

*'Alms for Oblivion': Elegy in English Verse*

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I

For nigh on two centuries elegiac feeling has pervaded English poetry, not least at the present day. Yet though elegy accounts for some of our finest poems it can also expose the limitations and lacunae in them. Geoffrey Hill has observed the spell that nostalgia cast over English poetry at the start of the twentieth century (I would put it earlier) and this slant has inevitably skewed the tradition in one direction. The point of the present essay is to chart this predilection and define its consequences. I will leave specific poems until later since most of them are well-known and their beauty is not in doubt.

The issue lies not just in what elegy has contributed to English poetry but in what it has tended to exclude from it. I should note at the outset that I do not assume, as Tennyson perhaps did, that elegy necessarily entails Virgilian *lacrimae rerum*.<sup>1</sup> It may not deepen our awareness of mortality as much as we suppose. In a great passage of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin described the gulf between Turner's landscapes and those of the 'the lower picturesque', with their 'light sensation of luxurious tragedy'. The picturesque delight in ancient ruins may be elegiac without being tragic. Tragedy confounds and stuns us, making us face the world as it is and not as we want it to be, whereas elegy often provides consolation for it. The resignation found in Virgil or *King Lear* is quite different from the staple tremulo of *A Shropshire Lad*.

There is an apposite line in Wordsworth's 'Laodamia': 'The gods approve the depth, and not the tumult, of the soul.' Feeling in poetry moves us more by quietness than display. Pathos is central to our poetry but sometimes it acts as a substitute for other feelings that it precludes. Sometimes, moreover, it may generate feelings beyond itself. The divide between pathos that is untragic and genuine tragedy, so evident in Shakespeare's different treatment of the deaths of Hamlet and of Ophelia, is a fine one, easily missed. Hamlet stares into the 'silence' but Ophelia is 'incapable of her own distress'. Only the greatest poets register such differences. This is where 'Lycidas' comes in. In the greatest elegies the poetry does not stay in the same key throughout, as in a groove. At moments of maximum intensity, a change of key will usher in a new, heightened emotion that takes the poem's music beyond the elegiac. Hopkins admired such a transition between the eighth and ninth stanzas of the 'Immortality Ode';<sup>2</sup> there is a similar, even grander effect in 'Lycidas' at 'Ay me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding seas wash far away...' Poets such as Tennyson are so bent on sustaining the flow of their verse that they rarely provide such surprises. Only a few poems in *In Memoriam* have the energy for them. Hardy, on the other hand, was adept at transforming his own music; his poems are full of changes of key. Take the great moment that finally dispels the haunted feeling of 'After a Journey':

Trust me, I mind not, though Life lours,  
The bringing me here; nay, bring me here again!

I am just the same as when  
Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers.

These lines are still elegiac but their poignancy imparts a power to the verse that makes the word 'elegiac' feel limited. But such effects are not common, even in great poetry. There are, for example, similarly arresting transitions in *Four Quartets* but I am not sure they have the same power. The general tone of Eliot's verse is too measured, too impeccably controlled, to license such changes of key.<sup>3</sup>

It may be that the rarity of such moments in Tennyson's poetry is related to his absorption in recollection. Most of his best work is addicted to looking backwards. He rarely gets beyond this except in the rather streamlined rhetoric of the later parts of *In Memoriam*. The *Morte d'Arthur* and even the ostensibly forward-looking *Locksley Hall* are mesmerised by a sense of their own past. Even 'Ulysses', fine as it is, is more of a post-mortem delivered by a living speaker than a poem about life itself. And neither Tithonus nor St Simeon Stylites possess Ulysses's redeeming endeavour. It would be wrong to decry these poems but neither should what they offer be confused with the deepest effects of which elegy is capable. It was a distinction to be what Eliot called 'the saddest of all the English poets' but it was also a limitation. I can explain this by referring to an earlier English poet who was not as emotionally restricted as Tennyson was: Edmund Spenser.

Some historical context may help here, before more literary considerations come up. In fact, the poetic tradition has itself been such a context, poets having often felt drawn to see life from outside the actual living of it, as if it were already poetry. We have grown used to this distance since Tennyson, but earlier elegies were different. Spenser, who certainly knew how to orchestrate a lament and to turn sadness into a source of comfort, never sacrificed more virile feelings to melancholy. Take the beautiful speech of Despayre in the first book of *The Faerie Queene*:

What if some litle paine the passage have,  
That makes fraile flesh to feel the bitter wave?  
Is not short paine well borne, that brings long ease,  
And lays the soul to sleep in quiet grave?  
Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas,  
Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please.

