

POETIC(AL) ANTINOMIES AND MULTI-LEVEL DUALISM
IN NED ROREM'S 'Grief'
Aftermath (2002)

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When I am dead, even then,
I will still love you, I will wait in these poems,
When I am dead, even then
I am still listening to you.
I will still be making poems for you
out of silence.
silence will be falling into that silence,
it is building music.

Muriel Rukeyser



This paper serves as a condensed account of the impromptu speech I delivered during the workshop organized by Dr Nicole Panizza, in collaboration with the University of Florence, represented by Prof. Mila De Santis on 18 May 2022.

I was very pleased to have had the opportunity to participate in this event for several reasons: first because I admire Rorem's music: especially his *Eight Piano Etudes* composed in 1975, and his piano concertos. In fact, I was introduced to Rorem by a friend of his, the composer David Diamond, whilst I was studying in New York at the Juilliard School. The second reason is due to my personal experience related to 11 September 2001, since the piece I am about to analyse was composed right after these catastrophic events. On that very day I landed on the West Coast of the US, just a few hours before the first airplane crashed into the Twin Towers.

In further extension of this presentation, I have added pictures I took while visiting New York. The first image, taken in the 1990s, features the Twin Towers (still standing near Battery Park in the southern part of Manhattan), followed by Ground Zero and the breath-taking Memorial built by Michael Arad and Peter Walker.

My presentation, ‘Poetic(al) Antinomies and Multi-Level Dualism in Ned Rorem’s ‘Grief’’, underlines notable peculiarities and structural aspects of one song selected from Rorem’s song cycle *Aftermath* for voice, piano, violin, and cello. Commissioned and completed in 2002, Rorem scored ten songs based on texts by different poets. The text of the song in question is by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.



11 September 2001 (collective)

GRIEF

Loss of partner (personal)

Aftermath is an English term impossible to translate in other languages without using a periphrasis. The word, derived from the language of agriculture, has gradually acquired a double meaning since it describes the consequence of a disaster but also the period when shock and grief make room for acceptance and healing.

Here, Rorem combines two kinds of sorrow: collective (linked to the experience of 9/11), and personal (stemming from the loss of a partner). However, it is important to underline the subtle difference between the term’s ‘grief’ and ‘sorrow’. Grief is an emotional process, while sorrow refers to the actual emotion.

AFTERMATH (2002)

1. *The Drum* | John Scott of Amwell
2. *Tygers of Wrath* | Blake, (Marston, Housman, Arnold)
3. *The Fury of the Aerial Bombardment* | Richard Eberhart
4. *The Park* | John Hollander
5. *Sonnet LXIV* | William Shakespeare
6. *On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* | Walter Savage Landor
7. *Grief* | Elizabeth Barrett Browning
8. *Remorse for Any Death* | Jorge Luis Borges
9. *Losses* | Randall Jarrell
10. *Then* | Muriel Rukeyser

I initially noted that the first three songs (‘The Drum’, ‘Tygers of Wrath’, and ‘The Fury of the Aerial Bombardment’) mostly address the idea of war and destruction, and therefore collective grief. The following three songs focus instead on grief brought about by the loss of a beloved one. The song under analysis comes right after these two groups and appears to have a pivotal role in the cycle. In fact, Barrett Browning’s poem is a reflection on the very concept of grief, whilst the following two poems by Borges and Jarrell express (respectively) the idea of death as absence, and the hopeless banality of death due to war.



GRIEF

I tell you; hopeless grief is passionless—
That only men incredulous of despair,
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air,
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness
In souls, as countries, lieth silent-bare
Under the blenching, vertical eye-glare
Of the absolute Heavens. Deep-hearted man, express
Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death.
Most like a monumental statue set
In everlasting watch and moveless woe,
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath!
Touch it! the marble eyelids are not wet—
If it could weep, it could arise and go.

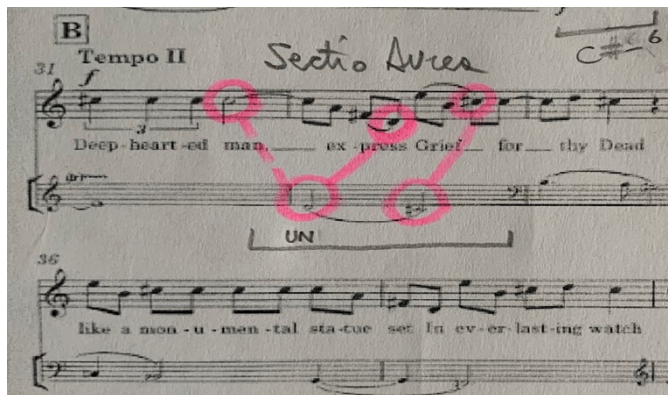
ELISABETH BARRETT BROWNING
(1806-1861)

The image and text (above) features Barrett Browning's poem, and a picture I took, in the English cemetery in Florence, of her tomb. The poetess (and her famous husband Robert Browning) spent a great part of their lives in Florence and were among the most important protagonists of the intellectual English community residing there at the time of the Italian Risorgimento.



