

Swinburne's "ave
atque vale" and the
role of the dead in the
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' The long history of English elegy is a pouring of fresh tears into ancient vessels,' claims Rosenberg in ' Elegy for an Age.' Indeed, the elegy seems the best literary form to exemplify Eliot's famous claim that " No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists." We might go as far to say that throughout the history of English Literature, writers have poured their ' fresh tears' into the ' ancient vessels' which are those writers who have preceded them.

One particularly prominent example of this is Algernon Charles Swinburne's elegy ' Ave Atque Vale,' dedicated to Baudelaire. Within his poem, Swinburne not only refers and relates to Baudelaire's work but also to a number of Greek myths and legends, of which Homer and Ovid amongst others wrote about; generating the question, what is his intent in doing so? T. S Eliot seems to argue that relating to or acknowledging dead poets and artists is both a genuine appreciation of their work whilst being a kind of enrichment to the present work. Where this is certainly an amenable viewpoint, there is an additional dimension to this literary trend. Being an elegy, ' Ave Aque Vale' naturally conveys some sense of personal loss to the reader, but in a wider sense, Swinburne's appreciation of Baudelaire's life and work in an elegy is a mode through which he can effectively lay Baudelaire to rest and insert himself into a Harold Bloom-like scheme of canonical writers, confirming himself as next in line in the tradition.

Eliot's claim is certainly true in the sense that it is a fallacy to suggest that any writer or artist can create a totally pure piece of work; that is, one which is totally unmarred by the influence of artists preceding them (the influence

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on their work naturally being appreciation for the dead artist.) This explains to an extent, why writers of the same era are often referred to collectively; the similarities between their writing stems from the influence they have exerted on one another, either deliberately or unconsciously. In consequence, Eliot's notion of completeness rings true. A reader cannot hope to fully comprehend or understand a piece of literature if the writer's allusions to other work are not understood or glossed over. For example, Swinburne refers in the second stanza to ' Lesbian promontories,' a line which alludes to Baudelaire's ' Lesbos.' This is a poem which at its end depicts the death of Sappho, the Greek poet who was claimed to have committed suicide by leaping from the Leucadian rocks, an allusion which thus lends a heightened sense of tragedy to Baudelaire's death, a tone which would be missed by the reader were they not to grasp the nature of this reference.

Furthermore, from these allusions emerges an evident chain running through the history of literary works and with elegies in particular. Where Swinburne pays tribute to Baudelaire, Baudelaire pays tribute to Sappho, and, after Swinburne's death, Thomas Hardy paid tribute to him in the elegy ' a singer asleep.' Critic Yopie Prins comments on the idea of ' poetic vocation' in Thomas Brennan's *Creating from Nothing* essay, suggesting that Swinburne's allusion to Sappho ' enables him to articulate the recurrent structure of poetic vocation: the body of the poet is sacrificed to her song, and this body is sacrificed to posterity, which recollects the scattered fragments in order to recall Sappho herself as the long-lost origin of lyric poetry.' Whilst this comment is specific to Sappho, it seems to apply more widely in the tradition

of poets elegising other poets, where the elegy can be seen as a kind of portrait to immortalise the dead artist after their physical being has deceased.

Considering the context in which Swinburne was writing, his elegy to Baudelaire could also be an act of moral obligation. As Rosenberg comments in *Elegy for an Age*, the Victorians were in a period between a 'vanishing past and an uncertain future,' moving towards a modernist period in which many people abandoned religion and God in favour of atheism or agnosticism. This is particularly evident in 'Ave Atque Vale' with the absence of the traditional Christian God or mention of heaven in a poem which effectively is funereal, displaced by the notion that Baudelaire will not ascend to heaven, but will be immortalised in joining a league of great poets before him: 'holy poet's pages.' Therefore, it becomes Swinburne's duty in the absence of God, to confirm Baudelaire's place as one of the great poets through his elegy. In the very act of consecrating Baudelaire and appreciating him in this way, Swinburne's significance as a poet is heightened in the assumption the reader makes that he is qualified to determine who is and isn't a great or significant writer.

It is also important to consider Swinburne's elegy as a form of inserting himself into the literary canon and perhaps even replacing Baudelaire in his death. In Brennan's essay he establishes that the traditional implication by critics such as Harold Bloom is that Swinburne's allusions to Baudelaire are means for him to 'make place in the tradition for his own endeavour.' In a structural sense, this notion is supported by Swinburne's physical placement of the Baudelaire extract at the start of his poem, preceding his own writing, <https://assignbuster.com/swinburnes-ave-atque-vale-and-the-role-of-the-dead-in-the-construction-of-the-canon/>

