpless to deal with present situations and too emotionally drained and mentally numb to have any kind of vision for the future, which alone can bring about progressive changes in the society. They therefore denounce this mania for the past as unwarranted and unproductive and even poke fun at

... the incredible agony

of an exile

that can be at most

*a day’s travel away.*²³

But in their enthusiasm to remove what they believe is a deadening *hiraeth* for bygone eras from the heart of the Welsh people, and by vigorously advocating a realistic appraisal of the present, these poets, are actually expressing a new form of *hiraeth* for more readily attainable goals, such as a well-balanced growth of Wales as a modern nation that can stand on its own feet.²⁴ Polk brands this *hiraeth* as “Ironic, Realistic and Anti-*hiraeth*.” (P 109)

All this represents the theme of *hiraeth* “in all its varieties, satirical and lively as well as heart-rending.”²⁵ Polk observes that her anthology is primarily intended to reveal the Welsh *hiraeth* to non-Welshmen. But nonetheless, she hopes that it may

... even serve to reinforce the ethnic bonds between the stayers and goers and nurture a fresh interest in our common roots among people of Welsh heritage

throughout the world. There is hiraeth for old songs, poems and reminiscences too, and many included here will both stir and assuage the hiraeth in us for loved-and –lost, but not forgotten, people and times. (P 12)

One may easily understand the function of *hiraeth* as one which may serve as a cementing ingredient, bringing “people of Welsh heritage” together in the realisation of their common roots; but how is it that it can perform a double role of both stirring and assuaging “the *hiraeth* in us...?” Polk finds an answer to this in the cathartic effect of literature itself. She writes:

Sufferers of hiraeth can seldom hope to find release through the restoration of beloved places, people, things or conditions that are lost from or lacking in their lives. Relief from pain ranging from gentle nostalgia to anguished longing and near-despair can be found only in the catharsis of expression. (P 124)

It may seem contradictory that “this most Welsh of emotions”²⁶ should be associated with the poetry of Soso Tham, the most Khasi of all Khasi poets. It is the purpose of this chapter, therefore, to project through argument that there are no contradictions and that *hiraeth* is in fact, an essential aspect of Tham’s poetry.

Soso Tham (1873-1940) is the uncrowned, though acknowledged poet laureate of the Khasis and his death anniversary falling on December 18 has always been commemorated as a state holiday since the late 1970s. According to his most authoritative biographer, Hughlet Warjri, Tham was born in Sohra, or Cherrapunjee, in 1873 (actual date unknown) into “a poor but happy family,” newly converted to Christianity. He was the third and only son in a family of four children. His mother, Lyngkien Tham, was said to be a very pious woman and married one Hat Tongper from

Sohkha, a village near Dawki, who had come to Sohra to work with the Welsh missionaries. Though poor, the young Tham was fortunate in other respects, for he grew up in a cheerful, God-fearing family, in a place which had not only become world-famous because of its record-shattering rainfall and the breath-taking beauty of its landscape, but also because it had been the first headquarters of the British empire in the Khasi Hills, where the new religion and school education had first taken root. Warjri says in his book, *U Soso Tham bad ki Jingtrei Jong U* (1980) that Tham was among the few who were able to take advantage of this education and that he studied in one of the missionary schools there till Class VI, although his father had died sometime before that. A little after this first tragedy, the family shifted to Shillong, which had replaced Sohra as the new capital in 1874, and Tham was reported to have continued with his studies in the new township. But the early death of his father, it seems, proved too much for his family, and this consorted with grinding poverty to force him out of school when he was only in Class VIII.

Warjri also records that at that time there was an attempt to induct Tham as a student in the newly-established Theological College at Sohra, but that somehow did not work out and so he began his career as an itinerant teacher in village primary schools and finally landing up on October 12, 1905 as a teacher of Khasi in Shillong Government High School, Mawkhar (the only high school in the Hills in those days). Tham remained in the school till he retired on July 30, 1931.

Soso Tham's total output as a writer is rather small. He has two volumes of poetry to his credit: *Ka Duitara Ksiar* (The Golden Harp, 1925), comprising 46 short poems, including nursery rhymes, lyrics and ballads, and 14 translations of various English poets;

and his “crowning work,”²⁷ *Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* (The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep* (1936),²⁸ which is a single long poem having 181 stanzas of six lines divided into 10 sections, each under a separate heading. The poem is about the *Hynñiew Trep* people, ancestors of the seven Khasi sub-tribes, about whom more will be written in the second chapter. Tham had also translated *Aesop’s Fables*, Charles Dickens’s *The Life of Our Lord* and the great Shakespearean comedy, *The Tempest*, to which he had given the title of *U Kyllang*. Unfortunately the manuscript of this translation was irrecoverably lost because of “the reckless negligence”²⁹ of his heirs.

All this then, along with some translations and original compositions of religious songs, constitutes the entire volume of his work as a writer. There are very important biographical details to account for this lack of prolificacy, but then again, it is this very fact which has become the surprise of surprises, where his fame and popularity as a poet is concerned. How could a poet whose output is so meagre, who had started writing so late in life and who had confessed in the preface to *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* that “he had never known about Art or Poetry: foot, metre, rhyme, rhythm, idea” and that all these had seemed to him “like a confused litter of cattle bones in the hills” rise to become a national³⁰ poet and stand towering over Khasi literature like someone who “doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus,” to borrow Cassius’s description of Caesar.

Some of his poems were set to music and became immediate hits. His inspiring words were heard everywhere: in casual chats, in public meetings, in funeral gatherings and wherever people had anything to say about the burning issues of the day and the future of their land. Such was his powerful appeal that he was quoted by the learned and unlearned alike; by the old and the young, as if his poetry was like the vast expanse of the

horizon, accommodating the motley crowd within it. Samples of such quotations are scattered everywhere in the poet's two collections. These are a few of the most quoted ones:

*La phi rit bor la phi tlot,
Jar-jar la phi dei ban iam;
Ei ba ong ba phim lah kot,
Sha ka kyrteng bad ka nam. (P 14)*

(“U Khlur,” *Ka Duitara Ksiar*)

(Though you may be small and weak,
Quietly if you have to weep;
Who will say you cannot claim,
Glory and a name.)³¹

Another one from the same book:

*Ka dohnud ruh kan pang
Haba marwei ha jngai:
Ki ummat kiba lang
Ki long mawlynnai. (P 11)*

(“Ki Mawlynnai”)

(The heart too will grieve
Alone faraway:
The tears that gather
Are actually pearls.)

From *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* many more can be quoted, but these are among the most popular:

Jingshai ngi wad sawdong pyrthei;

Jingshai ka Ri ngim tip ei ei, (P 1)

(“Ki Symboh Ksiar”)

(Enlightenment we seek around the world;

That of the Land’s we know but nought),

and :

Sa shisien pat kin win ki khlaw,

Sa shisien pat kin kih ki maw; (P 37)

(“Ka Meirilung”)

(Once more will the woods reverberate,

Once more will stir the rocks;)

Although all this glory had come only 33 years after his death, there were those among his eminent contemporaries who had immediately spotted his genius and heaped praises upon him. S. K. Bhuyan,³² called him the “Robert Burns of the Khasi Highlands” in his book, *Studies in the Literature of Assam* (1956), which also contains a chapter on “Modern Khasi Literature.” Rev. Oliver Thomas, the then General Secretary of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, described him as “a man of great gifts” and continued, “had it been possible for him, as a young man, to have had the advantages of an academic training, he surely would have risen to great heights as a scholar.”³³ Contemporary Writer like Homiwell Lyngdoh and R. R. Thomas were simply captivated by the sheer magic of his poetry. Homiwell Lyngdoh was inspired to write an

essay on the origins of the Hynñiew Trep people after reading Tham's long poem, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* and Thomas called this poem "one of the best if not the very best in Khasi Literature. It is decidedly the best in verse that a Khasi has produced and is undoubtedly a classic."³⁴

To the later writers and critics, Soso Tham was not only a poet but also a visionary, a philosopher and a moral teacher. H. W. Sten compared his crowning work with Milton's *Paradise Lost* in his book *Na ka Hyndai sha ka Lawei* (1980) and writing earlier, R. S. Lyngdoh had even gone further as to say in the "Soso Tham Birth Centenary Souvenir 1973" that "If Rabindranath Tagore could achieve world recognition through his English version of his 'Gitanjali' U Soso Tham can as well achieve such fame if only his masterpiece [*Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*] could be translated into other languages." (P 71) Lyngdoh's dream may or may not be realised, but all this high praise decidedly prove one thing — that Soso Tham is a poet worthy of study and research. Such a study is all the more exigent because to the outside world, to the non-Khasi readers, he was but a name, a reputation, whose aura shines but whose poetry still lurks in the dark confines of Khasi Literature.

It is something very strange that the works of so popular a poet among his own people have never been translated and the few that have been are so bad that they have not only not found a place in any recognised journal of poetry in the country, but they also threaten to be a disservice to the memory of this poet who had once written about himself and the apathy of most of his contemporary readers in the following lines:

Jar-jar hapoh ki dieng ha khlaw,

U san hapdeng ki ñiut;

*U syntiew pher, u tiew-dohmaw,-
Laiphew-na-ar jingmut.*

*Jar-Jar harud ki wah ba tngen,
Ban iwbih ynda stai;
U tiew tyrkhang ba ai jingkmen,
U jyrngam khadar bnai.*

*Iathuh, premmiet ba ieit ki blei,
Bad phi ki lyoh bun rong;
Iathuh ia nga u don haei
U khlur ba paw nyngkong.*

*Jar-Jar u im, jar-jar u jah,
Hapoh rai-eh rai-dam;
Jar-Jar ha jingtep ai un thiah,-
Hapoh u phlang jyrngam. (P 12)*

(“U Phlang Jyrngam,” *Ka Duitara Ksiar*)

Below is the English version:

(Quietly in the wood,
It grows among the weeds;
An uncommon blossom, *u tiew dohmaw*, *
A thing of lofty thoughts.

Quietly by shadowy streams,
 To be a fragrance when faded,
 The joy-giving fern
 Remains green for twelve moons.

Tell me twilight, beloved of the gods,
 And you the motley clouds;
 Tell me where is that star
 That first speckles the sky.

Quietly he lives, quietly he dies,
 Amidst the wilderness;
 Quietly in the grave let him rest,
 Beneath the green, green grass.

**A wild flower, symbol of great wisdom.*

(“The Green Grass”)

This poem along with another of his popular lyrics ³⁵ were the very first to be accepted and published by one of the best known national journals of poetry, “Kavya Bharati” (Madurai) in its special translation issue of 1997. If we place this poem side by side with that of Yi Kyu-Bo, a world-famous Korean poet, we will understand how Soso Tham has been able to transcend the immediate boundaries of his life, his time and his

culture to appeal to the universal feelings of mankind itself. The poem of Yi Kyu-Bo reads:³⁶

*I have always feared withering sooner than grass and trees,
But I find the volumes of my poor poems worse than nothing.
Who will know a thousand years from now,
That a man named Yi was born in a corner of Korea?*

(“To My Son Editing My Poem”)

It is this transcendence, this affinity between Tham and other poets of the world that has been the inspiring force behind this project. It might well be a surprise if the readers of Tham’s poetry come to know, that writing in 1936, Tham had already pre-empted J. F. Kennedy in his famous call to his countrymen, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”³⁷ Writing 24 years earlier, Tham had made the same call in his famous lyric “*Ki Sngi U Hynñiew Trep*”³⁸ when he said, “*Ngi im ha kiwei pat ki sngi, / Aiu ngin leh namar ka ri?*” (“We live in other days than our own / what shall we do for our land?”). One therefore feels that it is time to draw more attention to Tham, to exhume his works as it were, from the crypt of Khasi literature and exhibit them to the world so that they may be read and appreciated by all.

The major thrust of this project is, of course, not this kind of exhibition, although in subsequent chapters the study will try to render into English as many poems or excerpts, relevant to it, as possible. Firstly, what the study proposes to do is to use the ✓Welsh concept of *hiraeth* as a *passé-partout*, a master key to unfold the much-proclaimed treasure-trove of Tham’s poetry and examine what kind of wealth it contains. And ✓secondly, to establish that this ostensibly alien concept had actually been, to quote Dylan

Thomas, “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower”³⁹ of Tham’s poetry, or in other words, the driving force behind his success story as a poet. It was *hiraeth* that had pushed Tham to the path of poetry so late in life, and it was *hiraeth* that had sustained and prompted him, still later, to stick to that path and go on to create his “crowning work.”

The central question here is how had *hiraeth* been at once at the stimulus and sustaining power behind Tham, the poet? The answer must, unavoidably, be looked for in the life and times of Tham himself. This means adopting the “historical-biographical” approach suggested by Guerin and others in their handbook.⁴⁰ Laying down the basic tenets of the approach, these authors acknowledge their indebtedness to the nineteenth century French critic, H. A. Taine, whose phrase “*race, milieu, et moment...*” bespeaks a hereditary and environmental determinism.” (P 22) Put simply, they remark, “this approach sees a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author’s life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work.” (P 22)

Guerin et al quote profusely from the works of William Langland (“Piers Plowman”), John Milton (“On His Blindness”), William Blake (“London”) and the political and religious satires of John Dryden and Alexander Pope to underscore the importance of the historical-biographical method in the study of literature. They advise:

... any knowledge or insight (with special reference to scholarly discipline like history, philosophy, theology, sociology, art and music) that can help to explain or clarify a literary work ought to be given the fullest possible chance to do so. (P 27)

Advocating the application of this approach, they observe:

It seems reasonable, then, to employ [the] historical-biographical... analysis among other methods... in getting at the total meaning of a literary work when the work seems to call for [it].” (P 26)

The works of Soso Tham in relation to *hiraeth*, not only seem to call for this kind of study but are, as a matter of fact, a product of the historical-biographical conditions of his times. Some essential and diverting anecdotes in the book by Warjri will bear testimony to the actuality that it was Tham’s *hiraeth* for his language and literature that had made him turn to writing and poetry. According to Warjri, it was Tham’s entrance into the Shillong Government High School as a teacher that had brought him face to face with the stark realities of Khasi literature in those days. The predicament Khasi literature was in then profoundly disturbed him and he committed himself to shoulder the responsibility of developing it. ⁴¹ A brief summary ⁴² of its history till Tham’s teaching commission in the school will afford more insight into the situation.

The Khasis, who had a rich oral literature consisting of myths, folk stories, fairy tales, fables, narrative poetry, gnomic *phawar* (verse) and lively traditional songs, ⁴³ had never obtained the blessing of the written word until the mid-nineteenth century, that is, until the appearance of the Welsh Presbyterian Missionary, Thomas Jones, on July 22, 1841. Prior to this, around 1831, there were indeed attempts by Krishna Chandra Pal and Alexander B. Lish of the American Baptist Mission of Serampore, to reduce Khasi to the complex Bengali script. But these had proved unsuccessful and it was left to Jones to take up where they had left off. The tenacious and inventive Welshman resorted to Welsh orthography and the Roman script to cast the language in written form. The outcome was

the publication, in early 1842, of the *First Khasi Reader* or *Cacitab Ban Hicai Ca Citien Cassia*. It is out of this little book that all other Khasi books have emerged.

Since that time till the year 1895, the writing and publication of Khasi books rested solely in the hands of the Presbyterian missionaries and therefore, the literature of this period of 40 years or so was “almost exclusively Christian and moralistic in character.”⁴⁴ Jones himself translated the Welsh *Rhodd Mam* (A Mother’s Gift, 1842), the *Gospel of Mathew* (1846), a book of scriptural catechism and a collection of hymns for use in the mission’s first three schools in Sohra. From the pens of his successors came translations of *Rhodd Tad* (A Father’s Gift), Watt’s *Scripture History* (1859), Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1864), Longfellow’s “The Psalm of Life” and the complete translation of the Bible (1891).

The only books written during the period that had little or nothing to do with religion was William Pryse’s *Khasi Grammar* (1859) and Hugh Robert’s *Anglo-Khasi Dictionary* (1870) and *Khasi Grammar*. John Roberts,⁴⁵ who had earlier translated *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the “Psalm of Life” and the *Bible*, added the less religious-centred *Khasi First Reader*, *Khasi Second Reader*, *Khasi Third Reader* and *Khasi Fourth Reader* to the treasury of Khasi literature.

Others followed in the footsteps of these later writers and came out with their own books. Among the first non-missionary writers to take up the task of further developing Khasi literature, was another non-Khasi, S. M. Amjad Ali. In 1888 he brought out the first ever book of self-composed Khasi poems, *Ka Myntoi Lane ka Kot Boit*, and thus earned for himself the distinction of becoming the father of Khasi poetry. After Ali, the precursor who called on the Khasi people to stand up and chart their own course of

history, came what has been described by R. S. Lyngdoh ⁴⁶ as “the great cultural revival at the turn of the century, ushering for the first time, a coherent and purposeful challenge to the influence of Christianity and the missionaries’ monopoly over intellectual and cultural affairs.” This awakening was led by three erudite Khasi scholars, Rabon Singh Kharsuka, Jeebon Roy Mairom and Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang. Rabon Singh ⁴⁷ is reputed to be the first Khasi to ever write a book. Among his well-known works are *Ka Kitab Niam Kheĩñ Ki Khasi*, a book about *Niam Trai* or Khasi indigenous faith, published between 1897 and 1900, followed by *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* (1905), a collection of traditional gnomic verses and *Ka Kot Jingiathuh Khana Puriskam* (1908), a collection of folk stories and fairy tales. Jeebon Roy produced altogether 11 books including *Ka Kitab Shaphang Uwei U Blei*, a tract about one God, and the history of India in Khasi. Radhon Singh Berry came up with the still-popular *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen*, a collection of Khasi aphorisms. Others like Sib Charan Roy Dkhar, Morkha Joseph Chyne and Hormurai Diengdoh contributed with their works to broaden the circle of secular Khasi literature.

But because the schools were run by the missionaries, the outstanding efforts of Ali and the Khasi pioneers went largely unnoticed. According to the historians of Khasi literature, ⁴⁸ when Tham joined the Shillong Government High School in 1905 as a teacher in Khasi, he discovered that it was mostly religious texts like *Ka Kitab U Joshwa* (The Book of Joshua), *Ka Kitab U Job* (The Book of Job), *Ka Kitab Ki Proverb* (The Book of Proverbs), and others that had been prescribed for the Entrance or Matriculation Examination. The only exceptions to these were John Robert’s *Khasi Fourth Reader* and *Ka Kot Jingiathuh Khana Puriskam* of Rabon Singh.

This state of affairs continued till 1919. During that time, as may be gathered, Khasi literature was still at a very incipient stage, and as most of the books written by non-missionary authors were not on the school curriculum all literary activities came to a sudden halt, leading to a sudden slump in the production of new texts. This meant that Tham and other teachers had to teach the same things repeatedly for about 14 years from 1905. For Tham, the bibliophile and conscientious educator, there could be nothing worse than this. In the preface to *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*⁴⁹ he confessed that he was quite fed up with having to “teach the same books over and over again for years.” (P x) He added that even the students “were bored to death with having to read the same stuff from class VII to class X.” (P xi)

In his book, Warjri⁵⁰ confirms that Tham, who had tasted the sweet Kernel of Khasi texts and who had realised the vast potential of the Khasi written word, could not accept this somniferous situation. At this point of time he was not aware that he would himself be called upon to shoulder the responsibility of promoting Khasi literature. He did not know that he had the talent or moral strength to do it. Indeed he did not know that he held the “Gilded Pen”⁵¹ in his own hand and that one day he would be using it in the most effective manner. His natural reaction, therefore, was to turn to his contemporary authors, to plead with them to write and bring out new books that could be incorporated in the syllabus. He had appealed to them many times but had received not so much as a hint that they had heard him: “...deaf were the ears of the wise (missionaries and Khasis) ...” (P x) he wrote of their unresponsiveness in the preface. So what was he to do? He was at his wit’s end. If the learned would not do it, who else would, or could? Was the seed of Khasi writings, sown by Thomas Jones and nurtured into a healthy sapling during

the period of the cultural revival, to be stunted now by the combined inertia of his contemporaries? These were forlorn questions that furied him night and day and made his life miserable. He had been moved by the great moral teachings of Christianity in the translations of the missionaries. He had delighted in the splendour of traditional wisdom in the books of the Khasi scholars: was he to lose forever what he had once possessed? Was he not to see his own literature grow to the full height of its early promise?

In the grip of this awful *hiraeth*, he wrestled alone with his “longing like despair”⁵² until one day when strolling along the cliffs of Sunapani (Waterfall in the suburban west of Shillong), he heard this persistent whisper: “Do it yourself.”⁵³ But even this inspiration only brought him more misery and restlessness. How was he to go about it? When he thought of writing and poetry he only saw a thick black cloud masking the path ahead, for after all, had he not confessed that “he had never known about Art or Poetry: foot, metre, rhyme, idea...?” It was only after losing sleep over the matter for weeks that he finally came to a decision.

One morning, Warjri relates, he marched into a classroom and proposed to his Class X students: “Young men, let us try our luck in writing our own books!”⁵⁴ The class broke into a deafening roar as the students laughed at what they had thought was the best joke of the morning. But their teacher was never more serious than at that moment. He called to one of the students to bring him the anthology of English poetry⁵⁵ they had been doing for so many years and told the whole class to translate (it is not clear, by chance or design) W.E. Hickson’s nursery rhyme, “Drive the Nail Aright.” The students thought their beloved “*Babu*,” for so they called him, had lost his mind. It was unthinkable for them to embark upon such a task. Warjri quotes Tham himself as saying,

“some looked at the poem and scratched their heads; others tittered like a *shakyllia* [a type of bird], and still others sat with folded hands and drooping eyelids as if they were hearth stones.” (P 54)

Meanwhile, Warjri goes on, Tham on his part sat in his chair with pen and paper in hand, lost in thought and straining hard to come up with a Khasi translation of the first line, “Drive the nail aright, boys.” He remained in this posture of intense reflection for a space of ten minutes after which he triumphantly cried, Archimedes-like, “I have found...I have found the fibre.” (P 54) And there was another deafening roar as the class cheered its teacher’s success. The fibre was “*Sah beit ia u prek, hep,*” from which Tham started working on the poem, as one would do when breaking a particularly knotty block of wood.

Having experienced the thrill of his first triumph, and now fully realising that he did have it in him the talent to write and create, his *hiraeth* grew in force and like Shelly’s “West Wind,” drove him forward as if to a predestined destiny. The end result was hugely satisfying. As Tham wrote in the preface, from this “mustard seed,” that is “*Sah beit ia u prek, hep,*” grew others, till gradually they evolved into “the branches and leaves” (P xiii) of *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, his piece de resistance.

But Tham did not have an easy going of it. His onward course as a poet was slow and painful. Having sown his “mustard seed,” he wanted, as he said in the preface, to “pursue onwards as if for a prize.” (P xi) The prize that he sought was a fuller understanding of poetry and its intimidating paraphernalia, which had at first seemed to him “like a confused litter of cattle bones in the hills.” This, he felt, was the only means through which he could fulfil his heart-burning desire to contribute, through poetry, to his

literature and thus push it along the difficult path of progress. But he was impeded in his high objective by three things which Warjri lists as, "... His lack of education; his lack of travel; and his lack of assistance from Khasi literature." (P 57)

Since nothing much was happening in Khasi literature, especially in the field of poetry, Warjri reports that Tham had to take recourse to English poetry. But because of his rudimentary education, seeking enlightenment from the English world of letters must have been a very formidable task indeed. Warjri suspects that Tham must have struggled "like a farm bull to plod his way through English literature." (P 61) And struggled he did, for the *hiraeth* in his heart was a hunger, inappeasable, a fire, unrelenting. With a zest that would have done the most industrious schoolboy proud, he dug into the works of Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantic poets and any other he could lay his hands on, in his quest to discover what is prosody and the metrical laws of English poetry. Eventually, after three years of this gruelling ground-breaking, Tham was said to have felt confident enough to complete the translation of "Drive the Nail Aright" in 1922.

The extraordinary time taken by Tham to translate this little poem can be explained further by the manner of his translation. He had not only translated the words but had followed its metrical pattern to the letter. A comparison between the original and the translated version will bring out the similarities, at the level of form, more vividly:

Drive the nail aright, boys,

Hit it on the head;

Strike with all your might, boys,

While the iron's red.

When you've work to do, boys,

Do it with a will;

They who reach the top, boys,

First must climb the hill.

Standing at the foot, boys,

Looking at the sky;

How can you get up, boys,

If you never try?

Though you stumble oft, boys,

Never be downcast:

Try and try again, boys,

You will win at last.

Drive the nail aright, boys,

Hit it on the head;

Strike with all your might, boys,

While the iron's red.

(“Drive the Nail Aright”)

The Khasi translation:

Sah beit ia u prek, hep,

Ai na shata dar;

Tangon eh taiñ-taiñ, hep,

Myndang saw u nar.

Man ba trei jingtrei, hep,

Naduh mynsiem trei;

Ki ban poi sha kliar, hep,

Ban kiew lum ki dei.

Phai ka khmat shaneng, hep,

Sdang naduh ba sdang;

Kumno phin poi kliar, hep,

La phim da pyrshang?

La jynthut bunsien, hep,

Wat ju tieng ne kyih:

Pyrshang iai pyrshang, hep,

Phin jop hi khadduh.

Sah beit ia u prek, hep,

Ai na shata dar;

Tangon eh taiñ-taiñ, hep,

Myndang saw u nar.

(“Sah Beit ia u Prek”)

Both versions are written in four-line stanzas with the first and third lines of each stanza containing six syllables, while the second and fourth containing five. In both, the first stanza is repeated as a refrain at the end, while the rhyme scheme also follows a similar pattern of *abab*, *acac*, *adad*, *aeae*, and *abab*. All these points of comparison call attention to the fact that Tham had clearly succeeded in the task he had set out for himself, that is, to achieve an absolute understanding of English prosody. This is also borne out by later translations and original compositions arranged in the popular metrical designs of the day.

With the successful completion of this poem, Tham threw himself into his translation work with more vigour and translated a total of 10 English poems into Khasi. These include, among others, William Shakespeare's "The Passionate Pilgrim;" William Wordsworth's "Lucy Poems" and "The Solitary Reaper;" Lord George Gordon Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib;" Sir Walter Scott's "Patriotism;" and William Cowper's "The Diverting History of John Gilpin." These translations, in turn facilitated the composition of his own poems, which started as nursery rhymes and then matured to a more serious type of poetry as the poet gained in skill and aplomb. These were later collected together with the translations in *Ki Poetry Khasi*, afterwards to receive wide recognition and plaudit as *Ka Duitara Ksiar*.

It must be reiterated once again, however, that the emergence of Tham's first collection of poetry in 1925 was not at all a smooth nine-month gestation. Later, Tham was to write about these difficult beginnings in the following manner:

Ki umjer ha u phlang,

Dang step ki phyrnai;

*Nga ruh na ïng jlang
Ngan leit wad mawlynnai.*

*Na u phlang ba jyrngam
Ka rong noh ka sngi;
Kum ki keiñ ngan ngam
Sha kawei pat ka ri.*

*Ki shiah la ki thar
Ha lynti kaba jngai;
Ngan jah na ïng jar
Bad slem ngan wan phai.*

*Ka dohnud ruh kan pang
Haba marwei ha jngai:
Ki ummat kiba lang
Ki long mawlynnai. (P 10-11)*

(“Ki Mawlynnai,” *Ka Duitara Ksiar*)

In English:

Dew drops on the grass,
In the morning they glitter;
I too from home will depart
To hunt for these pearls.

From the grass that is green
They take off with the sun;
Like them then I'll plunge
To an unknown region.

The thorns though they prick
In a faraway street;
From home I'll depart
And return long after.

The heart too will grieve
Alone faraway;
The tears that gather
Are actually pearls.

("Pearls")⁵⁶

It was not only the loneliness, the exacting toils, the hardships, and the pain that Tham had to endure during his long and arduous search for the essence of poetry. Compounding the problems directly linked with poetry writing, were a host of others, which nearly made the publication of this book impossible. Warjri recounts that the poverty that had forced him out of school in childhood still haunted him in manhood. He was but a poorly paid schoolteacher and a widower with the responsibility of raising four sons and the children of his only daughter, who died prematurely in 1926. As if poverty

was not obstacle enough to discourage a man from the costly business of publishing books, there was, in those days, no financial support from the government for authors who wished to print their own books. Tokin Rymbai,⁵⁷ confirmed this when he wrote in the *Dr. Homiwell Lyngdoh Birth Centenary Souvenir* (1997):

During the days of Babu Soso Tham, to write Khasi texts and have them printed was a very expensive affair. There was no grant from the Government to support and encourage authors as is the practice today... ” (P 77)

But the worst vexation for Tham and the writers of his day was perhaps the lack of readership. Readers form the backbone of literature. They are the sponsors who inspire writers to ever-greater feats. It is for this reason that the most developed literatures of the world are invariably those that command the interest and goodwill of the greatest number of people. But unfortunately for Tham, this was not the case with Khasi literature. Writing an introduction to Tham’s *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, S. K. Bhuyan said:

U Soso Tham has been born an age too early. His countrymen have not as yet been trained to appreciate the inner beauty of his poetry, nay of any poetry. In such an atmosphere even the most poetically-minded genius will languish for want of inspiration and stimulus for self-expression. (P vii)

It is because of this that Reverend Oliver Thomas⁵⁸ said in 1920: “It is not easy to publish books in this land. Most of those who had published earlier had lost quite a bit of money and, therefore, people are hesitant to write books.” Even Tham had commented on this hopeless situation in his “*Ka Tien Khmat*” (preface) to *Ka Duitara Ksiar*:

*Hynrei u Khasi mynta um treh pule lynda phñian ha u ha skul bad ha ñngmane.
Bad ki khynnah kim pule ia ka kot Khasi, la ka bha katno katno, lynda ka ka dei
ka Text Book. Don jingmatlah kaba kham thlip nalor kane? (P ii)*

(But the Khasi today refuses to read unless compelled to do so at school or the church. And the young people do not read a Khasi book, however good it may be, unless it is a Text Book. Is there a blindness more opaque than this?)

Warjri even tells us that Tham had to go from house to house like a peddler to try selling his first published work, *Ki Phawar U Aesop* (Aesop's Fables, 1920), which has become the most widely read book in Khasi society today. If Tham had to assume the role of a door-to-door salesman to hawk his first book, what is it that had made him battle against all odds in order to complete writing and publish his second in 1925? His second is, of course, his first collection of poetry, *Ki Poetry Khasi* or *Ka Duitara Ksiar*. Poetry as a norm attracts even fewer takers than stories and fables. Yet in the face of all these harrowing afflictions, Tham had not only completed this first volume of poems but had gone on from there to the even more rigorous employment of writing his most significant work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*. What is it that had impelled him to compose this poem of 181 six-line stanzas?

These queries have been partly answered earlier when *hiraeth* for his native tongue and literature has been ascribed as the poet's prime mover. But to face down all these traumatic experiences; to "depart from the familiar world" as he himself had written in the preface, and drudge on "in good health or in sickness— amidst the ups and downs of life, amidst scorn and praises;" (P xi-xii) the poet must have been motivated by a much greater compulsion than *hiraeth* for his language and literature.

Of himself and his poetry, the great Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, had said:

*Under the volcanoes, besides the snow-capped mountains, among the huge lakes, the fragrant, the silent, the tangled Chilean forest...I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world....*⁵⁹

In a way, Neruda's confession can be used to discover the secret repertoire of Tham's strength as a poet. Like Neruda's poetry, it is out of an immense love for his land, his people,⁶⁰ and all that they imply, that Tham's poetry had risen like a nourishing plant from a literary field that was degenerating into a dry and fallow patch. This was the implacable compulsion, which had driven Tham to the calling of a poverty-stricken poet and eventually, in his people's estimation, to greatness.

In his book, Warjri also speaks of the "pure and profound patriotism" of the poet. He notes, "the words of wisdom which are more often accommodated in his [Tham's] writings are those that refer to his land." (P 71) In fact, Warjri insists that it was the poet's patriotic fervour that had spawned many of the poems in *Ka Duitara Ksiar* and that had been the seed from which had sprung the colossal tree of Khasi poetry, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*. One who has gone through the works of Soso Tham will not hesitate to agree with Warjri, that it was indeed patriotism, the mother of all *hiraeths* that had been at the heart of his most powerful creative impulse. It is an emotion that reveals itself almost everywhere in his poems, in all its infinite varieties. It becomes not only the subject matter of his poetry, but truly its inspiring and sustaining power. It is this parent *hiraeth* that had gifted him the courage to embark on what must have seemed like a mad pursuit to his countrymen, and Don Quixote-like, "to dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe, to bear with unbearable sorrow...."⁶¹ And having passed the

cruel tests of life with flying colours, he offers to the novice the following encouragement and advice:

*Khmih samla ha khmat jong phi,
Ba phin tip shano ban jam;
Don u khlur ba lam lynti,
Im ka kyrteng sah ka nam.*

*Sei ka bor te kum ki briew,
Wat trei tang ban ioh ka bam;
Hynrei artat ruh ban kiew,
Na ki kyrdan jong ka nam.*

*Ne ban khraw ruh tang ka spah,
Bad ban iar ka pud ka sam;
Namar slem kim lah ban sah,
Kum ka kyrteng bad ka nam.*

*La phi rit bor la phi tlot,
Jar-jar la phi dei ban iam;
Ei ba ong ba phim lah kot,
Sha ka kyrteng bad ka nam.*

Wat tieng te la dei ban tur,

Na ka ding ne na ka snam;

Ki poi tang ki briew ba shlur,

Sha ki kliar lum jong ka nam.

La ia phi ka sngi ka shoh,

Lyer pyngngad phin ioh ban bam;

Ha ki kam ba ni baroh,

Hangta keiñ ka rieh ka nam. (13-14)

("U Khlur," Ka Duitara Ksiar)

In English:

Look young men what lies ahead,

That you may tell which way to step;

There's a star that leads the way,

Alive the name the glory stays.

Make an effort like other men,

Work not only for your subsistence;

But also that you may ascend,

From the very rungs of fame.

Or to pile up only wealth,

And your boundaries to spread;

Because long they can't remain,

Like reputation and a name.

Though you maybe small and weak,

Quietly if you have to weep;

Who will say you cannot claim,

Glory and a name.

Fear not if you have to plod,

Through the fire or through blood;

Only brave men who are game,

May reach the mountaintops of fame.

Though the sun beats down on you,

Soon the cool breeze you'll taste too;

It's in all that's done diligently,

That it lurks immortal glory.

("The Star")

This is one of Tham's most popular lyrics and has become synonymous with inspirational poetry in Khasi.⁶² The poem also offers an additional clue as to what had driven him on, and that is, the yearning to achieve in life, something that is worthwhile to his people and his land, and something that may also lend glory and perpetuity to his name.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dora Polk, A Book Called *Hiraeth* (Port Talbot: Alun Books, 1982). This is the only book of its kind on the subject, hence frequent references will be made to it, and quotations will be from this book unless otherwise indicated.

² John Owen, "*Hiraeth am Dduw*," trans. Gwynn ap Gwilym, *Pregethau'r Dr. John Owen* ed. Williams Morris (Aberystwyth: Llyfrau'r Cyfundeb, 1975) 44.

³ Meic Stephens, ed., The New Companion to the Literature of Wales (Swansea: University of Wales Press, 1998) 105.

⁴ Dafydd ap Gwilym, "*Y Cywydd Diweddaf*," trans. Robert Gurney, Bardic Heritage ed. Robert Gurney (Edinburgh: Chatto & Windus, 1969) 142-3.

⁵ A Welsh stanzaic form of four lines of ten, six, seven and seven syllables. The rhyme scheme is normally *abbb*. The sample quoted was translated in free verse. See Tony Conran, ed. & trans., Welsh Verse (Mid Glamorgan: Welsh Arts Council, 1986) 320.

⁶ Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle Labor, Lee Morgan, Jeanne C. Reesman, John R. Willingham, A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 315.

⁷ Stanley Edgar Hyman is author of The Armed Vision. Rev. ed. (New York: Random House (Vintage), 1955) 187-8.

⁸ Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960) 3.

⁹ See 3 above.

¹⁰ The early poets, which is to say the poets of the sixth century, the first known poets of Wales.

¹¹ A famous collection of stories based on ancient Celtic myths and folktales, interspersed with a fair amount of verse.

¹² Classical Welsh Lyrics often written in heptasyllabic or octosyllabic (eight syllables) rhyming couplets. See 5 above. 51 & 322.

¹³ According to Welsh poet and journalist, Nigel Jenkins, This means “the son of prophecy, that strain in Welsh literature of vaticination / foretelling the future.”

¹⁴ All quotations from here on are from Conran’s Welsh Verse, unless otherwise indicated. See 5 above.

¹⁵ This poem, part of the Llywarch Hen Cycle, features in Conran’s Welsh Verse. See 5 above. 124-25. The quotations are from stanzas 11 & 20.

¹⁶ This festival, held in a different Welsh town each year, marked an “important Celtic come-back” after the onslaught of Methodism. See Conran’s Welsh Verse, 5 above. 74.

¹⁷ From Waldo William’s “*Cofio*” (“Remembering”), translated by R. Geralt Jones. See Conran’s Welsh Verse, 5 above. 107-8.

¹⁸ See 1 above. 116 & 113.

¹⁹ Goronwy Owen (1723-1769) was, according to Conran, “the first great romantic poet of the Welsh middle class.” He was an Anglesey man who spent most of his life in exile in England and America.

²⁰ See 2 above. 48.

²¹ From Peter Finch’s collection, The End of Vision (Cardiff: John Jones, 1971) 40-1.

²² R. S. Thomas, "Welsh Landscape," Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry, ed. Dannie Abse (Bridgend: Seren, 1998) 74-5.

²³ Finch, "A Welsh Wordscape- I." See 21 above. 40.

²⁴ This sentiment is being voiced more and more forcefully by an influential group of Welsh patriots known as *Graeg Cymru*.

²⁵ See 1 above. Blurb,

²⁶ See 1 above. 12.

²⁷ R. S. Lyngdoh, "A Review on *Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*," Soso Tham Birth Centenary Celebrations Souvenir 1873-1973, ed. B. Chedrack Jyrwa (Shillong: Souvenir Committee, 1973) 71.

²⁸ '*Hynñiew Trep*' literally means 'Seven Huts,' but this is a proper name referring to the ancestors of the seven Khasi sub-tribes as explained in the lines that follow. The researcher therefore chooses to retain the name as it is.

²⁹ Hughlet Warjri, *U Soso Tham bad ki Jingtrei Jong U* (Shillong: Hughlet Warjri, 1980) 5.

³⁰ This term should be taken in the Khasi context since the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were under British rule and had not become a part of India till the signing of the Instrument of Accession by the different Khasi-Jaintia states in 1948. See I. Nongbri, *Ka Histori Ka Ri Hynniewtrep* (Shillong: I. Nongbri, 1982) 51.

³¹ All translations of Tham's poems or excerpts are done by the researcher, unless otherwise indicated.

³² A well-known Assamese writer, S. K. Bhuyan was the Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University during Tham's time. For more of his comments on Tham see "Modern Khasi Literature," Studies in the Literature of Assam (Gauhati: S. K. Bhuyan, 1956) N. pag.

³³ The quotation is from a letter by Reverend Oliver Thomas, General Secretary of The Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, Liverpool (n. d.). See Minnette Sibon Tham, I Mabah Soso Tham (Shillong: Minnette Sibon Tham, 1990) Appendix iv.

³⁴ The quotation is from R. R. Thomas's, "Opinion" printed as a foreword to Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep, by Soso Tham. xviii. Prof. Thomas (1888-1959) was the younger brother of the distinguished statesman and first Khasi Member of Parliament, Reverend J. J. M. Nichols Roy. After a brilliant career as an academician, beginning with his lectureship in Philosophy at Scottish Church's College, Calcutta (1914-16), he became the first and only Khasi Principal of Cotton College, Gauhati (1944-46). See Charles Thomas, "Roy Rowland Thomas, Eminent Educationist, Scholar and Teacher," Shillong Centenary Celebration (Shillong: Celebration Committee, 1976) 69-72.

³⁵ The poems were translated by the researcher. See Kavya Bharati: Translation Issue 9 (1997) 63-4.

³⁶ The poem quoted appeared in the Penguin Book of Korean Poetry, Sam Kim-Jung, ed. and trans., (London: Penguin, 1986) 56.

³⁷ Inaugural address of J. F. Kennedy as President of the USA, 20 January 1961; J. M. and M. J. Cohen, The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations (London: Penguin Books, 1980) 181.

³⁸ This poem appearing in Ka Duitara Ksiar, P 54-6 should not be mistaken with the book, Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep.

³⁹ Dylan Thomas, The Poetry of Dylan Thomas, ed. R. L. Varshney (New Delhi: Doaba House, 1985) 95.

⁴⁰ See 6 above. 21-7.

⁴¹ See 29 above. 54.

⁴² The summary is based on the following:

i. R. S. Lyngdoh, Ka Histori ka Thoh ka Tar: Bynta II (Shillong: R. S. Lyngdoh, 1983) 131-7.

ii. Hamlet Bareh, A Short History of Khasi Literature (Shillong: Hamlet Bareh, 1969) 49-72.

iii. H. W. Sten, Khasi Poetry: Origin & Development (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1990) 93-221.

iv. Kitbor W. Nongrum, Ki Nongthohkot Khasi: Bynta I & II (Shillong: Kitbor W. Nongrum, 1982).

v. Nigel Jenkins, "Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis." The New Welsh Review 21 (1993): 56-82.

⁴³ Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "Khasi Folk Tales: Prelude," Apphira Daily News [Shillong] 3 July 1994: supplementary sec. N. pag.

⁴⁴ See 42 (v) above. 61.

⁴⁵ John Roberts came to the Khasi Hills in 1871. Many Khasi scholars feel that the title of "the father of Khasi literature" belongs more properly to him as his literary contributions far outweigh that of the other missionaries."

⁴⁶ See 42 (i) above. 83-84

⁴⁷ This was according to R. S. Lyngdoh, writing in “*U Pahep Rabon Sing Kharsuka*,” Soso Tham Birth Centenary Celebrations Souvenir 1873-1973. Details as 27 above. 35.

⁴⁸ See 42 (i-iv) above.

⁴⁹ Soso Tham calls his preface to the poem, “*Ka Jingpynshai*.” Hereafter this will simply be referred to as the preface.

⁵⁰ See 29 above. 53. All biographical details from here on are from this book unless indicated otherwise.

⁵¹ Soso Tham, “*Ki Symboh Ksiar*,” *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* (Shillong: Primrose Gatphoh, 1976) 3.

⁵² Matthew Arnold, “Switzerland: To Marguerite — Continued,” *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*, ed. Francis Turner Palgrave (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1964) 364.

⁵³ As revealed by the poet in the preface. x.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* xi.

⁵⁵ Proper title unknown.

⁵⁶ Translated by the researcher, the poem appeared in *Kavya Bharati: Translation Issue*. See 35 above. 64.

⁵⁷ Noted writer and leader of Seng Khasi, R. Tokin Rymbai was a student of Soso Tham.

⁵⁸ Quoted by F. M. Pugh in his *Ka Jingiarap ia ki Kot B. A. Khasi: Bynta III* (Shillong; F. M. Pugh, 1970) iv. See also 33 above.

⁵⁹ Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, trans. Hardie St. Martin (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1984) 5.

⁶⁰ As stated earlier this ‘love’ must be taken in the Khasi context.

⁶¹ From Joe Darion's song, "The Impossible Dream," as sung in Man of *La Mancha*, a television play by Dale Wasserman, based on Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra's Don Quixote de *La Mancha*. Source: <http://www.manoflamancha.com/index2.htm>

⁶² The poem was originally written as an inspiration to S. J. Duncan, one of Tham's students, who later became one of the most celebrated writers in Khasi.

CHAPTER II

Hiraeth, Soso Tham, and the Elegiac Tradition

Section I

The endeavour in the first chapter was to demonstrate how Tham's *hiraeth* for his native tongue and literature had pushed him to the path of poetry so late in life. It further discussed how his patriotism, the mother of all *hiraeths*, had sustained and driven him, despite daunting difficulties, to go on creating his most significant work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*. This chapter will analyse the influence or influences of *hiraeth* on Tham's poetry, and the questions that will be raised and examined here are about how this concept has shaped and moulded his poetry, or to what kind of poet it has turned him to be.

While discussing the nature and range of *hiraeth*, the first chapter identified this emotion as essentially one of mourning. Scholars on the subject, from Polk to Stephens and Conran ¹ concur that there is a pervasive tone of bitter mourning in all *hiraeth* writings. Polk, for instance, traces the origin of *hiraeth* as a literary concept to Wales's ancient elegies and lamentations. Conran traces it to the Welsh poetry of praise in the sixth century, whose emotion of genuine love, would sink to the emotion of lament whenever tragedy strikes. Stephens quotes famous critics like Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold to equate *hiraeth* with the elegiac note, which according to him, had been struck early in Welsh literature since the time of the *Cynfeirdd* or the early poets of the sixth

century. On the strength of these observations and the detailed discussion in the preceding chapter, one observes that the literature of *hiraeth* properly belongs to the great elegiac tradition, both conventional and unconventional.

Having been inspired and nurtured by *hiraeth*, the elegiac elements are predominant in the larger body of Tham's poetry. In fact, the same tone of profound yearning and bitter mourning pervades his major work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim u Hynñiew Trep*. But before proceeding to classify and discuss this long poem, or any of his other poems, as elegiac, the tradition itself has to be first examined.

In their handbook, Guerin and his co-authors² emphasise the importance of genre criticism in the analysis of a given work of art. They feel that it is essential to establish the genre of a work before it is scrutinised. In the chapter on "Traditional Approaches: Genre Criticism," they reveal that this has been the practice since the time of "the classical Greeks and especially during the neoclassical period," when "it was assumed that if readers knew into what genre a piece of literature fell, they knew much about the work itself." (P 307) They maintain that "regardless of literature's protean quality, our interpretation of it is easier if we can recognize a genre, if we can therefore be provided with a set of 'expectations' and conventions, and if we can then recognize when the expectations are fulfilled and when they are imaginatively adapted." (P 310)

E. D. Hirsch vouches for the same approach in his *Validity in Interpretation*³ when he shows again and again how "the reader's understanding of meaning is dependent on the reader's accurate perception of the genre..." Genre criticism, therefore, seems to hold the key to the understanding of the literature of *hiraeth* and Tham's poetry through a generic study of the elegy. This is especially so in the light

of Hirsch's statement that "when we read a work with which we are not previously familiar or read a work that is creating a new genre, we operate by moving back and forth from what we know to what we do not know well yet." (P 92)

There are two possible definitions of the elegy as a genre: one in its traditional sense and the other in its broader, unconventional sense. ⁴ According to Gupta ⁵ the word *elegy* is derived from the Greek *elegeia*, which means lament. In the traditional meaning, the elegy refers to an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure. It is characterised by a powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration, and above all by the movement from mourning to consolation. In literature *dirge*, *threnody*, *monody* and *lament* are variations of almost the same theme. They are generally shorter versions of the elegy. But lament did not have anything much to do with the elegy in ancient Greece. Recounting the origins of the elegy as a genre, Peter M. Sacks states in the introductory chapter of his book, *The English Elegy Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, that the term derives from "the Greek elegiac couplets traditionally accompanied by the flute, or more precisely, by the oboelike doublepipe called *aulos*." (P 2) These couplets of alternating dactylic hexameters and pentameters could contain a fairly broad range of topics, including exhortatory martial epigrams, political philosophy, commemorative lines, or even amatory complaints. It is interesting to note that the prototypes of the modern elegy were known to be the idylls of Theocritus and his Greek imitator, Bion.

But as Sacks observes, behind this array of topics there may have lain an earlier, more exclusive association of the flute song's elegiacs with the expression of grief.

Margaret Alexiou, an authority on ancient Greek ritual laments, supports Sacks's argument when she writes:

*It is possible that Echembrotos, the Peloponnesian poet who was famous for his mournful elegoi accompanied by the aulos, was only one of a school of Dorian elegists, who used the form for a kind of lament; and it was this same Echembrotos whose music to the aulos was disqualified at the Delphic festival in 578 B. C. on the grounds that its mournful character was unsuitable....*⁶

Latin adaptations of the elegiac form closely followed the Greek model, but with an increasing focus on the amatory complaint. Likewise the English versions continued to associate the term elegy with the elegiac distichs and admitted a variety of subject matter to the genre. John Donne, for instance, applied the term to his amorous and satirical poems in heroic couplets. But after the sixteenth century the definition that gradually gathered currency was that of a poem of mortal loss and consolation. And with Spenser, and more explicitly with Milton, “we return,” as Sacks says, “to Echembrotos and the Dorian elegists whose *aulos* reeds precede the mournful pipe players of Theocritus and Virgil.” (P 3)

In its broader, unconventional sense, the elegy may refer to a poem of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life. In the note on the elegy, Gupta refers to a critic who “has ably drawn a line of distinction between the ‘elegiac’ and the ‘elegy’.” (P 7) The elegiac, he observes, is an extended version of the elegy and refers to poems having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrows. M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* and Chris Baldick in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* not only concur with this distinction but

also place Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) and Maria Rainer Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1912-22) within this tradition. Gupta adds to it Matthew Arnold's "Memorial Verses" (1850) and "The Scholar Gypsy" (1853), while Conran firmly places the Welsh songs of lamentation, the fountainhead of the literature of *hiraeth*, within this unconventional tradition when he says (as discussed in Chapter I) that such songs mourn not the death of an individual but the ruined house of tribal chiefs and the collapse of an entire society.

But regardless of the category to which an elegy might belong, there are always certain conventions that have evolved along with it throughout its history, and no definition or description of the genre can be complete without listing them. Baldick credits Theocritus and the other Sicilian poets of the third and second centuries BC with the introduction of the pastoral conventions. But Sacks contends that the elegy as a poem of mourning and consolation "has its roots in a dense matrix of rites and ceremonies, in the light of which many elegiac conventions should be recognized as being not only aesthetically interesting forms but also the literary versions of specific social and psychological practices." (P 2)

Sacks reveals that the *aulos* was related to the Phoenician *giggras*, flutes played at the funeral rites for Adonis, and descended from an Egyptian wind instrument associated with its divine inventor, Osiris, god of the dead. The Greeks themselves mythologised the invention of the wind instrument, clinching its association with loss and consolation in the legend of Pan and Syrinx, a legend whose particular sorrow, invests the role of Pan and of pipes in pastoral and elegiac poetry as diverse as Theocritus, Spenser, Milton, Pope, Shelley, Arnold, and Yeats.

Among the conventions rooted in the “dense matrix of rites” and further developed by Theocritus and the Sicilians are: the representation of the dead friend as a shepherd to be mourned by the natural world, or pastoral contextualisation with its apostrophe and pathetic fallacy; the myth of the vegetation deity; the use of repetitions and refrains; the reiterated questioning and the outbreak of vengeful anger or denunciation; the procession of mourners; the passage from grief to consolation and the traditional images of resurrection, transfiguration, stellification or deification. Additional conventions can also be seen in the use of the images of flowers and light, the eclogic division within or between mourning voices, the question of contests, rewards, and inheritance, and the unusual degree of self-consciousness regarding the actual performance of mourning. This last feature relates to the need of the elegist to draw attention to his own surviving powers with a view to consoling himself.

But for a proper understanding of the elegiac tradition, a mere listing of conventions will not be sufficient. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*⁷ Northrop Frye writes that “The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify such traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them.” (P 247-48) In the light of Frye’s statement it would seem necessary to further elaborate on the elegiac conventions so that later it may be possible to bring out such literary relationships among the elegies to be analysed. Such an elaboration would also shed light on how the poems conform to established conventions and how they adapt, develop or modify such conventions.

The pastoral contextualisation of the elegy, as Sacks suggests, begins with the crucial images of weaving, of creating a fabric in the place of a void. Thus in the story of Apollo's unrequited passion for Daphne, the god found a laurel wreath as a consoling substitute:

*Since thou canst not be my bride, thou shalt at least be my tree. My hair, my lyre, my quiver shall always be entwined with thee, O laurel. With thee shall Roman generals wreath their heads....*⁸

And Pan fashioned the pipes from the cut and bound reeds as a consoling substitute for Syrinx. In Theocritus's "First Idyll," the boy on the carved bowl plaits a cage of asphodel. The elegist in Virgil's "Eclogue X" weaves a basket while he sings. The grieving Camus of "Lycidas" wears a carefully embroidered hem "inwrought with figures dim." In section 66 of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson compares himself to a blind old man winding the curls of children's hair, or playing with threads, and even a modern elegist like Stevens, while describing the figure of "peace after death" in his elegy for Henry Church, uses the images of

*Generations of the imagination piled
In the manner of its stitchings, of its thread.
In the weaving round the wonder of its need.*⁹

Sacks associates the images of weaving with the task "of weaving a consolation" (P 19) at the close of an elegy. In addition, he associates the task with the actual weaving of burial clothes and shroud to emphasise not only the pastoral contextualisation but also the fact that mourning is a ritualistic and psychological action.

But the greatest influence on the pastoral form of the elegy has been the rituals associated with the death and rebirth of vegetation gods (features of this influence can also be found in elegies that are not strictly speaking pastoral). An obvious influence of such rites is the ceremonial structure of the elegy with its measured pace and direction, which develops the effect not only of an event but also of a performance. This effect is achieved by foregrounding the performance with the genre's staging devices, drawing attention to the mourner's or cast of mourners' intention. This "ceremonious self-dramatization and its framing devices," (P19) Sacks reveals, can either be sophisticated as in "Lycidas" or simple as in the elegiac eclogues of Theocritus, but in either case they serve the purpose of increasing the reader's sense of performance and of enhancing the vigorous responses of the living.

The emphasis on self-dramatisation, crucial to successful mourning, ensures a sense of progress and egress, of traversing some distance, even if only figuratively or psychologically. This brings in the next elegiac convention of placing the dead, and death itself, at some distance from the survivor. The sense of distance in the elegy is marked by the procession of mourners or by the inventoried offering of flowers, which apart from their figurative meanings and function of obeisance, also serve, as Sacks remarks, to demarcate the dead from the living. Examples of such demarcative offerings can be found in numerous elegies mostly drawing on Spenser's "Bouquets" of elegies thrown on the hearse of Sir Philip Sidney ¹⁰ and Milton's figurative flowers to "strew the laureate hearse...." ¹¹

Another important convention is the ritual movement of the elegy, which follows the ancient rites in the basic passage through grief or darkness to consolation and

renewal. Sacks elaborates that the Greek terms for these two phases of the ceremonies, *cathode* or the way down and *anode* or the way up not only “mimed the death and return of the vegetation god but also represents the initiate’s descent to and ascent from a crisis of mysterious revelation.” (P 20) Such a revelation can be seen in the resurrection, stellification or deification of the dead. Milton’s mourning of Edward King is a perfect example, although the same movement is to be found in all elegies.

One more point to be considered here is that the movement from loss to consolation always requires a deflection of desire, with the creation of a trope for the lost object. Sacks says the story of Apollo and Daphne itself ¹² exemplifies the relation between loss and figuration. Having insulted Cupid, Apollo is smitten with an unrequited love for Daphne. He pursues her to the riverbanks of her father, Peneus, from whom she begs for release. As Apollo grabs her she turns into a laurel tree. But this metamorphosis, where the tree substitutes for the nymph, is not the end of the story for Apollo’s embrace of the tree does not bring comfort as “even the wood shrank from his kisses.” ¹³ It was only when Apollo turns to founding a sign, a laurel wreath, as a consoling substitute for Daphne, does he accept his loss, as could be seen from the quotation on the subject earlier. The story of Pan and Syrinx is similar and thus it is that Apollo’s laurel symbolises Daphne and Pan’s flute symbolises Syrinx.