This is not the sweet capitulation it seems to be. Redcrosse does not succumb to Despayre's blandishments; he treats their poetry with circumspection, not as a sort of syrup, because he knows it to be as deceptive as it is seductive. Though the speech goes through his heart 'as a sword's point', Una turns it from an invitation to lotus-eating into a cue for action:

Come, come away, fraile, feeble, fleshly wight,  
Ne let vaine words bewitch thy manly hart...

Spenser lets Despayre flow because he knows that his flow will soon be cut off, that it is not compatible with true living. The wistfulness is partial and the real poetry lies in its interruption. Not all feelings should be given in to, however hypnotic they may be. Redcrosse takes over from Despayre but to another tune.

Yet an uneasy overlap between pathos and tragedy has marked English verse ever since Shakespeare. In Chaucer the two are distinct – the sorrow of Troilus and Criseyde's fate is never confused with their own self-pity in the face of it – and this is still true of Spenser who never mistakes his heroes' regret for their own backslidings with the finality of real tragedy. But there is nothing sentimental about the stark exclamation that signals Verdant's defeat in the Bower of Bliss: 'O horrible enchantment'. By Shakespeare, such enchantments are apt to be more equivocal and less final, attributable partly to fate and partly to character. Troilus and Criseyde perish because their love is too absolute, not because it is flawed, whereas Richard II is deposed not simply because of the common fate of kings but because, for all his anguish, he fails to face up to it. He is less tragic than we expect him to be: Bolingbroke only has to wait and watch his operatics and the crown falls into his lap. Much as we pity Richard, he hardly acts like a king. His pathos is in excess of his tragedy; only his Queen and his groom take it at face-value.

This interaction of pathos and tragedy persists in Milton, whose most moving descriptions of the Fall are often the most consoling. At the tragic conclusion of *Samson Agonistes* we are even told that

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail  
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,  
Dispraise or blame, nothing but well and fair,  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

Milton only broaches tragedy on condition that it can be transcended. Suffering, though extreme, is not absolute. In the same way, *Richard II* may feel like a tragedy but, once we reach the end of *Henry V*, it seems more like the prelude to a triumph, its pathos partly just a passing ornament. Shakespeare may be the most tragic of dramatists but his tragedies are rarely as inexorable as plays like the *Antigone* or *Phèdre*. Part of their effect, which they share with elegy, depends on side-stepping grief in the very act of recognising it. Few scenes are more tragic than the last act of *Antony and Cleopatra* but few so effortlessly transcend their own pathos. Cleopatra does not so much undergo her death as affirm it.

Tennysonian elegy is not dissimilar. For all its indelible sense of tragic waste *In Memoriam* filters its grief through an assuaging regret;

Old warder of these buried bones,  
And answering now my random stroke  
With fruitful cloud and living smoke,  
Dark yew, that graspest at the stones

And dippest toward the dreamless head,  
To thee too comes the golden hour  
When flower is feeling after flower;  
But sorrow – fixt upon the dead,

And darkening the dark graves of men, –  
What whispered from her lying lips?  
Thy gloom is kindled at the tips,  
And passes into gloom again.

Few elegies are as rich as this but few are more narrow. Grief over-shadows us like the gloomy tree itself and we are neither able nor inclined to seek any 'world elsewhere'. Such a poem acts as a beautiful restriction to later poets, a kind of golden cage. Regret becomes an end in itself until the baldness of 'the blank day' gives way to the poignancy of 'O that 'twere possible'; thus, tragedy is channelled into elegy: 'one pure image of regret'. In the long run, for all the anguish, the poetry is made safe for a purgative consolation. Such loopholes became more and more necessary to Tennyson, the more he went on writing. At the end of *The Idylls of the King*, what moves us is not so much the spectacle of Arthur's defeat as the redemptive nobility that he salvages from it. Nor is this pattern peculiar only to Tennyson. Other English poems that flirt with tragedy turn out to be equally wistful: for example, Cowper's *The Castaway* and Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Even 'A Slumber did My Spirit seal' has the knack of making death seem like a blessing in disguise (though even Brecht loved it). D.H. Lawrence once described such poems as 'post-mortem poetry' and one can see why he felt they were not quite fully alive. There is a difference in vitality between, say, Macbeth's 'My way of life is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf' and the serene peroration of 'Ulysses':

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved heaven and earth; that which we are, we are...