an act which could be seen to indicate Swinburne's intention to follow on from the poet and become his heir. Furthermore, the poem begins with Swinburne asking ' shall I strew on thee rose or rue or laurel' and closes with him giving the ' garland' and proclaiming ' farewell,' clear chronology which lends the elegy a funereal purpose of putting Baudelaire to rest, thus making way for Swinburne as the new poet. By elegising a canonical writer such as Baudelaire, Swinburne again heightens his own significance as a writer as he automatically becomes next in line: ' my flying song flies after.' However, this is not to say that Swinburne's elegy is not appreciative of Baudelaire and his work, as T. S Eliot suggests a writer should be, and Brennan seems correct in his essay to dismiss the notion that the elegy is a ' competitive' genre. This notion seems a fallacy on two grounds. The first being that competition is problematic when one participant is deceased; the word implies an ongoing struggle to beat the other whereas Swinburne simply seems eager to continue in a similar vein to Baudelaire. Secondly, if Swinburne's intention truly was to dismiss and replace Baudelaire, it would be illogical to compose an elegy rather than a criticism, for instance. Swinburne places great emphasis on his imagery of Baudelaire as being silent in his death, ' unmelodious mouth,' ' silent soul,' something which works as a kind of self-promotion in its suggestion that Swinburne himself will be the one to carry on his ' song,' rather than replace it.

Returning to Swinburne's references to Baudelaire throughout the poem, these are often vague, and his allusions could be missed by a less critical reader. Therefore, this puts into question whether the poem can in fact have meaning without understanding of the dead poets' influence on it. If by '

meaning' we examine what Swinburne is trying to communicate to his reader, then naturally the reader can understand the sentiment of mourning: ' O sleepless heart and sombre soul unsleeping, that were a thirst for sleep and no more life.' Swinburne here uses classic images associated with death and mourning, these being ' soul,' ' sombre,' and ' sleep,' all of which convey general lament without reference to Baudelaire whatsoever. In this sense the reader understands the grief contained in the poem organically without acknowledging the references to past artists, something which some might conclude is a better way of reading the poem. However, whilst we can assure that meaning of the poem is not wholly dependent on its references to poets and artists of the past, it is fair to say that the meaning is not complete without acknowledging and understanding these. For instance, Swinburne references ' Orestes and Electra,' who were written about in Greek mythology. Swinburne mentions that neither of the two is mourning Baudelaire's death, a seemingly jarring thing to place in an elegy if one is not aware of the myth behind it. Orestes and Electra, after their father was murdered, wanted resurrection for him. McGann argues that ' Orestes and Electra, by wanting resurrection for their father, are also seeking deadly revenge. By contrast, Baudelaire is not involved in such a redemptive project.' Whilst Orestes and Electra do not mourn because they hope for resurrection, Swinburne retains no such delusion about Baudelaire. In consequence, a reader who was not aware of the myth behind Orestes and Electra would not pick up on this point, gaining meaning from the poem, but meaning that is not fulfilled or complete as it would be were the reader to appreciate the references to other artists and works within it.

The notion that Swinburne, unlike Orestes and Electra has accepted Baudelaire's passing is one which is exemplified throughout the poem; he is neither in disbelief nor has any delusions about Baudelaire's return, whose 'days are done' and has 'past the end.' Similarly, his language throughout is fairly detached and the presence of his own lament is minimal; instead, the focal point appears to be Baudelaire's own feelings: 'if life was bitter to thee, pardon,' 'content thee.' Whilst this asserts T. S Eliot's notion that his poem is dedicated purely to the appreciation of Baudelaire and his work, it raises the question of why Swinburne chose to write an elegy over any other literary form. The appreciation of Baudelaire and his work may, for instance have been just as evident in a prose piece, or a ballad. However, we again return to Swinburne's putting to rest of Baudelaire; the elegy allows him to mourn his passing and appreciate his work in a formal way, but at its end, effectively bury him and take his place. Furthermore, through the simple act of writing the elegy for Baudelaire and thus appreciating his work, Swinburne binds himself to the dead poet, again giving himself a leg-up to stand on the shoulders of Baudelaire and his work.

After careful examination, Swinburne's elegy begins to seem less constructed from a deep sense of grief for the loss of Baudelaire and more a kind of self-driven advertisement. Where this might be more viable if Swinburne had written 'Ave Atque Vale' at the beginning of his career, he was already a fairly well-established poet by the time of its publication. This tells us that Swinburne must have composed the poem out of at least some sense of personal loss, and that whilst undoubtedly being a way to set in stone his place in the literary canon, it is also a work of genuine appreciation

for Baudelaire. As is true for innumerable literary works, Swinburne was clearly influenced by Baudelaire's work as well as Greek myth, and the meaning of his elegy cannot be comprehended in a complete way if the influence of both these things is negated in our analysis of it. Additionally, it seems entirely viable that in T. S. Eliot's words, it is Swinburne's 'relation to the dead poet' which was accountable for his own significance and success as a poet, making his elegy a combination of both appreciation for the dead poet alongside his own endeavour to continue in his footsteps.