According to Sacks, the prominent elegiac convention of pathetic fallacy itself derives from the figure of the vegetation god. The god is personified and shown as a human or human-divine rather than a merely elemental or vegetative figure. This serves several functions. The god reduces multiplicity to apparent unity and allows the devotees or mourners to focus their grief or gratitude on him. It also means that man is mourning

not only his own image but also identifies that image with nature's regenerative powers for the sake of a consolatory schema. But such a personification also effects a role reversal in the sense that it reverses man's submission to nature or its changing seasons. As Sacks explains,

Instead of grieving over the inhuman operation of nature or time, a setting and process on which he is unavoidably dependent, man creates a fiction whereby nature and its changes, the occasions of his grief, appear to depend on him. The withering vegetation is now no more the cause of human grief but rather the mourner or even the effect of a human-divine loss—the death of such figures as Adonis, Thammuz, Persephone, or Dionysus. (P 20-1)

Thus the convention of the pathetic fallacy of nature's lament, often denounced as artificial and mere contrivance, "actually has a naturalistic basis in the notation of seasonal change." (P 21)

The convention of displaying anger or resentment against nature and change follows from the convention of pathetic fallacy. This has been clearly explained by Sacks with the help of Freud's *fort-da* episode. Freud described the behaviour of his eighteen-month-old grandson, who seemed to master the absences of his mother by the *fort-da* game.¹⁴ Whenever the mother left the room, the child controlled his anger and grief by repeatedly casting away and then retrieving a wooden reel, to the accompaniment of the syllables *fort* and *da*. Freud saw the reel as a surrogate mother and he interpreted the syllables to mean approximately "gone" and "there" or "here" (in the sense of reclaimed presence). This game of "disappearance and return," he regarded, as "related to the child's great cultural achievement—the instinctual relation (that is, the renunciation of

instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach.” (P 34)

Sacks says the game’s rhythm of loss and retrieval not only corresponds roughly to the two phases of grief and consolation in the ancient rituals but also achieves a similar psychological reversal of dependence. He adds,

Freud supposed that the child not only masters the disappearance of the mother but psychologically causes it in representational form, by discarding the surrogate figure of the reel. Similarly, by the sacrifice or mimed death of the personification of nature, man ‘causes’ nature’s death, or at least brings on her deathlike mourning. As in the case of the child, man reverses his passive relation to the mother or matrix, perhaps even avenging himself against her and his situation. (P 21)

From this point of view it could be seen that the elegy’s elaborate observations of nature’s degeneration are not the fallacious products of man’s self-pity but rather the expression of his attempted mastery of and vengeance against nature and change. These motives of mastery and revenge surface most explicitly in the many elegies in which man either enjoins nature to lament or curses it as in Theocritus’s “First Idyl”:

*Let all things be changed, and let the pine tree bear pears, since Daphnis dies,
and let the stag drag down the dogs, and let the screech owl from the mountains
contend with nightingales...¹⁵*

The attention to elegiac cursing naturally leads to a consideration of the relation between grief and vengeful anger found not only in the most traditional elegies like Milton’s

“Lycidas” and Shelley’s “Adonais” but also in the most modern as in Sylvia Plath’s elegies for her father, beginning with “Full Fathom Five” (1958) and ending with “Daddy” (1962). Jahan Ramazani confirms this in his book when he observes:

While elegists like Milton and Shelley had lashed out against nature, deities, and third parties, and while Jonson, Dryden, and Swinburne had betrayed competitive friction with the dead, Plath extracts and magnifies the elegy’s potential aggression [against the dead].¹⁶

The subject of anger and cursing in turn gives rise to the related convention of elegiac questioning. Sacks remarks that since the first question with which Thyrsis opened his lament for Daphnis in Theocritus’s “First Idyl,” the convention of questioning, which is sometime private and gnomic and sometime pointedly interrogative, addressed to a particular auditor, has reverberated throughout the elegy’s history. The determinants for this convention, he states, are multiple and one of its obvious functions is to “set free the energy locked in grief and rage and to organize its movement in the form of a question that is not merely an expression of ignorance but a voicing of protest.” (P 22) This serves the function of helping the mourner prevent the congealing of his own impulses in the same way that the ancient vegetation rites sought to unlock the frozen or withered energies of nature.

But more significantly, Sacks states that when the question is addressed to someone else in a repetitive and incantatory manner, the convention takes on the exorcistic or expiatory element of a ritual and the mourner succeeds in shifting focus from the lost object, or from himself to the world outside. If tinged with anger, as is often

the case, such questions may actually carry that anger away from its possible attachment to the self and thus stop the mourner from being possibly enmeshed in melancholia.

A further function of the elegiac question is to create the illusion that some force or agent might have prevented the death. Thus we have questions like “Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep/ Closed o’er the head of your loved Lycidas?”¹⁷ (50-1) in Milton’s “Lycidas.” But why is such a question asked, when there has never been any effective guardians against mortality? Sacks believes that this is because the question not only creates a fictive addressee but also fosters the illusion that such a guardian was temporarily absent rather than permanently non-existent. It is such an illusion that helps in bringing about some consolation in the elegy.

Elegiac questioning like the ritual origins of the genre is marked by a significant use of repetition, and Sacks tries to interpret why the elegy should be so conventionally repetitive. He asserts that elegies are presented as being repetitions in themselves and even the lament within Theocritus’s “First Idyl,” the poem commonly regarded as initiating the genre, has been sung by Thyrsis on earlier occasions. Each loss in an elegy recapitulates a previous loss and the elegy as a form always re-enacts an entry into a pre-existing language and code.

But these are only partial reasons for the repetitive character of so many elegies. Sacks lists the functions of repetition and observes that the first one is to create a sense of continuity as opposed to the extreme discontinuity of death so that time itself is seen as a familiar filled-in medium and not as an open-ended source of possible catastrophe. The second is to create a protective barrier against the disruptive shock of death since repetition is one of the psychological responses to trauma. The third is to create a certain

rhythm of lament by the repetition of words and refrains to control the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion. The fourth is to assimilate a particular lament to a comforting commonality of grief through the repetition of the form of the vegetation rites and its ritual context of consolation. The fifth is to confront the mind with the fact of death to achieve not only recognition of that fact but also the resulting withdrawal of attachment from the dead. And the sixth is to invoke the spirit of the dead by repeating its name so that it takes on a substantiality almost replacing the dead and effecting a consolation.

The repetition of the form of vegetation rites by so many elegies has evolved another convention, the convention of elegiac mythology. The purpose of such mythology is to affirm man's resurrection and his immortality. Sacks comments, "The vegetation god is, after all, the predecessor of almost every elegized subject and provides a fundamental trope by which mortals create their images of immortality." (P 26-7) This immortality is suggested by nature's self-regenerative power and the principle of recurrent fertility. Based on this principle man has created such myths of immortality as that of Dionysus, son of Zeus, who had been dismembered and devoured by the Titans, who in turn were destroyed by Zeus. Sacks narrates that mankind, born from the soot of the Titans' remains, inherited an element of ingested divinity. It was this element that the devotee nursed like a spiritual heart within himself. It is after a life dedicated to refining the sacred legacy from its Titanic dross that the true initiate could greet the ushers of the dead with such words as those inscribed upon an Orphic tablet: "I am the son of earth and starry heaven, and by birth I come from God: ye know this well yourselves." ¹⁸

Apart from this there is the other ritually stressed feature of the legend, the supposition that the heart of Dionysus escaped the Titans and was carried out by Athene, concealed in a basket laden with fruits. The survival of this organ enabled the second birth of Dionysus from Zeus's union with the mortal Semele. In the rites commemorating this survival or rebirth, the "heart," usually a carved piece of fig wood would be carried away in a special basket and revived by a group of women. Later the women would come to represent singing muses and the deity or its special attribute would signify the immortality of man and also the immortal power of poetry.

The use of the images of light is another convention so crucial to elegies. As with the images of flowers there are several levels of meaning attached to them. The obvious significance is of course that of an energy that conquers darkness and outlasts human mortality. Sacks informs that the figure of the sun and the associated figures of light and of fire have undergone a history of resignification throughout the development of the elegy. In Achilles' mourning of Patroclus, wrath arouses Achilles from grief and produces "Around his Brows a golden Cloud she spread/ A Stream of Glory flam'd above his Head." ¹⁹ This light was so intense that it was compared with beacon fires blazing forth at sunset, an artificial light emerging like a substitute for the sun. The subsequent variations of this fundamental image are too many to recount here but its survival in Milton's consolatory claim, no less than the attenuated retrospective glimmerings of Hardy's elegies for his first wife shall be discussed with more specificity later in the chapter.

One last set of conventions involves the use of division between or within mourning voices. Margaret Alexiou discusses this use with regard to the ancient Greek

laments, showing how the practice influenced the Greek *threnos*, a formal chant performed by professional mourners, in conjunction with the *goos*, the less formal wailing of the bereaved. In this way an antiphony would result, the voices of the bereaved coming to chime with the refrains of the paid singers.

The divided voice structure of the lament, according to Alexiou, entered drama as the *kommos*, or the tragic lament in dialogue form between chorus and actors. The structure also became popular as the antiphonal lament in eclogues. But as Sacks reveals, even in elegies that are not strictly eclogues, the ancient practice continues. In Bion's dirge for Adonis, he says, "the Loves join in weeping" as the refrain sets up a choral antiphony to the speaker's lament, which itself includes a further voice, that of the grieving Aphrodite. And even in elegies that call themselves "monodies," such as "Lycidas," the voice of the elegist, he adds, works through several moments of extreme divisiveness or multiplicity.

Three explanations for this conventional fracturing or separation of voices can be deduced. The first relates to the splitting and self-suppression that accompanies the self's first experiences of loss and substitution, its discovery of signs both for the lost objects and for the self. The second is associated with the strategy of dramatisation by which mourners not only lend ceremony to their rites but also intensify and indicate their own work as survivors. The third lies in the confrontational structure required for the very recognition of loss by the mourner. This recognition, as has been seen, is achieved through a kind of repetitive dialogue. Allied to this is the general function of controlling or criticising the mourner. Sacks discloses that as early as Theocritus's "First Idyl," the

griever is addressed by voices urging him to temper his sorrow and to rejoin the community of the living and the tradition is continued with variations through almost all the major elegies. In “Lycidas,” though the voices of address are internalised and dreamlike, they are nevertheless, in Sacks’s words, “successors to an entire line of admonishing or sympathizing voices in the elegies of Theocritus, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and others.” (P 36).

It will be worthwhile to close the discussion on elegiac conventions with the issue of poetic inheritance. In the vegetation rites the act of mourning quite simply included the act of inheritance. The connection between mourning and inheritance has remained a close one throughout history. Alexiou divulges that in Greece the right to mourn was from earliest times legally connected to the right to inherit. Furthermore, she states, the ancient law prevented anyone from inheriting unless he mourned. Alexiou quotes Isaios to illustrate the practice: “Is it not a most unholy thing if a man, without having done any of the customary rites due to the dead, yet expects to take inheritance of the dead man’s property?”²⁰

On the topic, Sacks reveals that since the time of Moschus’s lament for Bion, many elegies pivot around the issue of poetic inheritance. In this case, the heir apparent must not only demonstrate a greater strength or proximity to the dead than any rival may claim but he must also wrest his inheritance from the dead. It is clear, therefore, that from its earliest conflictual structures to its successive adaptations, the elegy clarifies and dramatises this emergence of a true heir. W. H. Auden’s lines for W. B. Yeats, “The words of the dead / Are modified in the guts of the living”²¹ not only recalls one of the most primitive images of inheritance, but are especially true of elegists as inheritors.

Having discussed the elegiac tradition at some length, Tham's *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* and his other short lyrics, can now be explored with the help of genre criticism. As mentioned earlier, *Ki Sngi ba Rim u Hynñiew Trep* is Tham's most significant work. The poem is written in a format that resembles that of an epic as far as the first section, "*Ki Symboh Ksiar*" ("The Golden Grains"), is concerned. It is here that the poet lays down his argument about the themes he is going to write on in the subsequent sections after having invoked the Muse in the spirit of a "Gilded Pen." The key lines in the argument are:

Jingshai ngi wad sawdong pyrthei;

Jingshai ka Ri ngim tip ei ei, — (1-2)

(Enlightenment we seek around the world;

That of the Land's we know but nought, —)

Based on this single word, "Enlightenment," one can explore the very roots of Khasi civilisation and cover every aspect of Khasi traditional life and culture. But this chapter will limit itself to themes referred to in the argument and will categorise it and place it within the elegiac tradition. This will be done because the researcher views the poem as one of lament, especially when later in the argument the poet repeats a variation of the quoted lines saying:

Jingshai ngi wad sawdong pyrthei;

Jingshai ka Ri ngim kheĩñ ei ei: (55-6)

(Enlightenment we seek around the world;

That of the Land's we care but nought:)

These are words of profound pain and what the poet is mourning here is not the death of a single person but the passing away of a whole generation of people and their way of life.

It has been seen how in its broader, unconventional sense, the elegy may refer to a poem of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life. It has also been observed how the elegiac is an extended version of the elegy and refers to poems having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrows; and how Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), Matthew Arnold's "Memorial Verses" (1850) and "The Scholar Gypsy" (1853), Maria Rainer Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1912-22) and the Welsh songs of lamentation have been placed within this tradition. It is to this tradition that Tham's *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* also belongs. But since the category of the poem has not previously been identified, Hirsch's advice that we should "operate by moving back and forth from what we know to what we do not know well yet"²² would be the best approach in examining the thematic and generic similarities the poem shares with other elegies. In doing this the chapter will begin with Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and move backwards to Arnold and Gray for reasons that will be explained later. In the process the discussion will also refer to the more conventional elegies of John Milton ("Lycidas," 1637), Lord Alfred Tennyson ("In Memoriam," 1850), and other modern elegies like Hardy's and the self-elegies of Wallace Stevens.

Of all the elegies named above, Rilke's *Duino Elegies* are the most unconventional in the sense that they were not occasioned by the death of any individual but were a product of a protracted personal spiritual crisis. Recounting the history of the elegies, Eudo C. Mason in his book *Rilke*,²³ reveals that prior to his stay in the castle of

Duino on the Adriatic in October 1911, as the guest of Princess Marie Taxis, the poet was in a deeply disturbed mental state. He observes:

Rilke's faith in himself, in everything, was seriously undermined, and with it also his never robust physical health. The uncertainty, transitoriness and waste of human existence and the horror of death afflicted him more than ever before, and all that he had built up against these spectres seemed to be losing its vitality. But what most tormented him was that his creative powers seemed suddenly to have deserted him. (P 72)

Indeed his doubts over the human value of art were so intense that he even exclaimed during these years, "Art is superfluous... can art heal wounds, can it take away the bitterness of death? It does not assuage despair, it does not feed the hungry or clothe the shivering." (P 72) But Mason asserts that Rilke was an assiduous observer of himself and that he had discovered in his psychic processes a certain regular rhythm by which his torments, if allowed to accumulate and intensify themselves, "would in the long run, through a kind of automatic reaction, suddenly swing round into their opposite, establishing in him...a divine euphoria, in which his creative powers awakened..." (P 77)

It was in search of this "divine euphoria" or "reversal" as Rilke himself called that he decided to subject himself to the seclusion of the Duino, far from the noise and glare of modern life, to help him concentrate and clarify his mind. The result was a kind of mystical experience, as if the poet had heard a voice calling with the very words used to open his first elegy: "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?" The manifold, inchoate afflictions were crystallising into poetic form and becoming articulate. The poem he now wrote, with its predominantly dactylic rhythm and occasional

rhymeless verses, its gravely stylised diction and its direct appeal to the inner sense, was, in Mason's opinion, "unmistakably derived from the great tradition of the antique elegy, as Klopstock, Hölderlin and Goethe ... had naturalised it in German literature." (P 79)

Rilke simply called the poem "the elegy." It could very well have been regarded as complete in itself, since it sets forth not only the spiritual situation, but also a spiritual event, a more or less rounded-off inward action of not only despair but an outward movement away from that despair. But according to Mason, Rilke saw it only as the opening motion of an elegiac symphony. Some ten days later another elegy and more elegiac fragments followed. However, it was not till after exactly ten years had elapsed before he could complete the cycle of ten elegies at Muzot, in Switzerland, in February 1922.

To study Rilke's elegies, and indeed those of the others, the traditional literary analysis of Guerin et al ²⁴ will be adopted whereby the narrative line will be summarised and textual matter be analysed.

The "First Elegy" ²⁵ sets forth the ideal of complete and undivided consciousness, where will and capability, thought and action, vision and realisation are one. This is the highest ideal that man can form. And yet so impossible is it for man to realise this ideal, to become like the angels, that it is rather a rebuke than an inspiration. What, then, remains for man? The answer is in giving the highest possible significance to his moments as they pass; to be continually prepared for those moments when eternity is perceived behind the flux of time, those moments when

Voices, voices. Hearken, my heart,

...

*hark to the suspiration,
 the uninterrupted news that grows out of silence.
 Rustling towards you now from those youthfully-dead.
 Whenever you entered a church in Rome or in Naples
 Were you not always being quietly addressed by their fate?
 Or else an inscription sublimely imposed itself on you,
 As, lately, the tablet in Santa Maria Formosa.²⁶ (53-63)*

But the price of these moments of insight is a constant attentiveness and loyalty to all things and relationships, even the humblest and least spectacular, that immediately surround man. Of course man is continually distracted from this mission or task, by all sorts of imaginary possibilities. Above all he is distracted by the illusory ideal of some permanently satisfying possession, and in particular, by the longing for some ideal lover or companion. And yet, Rilke declares that the highest kind of love is that which is unrequited, such as that of the great feminine lovers like the forsaken Milanese lady, Gaspara Stampa, which is content simply to endure and thereby, to become:

*...Is it not time that, in loving,
 we freed ourselves from the loved one, and, quivering,
 endured:
 as the arrow endures the string, to become, in the
 gathering out-leap,
 something more than itself? (49-52)*

And since the angels are too immeasurably beyond man, the great lovers, and also those who have died young should be taken as the examples whose destiny should be reflected

upon. It is through such a reflexion that man shall achieve an intuition, which will still more deeply reconcile him to the fact of his transitoriness, into the unity of life and death and the complementariness of sorrow and joy as in these lines:

*Yes, but all of the living
make the mistake of drawing too sharp distinctions.
Angels (they say) are often unable to tell
whether they move among the living or dead. The eternal
torrent whirls all the ages through either realm
for ever, and sounds above their voices in both. (78-84)*

And:

*But we, that have need of
such mighty secrets, we, for whom sorrow's so often
source of blessedest progress, could we exist without them [the early departed]?*
(87-89)

The "First Elegy" thus acts as an elegiac prologue and introduces all the main themes of the elegies. Among these are the contrast between the angels and man; the recognition of man's transitoriness, and the suggestion that this limitation may also be the condition of a special kind of activity; and the insistence on the destinies of the great lovers, of the early departed, and of the hero, as keys to the true meaning of life and death. In this elegy affirmation on the whole, predominates over negation, and praise or celebration, over lament. But in the succeeding elegies, between the first and the seventh, it is negation and the insistence on the limitations of man that predominate.

Leishman and Spender reveal in their book, *Duino Elegies*, how in one of his letters, Rilke had written, "If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst."²⁷ This look at the worst Rilke proceeds to take in the next few elegies and descends like Orpheus to sound his lyre among the shades. In the "Second Elegy" he insists on the contrast between the complete and continuous self-awareness of the angels and the fragmentary and intermittent self-awareness of man, whose whole life on earth, and indeed his very identity from moment to moment, is "Like dew from the morning grass" (25) that vanishes as soon as the sun comes up. Even the lovers are ordinary here, and unlike the great lovers of the "first Elegy," they seem to obtain no more than a fleeting intuition of eternity behind the flux of time. "Our heart transcends us" (76), says the poet, our reach so greatly exceeds our grasp that we had better content ourselves with a kind of sad moderation, a self-limiting, neither asking nor giving too much. He then recalls the restrained gestures of the figures carved in relief on Attic funeral monuments, which then leads him to a theme to be developed later, which is the lack of adequate external symbols to define the life within man.

The "Second Elegy" has suggested the inadequacy of ordinary lovers, whose blind animal passion is always the foundation, and often the whole content, of masculine love. In the "Third Elegy" that inadequacy is contrasted with the sublime love, which is complete in itself such as the love of the great feminine lovers celebrated in the "First Elegy."

One thing to sing the beloved, another alas!

that hidden guilty river-god of the blood.

He whom she distantly knows, the lover, what does he know

*of that Lord of Pleasure, who often, out of his lonely heart,
before she soothed him, often as though she did not exist,
streaming from, oh, what unknowable depths, would uplift
his god-head, uprousing the night to infinite uproar? (1-7)*

The poet also confronts that physical basis of life, which has so often made man's higher aspiration meaningless.

*He, so new, so timorous, how he got tangled
in ever-encroaching creepers of inner event,
twisted to primitive patterns, to throttling growths, to bestial
preying forms! How he gave himself up to it! (49-52)*

Leishman and Spender interpret this as that same basis "which held Swift in a condition of fascinated repulsion, and which, at times, seems to have upset the balance of Shakespeare." (P114) Here too the theme of childhood is introduced for the first time. The theme is about those aspects of childhood where the child dwells in "his interior world, his interior jungle/ that primal forest within," (5-6) and the every "terror" that "knew him." In other words, it is about the dark miseries and terrors, which even the tenderest maternal love could not dispel. Childhood here is quite unlike that of Henry Vaughan's or Wordsworth's. But later in the fourth and eighth elegies Rilke is to present a very different aspect of childhood, whose qualities are revealed for envy and admiration.

The "Fourth Elegy" is the most bitter and negative of all elegies. Its main theme has been alluded to in the "First Elegy," which is that distractedness, that dividedness of mind—"We, though, while we're intent upon one thing, / Can feel the cost and conquest of another,"(9-10) which prevents us from performing our proper task on earth. That task

is seen by the poet as the surrendering of our selves to those unseen forces whose instruments we are, and only in fulfilling whose purpose we can give a meaning to our lives.

Humans lack, for instance, the infallible instinct and the undivided consciousness of animals, a theme to be developed in the "Eight Elegy." We "are not one. We've no instinctive knowledge, / like migratory birds," (1-2) or trees. The poet says the trees, as autumn moves towards winter, shed their leaves, and the migratory birds congregate for their flight to warmer climates. But when, and how, do the "trees of life" reveal that their winter is approaching, so we, like the birds, may perceive the signal for departure and change? Unlike the birds, he asserts, which know instinctively when the time to migrate has come, we have only a dim and confused knowledge of the laws of our life. This is the reason why he had declared in the "First Elegy:"

*and already the knowing brutes are aware
that we don't feel very securely at home
within our interpreted world. (11-13)*

Consequently, we commit errors, which animals would never commit. Birds depart at the proper time, with the wind intended for their journey. We on the contrary do not recognise the necessity for departure, for fundamental change, until "winter" is already upon us. The result is that we force ourselves upon "winds" or circumstances intended for other purposes than our requirements. Hence, to us, circumstances and situations are nearly always unfavourable, and our first response to a world seemingly so hostile is hostility.

Rilke sees our perpetual mindfulness of our transitoriness as a limitation, as the reason, which prevents us from trying to accept it as a condition. After some fleeting perception of eternity we fall back into the flux of time, and flounder there in a kind of desperate dividedness. No sooner have we concentrated upon one thing than we think of some other thing either as a means, or an effect, or which we might have chosen instead. We are constantly oscillating between what we are doing and what we might be doing, between what we have chosen and what we might have chosen, between what is immediately before us and what is, or may be, just round the corner. We are, the poet bitterly observes, “half-filled masks,” only half-heartedly and half-attentively playing the parts allotted to us. A puppet-show, he opines, is a less depressing spectacle than our life. A puppet’s face may be “all outside,” its inner life may be no more than stuffed-in material, but at least it completely fills its part. An angel, he states, could do more with a puppet than the unseen powers could do with us, because of our perpetual refractoriness.

But even this most bitter elegy ends with praise, praise of childhood:

*O hours of childhood,
hours when behind the figures there was more
than the mere past, and when what lay before us
was not the future! (65-68)*

Could we retain or regain the open and undivided consciousness of the child, distracted neither by past nor future, and surrendering itself entirely to the eternal present, we should be able to play our parts.

The “Fifth Elegy” is actually the last elegy to be written. Rilke reshuffled his elegies and slotted this one in the fifth spot to fit in with the other elegies of despair, as

placing it at the end of the cycle would be opposed to his elegiac schema. The elegy was largely inspired by Picasso's picture, *Les Saltimbanques*, and there is a correspondence between the picture and the poem, though not an exact but a general one. Picasso's six acrobats are stylised, timeless, and motionless. They are standing in the middle of a landscape, and it is impossible to say whether they are arriving or departing, beginning or ending their performance. Rilke's acrobats are definitely about to begin. They are standing on a "threadbare carpet," and a number of spectators have gathered round. To Rilke, these acrobats, both in the performance of their profession and in their relationships with one another, are symbolic of human activity as a whole. Always on the move and with no fixed residence, they are even more fleeting than the rest of mankind, whose evanescence has been lamented in the "Second Elegy." Assembled on their "threadbare carpet," they present a very sorry sight, suggesting the ultimate loneliness and isolation of man in this incomprehensible world. Practising their occupation from childhood until death, it seems as if they were mere playthings in the hands of some unknown "never-contented will." Discussing them, Leishman and Spender say,

At first, perhaps they recall the limiting case of Angel and Doll, imagined in the preceding Elegy, but the "emptiness" of their hardly-conquered skill, which seems to give pleasure neither to them nor to their spectators who come and go like the petals of a rose, suggests rather some Aristophanic jester than the Angel.

(P124)

But significantly Rilke pauses over the sadness of the little boy:

*sometimes in half-pauses, a tenderness tries
to steal out over your face to your seldomly*

*tender mother, but scatters over your body,
 whose surface quickly absorbs the timidly rippling,
 hardly attempted look... And again
 that man is clapping his hands for the downward spring,
 and before,
 a single pain has got within range of your ever-
 galloping heart, comes the tingling
 in the soles of your feet, ahead of the spring that it springs from,
 chasing into your eyes a few physical tears.
 And still, instinctive,
 that smile....*

*Angel! Oh, take it, pluck it, that small-flowered herb of healing!
 Shape a vase to preserve it. Set it among those joys
 not yet open to us: (47-61)*

Though the sad little boy is jolted back, like the children of the fourth and eighth elegies, from his approach to reality by the uncomprehending elders, even before his sadness has had time to reach his heart, somehow “a tenderness tries to steal out.” It is that tenderness, manifesting in a smile that shines through the tears, that Rilke values the most and selects from this exhibition of mechanical performance to offer to the angel as a token of divinity in man.

Leishman and Spender hold that one of Rilke’s most fundamental convictions is that life is real in proportion to its difficulty. Accordingly, in this elegy, he tries to go

back to the imagined moment when the acrobats still found their act difficult. That he says, is the moment which is real, before they had achieved their present ease, before their “pure too little” had passed into “empty too much.” It has been noticed in the “Second Elegy” that there is a similar decline in the lives of lovers, how when they began to receive, they also began to lose the power of giving. Rilke now imagines the acrobats as lovers and lovers as acrobats:

*Angel: suppose there's a place we know nothing about, and there,
on some indescribable carpet, lovers showed all that here
they're for ever unable to manage— their daring
lofty figures of heart-flight,
their towers of pleasure, their ladders,
...
.....Suppose they could manage it there,
before the spectators ringed round, the countless unmurmuring dead:
would not the dead then fling their last, their for ever reserved,
ever-concealed, unknown to us, ever-valid
coins of happiness down before at last
truthfully smiling pair on the quietened
carpet? (96-109)*

Supposing, he says, the true way of conceiving death is not in the ordinary human notion, which makes life seem cheap and meaningless, but as the other side of life. And supposing that there the lovers were able to perform the task, they now find insuperable, as easily as the acrobats go through their motions, then there would indeed be an

exhibition of skill worth achieving. Then the smile upon the performers' faces would no longer be false or forced, but a true smile from the heart, and the dead, who would then be spectators, would experience genuine happiness.

Rilke has introduced in this elegy his fondest philosophy of life and death. But what exactly this philosophy is and how Rilke works it out, as an elegiac consolation, will be dealt with later.

Rilke had claimed in the "First Elegy" that it is only through the destinies of the great lovers and the early departed that one can understand life and death as aspects of the one great unity. He had also suggested that the early departed live on in our minds and hearts more intensely, more genuinely than when they were on earth. In the "Fifth Elegy" he celebrates the aspirations of lovers, which can never be realised on earth, as the preparation for a fuller and intenser life in "a place we know nothing about." He now celebrates, in the "Sixth Elegy," the single-mindedness and single-heartedness of the hero, whose destiny is "strangely akin to the youthfully dead."

Humans, the poet rebukes, "glory in flowering" unlike the fig tree which "almost entirely omit[s] to flower" and goes on "into the early resolute fruit." Lamenting this attitude in us he declares that the flowering of life in time as we know it, should be seen only as a preparation for its fruit, which is death that should not be conceived of as the opposite of life, but as its other, unilluminated side. But Rilke regrets that people draw a sharp distinction between life and death and view it as "that ugly cup with the broken handle and the meaningless inscription "Faith Love Hope" from which a bitterness of undiluted death is to be drunk."²⁸ He therefore, admires the hero who is indifferent to mere duration: "Duration doesn't concern him. His rising's existence." (22) The hero cares only for

existence without thought or fear of death. His existence is independent of time. And when he dies, he carries into the ripe fruit of his death, like the fig tree, his undisclosed and “purest secret.” By contrast all our secrets have been revealed and we have no further hidden significance or intensity that requires “the Whole” for its realisation when finally “we reach the retarded core of our ultimate fruit,” (11) which is death, the unilluminated side of life.

There is a remarkable mood swing from the “Sixth Elegy” to the “Seventh Elegy” and this switch has been best indicated by E. L. Stahl. He says, for the hero life is only a beginning. But

*Lest this should be thought to mean that life must be rejected as an unnecessary and disconcerting impediment on the path to death, the Seventh Elegy immediately proceeds to the glorification of existence. At the point when the value of human life in this world seems to have been completely denied, Rilke proclaims its virtues. Arriving at the furthest possibility of negation, he affirms: “Hiersein ist herrlich” [Life here’s glorious]. The tide of his poetry is on the turn from lament to praise.*²⁹

In the “First Elegy” Rilke had lamented man’s transitoriness and maintained that his real mission was to give the highest possible significance to his moments as they went by. He also said that from this task man was perpetually distracted by a longing for some satisfying possession or ideal companion. In this elegy he declares that he has outgrown this longing:

*Not wooing, no longer shall wooing, voice that’s outgrown it,
be now the form of your cry. (1-2)*

This is not to say, however, that he no longer has the power to woo, only that if he were to woo now, his wooing would be as impersonal and “pure as the bird / when the surging season uplifts him.” (2-3) Even if desire were present it would be a kind of universal desire:

*...you, too, would be wooing some silent companion
to feel you, as yet unseen, some mate in whom a reply
was slowly awaking and warming itself as she listened, —
your own emboldened feeling’s glowing fellow feeling.
Oh, and Spring would understand— not a nook would fail
to re-echo annunciation. (6-11)*

This desire is not limited to a particular object for the very reason that it is at the same time an annunciation of the blessedness of existence. Leishman and Spender elaborate on Rilke’s wooing and desire:

*More than that longed-for, unknown beloved, the possibility of whose existence,
as Rilke had declared in one of the Later Poems (“Shatter me, music,” 99), would
depend on his being able to “Extort resounding storms / From the trumpet an
angel blows on high at the end of the world” would respond to it [the poet’s call].
(P130)*

The others who would respond to the poet’s all-encompassing call would be the early departed, who would come and gather “Out of unwithholding graves” to hear the voice of one who had come to understand life through death and death through life, and who had come to perceive that the value of life depended, not on its duration, but on its intensity. Obviously the early dead had been cut off before they could attain happiness, and often

the happiness they enjoyed was not apparent. But then true happiness is never apparent, for according to Rilke, it is something invisible, something within.

The elegy now turns to rejoicing what had been lamented in the “Second Elegy.” Although we, unlike the Greeks and other ancient races, can no more find external symbols for our innermost feelings and aspirations, like the “Pillars, pylons, the Sphinx,” the gigantic towers and monuments, and divine music, yet now we have come to understand our real task. And that task is one of transformation of the visible world outside into an invisible world within. This process of transforming experiencable things into an imperishable invisibility is impelled by the need to preserve the significance of whatever still remains of our forefathers’ great visible achievements.

In the “Eight Elegy,” the stream of praise that was rising so forcefully in the preceding elegy is again interrupted by lament. Already certain causes for lament have been seen in the fundamental defects or weaknesses in human nature such as our transitoriness, our inability to accept it as a condition, our distractedness, our half-heartedness, and our constant fear of death. But at the same time, there has also been some suggestion that these weaknesses are not insurmountable. In this elegy, Rilke produces what he feels another still more fundamental defect or limitation, which is the fact that

*in almost all consciousness there is a distinction between what philosophers call subject and object: the fact that our awareness of Being, or existence, as an object, as something distinct from ourselves, prevents us from identifying ourselves with it and achieving a condition of pure Being or pure existence.*³⁰

Rilke calls this being or existence— which is discerned as something not ourselves— “World,” and he contrasts it with what he calls “the open,” the “nowhere without no.” In this open space, Rilke believes there is no time, neither past nor future, therefore, no end or limit, no separation or parting, and above all, no death as the opposite of life.

Children, he says, sometimes enter or get “quietly lost there,” in the condition of timeless being, but always to be “jogged back again.” Lovers “draw near to it and wonder” but the presence of their partners always distract them, “blocking the view” of the open space. Even the “free animal,” who “has its decease perpetually behind it” and who “moves into eternity,” that openness from which we are always looking back and moving away, is sad when memories of its more intimate life in the womb afflict it. Though such moments, in which the distinction between subject and object is transcended and all barriers of selfhood are broken down, are few and fleeting, they nevertheless, the poet believes, reveal to us our true home. But the sad destiny of man, as he sees it, is that “no one gets beyond” those moments to that open space and like departing travellers we are always taking leave from these moments and so the “world returns once more” and we lose our vision.

The “Ninth Elegy” continues the lament of the preceding elegy for the contradictions of human nature and the despondency of human destiny. The lament can be found in the question with which the elegy begins:

*Why, when this span of life might be fledged away
as laurel, a little darker than all
the surrounding green, with tiny waves on the border
of every leaf (like the smile of a wind):— oh, why*

have to be human, and, shunning Destiny,

long for Destiny? ... (1-6)

The question recalls the transformation of Daphne into a laurel tree and subsequently into a laurel wreath. Rilke speculates on the superior felicity of arboreal existence to human destiny, which he describes in the foregoing elegy as “being opposite / and nothing else, and always opposite” (34-5) to the openness of eternity. He asks, therefore, why, in spite of all, when the choice is offered to me, do I still persist with this human destiny?

The reply had already been suggested in the “First Elegy” when he said “all this was a trust,” and it had almost been formulated at the end of the “Seventh Elegy” through the transformation of the visible world into the invisible one within. Here he grieves that we are finite, transitory and that we are continually conscious of an opposite, something not ourselves. But at the same time, he says, when looked at in another way, these may be conditions and matter for rejoicing for they are also conditions for the fulfilment of our specifically human task of transformation, whose exact nature will be analysed later. And in this complete dedication and submission to this specifically human and finite task, freedom is found, freedom from fear— above all, from fear of death; for death, through whom the process of transformation, both here and beyond, is continued, is regarded no longer as an enemy, but as a friend. Finally in the elegy, the finite achieves infinity and the transient, eternity, by a kind of coincidence of opposites. To Rilke, the present, the here and now, completely accepted, completely affirmed, is nothing but the eternal present, eternity or infinity itself. Therefore, the agonised question of the “First Elegy,” “Alas, who is there / we can make use of?” (9-10) is in this elegy answered as: no one.

There is no one we can make use of, however, there are powers by which, if we submit ourselves to them, we can be used to achieve the final transformation.

The acceptance and celebration of the transitoriness of human life as the necessary condition of man's specific function, which is that of transformation, has been achieved in the "Ninth Elegy." In the last elegy Rilke attempts the most difficult of all affirmations, that of sorrow and suffering. The opening lines, extolling the ultimate triumph of suffering, or insight into the nature of suffering, are the most delightedly and convincingly jubilant Rilke ever wrote:

*How dear you will be to me then, you Nights
of Affliction! Oh, why did I not, inconsolable sisters,
more bendingly kneel to receive you, more loosely surrender
myself to loosened hair? We wasters of sorrows!
How we stare away into sad endurance beyond them,
trying to foresee their end! Whereas they are nothing else
than our winter foliage, our sombre evergreen, one
of the seasons of our interior year, — not only
season— they're also place, settlement, camp, soil, dwelling. (7-15)*

After the beautiful opening lines on sorrow, Rilke, through the parable of the "City of Pain," satirises all that most disgusted him in that half-minded and half-hearted life which he had denounced so bitterly in the "Fourth Elegy." The streets of the "City of Pain" are strange and hollow:

*where, in the seeming stillness of uproar outroared,
stoutly, a casting straight from the mould of vacuity,*

swaggers that gilded fuss, the bursting memorial.

*How an angel would trample it down beyond trace, their market of comfort,
with the church alongside, bought ready for use: as clean
and disenchanting and shut as the Post on a Sunday! (16-22)*

And its fair is full of the most ugly and curious tastes:

*Cheer-struck, on he goes reeling
after his luck. For booths that can please
the most curious tastes are drumming and bawling. Especially
worth seeing (for adults only): the breeding of Money!
Anatomy made amusing! Instructive, and guaranteed
to increase fertility! ...*

Oh, but then just outside,

Behind the last hoarding, plastered with placards for "Deathless," (27-33)

These are images of what Rilke calls that half-life from which death and all that is mysterious is simply excluded. This is that life whose consolations are provided by conventional religion, and whose activities are the pursuit of diversions, in the name of happiness, and the making of money. This is that life from which fear and mystery are expelled by distractions, and where suffering is regarded as an unfortunate accident.

Rilke contrasts this half-life in the enclosed and limited "City of Pain" with the spacious "Land of Lamentation." It is through this spacious landscape that the "youthfully-dead" is led by "one of the elder Laments," showing him, "the tall Tear trees," the "fields of flowering Sadness" and the "herds of Grief" till they reach "the mountains of Primal Pain," which is described as the "source of Joy." The "Land of

Lamentation” is equated with death, or rather, that great unity which includes both life and death. It is in this great unity that the “flowering,” the real meaning of sadness is understood by the newly dead. Instead of a perpetual escape from reality through distractions, there is in the elegy, a perpetual progress in reality through a painfully achieved insight, till at last, the ‘source of joy’ is discovered. With this discovery, the theme suggested in the “First Elegy” — that a reflection on the destinies of those who had died young might give us an intuition into the unity of life and death, and into the complementariness of joy and sorrow— is now fully developed.

But this analytical summary of the contents of the elegies leaves out of account the elegiac figures of the angels. The “First Elegy” in fact, opened with the most fundamental elegiac question of the elegies, “Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic/ orders?” and goes on to evoke these mysterious figures in the lines that follow with the famous phrases:

*... And even if one of them suddenly
pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength
of his
stronger existence. For Beauty’s nothing
but the beginning of Terror we’re still just able to bear,
and why we adore it so is because it serenely
disdains to destroy us. Each single angel is terrible. (2-7)*

The question that ensues from here is why is the anguished questioning so fundamental.

What are these angels? What is their function in the *Duino Elegies*? As Rilke himself

emphatically declared, they are quite certainly not the angels of Christian tradition. As he wrote to Witold von Hulewicz, his Polish translator:

*The "Angel" of the Elegies has nothing to do with the Angel of the Christian heaven...The Angel of the Elegies is the creature in whom that transformation of the visible into the invisible we are performing already appears completed...The Angel of the Elegies is the being for the recognition of a higher degree of reality in the invisible.— Therefore "terrible" to us, because we, its lovers and transformers, still cling to the visible.*³¹

The angels are neither the objectively existent beings in whose reality Rilke believes. In the words of Mason, "They are then hypothetical, imaginary or symbolical entities, but are invested as such with extreme density and magical, evocative force." (P 81) In the elegies, the angel has, to begin with, a structural, formal function to fulfil. Indeed without him the elegies would have become merely personal and confessional lyrics with a comparatively amorphous nature of thought and feeling. It is through the angel that the elegies acquire a mythical contour and also something in the nature of a dramatic action and tension for they put forth not only the limitless, surging inner problems of the poet, but also the relationship between him and the angel which goes through a decisive peripeteia. It is in this way that Rilke's solution of the problems of life by means of "the Invisible" can be called mythical. It may also be added here that by introducing the mythical element, Rilke is both endorsing and modifying the convention of elegiac mythology through which man's resurrection and immortality are affirmed. Rilke modifies the convention because, as will be seen, his idea of immortality does not conform to traditional notions.

However, the angel of the elegies is by no means to be considered merely as a stylistic and compositional device. Though he is indeed a device to project the poet's inner conflicts into a dim mythical action, there also attaches to him, beyond all this, a manifold, symbolical inner necessity. Even if taken only as an imaginary evocation of the perfect, eternal, and absolute, the angel forcefully brings out through contrast how inadequate, relative and merely provisional everything human is. Rilke's idea of perfection as it is embodied in the Duino angel is made clear in the "Second Elegy." The key phrase occurs in this elegy where the angels are described as: "Mirrors, drawing up their own / outstreamed beauty into their faces again." (16-17) The idea expressed here is what Mason calls an "extreme example of... 'Narcissism.'" (P 82) But this Narcissism is not without its own genius. What the narcissist in Rilke aspires to is a state of being that should not be dependent upon, or at least should not be aware of being dependent upon, anything or person external to itself. This may also be called the ideal of absolute solipsism, a state of being able to get on without any other person or things, of being able to experience all other persons and all external objects as an extension of oneself.

But how is the gulf separating the terrible, eternal, self-sufficient angels from the fleeting and transitory consciousness of humans to be linked? How should these angels ever bother about anything as weak and ineffectual as human sensibility "in their whirling return to themselves"? Rilke asks in the "Second Elegy"

Does the cosmic space

we dissolve into taste of us, then? Do the angels really

only catch up what is theirs, what streamed from them, or at times,

as though through an oversight, is a little of our

*existence in it as well? Is there just so much of us
mixed with their features....?(29-34)*

What Rilke implies is that human feeling could be rescued from the curse of transitoriness only if in some way it could insinuate itself into the timeless circulation of the angel's ever-plentiful consciousness. But it is not till the "Seventh Elegy" that he achieves a semi-dramatic peripeteia, the swinging around from lamentation to rejoicing, through the reintroduction of the myth of the angel. The unbridgeable gulf between the plenitude of being of the angel and the impotency of mere human consciousness as displayed in the "Second Elegy" is now seen not to be so terribly impassable. Here the greatest achievements of human art are offered as evidence that man too can attain to the intensity of being and force of feeling as that of the angel. The angel is challengingly appealed to recognise the greatness of human endeavour:

*But a tower was great, was it not? Oh, Angel, it was, though, —
even compared with you? Chartres was great— and music
towered still higher and passed beyond us. (81-3)*

It is true that humans can never emulate the angels, but there are certain phenomena and spheres of activities, where mankind transcends itself, which can do so. Such phenomena and activities are art in its highest form and a woman's love without possession. And since Rilke's angels are incapable of either pity or condescension, the gulf between man and angels must be bridged, if at all, entirely by the aspirations and achievements of humanity.

The “Seventh Elegy” would have seemed to be a fitting conclusion to the cycle of *Duino Elegies*. But as has been seen, this is followed immediately by the relapse into lamentation in the “Eight Elegy” over

*the fact that our awareness of Being, or existence, as an object, as something distinct from ourselves, prevents us from identifying ourselves with it and achieving a condition of pure Being or pure existence.*³²

The lamentation rises to jubilation again in the “Ninth Elegy” where the vision of the “Seventh Elegy” is amplified and modified. Finally the jubilation is tempered in the “Tenth Elegy” by a subdued but serene acceptance of the mystery of death and the complementariness of sorrow and joy through the grandiose myth of the “landscape of lamentation.” Mason beautifully describes the contour of the elegies as

that of a mountain rising precipitously on one side from terrible abysses, jagged crags and moraines to the heroic twofold summit of the seventh and ninth Elegies, with the forbidding chasm of the eight between them, and sinking then gently on the other side to the plains of the tenth Elegy. (P 86)

From what is seen above, it would seem that the entire cycle satisfies the traditional elegiac movement from lament to consolation. But a brief recapitulation of the entire movement will shed more light on the consolatory character of the elegies.

The earlier elegies present a situation of general despair, a hopeless tangle of problems. But in the seventh and ninth elegies one single problem towers above all others, a problem that if solved, would mean the end to all problems, including that of death: and this is the unpreventable ousting of human sensibility from the share it used to have in determining and shaping the external, visible world by modern technological

advancements with their soulless mass production of artefacts and the resultant abuse of nature. The solution to this problem, and with it, to all the problems of mankind, is to be found in Rilke's doctrine of miraculous transformation as revealed in the elegies. Mason calls it "magical internalisation:"

whereby all the beautiful, time-hallowed things of the human world and of nature which the machine threatens, and even also— by a strange leap of thought— the entire earth itself, labouring under the curse of transiency, are to be rescued in a mysterious, invisible domain of 'inwardness,' he who thus saves the endangered, beautiful, visible things by internalising them earning in the process his own salvation. (P 88-9)

The exposition of this doctrine climaxes in a celebrated passage in the "Ninth Elegy:"

*Earth, is it not just this that you want: to arise
invisibly in us? Earth! invisible!
What is your urgent command, if not transformation?
Earth, you darling, I will! (67-71)*

This then is the resolution of all the dissonances in the *Duino Elegies*. But such a resolution does not make any sense when applied to mankind in general. Mason, for instance declares, "If it is only by transforming the outer world into inwardness that one can be saved, the vast majority of mankind are assuredly damned." (P 89) The elegies' final resolution, therefore, applies in the first place, if not exclusively, to the poet himself. Leishman and Spender concur with this conviction when they call Rilke "a prophet, not of any widely accepted system or creed or ideal, but of an intensely personal vision of

reality.” (P 20). Rilke’s vision mainly rests on his idea of love and death and the task of transformation.

In many of his letters Rilke often declares that his purpose in the elegies is not only to represent death as the other, unilluminated side of life, but also to show the true place of love within this extended “Whole.” To Rilke love and death are closely related. This is clearly demonstrated in a letter he wrote to a young wife who had been forsaken. In reply to her bitter question about whether all the labour of loving and all the pain of unrequited love were merely for the purpose of giving life to a child, Rilke had written:

*... everyone of our deepest raptures makes itself independent of duration and passage; indeed, they stand vertically upon the courses of life, just as death, too, stands vertically upon them; they have more in common with death than with all the aims and movements of our vitality. Only from the side of death (when death is not accepted as an extinction, but imagined as an altogether surpassing intensity), only from the side of death, I believe, is it possible to do justice to love.*³³

But death not as an “extinction,” but a “surpassing intensity,” and the unilluminated side of life can become clear only if Rilke’s task of transformation is understood. In his letter to Hulewicz Rilke explained this transformation and the meaning of the elegies in the following manner:

Transitoriness is everywhere plunging into a profound Being. And therefore all the forms of the here and now are not merely to be used in a time-limited way, but, so far as we can, instated within those superior significances in which we share. Not though in the Christian sense, but, in a purely terrestrial, deeply terrestrial, blissfully terrestrial consciousness, to instate what is here seen and

touched within the wider, within the widest orbit— that is what is required. Not within a Beyond, whose shadow darkens the earth, but within a whole, within the whole. Nature, the things we associate with and use, are provisional and perishable; but, so long as we are here, they are our possession and our friendship, sharers in our trouble and gladness, just as they have been the confidants of our ancestors. Therefore, not only must all that is here not be vilified or degraded, but, just because of that very provisionality they share with us, all these appearances and things should be, in the most fervent sense, comprehended by us and transformed. Transformed? Yes, for our task is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again, “invisibly”, in us. We are the bees of the Invisible. We desperately collect the honey of the visible to accumulate it in the great golden hive of the Invisible...The Earth has no other refuge except to become invisible: in us, who, through one part of our nature, have a share in the Invisible, or, at least, share-certificates, and can increase our holding in invisibility during our being here, — only in us can this intimate and enduring transformation of the visible into an invisible no longer depend on visibility and tangibility be accomplished, just as our own destiny is continually growing at once MORE ACTUAL AND INVISIBLE within us. The Elegies set up this norm of existence: they attest, they celebrate this consciousness...By making the mistake of applying Catholic conceptions of death, of the hereafter, and of eternity to the Elegies or Sonnets, one is withdrawing oneself completely from their point of

*departure, and preparing for oneself a more and more fundamental misunderstanding.*³⁴

It may be seen from Rilke's vision that all traditional notions of what may be the meaning of life and the task of humanity are here discarded in favour of the "cult of inwardness" [Mason's phrase]. This only vindicates what has been said of the *Duino Elegies* at the beginning: that they are the most unconventional of all unconventional elegies not only in the matter of inspiration but also in their resolution and consolation. It may even be said that the *Duino Elegies* are self-elegies, where the poet mourns his human destiny with all its inadequacies: its transitoriness, its distractedness, its fears and miseries. And always, throughout the elegies, there is an anticipation, a longing even, for that unilluminated side of life, which is death, the invisible. But above all in the progress from lament to consolation, the poet has only managed to plot a consolatory formula, which may be termed as self-consolatory. That Rilke's primary intention in the elegies has been to save himself rather than to save others is borne out by what he had jotted down in the drafts of the last two elegies to be written, the tenth and the fifth:

*Art cannot be helpful through our trying to help and specially concerning ourselves with the distresses of others, but in so far as we bear our own distresses more passionately, give, now and then, a perhaps clearer meaning to endurance, and develop for ourselves the means of expressing the suffering within us and its conquest more precisely and clearly than is possible to those who have to apply their powers to something else.*³⁵

It may be worth noting that Rilke's longing is something like Dora Polk's *hiraeth*. In *Duino* he had had a glimpse of his vision; he had heard the call of the angels from the

invisible world; and now in the elegies, he experiences a painful *hiraeth* for that world. But that world could be achieved only through death, when the poet himself has become invisible. That is why the poet anticipates his own death, as if he were writing a self-elegy.

From Rilke's "cult of inwardness" the chapter's focus moves away, with Matthew Arnold, to the maladies of the Victorian Age and his quest for remedies in the calm solitude of pastoral life and the sanguine ideals of an earlier age.

That Arnold's poetry is born of the maladies of his age has been affirmed by Gupta,³⁶ who quotes the well-known critic on Arnold, J. D. Jump, as saying that Arnold's poetry is, in the main, conspicuously the work of a man, "who was trying to work out personal problems which were characteristic of the age he was at and of the society and the period he lived in." Working with the problems characteristic of his age and society, Arnold's "poetic centre remains at the core of his own doubts and despairs" (P 5) and the most popular poems he has ever written are either elegies like "Memorial Verses," "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Thyrsis," or poignant lyrics like "Dover Beach" and "To Marguerite." In fact, Arnold has been called one of the most elegiac poets in English literature. Gupta quotes Garrod, another well-known critic of Arnold as saying:

If I had to define Arnold's place in poetry, I should be disposed to say of him, quite simply, that he is the greatest elegiac poet in the language not in virtue merely of Thyrsis ...in virtue of the whole temper of his Muse, his genius was essentially elegiac. (P 6-7)

But as indicated earlier the chapter will take up for consideration only two of his unconventional elegies, “Memorial Verses” and “The Scholar-Gipsy,” as they most closely fit its schema.

“Memorial Verses” was written, according to biographical information,³⁷ on the day of Wordsworth’s burial at Grasmere on 27 April 1850, at the urging of Wordsworth’s son-in-law, Edward Quillinan. It was published for the first time in *Fraser’s Magazine* of June 1850. Though the initial purpose of the poem may have been a memorial to Wordsworth, Arnold also reflects upon Goethe (1749-1832) and Byron (1788-1824), and the poem, as an elegy does not present personal grief but a general concern for the passing of an era. Like “The Scholar-Gipsy,” the poem finally develops into a criticism of life and contemporary Victorian culture.

“The last poetic voice is dumb” introduces the theme of anguished lament in the poem. That Goethe and Byron are dead is tragic enough, but now the death of the most powerful of poetic voices is a terrible blow, rendering the age impotent and dumb. A whole generation of “Titanic” spirits has passed away, and this is nothing short of a catastrophe.

The poet begins his lament with the death of Byron. Though Byron had “taught us little,” he had profoundly affected the poet and his contemporaries by the sheer force of his poetry. He was a poet of “Passion,” he was “the fount of fiery life” and like Prometheus, the Titan, his mission was to save mankind by breathing new life into its mechanical soul. Arnold has spoken more specifically about Byron’s “Titanism” in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867),³⁸ where he compares him with the Celts and credits

him with the revival of the poetry of feeling that burns the blood like the fire of Prometheus.

Arnold's admiration for Byron does not end here. In his *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (1888)³⁹ Arnold calls Byron the "grand ally" against what he terms, in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), as Philistinism. The Philistines are explained by Arnold as "The people who believe most that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being very rich, and who most give their lives and thoughts to becoming rich."⁴⁰ In other words it is that class of people, the prosperous bourgeoisie and its nonconformist Liberal representatives, devoted narrow-mindedly to material prosperity at the expense of intellectual and artistic awareness. But Byron was the "grand ally" because he rebelled against the decadent traditions of the "cultural Barbarians" and did much to bring about a change in attitude, and to free, stimulate, and diffuse the emotional life of the 19th century.

The poet next moves to Goethe's death, addressed to as the "Physician of the Iron Age." The "Physician" had accurately diagnosed the ailments of the "Iron Age," the age of materialism and mechanised industry, where men had grown mechanical in body and soul, and where their heart was as cold and unyielding as iron. Gupta also explains "this iron time" by quoting Carlyle, who in "Characteristics" had written: "How changed in these new days... Not Godhead, but an iron, ignoble circle of Necessity embraces all things." (P 42) Arnold himself has beautifully described "the Iron Age" in his poem "Dover Beach:"

for the world which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

*So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.*⁴¹ (30-37)

But more than any writer of the 19th century, it was Goethe who, in his sage-like wisdom, had clearly “read each wound, each weakness” of contemporary Europe. He, Goethe himself, the poet says, was happy having offered this diagnosis.

The poet’s finest praise is, however, reserved for Wordsworth:

*:— Ah, pale Ghosts, rejoice!
 For never has such a soothing voice
 Been to your shadowy world convey’d,
 Since erst, at morn, some wandering shade
 Heard the clear song of Orpheus come
 Through Hades, and the mournful gloom.*⁴² (34-9)

Like the other two, Wordsworth too has fallen “upon a wintry clime / Had fallen— on this iron time/ Of doubts, disputes, distractions, and fears.” (41-5) But he did not succumb to the combined pressure of these maladies, which had caused so much unhappiness and brought “neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,” to the people of his age. Instead, when all others had been deadened by the afflictions of the time, he had rescued them like Orpheus with his “soothing voice” and loosed their hearts in cathartic tears. Most of all he had given the “spirits that had long

been dead,” the healing power of nature and the rejuvenating “freshness of the early world.”

On the passage on nature, Leon Gottfried⁴³ observes that “... the total force of the central passage indicates a symbolic and psychological identification of ‘nature’ with root emotional experience, so that the landscape of the poem becomes an almost mythic lost garden.” Looked at in this way, Wordsworth is a sort of redeemer who brings back the lost paradise to mankind.

The poem composed in irregular stanzas and mostly in iambic tetrameter, has three main attributes informing it. One is the sense of the *maladie du siècle* (the evil of the century), which biographical information reveals he got from Carlyle during his undergraduate days. The second is the therapeutic value of poetry that he learnt from John Keble, who occupied the Chair of Poetry at Oxford between 1832-41. And the last is Carlyle’s idea of the poet as hero,⁴⁴ which is directly connected with the second. In the face of the evil of the “Iron Age” and its “doubts, disputes, distractions, and fears,” the poet is overcome by a sense of despair, especially when “The last poetic voice is dumb.” He mourns the passing away of an era. The great poets, who had once lent succour and inspiration to man, have departed. But if the poet is to mourn successfully, he has to have a schema, and his mourning must eventually pass from grief to consolation. It is in this way that he transforms the dead into heroes, in keeping with the elegiac topos of transmogrification.

Arnold borrows the idea from Carlyle’s “The Hero as Poet. Dante; Shakespeare.” Carlyle maintains that “The poet is a heroic figure belonging to all ages; whom all ages possess, when once he is produced, whom the newest age as the oldest may produce;—

Let Nature send a Hero-soul; in no age is it other than possible that he may be shaped into a Poet.” (P 216) Carlyle goes on to say that “Hero, Prophet, Poet,” are all the same though they may have different names in different times and places. The hero indeed may be a “Poet, Prophet, King, Priest or what you will,” but the prophet and the poet are “synonymous” and they are also to be seen as a “*Vates*,” that is an instrument of God—one who sees into the inmost soul of things and can interpret the situation of the time so that an age without God may find God. This is reinforced by what Carlyle says that as seers, the poet and prophet “have penetrated... into the sacred mystery of the Universe... This divine mystery *is* in all times and in all places; veritably is...[and] I say, whoever may forget this divine mystery, the *Vates*, whether Prophet or Poet, has penetrated into it; is a man sent hither to make it more impressively known to us.” (P 218-9)

Thus the individual poets are seen in the poem as heroes and symbols embodying human virtues and qualities. Thus the great German poet, Goethe, with his Olympian wisdom is described as the “Physician of the Iron Age.” Byron as a dynamo of titanic force, who was felt “like the thunder’s roll.” And Wordsworth, the poet of nature, as the provider of the healing balm to the wounded heart of man. Therefore, even though “The last poetic voice is dumb” and there is no more *vates* to reveal the presence of God to man yet everything is not lost. While the quoted line is the bleakest statement in the poem, it also contains the seed of consolation for after all the hero is godlike and immortal. Though they are gone yet they live on in mankind’s memory and continue to inspire and console through their legacies and their gifts. As Rilke says “Duration / doesn’t concern him [the hero]. His rising’s existence. Time and again/ he takes himself off and enters the changed constellation / his changeless peril’s assumed.” (21-4 of the

“Sixth Elegy”) The hero is indifferent to mere duration. He lives an intense and full life without fear of death for he knows that he is “changeless,” independent of time and change.