There is no such cushion of retrospection for Macbeth. Even in defeat, he feels his fate to his fingertips, but Ulysses contemplates defeat at one remove from it, as if his tragedy were happening to someone else. He can't afford to be completely exposed to it, lest he miss out on the stoical consummation he yearns for. There is still a Shakespearian element in Tennyson's poem but it reminds us more of Horatio's 'flights of angels sing thee to thy rest' than of Hamlet's laconic 'the rest is silence'. In tragedy, life comes to a more final end. As Racine's Mithridate curtly puts it, after a lifetime of desperate rearguard struggle against the odds, 'C'en est fait, madame, et j'ai vécu'. His spirit is as intact as ever. Ulysses, by contrast, speechifies more than he lives.

Even in Hardy, despite an apparent resignation to the whims of 'The President of the Immortals', there are ways round tragedy. As Lawrence noticed, his characters may seem to succumb to the inexorable laws of the universe but, in practice, they tend to submit voluntarily to the conventions of society. A Clym Yeobright is not bound to punish himself as much as he chooses to. Hardy derived a perverse pleasure from the thought of capitulation. Even in bidding farewell to his first wife he salvaged a kind of quixotic redemption from what seemed inevitable. Emma Hardy may be swallowed up in the 'abysm of time' but not so Hardy's untarnished memory of her in her 'original air-blue gown'. She retains – or re-captures – a refulgence that, until then, time had stripped her of. Her image fills the poet's mind all the more completely because she is dead. In the most

poignant way, death is, as it were, circumvented. To say this is not to imply that these poems are any the less moving but simply to suggest that their pathos is more pleasurable and less purely tragic than it is sometimes thought to be. Hardy may make frequent allusions to Sophocles but his own tragedy is a more malleable one. Nor do these poems have the kind of savage desolation that we get in a poem such as Donne's 'Nocturnall on St Lucy's Day'. If anything, Emma Hardy's transfiguring death comes to the poet as a kind of good fortune, precisely what he needs to release his poetry. To a poet, there is a point at which suffering becomes not a curse but a blessing. What would Tennyson mean to us if Hallam had not died? Do we really suppose that Hardy is inconsolable?

I have no space to discuss the many exquisite elegies between Campion and Jonson and Herrick and Marvell's faun. It is enough to say that when they praise the dead they also evoke their life, as in Shakespeare's 'Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.' Death is an end but not a terminus: it takes us back beyond loss. Pathos need not rely on 'blue remembered hills'. A lament like 'Slow, slow, fresh fount' tingles with life, unlike the poetry of aftermath so prevalent since the Romantics. The poem that marks off these earlier elegies from more recent ones is, of course, 'Lycidas'. Like everything Milton wrote, it expands a common form so powerfully that it can never be the same again. Later poets had to write in its shade. They still had space to work in but only shadow, not the open air. The elegy became more formal and literary, its feelings running in a pre-ordained groove. One can imply the seismic shift that Milton's poem reflects by simply quoting from it:

Ay me! Whilst thee the shores, and sounding seas  
Wash far away, wher'ere thy bones are hurled,  
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides  
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide  
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world;  
Or whether thou to our moist vows denied,  
Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old,  
Where the great vision of the guarded mount  
Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold;  
Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth.  
And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.

Such lines may have been exemplary for later elegists but their grandeur has usually eclipsed them. Anyone reading them after Tennyson or even the more rugged Edward Thomas will be struck not just by their majesty but by their virility of tone. The whole man is engaged by such pathos, not just the repining elegist. 'Lycidas' exults as much as it laments. Tennyson claimed that his poetry was 'wild with all regret' but the energy of 'O ye dolphins' is too full-throated to put down just to 'regret'. For almost the last time, perhaps, elegy consorts with the sublime. By the eighteenth century, pathos becomes more simple; even in a poem like Pope's beautiful 'Elegy on an Unfortunate Lady', it is only saved by being covertly tongue-in-cheek. As Blake saw, elegy had begun to watch its manners:

The languid strings do scarcely move!  
The sound is forc'd, the notes are few.

In time, the range of 'Lycidas' makes it look as if *In Memoriam* had put all its eggs in one basket: the effect is not just Virgilian but Parnassian.

Where *In Memoriam* did supply a model, especially in its later poems, was in a polished rhetoric that is a Tennysonian variation on Virgil, Virgilian more in finish than in resonance. For instance:

Regret is dead, but love is more  
Than in the summers that have flown,  
For I myself with these have grown  
To something greater than before;

Which makes appear the songs I made  
As echoes out of weaker times,  
As half but idle brawling rhymes,  
The sport of random sun and shade.