Of note, it is a striking coincidence that three consecutive writers, specifically chosen by Rorem, are somehow linked to Florence. Walter Savage Landor spent most of his life in the Tuscan capital, becoming the owner of the Villa La Torraccia in San Domenico (now the seat of the famous Scuola di Musica di Fiesole). His tomb can be found quite close to his friend Elizabeth Barrett Browning's. Nearby is a gravestone marked with the names of Beatrice and Claude Shakespeare, the last descendants of the English bard.

The entire structure of Rorem's 'Grief' stems from a generative melodic cell (*Ur-Motif*) corresponding to a lower/upper neighbour (m2nd/M7th); a three-note motive occasionally presented incomplete with only two notes. The narrative curve of the song reflects traditional expectations for both life and music: three parts, representing a phase of growth, climax, and decay. It is interesting to note that the 'Golden Section' of the entire piece corresponds to bar 32 in the B section (climax), where 'express grief' is stated. Here, Rorem explores a loud dynamic range, while the *Ur-Motif* (upper neighbour) is split between voice and cello (C#-D-C#). This motive is presented in longer note-values (augmentation) after a trill used in the Classical style - serving as a signal preceding a cadence or an important structural point.



This example shows the doubling and splitting of the *Ur-Motif* in the voice and cello parts in bars 31-32, corresponding, as we pinpointed before, to the 'Golden Section' of the piece.

(in)complete 'upper neighbour' C#-D-C#

In consideration of the antinomies between the poetic text and music, one can note the words 'loud access' and 'shrieking' are set in *mezzo piano*, whilst the words 'vertical eye glare' correspond to a horizontal melodic line; 'in silence' is sung *forte*, and 'moveless woe' is expressed with jumping 2nds and 3rds from C⁴ to G⁵ in the melodic line. These apparent paradoxes may have been designed by Rorem on purpose, to emphasize the poetic content of the text.

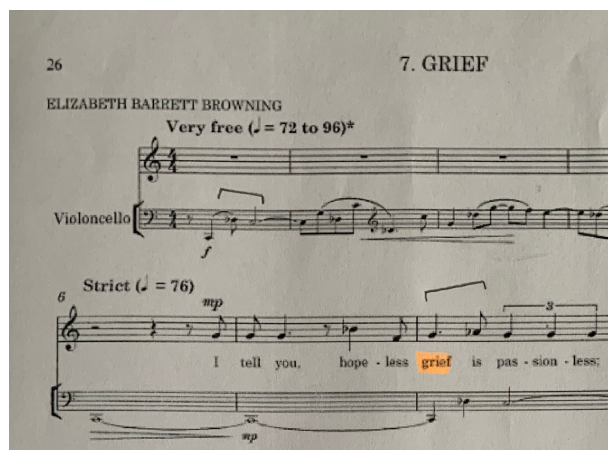
- 'loud access', 'shrieking' → *mezzo piano*
- 'vertical eye glare' → horizontal melodic line
- 'in silence' → *forte*
- 'moveless woe' → jumping 2nds and 3rds from C⁴ to G⁵

The dualistic principle we already mentioned on different occasions regards other aspects of the piece as well, starting from the most evident juxtaposition of silence - as a metaphor of death - and music - as a metaphor of life -, which correspond, on one hand, to the lack of passions mentioned in the text and, on the other, to the open expressivity of the song. The instrumentation of *Grief* represents a dichotomy, with only two sounding parts (the voice and the cello) and two silent instruments (the piano and the violin). In a broad sense, we could interpret the relationship between the two protagonists, the voice reciting the text and the cello expressing its emotional content, with an analogy to what De Saussure called *signifier* and *signified* in linguistics.