But it must also be pointed out that the heroes of Arnold’s poem are not like Rilke’s hero, whose intensity and totality of being makes him almost like the mythic angel. Arnold’s heroes do indeed distribute gifts to the sufferers of the strange disease of the “Iron Age.” But these gifts are insufficient. Byron offers strength to bear without the wisdom to diagnose or the joy to sustain life. Goethe offers wisdom to understand the maladies but this wisdom contains no suggestion of a cure. Wordsworth is of course different from the other two. He is seen as the greatest hero of all, a hero who bestowed on mankind a respite, a restorative potion from the fount of primal feeling. On the therapeutic value of Wordsworth’s poetry, F. W. Watt writes:

Arnold edited a selection of Wordsworth’s poems in 1879, and in his preface he wrote: “Wordsworth’s poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it...he brings us word ‘Of Joy in widest commonalty spread.’ ” (P 191)

With this gift of joy, Wordsworth would seem to have made life meaningful and worth living. But despite his earlier admiration of Wordsworth, Gottfried has found fault with him as a poet. Commenting on the lines

*The cloud of mortal destiny,
Others will front it fearlessly*

But who, like him will put it by? (68-70)

he says that

...for Arnold, only the great tragic poets succeed 'in breasting in full the storm and cloud of life and so rising to liberation, to content and joy.' Arnold has been interpreted to mean that Wordsworth had ignored or underestimated the problem of evil... Rather, he is saying that Wordsworth, by turning his back on modern life and ideas, by failing to expose his consciousness fully to the disintegration of the old order, had limited the possibilities of his interpretative relevance.

Has Wordsworth after all failed as a poet by averting his gaze from the seamy side of life? Has his relevance been diminished by his putting by the problems of life? It may indeed be argued that by putting by the ailments of the age, Arnold only implies that Wordsworth is showing the world how to live in a state of what John Keats had defined as "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."⁴⁵ But even if that were the case, Keats's "Negative Capability" is a difficult state to attain and could hardly be equated with the traditional elegiac consolatory formula. It would be safe to say, therefore, that the poem's coda leaves the reader in two minds about Wordsworth as the final figure of consolation. From here it follows that the reader is left only half consoled.

The same general concern for the passing of an era is seen in "The Scholar-Gipsy," one of Arnold's most successful poems, and perhaps, the most well known. While "Memorial Verses" was occasioned by the death of Wordsworth and overtly mourns the loss of three poets simultaneously, "The Scholar-Gipsy" does not mourn, overtly or otherwise, anybody recently dead. First published in 1853, the poem is based

on a legend, which Arnold appended as an explanatory note. As it appears in Watt's *Matthew Arnold* the note consists of sentences drawn from Joseph Glanvill's *Vanity of Human Dogmatizing*, 1661, and reads:

There was very lately a lad in the University at Oxford, who was by his poverty forced to leave his studies there; and at last to join himself to a company of vagabond gipsies. Among these extravagant people, by the insinuating subtilty of his carriage, he quickly got so much of their love and esteem as that they discovered to him their mystery. After he had been a pretty while well exercised in the trade, there chanced to ride by a couple of scholars, who had formerly been of his acquaintance. They quickly spied out their old friend among the gipsies; and he gave them an account of the necessity which drove him to that kind of life, and told them that the people he went with were not such impostors as they were taken for, but that they had a traditional kind of learning among them and could do wonders by the power of imagination, their fancy binding that of others: that he himself had learned so much of their art, and when he had compassed the whole secret, he intended, he said, to leave their company, and give the world an account of what he had learned. (P 196)

This is the "oft-read tale" referred to in line 32, a tale that might well have inspired Arnold not only in the content but the form of his poetry.

Like "Thyrsis," the poem is also written in the form of a pastoral elegy, whose conventions have already been discussed, but which may be briefly recapitulated here. In its purest form, the pastoral elegy is a lament for a dead friend where the poet-speaker is presented as a shepherd bewailing the loss of a fellow shepherd. The conventions

characteristic of the pastoral elegy include: “a pastoral setting, the invocation of the muses, all nature joins in the mourning, an expression of grief, a procession of mourners, bewilderment caused by grief, use of flower symbolism, and a closing consolation (grief becomes assurance, belief in immortality).”⁴⁶ But unlike “Thyrsis” the poem does not express grief for a friend recently dead, but invokes a figure two centuries in the past.

Written in regular ten-line stanzas, consisting of a sestet followed by the first half of the octet of a Petrarchan sonnet, the poem begins with a call to a fellow shepherd to “renew the quest!” for an “Oxford scholar,” who went on a quest of his own “to learn the gipsy lore,” the secret of their art of controlling people’s minds practised during moments of divine inspiration. The reason for the quest is partly established in the fifth stanza, where the legendary promise of the scholar-gipsy to impart his knowledge of the secret art to the world, is introduced. The myth of the scholar-gipsy, however, enters the poem from the next stanza where “rare glimpses” of him are seen by shepherds, boys, maidens, bathing men, the housewife at work and other simple folks. The difficulty of the quest for the quester is also emphasised in the stanzas that follow till the 13th. The scholar-gipsy is like a benign spirit, haunting the “retired” countryside, glimpsed only in fleeting visions, gifting flowers to maidens, meditating by the blackbird, at one and at peace with nature, his only longing is for “the spark from Heaven to fall.” It is only when the poet sees or imagines seeing him in the 13th stanza that the scholar-gipsy is perceived as battling against the forces of nature, seeking a secluded refuge from the inhospitable snow.

The poet’s vision of the scholar-gipsy in difficulties implies that not only is the quest for the quester difficult but that the quest of the quester himself is onerous. And this coming as it does just before his realisation that all had been but a dream is significant.

“But what— I dream” is highly resonant of Milton’s “Lycidas” and Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” When Milton realised that Lycidas was dead he had ejaculated, “Ay me! I fondly dream” (56) and Keats, drawn back to reality, had asked bewildered, at the end of his visionary experience, “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?” (79) This is the point also when Arnold is dragged back to reality:

Two hundred years are flown

...

And thou from earth art gone

*Long since, and in some quiet churchyard laid!*⁴⁷ (131-37)

The scholar-gipsy that he is seeking had died two hundred years ago and had been buried in some quiet country churchyard, whose description recalls the one in Gray’s elegy. The words, “But what— I dream,” is an ejaculation of despair, but one which is not allowed to degenerate into utter hopelessness. Like Milton in “Lycidas,” Arnold awakens into another realisation of the scholar-gipsy’s immortality, “thou hast not felt the lapse of hours!” He now becomes, like Rilke’s hero, a symbol of what is changeless in a world of flux, a symbol of the wholeness and intensity of being unlike the divided aims, which enervate the energy of modern man. From the 15th stanza the poem switches from the dreamlike pastoral world to a harsh criticism of modern life that culminates in his impassioned plea to the Scholar-Gipsy to fly “our feverish contact.” Using an epic simile, the poet concludes with a comparison between the Scholar-Gipsy and a Tyrian or Phoenician trader, who had fled the boisterous Greeks, in search for calm and isolation.

As a poem of mourning, “The Scholar-Gipsy” mourns at three levels. There is the Scholar-Gipsy himself, who keeps “waiting for the spark from Heaven to fall,” (124) so

that he could learn the secret art. But though he is brimful with undiminished hope, faith and innocence, yet as A. E. Dyson says in his article, "The Scholar Gipsy,"⁴⁸ "he waits in vain: the spark does not fall," and there is no indication in the poem that he ever succeeds in his quest. Dyson believes that Arnold deliberately lays stress upon the gipsy's magic art, an art, which he says, "had failed to produce results and been discredited." (P 55) The Scholar-Gipsy, he maintains, "embodies, then, the optimistic but chimerical hopes of an earlier age." (P 56) Therefore as he waits for "the spark from Heaven" the "nineteenth century has discovered for itself." (P 56) Dyson adds that the Scholar-Gipsy in the poem "looks not as a presiding deity but as a long superseded ghost from the past. His very nature forbids him to enter [the lighted city at night], since one touch of Victorian realism would reveal him for the wraith he is." (P 56) The failure of the Scholar-Gipsy in his quest is therefore a matter of great sorrow for the poet. Science with its material usefulness, as opposed to magic, had triumphed during the Victorian Age. But as observed by Watt, it had also "cast doubt on the authenticity of the Bible, on the active intervention of divine forces or of a personal God in history, and on the intuitive powers of men." (P 6) Thus the failure of the Scholar-Gipsy's quest for magical powers puts the poet at a sort of spiritual dead end. And this sense of hopelessness and helplessness, says Dyson, is reflected "in the rhythms and tone of the poem which is reflective and melancholy in the elegiac mode, not filled with dynamic hope." (P 56)

At the second level, there is the quest for the Scholar-Gipsy. As Dyson comments, "The first fourteen stanzas of the poem are on the whole memorable, and in these Arnold creates the myth of the gipsy. Analytical intellect is temporarily laid to sleep, but only in

order that the myth may be evoked in its own strength to serve the organization of the poem as a whole.” (P 57) There is a dreamlike quality in the poem, which is

...in the direct tradition of Keats’s “Odes”, and an elegiac note deriving from “Il Penseroso” and Gray’s “Elegy”. In the “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats wills his entry into an ideal world (“Away, away, for I will fly to thee”), and re-creates the song of the nightingale as a symbol of eternal beauty. ⁴⁹

In the same manner, Arnold wills his entry into the idyllic pastoral world of shepherds in search of the mythic figure of the Scholar-Gipsy, who would unlock the secret of the gypsies’ divine arts. The quest though difficult, is not without its inspiration in the “rare glimpses” people had of the spirit-like figure. And when the poet sees him for the first time in stanza 13, it is a moment of much hope. Though the figure is seen battling against the hostile snow, it is also a vision giving proof to his existence and to the possibility of his “heaven-sent” powers having been realised. But unfortunately, like Keats’s vision, though a positive one, it still belongs to poetry and not to life.

Keats is recalled by the word “forlorn” to reality, to the world “Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Nor new love pine at them beyond tomorrow.” ⁵⁰ (29-30) The nightingale of the vision, as Dyson says, “can reveal the bitterness of life in time, but cannot provide an escape; it belongs to art, not to life [“The fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.” (73-4)]. The nightingale’s song is vital and real as a symbol of what men desire, but has no reality beyond this.” ⁵¹

In like fashion, Arnold is recalled to reality by the words “But what— I dream!” This reality is equally unpleasant, for the poet realises that the Scholar-Gipsy is just a two-hundred-year-old myth. Like Keats’s nightingale, he does not exist in real life, but

represents, as Dyson puts it, “the joyful illusions of an earlier age,” which the poet yearns for but which is forever lost to him and his age. It is this recognition of the fact that causes in the poet “a longing like despair,”⁵² (13) which could have turned into a forlorn *hiraeth* but for the poet’s quick recovery in the realisation that the Scholar-Gipsy has now metamorphosed into an eternal symbol.

At the third level, there is the description of the Scholar-Gipsy as a symbol, the praise for the life that he represents, the caustic elegiac denouncement of contemporary realities, and finally a mourning of the failure of the Scholar-Gipsy even as a symbol.

For a better understanding of the Scholar-Gipsy as a symbol, and Arnold’s bitter criticism of the contemporary situation it will be worthwhile to consider what the age he represents was like.

Watt⁵³ quotes a letter by Arnold to his friend and fellow poet Arthur Hugh Clough to show what Arnold thinks of the era he lived in:

My dearest Clough these are damned times— the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great natures, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties.... Reflect too, as I cannot but do here more and more, in spite of all the nonsense some people talk, how deeply unpoetical the age and all one’s surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving: — but unpoetical. (P 4)

According to Watt the Victorian Age was an age of “the long revolution.” It was above all, he says,

an age for the doer: for the politician— men like Gladstone, Palmerston, and Disraeli have rarely been equalled in colourful politics or in statesmanship; for the reformer— out of its terrible evils the Victorian era reached new heights of humanitarian zeal, public conscience, and social enlightenment; for the prosperous merchant and manufacturer, who made Great Britain the workshop of the world; for the explorer, colonist, and empire-builder, who carried British power and British culture around the globe. The revolution was largely peaceful but none the less real— a vast tangled movement, its main elements the triumph of technology and industrialization, the growth of democracy, and the spread of popular education through schooling and the new communications systems, which was rapidly ushering in the modern world as we know it.

So how could all this be “unpoetical?”

Deryn Chatwin and H. M. Burton ⁵⁴ find part of the answer in the dehumanising results of the Industrial Revolution and the concomitant loss of faith. They say that one of the results was the growth of a new very rich middle class, whom Arnold refers to as the “Philistines.” Their growth came together with the consequent evils of “child labour in mills and mines, the destruction of vast areas of beautiful and fruitful country in the Midlands and the North, the creation of filthy slums for the ‘housing’ of the workers, and the building of huge, ugly towns.” (P 6). In fact, the crimes of the mill-owners, the incredible ugliness and squalor of the great new industrial centres, with their brutalised poor huddled together, uprooted from the natural life of the countryside and the civilising traditions of the village communities, have been brought to the fore in the works of Carlyle, Ruskin and Dickens.

But, the authors maintain, in spite of all this, England remained still a very religious nation and nearly all the people were convinced of the literal truth of the Bible. They were, that is, till the emergence of the geologists. According to the authors, the geologists, supported by scientific observation and study, and also by the evolutionists, completely shattered the faith of the people in the literality of the Bible. In their words, “It is no exaggeration to say that in England religious belief was shaken to its foundations. If one part of the Bible, people asked, was ‘false’, how could they trust the rest of it? Who *was* God? What was man?” (P 8) And this atmosphere of religious perplexity, they add, continued throughout the century and also cast doubt on the intuitive powers of men, thus rendering the age “unpoetical.”

The rest of the answer is provided by Watt, who declares: “The answer lies in the fact that the once spacious realms of the imagination and spirit were felt by some to be dwindling at the same time that new possibilities for material and social life were being developed.” (P 5) Quoting John Stuart Mill, Watt explains this contradiction as the result of two opposing traditions of thoughts with their conflicting conceptions of man and society. These traditions are best represented by Jeremy Bentham and S. T. Coleridge. Watt says, the effect of the Coleridgean tradition “was to sustain or revive faith in the innate, intuitive and creative powers of the human mind. It offered assurances that ‘the seeds of godlike power are in us still’ [and this] was nourishment indeed for aesthetic and religious man alike.” (P 5) But Bentham and his followers, Watt proclaims,

were empiricists: they considered the human mind to be the product of its experiences, and its private and social functions to be amenable to common-sense analysis, explanation, measurement, and improvement... Antiquated laws and

irrational institutions had to be swept by the stiff broom of practical intelligence, and every human activity required the testing by the radical questions, Is it useful? Does it serve the greatest happiness of the greatest number? (P 5-6)

Though “the virtues of this fresh approach,” as Watt states, were immense in the social context of nineteenth-century England, the spirit of the approach was also profoundly “unpoetical.” This was the complex world in which Arnold was young (he was 28 at the time), where the great formative forces of the Victorian Age could either lead to a new peak of human achievement or destroy the traditional structure and qualities of civilisation.

Speaking of the Scholar-Gipsy as a symbol, Gupta ⁵⁵ identifies him with “the wholeheartedness and energy of youth, [‘Thou hadst *one* aim, *one* business, *one* desire’ (156)] ... which are sapped by ordinary worldly existence [‘Else hadst thou spent, like other men, thy fire!’ (157)].” He says the “childlike purity and integrity [‘For early didst thou leave the world, with powers / Fresh, undiverted to the world without,’ (165-6)] of the scholar’s state constitute an ideal way of life which is no longer possible for Arnold and his age, and by contrasting the ideal with the actual, the poet achieves a criticism of Victorian civilization.” He concludes by saying, “It is not death, but existing conditions of life that cause grief and despair.”

It is now clear what the existing conditions that cause grief and despair to the poet are. There is no doubt at all in the poem that Arnold expresses profound sympathies for the traditional structure and qualities of civilisation, and displays a great propensity for the Coleridgean tradition.

It has already been seen how he denounces the materialism of the middle classes, their selfish indifference to the suffering of the poor and their ignorance as “Philistinism.” These were the “Philistines” who, like Bentham and his followers, had measured everything by the utilitarian yardstick. They were the ones who had created filthy slums and brought about the incredible ugliness and squalor of the great new industrial centres. They were the ones who had brutalised the poor and uprooted them from the natural life of the countryside and the civilising traditions of the village and country communities. And though they dominate the world, they are “by a class inadequately equipped for leadership and inadequately equipped to enjoy civilized living.”⁵⁶ In his relentless exposure of their narrow-mindedness he even avows that “just as the middle-classes did not know how to lead full lives, so also did they not know how to read the Bible intelligently.”⁵⁷

According to Abrams, the Bible, to Arnold “was a great work of literature like the *Odyssey*, and the Church of England was a great national institution like Parliament. Both Bible and church must be preserved ... because both when properly understood, were agents of what he called ‘culture’— they contributed to making mankind more civilized.” (P 2114) The loss of faith is, therefore, a cause of serious concern, a matter of deep disappointment and regret. In “Dover Beach” he laments:

The sea of faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of bright girdle furl'd;

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,

Retreating to the breath

Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world. (21-8)

And all this is reflected in the poem. The birth of the Scholar-Gipsy as a symbol takes place in the 16th stanza, where his “*one aim, one business, one desire,*” his wholeheartedness, his childlike innocence and fresh powers are contrasted with “the sick fatigue, the languid doubt,” of the life of the “Philistines” who:

...fluctuate idly without term or scope,

Of whom each strives, nor knows for what he strives,

And each half lives a hundred different lives;

Who wait like thee, but not like thee in hope. (167-70)

As a symbol the Scholar-Gipsy stands as the exact opposite of the dehumanising effects of material development and industrial progress. He represents a fullness of faith before the geologists and the evolutionists had destroyed not only the physical truth of the Bible but also the faith in the intuitive powers of men. He represents that time in the life of man “when wits were fresh and clear, / And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames.” (207-8) He is a symbol who stands against the bustling, rapidly changing contemporary scene that “wears out the life of mortal men” (146) with the “repeated shocks” of change after cataclysmic change. Stanza 23 compares the life that the Scholar-Gipsy represents with that which the “Philistines” represent. As against his childlike purity there is their “feverish contact” which strongly suggests “The weariness, the fever and the fret” (23) of John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” As against his “bliss” there is their “mental strife;” as against his intensity of being there is their distractedness; as against his cheerfulness

and joy, there is their “unblest” and dreary existence; as against his “hopes” and faith, there are their hopelessness and half-belief; As against his integral powers, there are their “unfix’d...powers;” and as against his youthful, undiminished gladness and energy, there are their physical enervation and devitalised intellect.

Explaining the symbolism of the Scholar-Gipsy, Wilson Knight ⁵⁸ points to the importance of oriental references in the concluding stanzas of the poem and associates the scholar with the qualities roughly corresponding to the oriental powers represented by the “grave Tyrian trader.” On the strength of this he moves on to identifying the scholar with Dionysian powers, that is, with intuitive wisdom as against Apollonian powers or the cold analytical intellect of the poem. He maintains that the scholar exemplifies “the essence of true learning; the opening of the mind, the wonder, the intuition of fields unexplored. That is why the presiding deity of a great university may be felt as the eternal undergraduate.” The dons are, on the other hand, he states, lacking in his qualities and need his energy and freshness to preserve them from complete desiccation, or what Arnold calls enervation. The dons, he continues, are symbolised by the “one” on the “Intellectual Throne,” in whom “the essentially backward, devitalized, ‘realistic’ thinking of the contemporary intellect is personified. The state indicated is unhealthy, nerveless, and guilty of self-pity.”

But all this criticism of his contemporary situation only makes the poet even more melancholy and mournful. But the mourning here is not over the death of the Scholar-Gipsy but over the “generations” of his “peers” who “are fled” and whose way of life is lost forever. And herein lies the tragic impasse of the poem and the Victorian Age as it is reflected in the poem. While the thinking of the contemporary intellect is represented as

“essentially backward and devitalized” and while the contemporary state is shown as “unhealthy, nerveless, and guilty of self-pity,” the beauty, the joy, the emotional and moral value, that could be envied by the poet’s perplexed and troubled age, are shown as lost and never to be regained. As Dyson states, “When contrasted with this symbol [the Scholar-Gipsy], the nineteenth century losses are severe, but they are beyond remedy—Time and the Zeitgeist are in alliance against the gipsy.”⁵⁹

Lamenting this loss, the poet also craves for the days of the Scholar-Gipsy and his peers “when wits were fresh and clear, / And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames.” (206-7) The praise for these days of hope and lost innocence like childhood is inevitably interlinked with a bitter denouncement for the present of “Vague half-believers of our casual creeds,” (176) and the

strange disease of modern life,

With its sick hurry, its divided aims,

Its head o’ertax’d, its palsied hearts, was rife—(209-11)

The poet so detests the present for its lack of hope, its lack of faith, its lack of purpose, its lack of freshness, energy and joy, that he apostrophises and invokes the spirit of the Scholar-Gipsy, making an impassioned plea to it to “fly” lest it too catches “the infection of our mental strife.” But in so doing, the poet is implying that even as a symbol the Scholar-Gipsy is not effective. There is a failure here of the scholar even as a symbol. That is why Dyson calls him the embodiment of “the joyful illusions of an earlier age.” (P 53) He says, “The scholar, like a child, is the embodiment of a good lost, not of a good temporarily or culpably mislaid.” (P 54) Even as a symbol, the Scholar-Gipsy cannot help resolve the tragic impasse of man, insofar as Arnold represents it, for human

predicament like the Victorian experience is, as Dyson states, “a tragic one— to desire with the heart what was rejected by the head, to need for the spirit what was excluded by the mind.” (P 57)

Speaking of the irreconcilable opposites in Arnold’s poetry, Watt feels that the same opposites are to be seen in “The Scholar-Gipsy.” He says:

...on the one hand, the other-worldly Scholar-Gipsy, whose dedication to ‘one aim, one business, one desire’ means integrity at the cost of his eternal alienation from society and ordinary human life; and on the other hand his worldly Oxford companions seeking pleasure and preferment, or their nineteenth-century equivalents, who lose themselves in ‘this strange disease of modern life’. These equally unacceptable opposites have their analogous forms in the poet’s coda, as the merry, frivolous Greeks, those ‘young light-hearted masters of the waves’, and the grave, elusive, isolated Tyrian trader who flees to the end of the earth to escape their ‘feverish contact.’ (P 15)

There is then, no elegiac consolation in the coda of the poem. The Scholar-Gipsy may flee and escape the “strange disease of modern life,” but there is no escape for the poet and his contemporaries. In his essays, Arnold tries to find an emotional cure for the loss of faith. As Dyson reveals, his attempt “took the form of an attempt to substitute culture and poetry for religion, and to find a few axioms that could be made real on the moral pulses.” (P 60) Explaining Arnold’s position on poetry and culture Abrams says “early in his career Arnold had evolved a theory of what poetry should do for its readers... To help make life bearable, poetry... must bring joy...it must ‘inspirit and rejoice the reader’; it must ‘convey a charm, and infuse delight’.” (P 2113) On culture he says,

For [Arnold] the term connotes the qualities of an open-minded intelligence— a refusal to take things on authority. But the word also connotes a full awareness of man’s past and a capacity to enjoy the best works of art, literature, history, and philosophy that have come down to us from the past. As a way of viewing life in all its aspects, including the social, political, and religious, culture represents for Arnold the most effective way of curing the ills of a sick society. (P 2115)

But there is no attempt to find such an emotional cure or consolation in the poem. As Dyson puts it, “Arnold did not discover anything adequate [in the poem] to replace the hopes of an earlier world.” (P 60) At the most what the poet is attempting is what Dyson calls, “a stoic readjustment” (P 55) entailed by the spiritual and emotional losses of his age. Though this is hardly a successful passage from grief to consolation to be found in traditional elegies, yet Arnold’s stoic acceptance of unpalatable realities is among the most impressive qualities of his best-known poems, including “The Scholar-Gipsy.”

On the other hand, Thomas Gray in his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” cannot reconcile himself to such distasteful realities. Though at the end of the poem there is an atmosphere of calm resignation, the poet also issues, from the grave as it were, bitter injunctions to his contemporaries and the future generations.

With Thomas Gray, the discussion now moves closer to its main purpose, which is the study of Thom’s major work and other short lyrics as elegies. There is a very interesting coincidence between Thom and Gray where the physical volumes of their works are concerned. The meagreness of Thom’s output, as a poet, has been discussed in the first chapter. Graham Hough now ⁶⁰ wonders why Gray occupies such a key position in the history of English poetry when his “production is so scanty and so much of it is in

a very minor mode.” (P 9) He finds his answer in the fact that Gray “happened to write one of the greatest poems in the language,” (P 9) which he identifies as “the Elegy” by which he means the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.”

Of the poem Sacks observes, “There is some question as to whether Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ in fact belongs to the kind of elegy I have been defining, namely, a poem of mourning occasioned by a specific death.”⁶¹ Early in the chapter this question has already been answered in classifying it as an unconventional elegy having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life’s transience and its sorrows. And now Sacks himself affirms the unconventionality of the poem when he says that William Mason, the friend who had suggested the title of the poem to Gray, “recognized the alternately rhymed iambic pentameter quatrains as the form used by such ‘elegists’ as Hammond and Shenstone, poets who were reviving the license of a merely formal definition to write... elegies on subjects of love or philosophical reflection.” (P 133) But having said this, he hasten to assert that “Gray’s poem is, of course a poem of mourning. Even if we unwisely discount the specificity of his residual grief for Richard West (who had died in 1742), the ‘Elegy’ mourns a particular death over and above those of the obscure villagers.” (P 133) What this death is will be clear when the poem is examined.

David Daiches, in introducing the poem,⁶² identifies it as belonging to the tradition of graveyard contemplation, that is, to the tradition of Thomas Parnell, Edward Young and Robert Blair, but here he states, “the handling of the setting and of the development of the meditation is done with high art.” (P 678) The poem moves with ease, he observes, from a contemplation of the landscape to a consideration of “the short

and simple annals of the poor” (32) to suggest moral ideas which arise from this consideration.

The movement of the slow moving stanzas have in fact attracted the admiration of most critics including Dr Johnson, ⁶³ Daiches, Roger Lonsdale ⁶⁴ and Hough. Of the opening stanzas, Daiches comments, “The poem opens effectively by gradually emptying the landscape of both sight and sounds as dusk descends, and the elegiac, meditative tone is sustained throughout a variety of turns in the thought.” (P 678) Sacks provides an explanation for such an opening and says “the figure of the poet in the opening scene derives from the Miltonic Penseroso, a melancholic solitary courting of prophetic vision.” (P133-4) The poet’s “solitary courting of prophetic vision” and the progress of that vision is best described by Lonsdale. Appreciating the poem as “well-constructed,” he summarises:

The three opening stanzas brilliantly setting the poem and the poet in the churchyard, are followed by four balanced sections...dealing in turn with the lives of the humble villagers; by contrast, with the lives of the great; with the way in which the villagers are deprived of the opportunity of greatness; and by contrast, with the crimes inextricably involved in success as the ‘thoughtless world’ knows it, from which the villagers are protected. (P114)

Then from this simple antitheses of rich and poor, of vice and virtue, of life and death, the poem turns to

A preoccupation with the desire to be remembered after death, a concern which draws together both rich and poor, making the splendid monuments and the “frail memorial” pathetic. This theme leads G. [Gray] to contemplate the sort of ways

in which he, or the Poet into whom he projects himself, may be remembered after his death, and the assessments he gives in the words of the "hoary-headed swain" and of the "Epitaph" (not necessarily meant to be identical) also evaluate the role of poetry in society. (P 115)

In a more detailed analytical summary, Hough observes, "The poem begins with what looks like a drawing from nature:" (P14)

*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

*Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;*

*Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wand'ring near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign. ⁶⁵ (1-12)*

Hough discloses that this is actually full of literary echoes. "The bell tolling for the dying day comes from Dante; that unelegiac creature the beetle had already been consecrated to poetic purposes by Shakespeare and Collins, and the owl seems to be behaving in an

extremely self-conscious manner.” (P 14) From this quiet contemplation of the landscape the poet moves on to a reflection of the “rude forefathers of the hamlet” and their way of life, consisting of homely joys and the “noiseless tenor” of traditional pastoral life far from the “ignoble strife” of the distracted and perplexed “madding” crowd of modern society. But this is a way of life, which will be experienced no more not only by the forefathers, since they are “for ever laid” to sleep in the country churchyard, but also by the poet, since they have become “The short and simple annals of the poor,” (32) that is, a thing not even of history, but of obscurity. And this is the poem’s first lament.

By reflecting on nature and then the sounds and sights that the forefathers will enjoy no more, Gray is here effectively establishing the mood of calm submission in which the poem must be read and also, as Hough says, lulling the readers “into a resigned, acquiescent, summer-evening frame of mind.” (P 14) It is only after this that Gray introduces what he really wants to say:

Let no ambition mock their useful toil,

Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;

Nor grandeur hear with disdainful smile,

The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r,

And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,

Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour.

The paths of glory leads but to the grave.

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to these the fault,

If Mem'ry o'er their Tomb no Trophies raise,

Where thro' the long-drawn isle and fretted vault

The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. (29-40)

The poet here contrasts the simple life of the unsophisticated forefathers with the lives of the great, the rich, the powerful and the proud, and prohibits these from mocking the “simple annals of the poor” for their wealth, their power and their arrogance are pointless, since the end will be the same for everybody else’s, as stated in the famous line, “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.” The lines that follow, on the rustic Hampdens and Miltons and Cromwells, whose narrow lot has prevented them from realising their true potential

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid

Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;

Hands, that the rod of the empire might have swayed,

Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre (45-8)

are among the most quoted lines of the poem and thus deserve closer attention. Gray is saying that though the “rude forefathers” could not develop their full capabilities, and though they did not achieve greatness, yet, if given the chance, they might have become as great a poet as Milton, or as a brave a leader as Hampden, or even as notorious a ruler as Cromwell. As Hough puts it, Gray is saying that in the first place “in society as we know it many such cases must occur; further, he is saying that this is part of the order of nature, and therefore must occur in any conceivable society:” (P 15)

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,

The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,

And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (53-6)

And this, Hough maintains, is not a matter for unmitigated regret. A flower, he says, presumably prefers not to be picked, and a gem can hardly be supposed to care whether it stays at the bottom of the sea or not. Humans may think that this is waste, but Hough declares that this is because we take only a false and partial view. Indeed obscurity, as Gray writes in the poem, does have its advantage. In the words of Hough, “The narrow lot of the villagers circumscribed not only potential virtues, but also potential crimes— forbade them the brutality of a conqueror or the venality of a court poet.” (P 15) But most important is the fact that such obscurity can lead to a sheltered and blissful existence,

Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife

Their sober wishes never learned to stray;

Along the cool sequestered vale of life

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. (73-6)

And this, the poet offers as a consolation for the stunted growth, the human waste and the lack of pomp and glory in the life of the simple villagers. In fact, the poet does more than offer a consolation. According to Sacks,

Gray marshals a defense of obscurity at large by juxtaposing it against examples of fatuous and cruel “greatness” and revealing it as the necessary condition of the dead. His praise seems to extend, therefore, to those who live in such a way— obscure and silent— as to suffer the least alteration by death. Hence, too, ‘they kept the noiseless tenor of their way.’” (P135)

On the topic of crimes, Hough feels, with some justification, that the poet gives more space to literary vices than the political ones:

*The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the Muse's flame. (71-4)*

From here he argues that Gray is actually far more concerned with the frustrated poet than the frustrated ruler. He says:

And from here we can realize what is going on beneath the surface of the poem. The obscurity that is being discussed is Gray's obscurity. The consolation offered for waste and frustration in the human situation generally is a fortiori, a consolation to Gray's own sense of waste and frustration, which no longer appears as personal inadequacy, but as part of what must inevitably happen in all human life and all nature. Gray is enabled to bear his own disappointments by seeing them in the wider setting of which they are a part. (P 15)

This is a credible argument especially when in the closing lines the personal reference becomes more evident. The "listless" youth, "Mutt'ring his wayward fancies" in solitude and dying young, and remembered by the "hoary-headed Swain," is first of all West, who recalls Milton's Lycidas in nursing poetic ambitions that were frustrated by early death. Secondly, he is Gray himself, West's *alter ego*, who cherished similar ambitions tinged by the hypochondriacal anxiety of dying young. The Epitaph sums up the whole sentiment and provides another argument for the attitude of calm resignation to his lot that he wishes to establish:

*No further seek his merits to disclose,
 Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
 (There they alike in trembling hope repose,
 The bosom of his Father and his God. (125-8)*

The lines above advance the argument that after all, this talk of success and failure, ambition and frustration, is vain, since humans do not really know what success or failure is, and since the final judgement rests with God. God alone can rectify human and natural injustice, and render complete its inadequacies. In *The Epitaph*, even the poet's earlier yearning to be remembered, as he himself remembers the "unhonoured dead," is replaced by a wish to be left in peace in the final consolation that he is now eternally resting in the benign embrace of God.

In the opening lines of his essay, Hough had stated, "The greatness of the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* no one has ever doubted, but many have been hard put to it to explain in what its greatness consists. It is easy to point out that its thought is commonplace... and to wonder where the immediately recognizable greatness has slipped in." (P13) But now, he says "We need no longer ask where the noble commonplaces of the *Elegy* derive their compelling force." (P16) There is of course the dignified diction, what I. A Richards calls "That triumph of an exquisitely adjusted tone,"⁶⁶ the fresh pastoral imagery and the majestic statements about the common lot. But Hough thinks that above all this, the poem is great also because these majestic statements "are also the solution of Gray's personal problem, and perhaps the only one possible in his day. Not a contented member of his own society, 'no longer at ease in the old

dispensation', Gray nevertheless, lived too early to see any likelihood of a new one, in which human capacity, his own included, could be more fully employed." (P 16)

Evaluating the role of poetry in society, Lonsdale reinforces Hough's observation:

The poet is no longer the urban, urbane, worldly, rational Augustan man among men, with his own place in society; what Gray dramatises is the poet as the outsider, with an uneasy consciousness of a sensibility and imagination at once unique and burdensome. The lack of social function so apparent in English poetry of the mid-and late eighteenth-century is constantly betrayed by its search for inspiration in the past. (P 117-8)

If the poet was an outsider, and if poetry lacked social function, the only possible solution, Hough upholds, "is a kind of elegiac Toryism." By this he means that since it is inevitable that "many a flower" must be "born to blush unseen," and since "many a gem" must lie about the ocean floor unregarded, we must therefore resign ourselves to this possibility of waste and realise that in any case the final solution to these perplexities is outside the realm of human estimation altogether. But since, unlike the Romantic Age, "both human dignity and poetic decorum— the whole convention of communication at the time— forbid" (P 16) the poet from making personal complains about this, Gray is forced to express this complex of emotions and reflections in general terms, thereby getting rid of one's private conflicts by absorbing them in a greater whole. This is the greatest source of the poem's strength, this dilemma that is both a lament and a consolation.

That the poem is a lament for both the obscure villagers and the poet himself has already been stated by Sacks when he remarks that the elegy mourns a particular death over and above those of the obscure villagers. He elaborates:

This individual death, albeit imaginary, is that of the poet himself. The preliminary description and meditation in the graveyard is, in part, a presentation of the sensibility of that poet and a definition of the terms by which he should be mourned. It is carefully modulated so as to climax with a plea on behalf of any dying person's desire for remembrance. And this is accordingly followed by a projection of the poet's death, a projection that includes a local swain's account of the poet's life and burial (24-29), together with a presentation of the epitaph written by the poet himself (stanzas 30-32). Incidentally, this entire two-part closing section from stanzas 24 to 32 produces an effect that closely recalls the eclogie forms of pastoral poetry where one expression of lamenting or commemorating supersedes another. (P 133)

The reason for this self-mourning has handsomely been supplied by Hough as shown earlier. But Sacks brings in another reason: the poet's "melancholy fear of being a mute inglorious Milton himself." (P 135) Haunted by this fear, the poet tries to develop a language for remembrance, a language that would supersede both his own living speech and that of the local swain.

Speaking of the introduction, Sacks asserts that it not only sets the scene but also introduces several related aspects of an attitude toward the dead, which he hopes would also be accorded to him when his death happens. The "attitude includes piety, compassion, respect, and attentiveness—the kind of attentiveness we owe to the mute. In

fact, there is a fascinating preoccupation with the theme of muteness as opposed to sound, or eventually, of an epitaphic script as opposed to the living voice.” (P134) This is because the poet recognises his inevitable dependence on the written word to guarantee his desire for remembrance. His living voice, “For thee, who mindful of th’ unhonoured dead,” (93) will eventually cease with his death. The voice of the “hoary-headed Swain,” who tells some “kindred spirit” about the poet will not suffice. As Sacks illustrates, “A measure of intimacy is lost, no swain can do justice to this poet, particularly considering the latter’s obscurity and isolation; the swain himself is mortal, and his spoken account must fall mute when his breath, too, is extinguished.” (P 136) Thus the poet turns finally to the only kind of language that can assure him of its posthumous identity and therefore his identity too, and this language is of course that of the silent script of the epitaph: “Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay / Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.” (115-6)

Regarding the figure of the elegised poet, as presented both by the swain and the epitaph, Sacks says, “Gray has blended the traits of the Pensive with those of Lycidas and his elegist (compare ‘Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn / Brushing with hasty steps the dew away, / To meet the sun upon the upland lawn’ with ‘Together both, ere the high Lawns appeared / Under the opening eyelids of the morn, / We drove afield...’).” (P136) And then he adds, as we hear and then read of him, the poet himself thus seems to recede and merge into the generalised figures of elegy. There is also an identification of the poet with an archaic vegetation deity returning to the common mother in these lines: “Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth / A Youth to fortune and to Fame unknown.” (117-8) It is from this repose in the common mother, as much as

from the bosom of God that the poet would not want to be disturbed, either by those who would praise his merits or by those who would expose his frailties. But why does he not want to be disturbed, despite his bid for remembrance? Sacks feels that this is because he has aligned “himself with muteness as the only condition, if any, of a posthumous existence,” (P135) and by so doing he assuages his melancholy fear of being a “mute inglorious Milton.”

But there is more than a hint of bitterness in his injunction to his survivors not to seek his merits or frailties any further. Hough has already indicated that “The obscurity that is being discussed is Gray’s obscurity.” (P 15) Therefore what the poet is indicating here is that, if he had led an obscure life, if his merits had not been acknowledged and appreciated in life, he should not now, in death, be bothered. This sentiment is highly reminiscent of Keats’s bitter self-epitaph, “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.”

⁶⁷ Though finally Gray seeks refuge and consolation in the common mother and the common father, his God, what he is stating at the end is not so much a statement of consolation as an angry denouncement of his times.

Section II

In the preceding pages of the chapter it has been stated that the discussion would begin with Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and move backwards to Arnold and Gray, and then on to Tham’s major work. This schema is followed because among the four poets, Gray and Tham are closest to each other, not merely in the volume of their production and the

foundation of their reputation as poets, as had been indicated, but also in the subject matter and the nature of their mourning in their respective poems.

In page 79 of the discussion, Tham's, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* has been identified as an elegy belonging to the unconventional elegiac tradition. It has also been established that, like the unconventional elegies of Rilke, Arnold and Gray, Tham's elegy mourns no specific death. While Rilke's elegies are the product of a protracted personal spiritual crisis, and mourn human insufficiencies, Arnold, Gray and Tham mourn the passing away of an entire generation of people and their way of life, while simultaneously expressing elegiac resentment against the existing conditions of life.

As illustrated earlier, Tham begins his elegy in the manner of an epic as far as the first section is concerned where he lays down his Argument about the themes he is going to write on in the subsequent sections after having invoked the Muse in the spirit of a "Gilded Pen." But of course, the poem is not an epic, although in the preface the poet does say, "*Ngam bakla lada nga ong ba hangne don lypa ki symbai ka Epic Poetry lashai lashisngi.*" (P xvi, "If I'm not mistaken there are already seeds of an Epic Poetry of the future here"). The poem is a mournful lyric closer in structure to Tennyson's famous elegy, *In Memoriam*.

Written in the rhyme scheme of *aa bb cc*, this long poem of 181 six-line tetrameter stanzas ⁶⁸ opens, like *In Memoriam*, with a prologue, that is both an introduction of issues as well as an address. Sacks says "The prologue to *In Memoriam*, is itself a perplexing introduction raising several issues ...By at once offering and discussing what follows, it resembles a dedication to a patron or reader, in this case the 'Strong Son of God, immortal Love.'" ⁶⁹ Later in his discussion he adds, "we recognize

that the entire poem to come is thus addressed to an auditor whose presence is both invisible and unprovable. Almost all elegies have shown variants of this strategy whereby the act of address invents the presence of an addressee.” (P 170) It has been seen how Rilke’s elegies opened with an address to the angels: “Who if I cried, would hear me among the angelic / orders?” It has also been seen how Arnold opened “The Scholar-Gipsy” with an address to the “Shepherd” to “renew the quest.” This is exactly what Tham does in his prologue, which he titles, “*Ki Symboloh Ksiar*” (“The Golden Grains”). The prologue opens with an address:

Jingshai ngi wad sawdong pyrthei;

Jingshai ka Ri ngim tip ei ei, — (Section I, 1-2)

(Enlightenment we seek around the world;

That of the Land’s we know but nought, —)

By so doing the poet turns “we,” meaning his enlightened contemporaries including himself, into an addressee, who must listen to him discussing the enlightenment of his land, which is at once a subject for comparative study and a model for adoption.

As revealed above, the auditor in *In Memoriam* is the “Strong Son of God,” who, Sacks feels represents an ideal reader:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,

Whom we, that have not seen thy face,

By faith, and faith alone, embrace,

*Believing where we cannot prove*⁷⁰(1-4)

He says the poem is in large part a quest for this ideal reader before whom the poet criticises himself and his poem and begs for a sympathetic reading:

*Forgive these wild and wandering cries,
 Confusions of a wasted youth;
 Forgive them where they fail in truth,
 And in thy wisdom make me wise. (41-5)*

Tham's poem is also such a quest, for his objective to seek enlightenment from one's own land as against the enlightenment of other cultures, rests entirely upon such a sympathetic reader, his willingness to listen and implement his exhortations. Once the elegiac address has been made, and his objective has been stated, Tham introduces the themes he is going to write on in the subsequent sections.⁷¹ As indicated, the key lines in the prologue are the opening lines:

*Jingshai ngi wad sawdong pyrthei;
 Jingshai ka Ri ngim tip ei ei, —
 Kumno hyndai ki Kñi ki Kpa
 Ki saiñ pyrthei, ki seng hima—
 Mynba baroh u Hynñiew Skum
 U sah kyrpang—hapoh ba dum," (1-6)*

(Enlightenment we seek around the world;

That of the Land's we know but nought, —

How in ancient times the Uncles the Fathers
 Had fashioned politics, had founded states—

When all the race, *u Hynñiew Skum*

Had lived apart— within the gloom.)

This single word, “Enlightenment,” allows one to explore the very roots of civilisation and cover every aspect of Khasi traditional life and culture. Through this word the poet thus makes it clear about the task in hand. He is going to sing the praise of *U Hynñiew Trep*, *U Hynñiew Skum* or the Seven Clans, forefathers of the Khasis, comprising, the Khyntriams in East Khasi Hills, the Pnars in Jaintia Hills, the Bhois in Ri Bhoi District, the Wars in the foothills bordering Bangladesh, the Marams, Lyngngams, and the now-little-heard-of Diko in West Khasi Hills.⁷² He is going to talk of their uniqueness, and their unique way of life, of a time when the *Hynñiew Trep* people lived an independent and enclosed existence in obscurity, before they came into contact with others such as the Aryans of mainland India and the white man.

The opening lines are strongly evocative of Gray’s obscure forefathers of the village, whose simple ways must not be mocked:

Let no ambition mock their useful toil,

Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;

Nor grandeur hear with disdainful smile,

The short and simple annals of the poor. (29-32)

Though Tham’s ancestors had “lived apart— within the gloom,” as do Gray’s forefathers (“Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife”), their destiny must not be mocked but be emulated. The gloom he is talking about here is not the darkness of primitive man, but the secluded, independent existence of an enlightened race. Singing the praises of his forefathers, the poet takes us to the “*Aiom Ksiar*” (“Golden Age”) in their life when man and beast lived together in happiness, communicating through the same language, and worshipping the same God, *U Blei*, before the appearance of the demons:

*U Briew, u Mrad, u Khla, u Thlen,*⁷³

Kawei ka ktien ki dang ia kren;

Shuwa ban paw u Ksuid u Khrei,

Baroh ki mane ia U Blei. (9-12)

(Man and Beast, Tiger and *Thlen*,

Then they spoke one only tongue;

Before the demons and the fiends emerged,

Then they worshipped one only God.)

Then still in the “Golden Age,” Tham speaks of the time when “*Ka Ktien u Briew*” (“The Word of Man”) carried great weight since it was the only means of interaction between man and all fellow creatures, who led a symbiotic lifestyle of mutual understanding and support. He also refers to the literature of the Khasis and explains through the myth of *The Lost Manuscript*⁷⁴ how this literature had to remain unwritten because the forefathers could not read nor write, having lost their scripts. But this was no cause for lament, since it was the time of the great oral tradition, of the “*Puriskam*” and “*Purinam*” (the fairytales and legends), through which their literature had flourished.

And since they had swallowed the teachings of God and the written word, these had become part of their body and soul, and they therefore not only had the wisdom to teach but also the conscience to differentiate between good and evil. That was how they propagated their philosophy and their religion through *ki khana tang* (sanctified stories or creation myths). Through these stories, steeped in symbolism or “*Pharshi*,” they spoke of the emergence of demons in the form of “*u Thlen*,” of the advent of “*Ka Pap ka Sang*,” the Age of Evil, in the form of “*Diengiei*” (“Tree of Gloom”), the termination of

the Golden Ladder, the means of communication between heaven and earth at “*U Sohpet Bneng*” (“the Mount of Heaven’s Navel”); and finally the emergence of “*u Syiar*” (“the Rooster”) as man’s redeemer. The poet also speaks of the foundation of the Khasi religion, “*ka Niam*” or “the Living Word,” based on the tenet of “*Ban ap jutang U Blei na jrong,*” (34) loosely translated as “God, the caretaker of the covenant from above.” Lastly he speaks of the elaborate mourning and funeral rites of his forefathers, using the legend of “*The Death of Lapalang, the Stag,*” whose mourning mother was the legendary originator of the first Khasi dirge and mourning rituals.⁷⁵

Having sung the praises of his ancestors’ way of life, Tham justifies his praise by saying that all that he has said is not without foundation. There are audio-visual evidences like “*ki Dak halor ki maw*” (“the Indications on the stones”) and the stories to witness that “*Jingshai barieh*” (“the hidden Light”) had existed and still survives in “*kylleng ki Trep ki Skum,*” or the huts scattered throughout the land. All that one has to do is carry out a sort of archaeological investigation for this “hidden Light” to reveal itself and enlighten us about *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* (The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep*). Another method suggested by the poet is best expressed by Ramazani while discussing Thomas Hardy’s elegies, “On a Discovered Curl of Hair” (1922) and “A Forgotten Miniature” (1928). Ramazani says “Hardy again meditates on visual symbols of his dead wife”⁷⁶ to “externalise two opposing impulses— the impulses to preserve and to destroy the lost person.” (P 63) In the prologue, Tham calls for this kind of meditation on the visual symbols of the dead so as to externalise the impulse to preserve the memories of his forefathers and perpetuate their way of life in the present.

But in this task he is obstructed by the lamentable apathy of the present generation towards its ancestors and, therefore, towards its own past:

Ki Khraw Jutang ki Khraw Pyrkhat

Hangne ki kren da kumwei pat; (45-6)

(The Honourable the Learned

Here they speak in different ways)

As against this we have:

Nalor ki lum napoh dymmiew

Ka maw ka dieng kan dang kren briew. (47-8)

(From the hills within the shade

The stone the wood would speak the human tongue.)

And speaking the human tongue, they would reveal to us the “hidden Light” if only we have the interest to learn. But what is a subject of the poet’s profoundest pain is exactly this lack of interest and the execrable scorn the present shows towards the past and the wisdom of its ancestors. This anguished lament is voiced through a variation of the opening lines:

Jingshai ngi wad sawdong pyrthei;

Jingshai ka Ri ngim kheĩñ ei ei: (55-6)

(Enlightenment we seek around the world;

That of the Land’s we care but nought:)

So how is the poet to fight against such contempt for everything that the forefathers stand for? Like Milton, who invokes in the epic:

Sing heav’nly Muse, that on the secret top

Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire

That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,

In the beginning how the heav'ns and earth

Rose out of chaos... (6-10)

Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song...⁷⁷ (13)

Or in "Lycidas": "Begin then, Sisters of the sacred well," (15) so does Tham invoke the muse to inspire him with Rilke's "divine euphoria." He implores:

To suit ki rong, Ko Khulom Ksiar,

I'u briew ba dum ban pynshai kdar. (75-6)

(Pour forth your colours, O Gilded Pen

Let the man in darkness comprehend.)

These lines may be termed as the second elegiac address in the prologue; this time not in quest of an ideal reader, but in search of divine inspiration from the muse, an inspiration that is sorely needed to make the poet's ignorant and scornful contemporaries understand the value of the times gone by. It is through such a comprehension of the need to learn from the past and the ways of the ancestors that "*U Lyoh ba rben*" ("the thick dark Cloud") veiling the wisdom of the past from the present would be removed by "*u Simpyllieng*" ("the Rainbow"). When this happens, the future will shine in hope.

Tham's prologue is thus an elegiac foregrounding device that the genre had inherited from the rituals associated with the death and rebirth of vegetation gods. As Sacks had pointed out, an obvious influence of such rites is the ceremonial structure of the elegy with its measured pace and direction, which develops the effect not only of an event but also of a performance. Tham's prologue is all of these and more. Like

Tennyson in his proem and Rilke in the "First Elegy," Thom makes elaborate and ceremonial preparations in his prologue to introduce all the main themes of the sections to come. Among these themes are two broad movements: firstly, at the spiritual level, we are shown the poet's ancestors and their spiritual awareness, their religion, the myth of their "Golden Age," the emergence of evil and the redemption of man. Secondly, at the secular and material level, we are shown their statesmanship, their political and practical wisdom, their literature, and their way of life, which are not only worthy of emulation but must be emulated. And common to both movements, we are shown the apathy and scornful negligence of the poet's contemporaries towards the past and the legacy of their own ancestors, bedazzled as they were by lifestyles with which they had newly come in contact. The present generation is thus seen to have lost its moorings and is floating about the water like a boat without its rower. The only redemption that the poet could see for his own people as a race is to go back to their roots, and be guided in the present by the esteemed values of the past. Patriotism, the poet's deep love for his own people, and for whatever they represent, has also been shown in the prologue as the driving force behind the poet's whole endeavour.

Besides the themes mentioned, the prologue has also introduced, in the manner of Tennyson's and Rilke's proems, some very important elegiac devices like the elegiac denouncement in the opening lines, the elegiac repetition, the elegiac mythology and the elegiac use of the symbols of light and darkness.⁷⁸ The elegiac repetition in this context has at least three functions. The first is to create a certain rhythm of lament by the repetition of words and refrains (see the repetition of a variation of the opening lines) to control the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion. The second

is to assimilate a particular lament to a comforting commonality of grief where the poet's grief is not only seen as his but ours (see the use of the word "we" in the opening lines). And the third is to invoke the spirit of the dead by repeating their names (see the repeated use of the word "*ki*" or "they," which refers to "the Uncles the Fathers" or the poet's ancestors) so that they take on a substantiality almost replacing the dead and effecting a consolation

The myth making in the poem is achieved by the poet by basing a major part of his argument on the foundation of Khasi creation myths. The purpose is not only to establish the themes, elevate the subject matter and style but also to prepare the reader for the consolatory formula of immortality and expected divine intervention so integral to the poem. This divine intervention is seen as the removal of the "thick Cloud" by the appearance of the "Rainbow".

The structure of the prologue, and therefore, of the whole poem, follows what Ramazani calls, "the usual tripartite structure of the elegy... the old meditative formula of out-in-out, or present-past-future, or memory-understanding-will."⁷⁹ Ramazani adds that in elegies, this structure generally allows a taking stock of the recent death, a recollection of an idealised past, and the creation of a future substitute. Thus Tham opens with a denouncement of the present generation's ignorance, which is tantamount to Ramazani's recent death, recollects the idealised past of his ancestors, and creates a future substitute in the statement of hope symbolised by "the Rooster" and "the Rainbow."

The next section after the prologue is titled "*Ka Persyntiew*" ("The Flower Garden"). The first thing that one encounters here is the angst and the restless *hiraeth* for the lost world:

Shalor ki Lum, shapoh Dymmiew

Haba nga iaid pyngngad weibriew,

Kylleng napoh ki Trep ki Skum—

Shaphang ka Ri hapoh ba dum—

Nga lap ki Symboh Jingpyrkhat,

Ba mih na rngai ki Thwei Ummat. (1-6)

(To Mountaintops, in Shaded Spots

When I take a solitary walk,

From everywhere within the Huts—

About the Land within the dark—

I discover Grains of Thoughts,

That well from dreamlike Pools of Tears.)

In the grip of this *hiraeth*, which Tennyson calls “divine despair”⁸⁰ the poet looks for lingering traces of the lost world and finds them in the agricultural crops (“*ka shriew, u kba, u krai*” or “arum root, paddy, millet”) unique to his land, the very same crops that his ancestors had farmed. This discovery intensifies the *hiraeth* of the poet, and when he hears the pristine sound of a bird chirping among the trees, he is suddenly inspired to sing about this lost world:

Ban kyrsiew pat napoh ki Kpep,

Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep. (17-8)

(To kindle from within cremation *Kpeps*⁸¹

The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep*.)

As Arnold embarked on the quest for the mythic figure of the Scholar-Gipsy, so does Tham embark on the quest for the mythic world of his ancestors. As Gray sang praises for the “rude forefathers” of the village and their “destiny obscure,” so does Tham seek to describe in reverence the lives of his forefathers. But while Tham’s mission in the poem is to make the ignorant understand, and the scornful revere the ways of their forebears, so that they could be revived and perpetuated in the present, and while his immediate task in hand is “To kindle from within cremation *Kpeps* / The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep*,” Gray’s forefathers are dead and “The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn, / No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.” (19-20) This is one of the causes for Gray’s lament and all he can do is to be “mindful of th’ unhonoured dead.” In this mission, Tham is closer to Arnold, whose Scholar-Gipsy seeks “the secret of their [the gypsies’] art, / When fully learn’d will to the world impart.” (49-50)

Tham launches his quest by going back to his people’s creation myths. He starts from the beginning, the descending of the *Hynñiew Trep* from their mythic celestial homes, “to till the earth, to populate the wilderness, to rule and govern and be the crown of all creations”⁸² and above all to transform the world into “*ka Persoh Persyntiew*” (“the Garden of Fruits and Flowers.”) From here he narrates their progress in time, when they grew in number, strength, and prosperity; when they developed their means of communication through one only tongue; when they set up their religion; when they organised their festivals, and slowly evolved their own distinctive traditions and customs. That was the “Golden Age” in their existence, a time when they lived at peace with all the fellow creatures of God, sharing a holy communion with animals and birds, with fishes and flowers. It was a time of great happiness and

Baroh ka Ri ba dang sah khlaw

Ka sawa, bad, ki win ki maw. (29-30)

(All that Land that wilderness

Reverberated, and, the stones resounded.)

It reverberated, that is, with the joys of that glorious life. So smitten is the poet by the conjured image of that lost “Golden Age” that he determines to sing about it till

Sa shisien pat kin win ki Khlaw,

Sa shisien pat kin khih ki Maw. (59-60)

(Once more will the Woods reverberate,

Once more will stir the Rocks.)

Tham’s description of the “Golden Age” of his forefathers has been likened to the Eden of the Bible by Sten⁸³ But talking of resemblances, it will be worth mentioning that the Welsh literature of *hiraeth* also speaks of *Affalon*, which according to Conran, is “...one of those island Otherworlds so common in Celtic mythology, the land of eternal youth where old age, sickness or grief never come.”⁸⁴ It may also be worth quoting the following lines from Milton’s “Lycidas:”

Together both, ere the high lawns appear’d

Under the opening eye-lids of the morn,

We drove a-field, ...(25-28)

Oft till the star, that rose at evening bright,

Towards heaven’s descent had sloped his westering wheel.

Meanwhile the rural ditties were not mute,

Temper’d to the oaten flute;

Rough Satyrs danced, and Fauns with cloven heel

From the glad sound would not be absent long; (30-5)

What should be noted is the idyllic existence amidst pastoral surroundings of shepherds, Satyrs and Fauns in this poem before tragedy strikes and death comes to Lycidas. The description of such heavenly life belongs to the convention of a pastoral elegy, as Sacks had indicated, since the time of “the Dorian elegists... Theocritus and Virgil.” (P 3) Tham, writing an elegy, has followed this convention in singing of the “Golden Age” both in the prologue and in this section.

The third section is titled, “*Pyrthei Mariang*,” a difficult name to translate since Tham has used synonyms side by side. “*Pyrthei*,” meaning earth has been used together with its synonym, “*Mariang*,” meaning nature. Literally then, the name would be “Earth Nature” or “Natural World.” Tham in this section is still in the “Golden Age.” Nevertheless he invokes the muse again:

Baroh ki khlur ka Jingshisha,

Mynba ka Ri ka dang synñia;

Katba me lah ban ioh Jingtíp

Shuwa ba ki baroh kin lip;

Ko Diamon, Ko Khulom Ksiar,

To kyrsiew thiah bad pynshai kdar. (3-6)

(All the Stars the Truth,

When the Land was still a night;

Whatsoever Intelligence you may get,

Before all these fade away;

O Diamond, O Gilded Pen

Awaken and make things transparent.)