Eloquent as this is, it can't convince us that the 'love' is as deep as the 'regret' was. The music is incomparably tuneful but it is not as moving. To some ears it may even sound a little complacent. That is always a danger for poets to whom classical poise comes too easily. Tennyson's effects are subtle but the general point should be clear. Though drained by grief, he still has time to grieve elegantly. It was his ornament as much as his grief itself that later poets like Swinburne built on. This is not to disparage Tennyson but simply to distinguish his art from Milton's. In fact, it was only later that the real damage became apparent, when lamentation began to turn into an end in itself, as in a poem like Dowson's 'Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae'. The more eloquent Tennyson's successors became, the less they were exonerated by the authentic note of raw grief so constant in his own poetry. By the time of Dowson, melodious pathos had declined into a kind of sensuality. That much had been predictable ever since 'The Lotus Eaters'. After that, poetry had to turn to the rougher music of Hardy and then Edward Thomas to breathe at all. Only by forsaking the master, whom Pound mocked as 'Lawn Tennyson', could poets escape from the 'palace of art' and return elegy to the English mainstream.

Yet though poets began to keep Tennyson at arm's length they still drew on his legacy. We meet him not just in Swinburne but in early Yeats too, in *The Wanderings of Oisín*, and in Housman, wherever poetry is unified by the sense of loss. Even 'Dover Beach' sounds a little Tennysonian, for all its effort to be Greek: Tennyson remained a crucial influence on elegiac verse even *after* poets began to react against him. Perhaps only the Hardy of the 1912 poems took pathos out of its dream-world. Only there, and in Edward Thomas, did poets get free of the literariness that had obscured an earlier 'Englishness'. Before that, for all their art, they had been treading in other men's footprints. I don't mean to claim that Thomas on his own was enough to stand for 'fresh woods and pastures new' but he at least made a long-deferred start in their direction, as later poets like Hughes and Heaney have acknowledged.

## II

It seems likely that the English penchant for the elegiac is partly insular in character. Other literatures, such as the

French and the Italian, are too rational or too passionate to share it. One writer who suspected as much was the philosopher George Santayana: 'So everything, in its ruin, seems in England to live a new life; and it is only this second life, this cottage built in the fallen stronghold, that is English.'<sup>4</sup> This is not said in reproof of our predilection for elegy, but there is a kind of affectionate condescension in it. Santayana understood the drawbacks entailed in cherishing old things just because they were old. He had done his stint in England himself and, as a European American, he met its past with firm but kindly distrust, choosing to settle elsewhere. He did not castigate the 'lament for the old lavender' that Pound thought spoilt *The Ankward Age* but he did detect provinciality in it. He saw, moreover, that the cult of the past would never give him the support that it did to the natives. Even Whitman, who revered Tennyson, looked beyond yesterday's lilacs towards the future. His Lincoln lives in our minds, not on a funeral gun-carriage like Tennyson's Duke of Wellington. For him, at least, there was a 'world elsewhere', beyond elegy. If the 'lilac and star and bird' were 'twined with the chant' of his soul he could still see through his 'noiseless dreams of hundreds of battle-flags' to the 'debris of all the slain soldiers of the war'.

It would be facile to lump all English elegies together. The poems one treasures are often the exceptions. As always, Blake is one of them. His poetry may come out of a sense of loss but it is too intense for ruminative nostalgia:

Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,  
Who countest the steps of the sun;  
Seeking after that sweet golden clime,  
Where the traveller's journey is done;

Where the youth pined away with desire,  
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow,  
Arise from their graves, and aspire  
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

To be 'weary of time' translates into a desire to be 'where my sunflower wishes to go'. Far from hankering after vanished joys, the poet seeks to transcend them through new ones. Elegy is only a step on the way, never just a cue to be 'palely loitering'. Unlike Proust, Blake did not assume that every paradise is a paradise lost.

Perhaps only Burns had the vitality to resist the lure of retrospection so confidently:

Mourn, ye wee songsters o' the wood;  
Ye grouss that crap the heather bud;  
Ye curlews calling thro' a clud;  
Ye whistling plover;  
And mourn, ye whirring pattrick brood;  
He's gane for ever!