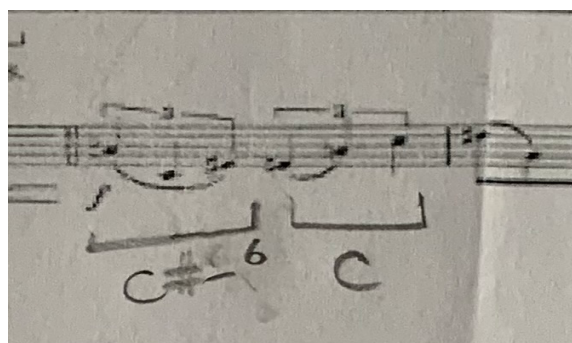
- Piano and violin (soundless) ↔ voice and cello (sounding)
- Voice, instrument ↔ *signifier*, *signified* (De Saussure)
- TEXT (voice) = thought/mind/static state → limited use of large intervals, tendency to move around a tone functioning as a *repercussio* in Gregorian Chant, 'strict' tempo
- MUSIC (cello) = emotion/body/movement → large melodic leaps, broad dynamic range (no FF in the voice part), 'very free' tempo
- A tetrachord from the double harmonic major scale (C-Db-E-F) + a tetrachord from the natural minor scale/Aeolian mode (G-Ab-Bb-C)

Words can be seen as a metaphor of thought, as a mental product somehow detached from the body. Consequently, Rorem uses a limited number of large intervals, the melodic line tends to move around a tone functioning as a *repercussio* in Gregorian Chant, and the tempo is specified as ‘strict’. On the opposite side, the cello part openly evokes emotion and bodily movements, which are reflected in the use of large melodic leaps, a wide dynamic range, and a tempo specified as ‘very free’.

Another dualistic principle can be seen in the scale used by Rorem, formed by the combination of a tetrachord from the double harmonic major scale (C-Db-E-F) and a tetrachord from the natural minor scale/Aeolian mode (G-Ab-Bb-C).

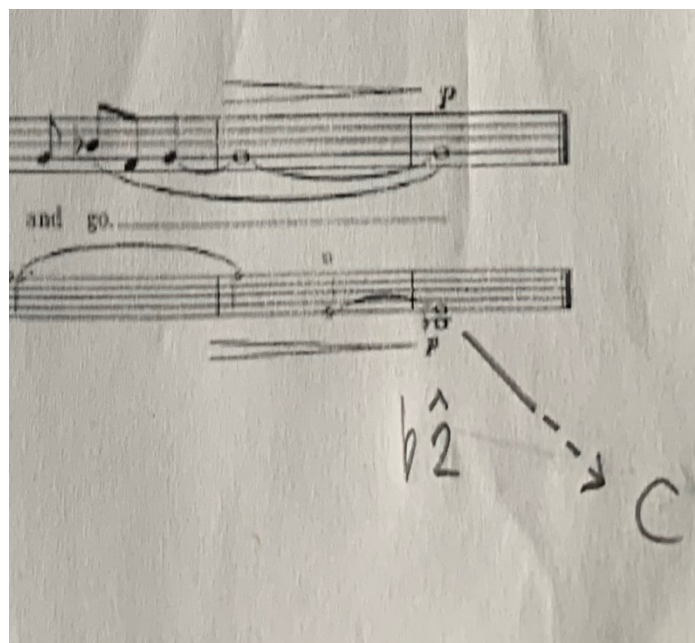


A | Finalis C, Repercussio G (dominant)



B | Finalis F#, Repercussio C# (UN of C)

These images show the triadic structure of Rorem’s song, corresponding to different tonal areas at the distance of a tritone (C-F#-C). Using again Gregorian chant terminology, we could say that the melodic line moves around the *finalis* C and the *repercussio* G in sections A and A’, and around the *finalis* F# and *repercussio* C# in section B



A' | Finalis C, Repercussio G (dominant)

The last note is an unresolved *appoggiatura*. The double stop in the cello part (there is only one in the piece), forming a tritone, sums up the entire structure and reflects the ‘moveless woe’ and the paralyzing effects caused by ‘hopeless grief’.

The last note of the piece is an unresolved *appoggiatura*. The double stop in the cello part (the only one across the entire composition) forms a tritone, thus summing up the tonal structure of the piece. This unresolved tritone reflects the ‘moveless woe’ and the paralyzing effects caused by ‘hopeless grief’ mentioned in Barrett Browning’s text: the D flat simply does not have the strength to resolve on C, as our ears would expect.



As we have seen, Rorem's style is based on traditional compositional principles which ensure his 'modern idiom' as easy to perceive and understand. Like most of his American contemporaries - from Copland to Bernstein, from Barber to Diamond - Rorem keeps a distance from the European avantgarde and sticks to a more conservative (and, consequently, more communicative) approach. The song cycle *Aftermath* comes to a magnificent conclusion with the song 'Then', set to a text by Muriel Rukeyser, which dissolves all previous antinomies by transforming the silence of death into a musical silence, hinting at a new life hidden under the motionless ruins of grief. As Rorem's piece testifies, music remains the most powerful means at our disposal to cope with sorrow and grief.

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