As Sten remarks this method of invoking the supernatural powers is definitely Miltonic. Sten traces this influence to *Paradise Lost* where “Milton prays to such powers in each and every Book... and especially in Book III” (12-3) where Milton appeals to the “holy Light!” to guide his way back to heaven from hell. But this, as explained, is also an elegiac convention, and in “Lycidas,” for instance, Milton makes as many as three invocations:

*Begin then, Sisters of the sacred well,
That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring;
Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string; (15-7)*

Then again,

*O fountain Arethuse, and thou honoured flood,
Smooth-sliding Mincius, crowned with vocal reeds,
That strain I heard was of a higher mood: (85-7)*

And again,

*Return, Alpheus, the dread voice is past
That shrunk thy streams; return, Sicilian Muse,
And call the vales and bid them hither cast (132-4)*

Tham, who, according to biographical information, was familiar with most of Milton’s works, could very well have had “Lycidas” in mind while resorting to the convention of invocation in his elegy.

The invocation is made because the poet would like to undertake the difficult task of capturing the past in all its pristine glory, and impart what he has learnt to the world, before it is too late. The poet calls upon the muse in the form of the “Diamond” and the “Gilded Pen” to transport him “*Sha ba ki iaid ki Wahrupa*” (“To where they roam the Silverstreams”), and there, in “Mountaintops, in Shaded Spots,” beside the waterfalls and river pools he seeks for “*Uba ngi ieit U don haei!*” (“Where is He the One we love!”), so that He may guide the poet to his people’s *Affalon*. It is in these secluded spots of nature during the beloved seasons of spring and autumn that the poet finds a landscape that most closely resembles that of the “Golden Age.” He finds all this consoling but then, he confesses,

Kumta ki Ummat Ksiar ki shlei,

Hynrei, um tip ki wan naei! (29-30)

(So they fill the Golden Tears,

But from where, he cannot tell!)

Almost on the same topic Tennyson writes:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,

Tears from the depth of some divine despair

Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,

In looking at the happy Autumn-fields,

And thinking of the days that are no more. (1-5)

The answer is beautifully provided by Tennyson. Like him, on contemplating the idyllic landscape, Tham experiences a sudden pang of *hiraeth* for the blissful era of his forefathers, “the days that are no more.” That is the source of his tears. Therefore he

harps back to the mythic times when God “*U hiar ban iaid kai bad u briew*” (36, “Descended to take a stroll with man”), when happiness reigned everywhere “*Shuwa ban dkut u Sohpet Bneng.*” (42, “Before it snapped *u Sohpet Bneng*”), and when the *Hynñiew Trep*, the seven Clans, could come and go as they please between heaven and earth through the Golden Ladder at *Sohpet Bneng*.

This was what the poet calls “*ka Sotti Juk*,” the “Age of Innocence.” But he now speaks about it in more realistic terms, as it is reflected in the virtues of the traditional act of courtship, in the homely joys, not unlike those experienced by Gray’s “rude forefathers,” and in the supremacy of “*ka Hok*” (“Honesty”). This is how the “*Aiom Ksiar*” (“Golden Age”) had progressed. But now like Milton in “Lycidas,” who ends with, “Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new,” (193) Tham resolves,

Sha kiwei pat ki Ri bapher

Sa shata to ai ngan her. (65-6)

(To other Lands of different sorts

To them let me depart.)

This is the end of the “Golden Age” as far as the poet is concerned. This is the point of departure in the poem, when the poet moves away from fantasy to reality, the same way that Arnold was dragged back to reality when he realised that the Scholar-Gipsy he had been seeking had died two hundred years ago:

Two hundred years are flown

...

And thou from earth art gone

Long since, and in some quiet churchyard laid! (131-37)

The second stanza of this section, where the poet talks of “the Silverstreams” the “Mountaintops, in Shaded Spots,” the waterfalls and river pools, and where he seeks for “the One we love!” has often been compared with Henry Vaughan’s “The Retreat” and Wordsworth’s “Ode on the Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” In childhood, Vaughan

*Could see a glimpse of His bright face:
When on some gilded cloud or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity: (10-15)*⁸⁵

And Wordsworth, who was influenced by Vaughan recalls,

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light, (1-4)*⁸⁶

And Tham invoking the muse implores,

*To pynshai kdar bad lam ia nga,
Sha ba ki iaaid ki Wahrupa;
Napoh ki Dieng ba kah syrngiew,
Shata ngan leit bam lyer weibriew—
Na khlieh ki Kshaid, narud ki Thwei,
Uba ngi ieit U don haei! (7-12)*

(O make things transparent and guide me,

To where they roam the Silverstreams;
 Beneath the Trees that cast a shade,
 There shall I stroll alone —
 From crests of Waterfalls, beside the river Pools,
 Where is He the One we love!)

Sten remarks that Tham “believes that our souls have already seen the face of God, the Creator, before we are born into this world.” (P13) But while Vaughan and Wordsworth have no doubt that the child is nearest to God and that in childhood one could have glimpses of heaven and God in the common sights and sounds of nature, Tham has no such confidence. For him it is an elegiac quest like Rilke’s and Arnold’s for the ideal and that is why he asks, “Where is He the One we love!” The idyllic scenes of nature does afford him with a vision of a mythic “Golden Age” but that vision merely puts him in the pangs of a painful *hiraeth*, making him brimful with tears. At this point, the movement of the elegy is still far away from its traditional consolatory ending.

In Section IV, titled “*U Lyoh*,” (literally “The Cloud”) the poet has indeed departed “To other Lands of different sorts.” While in Section III, God “Descended to take a stroll with man,” and while “*Synshar ka Suk ka Saiñ kylleng*” (47, “Peace reigned everywhere”), this section sees the proliferation of evil across the land. The myth of “*U Masi*” as the symbol of the beginning of adversity and “*Diengïei*” as the symbol of evil and the powers of darkness are introduced here, as against the myth of “*u Sohpet Bneng*,” the symbol of man’s holy communion with God, in the previous section. The transition from the age of plenty and happiness to the age of adversity and evil is so sudden and so complete that it gives one the intended impression of sudden death and

irreparable loss. This section and the one to follow are the most bitter in the whole poem, representing an acerbic elegiac denouncement of the contemporary situation.

The age of adversity begins with the cheating of man by “*u Masi*” or “the Bull” as indicated in the first stanza of the section. As narrated by Rabon Singh,⁸⁷ the Bull, a servant of God had been sent to man to tell him that “he does not have to boil so much rice in the pot, but to put in only a single grain for the pot to fill up however big it may be.” God had also directed: “And tell him that I have given him my blessing so that he will live in prosperity and good health.” But the Crow that was picking ticks from his back fooled him into telling man just the opposite, that “he should boil one seer two seers, and that he should live, should die, fall sick and be amidst adversity.” (P 47) By bringing in this myth the poet points to the distance that man had introduced between him and God as he moved away from the “Golden Age.” The distance created communication problems so that what was meant as a boon, became a bane. This was the confusion that finally snapped “*u Sohpet Bneng*,” the umbilical cord between heaven and earth, the communion between man and God. This led to the monstrous growth of “*Diengiei*,” (“Tree of Gloom”) as a sign of God’s displeasure at man’s violation of the covenant according to which he should have lived by following the three principles of “*Ka Tip Briew, Tip Blei, Ka Kamai ia ka Hok*,” (“to Know Man, to Know God and Earn Righteousness”). And the tree continued to grow till “*ki Tnat Diengiei*” (“the Branches of *Diengiei*”) enveloped the earth with the cloud of darkness, blotting out the sun, and driving God out from the world of man: “*Na pdeng u briew la jah U Blei*” (18, “From among men had vanished God”).

With the snapping of ties between God and man, the *Hynñiew Trep* had also been shut out from the celestial abode of their brethren, the “*Khyndai Trep*” (“the Nine Clans”) and their state of affairs on earth is described by the poet as that of “*u ngap ba jah ka Kyiaw*” (“the bee without its Queen”), that is, they blindly grope their way without anyone to guide them and break out into several different directions.

In this sightlessness man roams the earth, going through frightening caves, parched deserts, and bogs, till at last he lands in “*Khyndai Pateng Ñiamra*” (“the Pit of Nine Storeys”), where “*Ka Lyer baroh ka sma Seiñiong*” (32, “The Air itself reeks with the scent of a Cobra”). This is the place where “*Thlen*” and his mother live, the abyss of “*ka Pap*” (“Sin”) whose purpose is to “*thaw Thynriew / Hangno ba don ka Dohnud briew*” (35-6, “to Hatch / Wherever is the Heart of man”). The suggestion here is that man is now in the grip of “Sin;” the earth changes from the “Flower Garden” to a place where the sun and the moon have been eclipsed, a haunt of dwarf-like demons and countless hideous insects and animals. The transformation from good to evil is so fast and so excessive, that even “*U Blei na jrong u peit lyngngoh*” (37, “God above stared in amazement”). The poet describes this transformation in these words:

Halor ka Khet ka sotti Juk,

U long Patsha u kuli Juk. (41-2)

(Upon the Throne of Innocence,

The Emperor is Chaos).

This is the period of hell on earth, where man is blind, deaf and dumb, and where

Long syiem ka Dum, synshar ka Bieit,

Ka long Raiot ka Tieng ka Smieit; (45-6)

(Darkness is sovereign, Folly reigns,
Fear and Dread, the Subjects,)

This evil in the heart of man has affected his external activities, his political, social and economic life. While at the political level, “Darkness is sovereign” and “Folly reigns,” at the economic level we see

Ka Duk, ka Thngan, Shitom, Kordit,
Ka Raibi ruh— baroh ki kjit: (57-8)
(Poverty, Hunger, Disease, Adversity,
Contagion too— all they consume:)

These afflictions are not only prevalent in the age but they also spread like hereditary diseases and are passed on to the next generation as the repugnant legacy of the present. In this way the race itself like “*u Phniang*” (“the Seed”) wilts, and diminishes in strength and number.

Meanwhile man continues to grope in blindness. He loses all sense of shame, all sense of right and wrong, and these are reflected in his face from where all vestiges of manliness dim and he degenerates into the likeness of fiends. His heart is now spoken of as if it were a smithy, making not tools of survival, but “*Jingmut runar bym lah ñiewtang*” (73, “Numberless fiendish thoughts”), which become his “*ki blei*,” his “guiding spirits.” The poet is so sickened by this degeneracy that he enquires,

Ju don u Ksuid u Kohtympan,
Nalor u briew ba iaid kuman? (71-2)
(Is there a Fiend a Monster
Worse than wayward man?)

With his “fiendish thoughts” becoming his “guiding spirits” man turns away from worshipping the one true God, “*U Blei*,” into the worship of “*ka Lei Longspah*” (“the Goddess of wealth”). Now greed emerges as the only living principle of man, who would go anywhere and do anything to satisfy its craving. Now “*u Lyoh ba jngut*” of the ninth stanza, the “dark Cloud” enveloping the outer world, has become “*u Lyoh khyndew*,” “the Mist” seeping into the inward life of man. And in lines that are highly resonant of Conrad’s, *Heart of Darkness*, he asks:

Ju don ki Thwei ba iong ba ngiew,

Nalor ki jong ka Dohnud briew? (89-90)

(Are there caverns darker more terrible

Than those in the Heart of man?)

It is from the dark and terrible confines of the heart of man that demons emerge like termites emerging from their hole to fly directionless “*Hapoh ka Miet Pandemonium*” (96, “In the Night of Pandemonium”). And in their directionless flight in the “Night of Pandemonium” these demons, or men that seem like demons, have one and only one goal: to get hold of “*u Sbai Rupa*” (“the Silver Piece”). And for this wealth they would even go to the “Nine Storeys of Hell” to worship “*ka Lei Bhabriew*” or the “Goddess of Beauty” equated here with “*Mamon*,” or “Mammon.” The erosion of values here is terrifying. There is no more appreciation of what is good and beautiful. The only thing of beauty is wealth, as against the famous lines of John Keats, “ ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty.’ ”⁸⁸ The only one worth worshipping is Mammon. And greed is seen as the mother of all evils. It leads to the supremacy of “*ka Thok*” (“Fraud”), the eradication of “*ka Hok*” (“Virtue”), then to the reckless destruction of the material world when “*Ki*

Lum ki twa, ki Thwei ki thnam,” (110, “The Hills collapse, the Seas froth”), and the corruption of “*Synshar, Bishar, Rangbah Saidthma*” (111, “Government, Justice, Advocate”). The leaders, “*U Khun ba khraw*” (“The Son of the great”), those in power, who hold the destiny of the land in their hands, are not far behind in their blind greed. They extort money from all parties, they thrive where there is trouble, and their only interest is in making their own pockets heavier and heavier. This is the state of affairs during the poet’s time when,

Ka Hok ka shong ha shnong U Blei,

Ka Pdok u briew ha snieh Pyrthei. (117-8)

(Virtue lives in the land of God,

The Purse of man in our world.)

This is the time when man would kill for money, when he is worse than demons and when,

‘La raid ka Bha, radbah ka Sniew:

La kheiñ ka Aiñ U Blei u Briew’: (137-8)

(‘Dwarfed is the Good, gargantuan the Bad:

Broken the Law of God broken the Law of Man’:)

At the end of the “Golden Age,” man is seen to have broken only the law of God. But now in this “Age of Chaos,” even his own law has been broken. He is now truly reduced from the man who took a stroll with God to a Liliput of Jonathan Swift. And the law that he now follows is the law of “*u Sbai Rupa,*” or money, which the poet identifies in this section as “*U Thlen,*” introduced in the prologue.

Section V carries the title of “*U Rngiew*” or “The Shadow.” *Rngiew* in Khasi is actually defined as the “essence of humanity, individuality, spirit”⁸⁹ or even “luck.” *Pyneh rngiew*, *pynjem rngiew*, *leh rngiew*, and *tap rngiew* are very common sayings in Khasi. *Pyneh rngiew* means to strengthen one’s essence and, therefore, enhancing one’s luck. *Pynjem rngiew* means to cause the weakening of one’s essence and, therefore, reducing one’s luck. *Leh rngiew* means to become like a spirit. And *tap rngiew* means to cover with darkness.

The translation of “*U Rngiew*” as “The Shadow” takes into consideration the definition of “*tap rngiew*” and also Jung’s theory of *individuation* as related to the archetypes designated as the *shadow*, the *persona*, and the *anima*. According to Jung, the shadow, the persona, and the anima are structural components of the psyche that human beings have inherited. The shadow, he says, is the darker side of our unconscious self, the interior and the less pleasing aspects of the personality, which we wish to suppress. “Taking it in its deepest sense, the shadow is the invisible saurian tail that man still drags behind him.”⁹⁰ The reason for such a consideration is simple: Tham associates “*U Rngiew*” with “*U Thlen*,” and the forces of darkness like Milton’s Satan, Goethe’s Mephistopheles, and a host of other symbolic representations of this archetype.

In the earlier section the poet talked about evil in the heart of man, the “Age of Chaos,” the worship of Mammon, and the supremacy of the law of “*u Sbai Rupa*” or money, which was identified with “*U Thlen*,” whose haunt is the “Pit of Nine Storeys.” In this section, the elegy is more or less in its *cathode* or descent for the poet now proceeds to explain this “Pit of Nine Storeys” or “Hell.” He begins by telling the reader of an eternally cloud-covered forest far away from human habitation where “*u*

Nongshohnoh,” a killer in the hire of the *Thlen*-keepers, lives. Then he goes on to say that since the beginning of time, this dark and tangled forest had always been the quagmire of “*Ka Pap*” (“Sin”), a precipitous abyss of death, a fiery, smoking “fen of stagnant waters” and a haunting place of terrible creatures and evil spirits. As in the previous section he talks of “The Air itself reeks of the scent of a Cobra,” and snakes which are seen to wrap themselves in every tree. In this abyss and its numerous ravines Sin raises its jaws (“*Ka Pap hangta ka phnieng tyngam;*” 22) and the entire world listens to the tumult beneath the earth (“*Balei ka win hapoh Ramew*” 24).

So far “*U Rngiew*” has been equated with the Christian concept of Sin, which may again be equated with Milton’s Satan. From stanza XIII onwards he is seen as “*U Thlen*” of the Khasi myths. This is how *Thlen* is portrayed in Khasi lore:⁹¹

The legend of U Thlen is a living one and to this day people talk about this man-eating, blood-sucking serpent as they would talk of the plague, cancer, tuberculosis and any other killer disease, for that is what this monster represents now, the cause of a kind of deadly illness where a person loses his natural colour, grows thin and weak, with a strange bloatedness about his face and belly. They say the keepers of this creature and the killers in their employment, whose business is the hunting of men for their blood, are still very active in some parts of the Khasi Hills. At first Thlen did not need a keeper or a hunter to feed him with the blood of humans. But the story of how he became a blood-drinker from a man-eater and how he metamorphosed into a dependent creature really began somewhere in the dim past, where man and the spirits were said to have rubbed shoulders. (P 142)

Tham also depicts *Thlen* as a serpent. He calls him “*u Syiem Seiñiong*” (“the King of Black Serpents”), but this king of serpents can also change its form at will, sometimes appearing as “a black Kitten,” “a Deer,” “a Tiger,” “a goddess,” “*Ren*, the Sea Monster,” and even a “Necklace.” The legend has an explanation for this phenomenon:

Today it is said that Thlen punishes the keepers who cannot keep him fed not only by killing one or two of their children but also by shaming them before the world by climbing on to rooftops and assuming the form of a cat, a smelt and several other animal forms. (P 147)

Tham explains the emergence of *Thlen* from the “Pit of Nine Storeys” in these words:

Ynda u klun haban da lut,

Ka sngi jong u hangta kan kut. (77-8)

(When he’s swallowed till all is gone,

Then there his day would finally end.)

And that was the time when he came overground to begin feasting on human beings and brought along with him his hell on earth. Tracing the legendary metamorphosis of *Thlen* into a dependent creature, Tham quotes the legend to narrate how the people of Sohra had slain it with the help of *U Suitnoh*, the patron god of villages, who had fed him with a huge white-hot iron ball, and who had directed the people to eat up every part of his flesh without leaving a single piece. But unfortunately he survived in the single morsel an old woman had taken home, and from then began to flourish again, for the woman had become the first *Thlen*-keeper in exchange for indescribable riches.⁹² Tham writes:

Nangta u kreh sha bym phohsniew,

Hapoh ki krem ka Dohnud briew. (143-4)

(“And then he went where none had dreamt

Within the caverns of human Heart.”)

At the end of the section *Thlen* emerges as the god of wealth, a Khasi version of Mammon, with his own worshippers, who hired *Nongshohnohs* to feed him with human blood. In the section *Tham* also describes the rituals connected with the feeding of *Thlen* and also the freak religion practised by some of his contemporaries, a religion frighteningly close to the rituals of the *Thlen*-keepers. He also speaks of the future of *Thlen* and his keepers, pronouncing:

Haduh ba wai ka Jingkyrmen;

Nangta iap duh ki ñng ri Thlen. (137-8)

(Until the end of Hope;

Wiped out the *Thlen*-keepers.”)

The poet is saying that *Thlen* and his keepers would be eradicated eventually but not before the keepers have lost all hope. But how can they lose all hope? They will lose hope only if man turns to God and society rises unitedly against them, so that it becomes no more profitable for them to practise this custom of raising unjust wealth through the blood of their victims. In this section, however, the poet abstains from commenting upon such a possibility. As far as he is concerned, he sees,

Synshar, Bishar, Rangbah Saidthma,

U sur matlah u Sbai Rupa. (Section IV, 111-2)

(Government, Justice, Advocate,

It glues with pus the Silver Piece.)

And again as quoted earlier,

Virtue lives in the land of God,

The Pursue of man in our world. (117-8)

Finally he closes the section with:

Ha kper ba phuh u Amirphor,

Sawdong u spaiñ u Ekjakor. (149-50)

(The garden where it blooms the *Amirphor*,

(Around it wraps the *Ekjakor*.)

When it is explained that *Amirphor* means the tree of life, and *Ekjakor*, the giant snake or fabled monster, what the poet means becomes clear. There is as yet no redemption.

These sections, IV and V, undertake three main purposes. As stated before, the sudden transition from the “Golden Age” to this “Age of Chaos” and evil gives one the impression of sudden death, a sudden irreparable loss. This is indeed the period of intense grief in the poem, the period of gloom symbolised by the sometime dark cloud of the sky (“*u Lyoh ba jngut*”) and the sometime seeping mist of the land (“*u Lyoh khyndew*”). This transition represents the ritual movement of the elegy, which, as had been revealed previously, follows the ancient Greek vegetation rites in the basic passage through grief or darkness to consolation and renewal. The Greek terms for these two phases of the ceremonies, cathode or the way down and anode or the way up not only, in the words of Sacks, “mimed the death and return of the vegetation god but also represents the initiate’s descent to and ascent from a crisis of mysterious revelation.” (P 20) These sections it would seem have entered the first phase of the elegiac movement, that is, the cathode or the descent, miming the death of the vegetation god, in this case, the “Golden Age” of the

Hynniew Trep, with its passage from a state of idyllic existence to a period of grief and darkness.

As has been seen, this movement is also traceable in Arnold's "The Scholar-Gipsy" when the poet moves away from fantasy to bitter reality in the realisation that the Scholar-Gipsy he has been seeking had died two hundred years before. The same is noticeable in Gray's elegy, when his contemplation of the landscape leads him to the grief-ridden contemplation of the death of the "rude forefathers" of the village and with them the passing away of a whole generation of people. Even the most unconventional of elegies, Rilke's cycle of elegies, follow the same movement. For example, Rilke's "First Elegy" acts as an elegiac prologue like Tham's, making affirmation predominate over negation, and praise or celebration, over lament. But in the succeeding elegies negation is seen to predominate till at last it sinks into the bitter lament of the "Fourth Elegy," the bitterest elegy in the entire cycle, representing the descent or cathode.

Although the reasons are different, these sections are like Rilke's "Fourth Elegy" in their descent to the lowest depth of lament. But in their indignant denouncement of the present, they most resemble the "Scholar-Gipsy" of Arnold. Of this poem Gupta has been quoted as saying "the childlike purity and integrity of the scholar's state constitute an ideal way of life which is no longer possible for Arnold and his age, and by contrasting the ideal with the actual, the poet achieves a criticism of Victorian civilization." He concludes: "It is not death, but existing conditions of life that cause grief and despair." (P 48) The same thing could be said of Tham's poem. Tham paints the picture of the "Golden Age" in the first two sections after the prologue, and contrasts that ideal with the

present-day reality of the next two sections, which he sees as a chaotic age without God; a greed-infested age of headless monsters as portrayed in almost every stanza of the sections.

That Tham is directing his ire at his contemporaries there is no doubt at all. He makes this clear in the prologue when he laments: “Enlightenment we seek around the world; / That of the Land’s we care but nought.” (55-6) The enlightenment that Tham wishes for his generation to seek and to care, in this first movement of the elegy, is the aspect that relates mostly to the idea of good and evil. In the preface he proclaims:

Lada “ka Hok ka kyntiew ia kano kano ka jaid bynriew,” lehse dei kane ka Kmie ki Jingshisha pynban kaba la tyngshaiñ khrek ha ka Shaiong baroh, bad kaba la ri ia ngi kiba tang shitroh, ha ki jingiaidwir hyndai kum “ka jaid bynriew ba kyrpang:” (P xiv)

(If “Righteousness elevates a people,” perhaps it was this mother of Virtues which had shone during all the Perplexity, and which had kept us safe, we who are only a handful, in our wandering in ancient times as “a unique race:”)

Elsewhere in the preface he asserts:

Ban mih kane ka Tusbir te ngam shym pep ban kdew khamtam ba “Ka Pap ka long ka kheiñ burom ia kano kano ka Ri.” Nga la pyrta jam; bad ngam shym la tyngkai. Nga la thoh katba nga lah da ka khmut u Diamond bad u Khulom nar: (P xvi)

(That this Picture should emerge I have not hesitated to point out especially that “Sin is a shame to any Nation.” I have forcefully cried; and I have not spared. I have written whatever I could with the tip of a Diamond and an iron Pen:)

Therefore when he sees his people forgetting and scorning the “Righteousness,” the “mother of Virtues,” that had guided his ancestors and had preserved them as a unique race during their nomadic days, though they were only a handful; when he sees them wallowing in “Sin,” which is not only “a shame to any nation,” but also the mother of evils, he cries out angrily against them “almost like the old prophets,” (Warjri’s phrase) without sparing anyone. As Sten reveals, he does not even spare his friend and fellow writer, U Sib Charan Roy, when he and others tried to subvert the Khasi indigenous faith with freakish practices.

Here he is like Arnold. In “The Scholar-Gipsy” Arnold so detested the present of “Vague half-believers of our casual creeds,” (176) and their lack of hope, their lack of faith, their lack of purpose, their lack of freshness, energy and joy, that he raged against them, apostrophised and invoked the spirit of the Scholar-Gipsy, making an impassioned plea to it to “fly” lest it too catches “the infection of our mental strife.” Then of course, does not ask his forefathers, who are “*kiba snar, kiba shynrang bad kiba tbit*” (“sturdy, valiant and skilful”) ⁹³ to flee. He is rather like Wordsworth who, in his well-known sonnet, “London 1802,” invokes the spirit of Milton and strongly condemns the degradation and corruption of manners and living, which marked English life around the time:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:

England hath need of thee: she is a fen

Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,

Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,

Have forfeited their ancient English dower

Of inward happiness. We are selfish men:

O! raise us up, return to us again;

And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power. ⁹⁴ (1-8)

Tham too invokes the spirit of his ancestors and calls upon the present lot to learn from their sturdiness, courage, virtue and skills so that they may flourish in life. But when he sees them not only ignorant but also uncaring of these virtues, he rebukes them and deplores their evil ways. In his tirade he calls them all sorts of names and compares them with all sorts of things: “bee without its queen,” “blind gropers,” “headless monsters,” “children of greed and Pandemonium,” “worshippers of Mammon,” “the corrupt and corrupters,” “extortionists,” “hired killers,” “*Thlen*-keepers” and “fiends” from the “Nine Storeys of Hell.” In his elegiac denouncement, Tham in this section, strongly reminds one of Milton’s “*Lycidas*” and its “Pilot of the Galilean Lake,” (109) who “shook his mitred locks, and stern bespake:” (112) condemning the gross abuses in the church during Milton’s times. It is in this way that the poem, like Arnold’s “*The Scholar-Gipsy*” and Wordsworth’s “*London 1802*,” mourns not so much death but the existing conditions, which cause grief and despair.

The other thing that the sections do is to point out that the transition from the “Golden Age” to the “Age of Chaos” and evil is also an internal one. The shift signifies the spiritual degeneration of man deprived of God’s guidance. That is why his heart is compared to a smithy forging “Numberless fiendish thoughts.” In this Tham is no different from Joseph Conrad and William Golding, who speak of very much the same theme. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is not merely the Belgian Congo but the heart of man

as personified by Kurtz, whose character is described by Marlow as, “an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines.”⁹⁵ Kurtz himself describes the “adventures of his soul on this earth,” in his dying breath, as “‘The horror! The horror!’” (P 84) Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* conveys the same meaning. As the Oxford University Press “Introduction” to his book says, “The title, therefore, is appropriate to a novel which like a fable conveys a moral that ‘the world is not the reasonable place we are led to believe’ and that ‘all power corrupts’ and that one has to live with the darkness of man’s heart [intrinsically present even in the hearts of children, who are universally believed to be the embodiment of innocence].”⁹⁶ Tham depicts this evil with the help of Khasi myths and liberal borrowings from Greek myths and, as Sten revealed, from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. But this aspect will be discussed more extensively in the third chapter.

Section VI is the most hopeful of all the sections in the poem. Its title, *U Simpyllieng* (“The Rainbow”), tropes the elegiac image of light and the section opens with a repetition of themes and thoughts from the previous two stanzas:

La pap u brierw shi snieh Pyrthei,

Napoh jong u la jah U Blei;

Nangta la kut ka ‘Hiar’ ka ‘Kiew’,

Nangta la kem ka Tieng ka Ngiew:

Namar la tap u Ksuid u Khrei,

‘Uba ngi ieit U don haei!’ (1-6)

(Wicked is man over the world,

From within him vanished is God;

Then to an end ‘Descent’ ‘Ascent,’

Then in the clasp of Fear and Dread:

Because of Fiends and Demons everywhere,

‘Where is He the One we love!’)

The repetition goes on:

Jingshai u briew, ka Stad, ka Tip,

Pyrkhat, Pyrdaiñ— ka iaid khapbrip; (7-8)

(The Light of man, Knowledge, Insight,

Contemplation, Thought— it goes about with sightless eyes;)

And:

La jah u Syntiew Amirphor,

U sah sa tang u Ekjakor ! (11-2)

(Gone is the Flower *Amirphor,*

It stays only the *Ekjakor*)

As the section progresses more and more repetitions are noticed. The myth of the Bull is repeated and so is the snapping of the Golden Ladder at *Sohpet Bneng*, when “*u Syiem Synñia*,” the “King of Darkness” reigned. The function of this elegiac repetition has been partly clarified in the explication of the prologue. Here it serves to re-establish the age without God, to capture the atmosphere of man’s blind groping, and to carry the argument forward of how, in this blind groping, man finally turns to make his first appeal to God:

La rngat ka Um, ka sah ka Rew,

‘Nongbuh, Nongthaw, na neng to sngew!’ (29-30)

(Drained is the Water, only the Crust,

'Keeper, Creator, hearken from above!')

God is now appealed to not only to help him out in his period of darkness, but also to restore the "*Jingkieng Ksiar*" ("the Golden Ladder") so that the relationship between man and God is re-established. Man is shown to be making his entreaties to God through various rites and rituals, always pleading for forgiveness for his "*ka Lait ka Let*" his errors and misdeeds, his acts of omission and commission. When God is eventually convinced of man's repentance, he sends him signs to send to him a "*Simpah Simsong*," that is one who will "*kit ka Pap*," bear man's "Evil" and through his self-sacrifice not only return man's godhood to him but also strengthen the essence of his humanity ("*Ban eh ka Rngiew*,"), and cleanse all wickedness from his heart.

In doing all this Tham makes use of the myth of the Rooster and explains how man convenes a great council of all creatures to resolve through deliberations and mutual consultations, who would be that "*Simpah Simsong*." After a long debate, the poet says finally the Rooster comes forward to offer:

Ha sngap na Krem Lamet Latang,

U Rangiarkhad, u Khraw Jutang:

'Haduh ba poi ka sngi Uta,

Kam pher, ' u ong, 'ngan kit ma nga:

Te me, u briew, men lait shitom,

Ha khmat U Trai Nongthaw junom.' (73-8)

(Hark from the Cave of the Sanctified Leaf,

The Sacrificial Rooster, the Great Covenantor:

‘Till the day that comes the One,
 All right,’ he said, ‘let me bear all:
 So you, a man, suffer no more
 Before the Master Creator evermore.’)

The poet then elaborates on the myth. The “Cave of the Sanctified Leaf” is the holy retreat to which the Sun, symbol of divine light, the grace of God, had fled after being slighted by man and all earthlings. Her flight had left the entire world in darkness and brought about all attendant evils. But now the “Rooster” has wooed her back to earth with his humility and,

*Ynda lai sien u riew u Syiar,
 Nangta ka shai ka Pyrthei kdar. (83-4)*

(When the Rooster bugles thrice
 Then all the Earth shines bright and clear.)

He compares this shining bright and clear of the earth with the appearance of “The Rainbow” after a particularly dark and stormy period. In the prologue he says:

*U Maw Jyrngum hadien un paw,
 Ynda u rang u Lapmysaw !
 U Lyoh ba rben baroh un phieng,
 Ynda u mih u Simpyllieng. (61-4)*

(Then will appear the Azure Rock,
 After the Rain of Menace stops!
 Then the dense Cloud will be bright,
 After the Rainbow has emerged:)

And here he says:

Pyrthei Mariang ka phuh ka phieng;

La poi ka Shngaiñ la lait ka Tieng ;

Ka Ngiew ka jiah shapoh Diengïei,

Ryngkat bad ka u Ksuid u Khrei; (85-8)

(The World blooms bright and wonderful;

Safety's here no more is Fear;

Terror has sunk beneath the Tree of Gloom,

With it the demons the fiends of doom;)

The emergence of the Rainbow brings back a bright and beautiful world, a world moreover free from terror and fear. It is in this section that the first movement of the elegy, that is, its spiritual movement, the internalisation of good and evil, the titanic clash of these forces in the heart of man, formally comes to an end. The section marks the passage of the elegy away from the period of grief and darkness towards a moment of mysterious revelation. The forces of good have triumphed over the forces of evil. The "Age of Chaos" and greed, the age of *Thlen*, his keepers and their hired killers, have come to an end. All the demons have been wiped off the face of the earth. Safety has returned, Fear and Terror are gone. This is a period of renewal. And as revealed to the poet through the myth of "the Rooster," all this has been possible by the simple act of Humility, which directs man to return to God, to appeal to Him for forgiveness and guidance, and above all, to return to Him with a promise of unending virtue. After all, God, as is seen in the prologue, is "the caretaker of the covenant from above" ("*Ban ap*

jutang U Blei na jrong”), that is, One who would among other things, wait for man to make his entreaties to Him should he require His succour.

The birth of Tham’s new world is best described by Robert Browning:

The year’s at the spring,

And day’s at the morn

Morning’s at seven;

The hill-side’s dew-pearl’d;

The lark’s on the wing;

The snail’s on the thorn;

God’s in His heaven—

*All’s right with the world!*⁹⁷

Such a world, it would seem, would have meant more than a consolation. But to Tham this is not yet the ideal world that he yearns for. Though it is a charming and terror-free world, yet the beauty of nature has not been reflected in the face of man, which means that his heart has not been completely cleansed as implied in stanza XVI. What Tham pines for is the restoration of the Golden Ladder:

U brieve u wad jingshai kylleng,

Ka Jingkieng Ksiar kumno ban bteng: (45-6)

(Man seeks illumination the world over,

How he would mend the Golden Ladder:)

This mending of the broken Golden Ladder means a complete reunion between man and God, between heaven and earth without the need for an intercessor. He dreams of the time when God would once again descend “to take a stroll with man” and when man

would once again “*un Hiar un Kiew*,” that is, descend from and ascend to heaven as a matter of daily routine. He dreams of the time when “*Synshar ka suk ka saiñ kylleng*,” when “Peace contentment reigned everywhere.” In other words his *hiraeth* is for another “Golden Age.” But seized by another moment of mysterious revelation he says this will be possible only “*Haduh ba poi ka sngi Uta*” (75, “Till the day that comes the One”).

But who is this “the One?” When will he come? Will he do so at all? Is the poet refusing “the Rooster,” the embodiment of Humility, that “which will make us genuflect before God, so that we will once again receive enlightenment, inspiration and blessing from the Keeper the Creator?”⁹⁸ Is he refusing “the Rooster” as the final redeemer, even as the Jews refuse Jesus Christ to await the coming of the Messiah? Or is he, like all the believers of Christianity, awaiting the Second Coming of Christ? And if man is to wait for his Messiah or the Second Coming, what is he to do for the present? Tham returns to Khasi faith, which teaches that

Lyngba ka Miet ba iong ba rben,

Um lip u Khlur ka Jingkyrmen:

Kumno un ioh ka Jingisynei,

Haba u dem ha khmat U Blei. (111-4)

(Through the Night that’s dark and dense,

It will not dim the Star of Hope:

How His Compassion he will win,

When he genuflects before Him.)

Tham offers this consolation for the time being. But this stop-gap arrangement will hardly console the people whom he had denounced as “Enlightenment we seek around the world; / That of the Land’s we care but nought.”

Tham’s resolution of the spiritual quest is inadequate from the point of view of the traditional elegiac consolatory formula. Especially in an age of unbelievers, where “Virtue lives in the land of God, / The Purse of man in our world,” the ambiguous, vague and uncertain “the One” may find it difficult to either renew faith or console the loss of faith. The return of the “Golden Age” of Tham’s ancestors is a remote possibility indeed.

The coda is neither an effective nor a final consolation. Milton in “Lycidas” leaves no doubt in the mind of the reader when he says:

*Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,
For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he beneath the watery floor;
So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with the new-spangled ore
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of Him that walked the waves,
Where, other groves and other streams along,
With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,
And hear the unexpressive nuptial song,
In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love, (165-77)*

Here the reader is carried by the force of the poet's eloquence and his unquestioning faith that Lycidas lives, through death, a more glorious life. But Tham's tentative "the One" cannot do the same especially when he had asked earlier in Sections III and VI, "Where is He the One we love!" This is definitely not like Milton's final buoyant vision of Lycidas happily rejoicing among the saints.

With "*Ka Īng i Mei*" ("Mother's House") in Section VII, the elegy moves away from its spiritual movement and truly concerns itself with the customs and traditions of the forefathers. But these are not the "rude forefathers" of Gray. In the prologue the reader is told of the statesmanship, the political and practical wisdom of these "enlightened pioneers," their literature and their way of life, which are not only worthy of emulation but must be emulated. These are the forefathers about whose wisdom the poet is going to sing. These are the forefathers, "sturdy, valiant and skilful," about whose way of life he is going to speak in more concrete terms from this section onwards. But since this chapter is more concerned with a study of the poem as an elegy, only the bare summary of this and remaining sections will be brought out in order to highlight the second elegiac movement and how that movement arrives at its final consolation. The traditions of the poet's forefathers will be dealt with in greater detail in Chapter III.

As will be seen, his mother's house contains at least three layers of meaning here, with an additional and conclusive one at the end of the poem. First of all, the house literally means his mother's house at Sohra, the place where he was born and brought up. Experiencing a *hiraeth* for that house, the poet describes how he had been brought up amidst idyllic nature in a very traditional kind of upbringing. From here the poet moves on to the next mother's house, the house of the clan, the house of the "*Meisan Meinah*,"

the “elder maternal Aunt” and the “younger maternal Aunt” and most of all to the “*ing khadduh*,” that is the house of the youngest maternal aunt, where all the members of the clan would gather.

In stanza VIII the poet introduces a new theme, a variation of the “smithy” of Section IV. While in that section the heart of man was shown as the smithy making not tools of survival but “Numberless fiendish thoughts,” here the smithy is “*ka Lyngwiar Dpei*” (“the Hearth”) of the mother’s house, where the uncles and the fathers of *U Hynñiew Trep* had forged their social and economic systems (“*ka jaid ka Spah*”), their religion (“*ka Kñia ka Khriam... ban long ka Niam*”) and their political system (“*ban saiñ pyrthei*”). These social, economic, religious and political systems of his people constitute the next mother’s house of the poet.

Speaking of these systems, he sings of the sterling qualities of the old ones. He admires their solidarity be it in war, peace or festivities. He appreciates their conscientiousness: “*Ki don ka Sang ki tip ka Ma*” (69, “They have their Taboos they know what’s Sacrilege”). He praises their ever ready patriotism: “*Namar ka ñng ka Kur ka Jaid, / Un khie u Sum ka Stieh ka Wait*: (75-6, “For the house the Clan the Tribe, / The Spear the Shield the Sword will rise:”). And what is more important for the poet, as an elegist, is their great reverence for the dead, their mourning rites, introduced in the prologue through the myth of “*The Death of Lapalang, the Stag*,” which include the commemoration of the memories of the dead by erecting cromlechs and monoliths. These are virtues that the poet values more than anything else in life.

Section VIII, “*Ka Meirilung*” (“The Motherland”) presents the poet’s *hiraeth* for a knowledge of his people’s origins. He invokes creatures associated in Khasi lore with mythical powers and asks:

Ma phi, ki khun ka Step phyrngab,

Iathuh ma phi, Mei-Lieng, Mei-Ab,

Haba phi her sawdong pyrthei.

Ka Thymmeiri jong ngi naei?

Ba ngan da lah ban jngi kum phi,

Shaduh ki khadar snem Lynti! (1-6)

(You, the children of the Dawn,

Tell me, Mother-Raven, Mother-Hawk,

When you circle round the world,

From where the Roots of our Land?

If only I could soar like you,

To the twelve-year long Journey!)

Then looking for the family tree of the *Hynñiew Trep*, he calls upon the primordial wind:

Ko Lyer ba rong i’u symbai Kseh,

Hangno u Dieng ba iaw ba heh? (7-8)

(O Wind that bears the seed of Pines,

Where is the Tree weathered and vast?)

But finding no consolation from such agonised elegiac questioning, he turns to elegiac praise and declares:

Tang ba kum ki ngi iaw mynsiem,

Kham lah ba mih na Krem ki Dngiem. (17-8)

(If only we could be as fierce,

Better if we'd emerge from Caves of Bears.)

There is a slight shift in the argument here. Earlier the poet has been drawing more attention to the virtues of his forefathers' ways, but now he implies that their sterling qualities like fearlessness are even more important. And such qualities whose "*Ki Dak jong ki ki paw tyngkreñ*" ("Their Signs are still clearly visible") should be of immense value as the tribe forges ahead into the future and interacts and mixes with all sorts of races:

Da kumwei pat hadien ngin kiew,

Ngin khleh bad kiwei pat ki briew; (25-6)

(In other ways later we'll grow,

Though with others we come and go;)

From here the poet turns to brooding upon the audio-visual symbols of the past that "are still clearly visible." These include the monoliths, stone resting places, stone bridges, man-made ponds and lakes, palaces built without nails and of course, the music of "*ka Tangmuri*" ("Pipe Instrument") and "*ka Sharati*" ("Flute") and "*ka Ksing*," "*ka Dhah*," the drums, big and small. The poet's meditation on the symbols of the past finally turns to

Ki Khla ka Wait, ki Khraw Jutang,

Ha um ha ding ia ki la phrang: (55-6)

(The Tigers of the Sword, the Great Guarantors,

Tempered by water tempered by fire:)

that is, the great warriors, who had secured the safety and survival of the race. From here the poet moves once more to patriotism and the ancestors who would make any sacrifice for the survival of the people:

Namar ki iap, nangta ki im;

Te kum kita kumno kin rim! (89-90)

(Because they died, therefore they lived;

How could such breeds be obsolete!)

Such were the ancestors of *U Hynñiew Trep* who could endure any hardship and face any challenge:

Namar ka Pud ka Sam Hima,

'Ka Ri um Snam u Kñi u Kpa'. (101-2)

(For the Boundary of the State,

'The Land of the Uncles' the Fathers' Blood'.)

It is only by emulating the fearless and selfless patriotism of these ancestors that the glory of the past would return and then:

Sa shisien kin win ki Khlaw,

Sa shisien pat kin khih ki Maw;

Kum kiwei pat ki sngi kin mih,

Da kumwei pat ka Ri kan ih; (103-6)

(Once more will the Woods reverberate,

Once more will stir the Rocks;

Like others the days will come

In other ways the land will ripen.)

This is a variation of the theme in Section II when the poet was so smitten by the conjured image of the lost “Golden Age” that he determined to sing about it till “the Woods reverberate” and “the Rocks” stir once again. But now he says the “Golden Age” or at least some of its glories could be relived if only the present could learn from what the past has to teach:

Lada ngi don ki shkor ba sngew,

Aiu ka kren ka Mei-Ramew! (107-8)

(If only we have ears that hear,

What she says the Mother-Earth!)

The last symbol of the past that the poet contemplates on is the political set-up inherited from the ancestors and which is still found in practice today.

The next section, “*Lum Lamare*” (“Lamare Hill” or “Hill of Lamare”), dwells on those aspects of the audio-visual symbols relating to the forefathers’ economic and social activities. The poet finds his ancestors so incredibly enlightened in every sphere of life that he addresses the mountain of *Bah-Bo-Bah-Kong* and asks:

Iathuh, sa me, Bah-Bo-Bah-Kong,

Ki blei aiu ha me ki shong! (119-20)

(And now, you say, *Bah-Bo-Bah-Kong,*

What gods are these who dwell on you!)

The poet’s song of praise for his ancestors is now complete. Having delved deep into the past, he discovers that they are no less than gods, who had organised every aspect of their lives into a grand civilisation.

By so brooding on the audio-visual objects of the past, the poet is re-enacting one of the elegiac conventions. Recalling his friendship with Lycidas, Milton, the poet, relives each experience in his memories:

Together both, ere the high lawns appear'd

Under the opening eye-lids of the morn,

We drove a-field, ... (25-28)

Oft till the star, that rose at evening bright,

Towards heaven's descent had sloped his westering wheel.

Meanwhile the rural ditties were not mute, (30-3)

So does Tennyson in *In Memoriam* when “the generic conventions do allow moments of retrospect, in which the poet evokes the traditional idyll of shared joy. Here, with Pan and the flutes of Arcady, the survivor can at least surmise images of well-being while also submitting himself and his friend to the impersonal figures of Theocritean pastoral.”⁹⁹

Below are quotations from the relevant sections:¹⁰⁰

The path by which we twain did go,

Which led by tracts that pleased us well,

Through four sweet years arose and fell,

From flower to flower, from snow to snow;

And we with singing cheered the way,

And, crowned with all the season lent,

From April on to April went,

And glad at heart from May to May.

(Stanzas one & two, Section 22)

And crying, How changed from where it ran

Through lands where not a leaf was dumb,

But all the lavish hills would hum

The murmur of a happy Pan;

And all we met was fair and good,

And all was good that Time could bring,

And all the secret of the Spring

Moved in the chambers of the blood;

(Stanzas three & five, Section 23)

As has been cited earlier, even an elegist like Hardy, who is classed as modern by Ramazani, makes use of the convention in “On a Discovered Curl of Hair” (1922) and “A Forgotten Miniature.” (1928)

The purpose of such elegiac brooding on memories of the past is, as Ramazani observes, “to abate the misery / Of absentness” and “to preserve... the lost person.”¹⁰¹ Tham’s contemplation is meant for purposes higher than mere abatement and preservation. When Gray describes the life of his “rude forefathers,” he does so not from any necessity to abate personal sorrow, but to draw attention to them and inspiring a remembrance and a reverence for them. Tham is more like Gray in his intent, only he identifies himself with the dead more closely than him. He feels the loss of his forefathers’ ways very intensely; he recalls these first of all because he wants them to be remembered. Though the signs of his forefathers’ traditions and deeds are “still clearly

visible,” yet they grow dimmer and dimmer with each passing year, therefore he cries out,

Sa tang wei-ar ki paw ngut-nget,

‘Ba ioh ngi klet! Ba ioh ngi klet!’ (77-8)

(Only one-two they vaguely show,

‘Lest we forget! Lest we forget!’)

But mere remembrance and reverence for the deeds and the ways of his forefathers will not do. Tham like a teacher calls for a perpetuation of these ways much the same as Wordsworth calls on the spirit of Milton. The ways of his forefathers must come to life again and guide the present through to a glorious future. And he has a warning for any negligence shown for the forefathers and their way of life:

Lada ia ki baroh ngi klet,

Ka Ri junom kan sah khunswet. (83-4)

(If we slight them altogether,

The Land an orphan forever.)

This warning serves to foreshadow the fact that the theme of praise is about to sink to that of lament in the final section, “*Ka Aiom Ksjar*” (“The Golden Age”). The lament comes first in the form of a vague premonition:

Shalor ki Lum shapoh Dymmiew,

Haba nga iaid pyngngad weibriew,

Iathuh sa pha Ko Ri jong nga,

Balei bunsien nga sngew pisa:

Haba sawdong nga phai ka khmat,

Balei nga sngew ban jaw ummat. (35-42)

(To Mountaintops in Shaded Spots,

When I take a solitary walk,

Speak to me, beloved Country,

Why do I often feel uneasy:

When I turn to look around me

Why do I feel so weepy.)

Then it manifests as a real tangible fear:

Hyndai, ki lum ki da ia ki,

Hadien, mano ban da ia ngi! (43-4)

(In ancient times the Hills protected them

In times to come, what is our defence!)

But what is the nature or source of this fear? It is clear enough that the poet fears for the future well-being of the land and his people. But a clearer picture will emerge only if the conditions of his time are looked into. Tham's age (1873-1940) was not very different from Arnold's perplexed age of flux. According to Warjri ¹⁰² Shillong, where Tham lived was a rapidly changing town with people swarming to it from all over the sub-continent and indeed the world. He recounts:

Shillong that was only a village in 1864— the year when it was made the capital of the District— slowly and steadily became one of the biggest and most populated towns in the north-eastern part of India. In fact, in Shillong, even before Independence, we the indigenous people, had already become minorities.

(P 76)

That Tham was deeply disturbed by the ceaseless influx of people from outside to his land, and the fact that the Khasis had become a minority in their own town is again highlighted by Warjri in this anecdote:

U Soso Tham who was always a close observer had already seen this development [the influx]. It was revealed to us that one day Soso Tham was lazing in a corner of Iewduh [also known now as Bara-Bazar]. As they were talking of this and that Soso Tham suddenly asked his friend if he had noticed anything different in the place. "No" the friend replied. But Soso Tham told him that he had noticed one very important change. He said that the road and paths were crammed full with people. But what was surprising was to find that amidst all that hustle and bustle of people, there was only one or two stray Khasis to be found. The surprise was that in the few years that had gone by, we had become marginalised in the capital of our own land. (P 76)

The threat that Tham sees to his own land was not so much the white man but the people from mainland India, whom he had noticed jamming the roads and by-lanes of Iewduh. (It must be kept in mind that Tham died in 1940, a full seven years before the independence of the country, and at a time when the idea of India as a single nation had not really taken root in the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills. When Tham speaks of "the country" he always means, therefore, his own land, the land of the *Hynñiew Trep* people). It was of these people that he speaks in these lines:

Ki Kliar ki Lum Himalaya,

Lano kin ngiah ban peit ia phah! (Section IX, 3-4)

(The Mountaintops, Himalayas,

When will they tire to leer at you!)

Sten interprets these lines to point to the people of the Himalayan mountain ranges, especially “the Nepalese, who were always yearning to come and make a living here.” (P 87) There is much truth in this interpretation especially when Tham himself had revealed in the preface:

ia kaba mynta kynrei ki nongwei shisngi kiba thap mrong ban shu ioh-ei lada ngi tamlah ban ai ri muid bad ban die la ki khyndew ha ki. (P xv)

(as it were now outsiders abound who are bidding their chances to capture the land the moment we make a mistake and sell them plots to raise buffaloes and cattle.)

That the fear expressed in the last section of the poem is the fear of being swamped by the more populous outsiders is reinforced by what Tham himself had stated in another part of the preface:

Nga iohi ruh ia la ka ri ha tmier ka riat ba shyrkhei. Sa tang katno, ia ngi kiba tang shitroh, lada ngim kyndit briew kan sa tyllep ka umsaw, bad ngin sa long nong-Gebion ban thoh dieng bad tong um ianore! (P xvii)

(I also see my country on the edge of a terrible precipice. After a while, we who are only a handful, if we do not wake up the flash flood will overwhelm us and we will be like the people of Gebion to cut wood and carry water for some unknown masters!)

So if the land is on the edge of a terrible precipice and is under threat from the influx of outsiders, then what is it that will save it? Tham feels that it can be nothing else but patriotism that is true and selfless, that is the patriotism of his ancestors, “The Tigers of

the Sword, the Great Guarantors,” who “Because they died, therefore they lived.” So that the glories of the “Golden Age” would return, so that “Once more will the Woods reverberate, / Once more will stir the Rocks,” the poet appeals for this kind of patriotism:

O Lyer— ‘ban im namar ka Ri,’

Sa shisien pat to beh ha ngi: (49-50)

(O Wind— ‘that we may live for the Land,’

Be among us once again:)

But not satisfied with this invocation to the primordial wind, the poet turns to God:

Namar ka Ri Khasi Ri Pnar,

Ko Trai ka Pyrthei salonsar,

Ngin shoh, ngin thaw, baroh ngin rep,

Shaneng ngin kiew napoh ki Trep. (75-8)

(Because of *Ri Khasi Ri Pnar,*

O Master Keeper the world over,

We’ll beat, we’ll make and all we’ll farm,

From our Huts upwards we’ll climb.)

Ri Khasi Ri Pnar is of course another name for the land of the *Hynñiew Trep* people.

What the poet is doing here is pleading with God for the all-round prosperity of his land and people, while at the same time promising before Him that he and his countrymen would try their best to help themselves grow towards this goal.

The patriotism that Tham calls for in this stanza is of a different kind. It is not only the selfless sacrifice to defend the land from external dangers, but the firm determination to build the country from within, to make it flourish in every sphere of

activity. In the coda of the poem, Tham then makes patriotism, the greatest legacy of his ancestors, as the redeeming quality of his race, the only one that can save it from hostile external forces and inspire it to greater accomplishments. This is the consolation offered by Tham in the second elegiac movement, the movement of the poem at the material or secular level.

But here as in the spiritual level, the consolation proposed is not very effective. It is ineffective mainly because of two reasons, the dependence of the poet on patriotic love and the quest for an ideal reader. In the first place Tham's contemporaries are ignorant lethargic and therefore, extremely unpatriotic in Tham's sense of the word. They do not know anything of the enlightenment of the land and the wisdom of their forefathers: "Enlightenment we seek around the world; / That of the Land's we know but nought." They need to be aroused and awakened not only by the poet but also by forces imbued with supernatural powers ("O Diamond, O Gilded Pen"). But in spite of the attempt to arouse them the possibility of success is slim for not only do they not know of the past, they also do not want to know: "Enlightenment we seek around the world; / That of the Land's we care but nought." This is not just unpatriotic, but the apathy and scorn of the poet's contemporaries towards whatever is their own is nothing short of treachery as far as the poet is concerned. In this kind of atmosphere it is impossible to see how the poet's consolatory formula could work as a condition for redemption.

Added to this is the difficulty of the poet's quest. In the prologue, the poet's quest, or the objective of his quest is seen as his search for enlightenment from one's own land as against the enlightenment from other cultures. But as stated, this Tennyson-like mission rests entirely upon the presence of a sympathetic reader or readers, and their

willingness to listen and implement the poet's exhortations and teachings. But again this is something that was not likely to happen on a large scale during Tham's time. The reason can be gleaned from what Tham himself had said of his contemporaries in the preface to his first volume of poetry, *Ka Duitara Ksiar*:

*Hynrei u Khasi mynta um treh pule lynda phñian ha u ha skul bad ha ñngmane.
Bad ki khynnah kim pule ia ka kot Khasi, la ka bha katno katno, lynda ka dei ka
Text Book. Don jingmatlah kaba kham tlip nalar kane? (P ii)*

(But the Khasi today refuses to read unless compelled to do so at school or the church. And the young people do not read a Khasi book, however good it may be, unless it is a Text Book. Is there a blindness more opaque than this?)

Tham did win admirers during his time, people like S. K. Bhuyan, R. R. Thomas and Homiwell Lyngdoh, referred to in Chapter I. But for the kind of transformation that Tham has in mind, the ideal reader must be the masses, like the ones influenced by Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. But if the poet's contemporary Khasis refused to read Khasi books, there was no likelihood of such a thing happening. Tham knows this and that is why, failing to find consolation from his own consolatory coda, he turns his attention away from the painful reflection on his beloved land to gaze heavenwards in the last stanza:

*Na khlieh ki Kshaid na rud ki Thwei,
Khadduh nga poi ngam tip shaei:
Na Lum Shyllong, Kyllang, Symper
Ko Ri na Pha, shano ngan her;
Ynda nga poi ha ñng U Blei,
Nyingkong ngan wad hangno i Mei. (79-84)*

(From crests of Waterfalls beside the river Pools,

I know not where at last I'll be:

From Shyllong, Kyllang, Symper mounts,

O Land from You, where shall I flee;

When I reach the house of God,

First I will seek my Mother where.)

The consolatory formulae of the poem for both spiritual and secular quests have been seen to be inadequate and ineffectual for a successful mourning in the traditional elegiac sense. The passage from grief and darkness to light and consolation has not been conclusive and fully compensatory. Tham's conclusion of the spiritual movement of the poem for instance, is like Hardy's ending of his famous "God's Funeral" (1912).¹⁰³ In the last segment the speaker of the poem says, "I could not buoy their faith," thus aligning himself with the mourners who have faith only in the loss they mourn. Then suddenly he imagines having seen in the distance a "pale yet positive gleam low down behind"¹⁰⁴ (60) This "small light," as Ramazani observes, "is akin to the new sun at the end of 'Lycidas,' the somewhat darker sun at the end of the 'Intimations Ode,' and the 'rising sun' in which Hallam stands at the end of *In Memoriam*." (P 45) This light may also be equated with the "Rainbow" of Tham. But while the earlier elegists had resolved grief through images of continuing energy, Hardy makes the light, much diminished in its power and in its promise. As Ramazani remarks, "Hardy leaves its significance vague: we cannot know whether it is a new god (humanity?), a new saviour (the nation-state?), a new faith (the positivist creed?), or simply a new illusion, forced on the speaker by his urgent need for compensation." (P45-6) Thus the ending of the poem

in the words of Ramazani again, “lacks ebullience; indeed its description of the consolatory light is so tentative and vague as to justify the speaker’s bleak response [to it and his subsequent joining with the melancholic mourners].” (P46)

Tham’s “Rainbow” is of course strong. As an elegiac image of light it does serve its purpose and lifts the dark “Cloud.” It would seem that Tham like “Tennyson has finally overridden most doubts [at the end of *In Memoriam*] that his consolatory project has been worthwhile...”¹⁰⁵ But then the poet makes this light dependent upon “the One” whose day of arrival is less a statement of assurance than the desperate prediction of the “Sacrificial Rooster.” So what if “the One” does not come? Will the “Rainbow” fade? As is the case in Hardy’s poem, Tham’s coda leaves the reader unsure of the future.