Mourn, sooty coots, and speckled teals;  
Ye fisher herons, watching eels;  
Ye duck and drake, wi' airy wheels  
Circling the lake;  
Ye bitterns, till the quagmire reels,  
Rair for his sake.  
(*Elegy on Capt. Matthew Henderson*)

Such an elegy is not formal, nor does it confine grief to a hushed and separate annexe of human life. Its language is the language of everyday, a way of acknowledging death's place in a robust and animated living world. The birds and the fish register Burns's loss as realities, not at the behest of any poetical pantheism. Such a flesh and blood effect is rare in the subdued realm of the elegy and would be more common in a love song. If Burns provides a test to measure later elegists by it is because he shows us that an elegy does not have to be elegiac. That, one surmises, is why he delighted Wordsworth and Keats, though it has not always prevented readers from seeing him as a plaintive outsider himself, baiting the 'unco guid' and nursing his wounds. In fact, his best poems reach beyond their occasions, whether personal or national. They have the common feeling of Gray but with more energy. Burns's sensual imagery reaches forward; it is not buried in the past or ensnared in dreams as the Lotus Eaters are. Tennyson had his anguish to sustain him but no future. That is why he had to make Hallam exemplary. He may not have *idealised* him any more than the other Apostles did, but neither could he leave him in the realm of lived experience. Instead, he kept wavering between loss and hope, the pain of 'Break, break, break' and the solace of 'Crossing the Bar', unable to take elegy as far as Blake and Burns did. It was left to Whitman to go further. The lilacs that bloomed in his door-yard express regret without being absorbed in it. Lincoln was not, that is, another Hallam, frozen in time past.

Few elegies have combined pathos with grandeur as 'Lycidas' did (Whitman is sumptuous but not exactly grand) but a rare exception is Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle', written in mourning for his brother John. Its strength is that it is as much a record of survival as of loss. The mourner is as central as the mourned. As a result, the poem's profound sadness is stiffened by a stoical fortitude. We know from Wordsworth's essay on epitaphs, which contains some of his finest prose, that he thought of grief as an experience that cements the sense of common mortality. Out of it came the kind of elated chastisement that lights up the ending of the 'Elegiac Stanzas':

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,  
I love to see the look with which it braves,  
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,  
The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,  
Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!  
Such happiness, wherever it be known,  
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,  
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!  
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here. –  
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.

One wonders not just at how much meaning Wordsworth gets into that 'Not' but at the fact that its effect is so far from being negative. Even in his later years he could still achieve such effects, as in the 'Extempore Effusion' and, most thrillingly, in the great sonnet on the death of his daughter:

Surprised by joy – impatient as the Wind  
 I turned to share the transport – Oh! With whom  
 But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb,  
 That spot which no vicissitude can find?  
 Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind ...

Not many elegies since Milton confront death this unshrinkingly. One has to turn to foreign poets such as Villon and Racine, Rilke and Leopardi, for a comparison. Even the Eliot of *Little Gidding* is nearer to Tennyson's measured pain than he is to Dante. At this point, though, one has begun to speak of tragedy rather than just of elegy. My only proviso is that one should not limit Wordsworth's sense of tragedy simply to his stern moral stance: the tragic is not the same thing as 'the tragic sense of life' and the 'Elegiac Stanzas' are a cry of pain before they are a lesson in resignation.

### III

It is not easy to think of a more recent poem that can stand beside Wordsworth's but it is possible to cite poems that, in more modest ways, also broaden the scope of English elegy. One recent example is Don Patterson's 'Phantom', on the death of the poet Michael Donaghy, in his recent book *Rain*. At first sight, this poem may seem to re-tread familiar Tennysonian ground:

We come from nothing and return to it.  
 It lends us out to time, and when we lie  
 in silent contemplation of the void  
 they say we feel it contemplating us.

Patterson could not have written so plangently if Tennyson had not done so before him. But when we persist with the sequence other notes can be heard. One of the strongest passages, for example, has a visceral sense of death that is far from Tennysonian. It describes Zurbaran's great painting of *St Francis in Meditation*:

But I would say the fetish-point, the *punctum*,  
 is not the skull, the white cup of his hands  
 or the frayed hole in the elbow of his robe,  
 but the tiny batwing of his open mouth  
 and its vowel, the *ah* of revelation, grief  
 or agony, but in this case I would say  
 there is something in the care of its depiction  
 to prove that we arrest the saint mid-speech.

This works because of its vigilant attention to the picture itself. There is no question of elegy closing down the senses to wallow in a single poetic mood. There may be parts of the poem that do seem a little too finished, where Patterson falls into moralising, but when, at the end, Donaghy speaks in his own voice, the verse is enhanced by a new tone of vernacular directness:

*But that's my point:*  
*what kind of twisted ape ends up believing*  
*The rushlight of his little human art*  
*Truer than the great sun on his back?*

*I knew the game was up for me the day*  
*I stood before my father's corpse and thought*  
*If I can't get a poem out of this...*  
*Did you think any differently with mine?*

It is not far-fetched to suggest that this directness hails from a much earlier period in English verse. The 'great sun' may be a covert echo of Donne. Even the most established tradition can renew itself.