If the “Rainbow” does not completely succeed as a consolatory symbol, the “Wind” of patriotism fairs even worse for it is not a wind that is blowing in the present but a wind that may or may not blow in the future, depending on the changing attitude of the people. But if the apathy and disdain of the present towards the heritage of the past do not change, then it is highly uncertain that this “Wind” would blow at all. The only certainty in the entire poem is that Tham, like Hardy’s mourners, is certain of only the loss that he mourns.

In its attempt at consolation, the last stanza of Tham’s *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* strongly recalls that of Gray’s elegy. Failing to find adequate consolation for the obscure fate of the “rude forefathers” and fearing his own obscure fate, Gray anticipates his own death and finally seeks solace in the common mother (“the lap of Earth”) and the common father, who is God. Tham does exactly the same thing. Knowing full well that bringing about a reformation in his contemporary society, in line with his yearning, is

next to impossible, he too turns to the “house of God” to seek the final consolation in his “Mother,” who may also be “*ka lawbei*,” the primal ancestress. This turning away from the present is what Sacks calls the elegiac deflection of desire necessary for consolation. The difference here is that this deflection also involves an anticipation of the poets’ own death. This is what makes the elegies of Gray, or Tham, or Rilke, self-mourning and self-consoling.

But this line of argument hardly takes anything away from the poem. It must be kept in mind that Tham’s *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* is not a traditional elegy. The unconventionality of an elegy, as has been argued, does not merely lie in the fact that it mourns no single person, or that the grief it expresses is that of a general kind. It also rests on the question of what Ramazani calls the “consolatory machinery.” (P 3). Talking of modern elegies, Ramazani asserts that “Sacks’s model of ‘healthy’ and ‘successful’ mourning is, I think inadequate for understanding the twentieth-century elegy.” (P xi) In assessing the unconventional *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* (1936)—certainly a twentieth-century elegy— Ramazani’s yardstick rather than Sacks’s model should be adopted.

Defining the modern elegy Ramazani observes, “Broadly defined, the elegy permeates a wide range of poems about war, love, race gender, meditation, the self, the family, and the poet.” (P x) And in his “Introduction” he writes:

Among the oldest and richest of poetic genres, the elegy survives the twentieth century’s challenge to inherited forms. Indeed, the poetry of mourning for the dead assumes in the modern period an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and scepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever

before. As warfare was industrialized and mass death augmented, as mourning rites weakened and the “funeral director” professionalized, as the dying were shut away in hospitals and death itself made a taboo subject, poetry increasingly became an important cultural space for mourning the dead. (P1)

Among the major modern elegists, Ramazani names Hardy, Owen, and Plath (and even Pound and Eliot, who wrote “covert elegies”) who continue to “perpetuate and intensify the ancient literary dialogue with the dead.” (P 1) But unlike most canonical elegists who depicted mourning as compensatory, the modern elegists, he avers “tend to enact the work not of normative but of ‘melancholic’ mourning— a term I adapt from Freud to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent.” (P 4) He adds that in their fierce resistance to solace, their intense criticism and self-criticism, even as they mourn, they are like the Freudian “melancholic.” Unlike their literary forbears, he says, they attack the dead and themselves, their work and the tradition; and they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself. That is why, according to Ramazani, the modern elegy has been called an “art of losing.” Instead of practising the art of saving, which defines the traditional elegy, instead of “resurrecting the dead in some substitute, instead of curing themselves through displacement, modern elegists ‘practice losing farther, losing faster,’ so that the ‘One Art’ of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it.” (P 4)

And yet modern poets, Ramazani reveals, “often smuggle into their elegies a surprising array of ancient elegiac tropes, structures, and even consolations.” (P 10) In this manner they reanimate the elegy not by slavishly adopting its conventions but by violating its norms and transgressing its limits. In the words of Ramazani:

They conjoin the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure, and imagery of the genre. The apparently oxymoronic term “modern elegy” suggests both the negation of received codes (‘modern’) and their perpetuation (‘elegy’)— a synthesis of modernity and inheritance that is especially fruitful for poets like Hardy, Stevens, Hughes, and Plath, who neither rehash nor neglect literary traditions. They make it new but make it old, rebel against generic norms but reclaim them through rebellion...[In its extreme form] the modern elegy more radically violates previous generic norms than did earlier phases of elegy: it becomes anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-literary. (P 1-2)

In the light of Ramazani’s exposition, the elegies of Tham, Rilke, Arnold and Gray may be said to occupy a position somewhere in between the traditional and the modern elegy. They make use, as illustrated, of many of the elegiac tropes and topoi. Their movement is always from praise to lament and then, to an attempt at consolation. Grief and darkness are always replaced by hope of renewal. Negation moves towards affirmation. And most important of all, they do not disdain the old dictum, *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* (say nothing but good of the dead). Thus the “early-departed” of Rilke, the poets and the Scholar-Gipsy of Arnold, and the “rude forefathers” of Gray are nothing less than heroes. And Tham’s ancestors are not only heroes but also gods (“What gods are these who dwell on you!”). There is no question of attacking the dead here as modern elegists do.

But in their use of the conventions, they do not slavishly follow them. In their themes of mourning, they are obviously unconventional. In the act of mourning itself,

they are certainly unresolved, violent, and ambivalent. Their violence is seen in their resentful anger against the living; and their unresolved and ambivalent attitude is seen in their resolutions, which, though not outright anti-consolatory and anti-elegiac, are nevertheless inadequate consolations. While Rilke tries to find consolation in a private cult of inwardness; while Arnold tries to find it in a stoic acceptance of unpalatable realities; while Gray tries to find it in the lap of the common mother and the bosom of his father, God, from where he issues an anti-consolatory injunction to his survivors; Tham pins his hopes in the very remote possibility of the return of the “Golden Age” both at the spiritual and material levels. These seem more like contrived compensatory models, which instead of being recuperative and transcendental, leaves one with the impression that the mourners are still immersed in their losses. But it is exactly because of this ambivalence that their poems have triumphed as elegiac poetry. As Ramazani says:

...consolation may no longer be an important “criterion by which to judge” the elegy, since many of the weakest are merely consolatory and many of the strongest... are poems less of solace than melancholia, less of resolution than of protracted strife. (P 226)

In this sense these elegies may truly be termed as the precursors of the modern elegy.

In finally assessing Tham’s poetry as an elegy, attention must be drawn to a particular quality of *hiraeth* referred to in Chapter I as “ ‘a great and cruel’ emotion that makes a mockery of the old Welsh proverb: ‘Time soothes all longing.’”¹⁰⁶ Viewed in this light, most literature of *hiraeth* is anti-consolatory in nature. Being a product of *hiraeth*, Tham’s poem is no different from the rest.

After Tham's major work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, the chapter will now turn to identifying which out of the thirty-two poems, excluding nursery rhymes and translations, in Tham's first volume, *Ka Duitara Ksiar*, are elegies or elegiac. Having gone through the collection and scrutinized the poems, five of them have been found to be what may be termed as elegies proper. These include "*U Tiew Pathai*" (named after the flower, U Tiew Pathai), "*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*" (The Air Is Still Fragrant) "*U Sim ba la Lait*" (The Bird That Is Free), "*U Trot*" (named after the dog U Trot) and "*U Phlang Jyrngam*" (The Green Grass). Of these the first three are family elegies and will be taken up in the third chapter while discussing the poet's "*Hiraeth* for Persons." The next one may perhaps be called an animal elegy and the last one is an interesting self-elegy.

"*U Trot*" is a unique elegy the likes of which has not even been mentioned in the two most authoritative books on the genre: Sacks's *The English Elegy* and Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning*. The poem presents the poet persona in the shape of:

U Trot u dei ha pdeng ka jaid

Ki ksew ba shong ka pher: (1-2)

(*U Trot* is one among the breed

Of dogs where dwells a rarity:)

This dog with a rare and uncanny quality belongs to a poor labourer's family. But not aware of this poverty and the hardship his beloved master and friend has to go through daily; aware only of the love and special bond that exists between them, Trot's life is a happy one. He "*mastieh bad u shad*" ("skips and dances") by his friend's side and whiles his time chasing swallows and deer roaming the countryside.

But this idyllic existence comes to an abrupt end, when the labourer suddenly dies. Trot follows the labourer's weeping wife and children as the procession of mourners carries his body "*Shaduh ka tmier ka riat*" (48, "Till the edge of a precipice") for the last rites. His master's funeral gives rise to a feeling of great confusion and restlessness in him, and often he is seen trying to jump into the precipice, and then returning home, moving about agitatedly, moaning and howling, and looking for his master everywhere. The precipice is apparently a metaphor for death and Trot trying to fling himself into it represents his desperate attempts to follow his master into its unknown world. He is confused as to why his master who takes him everywhere had not taken him to where he was going. He laments, whimpers, and seeks answers for days on end, so that the people watching him, including the poet, experience such sorrow that "*Ki um ki dohnud hin*" (56, "The hearts turn to water").

This period of wretched bewilderment and agitation finally comes to an end when Trot realises that his master is never going to rise from the grave again. But this does not bring relief to Trot, whose world is now enveloped in perpetual gloom. During this period of gloom all sounds and movements also cease, as Trot stops even his whimpering and restive stirrings. The swallows as always fly in and out of their crevices; the deer as always run about the countryside, but Trot notices nothing and does not budge. It is as if something has died inside him, and as he lies sprawled in the garden, it seems that he too has become a carcass.

This is one of Tham's most mournful elegies. The mourning takes place at two levels: that of Trot for his dead master and that of the poet for Trot. That is why the poem has been described previously as an animal elegy, where the poet not only mourns the

suffering of Trot but also experiences a *hiraeth* for both the animal and his former happy state.

The mourning of Trot is like the “melancholic” mourning of modern elegists. Trot is completely immersed in his loss so that his situation is like Tennyson’s “O Death in Life, the days that are no more.”¹⁰⁷ But Trot’s loss is even more agonised as it is without voice, and therefore, without release and without any hope of relief. It is truly a heart-rending grief, without any equivalent in the genre. Although the pathetic fallacy of the traditional elegy speaks of animals and even objects of nature mourning the death of a beloved shepherd, the mourning is more a matter of elegiac convention than anything else. Certainly it is nothing as real or tragic as Trot’s inconsolable grieving as depicted in the poem. It is this mute, helpless, and hopeless mourning that so affects the heart of the poet and “turn[s] it to water.” Bemoaning the fate of Trot the poet turns to apostrophising the future:

Kiwei ki pateng kin dang khie,

Kin tei ruh la ki mot;

Hato hangne, hangtai, hanghie,

Kin kynmaw ia u Trot! (69-71)

(Other generations yet will come,

 Their monuments they will raise;

Will someone here and there,

 Remember of *u* Trot!)

This *hiraeth*-ridden elegiac questioning is actually a call to the future generations to raise a monument for Trot, or at least devise some means of remembering his story. For to

him, it is only the possibility of such a remembrance and perpetuation that can assuage the wretchedness of his heart. This is the consolatory schema of the poem.

About the story of Trot itself, there is no biographical data to indicate if Tham had based it on a true incident, or that Trot was a dog that he really knew. But Sten believes that Tham writes about a dog in Shillong having been inspired by the works of Wordsworth including “Incident, Characteristic of a Favourite Dog” and “Tribute to the Memory of the Same Dog.”¹⁰⁸ Sten’s theory is acceptable especially keeping in mind some resemblances between Wordsworth’s dogs and Trot. But then again, such resemblances are many in real life. The point is that “*u Trot*” is the only elegy of its kind as far as could be established in this study.

“*U Phlang Jyrngam*” (The Green Grass) is a brilliant self-elegy already likened in the first chapter to the poetry of the world-famous Korean poet Yi Kyu-Bo. In the first stanza the poet speaks of *u tiew-dohmaw*, which is a wild flower, traditionally associated with great wisdom. The flower blossoms quietly among the weeds unseen and unappreciated by anyone. In the second stanza he speaks of “*U tiew tyrkhang ba ai jingmen*,” (7, “The joy-giving fern,”) which remains green throughout the twelve months, and therefore lives unnoticed by all. It is only when it withers and dies that it gives rise to a pungent fragrance, making people finally aware of its existence. In the third stanza the poet apostrophises the “*premmiet ba ieit ki blei*” (“twilight, beloved of the gods,”) and “*ki lyoh bun rong*” (“the motley clouds”). He appeals to them to tell him where is the star that first speckles the sky, among the myriad number of stars in heaven. Inspired by the “twilight” and “the motley clouds” the poet arrives at the moment of revelation in the last stanza:

Jar-jar u im jar-jar u jah,

Hapoh rai-eh rai-dam;

Jar-jar ha jingtep ai un thiah,—

Hapoh u phlang jyrngam. (9-12)

(Quietly he lives quietly he dies,

Amidst the wilderness;

Quietly in the grave let him rest, —

Beneath the green, green grass.)

The star “That first speckles the sky” is explained as the one who lives quietly and dies quietly in “the wilderness.” It is only in this stanza that one begins to understand that the poet has all along been talking of a human being and a poet. And having read the life story of Soso Tham, one realises that this poet is none other than Tham himself.

Though Tham is not the first poet to write Khasi poetry, he is the first Khasi to do so, and to make a reputation for himself as a poet whose name “rests on the highest pinnacle among [the] literary towers”¹⁰⁹ of his people. But despite the fact that he is now acknowledged as the poet laureate in Khasi literature, according to Warjri, Tham had to undergo great hardships just to bring out his first collection of poems, *Ki Poetry Khasi*, later to be renamed as *Ka Duitara Ksiar*. Warjri says that the greatest difficulty Tham had to overcome was the “the complete lack of inspiration and encouragement from the Khasi people.”¹¹⁰ This indifference, he says, was such that Tham had to hawk his books “from door to door like a common salesman.” (P 59) Of this indifference and ignorance Bhuyan had also spoken in these words: “U Soso Tham has been born an age too early. His countrymen have not as yet been trained to appreciate the inner beauty of his poetry nay

of any poetry. In such an atmosphere even the most poetically-minded genius will languish for want of inspiration and stimulus for self-expression.”¹¹¹

It is against this criminal indifference of his contemporaries to his works that the poet is protesting. He compares himself, the poet, to a *u tiaw-dohmaw*. As the rare flower, the poet too is a rare creature with special talents and gifts. But like the flower— which strongly recalls Gray’s “Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,”— (55) he too blossoms “unseen” largely because of his people’s philistinism. The poet is like the fern. It is never noticed as long as it lives for its blasé green is not something remarkable. The poet too is no different from the rest of mankind while alive. It is only after his death that, like the fern, he begins spreading his fragrance, and the people begin to perceive his real worth. But as long as he is alive, even though he may be the star “That first speckles the sky,” he is never given the credit due to him as a special human being doing something special for his people. That is why, in sheer frustration, he turns away from the ugly present to anticipate his own death, saying:

Jar-jar ha jingtep ai un thiah,—

Hapoh u phlang jyrngam. (9-12)

(Quietly in the grave let him rest, —

Beneath the green, green grass.)

As a self-elegy the poem shares similarities with others in the genre. Discussing self-elegies as a genre, Ramazani observes,

For all their differences, the elegy and the self-elegy cannot be neatly compartmentalized... the anticipation of death is a central concern, [also to be found among canonical poets who] had often mourned themselves in elegies while

at the same time mourning others: Milton, for example, had turned in "Lycidas" to glance at his own fated shroud, and in Adonais, Shelley had ecstatically foreseen his own demise. (P 119)

Again, discussing Wallace Stevens, whose self-elegies he considers to be among the best in the English language, he says:

The genre of the self-standing meditation on the author's mortality extends from Horace to Raleigh to Keats and Dickinson, and flourishes in the modern ars moriendi poetry of Yeats, Hughes, Auden, Berryman, Lowell, Plath, Smith, and Larkin. (P 119)

The difference may only be found in the authors' treatment of death, and their attitude towards their own works. Wallace Stevens, for instance, follows the footsteps of Shelley's *Adonais* in trying to see death as a return to origins, rather than an abrupt ending. As Ramazani states, to him death is not merely "Omega but Alpha." Yeats on the other hand tries to deny death through the redemptive power of poetry. As a self-elegist, Tham neither tries to deny death nor thinks of it in terms of a return to origins. His death is final, an "Omega."

As for the poets' attitude towards their works, Yeats talks about his own poetry in glowing terms. As Ramazani reveals, Yeats believes "that his work is probably even better than that of his ancestors and orders future generations to preserve his creed." (P 125) Stevens, in a more subdued manner "makes very much the same claims." (125) But Tham like Gray and Yi Kyu-Bo never approximate the tone of such exhortations. Of his own work Yi says:

I have always feared withering sooner than grass and trees,

But I find the volumes of my poor poems worse than nothing.

Who will know a thousand years from now,

*That a man named Yi was born in a corner of Korea?*¹¹²

Yi is here so concerned with the poor quality of his poems that he is absolutely dejected about the possibility of people remembering his name and his work after his death. But Gray and Tham are not even concerned with such longing for remembrance. In fact, they do not want to be disturbed from their quiet rest in the grave. Gray orders:

No further seek his merits to disclose,

Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,

(There they alike in trembling hope repose,)

The bosom of his Father and his God. (125-8)

Tham in much the same way demands:

Quietly he lives quietly he dies,

Amidst the wilderness;

Quietly in the grave let him rest, —

Beneath the green, green grass. (13-16)

Both the poets are so resentful of the present and its insensitivity to their works that they issue stern injunctions from the grave. If the poets are not to be acknowledged in life there is no reason for them to be bothered after death either by those who seek to praise them or by those who wish to censure them.

As a sample of *hiraeth* writing, Tham's self-elegy therefore is born of a longing for recognition in life, and of resentment against the non-existence of that recognition. As

a natural result of this, Tham experiences a *hiraeth* for the tranquillity of obscure existence in afterlife. As he had lived in peace so should he die in peace.

In one's discussion of Tham's elegies as a literature of *hiraeth*, it must also be mentioned that most of the other lyrics in *Ka Duitara Ksiar* are strongly elegiac with the melancholy reflection on the meaning of existence ("*Ka Duitara Ksiar*"), a vanished way of life ("*Ki Sngi U Hynñiew Trep*"), the anticipation of death ("*Ka Dak ha u Maw*") and lost love and childhood ("*U Tiew Pathaw*" and "*Ki Sngi ba la Leit*") forming a strong undercurrent. Hiraeth, in these poems, manifests itself in its many forms and varieties. ✓ But these forms and varieties, the manifestations of *hiraeth*, are topics to be dealt with in the third chapter.

ENDNOTES

¹ Their comments have been detailed in Chapter I.

² Wilfred L. Guerin et al, A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature. See endnote 6. Chapter I. 307.

³ E. D. Hirsch, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 75.

⁴ The definitions are based on the following:

- i. Chris Baldick, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 66-7.

- ii. M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 7th Edition (New Delhi: Harcourt India Private Limited, 1999) 72-3.
- iii. Peter M. Sacks, The English Elegy Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 1-37.
- iv. Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) ix-xv, 1-31.
- v. Matthew Arnold, Matthew Arnold Selected Poems, ed. S. P. Sen Gupta (Bombay: Orient Longman Limited, 1979) 1-6.

⁵ See 4 (v) above. "Note on the Elegy as a Genre," 7.

⁶ Margaret Alexiou, The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 104.

⁷ Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 247-8.

⁸ From Ovid's Metamorphoses as appeared in Sacks's, 4.

⁹ Wallace Stevens, "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1971) 434.

¹⁰ See "Astrophel" an Arcadian elegy on Sir Philip Sydney's death, 1596 as it appeared in A History of English Literature, Arthur Compton-Rickett (New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, 1985) 121.

¹¹ John Milton, "Lycidas," The Poetical Works of John Milton ed. L. Valentine (London: The "Albion" Edition, 1896) 101.

¹² See 4 (iii) above. 5.

¹³ See 8 above. 4.

¹⁴ Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1950) 34.

¹⁵ As quoted by Sacks, 21.

¹⁶ The quotation is from Jahan Ramazani's Poetry of Mourning The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney, which is considered to be the most authoritative book on the modern elegy. See 4 (iv) above. 263-4.

¹⁷ See 11 above. 98.

¹⁸ As quoted by Sacks, 31.

¹⁹ Homer, Iliad trans., Alexander Pope, in The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt, Vol. 7 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 334.

²⁰ See 6 above. 21.

²¹ W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957, 2nd ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1969) 141.

²² See 3 above. 75.

²³ Eudo C. Mason, "The Duinese Elegies," Rilke (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963) 70-76.

²⁴ See 2 above. 22.

²⁵ The paraphrasing is based on textual analysis and commentaries in the following:

- i. Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies, trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957) 9-21, 101-60.
- ii. ---. Selected Letters of R. M. Rilke, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Macmillan, 1946) 1-384.

- iii. Eudo C. Mason, "The Duinese Elegies," Rilke (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963) 70-90.

²⁶ A church in Venice with a tablet containing this inscription in Latin: "While life lasted I lived for others; now, after death, I have not perished, but in cold marble live for myself. I was Herman Wilhelm. Flanders mourns for me, Adria sighs for me, poverty call for me."

²⁷ "*Briefe aus Muzot*," extract from Rilke's letter of November 13th, 1925, to his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz on the meaning of the elegies. As reproduced by Leishman and Spender, 111. See also 25 (ii) above. 334-8.

²⁸ From the poem "Death," in Rilke's Later Poems as quoted by Leishman and Spender, 128.

²⁹ E. L. Stahl, "The *Duineser Elegien*," Rainer Maria Rilke: Aspects of His Mind and Poetry (Hamburg: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1938) 149.

³⁰ See 25 (i) above. 132.

³¹ See 25 (ii) 338.

³² See 25 (i) above. 132.

³³ "*Briefe an eine junge Frau 1920*," extract from a letter to a young wife. See 25 (ii) above. 21-2.

³⁴ See 25 (ii) above. 334 & 337-8.

³⁵ As reproduced by Leishman and Spender, 16.

³⁶ See Gupta, 4 (v) above. 3.

³⁷ All biographical information is based on the following:

- i. Matthew Arnold, Matthew Arnold Selected Poems, ed. S. P. Sen Gupta. Details as 4 (v) above. 1-8.
- ii. ---. Matthew Arnold Selected Poems and Prose, ed. F. W. Watt (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1964) 1-29.
- iii. M. H. Abrams, ed., The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987) 2110-15.

³⁸ As quoted by Gupta, 40.

³⁹ *ibid.* 42.

⁴⁰ Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) 52.

⁴¹ Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach." Details as 37 (ii) above. 156.

⁴² Matthew Arnold, "Memorial Verses." Details as 37 (iii) above. 2124.

⁴³ Leon Gottfried, Matthew Arnold and the Romantics (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1963) N. pag.

⁴⁴ Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Poet. Dante; Shakespeare," English Critical Essays Nineteenth Century, ed. Edmund D. Jones ([London]: Oxford Paperbacks, n. d.) 216-54.

⁴⁵ John Keats, "Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27(?) December 1817," Letters of John Keats, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 41-3.

⁴⁶ Joseph T. Shipley, A Dictionary of Literary Terms (n. d.) 233.

⁴⁷ Matthew Arnold, "The Scholar-Gipsy." Details as 37 (ii) above. 132.

⁴⁸ A. E. Dyson, "The Scholar-Gipsy," Critics on Matthew Arnold, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham, (New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, 1989) 52-60.

⁴⁹ *ibid.* 57.

- ⁵⁰ John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats Poetical Works, ed. H. W. Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 207.
- ⁵¹ See 48 above. 57.
- ⁵² Matthew Arnold, "Switzerland: To Marguerite — Continued," The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language, ed. Francis Turner Palgrave (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1964) 364.
- ⁵³ The description of the Victorian Age is based almost exclusively on Watt's account. Details as 37 (ii) above. 4-18.
- ⁵⁴ Alfred Tennyson, Tennyson's Poetry, ed. Deryn Chatwin and H. M. Burton (Suffolk: Methuen Paperbacks, 1978) 6-8.
- ⁵⁵ See 4 (v) above. 48.
- ⁵⁶ See 37 (iii) above. 2113.
- ⁵⁷ *ibid.* 2113-4.
- ⁵⁸ Wilson Knight, "The Scholar-Gipsy: An Interpretation," Review of English Studies, Vol. 6 (n. p., 1955) 53-62.
- ⁵⁹ See 48 above. 59.
- ⁶⁰ Graham Hough, "Gray," The Romantic Poets (N. p.: Hutchinson University Library, n. d.) 9-24.
- ⁶¹ Sacks, "Jonson, Dryden, and Gray." Details as 4 (iii) above. 133.
- ⁶² David Daiches, "Poetry from Thomson to Crabbe," A Critical History of English Literature, 2nd ed., 4 Vols. (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Limited, 1999) 678.
- ⁶³ As revealed by Daiches in 62 above. 678.

⁶⁴ Roger Lonsdale, ed., The Poems of Thomas Gray William Collins Oliver Goldsmith (London: Longmans, 1969) 114.

⁶⁵ Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," English Verse Volume III Dryden to Wordsworth, ed. W. Peacock (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) 256-61.

⁶⁶ As quoted by Hough. See 60 above. 13.

⁶⁷ From the epitaph of John Keats. According to an entry in www.kirjasto.sci.fi/jkeats.htm, Keats did not invent his own epitaph, but remembered words from the play Philaster, or Love Lies-Ableeding, written by Beaumont and Fletcher in 1611. Keats told his friend Joseph Severn that he wanted on his grave just the line quoted.

⁶⁸ Tetrameter stanzas were also used by Tennyson in his *In Memoriam*.

⁶⁹ Sacks, "Tennyson: In Memoriam." Details as 4 (iii) above. 169.

⁷⁰ Lord Alfred Tennyson, "In Memoriam." Details as 37 (iii) above. 1967-2011.

⁷¹ The discussion is based on textual analysis and the commentaries of the following:

- i. H. W. Sten, Na ka Hyndai sha ka Lawei (Shillong: Ropecta, 1980) 1-109.
- ii. Hughlet Warjri, U Soso Tham bad ki Jingtrei jong u. See endnote 29, Chapter I. 56-95.
- iii. S. S. Majaw, Ki Syrwet Jingshai 2nd ed. (Shillong: S. S. Majaw, 1985) 34-64.
- iv. B. Chedrack Jyrwa, Soso Tham Birth Centenary Celebrations Souvenir, 1873-1973. See endnote 27, Chapter I. 65-75.

⁷² R. Tokin Rymbai, "The Evolution of the *Hynñiewtrep* Polity," Khanasamari— u Khun u Hajar ka Ri Hynñiewtrep, ed. Sumar Sing Sawian (Shillong: Apphira Publications, 1998) N. pag.

⁷³ Literally, a man-eating serpent in Khasi myths. More about the creature will be discussed in subsequent sections. For a detailed information of the myth see:

- i. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "The Man-eating Serpent, *U Thlen*," New Frontiers 2.1 (2000): 142-148.
- ii. H. Elias, *Ki Khanatang u Barim* (Shillong: Don Bosco Publications, 1988) 87-95.

⁷⁴ Although all references to myths will be better dealt with in subsequent sections and chapters, for a detailed information of this particular myth see the following:

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "Khasi Myths and Folktales: The Lost Manuscript," Indian Literature 201 (Jan-Feb 2001): 166-8.

⁷⁵ For more on the myth see Nongkynrih, "Khasi Myths and Folktales: The Death of Lapalang, the Stag." Details as 74 above. 153-6.

⁷⁶ Ramazani, "Thomas Hardy." Details as 4 (vi) above. 63.

⁷⁷ John Milton, "Paradise Lost." Details as 11 above. 104.

⁷⁸ Arnold's and Gray's elegies, being much shorter, do not have a separate prologue, although Arnold does begin "The Scholar-Gipsy" by making use of the elegiac mythology.

⁷⁹ See 76 above. 43.

⁸⁰ From Tennyson's "The Princess," The Golden Treasury ... Details as 52 above. 332.

⁸¹ Stone structures for funeral pyres.

⁸² Nongkynrih, "Khasi Myths and Folktales: The Seven Clans." Details as 74 Above. 157-60.

⁸³ See endnote 71 (i) above. 2

- ⁸⁴ Tony Conran, ed. and trans. Welsh Verse. See endnote 5, Chapter I. 79.
- ⁸⁵ Henry Vaughan, "The Retreat," Six Ages of English Poetry, ed. H. M. Williams (Bombay: Blackie & Son (India) Ltd., 1969) 70-1.
- ⁸⁶ William Wordsworth, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," The Golden Treasury... Details as 52 above. 308.
- ⁸⁷ Rabon Singh, Ka Kitab Jingphawar, 16th ed. (Shillong: Mrs. F.B. Lyngdoh, 1987) 46-47.
- ⁸⁸ John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Details as 50 above. 208.
- ⁸⁹ Rev. E. Bars, Khasi-English Dictionary (Shillong: Don Bosco, 1970) 752. The explanations that follow are partly based on this.
- ⁹⁰ C. G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) 217.
- ⁹¹ As translated and retold by Nongkynrih. See 73 above. 142
- ⁹² As an archetypal symbol, the old woman, in Khasi folklore is often associated with sorcery, although she may also represent the archetypal Good Mother.
- ⁹³ As revealed by the poet in his preface. xv.
- ⁹⁴ William Wordsworth, "London 1802," NEHU Anthology of English Verse, compiled, North-Eastern Hill University Publications (Shillong: North-Eastern Hill University Publications, 2003) 8.
- ⁹⁵ Joseph Conrad, Heart Of Darkness (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1996) 84.
- ⁹⁶ William Golding, Lord of the Flies (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1988) 70.
- ⁹⁷ Robert Browning, "Pippa's Song," Language through Literature I (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1993) 78.

- ⁹⁸ Sumar Sing Sawian, *Ki Khun ki Hajar na Jingkieng Ksiar* (Shillong: Future Creations, 2004) 31.
- ⁹⁹ Sacks, "Tennyson: *In Memoriam*." Details as 4 (iii) above. 177.
- ¹⁰⁰ See 70 above. 1978-9.
- ¹⁰¹ Ramazani, "Thomas Hardy." Details as 4 (vi) above. 63
- ¹⁰² See 71 (ii) above. P 76.
- ¹⁰³ Thomas Hardy, "God's Funeral," from "Satires of Circumstance," *The Works of Thomas Hardy*, compiled, Wordsworth Editions Limited (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994) 307-9.
- ¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* Section 15th, 309.
- ¹⁰⁵ See 4 (iii) above. 68.
- ¹⁰⁶ Dora Polk, *A Book Called Hiraeth*. See endnote 1, Chapter I. 61.
- ¹⁰⁷ See 80 above. 333.
- ¹⁰⁸ H. W. Sten, *Ki Sur na ka Duitara Ksiar* (Shillong: Ropeca, 1979) 42.
- ¹⁰⁹ R. S. Lyngdoh, "A Review on *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*," *Soso Tham Birth Centenary Souvenir*. See endnote 27, Chapter I. 66
- ¹¹⁰ See 71 (ii) above. 59.
- ¹¹¹ S. K. Bhuyan, "Introduction," *Ki Sngi ba Rim u Hynñiew Trep*, Soso Tham (Shillong: Primrose Gatphoh, 1976) viii.
- ¹¹² Yi Kyu-Bo, "To My Son who is Editing My Poems," *Penguin Book of Korean Poetry* See endnote 36, Chapter I. 56.

CHAPTER III

The Manifestations of *Hiraeth* in the Poetry of Soso Tham

The second chapter attempted an analysis of the influence of *hiraeth* on the poetry of Soso Tham and with the help of genre criticism tried to establish his major work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, as an unconventional elegy. In the same manner it tried to identify five of his short poems from his first collection, *Ka Duitara Ksiar*, as elegies, and discussed the generic merits of at least two of them, while also taking stock that the elegiac note forms a strong undercurrent in many of the other poems in the collection. After having considered how *hiraeth* has shaped and moulded the poetry of Tham, this chapter will turn to the real subjects of praise, mourning, and yearning: the three major aspects that inform all literature of *hiraeth*. In other words, it will explore the theme of *hiraeth* as it manifests itself not only in Tham's major work but in the related short poems as well. This exploration will be carried out under the following sub-chapters:

1. *Hiraeth* for Indigenous Culture and Values
2. *Hiraeth* for Persons
3. *Hiraeth* for Place and Childhood
4. *Hiraeth* and Nature

As may be seen the sub-chapters exclude Tham's *hiraeth* for his native tongue and literature. This is because the theme has been treated in the first chapter where one's effort was to illustrate how *hiraeth* had been not only the inspiring force behind Tham's poetry but also the source of sustenance throughout his entire career as a poet.

1. *Hiraeth* for Indigenous Culture and Values

Tracing the origins of *hiraeth* as a literary concept, and explaining why the elegiac note is so prevalent in early Welsh literature, Meic Stephens¹ writes:

It has been argued that the military and political defeats of the Welsh may explain why their literature looks back to past glories and forward to the return of national heroes, as in the legend associated with Arthur.

On the same topic Tony Conran² demonstrates how this looking back to past glories and forward to the return of national heroes and the heroic age adds a new dimension to the concept of *hiraeth*—didacticism. According to Conran:

Methodism had swept through eighteenth century Wales like wildfire, destroying in its wake all that was considered pagan and cultural. The Methodists, in their passionate faith in the salvation from Christ, brought “dancing, harp-playing, public houses, even long hair” under their indictment “as dangerously profane and irrelevant pleasures. Minstrels and strolling players, last heirs of the tradition, were particularly attacked.” In the process, the Welsh lost much of their cultural heritage as a Celtic nation. (Chapter I, P 13)

But then Conran reveals, the old Celtic civilisation fought back “in the work of the antiquaries and scholars,” (P 73) who, out of the desire to rehabilitate the past as high culture or at least as interesting primitive lore, turned to

legendary heroes and Celtic mythology to provide moorings for Welsh social and cultural life during the violent cultural changes brought about by new industries, the rapidly increasing Anglicisation and evangelisation. (Chapter I, P 14)

The observations of Stephens and Conran would also serve as a good description of Tham's time and how the conditions of that time had generated a *hiraeth* in the poet for the culture and values of his people as they were practised in their unadulterated purity during the bygone era of his forefathers.

Tham's age (1873-1940) was not very different from the "bungling, rapidly changing contemporary scene" of Arnold's ³ or the Wales that Stephens and Conran talk about. The military and political defeats of the Welsh at the hands of the English, for instance, finds a parallel in the Khasis, who were defeated by the English in 1829 and whose dominions had been completely assimilated into the British Empire by 1839. ⁴ These defeats were followed by the arrival of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionaries in 1841. ⁵ After this there had followed, as in Wales of the eighteenth century, a period of fierce cultural changes brought about by the same rapidly increasing Anglicisation and evangelisation, and the influx of non-Khasis. ⁶

Narrating the life story of Tham, Warjri also recounts how Tham had lived during that period of fierce cultural changes. As recorded in the first chapter, Tham was born in Sohra or Cherrapunjee, an important place for the purpose of this discussion because it had been the first headquarters of the British Empire in the Khasi Hills. The coming of the white man into the hills was in itself an undreamed of novelty. The white man had then brought with him two other new things, the hitherto unknown religion of Christianity and school education, both of which had first taken root in Sohra.

According to Warjri, Tham was born in a family newly converted to Christianity, and was among the few children who were able to take advantage of this new education. But this education, though started by the Welsh missionaries, was based on the general

pattern outlined by Thomas Babington Macaulay for the whole of imperial India in 1835, whose purpose was

the creation of a class of educated natives who would contribute to the establishment of 'the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws' which would outlive the political empire.

This was the assertion of Macaulay himself as quoted by the Sahitya Akademi award winning critic, Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her article, "The Exile of the Mind." ⁷ Talking of this particular kind of exile "without any physical dislocation," Mukherjee blames Macaulay's system of education and goes on to say that

Macaulay had explicitly stated, "We must at present do our best to form a class ... of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, moral and intellect. (P 11)

Unfortunately Macaulay's plan for India fitted only too well in the Khasi Hills since there was no written indigenous literature to pose any challenge. As illustrated in the first chapter, even the teaching of the vernacular Khasi was based mostly on translations of English, Welsh, and Biblical texts. On the topic, R. T. Rymbai ⁸ observes:

Till then [1841-1896, that is, before "the great cultural revival" brought about by the erudite Khasi scholars written about in the first chapter] the books by the missionaries were about the great men of the West, their thoughts and deeds; or translations from the Bible and other books on Christian religion, or some works in praise of the West. The education given to the Khasi-Pnars was a very rudimentary one, to fit them to become village school teachers or village pastors for the spread of Christianity and the glorification of the West. (P 67)

This kind of education, based on these types of books naturally mass-produced hundreds of exiles of the mind, a class of intellectuals and neo-literates, who were increasingly becoming, in the words of Mukherjee, “outsiders in their community either through loss of the mother tongue or through a system of education that superimposes an alien grid of perception on immediate reality.” (P 11) Tham himself understood this growing alienation perfectly and he deplors it, as shown in the first chapter, in these words:

*But the Khasi today refuses to read unless compelled to do so at school or the church. And the young people do not read a Khasi book, however good it may be, unless it is a Text Book. Is there a blindness more opaque than this?*⁹

Another cause for “the rapidly changing contemporary scene” of Tham’s time was the new religion. As in Wales, in the Khasi Hills too, Methodism had swept like wildfire. Warjri describes how the new religion had quickly spread and how Sohra had become “the capital of the Christian world.” (P 7) He reports:

Sahep [Sahib] Alexander B. Lish had first started evangelising at Sohra in 1832. Although he could not continue with his work, Sahep Thomas Jones of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission took up from where he had left off in the summer of 1841 and since that time, preserved the foundation stones of Christianity till it rapidly spread to every corner of our land as it is now. Sohra was, therefore, the origin of Christianity in these hills. (P 7)

While Warjri speaks of the spread of Christianity in more or less objective terms, Nigel Jenkins, author of *Gwalia in Khasia*, with the benefit of knowing the history and culture of both Welsh and Khasi, tries to bring out both the boon and the bane of the Welsh mission thereby saying that Methodism is also another cause for turning the poet’s

contemporaries into “outsiders in their own community.” Writing in *The New Welsh Review* ¹⁰ he says:

Outside civilisation would have bulldozed into the self-contained world of the Khasis with or without the Welsh. Most Khasis seem relieved if not thankful, however, that it was the Welsh rather than ... the English that played that decisive role in the modernisation of their society. Christians and non-Christians alike may be justifiably critical of certain consequences of bossy Methodistical paternalism, but most seem to acknowledge that the distinct historical experience of the Welsh equipped them with an unusually sympathetic understanding of Khasi aspirations. (P 64)

In *Gwalia in Khasia* he adds:

No one can deny that as the Welsh, in their kindness, built, they also destroyed. Even Christians acknowledge the harm that was done to the Khasi way of life by boxing converts in mission compounds and attacking every manifestation of tribal culture— from musical instruments and rice beer to traditional sports and personal names. What perhaps the Khasis do not realise is that the Welsh, in the name of Reformed Christianity, had recently subjected their own civilisation to almost identical prohibitions...What survived the cultural attrition was, in both cases, the one tool that was vital to the negotiation of a future: the native tongue. (P 335-6)

In these words Jenkins not only confirms the statement of Conran on Methodism but also points to the remarkable resemblance between the cultural history of the Welsh and that of the Khasis. As Conran’s “antiquaries and scholars, men who first collected and then

tried to understand the great legacy of the past,” had done in Wales, so had they done, the “three erudite Khasi scholars, Rabon Singh Kharsuka, Jeebon Roy Mairom and Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang.”¹¹ Making use of the native tongue these had written the first secular Khasi books, as Rymbai says in his article, “not only to remind the Khasis of their great past, to acquaint them with their own history, but to familiarise them with their own noble traditions as well.” (P 68) The historians of Khasi literature as demonstrated in Chapter I had recorded that it was in fact, the proud Khasi stance adopted by such authors that had encouraged Christian writers like Tham to be more celebratory of their own culture. But before the discussion moves to Tham’s *hiraeth* for the past and indigenous culture, yet another aspect in the poet’s contemporary situation, that of the influx of non-Khasis, needs to be considered.

As could be expected, the British did not come alone but brought soldiers, officials, servants, and followers drawn from every part of mainland India. And all of them brought with them their own customs and practices, which must have been perplexing to the Khasis, who until that time had lived a more or less secluded life. In the same article, Rymbai reveals that “Till the occupation of their homeland by the British... the Khasis had been living exclusively by themselves in their hills...” (P 56) After some explanation, he concludes:

Thus, we may say that Khasi society remained in its pristine nature till the coming of the British to colonise their hills bringing in too the people of the plains who, since then not only maintained their own identity but spread their own influence withal. (P 58)

As further evidence of the bustling changes that the Khasis had to contend with during Tham's time, Warjri writes of the development of Shillong as follows:

Since that time [when Shillong became the British capital of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills] slowly and slowly the offices increased in number, new schools emerged, the volume of trade and commerce amplified and the people too multiplied in this new capital. People from all over India came swarming into this refreshing hill station and many of them were getting land to live, trade and work as tenders of buffaloes and cattle. Shillong that was only a village in 1864— the year when it was made the capital of the District— slowly and steadily became one of the biggest and most populated towns in the north-eastern part of India (P 76)

This led to Reverend John Roberts, one of the foremost Welsh missionaries and the acknowledged father of Khasi literature, to jubilate in his poem:

*La wan u Phareng, la kiew u Dkhar
Ka suk ka Ri Khasi, ka la shai ruh kdar.*¹²

(The White Man has come, the Plainsmen have come
Peaceful is Khasi Land, and fully enlightened too.)

But the fact was that in this melting pot of cultures, the Khasis began to lose their way. While many became Christians, others became converts to Hinduism and Islam, and everyone increasingly began to adopt western lifestyles and values. It is this waywardness that had led S. K. Bhuyan to make some damning observations about Tham's contemporaries. Writing the "Introduction" to Tham's *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, Bhuyan remarks:

Of all the preliterate tribes of Assam the Khasis are believed to have most rapidly adapted themselves to western methods of life and manners. This has been made possible chiefly by the establishment of the headquarters of the Province in their midst, which has brought in a large concourse of cosmopolitan population. But the two factors which distinguish all advanced societies, love of literature and love of the past, are not to be generally found among the educated section of the Khasi community. They have been allured by the charms of the culture with which they have come into contact, and never perceive that there is good in their own. They have desisted from building a new structure over the old, nor have they made any organised attempt to lay the foundation of their cultural progress which will serve as a link between the past and the present. Instances of modification and readjustment are rare; annihilation or supplantation is the order in Khasi enlightened society. (P i)

And it is this painful reality that had led Rymbai to condemn the lines of Reverend Roberts:

The peace, which the good reverend praised, is that of the grave, the fading away of the warlike spirit of the Khasi-Pnars; the civilization is the poor imitation of the West at the cost of their own. (P 58)

Added to all this was the confusion of the struggle for independence that was taking place all over India towards the last 15 years of Tham's life. But in the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills, the goal of independence was not at all clear. If the British were to leave, would they, the *Hynñiew Trep* people, become an independent nation, governed by their own *syiems*, the traditional rulers, and according to their age-old system of democracy?

Or would they be forced to become a part of mainland India, thereby risk losing not only their independence but also their very identity? These were questions without any answer at the time when Tham was alive, and they added to the angst of the age.

These were then the chaotic conditions that deeply disturbed Tham, a man whose patriotism is equated today with the great Khasi warriors like U Tirot Sing and U Kiang Nangbah.¹³ If these conditions and the erosion of Khasi culture and values had affected writers before and after him, then the poet was even more disturbed by them for he was not merely troubled by the loss of traditions alone but by the very threat to the survival of the race posed by the ceaseless influx of humanity from outside. That the poet was profoundly distressed by the contemporary scene is borne out by many utterances in the preface to his major work, many of which have been quoted in the second chapter. For instance he laments:

*ia kaba mynta kynrei ki nongwei shisngi kiba thap mrong ban shu ioh-ei lada ngi
tamlah ban ai ri muid bad ban die la ki khyndew ha ki. (P xv)*

(as it were now outsiders abound who are bidding their chances to capture the land the moment we make a mistake and sell them plots to raise buffaloes and cattle.)

And elsewhere he declares:

*Nga iohi ruh ia la ka ri ha tmier ka riat ba shyrkhei. Sa tang katno, ia ngi kiba
tang shitroh, lada ngim kyndit briew kan sa tyllep ka umsaw, bad ngin sa long
nong-Gebion ban thoh dieng bad tong um ianore! (P xvii)*

(I also see my country on the edge of a terrible precipice. After a while, we who are only a handful, if we do not wake up, the flash flood will overwhelm us and

we will be like the people of Gebion to cut wood and carry water for some unknown masters.)

The truth is that Tham, though a Christian by birth, was not so bedazzled by other cultures that he would be indifferent and scornful of his own. Therefore like the Welsh poets who had witnessed the political and military defeats of their nation at the hands of the English; and like others who had witnessed the loss of much of their cultural heritage as a Celtic nation at the hands of Methodism; Tham also turns to past glories and forward to the return of national heroes and the heroic age. Taking a cue from the “three erudite scholars” (Kharsuka, Jeebon Roy, and Kharwanlang), he attempts in his *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* to rehabilitate the past of his forefathers as high culture, for in their ways he recognises a merit unmatched by the new ethos that was flowing in. In fact, he sees them as the only means of preventing his people from losing their way completely in the chaos of his times.

The initial discussion of the sub-chapter has been on the changing circumstances of Tham’s era because any discourse on *hiraeth* always involves three things: praise, mourning and yearning, or what Polk calls “the love-loss-longing syndrome.”¹⁴ As has been demonstrated, the Khasis had lived a more or less secluded life, interacting, as could be imagined, only with peoples who were their immediate neighbours. Prior to the British incursion their culture was unique and unmixed. But all that was lost with the British conquest and its concomitant flux. And much of it, or most of it that was lost, was not only praised and loved but also looked upon by a patriotic sufferer of *hiraeth* like Tham, as the Greeks would look at the semi-divine figure of the vegetation deity, as something with redemptive powers. This is a matter for profound mourning and therefore, desperate

longing. And so the poet begins his most significant work with the now familiar lines: “Enlightenment we seek around the world; / That of the Land’s we know but nought.” (1-2) ¹⁵ This is a statement of deep regret and yearning. The ignorance of the present about the past and what it has to offer is lamentable. This ignorance can be remedied only by going to the past, to learn, to revive and to implement what has been learnt, as the guiding principles of the present as it marches towards the future. This is what Tham means when he says,

Ban kyrsiew pat napoh ki Kpep

Ki Sngi ba rim U Hynñiew Trep. (Section II, 17-8)

(To kindle from within cremation *Kpeps*

The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep.*)

But what do these “Olden Days” hidden within the cremation stone structures consist of? What is this enlightenment that the poet pines for?

In her book, Dora Polk states, “*Hiraeth* is not confined to personal losses of beloved places, people and things... [one] can feel the love-loss-longing syndrome for the ancestors and heroes of the race, and even beyond that, for symbolic, mythic and legendary matter embedded in the culture.” (P 83) Tham’s “Olden Days” consist of exactly all this, and the enlightenment that he seeks first of all lies in the “mythic and legendary matter” of his people’s culture because after all, this constitutes their literature where everything else is recorded. Speaking of American Indian literature, Alan R. Velie ¹⁶ observes that because Indians did not have a written literature, many whites have surmised that they did not have a literature, but, he adds,

that would mean that the Greeks of The Iliad and The Odyssey didn't have one either. Far from the stereotype of the mute and stoic Indian, Indians have always been highly verbal people who created the first American literature.

Like the American Indians, the Khasis have their literature in their myths and stories and like them they do not separate literature from everyday life as a special category to be enjoyed only by “a leisured, educated elite” (Velie’s phrase). What Velie says of the American Indians is very true of the Khasis:

All members of the tribe listen to the songs and chants, and there is no distinction between “high” and “low” culture. The tribe’s myths and stories are designed to educate the young about tribal beliefs, cure illnesses, ensure victory in battle, or secure the fertility of the fields. It is practical. (P 7)

Wilfred L. Guerin et al also speak about how in predominantly oral cultures, “storytelling passes on religious beliefs, moral values, political codes, ethics and practical lessons of everyday life.”¹⁷ Tham is also talking about this literature, and experiencing a *hiraeth* for it when he says in the prologue:

Hapoh ka Kpoh ki thep ka kot;

Nangta ki kha ki Puriskam,

Nangta ki mih ki Purinam. (Section I, 16-8)

(In the Belly they stuffed their book;

Then they bred their Fairytales,

Then out they came the Parables.)

There is a very important reason why Tham speaks of the oral literature of his people so early in the poem. Of the American Indians, Guerin et al say, “stories [for

them] are a source of strength in the face of centuries of silencing by European Americans.” (P 263) Tham also recognises the Khasi stories as his people’s greatest source of strength and they represent their greatest stabilising force in the face of the bludgeoning changes simultaneously pulling them in different directions. But yet another more important reason is in Tham’s reference, in the quoted lines, to the myth of “*The Lost Manuscript*,” a myth that tells the story of how the Khasis had lost their scripts and the God-given spiritual teachings. According to the myth an emissary of the people,

along with a representative of the people living in the plains below Ri Khasi, popularly known as U Dkhar had been sent to the summit of a tall mountain where they met God and were given instructions for eight days and nights continuously about various rites and rituals, and especially about the ways of true and clean living. God also had the teachings, along with the alphabet of the scripts, recorded in a set of two documents and gave them to the two representatives so that they could better propound His laws to their people.

But on their way home, at the foot of the mountain, they encountered a critical problem in the form of a large river they had to cross, which at that time, was in floods. How could they make it to the other bank safely? And more important, how could they make it with their treasures unspoilt? They knew well enough that water would immediately destroy the delicate substance on which the teachings were written. But at the same time, their exultant mood and the desire to be home to a hero’s welcome as soon as possible, made them consider the idea of spending sometime in the place, till the floods had subsided, an unpleasant one.

They therefore decided to risk crossing the river there and then, trying to protect their precious cargo as best they could.

The Dkhar, who sported a long turf of hair on his pate according to his custom, attached his document securely to it and swam safely across without so much as a ripple of water touching it. Safely on the other side, he hastened to his people on the plains without another thought for the Khasi.

The Khasi, who had no such turf, however, took his document between his teeth and began to swim. But being a hill man not accustomed to swimming in large rivers, he soon found himself floundering in the middle of the river, with his head bobbing in and out of the water. In trying to save himself and gulping air through his mouth, he accidentally swallowed his document, which was then reduced to a pulp.¹⁸

This was how the Khasis had “stuffed their book” in the belly and this was how their great storytelling tradition started. According to the myth, the errant ambassador had made up for his mistake by recounting everything that had been taught to him to the great *Dorbar* convened for the purpose. Recounting the teachings, the man had started from the beginning, that is, with the creation myths or *ki khanatang* (sanctified stories), *ki puriskam* (fairytales), *ki purinam* (fables, parables) and on to *ki khana pateng* (the legends).

As a mythopoeic poet, Tham also follows the example of the mythic emissary in the poem by beginning with the creation myths. But unlike him, the poet limits himself to the stories dealing with traditional values and the concept of good and evil. This is one of the major themes in the poem and constitutes the spiritual movement of the elegy as has

been shown in Chapter II. And since Chapter II has also attempted a section-by-section analysis of the theme, the present chapter will discuss it in a more summational manner and will try to demonstrate that the poet's *hiraeth* is indeed for indigenous culture and values and not for values based on the Christian faith, as some critics have argued. A reference to these critics will be made later in the discussion.

It has been seen in the second chapter how through stories steeped in "*Pharshi*," or symbolism the stories speak of the emergence of demons in the form of "*u Thlen*," of the advent of "*Ka Pap ka Sang*," the Age of Evil in the form of "*Diengiei*" ("Tree of Gloom"), the termination of the Golden Ladder, the means of communication between heaven and earth, at "*U Sohpet Bneng*" ("the Mount of Heaven's Navel"); and finally the emergence of "*u Syiar*" ("the Rooster") as man's redeemer, who also marked the foundation of the Khasi religion, "*ka Niam*" or "the Living Word," based on the tenet of "*Ban ap jutang U Blei na jrong*," (34) or "God, the caretaker of the covenant from above."

These are stories tracing what Sumar Sing Sawian¹⁹ calls "The Spiritual Roots" of *Ki Khun ki Hajar na Jingkieng Ksiar* (The Children from the Golden Ladder), which is another way of addressing the *Hynñiew Trep* people. The stories actually begin with the creation of the earth, its habitation by *Ki Khun U Hynñiew Trep* (The Children of the Seven Clans), and its transformation into what the poet calls, "*Ka Persyntiew*" ("The Flower Garden"). Briefly the creation myths narrate:²⁰

In the beginning there was nothing but a vast emptiness on Earth. God had created only two of his many creatures, Ramew, the goddess of earth, and Basa, her husband, who later came to be identified with the patron god of villages. The

two lived happily enough for a time, and there was only one thing that plagued their minds - the thought of children. They wanted children, ...and implored Him [their Creator] to bless them with at least a child or two so that their line could continue.

After many such entreaties, God granted them their wish and gave them five children of great powers and accomplishments, five children that the world has come to call elemental forces. The Sun was their first daughter, followed by their only son, the Moon, and three other daughters, Water, Wind and Fire. Fire was the last born, the womb-cleaning one, and it was always her duty to be at home, to cook their meals and tend to their daily needs as custom demanded.

Ramew was delighted to see her children grow up and prosper. She was particularly delighted to see how they kept themselves busy, reshaping the world into a pleasant land, giving life to tall trees and beautiful flowers everywhere. Yet amidst all that plenty and peace there seemed to be something wanting. That such loveliness should go untended and uncared for! It was not right, she felt.

Ramew turned to God again and beseeched him to bless her once more, this time with people to watch over her vast and beautiful gardens. God, who understood the yearning of Ramew and who had watched her labour hard and long to make the world a fitting place for life, promised to indulge her wishes. Accordingly he summoned the greatest council ever held in heaven to elect the future caretakers of Earth. After days of careful deliberation, God eventually declared that seven out of the sixteen clans living in heaven should descend to till the earth, to populate the wilderness, to rule and govern and be the crown of all

creations. And from then on they would be known as the Hynñiew Trep, or the Seven Clans.

God then provided for happiness on Earth, endowing its soil with riches and the fruits of plenty; and after all his work was done, he made a covenant with the Seven Clans and as a token of that covenant, He planted a divine tree on a sacred mount called Lum Sohpet Bneng, which served as the Golden Ladder between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Man. This covenant declared that so long as the Seven Clans adhered to the three principles of “Ka Tip Briew, Tip Blei, Ka Kamai ia ka Hok,” that is, so long as they led a virtuous life, as long as they lived on Earth in such a way as to earn righteousness and respected the laws of both Man and God, they would never be left alone, but could come and go as they pleased between heaven and earth, from the Golden Ladder at Lum Sohpet Bneng, literally, the Mount of Heaven’s Navel, so called because it acted as an umbilical cord between God and Man: for even as a child is joined with the mother through this “Thread of Flesh” and “Thread of Blood,” so also is Man joined with God.

Everything was well in the world then. And as long as Man remembered God and his divine decree, as long as he behaved in a manner befitting his celestial lineage, he prospered in life and never suffered real grief in any way. His life on Earth was one long tale of happiness.

This then provides the background for the description of the poet’s “*Aiom Ksiar*” or “Golden Age” in the life of his people. And in Section II the first thing that one encounters is the angst and the restless *hiraeth* for the lost world:

To Mountaintops, in Shaded Spots

When I take a solitary walk,

From everywhere within the Huts—

About the Land within the dark—

I discovered Grains of Thoughts,

That well from dreamlike Pools of Tears. (1-6)

And in the next section too, it is of this “Land within the dark” that he sings, that is, a lost and forgotten land, which was “*ka Persoh Persyntiew*” (“the Garden of Fruits and Flowers”), where,

Mihngi, Sepngi, Shathie, Shatei

Ka dei ka Ri ba shong ki blei. (Section II, 53-4)

(East, West, South, North

It was a Land where lived the gods.)

And where,

U Blei ha pdeng ka Persyntiew,

U hiar ban iaaid kai bad u briew. (Section III, 35-6)

(God among the Flower Garden,

Descended to take a stroll with man.)

But as the myths reveal, this “Golden Age” by and by came to an end because of man’s wilfulness and his rebellious desire to live not according to God’s decree but according to the laws of his own making. The myths say:

But it was not in Man to be content for long. Like everything else in this world, he is a “two-handed engine,” capable at once of great good and great evil. Soon he

began to tire of always following the dictates of God; he wanted to branch out on his own, to determine his life independently, according to his own instincts and inclinations. And that was how he first strayed away from God, indulging in all sorts of evils, framing his own laws, performing strange rites and violating the covenant... (P158)

The loss of this “*Sotti Juk*” (“Age of Innocence”) and paradisaal existence is reflected in Section IV, titled “*U Lyoh*” (“The Cloud”). While in the previous section God “descended to take a stroll with man,” and while “*Synshar ka Suk ka Saiñ kylleng*” (47, “Peace reigned everywhere”), this section sees the proliferation of evil across the land. The myth of “*U Masi*” (“The Bull”) as the symbol of the beginning of adversity and “*Diengïei*” as the symbol of evil and the powers of darkness are introduced here, as against the myth of “*u Sohpet Bneng*,” the symbol of man’s holy communion with God, in the previous section.