A contemporary elegy which alludes more explicitly to Donne is Paul Muldoon's 'Sillyhow Stride' in *Horse Latitudes*, in memory of the folk-singer Warren Zevon. It is a different proposition from the Patterson, written in a vernacular that turns urbanity into something more laid-back and street-wise (an Irish poet being American). The effect is brilliant but too 'm'as-tu vu?' to be as moving as it is clever. Muldoon is bent on being hip, at the risk of turning the poem into a dazzling display that insists too much on its own articulacy. But there is more to it than that. Donne keeps coming in too, his cadences merging into Muldoon's:

I want you to tell me if grief, brought to numbers,  
cannot be so fierce,  
 pace Donne's sales pitch,  
 for he tames, that fetters it in verse,  
  
 throwing up a last ditch  
 against the mounted sorrows, for I have more. Warren,  
I have more,  
 more as an even flame two hearts did touch  
  
 and left us mere  
 philosophers...

We may feel that Donne's poem is being used to import into the poem an intensity Muldoon himself can only gesture at but more than that is going on. The poem is too tonally complex to sum up so easily. All one can be sure of is that Muldoon alerts one to the lengths to which a contemporary poet has to go to escape from the music of Tennysonian elegy. Nevertheless, the poem could only have been written within the elegiac tradition. Its verbal high-jinks may distract us from its emotion but they still serve a literary purpose.

This tendency of the modern elegy to define itself against the poetry of the past is equally conspicuous in 'Meeting Austerlitz', George Szirtes's fine poem on the death of the novelist W.G. Sebald:

A puff of dust from the library,  
 swirling like ashes, had settled across his prose,  
 its flavour tart, magical and scholarly,  
  
 as tired as the world. Each cadence had to close  
 on what remained of it. A collection of postcards,  
 a guidebook, a street-map.

It is not difficult to hear behind this the grave tones of the 'familiar compound ghost' of *Little Gidding*, though Szirtes's manner is freer and less punctilious. As I read it, Eliot gives the poet another string to his bow, one he could not have found in earlier poems. It was brave of him to pit himself

against so magisterial a predecessor. Sometimes tradition takes the form of a challenge rather than a refuge. 'Meeting Austerlitz' still falls back on a familiar elegiac pathos –

*The picture that shows  
The young girl in the garden, her lips faintly curved  
into a smile, is touching because she is lovely  
and gone. Going is what we have deserved*

*and welcomed.*

– but it finds an original route to it. Yet it is not easy to tell whether Szirtes's poem will last. Like Tennyson, it is so fluent that it is almost too fluent:

Perhaps we were statues and time would pass  
leaving us unaltered, or him at least.  
His words were turning to silver behind glass

Like any mirror, although the mouth had ceased  
moving and his breath was only in my head  
stirred by a wind directly north-north-east.

The ghostly encounter is so precise that the rhymes seem almost pat and the overall effect feels a little too congruous. These are faults one can put up with but the poem perhaps stretches our feelings less than it might have done. Moreover, it meets no more resistance in its subject than in its language: Szirtes's admiration for Sebald is unqualified and Austerlitz seems almost too august for criticism.

I want to close with a less well-known poet who brings to elegy a toughness that is missing in Szirtes: the late Matt Simpson. Simpson was from Liverpool but that never made him glib as some Liverpool poets are. There is always a salutary resistance in his language, as if, to express himself, he had to break through it as through a hedge. His work has been admired by good judges such as Norman Nicholson, W.S. Graham and John Lucas, whose Shoestring Press has published some of it, but it has never had a place on any bandwagon. Despite this, his poetry has done as much to revive the English elegy as anyone's has. At first, his verse seems prosaic but slowly the prose elicits a richer music than we expected to hear in it. His first book, *An Elegy for the Galosherman*, about his Liverpool childhood, is full of such back-handed poetry:

*The Other Side of the Street*

is a row of faces watching. The windows are  
the glad-eyes of the street; the gaping doors  
with tongues held back will wag their say  
when this is done.

They, give them their due,  
Expect her to be ladylike; but let them bite  
On silence for a while:  
She will dress, will not be carried down,  
An ambulance is indignity enough.