As narrated in the second chapter, while the Bull tricks man into a life of adversity, sickness and death, “*Ka Diengïei*,” the “Tree of Gloom,” is now enveloping the earth in darkness. As the myths reveal:

God, on his part, was greatly vexed by Man’s rebelliousness. He was sorely grieved that Man had chosen to ignore and slight the covenant, and since this was quite meaningless now, He decided to break off his ties with Man and closed forever the Golden Ladder to Heaven through Sohpet Bneng. Away from their Nine Clans in heaven, and bereft of God’s guidance and blessing, the Seven Clans remained helpless orphans on earth, amidst a new kind of darkness that bred all sorts of evil in the minds of men. Their Golden Age had ended.

As evidence of his displeasure he made an oak tree, situated on another sacred mount, grow day by day to a monstrously enormous size and height, so that its shadow expanded to eclipse whole portions of the Earth in pitch darkness. The perpetual darkness caused by the branches of Diengïei, the name then given to this "Tree of Gloom," made standing crops wilt and threatened to destroy all plant life, as well as making Man himself vulnerable, a prey to wild beasts and many other evils.

But the poet here stops talking of the myth of "*Ka Diengïei*" and how it was toppled with the help of a little wren. Instead he continues in this section and the one that follows, that is, in Section V of "*U Rngiew*" ("The Shadow") to paint the picture of hell on earth.

Though the poet talks no more of the myth of "*Ka Diengïei*," he does refer to the snapping of ties between God and man, which happened just before this "Tree of Gloom" was felled. With this snapping of ties the *Hynñiew Trep* had also been shut out from the celestial abode of their brethren, the "*Khyndai Trep*," ("the Nine Clans") and their state of affairs on earth is described by the poet as that of "*u ngap ba jah ka Kyiaw*" ("the bee without its Queen"), that is, they blindly grope their way without anyone to guide them and break out into several different directions.

This blind groping is what creates the hell on earth, presented in the form of frightening caves, parched deserts, bogs, and "*Khyndai Pateng Nïamra*" ("the Pit of Nine Storeys"). This is the place where "*Thlen*," the "Man-eating Serpent," and his mother live. This is the abyss of "*ka Pap*" ("Sin") whose purpose is "to Hatch / Wherever is the Heart of man" (Section IV, 35-6). The suggestion here is that as man wallows in "Sin," the earth itself changes from the "Flower Garden" to a place where the sun and the moon

have been eclipsed; a haunt of dwarf-like demons and countless hideous insects and animals. The transformation from good to evil is described in these words: “Upon the Throne of Innocence, / The Emperor is Chaos.” (Section IV, 41-2)

This evil in the heart of man has affected his external activities, his political, social and economic life. While at the political level, “Darkness is sovereign” and “Folly reigns,” at the economic level we see “Poverty, Hunger, Disease, Adversity, / Contagion too— all they consume.” (Section IV, 57-8) And these afflictions are not only prevalent in the age but they also spread like hereditary diseases and are passed on to the next generation as the repugnant legacy of the present. In this way the race itself like “*u Phniang*” (“the Seed”) wilts, and diminishes in strength and number.

Meanwhile man loses all sense of shame, all sense of right and wrong, and these are reflected in his face from where all vestiges of manliness dim and die and he degenerates into the likeness of fiends. His heart is now spoken of as if it were a smithy, making “Numberless fiendish thoughts” (Section IV, 73), which become his “guiding spirits,” leading him away from worshipping the one true God, “*U Blei*,” into the worship of “*ka Lei Longspah*,” (“the Goddess of Wealth”). Now greed emerges as the only living principle of man, who would go anywhere and do anything to satisfy its craving. The supremacy of greed leads to the supremacy of “*ka Thok*” (“Fraud”), the eradication of “*ka Hok*” (“Virtue”), then to the reckless destruction of the material world when “The Hills collapse, the Seas froth” (Section IV, 110), and the corruption of “Government, Justice, Advocate.” (111) This state of affairs is described as, “Virtue lives in the land of God, / The Purse of man in our world. (Section IV, 117-8)

At the end of the “Golden Age,” man is seen to have broken only the law of God. But now in this “Age of Chaos,” even his own law has been broken. He is now truly reduced from the man who took a stroll with God to a Liliput of Jonathan Swift. And the law that he now follows is the law of “*u Sbai Rupa*,” or money, which the poet identifies in this section as “*U Thlen*,” introduced in the prologue.

In the earlier section the haunt of “*Thlen*,” has been identified as the “Pit of Nine Storeys.” In this section, the poet proceeds to explain this “Pit” or “Hell.” As discussed in the preceding chapter, he begins by telling the reader of an eternally cloud-covered forest far away from human habitation where “*u Nongshohnoh*,” a killer in the hire of the *Thlen*-keepers, lives. Then he goes on to say that since the beginning of time, this dark and tangled forest had always been the quagmire of “Sin,” a precipitous abyss of death, a fiery, and smoking “fen of stagnant waters,” a haunting place of terrible creatures, evil spirits and snakes which are seen to wrap themselves in every tree. Till here “*U Rngiew*” has been equated with the Christian Sin, but from stanza XIII onwards he is seen as “*U Thlen*” of the Khasi myths, that is, a man-eating serpent, which metamorphosed into a blood-drinker and dependent creature as explained in Chapter II.

Tham explains how *Thlen* had emerged from the “Pit of Nine Storeys” to begin feasting on human beings and brought along with him his hell on earth. Tracing the legendary metamorphosis of *Thlen* into a dependent creature, Tham quotes the legend to narrate how the people of Sohra had slain it with the help of *U Suitnoh*, the patron god of villages, who had fed him with a huge white-hot iron ball, and who had directed the people to eat up every bit of his flesh without leaving a single piece. But unfortunately he survived in the single morsel an old woman had taken home, and from then began to

flourish again, for the old woman— an archetypal figure often associated with sorcery in Khasi lore— had become the first *Thlen*-keeper in exchange for indescribable riches. In this way *Thlen* found refuge, as the poet describes, “where no one had dreamt / Within the caverns of human Heart.” (Section V, 143-4)

As illustrated in the preceding chapter, at the end of the section *Thlen* emerges as the god of wealth, a Khasi version of Mammon, with his own worshippers, who hired *Nongshohnohs* to feed him with human blood. In the section Tham also describes the rituals connected with the feeding of *Thlen*, and then of his future and that of his keepers, pronouncing: “Until the end of Hope; / Then would they die the *Thlen*-keepers.” (137-8) The poet is saying that *Thlen* and his keepers would be eradicated eventually but not before the keepers have lost all hope.

But how can they lose all hope? The poet explains that they will lose all hope when man finally turns to make his first appeal to God: “Drained is the Water, only the Crust, / ‘Keeper, Creator, hearken from above!’” (Section VI, 29-30) God is now appealed to through various rites and rituals, where man pleads for forgiveness for his “*ka Lait ka Let*,” his errors and misdeeds, his acts of omission and commission. Eventually God sends him signs to send to him a “*Simpah Simsong*,” that is one who will “*kit ka Pap*,” bear man’s “Evil” and through his self-sacrifice not only return man’s godhood to him but also strengthen the essence of his humanity (“*Ban eh ka Rngiew*”), and cleanse all wickedness from his heart.

In doing all this Tham makes use of the myth of the Rooster and explains how man convenes a great council of all creatures to resolve through deliberations and mutual

consultations, who would be that “*Simpah Simsong*.” After a long debate, the poet says, finally the Rooster comes forward to offer his services:

Hark from the Cave of the Sanctified Leaf,

The Sacrificial Rooster, the Great Covenantor:

‘Till the day that comes the One,

All right,’ he said, ‘let me bear all:

So you, a man, suffer no more

Before the Master Creator evermore.’(Section VI, 73-8)

The poet then elaborates on the myth. The “Cave of the Sanctified Leaf” is the holy retreat to which the Sun, symbol of divine light, the grace of God, had fled after being slighted by man and all earthlings. Her flight had left the entire world in darkness and brought about all attendant evils. But now the Rooster has wooed her back to earth and “When the Rooster bugles thrice / Then all the Earth shines bright and clear.” (Section VI, 83-4) The poet compares this shining bright and clear of the earth with the appearance of “The Rainbow” after a particularly dark and stormy period.

As stated earlier, through stories steeped in “*Pharshi*” or symbolism, the poet speaks of the concept of good and evil. These stories include the myth of “*U Sohpet Bneng*,” the myth of “*Ka Diengiei*,” and “*U Saw Shyrtong*” or “The Rooster,” whose bare summaries have been recounted. In symbolical terms, they demonstrate the relationship between man and God as taught by the indigenous Khasi faith. As H. Onderson Mawrie, an authority on Khasi faith and culture, observes in his article, “God and Man,”²¹

The relation between God and Man in our Khasi Religion is depicted in a number of stories and for this subject in hand I have chosen just three... They are—

1. *The Parable of u Sohpetbneng,*
2. *The Parable of u Lum Diengiei,*
3. *The Parable of Ka Krem Lamet Krem Latang.*

Before Mawrie's observations are recorded, it should be noted that the myth of "Ka Krem Lamet Krem Latang" ("The Cave of the Sanctified Leaf") is just another name for the myth of "The Rooster." In explaining the myth of "U Sohpet Bneng," Mawrie says:

The central idea of the Parable of u Sohpetbneng is Peace between God and Man. In the context of this Parable, God is imagined as a Person who has a personal relationship with Man. On top of the Sohpetbneng Peak there grew a tree which served as a golden ladder of communication between God and Man. That was in the Golden Age after the Creation. (P 86)

On the same topic, Sawian observes:

It is through the umbilical cord that flows the love of the mother, which is the life beating in the arteries and veins and invigorates the golden heart of the child, and which is also the closest bond between mother and child when it is still in the womb.

So also U Sohpetbneng points to the creation of man, of u Khadhynriew Skum [the Sixteen Clans, ancestors of the Hynñiew Trep]...and U Sohpetbneng is that 'Nati-Ksiar' [Golden-Rapport], which is the closest bond between u Khadhynriew Skum and God. (P 5-6)

The myth of “*Ka Diengïei*,” according to Mawrie points to the drifting of “*U Hynñiew Trep*” away from God. The darkness caused by the “over-spreading branches and leaves” of *Diengïei* “signifies Man’s spiritual crises. The more he groped in the dark the more he stumbled... finally he turned to God in repentance. He felled the Tree and God-Man relationship was restored.” (P 87) Sawian agrees with this explanation and affirms that the “central truth in this Parable is man’s repentance.” S. S. Majaw,²² adds to the explanation of the two and observes:

[“Ka Diengïei”] stands for the wickedness that had darkened the life and humanness of the Khasi people...for that source from which all other evils emerge...It is these evils– like the branches of Diengïei– which [in the poem] had darkened the life of man as an individual, in the society, in politics, in governance, and especially in the Khasi’s belief in God.

The myth of “*U Saw Shyrtong*,” “the Rooster,” is explained by Mawrie as the final reconciliation of man with God. First of all, he says, “it was the evil in the heart of Man that saw evil which was not there” (P 86) and that caused him to ridicule the Sun and the Moon, sister and brother, not only for their late arrival but for their solitary dancing, as if they were lovers. This caused the Sun to flee to the “The Cave of the Sanctified Leaf” till finally the Rooster won back her forgiveness. But why did the Rooster win the Sun’s forgiveness, when the Elephant of great strength, and the Hornbill of great beauty and wisdom had failed? Sawian clarifies that the Rooster is the embodiment of humility “that which will make us genuflect before God, so that we will once again receive enlightenment, inspiration and blessing from the Keeper the Creator.” (P 31)

Tham's representation of good and evil in the poem follows the contour and movement of the Khasi myths. Although he was a Christian by faith, in the poem he shows an undeniable *hiraeth* for indigenous values based on the teachings of his ancestors. There are of course critics, especially H. W. Sten, who always try to relate many aspects of this theme to the Bible and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

These critics, for instance, maintain that "*Ka Persyntiew*" that the poet sings of in Section II is the Biblical Eden. In his book Sten,²³ also brings in Christian mythology into this section, saying that Tham, "has likened Ri Khasi-Pnar with the Garden of Flowers in Eden where Adam and Eve had lived happily before their fall into sin." (P 6) The description of "*Ka Persyntiew*" might seem to resemble Eden, but such literary resemblances are many, even the Welsh literature of *hiraeth* also speaks of *Affalon*, which as depicted in the first chapter, is "...one of those island Otherworlds so common in Celtic mythology, the land of eternal youth where old age, sickness or grief never come." (Chapter I, P16) But in any case, this "*Persyntiew*," belongs to the Khasi creation myths and is described by the poet not as the paradise that Adam and Eve lived in but as:

Mihngi, Sepngi, Shathie, Shatei

Ka dei ka Ri ba shong ki blei. (Section II, 53-4)

(East, West, South, North

It was a Land where lived the gods.)

These gods are definitely not Adam and Eve since nowhere, neither in Milton's *Paradise Lost* nor in the Bible have they been equated with gods, and nor does Christianity allow such an equation. The gods here are, therefore, the poet's ancestors, not only because of their legendary celestial origins, but also because of their godlike virtues.

Another major character in the poem, that of “*U Rngiew*” or “*U Thlen*” has been confused with Milton’s Satan. Referring to *Thlen* in his book, Sten observes, “Here we see that Satan has taken the shape of *Thlen* and he changes his form every time that he feels the need for it.” (P 48-9) Then asserting that Tham has only followed the example of Milton in making *Thlen* capable of changing into many forms, Sten again says, “In *Paradise Lost* Satan appears as a Monster, it also appears as a Serpent when it goes to tempt Eve. In another place he shows himself as a wolf...” (P 52) But as illustrated in Chapter II, *Thlen* is a creature from Khasi legends. And not only that, the legend of *Thlen* is a living one. As quoted in that chapter:

*The legend of U Thlen is a living one and to this day people talk about this man-eating, blood-sucking serpent as they would talk of the plague, cancer, tuberculosis and any other killer disease, for that is what this monster represents now, the cause of a kind of deadly illness where a person loses his natural colour, grows thin and weak, with a strange bloatedness about his face and belly. They say the keepers of this creature and the killers in their employment, whose business is the hunting of men for their blood, are still very active in some parts of the Khasi Hills. At first Thlen did not need a keeper or a hunter to feed him with the blood of humans. But the story of how he became a blood-drinker from a man-eater and how he metamorphosed into a dependent creature really began somewhere in the dim past, where man and the spirits were said to have rubbed shoulders.*²⁴

Tham tells the story of *Thlen* in the poem exactly as it is portrayed in the legend. He depicts him as “*u Syiem Seiñiong*” (“the King of Black Serpents”), which can also

change its form at will, sometimes appearing as “a black Kitten,” “a Deer,” “a Tiger,” “a goddess,” “Ren, the Sea Monster,” and even a “Necklace.” And these changing forms are very much part of the legend, which explains this phenomenon as follows:

Today it is said that Thlen punishes the keepers who cannot keep him fed not only by killing one or two of their children but also by shaming them before the world by climbing on to rooftops and assuming the form of a cat, a smelt and several other animal forms. (P 147)

But having contradicted Sten and critics like him, it must also be acknowledged that they do have certain grounds for this kind of interpretation. In dealing with the theme of good and evil, Tham amplifies his argument with borrowings from Christian theology and Greek mythology. Foremost among these is the concept of sin and hell. As observed earlier, Tham at first equates “*U Rngiew*” with the “Sin” of Christianity whose haunt is hell, which he sometimes refers to as “*Ka Nurok ka Ksew*” (“The Place of the Dog”) and sometimes as “*Ka Khyndai Pateng N̄iamra*” (“The Pit of Nine Storeys”). And since the Khasis have no concept of hell, in his description of it, Tham had to borrow images from Milton and the Greek myths. As the story of the “*Lost Manuscript*” reveals, the Khasi universe,

*is essentially a two-tier system, comprising Ka Bneng (Heaven) and Ka Khyndew (Earth). The Khasi has no concept of Hell and the words like Dujok, Ka Nurok ka Ksew, and Ka Khyndai Pateng N̄iamra (the Nine Stages of the Underworld) which signify Hell, have been borrowed from Hindu and Greek mythologies.*²⁵

But then, such borrowings are not uncommon. Tham’s intent is to denounce the corruption of the age and in talking of hell as “The Pit of Nine Storeys” he is only trying

to find a befitting place where his false and greed-infested contemporaries should be damned. Such is also the view of Majaw. Though he acknowledges, “Milton too might have inspired Tham,” he goes on to say “there is a great difference in the treatment of the theme of evil between Milton and Tham.” The fact that Tham places the source of all evil in the heart of man makes Majaw conclude, “ the origin of evil in *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* is according to the belief and exposition of the religion of *u Hynñiew Trep*.” (P 35)

The only real concession that could be made to the critics who try to relate the poem to Biblical influence lies in the words of the sacrificial Rooster, who says:

'Till the day that comes the One,

All right,' he said, 'let me bear all:

So you, a man, suffer no more

Before the Master Creator evermore.' (Section VI, 73-8)

Though the self-sacrifice of the Rooster brings back a “bright and wonderful” world, which is moreover safe and terror free— “Safety’s here no more is Fear; / Terror has sunk beneath the Tree of Gloom— (Section VI, 85-8) yet Tham does not seem content. As Eliot says of the Magi, Tham too seems to be “...no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.”²⁶ The fact is that Tham longs for the restoration of the close relations between man and God (“How he would mend the Golden Ladder,” Section VI, 46) and the return of the “Golden Age.” But this, as he says, is possible only “Till the day that comes the One,” (Section VI, 75) who has been interpreted as Christ and his second coming.

Tham probably turns to the enigmatic “the One” because the Khasi myths do not provide for a return of the *Hynñiew Trep* to the “Golden Age.” But when one comes to analyse the poem, one finds that the coming of “the One” may not be the statement of hope that it at first seems to be. It is more like a regret that he and his Khasi contemporaries can no longer have “the wholeheartedness and energy,” or the “*one aim, one business, one desire*”²⁷ of Arnold’s Scholar-Gipsy, who may in this respect be equated with Tham’s ancestors. That Tham experiences such a regret is borne out by stanza V of Section X:

Shi khrum ka bneng— u paid byllien,

Shi snieh Pyrthei— kawei ka Ktien:

Pyllun ka Ri— kajuh ka Niam:

Ban paw ha rong— shi rong ka Riam:

Hangno ha Pyrthei don Riti,

Ba kum ka jong ka ri jong ngi! (25-31)

(Under the crypt of heaven— a numerous throng

On the surface of the Earth— one only Tongue:

Around the Land— one Religion:

For pageantry— the same Costume:

Where in the World could such be found,

A Tradition as our Land’s!)

Yet even if this concession is granted, the second coming of Christ is in the future. For the present, Tham returns to Khasi faith:

Through the Night that’s dark and dense,

It will not dim the Star of Hope:

How His Compassion he will win,

When he genuflects before Him. (Section VI, 111-4)

This is the central concept of the spiritual teachings of the Khasis. As indicated earlier, the Khasi faith is based on the tenet of “*Ban ap jutang U Blei na jrong,*” (Section I, 34) loosely translated as “God, the caretaker of the covenant from above.” This means that as long as man does not forget God, as long as he turns to him with a humble and sincere heart, God will never forsake him.

But what really clinches the fact that Tham is always keeping the indigenous values in mind, when talking of good and evil, life and death, is the last stanza of the poem where he says: “When I reach the house of God, / First I will seek my Mother where.” (83-4) How could the poet be so sure that when he dies he would reach the house of God where his mother would be? This is because he believes in the Khasi saying that all those who die “*Ki leit bam kwai ha ĩng U Blei,*” that is, go to take betel nut in the house of God. It is to this journey and to this rest that the poet looks forward to at the end of the poem.

If there are some doubts on the part of some critics about Tham’s *hiraeth* for indigenous spiritual values, there can be no doubt at all about his *hiraeth* for the other aspects of indigenous culture. All critics are agreed that in the poem, Tham sings of “The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep*” and dwells on every feature of ancestral culture. It is with “*Ka ĩng i Mei*” (“Mother’s House”) in Section VII, that Tham truly engages himself with the customs and traditions of his forefathers. The key stanza in the section is stanza eight where he declares:

Naduh ki sngi ba rim ba jah,

Hangta ka trai ka jaid ka Spah:

Nangta ki ieng ka Kñia ka Khriam,

Hangta ki seng ban long ka Niam:

Ka dei ka Ding ba rhem ha Dpei,

Nangta ki ieng ban saiñ pyrthei. (43-8)

(Since the days ancient and lost,

There it rests their kinship their Wealth:

Then they raised their Rites their Rituals,

There they founded their Religion:

It was the Fire in the Hearth,

Then they raised their politics.)

Here the poet introduces the theme of the “Hearth” as a variation of the “smithy” of Section IV. While in that section the heart of man was shown as the smithy making not tools of survival but “Numberless fiendish thoughts,” here the smithy is the “Fire in the Hearth” of the mother’s house, where the uncles and fathers of *U Hynñiew Trep* had forged their social and economic systems (“*ka jaid ka Spah*”), their religion (“*ka Kñia ka Khriam... ban long ka Niam*”) and their political system (“*ban saiñ pyrthei*”).

Speaking of these systems he begins with the social set-up of the *Hynñiew Trep* society, which revolves round its clan system. The clan system has as its nucleus, the “Mother’s House,” which is then extended to the house of the “*Meisan Meinah*,” the “elder maternal Aunt” and the “younger maternal Aunt” and most of all to the “*ing khadduh*,” that is the house of the youngest maternal aunt, where all clan gatherings

would take place. This social system of organising one's clan is explained by the poet as follows:

Te kum i'u Ngap ha Sympa maw,

Sympaiñ ka Kmie ka Kyiaw. (41-2)

(Thus like a Bee in its crevice Hive,

The Queen the Mother encloses all.)

This "Bee" is very different from the "the bee without its Queen" in Section IV. This "Bee" is the Khasi race, which not only has its queen and mother to care for it, but also "U Kur u Kha," ("Maternal, Paternal Relations"), "U Kñi u Kpa" ("The Uncles the Fathers") and "Ka Mei ka Iaw" ("The Great Grandmother") sitting around "Ka Lyngwiar Dpei" ("The Circle of the Hearth").

In his explanation of the Khasi clan system, the poet focuses attention on the mother's house and the houses of the aunts, especially that of the youngest aunt. This is because the Khasi social structure is matrilineal, where the name of the clan and that of the children is derived from the mother's name. On the Khasi social set-up, Hipshon Roy²⁸ observes:

In their social system the Khasis are matrilineal and they recognise the matrilineal descent but it should not be confused with matriarchate society. The woman is the mistress of the household and the custodian of wealth and property but not the proprietress. The man is the master in war and peace. The maternal uncle is the undisputed director of the ancestral wealth and property where [as] the father is the provider, the master and guide of his family. There were a clear division of functions between the household and the world outside. The woman is

the receiver and the custodian and, therefore, must not stray into the field of politics. She is not to take part in the affairs of the State; her domain is the home.

Tham understands this organisation perfectly. That is why he divides the labour between male and female:

Ka ìng ka Sem, Muluk Jaka,

U khun Shynrang un da ia ka;

Ka Spah ka Phew ka Blang Masi,

Ka khun Kynthei kan ri ia ki: (61-4)

(The house the Shelter, the State the Land,

The Son will safeguard them;

The Wealth the Treasure the Goat the Cattle

The Daughter will care for them:)

And that is why he also speaks of:

Ka Ri ba tip, 'U Kur u Kha,'

Ka Ri ba don, 'U Kñi u Kpa,' (39-40)

(The Land that knows, 'Maternal, Paternal Relations,'

The Land that's blessed, 'The Uncles the Fathers,')

The roles of "The Uncles the Fathers" within the house, within the village, and within the state; and the relationship between the "Maternal, Paternal Relations" are clearly defined in the system. The poet is full of praise for this system especially because like the American Indians', it provides for a very strong sense of right and wrong. Of the American Indians, Guerin et al have this to say:

Another misconception is that Indian tribes were merely “primitive”; in fact, they had more stringent taboos against casual sex and divorce than many more technologically advanced peoples. Their cultures were generally stable before the advent of whites, spiritually oriented, harmonious, and with complex worldviews.
(P 264)

This fits the description of Tham’s “spiritually oriented” *Hynñiew Trep* very well:

*Kine ki Kur, ki Kha ki Man,
Ki tip kumno ka Dur ka wan;
Ki don ka Sang ki tip ka Ma,
Ioh pom Pyrthat ioh dait u Khla;
U bym kheiñ sang, u Nongaiksuid,
Ki beh na Shnong, ki khi-lai-nuid. (66-72)*

(These the Clan, these the Kith, these the Kin,

They know what way the Shape is drawn;
They have their Taboos they know what’s Sacrilege,
Lest Lightning strikes, the Tiger bites;
He that profanes, a Sorcerer,
With tonsured head, ostracism.)

But the poet’s praise and *hiraeth* for the system of his forefathers is not merely because it is “spiritually oriented” but also because it is a conscientious and humane one:

*Ki khun mynlung ki lait ban khrong,
Ba dei ka Doh ka Snam la jong. (77-8)*

(Orphans do not have to beg,

For all are Flesh and Blood.)

This system takes care of its own. In the house of the youngest maternal aunt all those who find themselves in misfortune are given shelter and cared for.

And the poet is not the only one with admiration for this aspect of the culture of his forefathers. Jairamdas Doulatram, Governor of pre-independence Assam had this to say of the Khasi social arrangement:

I have been an admirer of some of your fine customs. I think there is a great deal to be said for the matrilineal system. I sometimes feel that indirectly it has considerable effect in encouraging the free progress of women and it tends to make them real equal of men. Their innate qualities get scope for evolution and development and they are more mature members of their own society than are their sisters elsewhere. ²⁹

On the social front Tham also eulogises their social services and their great legacies. The signs of these he finds in the audio-visual symbols of the past that “are still clearly visible.” These include the monoliths, stone resting places, stone bridges, man-made ponds and lakes and palaces built without nails. Of the social activities that he sings include their tradition of storytelling, their festivities and their sports, especially their great game of archery. Archery especially receives special treatment from the poet not only because he is known to be fond of it, but also because it represents the greatest pastime of the Khasis. He sings:

Pyllun kawei ki shad iasiat

Ki kad ha shkor, ha sop ki wiat;

Ba kiew u khnam ba lieh ba iong,

Halor Sohpdung ne ha ka Thong;

Ki seng phawar, ki sin sngewbha,

Ban ieng dawbah ka Rongbiria. (Section IX, 49-55)

(Together as one they dance in a ring,

They distend till the ears, on the tip then they draw;

That the arrow white and black,

Mount on the Target or the Bet;

They invent their *phawar*, for fun they slander,

So may it flourish an Event such as this.)

Almost in the same breath, the poet describes the scene of festivity at the archery ground; then the concentrated action of the archers and the arias and *phawar* (gnomic verses) of supporters. The poet speaks about archery with such enthusiasm that it seems he too has been caught in the thrill of the bull's eye, as the saying goes. Tham's great love for the game has been recorded by his most authoritative biographer, Warjri, who narrates:

U Soso Tham loved going on fishing and hunting trips and used to watch the game of archery, involving a wager between the people of Shangpung and Raliang, at the foot of Lamare Hill with great delight...So one day, Elders of the church went to persuade him away from it [archery]. As is understood, there were three of them. It is reported that Soso Tham replied in this way:

"Tang lai : phin lah ia nga?

So bad So long phra,

Sa bad ka Tham lei lei

La long ha nga khyndei." (P 26)

(Only three: you would overcome me?

So and *So* [Four and four] are eight,

Add to that *ka Tham* [the Crab]

All with me are nine.)

Tham reportedly ran into many such troubles with the church leaders all because of his love for indigenous customs. But according to Warjri, when he finally left the Presbyterian Church to join the Anglican Church, he reportedly did so of his own free will.

Tham's love for the game of archery has its reasons. It is, according to many writers including J. S. Shangpliang and W. R. Laitflang,³⁰ one of the greatest and oldest cultural events of the Khasis that still survives today. According to them, it is a huge community event always involving a competition between two villages. How important this competition was considered to be can be glimpsed from the story about the archery competition between the people of Sohra (Cherrapunjee) and the adjoining village of Mawsmmai. As narrated by Shangpliang, Sohra was losing the competition and Mawsmmai was rejoicing, when in the midst of all the chanting and jeering, someone from among the glum Sohra crowd, suddenly declared, "O, you the people of Mawsmmai! Do not rejoice yet, we still have one more!" (P 179) It was none other than the *Syiem*, the traditional king of Sohra and famed marksman, U Ram Sing Syiem, who had removed his kingly turban and was proceeding to the shooting circle to rescue Sohra from the losing contest. To make short work of the story, Ram Sing won the day for Sohra and the thunderous victory arias of that day was: "Only one was champion! Only one was champion!" (P 180)

But more than that, archery is also a unique cultural festival around which has grown many other traditions, as revealed by the poet and as corroborated by both Shangliang and Laitflang. These traditions include the shamanistic war of words between the two groups, before the actual competition could begin; the ceremonial handing over of arrows to the archers, involving prayers, blessings and words of advice; the singing, dancing and chanting of men, women, and children, rallying behind their champions; the spontaneous composition of *phawars* or gnomic verses by accompanying poets; the hurling of derogatory names by the supporting groups at each other; and above all the fair-ground and fun-filled atmosphere of the whole event. But though the game survives till today, during Tham's time, it became a forbidden event for converts like him, as has been demonstrated. Hence the poet experiences a *hiraeth* for the game and all its cultural trappings to the point of rebelling against his adopted faith.

Singing and music form another aspect of his people's social life that Tham celebrates and pines for. It is in Sections VIII and IX that the poet speaks of the music of "*ka Tangmuri*" ("Pipe Instrument"), "*ka Sharati*" ("Flute"), "*ka Duitara*" and "*Ka Marynthing*" (Khasi guitars), the drums and cymbals. The Khasis have many more traditional musical instruments than these, but what the poet is trying to say, without naming all, is that singing and music were so much a part of their lives that they were performed in festivities like the great dance festivals; in sports like archery; in mourning the death of illustrious personalities; and even in courtship, which could not be thought of without friendly musical competitions among the suitors.

The second theme that comes out of the smithy of Section VII is the forefathers' economic system. This is discussed in Section IX where their economy is shown to be

predominantly agriculture, including dairy farming and apiary, “*Junom junom kan khie ka Rep*” (13, “Forever will Farming surge”), although they had made considerable progress in small-scale industries, making things out of iron, wood and the products of the forest. Their greatest industrial achievement is iron manufacturing, which the poet describes as, “*Hapoh u maw ki saiñ u nar*” (43, “Within the stone they forged their iron”). Confirming the statement of the poet on this particular aspect of Khasi economy, Hipshon Roy says, “One of their major exports was steel and iron.” (P 3) For further evidence, he quotes from Dr. Hunter’s *Vital Statistical Account, 1879*, which reports:

The smelting of iron was once the chief industry in the Khasi Hills and a considerable quantity of the metal used to be exported into Sylhet (now in Bangladesh), both in crude and manufactured state. Recently, however, this industry has almost died out in the face of the competition of the superior imported iron from England and sold into the plains at a cheaper rate...(P 3)

This was the sad state of affairs during the poet’s time. The once prosperous and self-contained economy of his forefathers was shattered, and the people had lost their skills and enterprise to become completely dependent upon their British masters. Speaking of the Khasi economy, Hipshon Roy made a comparative study between the Khasis of the past and the Khasis after British occupation. He says “In the old days the Khasis” were not only self-sufficient but “had made a remarkable advance in trade and industry.” But “In modern times the Khasis are economically backward entirely depending on loans by the ruling government of the day.” (P 3) This is the reason why, the poet, who eulogises the hard work and industry of his ancestors, mourns the loss of that flourishing

economy of the past, and longs for its return to the present and its continuance into the future. This is reflected in these lines:

Ngin shoh, ngin thaw, baroh ngin rep,

Shaneng ngin kiew napoh ki Trep. (Section X, 77-8)

(We'll beat, we'll make and all we'll farm,

From our Huts upwards we'll climb.)

The third theme is enclosed in these words, "Then they raised their Rites their Rituals, / There they founded their Religion." But this aspect has already been discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter as well as in the preceding chapter, where it has been shown how the poet's ancestors had founded their religion on certain rites and rituals that emerged with the sacrificial Rooster, and how this religion, "*ka Niam*" ("the Living Word") had been based on the tenet of "*Ban ap jutang U Blei na jrong,*" (34) or "God, the caretaker of the covenant from above." The earlier discussion on the topic has also illustrated how this religion is based on the three principles of "*Ka Tip Briew, Tip Blei, Ka Kamai ia ka Hok,*" ("To Know Man, to Know God, to Earn Righteousness" or to respect man, to worship God and live a clean and virtuous life). Only one or two other facets need to be mentioned here.

First of all, as Hipshon Roy explains, the Khasi concept of God is that of a Universal Creator. That means that if He is a God of the Khasis, He is also a God of the Hindus, the Persians, the Jews, the Christians, and all other races. The second is that the religion of the Khasis is deeply personal. Hipshon Roy states:

As there is no missionary intention there is no organised church or temple. To a Khasi, religion is a personal contract between God and man. Here is God

Localised within this context, wherein God's place with man is nearest and holiest in man's Heart and Home. (P 5)

The third is that the Khasi faith teaches that man must love himself and respect others. Hipshon Roy again says, "He respects others in many of his ways and including in death." (P 6) It is this aspect of the indigenous religion that seems to appeal the most to Tham as a sufferer of *hiraeth*, that is their great reverence for the dead, and their mourning rites, introduced (as indicated in Chapter II) in the prologue through the myth of "*The Death of Lapalang, the Stag.*" These rites include the post-cremation ceremonies relating to the preservation of the bones of the dead, and the commemoration of their memories through the erection of cromlechs and dolmens amidst musical dirges and community feasting. This is what he means when he sings:

Ia ki baroh ki thep Mawbah,

Ki tem ka Ksing, ki tem ka Dhah;

Ban pynieng Maw Kynthei Shynrang,

Ki ieng artat ka Phur ka Siang; (Section VII, 79-82)

(For everyone they gather bones, ancestral Cairns,

They beat their Drums, big ones and small;

To get their Dolmens, their Cromlechs up,

They also raised their ceremonial Dance and Feast;)

The last theme forged in the smithy of "the Hearth" is also the most important. It is considered so important by the poet that he introduces it in the very first stanza of the poem: "How in ancient times the Uncles the Fathers / Had fashioned politics, had founded states." (3-4) The lines above serve to arouse the curiosity of the reader, who

would inevitably respond to them with his own question, “How had the forefathers ‘fashioned politics, had founded states’?” In Section VII the poet states that the beginnings of their politics had taken shape in the mother’s house. But it is not till Section VIII that the poet begins to explain the political set-up of his ancestors. He declares that it began “*Haba ki wad hangno u Syiem*” (113, “When they sought, where was the King”), who would be accepted as the leader of all, and who would be responsible for all.

This line refers to the many legends about the emergence of the “*Syiem*” clan. The most famous of these legends is the “Legend of *Ka Pahsyntiew*,” considered to be the progenitress of the first *Syiems* or Kings of *Hima Shyllong* or the State of Shyllong. According to the legend³¹ *Ka Pahsyntiew*, literally “the One-lured-by-flowers,” was the daughter of the reigning deity of the sacred Peak of Shyllong, popularly known as *U ‘Lei Shyllong*. In response to the prayers and pleadings of the people living in villages around the peak for a *Syiem*, the deity had sent one of his daughters to live in a cave called *Krem Marai*, somewhere near the peak itself. Later this daughter of the god was lured out of the cave by a bunch of flowers placed in front of the cave by an elder from one of the villages, whose name was Myllemngap. Myllemngap and the other elders of the village then chose a handsome youth from village Nongjri for the goddess to marry. It was from their union that the first rulers of *Hima Shyllong* had come.

But this is only one side of the story. The legend also points to the fact that Myllemngap and the elders of a group of villages had brought the divinely beautiful, and unusually fair-skinned young maiden from the plains and had made her stay in the cave for a while. Then they had floated the story of a fairy living at the *Krem Marai* cave, and

had made a great spectacle of her capture. This they had done because they were looking for someone who would lead their group of villages as a *Syiem*, their ruler. But finding it impossible to choose such a man, who would have hitherto unheard of powers over their lives, from any of the clans or villages without causing a rebellion, they, in their wisdom, had resorted to this stratagem. And in so doing, they had unwittingly propounded one of the earliest theories on the divine origins, but not rights, as will be seen, of kings. Affirming this line of argument, R. T. Rymbai³² discloses:

The Hynniewtreps hold it taboo to take possession of the properties of extinct families who are believed to have incurred a divine curse for which they have to suffer such cruel fate...They also hold it a taboo to pick up and bring home any article, money, ornament, etc. thrown away by families who consider such possessions accursed because they were obtained earlier ...by foul and wicked means...The belief is that the same cruel fate will befall those who pick up and keep such possessions. Nevertheless it was thought unwise to let such sources of income to the Hima go to waste, and some means would be devised to save them. This consideration and the growing need to have a person to preside regularly over the Administration and State Dorbars led to the invention of the institution of families and clans not affected by those taboos. Hence, the origin of titular heads of States called Syiems who hailed not from among the Bakhraw clans, the founding clans of the Hima, nor from the indigenous clans constituting the citizenry called U Babun U Balang, in whose hands is vested the ultimate authority of the governance of the Hima. As daylight comes after the dark night

we have the legend of Ka Pahsyntiew, a fairy queen emerging out of the cleft of a rock at Pomnakrai to found the dynasty of Ki Syiem Ka Hima Shyllong...

Rymbai also narrates the legend of *Ka Li Dahkha*, a mermaid, which transformed itself into a beautiful maiden and founded the dynasty of *Ki Syiem Sutnga* known later as the *Jaintia Rajas* and the dynasties of *Ki Syiemlieh Syiemiong* of the *Himas of Nongkhlaw* and *Maharam, Langrin, etc....* In the same manner he narrates the divine origin of *Syiems* in many other *himas*, including that of *Sohra*.

It is of this kind of political wisdom that the poet sings and praises. Having found their “*Syiem*,” the poet says:

Nangta ki nang ban saiñ Pyrthei;

Kumta ki lah ban seng Hima:

Baroh ki ieng ban da ia ka:

Kumta, namar ki um ka snam,

‘Ka im ka Kyrteng sah ka Nam’. (Section VIII, 116-20)

(So they learnt to forge their Politics;

So they learnt to found a State:

And all they pledged to protect it:

And so, because their blood surges,

‘Alive the Name the Glory stays.’)

The poet’s ancestors had learnt their first lesson in politics when they were trying to find a “*Syiem*” and then, having found him, they began organising their villages into a “*Hima*” or a “State,” which they vowed to protect even if they have to kill or be killed.

And so because of their patriotism, the poet says, their *himas* flourished and grew in name and glory. On the subject of *himas*, Majaw says:

As Soso Tham sees it, the politics of the Khasis is founded upon the formation of Himas. And the formation of Himas is founded upon religion, which in turn is founded upon the Covenant, that is, the agreement reached between u Hynñiew Trep and his Creator. (P 47)

But what are these *himas* or states that form the basis of the politics of the *Hynñiew Trep* people, and for which the poet experiences such a *hiraeth*? Writing on Khasi democracy, Hipshon Roy states:

Their [the Khasis'] democratic system and way of life have carried them through the ages for thousands of years in their small republics. Hon'ble Freeman Thomas, Earl of Willingdon...during his visit to these hills as Viceroy and Governor General of India had this to say: "It is a proof of the stamina and virility and competence of your people that when greater Empires in the East and in the West have throughout the ages come and gone, you still maintain in your pleasant Hills the freedom of your small republics, based on your ancient ways and tenets of your race." (P 1)

Both Hipshon Roy and the Viceroy refer to the Khasi states as "republics" implying a comparison between them and the Greek city-states. Rymbai explains why:

The political organisation of Ki Hynniewtrep is basically democratic where separate states, independent of one another, co-exist. Fundamentally they are all republican in nature, but monarchical in form. Tradition tells us that there used

to be thirty States, each under a titular head called Syiem, twenty-nine of which were in Khasi Hills and one in Jaintia Hills. ³³

Expounding further on the republican nature and formation of the *himas*, he says:

The head of a Hima...is not invested with any power to act on his own authority. Power lies with the people, the head or ruler is an agent to implement the common will of the people. The people of a State are not subjects (raiyats) of the head of the State, they are its citizens called U Khun U Hajar. Power is distributed in a three-tier system. At the grassroots of the village level, there is the Rangbah Shnong (Village Headman) who, with the help of the council of elders of the village, administers all its affairs. Matters affecting the village on the whole are referred to the Dorbar Shnong (the Village Council), to which every adult male has a right to attend and participate. The headman is the first among equals. He is elected by the common will of the people [at the council]...

A group of villages constitute a Raij with a titular head called Syiem Raij. Like a Rangbah Shnong he has no authority to act on his own. He is assisted in his duties by a council of elders called Basans. He settles disputes between inhabitants of different villages of the Raij or of the inter-village disputes within the Raij. He is elected by the members of the clan from which alone a Syiem may be elected...All matters are disposed of by consensus of members-in-council. Matters affecting the Raij as a whole are referred to the Dorbar Raij to which every adult male of the Raij is entitled to attend and take part in its deliberations.

A number of Raijs constitute a State, Hima. The number of Raijs varies according to the size of a Hima. The Syiem of a Hima is normally accepted by the

Bakhras (nobilities) if the members of the clan are unanimous in electing him; and he must not be otherwise ineligible by reasons of serious physical handicaps or moral turpitude. If the members of the Syiem clan or clans do not agree on one candidate only, the matter is referred to the nobilities, and should they also disagree, the choice is open to the male adults of the Hima.

Rymbai also declares that the republican nature of the Khasi political system derives its strength from the social structure of the society. He says:

In the social order the Syiem clan [this also applies to the Bakhras clans] is not higher than any other clan according to the structure of Hynniewtrep Society, which is based on the equality of one and all.... The difference is functional in the parts they play in the governance and administration of the Hima, Raij, or Shnong. The Syiem is assisted in the day-to-day administration by a council of Bakhras, known as Lyngdohs, Lyngskors, Basans, Myntris, etc. who are representatives of their respective [founding] clans of the Hima, which elect them. The head of a State...is in fact, an instrument to carry out the consensus decision of the people expressed through members of his Dorbar in session [this is for the conduct of the day-to-day affairs of administration only] and through the adult males of the Hima as expressed in the open session of the Dorbar Hima [this is for all matters of high importance affecting the Hima].

It is in making a reference to this republican nature of the Khasi *himas*, and the role of the people that the poet says:

U Syiem kam pher la dei 'u Maw';

Ka Hima kit u Rit u Khraw;

Bishar-khadar ryngkat bad ki;

Ha u ki ai ka Nar-bili:

Te kum a Tiew Myngor Lyngsyun,

Kumta ka iaaid Dorbar pyllun. (Section VIII, 121-6)

(It matters not, the King may be 'a Stone';

The State is borne by Small and Great;

Justice with them collectively;

To him the Fetters:

And so, rounded as Marigold,

It goes the Council of the State.)

The poet's understanding of the traditional political set-up is absolute. Since the governance and the weighty issues of the state are dealt with together with the "Great" or the "*Bakhras*, and the "Small" or "*U Khun u Hajar*," the citizens, it does not really matter what kind of *Syiem* heads the state, as long as he is someone who is acceptable to one and all. What is all-important as depicted in the stanza is the "*Dorbar*" or the "Council of the State." The admiration of the poet for this "*Dorbar*" is so great that he compares it to a marigold in full bloom. The comparison is not only because he is trying to describe the open-air, circular seating arrangement of Khasi *dorbars* but also because of its majestic magnificence. There is not the only one brimful with love and adoration for the Khasi *dorbar*. Talking of the democratic nature of the *dorbars*, Rymbai reveals:

This concept of Ki Hynniewtrep of the role of their kings and the fact that power lies in the hands of the people form the corner stone of the democratic nature of their political organisations where the will of the people is expressed by

consensus ...In their case the goodwill prevails throughout the deliberations, for or against, because each participant is guided and governed by the ruling spirit of the motto— ia kaba dei yn ia bat, ia kaba lait yn ia bret (We shall keep and hold what is right, reject and dismiss what is wrong). (N. pag.)

It is this distinctive trait of the *Hynñiew Trep* people that impressed Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose into stating, in one of his speeches as the President of Indian National Congress, “that those who wanted to see true democracy in action must go to Khasi Jaintia Hills and learn from the people out there its soul and spirit.”³⁴ Evidence of such high praise can also be found in the written records of David Scott, the architect of the British Empire in North-East India, who had approached Tirok Sing, *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw for permission to construct a road to Sylhet through his state. As noted down by Harry Inglis, a trader who had accompanied Scott, the records reveal:

The attendants came up the Hills, armed with swords, bows and quivers. The Rajah proceeded to explain the subject of the meeting and required the different orators to express their sentiments on the proposition of the British Government. The leading orator; on the part of the opposition, immediately commenced a long harangue in condemnation of the measure, expressed in continuous flow of language accompanied with such animation of manner and appropriate gesticulation. This was replied to by an orator of the Rajah’s party and in this way the ball was kept rolling until evening. I was struck with astonishment at the order and decorum, which characterised these debates. No shouts of exultation, or party. On the contrary every speaker was fairly heard out. I have often

witnessed the debates in St. Stephen's Chapel, but that of the Cossya parliament appeared to be conducted with more dignity of manner. ³⁵

In the stanza following the one quoted above, the poet speaks about the role and function of the *Syiem*, and the land tenure system as established by his forefathers:

Lynti ka Duwar un bam ma u,

Saikhum saiteh un bat ma u;

Ka Bor u ioh ban oh kuna,

Hynrei ha u kim siew khajna:

Baroh ki ri-raj ri-kynti;

Ki dei ma ki ki trai ka Ri. (Section VIII, 127-32)

(The Road the Market for his sustenance,

The Shackles are with him;

Power to fine is given him,

But they pay no tax to him:

All is community, private land;

They are the ones who own the Nation.)

By "him" the poet means the king, and by "they" the poet means the citizens. On the question of income for the king and the state that the poet speaks of, Rymbai says:

Their [the Syiem's, Bakhraws', Syiem Raij's, Basans'] income derives from fines on criminal cases, and fees on civil suits, and from tolls in markets, etc. payable to the Hima [and the Raij]. In addition they have cultivation lands allotted for their use during their term in office, which is normally for life unless otherwise removed for moral turpitude or physical disabilities. (N. pag.)

As could be seen, the king can collect tolls from markets and produce on the way to markets. He can impose fines and try criminal and civil cases, and see to the day-to-day administration, but he cannot impose taxes. This is what the poet means by, “The Shackles are with him; / Power to fine is given him.” And as for the land tenure system in the lines, “All is community, private land; / They are the ones who own the Nation,” this is explained by Hipshon Roy as follows:

Based on the customary laws of the race a British Court of Justice as late as 1847 decreed that: “Land in the Khasi Hills belonging to the children of the soil is the property of the owner for right of which he is answerable to no Chief and for which he pays no tax of whatever nature.”

The owner of the land may be an individual, a clan or a community constituting the commune of the village or group of villages. (P 2)

This then is the politics of the *Hynñiew Trep* people and the formation of their states based on democratic values and republican principles that had drawn the highest commendation from the best representatives of the best cultures in the world, people like Subhash Chandra Bose and David Scott. As said earlier, it is this high political awareness and wisdom that has aroused such a powerful *hiraeth* in the poet for “The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep*” and made him sing about it in such “full-throated ease.”

The *hiraeth* of Tham for the culture and values of his people is not unlike the *hiraeth* of Waldo Williams (1904-71) ³⁶ for “the old forgotten things of human kind” as had existed in his country, Wales, for centuries. Bemoaning the collective amnesia of his people in, “Remembering,” one of his most famous lyrics, Williams recalls:

One short minute before the sun goes from the sky,

One gentle minute before the night starts on its journey,

To remember the forgotten things

Lost now in the dust of times gone by.

Like the foam of a wave that breaks on a lonely shore,

Like the wind's song where there is no ear to hear,

I know they call in vain upon us—

The old forgotten things of human kind.

The achievement and art of early generations,

Small dwellings and great halls,

The fine-wrought legends scattered centuries ago,

The gods that no one knows about by now.

And the little words of transient languages,

They were gay on the lips of men,

And pleasant to hear in the chatter of little children,

But no tongue calls upon them any longer.

Oh, unnumbered generations of earth,

And their divine dreams and brittle divinity,

Does nothing but silence remain to the hearts

Which used to rejoice and grieve?

Often in the evening, when I am alone,

A longing comes to know you every one:

Is there anything which can keep you still in Heart and Memory,

The old forgotten things of human family?

This is a sad, doleful poem; this is *hiraeth* without consolation. “The old forgotten things of human kind” call in vain upon the living. The living has no room in either “Heart” or “Memory” for the “achievement and art of early generations,” or the “fine-wrought legends,” or the “gods,” or the “little words of transient languages.” The poet indeed remembers them and longs for them, and during these moments of longing he feels that he has come “to know you every one.” But the poet remembers them alone; he longs for them, but no one else does. And so in despair he asks, “Is there anything which can keep you still in Heart and Memory, / The old forgotten things of human family?”

One of the major concerns of *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* is the collective amnesia of Tham’s contemporaries with regard to their own heritage. This amnesia is very much like the one lamented by Williams in his poem. But whereas Williams’s lament is gentle and subdued, as he reminds his people of the “old forgotten things” of the past through his own “Remembering,” Tham’s on the other hand, is vigorous, angry, and at times, even violent.

Seeing the ignorance of his wayward contemporaries of the “Enlightenment” of their own ancestors, seeing their negligence and scorn towards the ways of their forefathers, Tham reacts like a teacher and determines, “To kindle from within cremation *Kpeps* / The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep*.” His intention here is very clear. He will

dispel this ignorance and rehabilitate the past of his forefathers as high culture. But more than that he will educate his people on the need to know and value their own customs and traditions so that they would not lose their way completely in the face of the diverse bludgeoning changes during his time, as recounted earlier.

In singing the praises of his forefathers' culture, Tham especially identifies two qualities, which could bring redemption to his people: and these are his forefathers' spiritual integrity and patriotism. This is the reason why Tham has been giving so much importance to the creation myths of his people and the traditional political system.

As the poet realises, political power is the one means that could guide his country forward, particularly if it is exercised after the fashion set forth by his forefathers. As has been pointed out by Majaw, his forefathers had based their politics and had founded their states on the principles of virtue incorporated in their religious teaching, which is "*Ban Tip Briew, Tip Blei, bad Ban Kamai ia ka Hok,*" which has been translated as "To Know Man, to Know God, to Earn Righteousness" or to respect man, to worship God and to live a clean and virtuous life on earth. As illustrated in Chapter II, this has also been stated by the poet himself in the preface when he says:

If "Righteousness elevates a people," perhaps it was this mother of Virtues which had shone during all the Perplexity, and which had kept us safe, we who are only a handful, in our wandering in ancient times as "a unique race:" (P xiv)

But this political power, the one tool that could have saved his people has, during the poet's time, become so debilitated by all sorts of corrupt practices that as against "Peace reigned everywhere" (Section III, 47) of the past, the present witnesses the proliferation

of evil across the land so that it becomes a quagmire of wickedness. To quote from Chapter II, this proliferating evil,

has affected [man's] external activities, his political, social and economic life. While at the political level, "Darkness is sovereign" and "Folly reigns," at the economic level we see: "... Poverty, Hunger, Disease, Adversity, / Contagion too— all they consume." (Section IV, 57-8) These afflictions are not only prevalent in the age but they also spread like hereditary diseases and are passed on to the next generation as the repugnant legacy of the present. (P 164)

It is when the poet

sees his people forgetting and scorning the "Righteousness," the "mother of Virtues," that had guided his ancestors and had preserved them as a unique race during their nomadic days, though they were only a handful; [it is] when he sees them wallowing in "Sin," which is not only "a shame to any nation," but also the mother of evils, [that] he cries out angrily against them. (Chapter II, P 174)

In his tirade he calls them all sorts of names and compares them to all sorts of things, as explained in Chapter II. And when he so launches his outburst, he not only speaks like an angry teacher, but thunders like the old prophets. In the words of Warjri:

He did not write for any other purpose but to arouse the land and the people of his generation and the generation to come from this moral stupor. In a moment he became a Jeremiah of the Hynñiew Trep for he spoke with courage and without fear. Of course, he even forgot himself and he did not seek any praise from anyone. "Even praise is for the kid," he had said [in the preface]. Therefore, he did not spare anyone, Syiem or layman, friend or foe, when in this book he loudly

protested against any show of negligence for one's own land, its customs and traditions; when he loudly protested against corruption, greed, selfishness, and all sorts of vices. (P 80)

But when his anger subsides, Tham resumes the role of a concerned teacher. He apostrophises and invokes the spirit of his ancestors and calls upon the present to learn from their sturdy patriotism, courage, virtue and skills so that they may flourish in life. In the preface he tells the *syiems* that as political leaders their duty is:

[ba] kin kyndit bynriew bad kin sharai ia u Khun u Hajar ba bieit na ki suri: bad, ba la nang khraw ka jingmih, kin ñiah...sha ba kham lung u phlang.... (P xvii)

([to] wake up and guard the ignorant citizens from the wolves: and, because the revenue is more, to lead them... towards greener pasture....)

In making this exhortation, the poet picks on the two most important aspects of his ancestors' statesmanship, their patriotic self-sacrifice and their conscientious concern for the welfare of the race. As the poet sees the present predicament of his land "on the edge of a terrible precipice," that is, under threat of extinction from "the flash flood" of humanity, (Preface, xvii) he reminds the present set of leaders that nothing short of patriotism that is true and self-sacrificing could save the land. This is the patriotism of his forefathers, whom he extols as:

"The Tigers of the Sword, the Great Guarantors," who "Because they died, therefore they lived." So that the glories of the "Golden Age" would return, so that "Once more will the Woods reverberate, / Once more will stir the Rocks," the poet appeals for this kind of patriotism: "O Wind— 'that we may live for the Land,' / Be among us once again." (Chapter II, P 195-6)

It is this kind of patriotism, the poet teaches, that will effect a change in the mindset of the *Hynñiew Trep* people:

Parum pareh baroh ngin long,

Hapdeng jong ngi ka Hok kan shong; (Section X, 63-4)

(A prosperous race we will be,

Among us will flourish Honesty;)

It is also this that will make his people a race that could face the future unitedly:

Kumba Hyndai, kumta Lawei,

Namar ka Ri ngin lang kawei. (Section X, 47-8)

(As was the Past, so too the Time to Come,

For our Land we'll live as one.)

But by patriotism, as has been argued earlier, the poet does not mean only the selfless sacrifice to defend the land from external dangers, but the unwavering resolve to build the country from within, to make it flourish in every sphere of activity. This is what he has in mind when he pleads with God:

O Master Keeper the world over,

We'll beat, we'll make and all we'll farm,

From our Huts upwards we'll climb. (Section X, 76-8)

Thus Tham's *hiraeth* for indigenous culture and values is not only past-centred but also forward-looking. In this sense, his idea of culture is somewhat like Arnold's. Explaining what the term culture means to Arnold, M. H. Abrams³⁷ says:

...the term connotes the qualities of an open-minded intelligence— a refusal to take things on authority. But the word also connotes a full awareness of man's past and a

capacity to enjoy the best works of art, literature, history, and philosophy that have come down to us from the past. As a way of viewing life in all its aspects, including the social, political and religious, culture represents for Arnold the most effective way of curing the ills of a sick society.

For Tham, culture represents not merely “a full awareness of man’s past” and a way of “curing the ills of a sick society,” but is in fact, the only way of returning to his “Land” the prosperity and glory of the past. Tham’s culture is very close to what Guerin et al call “British Cultural Materialism.” To quote the writers:

...in Britain two trajectories developed for “culture.” One led back to the past ...culture in its sacred function as preserver of the past against the present. The second led toward the future, a socialist utopia that would...make transformation, not fixity, the rule. (P 245)

Tham combines both trajectories in his attitude to past and future and, therefore, his *hiraeth* for the culture of his forefathers is not like the *hiraeth* of those Welsh poets, who have been ridiculed by Peter Finch for what he calls, their sentimental fixation on the past. In “A Welsh Wordscape” Finch ³⁸ pokes fun at this kind of *hiraeth*:

*A history is being re-lived
a lost heritage
is being wept after
with sad eyes and dry tears.*

*A heritage
that spoke beauty to the world*

*through dirty fingernails
and endless alcoholic mists.*

*A heritage
that screamed that once,
that exploded that one holy time
and connected Wales
with the whirlpool
of the universe.*

*A heritage
that ceased communication
upon a death, and nonetheless
tried to go in living.*

*A heritage
that is taking
a long time to learn
that yesterday cannot be today
and that the world
is fast becoming bored
with language forever
in the same tone of voice.*

Having jeered at this “lost heritage,” he then solicits his countrymen for a realistic appraisal of the present without the guidance of the past:

*Look at the Welsh landscape,
look closely,
new voices must rise,
for Wales cannot endlessly remain
chasing sheep into the twilight.*

Tham’s didactic *hiraeth* on the other hand is much more balanced, and hence much more mature. It is best described in his own words:

Nga kyrsiew te, da ki ktien ba shai kdar, ia ka jingieit la ka Ri na ki Hok bad jingshai ba ngi don na myn ba rim. Kum u khyllung uba ring bor ring mynsiem haduh ban da san na ka shadem la ka kmie bad u sumar kylliang ia ka, ngi ruh ngin suh thied nyngkong sha la Hyndai. U Symbai ba hap ha jaka maw—khlem la ka hyndai— u shohsamthiah tang shu shit ka sngi. (P xv)

(I do awaken, with words that are clear, for the love of one’s own country from the Virtues and enlightenment that we have from the ancient. Like a child who absorbs his strength and energy from the mother and who takes care of her in return, we too should first sink our roots into our own Past. The Seed that falls on stony grounds— without its roots— wilts as soon as the sun turns hot.)

2. *Hiraeth* for Persons

In her book, Dora Polk talks of a “*Hiraeth* for Persons,” saying some of the most powerful poetry of *hiraeth*, “is *hiraeth* for persons. Those left behind may suffer *hiraeth* as much as those who have gone away. Stayers and leavers share this type of *hiraeth* equally.”¹ As mentioned in Chapter II, Tham too experiences a *hiraeth* for persons in some of his lyrics as well as in his major work. But Tham’s *hiraeth* is not that of the “Stayers and leavers.” It is a *hiraeth* for the dead. On the subject Polk again says: “Separation by death has produced some of the most heart-rending poetry of *hiraeth*. The elegiac tradition is very strong in Welsh literature.” (P 67)

Tham has produced at least three family elegies mourning the death of loved ones. Two of these, “*U Tiew Pathai*” (named after the flower, *U Tiew Pathai*) and “*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*” (“The Air Is Still Fragrant”) articulate his *hiraeth* for his wife, and one, “*U Sim ba la Lait*” (“The Bird That Is Free”), remembers with longing his early-departed daughter. Besides these, Tham also expresses a *hiraeth* for his mother in his major work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*.

According to Warjri, Tham’s first mourning for his wife in poetry actually began on the very day that she died. Kerila Dora Gatphoh, whom the poet had married sometime in 1895 had died in July 1908, leaving behind five children, four young sons, the eldest being 12 and the youngest being two, and a daughter of around eight years old. Warjri reports that it was “the saddest day of Tham’s life” and in his distressed *hiraeth* for his loved one he had scribbled the following lines in English:

She heard a voice I couldn't hear

She saw a hand I couldn't see

It beckoned her away

*Ah me!*²

It is not very clear if these lines are Tham's original creation. Warjri feels that they are, in which case, they would be the first ever known writing of Tham in English, and in their poignancy they strongly remind one of the "Lucy Poems" of Wordsworth, one of which had been translated by Tham into Khasi.³ But more relevant to the study, the lines also compare easily with any utterance of *hiraeth* for persons as found in Polk's compilation:

I know a lad slain by grief's pain — Mary,

Pentraeth's gold candle's dead! —

Made weak by a, woe's poison,

Gossamer face, nursed on mead.

...

Garbed, wine-lavish sun, near Cyrchell's white strand,

In a new grave's close cell;

Grieved he, since heaven is hers,

Who loved her with fierce longing. (P 70)

The quoted stanzas are from Gruffudd ap Maredudd, a famous Welsh poet of the 14th century translated by Joseph P. Clancy. The love-loss-longing syndrome is very strong and very similar in both samples, although Tham's seems to be the more desolate, for while Maredudd could go on grieving, Tham's "Ah me!" seems to shatter his entire world much as the death of Lucy had done to Wordsworth. But more will be said about Maredudd's when the elegies proper are discussed.

Tham's first elegy for his wife, "*U Tiew Pathai*" begins abruptly with the poet disclosing his state of mind:

Haba ia phi nga poi kynmaw,

Nga her sha ri ba jngai;

Shirta ngan leit shong sha ri khlaw,

Ka ri u soh u pai. (1-4)

(When I recall your memory,

To a distant world I flee;

For a lifetime shall I dwell in the wilds,

The land of fruits and sweetness.)

This is the poet's state of mind. Whenever he recalls the memory of his dead wife he is transported into the world of his imagination and memories in complete oblivion to his everyday existence. This imaginary world where the poet recreates his happy days together with his beloved, is "the wilds," secluded and protected from both intrusion and sorrow. This is the land of plenty and sweetness, where he would like to spend the rest of his life. But the next stanza presents an entirely different picture:

Kumba ka kshaid ba tap ka tdem,

Ka buhrieh la ka khmat;

Nga ruh sha kiwei pat ki snem,

Marwei ban jaw ummat. (5-8)

(Like a mist-covered waterfall,

Hiding its features;

I too, to other years,

Alone with falling tears.)

Apparently the poet is jolted back to the reality of his loss the very moment that he recreates his happy life with his wife. Although he is still lost in “other years” and is yet not quite himself, the mood-swing in this stanza is startling. This is not the spontaneous flight that he undertakes in the first stanza. This is a forced journey not to relive joyful times but to hide his sorrow from the world even as a waterfall is covered by a seasonal mist. But is the poet’s grief merely seasonal, a passing phase? The next stanza reveals:

Ka por ka her, ka mareh stet,

Man ba nga don bad phi;

Da leilei keiñ ngam lah ban klet,

Ha kiwei pat ki sngi. (9-13)

(Time flies, scuttles in a hurry,

When in your company;

Never shall I forget now,

In other days than those.)

“Time flies” speaks of the ecstasy of the poet whenever he was in the company of his wife. So intense was his joy that it seemed to him he never had enough time with his beloved. Time “scuttles in a hurry” as if it were trying to cheat him of his happiness, even before death came upon the scene. But the poet determines that neither the fleeting time nor death would ever deprive him of the idyllic existence he had with his wife. In the darkest days of his life, it will be the memory of that blissful time that would keep him alive. The fierce *hiraeth* of the poet for his wife especially comes through in the last stanza:

La sha ñiamra ruh la phi ngam,

Shi hajar sien phin mih;

U tiew-pathai ba shong sangam,

Na jngai un iai iwbih. (14-18)

(Though you have sunk beneath the earth,

A thousand times you will emerge;

U tiew-pathai on soggy ground,

From a distance bequeaths its fragrance.)

This is not merely grieving like Maredudd, who loved with “fierce longing.” This is dogged *hiraeth* that refuses to let go, and even in the face of death, refuses to accept that his beloved would be a part of him no longer. As the poet says, she would still be like “*U tiew-pathai*,” a wild flower, whose scent is so strong that it could be felt even from a distance. In other words, his wife, even from the grave, will still have a bearing on, if not preside over, the affairs of his life.

As an elegy, the poem, written in alternating tetrameter and trimeter four-line stanzas, with the rhyme scheme of *abab*, presents a situation of continuous mourning. There is no attempt by the poet to move away from his grief, only an attempt to relive the past again and again as if a thorough wallowing in his grief would serve as consolation. This poem is indeed like the modern elegy that Jahan Ramazani speaks of, the kind whose art is “not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it.”⁴

It is only with the second elegy, “*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*” (The Air Is Still Fragrant) that Tham finally seems to move away from this kind of stubborn fixation. In

his *hiraeth* for his wife, he begins this poem by recalling how he had been struck by love at first sight when he spotted her sitting alone away from the sun. He says:

*La ngam ithuh ei ei,
Ne, kaei ka kyrteng;
Dei ha ka ha pyrthei
Ba nga wad ia ka bneng. (5-8)*

(Though I know her not,
Or, what her name is;
It is in her that on earth
I seek a heaven.)

Then comparing this strange and lovely woman to “a rose hidden / In its own leaves” (9-10) and “bowing its head /in the air that’s fragrant” (11-12), he says he loves her more than even his own mother. The image of the rose hidden “In it’s own leaves” seems almost like a reproduction of Shelley’s “rose embower’d / In its own green leaves,”⁵ but while Shelley uses it to compare it to the unseen music of the “Skylark,” Tham turns it into an endearing symbol of his wife’s love and charm. And having won her love in return, he confesses:

*Dei bad ka ha pyrthei,
Ba nga mad ia ka bneng. (15-16)*

(It’s with her that on earth,
I savour a heaven.)

The poet's heaven on earth continues as he recalls the halcyon days spent together with her roaming the hills and secluded spots, amidst the sights and sounds of nature. He confirms:

Kham sha jngai na ki briew,
Dei hangta keiñ ka bneng. (23-4)
 (A little away from people,
 It is there the heaven.)

But it is in the last stanza that he really confronts the fact that his heaven on earth is but a remembrance:

U rose u dang rieh
Ha ki sla la u dieng;
U dang dem la ka khlieh,
Bad ka lyer ka dang sieng;
La ka la leit noh shawei,
Ryngkat bad ka kyrteng;
Sha kawei ka pyrthei,
Bad kawei pat ka bneng. (25-32)
 (The rose is still hidden
 In its own leaves;
 It still bows its head,
 And the air is still fragrant;
 Though she has gone far away,
 Together with her name;

To another world,
 To another heaven.)

In the first three stanzas Tham is like Milton or more appropriately, like Hardy, who has written hundreds of elegies for his wife Emma. He is like Milton, because in “Lycidas” there is the same imaginative re-enactment of the happy times that Lycidas had had together with the poet amidst “high lawns,” “rural ditties,” and “rough satyrs.” But he is more like Hardy because of Hardy’s “intense nostalgia for the earliest stages of the relationship”⁶ with Emma. Of Hardy’s elegies for his wife, Ramazani observes that there is a “close inter-relation of love and grief” (P 48) in them. But he goes on to say that Hardy’s love elegies instance “the work of melancholia, fraught as they are with recriminations and self-recriminations, their affection intertwined with hostility.” (P 48) This is the reason why, according to Ramazani, Hardy flees

“from the tumult of their recent relationship by regressing to its earliest stages... [when] Emma seems during courtship to have been the object of unambiguous love when she was a little more than Hardy’s narcissistic fantasies about her, and so Hardy tries to sew up the ragged sleeve of marriage with the thread of his earliest feeling for her. (P 48)

There is also a very “close inter-relation of love and grief” in Tham’s elegies for his wife, but the reason for his evoking the “earliest stages” of his relationship with Kerila Gatphoh is very different from Hardy’s. Tham’s love for his wife as shown in the poems or as reported by his biographer, Warjri, is not only “unambiguous” but also profound. There is no need for Tham to go back to the days of his courtship to revive his love. His doing so in the poem is to demonstrate how chaste his love was and how divine their life

together had been. But now that she has gone “To another world, / To another heaven,” the poet has also lost his “heaven on earth.” And this is a tragic loss indeed.

But for all that, the poet’s grieving in this poem is not as fierce as in the earlier elegy and his *hiraeth* is neither dogged nor violent. The slow-moving trimeter lines with the rhyme scheme of *abab* convey a sad, quiet longing, and unlike Maredudd, who grieves “since heaven is hers,” there is here even a hint of consolation that the poet’s beloved has at least gone to “another heaven.” For the poet, only his own love remains chaste as ever and “the air is still fragrant.”

The death of his wife is also the cause of sorrow in the poem “*Ka Duitara Ksiar*, (“The Golden Harp”). Though the poem itself mourns no particular death, but presents a melancholy reflection on life in general, the cause that triggers this dark musing is the fact that he was left behind like

U 'tiew tyrkhang ba sah tyrkhong

U iam pangnud weibriew. (36-7)

(A fern abandoned to wither

Alone with bitter tears.)

This is evidently a reference to the death of his wife and his heartbreak because of that tragedy. As if to confirm this, in the lines that follow he relates that he used often to wander about the foothills of Shillong Peak, to listen to the songs of its streams so that “I may put behind, / The times that have flown by.” (40-1)

Hiraeth here takes the form of self-pity and even a Hardy-like resentment that he has been abandoned by his wife alone in this world in spite of his intense love for her. It is also a *hiraeth* that longs to put the past behind, but which only succeeds in making the

poet more desolate, as it leads him to ask questions about the meaning of existence itself and the traditional consolatory formula that the elegy finds in heaven:

'Hangno bad haei sha ka bneng?'

Namar ngam lah sngewthuh. (69-70)

(‘Where and what is heaven?’

For I cannot comprehend.)

From here, the *hiraeth* of the poet for his wife finally leads him to vague premonitions about the future of his land, which in turn causes more grief. The poet’s *hiraeth* in this poem arouses longings and fears without any hope of assuaging the feelings.

The next family elegy is “*U Sim ba la Lait*” (“The Bird That Is Free”), which mourns the early death of the poet’s daughter, Anne Silla Gatphoh. As revealed by Warjri, after the loss of his wife in 1908, Tham “found much consolation in his only daughter, who was always by his side. But as if the bitter cup of his life was still not empty, she too passed away in 1926.” (P 23) Warjri also revealed that Tham had “cried like an infant during that gloomy period so that those watching him were likewise moved to tears.” (P 23-4) Tham’s distress was intensified by the fact that his daughter had left young children behind, children who still needed their mother’s care, but who would now have to be content with their grandfather’s love, for it fell upon Tham to look after them according to the matrilineal custom and the wishes of his daughter.

The poet’s grief manifests itself in the poem in the spirit of “The Bird That Is Free.” Written in hexameter four-line stanzas with the rhyme scheme of *aabb*, the poem opens with the poet recalling:

Hamar ba nga iohthiah, na ka ri ba sha jngai

Shisien nga iohsngew ia kawei ka jingruwai;

Ka shai baroh— dei ka ryndang ba thiang,

Jong ka khun ba la leit sha shiliang. (1-4)

(Just when I could sleep, from a land faraway

Once not so long I listened to a song;

It was all very clear— the melodious voice,

The only daughter who had crossed the divide.)

But this is not the violent and heart-rending anguish that he reportedly experienced in real life. Perhaps the poet had written the poem much later after the incident, for the tone here, though sad, is quite composed. *Hiraeth* in the poem takes the form of a remembrance, a tuneful song heard often in the voice of the poet's daughter. The remembered song is so lifelike that it intrudes into his sleep, but then he realises that the "only daughter" had already "crossed the divide," and becomes quickly reconciled to his loss. In fact, the poet is not only reconciled to his loss, he is tired of mourning and longs to put his dark days behind him. So he says:

Bunsien nga la iaaid ia ki sngi ba dum lyoh;

Na pneh ka mariang ruh hadien nga la ioh

Ki sngi ba pyngngad ba ka suiñ ka shai pat,

Ynda nga la thait bad ki jaw ki ummat. (5-8)

(Often I had walked the days dark with cloud;

Yet from the lap of nature I received afterwards

Days that are cool and the sky that is clear,

When tired, and down came the tears.)

While in “*U Tiew Pathai*,” the poet is “drunk with loss” (Ramazani’s phrase) and wants nothing more than to be so drunk; here he is definitely a man suffering from the hangover of that drunkenness. So he seeks for a means to lighten his heart and clear his head. He looks for this consolation and finds it in “the lap of nature.” And this consolation is effective, for he says, after watching the bees and the birds, and the streams in the hills digging their pools and bringing in their pebbles, “*Te nga phai sha la ing ba ngan sdang la ki kam*” (“Then I turned to my home to resume my own tasks”). Then in the last stanza he makes it conclusive and final:

U sim u la lait bad u ruwai na u shiah:

Balei ngan iam briew ia ki sngi ba la lah; (15-6)

(The bird is now free and it sings from the thorn:

Why should I mourn for days that have gone;)

In a John Donne-like comparison of the body as the prison of the soul, Tham refers to the dead daughter as the bird that is singing because it is free from the shackles of the flesh. And since the bird is singing and happy, its happiness is therefore not only a reason for him to be consoled but also an inspiration to him to carry on the task of living.

The family elegies of Tham form a cycle that must be read together for they present a continuous elegiac movement. As has been seen, the first one, “*U Tiew Pathai*,” makes no attempt whatsoever to move away from grief and darkness, as the poet sinks deeper and deeper into his own mourning. The second, “*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*,” makes a tentative move towards consolation. Though the poet’s emotions more or less remain fixed in the past, he also takes comfort in the thought that his beloved has gone to “another heaven.” It is in the third, however, that he becomes weary of mourning, and

when he says, “Often I had walked the days dark with cloud,” he does not only refer to the dark days following his daughter’s death but to the period of loss and extreme pain beginning with the death of his wife. In this sense, his “days dark with cloud” have been extraordinarily long, making him spiritually and psychologically exhausted to the point that he longs for an end to it all. This end to his mourning comes when he turns to nature, which gives him “Days that are cool and the sky that is clear.” Therefore he determines in the very last two lines:

Ngan wad man ka por ia ki jingruwai ba thiang,

Ba shem man ka sngi tang ha pneh ka mariang.

(I’ll seek every time for the songs that are pure,

That are found everyday only in the fold of nature.)

In his search for consolation and in his determination to find inspiration only from the natural world, Tham shows a Wordsworthian temperament. “In Tintern Abbey,” for instance, Wordsworth writes of the “blessed mood” that could be found in nature:

In which the burthen of the mystery,

In which the heavy and the weary weight

Of all this unintelligible world,

Is lightened:— that serene and blessed mood,

In which the affections gently lead us on, —

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame

And even the motion of our human blood

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep

In body, and become a living soul:

While with an eye made quiet by the power

Of Harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things. ⁷ (139-50)

Tham, who according to biographical information had read the works of Wordsworth quite extensively, seems to have in mind this “blessed mood,” which can lighten the burden of the world and bestow “the deep power of joy” in man, when he determines in the poem to seek the therapeutic songs of nature. But it must be pointed out that the poet comes to this determination not because he is a literary imitator, but because he himself had experienced first hand the redemptive power of nature.

And so Tham closes his cycle of family elegies with the only cycle of his *hiraeth* poems that finds true solace.

As mentioned earlier, Tham also expresses a *hiraeth* for his mother, who had brought him up single-handedly following the early death of his father. Tham’s love for his mother is equal to none, although in the euphoria of courtship for his wife, he had declared in “*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*,” that he loved his beloved even more than his mother. This love most strongly manifests itself in his major work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*. The poem carries a section called, “*Ka Ìng i Mei*” (“Mother’s House”) in which the poet speaks of his *hiraeth* for his life with his mother among other things. But the most powerful utterance of his *hiraeth* for his mother is found in the last stanza of the poem:

Na khlieh ki Kshaid na rud ki Thwei,

Khadduh nga poi ngam tip shaei:

Na Lum Shyllong, Kyllang, Symper

Ko Ri na Pha, shano ngan her;

Ynda nga poi ha ñng U Blei,

Nyngkong ngan wad hangno i Mei. (79-84)

(From crests of Waterfalls beside the river Pools,

I know not where at last I'll be:

From Shyllong, Kyllang, Symper mounts,

O Land from You, where shall I flee;

When I reach the house of God,

First I will seek my Mother where.)

Exhausted by his constant worrying over the future of his land and his people, he anticipates his own death and attempts to seek his consolation in the final reunion with his dearly loved mother in the house of God.

In closing the discussion on Tham's family elegies it must be observed that his is very different from the modern family elegies of modern poets like Sylvia Plath and the American poets like Robert Penn Warren, Van Duyn, William Heyen and James Wright, who display not only irreverence but anger against their deceased relations. These poets "duel fiercely with the dead, refusing to temper their belligerence and sometimes deliberately inflaming it."⁸ But if he is to be compared at all, then it must be said that Tham most resembles Anne Bradstreet, "the mother of the American elegy,"⁹ who wrote elegies for her father, mother, and several grandchildren. Like Bradstreet, Tham too is encomiastic and displays nothing but love for the dead.

3. *Hiraeth* for Place and Childhood

Dora Polk locates “*Hiraeth* for Place: for Hearth and Village” and “*Hiraeth* for Youth” in different chapters in her book. It has been observed, however, that *hiraeth* for place and *hiraeth* for youth or childhood are so closely intertwined that it would be next to impossible to separate the two. This is the case in Polk’s book as may be illustrated by the following passage:

*When I was at home, my chief pleasure was to carve,
Whittling and whittling at my father’s snug hearth,
While my sister knitted stockings, and my mother with her flax
Kept spinning and spinning on the floor’s spotless flags.
Lure me what may, it is my natural way
To fly, growing blithe, on the wings of hiraeth,
Towards the old home, clean, modest and warm, the best in the land.*¹

The poet grows blithe “on the wings of *hiraeth*,” but this *hiraeth* is not simply for “the old home,” though it is “the best in the land.” It is also, if not chiefly, for the poet’s “chief pleasure” when he was young and living in his parents’ home. But that is not all. The poet’s *hiraeth* is also for the warm presence of his sister and mother and for the simple joys of home in youth or childhood. That *hiraeth* for place and the time gone by cannot be divorced is even more convincingly illustrated in this extract:

*Great is my grief for her,
Anglesey is like Zion to me;
My life will not be comforted*

Without Anglesey, despite every song or chord.

John Owen explains the passage:

It matters not how much singing or how much dancing there may be, says Goronwy, my soul's lament for Anglesey will not be silenced. Why for Anglesey? Anglesey is quite a commonplace and unromantic land, its bones protruding through its flesh in many a place. It has no expansive, fertile valleys, or romantic dales, or wide rivers, or high mountains. Why should the poet bruise his soul with hiraeth for Anglesey? Ah! it was in Anglesey that he was born and raised, it was there that his mother taught him to talk, it was there that the paths were which he had walked as a child. And he had to leave Anglesey for Liverpool and London and America without ever seeing his dear old country again, and hiraeth for it remained a terrible bitterness in his soul.²

If *hiraeth* for place and childhood are closely entwined in Polk's book, then this is even more so in Tham's poetry. The *hiraeth* of Goronwy as explicated by John Owen is exactly the kind of tangled *hiraeth* that the sub-chapter will examine as it reveals itself in Tham's major work and short lyrics.

In the chapter on "*Hiraeth* for Place..." Polk begins by asking: "What are the losses which cause *hiraeth*? Most often, of course, it is the home that is missed..." (P 17) Polk defines the concept of "home" in this manner:

The concept of "home" (tref) includes more than the hearth of the kin (cartref), or the old homestead (hendref). Depending on the degree of removal, the separated one may also pine for home village (pentref), home town (tref), or the larger

locality (cantref), and no amount of advancement in distant places can compensate for such forms of hiraeth. (P 18)

For Tham, “home” would mean first of all the house of his mother, *cartref* or *hendref*; his home village of Sohra, *pentref*; and the entire area making up the larger locality of *Ri Sohra*, *cantref*. And as shall be seen, when he is talking of his “home,” he is also talking of his childhood and the memories of things he used to see and do when he was a child.

In *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, Tham begins Section VII with a *hiraeth* for “*Ka İng i Mei*” (“Mother’s House”). This is what he says:

Sha la ka ïng, sha la ka Kper,

Ka ryngai ki ummat, shah ngan her;

Kumba ka Skei sha la dien trai,

Ka phai kylla khadduh ia wai;

Ynda nga lwait sawdong Pyrthei,

Lano ngan poi sha ïng i Mei. (1-6)

(To my house, to my Bower,

The vanished land of tears, let me wander;

As the Deer to its own tracks,

At the very last it turns back;

After I’ve strayed around the Earth

When will I reach my Mother’s house.)

H. W. Sten explains this *hiraeth* in these words:

When Soso [Tham] wrote this section he was already more than 60 years of age and therefore, to recapture the knowledge and the things he had experienced in

*the past he has to follow the example of the deer, to turn back to his "own tracks" that he may gather all these again in the alcoves of his mind.*³

In the grip of this sudden *hiraeth* for his mother's house, this is exactly what he does, as he narrates his life as a child in Sohra, where his mother's house was. He describes how he had been brought up amidst idyllic nature in a very traditional kind of upbringing. Among his many activities as a child he lists "*riam sim*" ("bird-catching"), his games among his brothers and sisters, and the traditional children songs like "*San ka Kong 'Ri, pat ka Kong A*"⁴ they used to sing. The poet devotes one whole stanza to "bird-catching" as he depicts how different varieties of birds would "*kiew na riat,*" that is, come up from the gorges to flock to their favourite fruit trees like "*ki Lapohiat*" in the sanctified woods.

It is not without reason that the poet talks of "bird-catching" with such *hiraeth*. This is a much-loved pastime of the people of Sohra, a community event, where men, women, and children would all be involved. A quotation from another poem on Sohra, or Cherra as it is known among non-natives, would perhaps throw more light on the subject:

All wintry night

We equipped for the trip.

At four, before the crack of dawn,

Home-made torches in hand

We marched in throngs

...

To Cherra's far away forests,

...

Where in serene little pools,

*Bathed with the first rosy rays,
 A medley of melodies greeted us.
 Where colourful crowds of birds
 Soulfully sang, danced and hopped,
 Took their ritual baths
 Played and pruned in the sun.*

...

There we laid our traps,⁵

The sad *hiraeth* of the poet for this custom is reflected in the line, “*Mynta jar jar ki sngap kynjah*” (12, “But now quiet they make no sound”). Is this custom dead? Are the birds no more that everything is silent? To the poet, leading the life of an itinerant schoolteacher as had been shown in Chapter I, and later forced by circumstances to stay put in Shillong, the custom and the birds were certainly no more. Hence the *hiraeth*.

But the most important and most endearing part of his childhood is seen in these words:

Nangne nyngkong nga nang ban ruwai

Shuwa ban pra iwei shawei,

Nangne ngi tip shaphang U Blei. (16-8)

(It was from here I first learnt how to sing

Before we scattered one to another

It was from here we learnt of God.)

This exemplifies the Khasi saying that the hearth is the first place of learning, where many things are taught, from legends and children’s songs to the traditional moral and

spiritual values. The line “from here I first learnt how to sing” might very well refer to the poet’s love of poetry and songs, which had been imbued early on in the hearth of his mother’s house. And of the values taught there, two things are underscored, the unity within the family and the knowledge of God. While the knowledge of God and reverence for Him remained with Tham throughout his life as borne out by his own exhortations in the poem, it seems that time had not been very kind to him and his family, who had to scatter into different places in search of livelihood. This is another cause of the poet’s poignant *hiraeth*, who, missing this kind of family gathering, longs for the return of that life in his mother’s house.

The poet’s *hiraeth* for Sohra as a *cantref* and the experiences of childhood are even more strongly manifest in his lyrics from *Ka Duitara Ksiar*, including “*Ki Kshaid ba Rymphum*” (“The Cascading Waterfalls”) and “*Ki Sngi ba la Leit Noh*” (“The Days that Are Gone”).

In “*Ki Kshaid ba Rymphum*,” the poet’s *hiraeth* for Sohra is an indirect one, expressed through his *hiraeth* for the rain and its worldwide reputation. In beautifully rhymed, highly rhythmic four-line hexameter stanzas, the poet describes in great graphic details the onslaught of the Sohra thunderstorm and its devastating effect.

As the poet narrates, trees would collapse as forests swing violently to and fro; hills would growl; the night would groan; and the overhanging rocks would tumble down the precipices, “*Ba la poi ka aiom ban sa ngam ka Surma*” (“That the season for Surma to sink has arrived”). And this season is the season of the Sohra “*eriong*,” the dark tempest, making people in Sohra and the adjoining areas feel “*rit mynsiem*” (“faint-hearted”), as the rain rolls down in cascading waterfalls to wreak even greater havoc in

the plains of river Surma in present-day Bangladesh. This is the season of darkness for weeks on end when:

Bad ka sngi ruh kam don kaba mih ne ba sep;

Tang teng-teng ka jngoh na u lyoh uba rben,

Ia ka duriaw ba lieh bad ki kshaid kiba kmen. (22-4)

(The sun too is not there that rises or sets;

Only now and then would it peep from the cloud that is dense,

At the sea frothing white and the gleeful waterfalls.)

The Sohra of the poet as presented here is all water, wind, cloud, darkness and terrorising tempests. So why should the poet experience a *hiraeth* for Sohra? And why for the relentless rain, which according to Nigel Jenkins had “dismayed even the webfooted Welsh”⁶ and driven “many a demented Company [British East India Company] wallah to suicide?”⁷ The answer has been supplied by Goronwy’s *hiraeth* as explicated by Owen above. But a complete insight into Tham’s *hiraeth* for Sohra is provided by the poet himself in the other lyric, “*Ki Sngi ba la Leit Noh.*”

Tham begins this poem with a statement of intention: “*Ngan leit sha ri Sohra ban kiew sha ki lum*” (“I will go to the province of Sohra to be among the hills”), and then proceeds to describe what that province is like. According to him it is a land of astonishing beauty, home to rare flora and fauna, a land of songs and music, and most of all, of “*ka jingshynrang*” and “*ka akor,*” that is, of traditional valour and the famed Sohra etiquette.

In the second stanza the poet sings of the renowned Sohra market, “*ĭewbah*” (“Big Market”), that used to be a thriving trade link between the plains of Bangladesh,

the gorges of *ri War* (War areas bordering Bangladesh) and the rest of the Khasi Hills. When the big market day comes, the din of commerce could be heard all through the region and the fame of the market would spread to the length and breadth of the land of the *Hynñiew Trep* people comprising, as shown in the poem, the sub-tribes of Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam and the extinct Diko. But what the poet most misses is another kind of din that comes with “*ĭewbah.*” This is the din from the exultant shouts of the archery game, talked about in Sub-chapter I. W. R. Laitflang tells us:

*In the old days they used to hold the game of archery during the sngi-iew-lyngka [second market day of the Khasi week] and continues from market day to market day according to the terms and conditions agreed upon by the two sides.*⁸

Tham, however, goes farther into the past than Laitflang, suggesting that the game of archery had actually started from Sohra and its “*ĭewbah.*” That is why he writes:

Ka riew ka jingrisa ban ieng ka dawbah!

Ka ngam sha ki pubon, na suiñ ruh ka par,

Sha u Khasi, u Pnar, u Bhoi, ne u War. (7-8)

(It resonates the cheering that the contest may be won!

It sinks into the caverns, from the sky too it creeps,

To a Khasi, a Pnar, a Bhoi, or a War.)

The cheering that the poet speaks of is that of the supporters of the two contending villages or groups, who would normally raise a huge medley of noise, prompting their champions to bring out their best and chanting mantras to “*Pyneh rngiew*” or strengthen their essence and, therefore, enhancing their luck. The resonance of this tumultuous

cheering throughout the Khasi-Jaiñtia Hills means the spread of the game to every nook and corner of the land.

The third stanza sings of the Sohra summer overflowing its musical chasms with roaring waterfalls, and shattering the silence of the gorges of “*ri War*” with the echoes of the boulders. Then almost in the same breath the poet also refers to autumn where “*ka lyer ba hin hin*” (“the breeze that’s tender”) blows among “*Ki tmier*” (“cliffs’ edges”), making the heart forever youthful. What the poet is trying to do here is to capture the memories of two endearing aspects of nature in Sohra. One is the rain feeding its brimful cataracts, and the other, the end of the season of the rain and the beginning of a favourite tradition of the people of the region: outdoor picnics on “cliffs’ edges.”

In the fourth stanza the poet suddenly turns away from the physical aspects of Sohra to remembering the relations and friends:

Na ki kur bad ki lok la jlang nga la jah,

La kiwei ki la leit noh, kiwei ki dang sah; (13-4)

(Long have I departed from relations and friends,

Though others have gone, others linger on;)

The poet misses his relations and friends, living and dead, even as he misses his *cantref* as a whole:

Te ka burom ka Sohra bad ki duriaw rupa,

Sa shisien, sa shisien, ki phalang pat ha nga. (15-6)

(Thus the honour of Sohra and its silver seas,

Once more, once more, came dazzling to me.)

When these memories “come dazzling” back to him the poet observes:

Te ki sngi ba la leit noh, ki shlei bad ki shlei,

Ngam tip ia ka jingsdang kin kut ruh haei; (17-8)

(Thus the days that are gone, they surge and they surge,

I don't know the beginning or where they would end;)

The poet seems to be coming to a tranquil conclusion with these lines. Even though he neither knows the beginning nor the end of his longing for the days that are gone, he seems to be quite reconciled to the situation. But then the stanza makes an abrupt turn:

Tang kane nga tip, ba bunsien nga kwah—

Sa shisien, sa shisien ban long u khynnah. (19-20)

(Only this I do know, that often I do want—

Once more, once more to be a boy.)

The concluding lines take the reader by surprise and what seems to be a calm acceptance of, as the saying goes, “gone is gone and never will return,” becomes an intense longing for childhood.

The reasons for the poet's *hiraeth* for Sohra are then clearly set forth in this poem. First of all his *hiraeth* is for the simple pleasures of a natural lifestyle, as indicated by the words “to be among the hills.” But this is not as simple a statement as it seems. Why would the poet wish to go to Sohra to climb its hilltops? This is actually one of the familiar diversions of the people there,⁹ and it is not simply the outdoor picnics on “cliffs' edges” but signifies a variety of activities. To go to the hills in Sohra may mean a leisurely stroll to enjoy the panoramic view not only of the plateau of the region but also the sweeping plains of Bangladesh, with their mystical charm in the shimmering distance. It may mean going to the forests and the sanctified woods for bird catching, fruit picking,

and the gathering of flowers, wild plants and herbs. It may mean the collecting of wild honey from crevice hives, or going to the hill streams for a bath and a swim, or for fishing with rods or bamboo cones and contraptions.

Apart from these activities, there is the game of archery for which the poet has such love as discussed in Sub-chapter I. There is *Ĵewbah* itself, a conglomeration of all sorts of things and people, a day that everyone looks forward to as the most important event of their lives; and of course, there is the breath-taking beauty of the Sohra landscape, of which the poet is so enamoured. On the subject of the poet's love for nature, Warjri writes, "Soso Tham had spent most of his childhood in Sohra... He had lived among the beautiful hills and valleys and the green woodlands. The beauty of nature had captured his imagination...." ¹⁰ For a poet who had such love for nature these simple pleasures would have meant a great deal and therefore provide good reasons for his profound *hiraeth* for his *cantref*.

Warjri provides some more reasons. On Sohra and its reputation he says, "Sohra is the fountainhead of Christianity, the origin of literacy and education, the mother of the Khasi language... and the teacher of the Khasi etiquette." (P 7) On its scenic splendour he observes that besides being a land famous for its legends and myths, it is, especially during Tham's time, a place famous for its wild flowers, its thick woodlands, and its waterfalls, each of which has its own tale to tell. He continues by saying that "this land of flowers and the rain had attracted [in those days] visitors from all over the world" including famous personalities like "the Vice-Roy and Governor General of India, Lord Willingdon and Countess Willingdon, who had visited the place on 4 October 1933," and "another Vice-Roy, Lord Linlithgow who had gone there on 28 July 1937." (P 9)

The worldwide fame of Sohra is a source of great pride for the poet, who sings, “Thus the honour of Sohra and its silver seas / Once more, once more, come dazzling to me.” This utterance represents the poet’s proud and warm-hearted *hiraeth* for his place of birth. But the most important reason for the poet’s *cantref hiraeth* is his sad longing for the relatives and friends both dead and living. The companionship of these people with whom he had spent his childhood, the people who had shared the happiest part of his life, is now denied to him since fate has scattered them “one to another.” This longing stirs “a terrible bitterness in his soul” and it leads the poet to another even more “terrible” and even more intense *hiraeth*: “Once more, once more to be a boy.”

Explaining this kind of *hiraeth* Polk says, “No *hiraeth* is more forlorn than pining for lost youth” (P 98) or childhood. Tham’s *hiraeth* for *cantref*, intertwined with his *hiraeth* for childhood, has thus produced one of the most forlorn and poignant of *hiraeths* to be found in his poetry.

But no explanation of this *hiraeth* can be complete without drawing a comparison between Tham’s “*Ki Sngi ba la Leit Noh*” and W. B. Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” Both poems express a *hiraeth* for the poets’ *cantref*: for “*ri Sohra*” in the case of Tham and for “Innisfree,” a lake island in Lough Hill, Sligo, Ireland, in the case of Yeats. And both begin with the poets’ similar resolution to go to their *cantref*. While Tham opens the poem by saying “I will go to the province of Sohra to be among the hills” and follows this with a description of the place as he remembers from childhood, Yeats begins:

I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree,

And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:

*Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (1-4)*

Like Tham he follows this with a description of Innisfree:

*And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings. (5-8)*

In both Tham's and Yeats's, the real reason for their resolution to "arise and go" to their *cantref* is given in the last stanza. While Tham articulates a *hiraeth* for Sohra because he would like to relive the life of innocent pleasures of childhood amidst idyllic surroundings, Yeats reasserts his resolution:

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core. (9-12)*

Without resorting to the explanation of Yeats's *Autobiographies* as to how he had written the poem,¹¹ it could clearly be seen that Yeats suffers from the same kind of *hiraeth* ("... for always night and day / I hear lake water lapping...") that distresses Tham. This *hiraeth* is both a despondent longing to forget the "the coarse and noisy world of soulless existence"¹² as experienced by them in their respective cities of residence, and a desperate yearning to go back to the idealised state of the past, and more particularly, to the spot that symbolises that ideal state. This spot is Sohra for Tham and Innisfree for Yeats.

4. *Hiraeth* and Nature

In the chapter on “*Hiraeth* and Nature” Dora Polk observes that the Welshman, with his keen feeling for nature, “has a way of reading in natural objects the ‘signatures’ of his longing, or projecting his *hiraeth* onto animals and birds.” (P 72) Having observed this she simply provides numerous samples of this technique whereby the poets make use of nature to articulate their *hiraeth* for various themes. Some of these samples are for longing of a general kind:

Singer of deathless song, longing in its voice,

Soaring with the motion

*Eloquent cuckoo in Aber Cuawg.*¹

Some are for love:

My love is like a cloudy thunderclap on the horizons of my longing.

*I do not hear the rustle of the wind in the corn, the lamb in the orchard, the scream in the night; I cannot digest the summer moon and its crumbs the stars without remembering my love, how she used to be sad on the scattered horizons of my longing.*²

Some are for love and the country:

II. *Swallow, swallow, flitting so joyously*

from eaves of my house

when thou returnest over the waves of the ocean

carry my love to my dear maid;

Longing, longing (Hiraeth, hiraeth) fills my heart

to see my darling Gwen, colour of the rose;

III. *Thou Sun that seest on thy journey*

Every corner of the world,

Tell me, if thou hast the language

How fares my sheltered Wales? ³

Some are for place:

*The eighty years of her eyes stared at the nostalgic sun of Pen Nant as it set,
drawing the sky after it to the heather bed of the unimpassioned mountain. ⁴*

Some are for home:

*I had started on my journey and had been escorted part of the way. Superficial
smiles of bravery had accompanied the farewells, and I had walked the level mile
or more to Pont Cae'r Gors before the real descent began. Near this bridge a new
stream starts flowing to the sea, although the sea itself is not in sight. That
September day the wind was blowing from the sea to the mountain, and on the top
of the hill it came strongly and unashamedly into my face. My eyes became moist.
In a flash I realised enviously in what direction it was blowing. I too, almost saw
the wind that day. ⁵*

Polk ends her samples with this all-embracing *hiraeth*:

The sun knows, the moon knows,

The sea's angry waves know,

The wind knows full well

That the hiraeth will never lift from my heart. ⁶

This is the kind of study the sub-chapter will undertake in the sense that it will examine how Tham reads in natural objects the “signatures” of his longing, or how he projects his *hiraeth* onto animals, birds and objects of nature. But in doing this, the discussion will also analyse how Tham has made use of nature to externalise his *hiraeth* both in his *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* and in his short lyrics from *Ka Duitara Ksiar*. It must be noted, however, that this is not a study of Tham’s nature poetry in its totality, which would require another thesis, but only an examination of the kind stated above.

That Tham like any Welshman has a keen feeling for nature can be gleaned from the titles he has given to most of the sections of *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*. The first section, for instance, being a proem, is titled “*Ki Symboh Ksiar*” (“The Golden Grains”). The second, signifying the “Golden Age,” is, “*Ka Persyntiew*” (“The Flower Garden”); the third, signifying the evolution of life on earth, is, “*Pyrthei Mariang*,” (“Earth Nature” or “Natural World”); the fourth, signifying the spreading evil, is, “*U Lyoh*,” (“The Cloud”); the fifth, signifying the supremacy of evil, is, “*U Rngiew*” (“The Shadow”); the sixth, signifying repentance and the return of virtue, is, “*U Simpyllieng*,” (“The Rainbow”); the eighth, representing a search for the origins of the race, is, “*Ka Meirilung*” (“The Motherland”); the ninth, dealing with the social mores of the race, is, “*Lum Lamare*” (“Lamare Hill” or “Hill of Lamare”); and the tenth, signifying the return of the “Age of Innocence,” is, “*Ka Aiom Ksiar*” (“The Golden Age” or “The Golden Season”).

Besides these, the titles of most poems of *hiraeth* from *Ka Duitara Ksiar* are nature-based as “*U Tiew Pathai*” (named after the flower, *U Tiew Pathai*), “*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*” (“The Air Is Still Fragrant”) “*U Sim ba la Lait*” (“The Bird That Is Free”),

“*U Trot*” (named after the dog *U Trot*), “*U Phlang Jyrngam*” (“The Green Grass”) and “*Ki Kshaid ba Rymphum*” (“The Cascading Waterfalls”). These, and the biographical information quoted earlier, that Tham had grown up amidst nature and had developed a strong attachment to it, should be clear evidence that the poet does indeed have a very keen feeling for nature. But just how steeped in the natural world Tham’s poetry is, and just how effectively he makes use of nature to express his *hiraeth* may be understood only by tracing the progression of thought in his major work, and then looking at the lyrics of *hiraeth* already examined.

In *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, Tham seeks the enlightenment of his land from “the Virtues and enlightenment that we have from the ancient,” (preface P, xv) that is the time of his ancestors, and attempts to teach the philistines among his contemporaries of these virtues and enlightenment. He begins by talking of the creation myths and how the *Hynñiew Trep* had descended to turn the world to “the Garden of Fruits and Flowers.” Experiencing a *hiraeth* for this pristine state of civilisation and the mythic colonisation of the earth, he describes it as: “All that Land that wilderness / Reverberated, and, the stones resounded.” (Section II, 29-30) The “stones resounded,” that is, with the ecstasies of that glorious living. So smitten is the poet by the conjured image of that lost “Golden Age” that he determines to bring it back to life: “Once more will the Woods reverberate, / Once more will stir the Rocks.” (Section II, 59-60)

When the poet speaks of the “Golden Age” and the innocence of his ancestors he uses this symbol from nature: “God among the Flower Garden, / Descended to take a stroll with man.” (Section III, 35-6) Emphasising the virtues of his forefathers he says: “East, West, South, North / It was a Land where lived the gods.” (Section II, 53-4) The

loss of this much-adored “Golden Age” of innocence and happiness is narrated by the poet through the myth of “The Bull” as the symbol of the beginning of adversity and “*Diengiei*,” the “Tree of Gloom” as the symbol of evil and the powers of darkness, as against the myth of “Mount *Sohpet Bneng*,” the symbol of man’s holy communion with God. This period of lament is described with images from nature as the cloud of evil spreads:

Na khlieh ki Lum sawdong pyrthei,

Na pdeng u briew la jah U Blei. (Section IV, 17-8)

(From Mountaintops around the world,

From among men had vanished God.)

God had vanished from the world of man because man had turned his own heart into a “smithy” where “Numberless fiendish thoughts” (Section IV, 73) are formed. And when he is left bereft of divine guidance, he becomes like “the bee without its Queen,” (Section IV, 19) groping blindly about the world. In this blind groping man falls deeper and deeper into the quagmire of greed and evil, and the poet, in his extreme distress, exclaims: “Are there caverns darker more terrible / Than those in the Heart of man?” (Section IV, 89-90) Greed turns man into a never-satiated leech:

Namar shi kham u Sbai Rupa,

Baroh u briew un am shirta; (Section IV, 97-8)

(For a fistful of the Silver Piece,

Every man will suckle endlessly;)

And evil first turns him into a “Tiger” and a “Bear” and then into a “Fiend” feeding on himself until he becomes the instrument of his own destruction: “Gone is the Flower *Amirphor*, / It stays only the *Ekjakor*.” (Section VI, 11-2)

When the flower of life is withered to be replaced by the monstrous *Ekjakor*, man in his *hiraeth* for the “Age of Innocence” finally turns to make his first appeal to God: “Drained is the Water, only the Crust, / ‘Keeper, Creator, hearken from above!’” (Section VI, 29-30) And when man turns to God, finally his redeemer comes in the form of a “Rooster,” who promises:

Hark from the Cave of the Sanctified Leaf,

The Sacrificial Rooster, the Great Covenantor:

‘Till the day that comes the One,

All right,’ he said, ‘let me bear all:

So you, a man, suffer no more

Before the Master Creator evermore.’ (Section VI, 73-8)

With the offer of the “Rooster” to be the willing scapegoat for man’s evil ways, the world changes:

The World blooms bright and wonderful;

Safety’s here no more is Fear;

Terror has sunk beneath the Tree of Gloom,

With it the demons the fiends of doom; (Section VI, 85-8)

But this is not the end of the poet’s *hiraeth* for the ways of his forefathers. Having spoken of their spiritual life with a *hiraeth* that is love, praise and lament; and having worked out a redemption for the people of his generation; he now talks of his *hiraeth* for

the other aspects of their life. Here too, as he had done earlier, he continues to read in natural objects the “signatures” of his longing, and to project his *hiraeth* onto objects of nature. Experiencing a sudden *hiraeth* for his mother’s house, he says, for instance:

To my house, to my Bower,

The vanished land of tears, let me wander;

As the Deer to its own tracks,

At the very last it turns back;

After I’ve strayed around the Earth

When will I reach my Mother’s house. (Section VII, 1-6)

Speaking of the social system and the organisation of the clan, the poet compares it with the social structure of bees: “Thus like a Bee in its crevice Hive, / The Queen the Mother encloses all.” (Section VII, 41-2) The poet is full of praise for this structure, which has not only its queen and mother to care for it, but also “The Maternal, Paternal Relations,” “The Uncles the Fathers” and “The Great Grandmother” sitting around “The Circle of the Hearth.” The hearth is also the “smithy” where the “Uncles the Fathers” forge their social and economic systems, their religion and their politics. Because all these begin to take shape in the mother’s hearth, the poet describes it as, “the Fire in the Hearth.”

The poet is so taken with his forefathers enlightened ways that in Section VIII he experiences a sudden and desperate *hiraeth* for the origins of his race. Projecting this onto mythic creatures, he asks:

You, the children of the Dawn,

Tell me, Mother-Raven, Mother-Hawk,

When you circle round the world,

From where the Roots of our Land? (1-4)

Then looking for the family tree of the *Hynñiew Trep*, he calls upon the primordial wind: “O Wind that bears the seed of Pines, / Where is the Tree weathered and vast?” (Section VIII, 7-8) But these are questions with no answer, for the history of the *Hynñiew Trep* people is hidden behind the dark impenetrable mist of time. This, therefore, is a *hiraeth* without hope, and for consolation, the poet turns to praising the sterling qualities of his ancestors, saying: “If only we could be as fierce, / Better if we had emerged from Caves of Bears.” (Section VIII, 17-8)

In the same section he refers to the democratic system of governance as laid down by his forefathers, and in his praise and longing for the magnificence of the traditional *Dorbar Hima* or Council of State, he waxes lyrical: “And so, rounded as Marigold, It goes the Council of the State.” (Section VIII, 121-6) And thus, having dived deep into the past to learn of the ways of his forefathers, the poet is filled with wonder at how incredibly enlightened in every sphere of life these ways are. So impressed is he that in his awe-struck *hiraeth*, he addresses the mountain of *Bah-Bo-Bah-Kong* and asks: “And now, you say, *Bah-Bo-Bah-Kong*, / What gods are these who dwell on you!” (Section IX, 119-20)

While he is full of praise for his ancestors, he denounces the insensitivity of the present, comparing them to things worse than wood and stone:

The Honourable the Learned

Here they speak in different ways;

From the hills within the shade

The stone the wood would speak the human tongue. (Section I, 45-8)

To his mind only patriotism that is pure, profound, selfless, and enterprising, that is the patriotism of his forefathers, could bring back prosperity and redemption. Therefore, he falls back on nature and calls on the wind: “O Wind— ‘that we may live for the Land,’ / Be among us once again.” (Section X, 49-50) And in his forward-looking *hiraeth*, he promises:

O Master Keeper the world over,

We'll beat, we'll make and all we'll farm,

From our Huts upwards we'll climb. (Section X, 75-8)

But this does not really bring him comfort, and so having done his duty as an awakener, he turns to anticipating his own death and in his wretched *hiraeth* seeks answers from “Shyllong, Kyllang, Symper mounts,” the most famous landmarks of his land, as to where he would be when he takes leave from his beloved land.

In the *hiraeth* poems in *Ka Duitara Ksjar* Tham adopts the same technique of externalising his *hiraeth* through the objects of nature. In “*U Tiew Pathai*,” saying that it would be impossible for him to forget his deceased wife, he uses the image of the wild flower, ending the poem with: “*U tiew-pathai* on soggy ground, / From a distance bequeaths its fragrance.” (16-8) In “*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*” (“The Air is Still Fragrant”), it is the poet’s remembrance and longing for his loved one, his wife, that is really “Still Fragrant.” But in “*U Sim ba la Lait*” (“The Bird That Is Free”), he grows weary of living his life in perpetual mourning over the death of both wife and daughter, and thus consoles his *hiraeth*: “The bird is now free and it sings from the thorn: / Why should I mourn for days that have gone.” (17-8)

In his *hiraeth* for place and childhood, one observes how he speaks of turning back to his mother's house as if he were a deer turning back on its tracks. In "*Ki Sngi ba la Leit Noh*" ("The Days that Are Gone"), he explains most of the reasons why he wishes to turn back to his mother's house and home village. He does this by using the landscape of Sohra: "Thus the honour of Sohra and its silver seas, / Once more, once more, come dazzling to me." (11-2)

Tham is thus no less a bard of "*Hiraeth* and Nature" than the Welsh poets quoted by Polk. In the chapter dealing with "Chief Bard of *Hiraeth* and Nature," Polk designates Dafydd ap Gwilym as the chief bard of *hiraeth*, "who sang of it in love, lamentation and irony." (P 80) Tham too has sung of *hiraeth* in all of these and more. He has included in his songs a *hiraeth* for his language and literature; for indigenous culture and values; for persons, childhood and places; for hearth and village; for his homeland; for the "Golden Age;" and even for a mythic and legendary past. Therefore, if Gwilym is the chief bard of *hiraeth* for the Welsh, Soso Tham is the chief bard of *hiraeth* for the Khasis.

While examining Tham's treatment of nature as a medium of projecting his *hiraeth*, the influence of *Aesop's Fables* is visible everywhere. Tham, who had translated the entire collection of Aesop's fables, seems to have been inspired by this book in using the art of conveying his profound poetic messages through natural symbols. At any rate, Warjri, his biographer, believes this to be the case when he states: "Aesop was a great influence on him and even when he speaks about trees, hills and streams, it is in fact, about lessons on human life that he teaches." (P 37) But be it as it may, this only makes *hiraeth* and nature all the more inseparable in his poetry.

ENDNOTES

1. *Hiraeth* for Indigenous Culture and Values

¹ Meic Stephens (ed.) The New Companion to the Literature of Wales. See endnote 3, Chapter I. 105.

² Tony Conran (ed. & trans), Welsh Verse. See endnote 5, Chapter I. 68-9.

³ F. W. Watt, ed., Matthew Arnold: Selected Poems and Prose. See endnote 37 (ii), Chapter II. 7.

⁴ I. Nongbri, Ka Histori ka Ri Hynñiewtrep. See endnote 30, Chapter I. 8.

⁵ Nigel Jenkins, Gwalia in Khasia (Llandysul: Gomer, 1995) 41.

⁶ The observation is based on the following:

- i. Hughlet Warjri, U Soso Tham bad ki Jingtrei jong u. See endnote 29, Chapter I. 7 & 76.
- ii. Nigel Jenkins, 5 above. P 59
- iii. R. Tokin Rymbai, "Evolution of Modern Khasi Society," Khasi Heritage. (Shillong: Seng Khasi, 1979) 56.

⁷ Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The Exile of the Mind," A Sense of Exile, ed. Bruce Benneth (Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1988) 11.

⁸ See 6 (iii) above. 67.

⁹ Soso Tham, preface to Ka Duitara Ksiar (Shillong: Primrose Gathphoh, 1979) ii.

¹⁰ Nigel Jenkins, "Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis." See endnote 42 (v), Chapter I. 64.

¹¹ See endnote 42 (i-v), Chapter I.

¹² As quoted by Rymbai from the poem “*Ri Khasi*” by Reverend John Roberts. See 6 (iii) above. 58.

¹³ Tirot Sing, *Syiem* (King) of Nongkhlaw in the Khasi Hills, and Kiang Nangbah, warrior from Jaiñtia Hills, had fought against the British for the freedom of their land, much before the Indian struggle for independence.

¹⁴ As observed earlier, Dora Polk’s *A Book Called Hiraeth* is the only compilation of its kind on *hiraeth*, hence frequent references to her work will be made from here on. The present quotation is from page 83. For details see endnote 1, Chapter I.

¹⁵ All quotations already quoted earlier will be in English only.

¹⁶ Alan R. Velie, ed., *American Indian Literature: An Anthology* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979) 9.

¹⁷ Wilfred L. Guerin et al, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. See endnote 6, Chapter I. 263.

¹⁸ Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, “Khasi Myths and Folktales: The Lost Manuscript.” See endnote 74, Chapter II. 166-8. Also see H. Elias, endnote 73(ii), Chapter II. 84-6.

¹⁹ Sumar Sing Sawian is one of the most respected living scholars on Khasi culture today. The explication of the stories are based on his latest book *Ki Khun ki Hajar na Jingkieng Ksiar*. See endnote 98, Chapter II. 1-31.

²⁰ The myths are based on Nongkynrih’s “Khasi Myths and Folktales.” See endnote 74, Chapter II. 157-170.

²¹ H. Onderson Mawrie, “God and Man,” *Khasi Heritage* (Shillong: Seng Khasi, 1979) 86-8.

²² S. S. Majaw is a well-known critic of Tham. See Ki Syrwet Jingshai, endnote 71 (iii), Chapter II. 36.

²³ H. W. Sten, Na ka Hyndai sha ka Lawei. See endnote 71 (i). Chapter II. 12-74.

²⁴ Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, “The Man-eating Serpent, *U Thlen*.” See endnote 73, Chapter II. 142-148. Also see H. Elias, endnote 73 (ii), Chapter II. 87-95

²⁵ See 18 above. 168.

²⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Journey of the Magi,” The Siren’s Song, ed. David Murdoch (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1971) 62-4.

²⁷ S. P. Sen Gupta, ed., Matthew Arnold: Selected Poems. See endnote 4 (v), Chapter II. 48 & 59.

²⁸ Hipshon Roy, “The Khasis,” Where Lies the Soul of Our Race, ed. Hipshon Roy (Shillong: Hipshon Roy, 1982) 3.

²⁹ As quoted by Hipshon Roy. *ibid.* 4.

³⁰ A detailed account of the game of Archery may be found in:

i. W. R. Laitflang, “*Katto Katne Shaphang ka Jingiasiat Khnam* (Archery),” Dongmusa [Shillong] 22 April 1999: 4.

ii. J. S. Shangpliang, “*Ka Jingiasiat-thong*,” Ki Dienjat jong ki Longshuwa, ed. J. Bacchiarello (Shillong: Don Bosco Publications, 1993) 177-80.

³¹ A detailed account of the legend may be found in Nongkynrih’s “Khasi Folk Tales: The Legend of *Ka Pahsyntiew*,” Apphira Daily News [Shillong] 12 February 1994: supplementary sec. N. pag.

³² R. Tokin. Rymbai, “The Evolution of the *Hynñiewtrep* Polity.” See endnote 72, Chapter II. N. pag.

³³ *ibid.* All quotations on the subject are from the same article, unless indicated otherwise.

³⁴ As quoted by Rymbai. *ibid.* N. pag.

³⁵ As quoted by Rymbai. *ibid.* N. pag.

³⁶ Waldo Williams, "Remembering." See endnote 17, Chapter I. 107-8.

³⁷ M. H. Abrams, ed., The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors.

See endnote 37 (iii), Chapter II. 2114.

³⁸ See endnote 23, Chapter I. 40.

2. *Hiraeth* for Persons

¹ See endnote 14 in Sub-chapter 1 above. 63.

² See endnote 6 (i), Sub-chapter 1 above. 22.

³ Tham had translated "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," the ending of which could have suggested his own grief-ridden lines.

⁴ Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney. See endnote 4 (iv), Chapter II. 4.

⁵ P. B. Shelley, "To a Skylark," English Poetry: A Kaleidoscope, ed. A Board of Editors (Bombay: Universities Press, 1989) 66-8.

⁶ See 4 above. 51.

⁷ William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," Six Ages of English Poetry, ed. H. M. Williams (Bombay: Blackie & Son, 1976) 113-4.

⁸ See 4 above. 221. For more on the family elegy, see Ramazani's chapters on "American Family Elegy I & II." 216-61 & 293-333.

⁹ *ibid.* 222.

3. *Hiraeth* for Place and Childhood

¹ From the Welsh of John Ceiriog Hughes (1832-87) as quoted in Polk's book. See endnote 14 above. 17.

² John Owen's explanation of Goronwy Owen's poem is from, "*Hiraeth am Dduw*," translated by Gwynn ap Gwilym. See endnote 2, Chapter I. 44.

³ H. W. Sten *Na ka Hyndai sha ka Lawei*. See endnote 71 (i), Chapter II. 68.