This is like the last of trams, the last  
Cunarder facing the horizon. They observe  
Her exit, marvelling. Each one can see  
Her clutch her handbag to her pain.

Every touch of this binds character and place together: the handbag becomes a whole life. Such poems have been rather neglected so I can't resist quoting another in which the poet combines humour with a kind of luminous drabness, ordinary as a realist novel but changed by feeling. 'Send-off in Millom' commemorates the poet Norman Nicholson:

But there were no mumbblings, no stirrings  
From within, no cheeky-chappy back-chat.

It all went woodenly. Outside,  
In the hillside graveyard, we cast soil  
That rattled like polite applause.

Both the feeling of the occasion and its embarrassing lack of feeling are perfectly caught. The poet is not carried away – a saving grain of irony holds us in check, an awareness that strong emotion may be a cue for humour. This freedom from sentimentality, the edgy mix of embarrassment and seriousness, is rare. It brings elegy closer to real grief in the real world. Often, as here, the feeling of loss is laced with a kind of glum self-mockery, immune to fine feeling and too humdrum to inhabit any poetic dream-world. Simpson is not unique in this respect but his wry tenderness stands out. One also finds prose in abundance in a poet such as Peter Reading (the so-called 'Laureate of Grot') but not this ability to be realistic *without* being sour and disabused. Reading's more saturnine humour –

This is a land where, unless a man is  
dogged by misfortune,  
he should not venture to be;  
my lot it is to live here.

amounts to a kind of boast. Reading's real merit is to take elegy back to the austere elegance of its classical origins:

Those who still spare me a thought should know the  
fate I endure here  
on this forgotten stark shore  
under the frost-sharpened stars.

I am surrounded by hordes of barbarians –  
which tribe is foulest  
I am unable to judge  
for they seem equally vile.

It is good to know that English poetry can still call on the Gray of the *Elegy*, that great and now underrated poem whose sobriety of feeling was for long eclipsed by Tennysonian grief, but, after Simpson, Reading seems slightly frigid.<sup>5</sup> There is more than one way of being elegiac. Moreover, a further question has to be asked: what poetic qualities are subdued or by-passed when we linger at the shrine of the past? One wonders at what a Tennyson can do with loss but even in him it may exclude as much as it reveals. It would be naive to imagine either that the English elegy can continue in the old way or that it can be easily renewed. Nearly all the poets I have mentioned are what D.H. Lawrence called 'post-mortem' poets, or partly so; the critic's job is to see whether they can transcend that limitation. But this question is too vexed for any conclusion. What

matters more is that our elegies should not fall into a rut of repetition. The form has become a very English one but it should still remind us that grief is always a common burden, borne in common, and not merely a property of 'Englishness'.

#### Notes

- 1 Tennyson's pathos is nearer to a modern such as Schubert though it lacks the sharp glint of tragedy that one gets in a work such as the *Winterreise*.
- 2 Hill discusses Hopkins's response to the 'Ode' in *The Lords of Limit*.

3 What might be called the Augustan evenness of tone that prevails in the *Quartets* perhaps precludes the kind of dramatic impulses valued by Hopkins and Hill.

4 *Soliloquies in England*.

5 For all its popularity, Gray's poem was often, after Wordsworth, a 'road not taken'. Poets preferred more showy effects. The distinction of the 'Elegy' was to voice a feeling of common mortality that was common in the best sense and not merely trite. What makes it beautiful is its readiness to be pedestrian. But restrained prosaic grief, as in Dryden's elegy to Oldham and Johnson's verses on the death of Dr Robert Levet, has usually been the exception.

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## DAN BURT

### *Who He Was*

(Joe Burt 1915–1995)

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#### I

He catapulted from his armchair,  
airborne for an instant, primed to smash  
the fledgling power who dared challenge  
his rule. That runty five-year-old who would  
not stop his catch to fetch a pack of Luckys  
crossed some unmarked border, threatened  
the kingdom's order and loosed the dogs of war.

No chance to repent, no strap, no bruises  
on my face, my mother's screaming just static  
behind the pounding taking place; rage spent,  
sortie ended, he thumped down the stairs  
to his crushed velvet base, pending new  
provocations to launch him into space.

Worse followed till my biceps hardened,  
but that first strike left most scars: with strangers  
six decades on klaxons *ahmooga*,  
the clogged heart hammers, I weigh my chance.

#### II

A scion of the tents of Abraham  
born during World War I, he policed  
a patriarch's long list of rights: no one  
but he sat in the fat feather armchair  
confronting the TV or at our table's  
head, read the paper before he did or  
said *Let's go somewhere else* when we ate out;  
if he fell sick the house fell silent, roared  
and we all quaked.