⁴ The quoted lines are a magic chant from the legend of "*Ka Nam* and the Tiger." For more on the legend see Nongkynrih's "Khasi Folk Tales: *Ka Nam* and the Tiger." Details as endnote 31, Sub-chapter 1 above. 16 October 1994. N. pag.

⁵ Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "Such My Pleasures Used to Be," *Moments*, Nongkynrih (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1992) 42. The poet being from Sohra had experienced the activity personally.

⁶ Nigel Jenkins, *Gwalia in Khasia*. See endnote 5, Sub-chapter 1 above. 159

⁷ Nigel Jenkins, "Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis." See endnote 10, Sub-chapter 1 above. 59.

⁸ W. R. Laitflang, "*Katto Katne Shaphang ka Jingtasiat Khnam* (Archery)." See endnote 30 (i), Sub-chapter 1 above. 3.

⁹ The researcher, a native of Sohra had experienced this for himself.

¹⁰ Hughlet Warjri, *U Soso Tham bad ki Jingtrei jong u*. See endnote 29, Chapter I. 20.

¹¹ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* as quoted in Vikramaditya Rai's *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (New Delhi: Doaba House, 1983) 58. The quotation explains why and how Yeats had written the poem.

¹² The quotation is from S. Homchaudhury's annotation as published in NEHU Anthology of English Verse. Details as endnote 94, Chapter II. 60.

4. *Hiraeth* and Nature

¹ "The Poetry of *Llywarch Hen*" (sixth century) translated by Patrick K. Ford. As quoted by Dora Polk. 72

² T. Glynne Davies, "*Adfeilion*," translated by R. Geralt Jones. As quoted by Polk. 72.

³ "Folksongs of Wanderers" as quoted by Polk. 73.

⁴ T. Glynne Davies, "*Adfeilion*," translated by R. Geralt Jones. As quoted by Polk. 75.

⁵ T. H. Parry Williams, "*Ysgrifau*" ("Seeing the Wind"), translated by Gwynn ap Gwilym. As quoted by Polk. 78.

⁶ Traditional harp stanza, translated by Gwen Watts Jones. As quoted by Polk. 79.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

Talking of “Poetry and *Hiraeth*” in Chapter 30 of her book, Dora Polk observes, “It was ever the bard’s honoured function to praise, to mourn, and to yearn.” (P 124) As a sufferer of *hiraeth*, Soso Tham has been performing this function most consistently in his magnum opus, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* and in his short lyrics of *hiraeth*. In fact, Tham had been praising, mourning, and yearning, even before he discovered his poetry. And since that is the case, this concluding discussion will first take up the cause of that *hiraeth*.

It has been stated in the first chapter that it may seem contradictory for “this most Welsh of emotions” (Polk’s phrase) to be associated with the poetry of Soso Tham, the most Khasi of all Khasi poets. In the same chapter it has been projected through argument that there are no contradictions but that *hiraeth* had actually been at once the stimulus and the sustaining power behind Tham’s poetry. Using the “historical-biographical” approach suggested by Wilfred L. Guerin et al in their handbook ¹ it has been illustrated how Tham had tasted, in his mother tongue, “the great moral teachings of Christianity in the translations of the missionaries.” (Chapter I, P 40) He was moved by these teachings. But more significantly, he was also wonderstruck by the magnificence of his own literature in the secular writings of the Khasi authors. He lamented, therefore, to find the sudden slump in the production of Khasi books, which had put him in a situation where he “had to teach the same things repeatedly for 14 years from 1905.” (Chapter I, P 39) In his love

for his own language and literature, he yearned for the time of “the great cultural revival at the turn of the century” (Chapter I, P 38) when the best Khasi texts of the period had been published. But when this revival did not take place; when “the wise (missionaries and Khasis)...”² had failed to respond to his plea for new Khasi texts, his *hiraeth* did not allow him to simply pine away in grief, but drove him to resolve: “Do it yourself.” (Preface, x)

As Chapter I has revealed, Tham, in the grip of this relentless *hiraeth*, did do it himself. But, by his own admission, not knowing anything about “Art or Poetry: foot, metre, rhyme, rhythm, idea...” (Preface xi) he first tried his hand at poetry writing by translating W. E. Hickson’s “Drive the Nail Aright Boys.” He succeeded in this venture after three years of hard labour, when he struggled not only to translate but also to understand the intimidating paraphernalia of poetry, which had first seemed to him “like a confused litter of cattle bones in the hills.” (Preface xi) With the successful translation of this poem, Tham’s *hiraeth* grew and pushed him forward, inspiring him to more translations, and gradually to composing his own poems, till in 1925 he ultimately came out with his first collection of poems, *Ki Poetry Khasi*, later to be renamed as the much more popular *Ka Duitara Ksiar*.

Tham’s *hiraeth* for his literature and language is then, a very different one from the forlorn *hiraeth* that most Welsh poets, dealing with the same topic, suffer. Take the *hiraeth* of Dafydd Benfras for the Welsh language for instance:

It’s bright the icy foam as it flows,

It’s fierce in January great sea tumult,

It’s woe’s me the language, long-wished-for speech

For the sake of tales, would be sweet to my ear.

Ability in English I never had,

Neither knew phrases of passionate French:

A stranger and foolish, when I've asked questions

It turned out crooked— I spoke North Welsh!

On a wave may God's son grant us our wish

And out from amongst them readily bring us

To a Wales made one, contented and fair,

To a prince throned, laden nobly with gifts,

To the lord of Dinorwig's bright citadel land,

To the country of Dafydd, where Welsh freely flows!³

The poet's *hiraeth* in the poem is truly a forlorn one. Finding himself in a strange place amidst strangers speaking strange languages, the poet pines for his return to his own part of the world. And burdened by his mournful *hiraeth* he turns to "God's son," praying to him for a Wales united in one language, a country "contented and fair," "laden nobly with gifts," and "where Welsh freely flows!" The intense sadness of the poem cannot fail to touch the reader, but at the same time, one cannot help noticing that in his helplessness, the poet has turned to wishful thinking for consolation.

Another poem by Goronwy Owen speaks of much the same longing but in an entirely different situation:

*Where I played of old are men who knew me not; a friend or two may remember me, scarce two where once were a hundred. I am a man cut off, obscure, an exile from Mon, a stranger to our ancient tongue, strong-syllabled, a stranger to the sweet strains of the Muse. Full of care I am, ah me to speak of it! And full of longing, sunk in heavy-hearted sorrow.*⁴

Here the poet becomes an exile in his own land because he is “a stranger to our ancient tongue.” Cut off from friends and songs because of his ignorance of the mother tongue, he sinks under the weight of his “heavy-hearted sorrow.”

Tham on the other hand neither turns to wishful thinking nor sinks under the heaviness of his own sorrow. Lamenting the absence of new Khasi publications, in his love for his language and literature, his *hiraeth* for their growth and development made him more forceful, almost aggressive, as he declared: “Do it yourself.” Later, Tham disclosed how he had faced these early challenges in this manner:⁵

*Dew drops on the grass,
In the morning they glitter;
I too from home will depart
To hunt for these pearls.*

...

*The thorns though they prick
In a faraway street;
From home I'll depart
And return long after.*

The heart too will grieve

Alone faraway;

The tears that gather

Are actually pearls.

It is because of this kind of grit and perseverance in the face of harrowing difficulties that Tham's *hiraeth*, instead of languishing in perpetual dejection, becomes active and eventually fruitful and highly satisfying.

The publication of his first book of poems, did not, however, make everything easy for Tham. True he had more or less come to master the art of poetry and its forms and varieties, but as Hughlet Warjri reports, there was no taker for his poetry, and Tham even had to wander from door to door to sell his now hugely popular *Ki Phawar u Aesop*. The lack of sponsorship from both government and the reading public, and the difficulty of getting books published, have been amply demonstrated in the first chapter.⁶ And yet, despite all that, Tham had gone on from his first book to create, in the twilight of his life, the most famous poem in Khasi literature, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*. One may well repeat the question raised in Chapter I: what is it that had driven him on?

Polk's chapter on "*Hiraeth* for the Welsh Language" assists in arriving at an answer. She says, "Love of Wales is inextricably bound up with the Welsh language." (P 29) this is precisely the case with Tham. Warjri describes the "pure and profound patriotism" of the poet in his book, by saying, "But his love for his land did not end only at the surface of 'patriotism.' To love the land means to love its language, its culture and everything else that belongs to it." (P 72) This then, the love for his land, the mother of all *hiraeths*, is the secret repertoire of Tham's strength. It is this *hiraeth*, which had made

Tham depart from home and the familiar world to skivvy on “in good health or in sickness— amidst the ups and downs of life, amidst scorn and praises.” (Preface, xi-xii) As has been shown in Chapter I, it is this *hiraeth*, which is the sustaining power behind Tham, the poet.

Since *hiraeth* for his language and literature has been drawn attention to as the reason for Tham’s “praising, mourning, and yearning, even before he had discovered his poetry,” the discussion will now move on to the causes of *hiraeth* in his poetry. This, side by side, with an assessment of the poet as a sufferer of *hiraeth*, will occupy the major portion of the chapter, which will be followed by a reconsideration of the influences of this literary tradition, wrapping up with general evaluative remarks not previously made.

It has been illustrated earlier that in his first volume of poems, *Ka Duitara Ksiar*, Tham, as a sufferer of *hiraeth*, praises, mourns, and yearns for a different number of reasons. In the poem “*U Trot*” he praises the rare quality of the dog:

U Trot is one among the breed

Of dogs where dwells a rarity (1-2)

This rare quality most strongly manifests itself at the moment when Trot’s master dies. One observes that as long as his poor master is alive, Trot’s life is one long happy tale. He “skips and dances;” by his friend’s side and whiles his time chasing swallows and deer roaming the countryside, but never straying too far away. But his master suddenly dies and something inside Trot snaps and seems to die along with him. At first he grows restless, moving agitatedly about, moaning and howling ceaselessly, looking for his friend everywhere, even trying to jump into the precipice. But when it seems to dawn upon him that his master has finally gone to where he cannot even take his faithful dog

along, he stops all movements and all sounds. His will and reason to live have completely gone. Seeing this profound love, and this even more profound mourning, with its raw, naked grief, the poet, who had suffered terrible losses in the early death of his wife and daughter, says: “*Ki um ki dohnud hin*” (56, “The hearts turn to water”). He mourns for the mute and noble grief of this noble dog. In his *hiraeth* for this rare creature, he exhorts the “future generations to raise a monument for Trot, or at least devise some means of remembering his story.” (Chapter II, P 207-8) This would at least console the poet in his yearning for Trot’s remembrance.

In his mourning for Trot, Tham shows himself as the most unique of all the sufferers of *hiraeth*. In the hundreds of samples that illustrate Polk’s, *A Book Called Hiraeth*, there is none that articulates a *hiraeth* for an animal, not even for the Welsh legendary creatures such as the distinctive Welsh dragon that has now become a national emblem. This, of course, in no way makes the Welsh poets less sensitive, since the criteria of selection might have occluded a *hiraeth* for animals. But this certainly places Tham among the most compassionate and empathic of poets.

Tham also mourns his own imaginary death in the poem “*U Phlang Jyrngam*” (“The Green Grass”). His mourning is occasioned by the disregard shown to his works by his contemporaries. As has been argued, he has given his all to the cause of propagating his own literature and through it, his language. For his poetry to be received with such lack of interest and coldness, as has been said earlier, is therefore a matter of great anguish for the poet. As stated in Chapter II:

He compares himself, the poet, to u tiew-dohmaw. As the rare flower, the poet too is a rare creature with special talents and gifts. But like the flower, he too

blossoms unseen largely because of his people's philistinism. The poet is like the fern. It is never noticed as long as it lives for its blasé green is not something remarkable. The poet too is no different from the rest of mankind while alive. It is only after his death that, like the fern, he begins spreading his fragrance, and the people begin to perceive his real worth. But as long as he is alive, even though he may be the star "That first speckles the sky," he is never given the credit due to him as a special human being doing something special for his people. (P 210)

In his despairing anger against his compatriots, he tells them that if he has been ignored and left in "the wilderness" during his lifetime, then they have no business disturbing his peace after death: "Quietly in the grave let him rest, — / Beneath the green, green grass." (9-12)

As a poem of *hiraeth*, Tham's self-elegy is thus "born of a longing for recognition in life, and of resentment against the non-existence of that recognition. As a natural result of this, Tham experiences a *hiraeth* for the tranquillity of obscure existence in afterlife. As he had lived in peace so should he die in peace." (Chapter II, P 212-3) Here Tham is at one with Polk's sufferers of *hiraeth* in whose poetry, elements of self-mourning are often found. The most cogent sample of this self-mourning *hiraeth* is "The Bard's Last *Cywydd*"⁷ by Dafydd ap Gwilym:

To think of my lost young days, this is my sorrow,

Keening deep to my heart like a flighting arrow.

I cry to my Lord to raise me, to succour me,

O weary must be my days!

Sure to its grave youth flieth and is gone;

*If it was brave, now are the brave days done;
 My thoughts have dying ways, but though all die
 Still love revenging stays.*

*Cast from my lips afar is the spirit of song,
 Music of joy, my living delight so long.
 Ifor, my wisdom, where is he with his fame?
 Or Nest, my refuge, his noble and fair young dame?
 Where in the woods is Morvyth, my darling fled?
 They all lie dead in the mould.*

*But here I linger, old and in heaviness
 Bearing my woeful burden of cold distress.
 ...*

*A spear-thrust in my breast is old, old age,
 Love of fair women leaves for a heritage
 That, that still wounds which no balm can assuage,
 Sorrow to think on now.*

*My strength ebbs fast, like chaff before the wind
 It fleeth, nor can death wait far behind,
 Ghostly and pale of brow.*

Though the reasons for self-mourning in the poems are different, there is the same anticipation of their own death, and the same atmosphere of hopelessness, modulating into ultimate desolation and despair.

Another cause for Tham's *hiraeth* is his longing for the place of his birth, Sohra. But as discussed in Chapter III, this *hiraeth* is inseparably intertwined with the poet's *hiraeth* for his childhood. This has prompted a simultaneous study of both in Sub-chapter 3, which examines this *hiraeth* as it reveals itself in "*Ki Sngi ba la Leit Noh*," "*Ki Kshaid ba Rymphum*," and in Section VII of *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, which carries the title of "*Ka Ĩng I Mei*."

Tham, first of all experiences a *hiraeth* for the house of his mother, *cartref* or *hendref*, of which he speaks in "*Ka Ĩng i Mei*," where he sings of the lost childhood activities, and where he reveals the Khasi concept of the hearth as the first place of learning. What the poet misses most of all, is seen as the daily family gatherings around the hearth and the teaching, through stories and songs, of the enduring values of life, especially unity within the family and knowledge of God.

His *hiraeth* for his home village of Sohra, *pentref*, and the entire area of *Ri Sohra*, *cantref*, is expressed in the other two lyrics. The great love of the poet for the place is clearly illustrated in "*Ki Kshaid ba Rymphum*" where he even sings with longing for the record-shattering and terrorising rain, which according to Nigel Jenkins had driven "many a demented Company [British East India Company] wallah to suicide."⁸ The reasons for his *hiraeth* for Sohra, however, are more clearly set forth in "*Ki Sngi ba la Leit Noh*." The poet praises the amazing splendour of the Sohra landscape; the simple pleasures of life amidst nature that belong to the people of Sohra; the great game of archery, which according to him, had started from there; and most of all, the honour of Sohra as a place with a worldwide reputation. He mourns that these are forever lost to him. He also remembers with a provoking *hiraeth*, the friends and relatives, who had

shared his childhood days with him, and remembering them, he is suddenly seized by an impossible *hiraeth*: “Once more, once more to be a boy.” (20)

As has been stated before, in this *hiraeth*, Tham is both like Yeats and Goronwy Owen. He is like Yeats in the despondent longing to forget the “the coarse and noisy world of soulless existence”⁹ as experienced by him in the city of his residence, and in the “desperate yearning to go back to the idealised state of the past, and more particularly, to the spot that symbolises that ideal state.” (Chapter, III P 313-4) He is like Goronwy because the most potent reason for his *hiraeth* for Sohra is seen as none other than the fact that he was born and brought up there, even as Goronwy’s *hiraeth* for Anglesey, is because of that same reason.

But whether he is like Yeats or Goronwy, his *hiraeth* here is intensely forlorn and poignant for the simple fact that, as Polk says, “No *hiraeth* is more forlorn than pining for lost youth.” (P 98) Here he is truly in the company of those Welsh poets like T. Glynne Davies, Vernon Watkins, and Dafydd ap Gwilym, who would contest even the old Welsh proverb, “Longing for youth will not avail.”¹⁰

Tham has also suffered a cruel *hiraeth* because of loved ones separated by death. In his three family elegies, “*U Tiew Pathai*,” “*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*” and “*U Sim ba la Lait*” he mourns the early death of his wife and daughter. In the first elegy for his wife, the poet’s love and praise for his beloved, and his mourning for her death have no end whatsoever, as he stubbornly refuses to forget his blissful life with her. In the second, he still mourns the loss of the woman, who had given him a heaven on earth, but in a more subdued mood. In the last he mourns the premature death of his daughter.

But as discussed in Chapter III, Sub-chapter 2, the family elegies of Tham form a cycle that must be read together for they present a continuous elegiac movement. While the first one, “*U Tiew Pathai*,” makes no attempt at all “to move away from grief and darkness, as the poet sinks deeper and deeper into his own mourning,” (P 297) the second, “*Ka Lyer ka Dang Sieng*,” makes a tentative move towards consolation. “Though the poet’s emotions more or less remain fixed in the past, he also takes comfort in the thought that his beloved has gone to ‘another heaven.’” (P 297) It is only in the third that he grows weary of mourning. He says, “Often I have walked the days dark with cloud,” By this “he does not only refer to the dark days following his daughter’s death but to the period of loss and extreme pain beginning with the death of his wife. In this sense, his ‘days dark with cloud’ have been extraordinarily long, making him spiritually and psychologically exhausted to the point that he longs for an end to it all.” (P 298) The end to it all comes only when he turns to nature, which affords him “Days that are cool and the sky that is clear.” (7)

It has been observed before that this cycle of family poems presents the only poetry of *hiraeth* where Tham truly achieves solace. In this case at least, Tham’s *hiraeth* does not make a mockery of the old Welsh proverb, “Time soothes all longing.”¹¹ In Chapter 26, Polk also speaks of a forward-looking *hiraeth*, “more personal than social, which continues to give heart to many Welsh people... This is spiritual *hiraeth*” (P 113) Tham’s *hiraeth* in this elegiac cycle is akin to the spiritual *hiraeth* that Polk speaks of. But while the Welsh spiritual *hiraeth* yearns “for an Ideal Homeland beyond the precincts of this world,” Tham, like Wordsworth, seeks for the “blessed mood” that would impart “the power / Of Harmony, and the deep power of joy,”¹² from the natural world.

Nature does give Tham comfort, but more important than that, it also gives him inspiration and strength: “*Te nga phai sha la ïng ba ngan sdang la ki kam*” (16, “Then I turn to my home to resume my own tasks”). With comfort, inspiration and strength, Tham, as revealed by Warjri, was able to resume normal life and to carry out his special tasks as a writer. But this does not mean the end of his *hiraeth*. One of the tasks that he refers to in the poem is the composition of his “crowning work,” *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, as disclosed by Warjri:

It was patriotism that made him restless; it was patriotism that made him eager to breathe new life into his land. In his mind he had dived down to the deepest depth and like an eagle he had gazed into the farthest horizon. And he saw that if the Hynñiew Trep people were to be regenerated, if they were to get back their true and sincere patriotic love, they should first seek themselves— their own past. It was of this subject that he had been thinking long before he wrote Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep as is borne out by the short lyric in Ka Duitara Ksiar, “Ki Sngi U Hynñiew Trep.” It was of this subject, therefore, that he intended to write in his crowning work. (P 79)

And when the poet begins singing about the past of his forefathers in *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, he becomes a sufferer of the strongest and most complex of *hiraeths*.

The subjects that cause the poet “to praise, to mourn, and to yearn” in his major work has been discussed extensively in both Chapter II and III, using the methods of both “Genre Criticism” and “Cultural Studies.” These chapters discuss how the poet begins the poem by mourning the fact that his compatriots seeks “Enlightenment ... around the world” without knowing or making an attempt to know the enlightened civilisation of his

own land and people. And what is more lamentable is the fact that these compatriots do not want to know, and care nothing for that enlightened civilisation as evolved by his forefathers. So like a teacher, he determines: "To kindle from within cremation *Kpeps / The Olden Days of U Hynñiew Trep.*" (Section II, 17-8) It is, he believes, by rediscovering the past and holding up what is good in it for the education of the present that both the ignorance and scorn of his compatriots could be removed, thus paving the way for the regeneration of his land.

The poet tries to rediscover the enlightenment of his land by first going into the mythic past, that is, the past as revealed by the creation myths of his people. Tham refers to the myths in an attempt to trace the progress of the race from age to age. But this progress is shown to be mostly concerned with the spiritual life of the ancestors, and what the poet discovers of this spiritual life is similar to what Guerin et al discover in the societies of the American Indians, that is, that "Their cultures were ... spiritually oriented, harmonious, and with complex worldviews."¹³

As the myths of the poem narrate, the *Hynñiew Trep* people are the descendants of the *Khat Hynriew Trep* (the Sixteen Clans), whose land is somewhere in the celestial regions. The *Hynñiew Trep* descended from heaven to turn the earth, in the poet's words, into a "Garden of Fruits and Flowers," having made a covenant with God, *U Blei*, that they would always live according to His divine decree. The covenant declared that so long as the Seven Clans adhered to the three principles of "*Ka Tip Briew, Tip Blei, Ka Kamai ia ka Hok,*" that is, as long as

they led a virtuous life, as long as they lived on Earth in such a way as to earn righteousness and respected the laws of both Man and God, they would never be

*left alone, but could come and go as they pleased between heaven and earth, from the Golden Ladder at Lum Sohpet Bneng, literally, the Mount of Heaven's NavelGod then provided for happiness on Earth, endowing its soil with riches and the fruits of plenty....*¹⁴

The covenant also declared “God, the caretaker of the covenant from above” (“*Ban ap jutang U Blei na jrong*”), which also means that He would always be there whenever man should require Him.

Man, however, by and by strayed from God, leading life according to laws of his own making, which invariably violated the three guiding principles of the covenant. This brought about the snapping of *U Sohpet Bneng* and the end to all “Descend, Ascend” between heaven and earth. This also brought to an end the “Golden Age” in the life of man and ushered in the era of darkness and evil spreading from “the Branches of *Diengiei*.” It was only when man eventually turned back to God in repentant humility and genuflected before Him, appealing to Him to come to his aid in his tribulations that God responded. The narration of the myths come to an end with the myth of the Rooster, who promised: “All right,’ he said, ‘let me bear all: / So you, a man, suffer no more.” (Section VI, 96-7)

The purpose of the myths is to educate the poet’s ignorant compatriots of the highly developed concept of good and evil and of the man-knowing, God-knowing ways of his ancestors. This represents the poet’s high praise and yearning for such a culture, and also a yearning for his contemporaries to learn from, and be guided by it.

Tony Conran also speaks of the same kind of didacticism in the poem of T. Gwynn Jones (1871-1949), who had re-appropriated the legend of King Arthur from the

English, with his “*Ymadawiad Arthur*” (“Arthur’s Passing”). Conran reveals that for the Welsh, King Arthur represents the central myth of their civilization. He was a leader who did not die, who will rise again at some future date, who will return from Afallon to lead his people to victory. Afallon, he says, is

... one of those island Otherworlds so common in Celtic mythology, the home of the ancient gods, the land of eternal youth where old age, sickness or grief never come. Secondly, it is some sort of Platonic country of eternal ideas, where the ideals of the race never die and no one suffers the attribution of lost faith or broken heart. But thirdly, Afallon represents the continued possibility of change... the source of energy, for those who want reform, and a basis for always wanting to hope. It is from this source... that Arthur will return. (Chapter I, P 16)

By dwelling on Afallon, Conran asserts,

Gwyn Jones is not merely re-appropriating Arthur, a Welsh leader who is talking of a nation that is Wales. He is in fact, turning the legend into an instruction for the benefit of his compatriots that there is, even in there allegedly heathen and barbarian ways, such a thing as God, spiritual life, a blissful otherworld and a ‘second coming.’ The poet, he says, seems to be proposing that Methodism is not the only hope for Wales and its people, and in so doing, outfits the poem with a hiraeth that looks forward, that hopes, anticipates and teaches. (Chapter I, P 17)

Conran’s statement on Jones’s poem makes for the most fitting description of Tham’s *hiraeth* for the spiritual ways of his ancestors.

With the end of the great myths, Tham proceeds, or rather returns like a “Deer to its own tracks” to “*Ka İng i Mei*” (“Mother’s House”) in Section VII. The poet returns to

his “Mother’s House” because he maintains that the customs and traditions that make up the culture and civilisation of his people are forged in the mother’s hearth, which he compares to a “smithy” or “the Fire in the Hearth.” From this section he begins to sing literally of his own mother’s house at Sohra, the house of the clan, and the house of the *Hynñiew Trep* people, that is the land as a whole. He dwells at some length on the social set-up characterised by the matrilineal clan system; the roles of “the Uncles the Fathers” in the family, the clan, and the state; the division of labour among men and women; the system of family relationships characterised by “the Maternal, Paternal Relations” and the various taboos; and finally their methods of disposal of the dead and their commemoration in the erection of cromlechs and menhirs.

Having used the symbol of the “hearth,” to study the social system of his forefathers, the poet now resorts to the method of apostrophising mythic creatures in Section VIII, “*Ka Meirilung*” (“The Motherland”). He requests the creatures to reveal to him the history and origins of his people:

You, the children of the Dawn,

Tell me, Mother-Raven, Mother-Hawk,

When you circle round the world,

From where the Roots of our Land? (Section VIII, 1-6)

But these are desolate questions, and this is Tham’s most anguished *hiraeth* in the poem rivalled only by his despairing *hiraeth* for place and childhood in “*Ki Sngi ba la Leit Noh.*” The poet very well realises that his questioning is a desperate act, but so great is his praise for his cultured forefathers, and so intense his longing to know more about them that he simply has to give voice to his smouldering *hiraeth*.

The poet's other method of rediscovering the past is a brooding upon the audio-visual symbols of the past that "are still clearly visible." (Section VIII, 29) The poet lists some of these symbols like some traditional musical instruments (*Tangmuri*, the pipe, and *Sharati*, the flute) the monoliths, the stone bridges across streams and rivers, the famous man-made lake of Thadlaskeifi, near Jowai, the palaces made without nails, and the stone resting places erected for travellers. These accomplishments are carefully listed to highlight the uniqueness of their culture, their great engineering feats, and their conscientiousness in always keeping the general welfare of the public in mind. The poet's meditation on the symbols of the past finally turns to

Ki Khla ka Wait, ki Khraw Jutang,

Ha um ha ding ia ki la phrang: (Section VIII, 55-6)

(The Tigers of the Sword, the Great Guarantors,

Tempered by water tempered by fire:)

These "Tigers of the Swords" are held up as heroes in looks and deeds. They are the paragons of traditional wisdom, virtue and altruistic patriotism, leaders and statesmen who were skilled at peace and daring at war. And singing their praises, the poet says:

Lada ha ngi ka Ri kan kiew,

Kum ki ngi dei ban long ki briew. (Section VIII, 53-4)

(If with us should grow the land,

Then like them we must be men.)

The poet's praise does not end here. As he broods on the audio-visual symbols, he observes the "clearly visible" signs of the highly advanced political system of his ancestors, characterised by the much-admired democratic republics known as *himas*,

where the king is but a titular head, and the council of state, made up of the council of ministers, representatives from the provinces (*raijs*) and villages, and every eligible adult male of the *hima*, make all the important decisions concerning the affairs of the state. The poet is so enamoured of this state council or “*Dorbar Pyllun*” that he compares its circular open-air seating, and magnificence to a full-blown marigold.

From here the poet moves on to the economy as it flourished in the past. The backbone of the economy is shown as agriculture and animal husbandry, though the poet’s ancestors had also made substantial advancement in industries, notably iron making, and were highly skilled in trade and commerce. Then picking up from the audio-visual symbols, the poet goes on to sing of the social life of his ancestors, their music and dances, their hunting and sports, and especially their still renowned game of archery.

As observed previously the poet begins his poem by mourning the ignorance, the apathy and scorn of the present for the culture of their own land. This makes the poet delve into that past to exhume and bring to light the wisdom of that culture. The poet performs this function as a teacher, a research scholar, an anthropologist, a sociologist, an archaeologist, and a historian. On this journey of discovery he uncovers a just and democratic civilisation that is, to his mind, astoundingly enlightened and incredibly self-reliant. In his overflowing praise he sings the eulogies of his ancestors: “And now, you say, Bah-Bo-Bah-Kong, / What gods are these who dwell on you! (Section IX, 119-20)

But this praise does not last long, for as he returns to the present he finds his contemporaries in an even worse state than before. Whereas before they were ignorant and scornful, now, without the guidance of the past and their own culture, they are like lost souls:

Ngí im ha kiwei pat ki sngi,

Ngim tip shano kan poi ka Ri! (Section X, 35-6)

(We live in other days than our own,

We know not where the land will go!)

Mourning alone in his profound grief, and filled with a vague premonition regarding the future of his land, he asks:

Hyndai ki Lum ki da ia ki,

Hadien, mano ban da ia ngi! (Section X, 43-4)

(In ancient times the Hills protected them,

In times to come what is our defence!)

The poet is of course referring to the inflow of strangers into his land, as has been demonstrated with biographical material. This, he says is a real and serious threat, making him ask in bewilderment:

When I take a solitary walk,

Speak to me, my beloved country,

Why do I often feel uneasy: (Section X, 39-42)

This development also makes him see his own land “on the edge of a terrible precipice.” (Preface, xvii). But the poet does not lose hope completely, and since he is speaking like a teacher he cannot afford to let himself sink into hopelessness. As he sees it, only one thing can save his people, the *Hynñiew Trep*, and that is, “the love of one’s own country from the Virtues and enlightenment that we have from the ancient.” (Preface, xv) This is a special brand of patriotism that belongs to his forefathers, who “Because they died, therefore they lived” (Section VIII, 79), and who “had founded their states on the

principles of virtue..." (Chapter III, P 279) It is this patriotism that will effect a change in the mindset of his people. It will make them "*kiba snar, kiba shynrang bad kiba tbit,*" ("sturdy, valiant and skilful," Preface, xv) like their forefathers; it will bring back honesty among them ("Among us will flourish Honesty," Section X, 64); it will make them determined to be industrious so that "From their huts upwards [they'll] climb;" (Section X, 98) and it will bring them together to enable them to face all challenges unitedly: "For our Land we'll live as one." (Section X, 47-8) It is when this "Wind" of true patriotism has come to blow among his people once more that the glory of the past will be resurrected in the present and carry on into "the time to come."

As the poet shows the way to the people of his generation, and as he distinctly sees the possibility of change and improvement, he becomes jubilant again and sings his favourite refrain:

Sa shisien pat kin win ki Khlaw,

Sa shisien pat kin khih ki maw;

Kum kiwei pat ki sngi ki mih,

Da kumwei pat ka Ri kan ih; (Section VIII, 103-6)

(Once more will the Woods reverberate,

Once more will stir the Rocks;

As others the days will come

In other ways the Land will ripen.)

But can the poet depend on a people who "know not where the land will go!" to bring about the change and improvement that he hopes? For this change and improvement, the land will need the kind of governance that is founded "on the principles

of virtue...” and a high-minded, honourable leadership that is prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of the common good. And yet it is because of the lack of this kind of governance and leadership during his age that the poet mourns so bitterly in the poem. In Chapter III it has been shown how he rants like an angry teacher and thunders like “the Jeremiah of the *Hynñiew Trep*”¹⁵ against the rampant greed and corruption of his day that had affected even the highest positions of political and judicial administration. And when greed corrupts the high places of administration, everything else suffers, and in the life of the people the poet could only find “Poverty, Hunger, Disease, Adversity, / Contagion too— all they consume.” (Section IV, 57-8)

And what about the leaders of the land, the *syiems*, who used to be “the Great Guarantors” and who would lay down their lives for the well-being of the people? The poet observes that they are among the lost souls of his age, and so he challenges them in the preface:

Hato ki Syiem bad kiba Khraw kin sangeh kumne ne kin kyndit bynriew bad kin sharai ia u Khun u Hajar ba bieit na ki suri: bad, ba la nang khraw ka jingmih, kin ñiah...sha ba kham lung u phlang? (P xvii)

(Will the *Syiems* and the Nobilities look on like this or will they wake up and guard the ignorant citizens from the wolves: and, because the revenue is more, to lead them... towards greener pasture?)

But this is not the end of the land’s maladies. Not only are the seats of power corrupt, but the people themselves are shown to be the “bee without its queen,” “headless monsters,” and “children of greed and Pandemonium.”

As he ponders the situation the poet realises that he is up against insurmountable problems in his attempt to talk sense to his contemporaries. But speaking as a teacher, it is his duty to show the way forward, and in this sense, his *hiraeth* in the entire poem is one that is not fixated on the past, but one that truly looks forward to the future, that hopes for redemption and teaches the means of achieving that redemption.

But as a sufferer of *hiraeth*, his buoyancy is deflated and he sinks under the burden. He knows that the chances of his convincing his compatriots to reform are slim indeed, especially when they are the kind of people who look down on anything indigenous, including literature. How will he reach out to them, *syiems* and laymen, if, as he himself has lamented, the people of his time decline to read Khasi texts? How will he ever help his land if not through the people? These are forlorn questions, and the *hiraeth* they arouse is without assuagement. The coda of the poem particularly justifies the statement of Polk in the last chapter of her book that

Sufferers of hiraeth can seldom hope to find release through restoration of beloved places, people, things or conditions that are lost from or lacking in their lives. Relief from pain ranging from gentle nostalgia to anguished longing and near-despair can be found only in the catharsis of expression. (P 124)

As depicted in the coda, Tham is exhausted by his constant worrying over the future of the land and by tormenting himself with questions without answers. He has done his job by singing about what is good and evil. He has exhumed the past and exhibited its sterling qualities to the present for emulation. He has, like Arnold's "Physician of the Iron Age,"¹⁶ shown the ailments of his generation, and like Warjri's "Jeremiah of the *Hynñiew Trep*," pointed out the means of salvation. It is now up to his

compatriots to listen and to implement. As for him, the poetic expression of his *hiraeth* seems to have given him the catharsis that Polk speaks of. And so at the very end he calmly looks forward to the “house of God” and to meeting his “Mother.”

Assessing Soso Tham as a sufferer of *hiraeth* and tracing the subjects that cause him “to praise, to mourn, and to yearn,” must logically lead to his assessment as an elegist. Besides the elegies proper, many of Tham’s poems are elegiac in nature being the product of his many *hiraeths*. His major work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, clearly indicates that its contours are unmistakably elegiac. Chapter II has tried, with the help of “Genre Criticism,” to place this poem within the great unconventional elegiac tradition, together with the elegies of Maria Rainer Rilke, Matthew Arnold and Thomas Gray. Beginning with two working definitions relating to the conventional and unconventional elegies, the chapter has listed and discussed the various elegiac conventions, and then moving on from there to an examination of the poets mentioned. The chapter ends with an evaluation of Tham’s major work and some of his short lyrics as elegies.

In the course of this evaluation, one discovers that Tham’s *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* contains within it many of the most important elegiac conventions. Some of these include the use of the prologue as an elegiac foregrounding device, giving to the poem its ceremonial structure, as the poet makes elaborate preparations to begin his solemn act of mourning. Others include the use of the elegiac apostrophe; the reiterated questioning and the outbreak of vengeful anger or denunciation; the elegiac repetitions and refrains; the elegiac mythology; the elegiac brooding on the audio-visual objects of the past; the basic passage from grief to consolation and the traditional images of resurrection; and most importantly, the apotheosis of the dead.

In the use of some of these conventions Tham is seen to be very traditional. His attitude towards the dead follows the traditional elegiac dictum of *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*. For Tham, his ancestors are not only heroes but gods, as in the lines: "And now, you say, *Bah-Bo-Bah-Kong*, / What gods are these who dwell on you!" (Section IX, 119-20). He is also traditional in the basic elegiac movement from grief or darkness to consolation and light, as in the redemption through the "Sacrificial Rooster" and the resurrection of the land that could be brought about by emulating the sturdy and virtuous patriotism of the ancestors. In the use of the prologue, he shares similarities with Lord Alfred Tennyson's prologue to *In Memoriam*. In his reiterated questioning and elegiac denunciation, and in his various apostrophes and invocations, he is at one with John Milton's "Lycidas." Tham may also be said to be more or less traditional in his use of elegiac mythology.

But here ends his traditionality. Having examined the two definitions, one must perforce argue that Tham's major work is an unconventional elegy belonging with Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1912-22), Matthew Arnold's "Memorial Verses" (1850) and "The Scholar Gypsy" (1853), Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), and the Welsh songs of lamentation, the fountainhead of the literature of *hiraeth*. The most unconventional aspect of these elegies lies in the fact that none of them mourns any particular death. While Rilke's elegies are the product of a protracted personal spiritual crisis, Arnold, Gray and Tham mourn the passing away of an entire generation of people and their way of life. It may even be maintained that in the elegies of these poets, it is the existing conditions of life that cause grief, and not merely the death of an era. The Welsh songs of lamentation on the other hand, "mourn for a ruined house of the

chief that the loved one has died defending.” (Chapter I, P 13) Here too, the loss is by no means merely personal for the halls of chiefs were looked upon as tribal centres and their overthrow, therefore, is the collapse of an entire society.

Tham is also unconventional in the manner of his mourning. While his theme of lamentation is obviously unconventional, in the act of mourning itself, he is closer to the modern elegists, in being unresolved, violent, and ambivalent. His violence is seen in his resentful anger against the living; and his unresolved and ambivalent attitude is seen in his resolutions to the two broad elegiac movements of the poem, which, though not outright anti-consolatory and anti-elegiac, are nevertheless inadequate consolations, as depicted in Chapter II.

Take his conclusion of the spiritual movement of the poem for instance. While he uses the “Rainbow” as a symbol of light, dispelling the darkness of evil, he makes it completely dependent on the vague “the One” whose day of arrival is less a statement of assurance than the desperate prediction of the “Sacrificial Rooster.” So what if “the One” does not come? Will the “Rainbow” fade? The “Rainbow” is like the “pale yet positive gleam” in Hardy’s famous poem, “God’s Funeral” (1912)¹⁷ Hardy makes the power and promise of the light so diminished, its significance so vague that the mourners of the poem are unsure what to make of it. Is it, as Ramazani remarks, “a new god (humanity?), a new saviour (the nation-state?), a new faith (the positivist creed?), or simply a new illusion, forced on the speaker by his urgent need for compensation.”¹⁸ Thus, as in the case of Hardy’s poem, Tham’s resolution of the first elegiac movement leaves the reader unsure of the future.

If the “Rainbow” does not completely succeed as a consolatory symbol, the “Wind” of patriotism fares even worse, as a symbol of consolation for the secular elegiac movement. This “Wind” represents the true love of one’s own land and everything that it stands for. And this is projected as the only power, which can bring about change and reformation to the poet’s contemporary society. But the poet makes it conditional to the changing attitude of his compatriots. However, if their apathy and disdain towards the heritage of the past do not change, then it is highly uncertain that this “Wind” would blow at all. In the coda of the poem, Tham remains uncertain of the regeneration of his land. Like Hardy’s mourners, he is only certain of the loss that he mourns.

But in not being able to devise an adequate and effectual compensatory formula for a successful mourning in the traditional elegiac sense, Tham is not alone. In fact, it is this inability to accept the traditional consolatory mechanism that binds Rilke, Arnold, Gray and Tham together. Therefore, while

Rilke tries to find consolation in a private cult of inwardness; while Arnold tries to find it in a stoic acceptance of unpalatable realities; while Gray tries to find it in the lap of the common mother and the bosom of his father, God, from where he issues an anti-consolatory injunction to his survivors; Tham pins his hopes in the very remote possibility of the return of the “Golden Age” both at the spiritual and material levels. These seem more like contrived compensatory models, which instead of being recuperative and transcendental, leaves one with the impression that the mourners are still immersed in their losses. But it is exactly because of this ambivalence that their poems have triumphed as elegiac poetry. (Chapter II, P 204)

Jahan Ramazani's statement on the topic would serve to justify the observation above:

*...consolation may no longer be an important "criterion by which to judge" the elegy, since many of the weakest are merely consolatory and many of the strongest... are poems less of solace than melancholia, less of resolution than of protracted strife.*¹⁹

Tham's *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* and the elegies of Rilke, Arnold, and Gray, are conventional in their attitude towards the dead, and in their attempt to find consolation. But in their subjects of mourning, in the violent manner that they mourn, and in their unresolved, ambivalent endings, they bear a resemblance to the modern elegies, which are characterised, among other things, by their fierce resistance to solace, their intense criticism and their complete immersion in the loss that they mourn. In this sense, the elegies of the four poets, like Hardy's elegies, may be said to be the true precursors of the modern elegy.

Tham's *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* is also unique as an elegy in being self-mourning and self-consoling even as Rilke's or Gray's are. Rilke's elegies are self-elegies, as he mourns his human destiny with all its inadequacies, and always looks towards death, the unilluminated side of life, with a sense of longing, thereby contriving a very private "cult of inwardness" as a means of compensation. Tham and Gray are far less radical, and their elegies are very similar:

Failing to find adequate consolation for the obscure fate of the "rude forefathers" and fearing his own obscure fate, Gray anticipates his own death and finally seeks solace in the common mother ("the lap of Earth") and the common father, who is God. Tham does exactly the same thing. Knowing full well that bringing

about a reformation in his contemporary society, in line with his yearning, is next to impossible, he too turns to the “house of God” to seek the final consolation in his “Mother,” who may also be “ka lawbei,” the primal ancestress. (Chapter II, P 200-1)

Therefore, what Polk refers to earlier as the “catharsis of expression” can also be seen here as a self-elegiac consoling device.

Another outcome of the influence of *hiraeth* on Soso Tham’s poetry is didacticism. The discussion in the preceding pages shows how Tham speaks like a teacher when he is talking of indigenous culture and values, and the wisdom of his ancestors. One has also endeavoured to show how his *hiraeth* for the civilisation “within the gloom” is similar to the *hiraeth* “that looks forward, that hopes, anticipates and teaches,” which is found in the poetry of Gwyn Jones. (Chapter I, P 17) Attention must now be drawn to the likeness between Tham’s didacticism with that of Chinua Achebe, an Igbo author from Nigeria. Writing almost about the same circumstances, against the backdrop of the same colonisation, rapid Anglicisation, and evangelisation, Achebe shares a common concern with Tham. And this concern is spelled out in his essay on “The Novelist as Teacher,”²⁰ where he states,

here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse— to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word.

Referring to the “acceptance— for whatever reason— of racial inferiority” (29) as the very worst blasphemy of his people, Achebe observes that what is needed is to counter it “with

what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better.” (P 30) He continues:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front. For he is after all— as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his African Image— the sensitive point of his community. (P 30)

Affirming his own statement, Achebe says that he for one would not be excused, but that he

would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past— with all its imperfections— was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them. (P 30)

When Achebe is talking of the novels “set in the past” he is of course referring to *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* where he speaks of the past with love and pride, and as a means of educating his people.

As has been amply illustrated earlier, Tham too holds up the past for the education of his contemporaries, who, without the guidance of the wisdom and the virtue of the ancients, had behaved like “headless monsters.” In so doing he also announces “not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better” as may be explained by these lines about his ancestors:

Ki dei ki Syiem ba phieng ka Maiñ,

Balei ia ki ngin sngewlehrainñ; (Section VIII, 73-4)

(They are Kings with a majestic Mien,

Why should of them we be ashamed;)

But Achebe is famous not because he tries to educate his people in his novels. His popularity first and foremost rests on the fact that he spins a good tale, and that his “art” is great. On the subject Achebe himself says, “Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure... Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. I don’t see that the two need be mutually exclusive.” (P 30) That art and education do not have to be mutually exclusive has been abundantly demonstrated by both Achebe and Tham. Tham’s popularity among his own people has been discussed in Chapter I when it is shown how

his poems were set to music and became immediate hits. His inspiring words were heard everywhere: in casual chats, in public meetings, in funeral gatherings and wherever people had anything to say about the burning issues of the day and the future of their land. Such was his powerful appeal that he was quoted by the learned and unlearned alike; by the old and the young, as if his poetry was like the vast expanse of the horizon, accommodating the motley crowd within it.

(Chapter I, P 28-9)

As is the case with Achebe, Tham is popular not because he tries to educate his people in his poetry. Amjad Ali, the Father of Khasi poetry, also writes didactic poetry, but he is neither popular nor considered great, though he is respected as a pioneer. That Tham is popular is because he is first and foremost a good poet, and because his “art” is great. A quotation from Ali’s poem “*Synshar ‘Riw Khasi*” (“Govern Khasi People”) ²¹ will drive home the great difference between the didacticism of such poets as Ali and that of Tham:

Synshar, synshar, Ko ‘Riw Khasi!

To synshar hi ia phi,

U Blei u'n rap baroh ia phi

Ba'n synshar ma phi hi.

Balei phi'n leit kylla mraw (1-5)

(Govern, govern, O Khasi People!

Govern by yourselves,

God will help you all

So you could govern by yourselves.

Why should you become slaves)

Ali's well-meaning poem speaks like a demagogue, direct, exhortatory, and with strong feeling. But this is definitely not good poetry. As against this we have Tham who articulates his *hiraeth* through metaphors drawn from the natural world, various samples of which have been quoted in Chapter III (Sub-chapter 4). When Tham wants to arouse his countrymen and draw their attention to their own culture, he declares: "Enlightenment we seek around the world; / That of the Land's we know but nought." (Section I, 1-2) This is not merely a statement of accusation, where even he, the poet, is accused. It is a statement loaded with irony and anguished lament, but more than that, it is a statement that reveals everything about the existing conditions of his age and the attitude of his people. When he censures, he does so very subtly and always metaphorically, and with deadly irony:

The Honourable the Learned

Here they speak in different ways;

From the hills within the shade

The stone the wood would speak the human tongue. (Section I, 45-8)

When he determines to sing about the past, he says: “To kindle from within cremation
Kpeps ²² / The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep.*” (Section I, 17-8) Of the mythic
 colonisation of the earth he describes: “All that Land that wilderness / Reverberated, and,
 the stones resounded.” (Section I, 29-30) When he experiences a fervent *hiraeth* for that
 “Golden Age,” he sings: “Once more will the Woods reverberate, / Once more will stir
 the Rocks.” (Section I, 59-60) The “Golden Age” itself is described through a metaphor:
 “God among the Flower Garden, / Descended to take a stroll with man.” (Section I, 35-6)
 But the age of evil is described through paradoxes: “Upon the Throne of Innocence, / The
 Emperor is Chaos.” (Section IV, 41-2) And of the evil in man’s heart he describes
 through an illuminating rhetorical question: “Are there caverns darker more terrible /
 Than those in the Heart of man?” (Section IV, 89-90)

As everywhere else, Tham’s creative and imaginative use of the language can be
 sampled below when he depicts, in just two lines, a world where greed is the only living
 principle of man: “Government, Justice, Advocate, / It glues with pus the Silver Piece.”
 (Section IV, 111-2) The metaphor used is one of the most forceful in the poem,
 reminding one of “Lycidas” and the denunciation of St. Peters. This state of affairs is
 described with an image that is all-embracing: “Virtue lives in the land of God, / The
 Purse of man in our world.” (Section IV, 117-8) But when man appeals to God, the
 approaching redemption is rendered in a solemn and befitting diction:

Hark from the Cave of the Sanctified Leaf,

The Sacrificial Rooster, the Great Covenantor:

‘Till the day that comes the One,

All right,' he said, 'let me bear all: (Section VI, 73-8)

After the theme of redemption, the poet moves on to the social, economic, and political systems of his ancestors. Speaking of these systems he begins with the social set-up and the matrilineal structure, which he explains through a beautiful simile: “Thus like a Bee in its crevice Hive, / The Queen the Mother encloses all.” (Section VII, 41-2) Of the mainstay of his ancestors’ economy, the poet succinctly summarises as: “Forever will Farming surge”(Section IX, 13) and “Within the stone they forged their iron.”(Section IX, 43) Of the great warriors, who had secured the survival, safety, and prosperity of the race, he eulogises as “The Tigers of the Sword, the Great Guarantors,” and their great patriotism is presented in beautifully juxtaposed images: “Because they died, therefore they lived; / How could such breeds be obsolete!” (Section VIII, 89-90)

But Tham’s great descriptive power is nowhere more apparent than in his description of Khasi democracy. In a single stanza he captures the entire democratic system of the Khasi states, from the role of the king, his functions and powers, to the role of the *dorbar hima* or state council, and its eligible male representatives. And what is even more impressive is that the description is done in a most lyrical manner which comes through even in free verse translation:

It matters not, the King may be 'a Stone';

The State is borne by Small and Great;

Justice with them collectively;

To him the Fetters:

And so, rounded as Marigold,

It goes the Council of the State. (Section VIII, 121-6)

On the other hand, his metaphorical force, which is everywhere manifest in the poem, is perhaps best revealed in the following lines:

Baroh ngi wad ka Siarnylla,

Hangne ngi lap ka Siarphylla: (Section VIII, 97-8)

(All we seek the Gold that's pure,

Here we find the Gold that's rare:)

Having returned from a journey of discovery, this is how he finally describes what he has unearthed of the culture of his forefathers. And what he has unearthed is even more precious than the gold that is pure, and this is simply because of the fact that it is "the Gold that's rare." The far-reaching implications of these lines have to be pondered upon hard and long before they could be grasped in their totality. That is why Tham is considered such a great poet.

In the opening lines of his essay on Gray, Hough states, "The greatness of the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* no one has ever doubted, but many have been hard put to it to explain in what its greatness consists. It is easy to point out that its thought is commonplace... and to wonder where the immediately recognizable greatness has slipped in."²³ This is also a question often raised about Tham's greatness and popularity as a poet. His admirers have been very effusive about the brilliance of his poetry. Some like R. S. Lyngdoh had even claimed that "If Rabindranath Tagore could achieve world recognition through his English version of his 'Gitanjali' U Soso Tham can as well achieve such fame if only his masterpiece (*Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*) could be translated into other languages." (Chapter I, P 31) But none has really addressed the question as to why he is deemed great.

Part of the answer to the question has been provided in the preceding pages while illustrating his didactic subtlety, his irony, his great descriptive power, and his even greater metaphorical skill. More illustrations of his dignified diction, fresh pastoral imagery, and majestic statements about the life of his ancestors, have also been provided in Chapter I and Chapter III (Sub-chapter 4). Another part of the answer is provided by S. K. Bhuyan²⁴ in his “Introduction” to *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*:

The preponderance of monosyllabic words in the Khasi language makes it practically impossible to adopt any metrical law based on accentuation. The only possible recourse is the syllabic system which must be punctuated by rhythm and variety. The last eleven years, which cover the poetical period of Mr. Tham's life have been devoted to the formulation of the laws of Khasi prosody, and his poems...embody the results of his long pursued pioneer efforts. (P ix)

What Bhuyan states about the difficulty of writing Khasi poetry based on the English metrical laws is very true. But the fact that in spite of this difficulty, Tham has written such a beautiful lyrical poem in *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* is certainly proof of his greatness and painstaking devotion. In the poem Tham deals with almost every aspect of his people's culture. Some of these aspects, relating to the most commonplace of human activities, are highly unyielding to poetic use. But in spite of that, Tham's rhythm never once falters in the 181 stanzas and 1086 lines of the poem. This is indeed a very remarkable quality. Of this quality Bhuyan remarks:

His poems have the naiveté of ballads, and hence they have been sung by the educated and the uneducated alike. They have a catchiness which the reader or hearer can scarcely resist. They represent Khasi life and manner and depict their

sorrows and sufferings, with all the pathos of the short and simple annals of the poor. (P viii)

Apart from the song-like quality of Tham's poetry, and the catchiness of his phrases, which contribute to his popularity, Bhuyan is also drawing attention to other aspects of Tham's poetry in the passage. Tham is not merely a sufferer of *hiraeth*, and although the number of his poems is essentially few, he is incredibly rich in variety. He has written some of the most moving ballads in Khasi literature. He has written some of the strongest satires and some of the most humorous poems in the Khasi language. And besides his hugely popular nursery rhymes, he has also written the best nature poetry ever to be produced in Khasi literature. But part of the secret of Tham's popularity is undoubtedly the fact that his poetry "represent Khasi life and manner." This is also the quality that has contributed to the reputation of many a poet including the great Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda. Of his own poetry Neruda writes:

Ehrenburg [Spanish poet], who was reading and translating my poems, scolded me: too much root, too many roots in your poems. Why so many?

*It's true. The frontier regions sank their roots into my poetry and these roots have never been able to wrench themselves out. My life is a long pilgrimage that is always turning on itself, always returning to the woods in the south, to the forest lost to me.*²⁵

This same rootedness is visible everywhere in Tham's poetry. The roots of his beloved land; the roots of his people's culture; the roots of his time; and most of all, the roots of the past that is "lost" to him, have sunken deep into his poetry. And this is one of the reasons why his poetry is so immensely loved by his own people.

But perhaps the most important reason why Tham's poetry is considered great is because his "thoughts and feelings gushed up with such a natural freedom," and because he "made great truths so familiar by his simple utterance of them."²⁶ These lines from Hawthorne's "The Great Stone Face" are an appropriate description of Tham's poetry, who had said of his own gushing thoughts and feelings:

That this Picture should emerge I have not hesitated to point out especially that "Sin is a shame to any Nation." I have forcefully cried; and I have not spared. I have written whatever I could with the tip of a Diamond and an iron Pen:
(Preface, xvi)

Having "written what [he] could with the tip of a Diamond and an iron Pen," Tham has also "made great truths so familiar by his simple utterance of them" as has been illustrated in the many translations and quotations throughout the discussion. An extract from Hawthorne's short story will lend support to the argument that Tham is popular and valued as a great poet because he writes about what he most deeply thinks and feels:

Ernest began to speak, giving to the people of what was in his heart and mind. His words had power, because they accorded with his thoughts; and his thoughts had reality and depth, because they harmonized with the life which he had always lived. It was not mere breath that this preacher uttered; they were the words of life, because a life of good deeds and holy love was melted into them. Pearls, pure, rich, had been dissolved into this precious draught. (P 310)

Soso Tham is Ernest, the hero of the short story. His poetry is the spontaneous outpouring of Ernest. And because of this singular quality, it may now be presented: here is a poet

from the Khasi Hills who deserves to walk shoulder to shoulder with the likes of Gray, Tennyson, Arnold, Rilke, Hardy, and of course, the “venerated” Welsh poets of *hiraeth*.

ENDNOTES

¹ See endnote 6, Chapter I.

² From the preface. P x. Anything from here will simply be indicated as (Preface).

³ Dafydd Benfras, “From Exile.” See Conran’s Welsh Verse, endnote 5, Chapter I.160-1.

⁴ Goronwy Owen, “*Hiraeth am Fon*” (“Longing for Anglesey”) translated by H. Idris Bell. See Dora Polk, A Book Called *Hiraeth*, endnote 1, Chapter I. 29.

⁵ The poem, “*Ki Mawlynnai*” (“Pearls”), is reproduced in English only since it has been quoted in full in Chapter I.

⁶ For more on the subject see endnote 58, Chapter I.

⁷ The original title of the poem is “*Y Cywydd Diweddaf*.” See endnote 4, Chapter I.

⁸ From the New Welsh Review. See endnote 42 (v), Chapter I. 59.

⁹ From NEHU Anthology of English Verse. See endnote 94, Chapter II. 60.

¹⁰ The poets are well known for their *hiraeth* for youth. See Dora Polk, A Book Called *Hiraeth*, endnote 1, Chapter I. 98.

¹¹ From Polk’s. *ibid.* 61.

¹² William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey.” See endnote 7, Chapter III, Subchapter 2. 113.

- ¹³ Wilfred L. Guerin et al, A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature. See endnote 6, Chapter I. 264.
- ¹⁴ See endnote 18, Chapter III, Sub-chapter 1. 157.
- ¹⁵ See Hughlet Warjri, endnote 29, Chapter I. 80.
- ¹⁶ Matthew Arnold, “Memorial Verses.” See endnote 37 (iii), Chapter II. 2124.
- ¹⁷ Thomas Hardy, “God’s Funeral.” See endnote 103, Chapter II. 309.
- ¹⁸ Jahan Ramazani, The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney. See endnote 4 (vi), Chapter II. 45-6.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.* 226.
- ²⁰ Chinua Achebe, “The Novelist as Teacher,” Morning Yet on Creation Day, Achebe (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975) 30.
- ²¹ S. M. Amjad Ali, Ka Myntoi (1888; Shillong: Khasi Authors’ Society, 1980) 12.
- ²² Stone structures for funeral pyres.
- ²³ Graham Hough, “Gray,” The Romantic Poets. See endnote 60, Chapter II. 13.
- ²⁴ S. K. Bhuyan was the Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University during Tham’s time. He was also a well-known Assamese writer.
- ²⁵ Pablo Neruda, Memoirs. See endnote 59, Chapter I. 191.
- ²⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Great Stone Face,” Hawthorne’s Short Stories, ed. Newton Arvin (New York: Vintage Books, 1960) 308.

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