I was chattel as well  
as son and he sold my youth for luxuries:

an extra day a week to fish, lunch time  
shags with his cashier, a kapo's trades.

My anger, like an old Marxist's, leached  
away as parenthood, mistakes and time  
taught Moloch is a constant. Attic myth,  
Old Testament, bulge with sacrificial  
tales, the Crucifixion one more offering  
to Baal; families recapitulate  
phylogeny, it's what some fathers do.

#### III

*the golden land in the 'Thirties*

Morning he threads russet gorges  
of two-storey brick row houses,  
short pants, pals, eighth grade  
shut behind him, and evening  
draggles home past trolleys full  
of profiles who paid the nickel  
he can't afford to ride

no one  
waits dinner: his mother leaves cold  
soup in the kitchen (on Fridays  
chicken) he gobbles by the sink  
and chases with a fag puffed  
on the way to box, while siblings,  
older, younger, scribble lessons  
or meet friends; sleeps alone  
above the back porch in an unheated  
room; wears his brother's hand me  
downs; his father beats him bloody  
for spending part of his first pay-  
check on a first pair of new shoes

we buy them a pint with a Bushmills chaser  
and then on to the festering gap in the shipyard  
the Titanic made when it sank.

Our talent for holes that are bigger  
than the things themselves  
resurfaces at Stormont, our weak-kneed parliament,

which, unlike Rome, we gained in a day  
and then lost, spectacularly, several days later  
in a shower of badly-played cards. Another instance, we say,  
of our off-beat, headstrong, suicidal charm.

Morrissey's often remarkable poems constitute a fitting end to the book, and Davis's selection from her four collections to date, ending with 'Through the Square Window' from the 2009 collection of the same name, is a fairly good and representative one.

Davis's policy of including a dozen or more pages for each poet almost always allows a reader to get a strong sense of the range of a poet's work, but this comes at a cost. For all of the anthology's considerable bulk, the list of notable absentees is a glittering one. There is no room for the 'peasant poet' Francis Ledwidge, Ireland's only prominent poet of the Great War. Or F.R. Higgins, a noted follower of Yeats. Or most of Ireland's 'second generation' Modernists, among them Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin and Blanaid Salkeld (though there is, of course, a slot for Samuel Beckett). The truth is that there have been more than fifty or so fairly significant Irish poets born since the 1880s, and some of Davis's omissions – and therefore also some of his inclusions – are bound to seem unfortunate. All anthologies are destined to have weaknesses, and this particular weakness is largely the inevitable consequence of a notable strength. Such is the lot of the anthologist: he is the football referee of literary taste (or, to make another Aldridge analogy, perhaps the fourth official).

A notable benefit of Davis's method, beside the scope it affords for each poet, is that it enables the inclusion of important long poems, such as the full twenty pages of Patrick Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger' and Anthony Cronin's remarkable if flawed 'RMS Titanic', alongside selections of these poets' other works. But Davis's willingness to find space for long poems does not leave him blind to the merits of more obviously slight ones (indeed, perhaps not blind enough, considering their quantity here), such as Peter Fallon's simple 'Birches':

Shadows cross  
the road;  
a row of birches:  
barcode.

And another virtue of this anthology, naturally, is that it allows readers to discover the work of poets with whom they are not familiar. This is likely to be particularly true in the latter third of the book, where younger poets jostle for the reader's attention. Never mind, for a minute, the absentees or few suspect inclusions: the more recent and less widely familiar poets Davis includes all seem to deserve their place, or at least one can see why Davis thinks they do. Whether or not (say) Conor O'Callaghan, Justin Quinn and Sara Berkeley are going to stand out as the complete unknowns in Davis's anthology in a few decades' time is another matter, but when it comes to the tricky issue of selecting from writers presumably at the greener end of their careers in an anthology that includes the likes of Kinsella, Beckett and MacNeice, Davis has taken to the task with gusto and done so as proficiently as anyone could expect. Whilst posterity makes up her mind this book deserves a space on your shelf, in spite of its significant failings.

RORY WATERMAN

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## SOME CONTRIBUTORS

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SAM ADAMS's many publications in the field of Welsh writing in English include three monographs in the Writers of Wales series. He is the editor of *Seeing Wales Whole: Essays on the Literature of Wales* (UWP, 1998) and of Roland Mathias's *Collected Short Stories* (UWP, 2001) and *Collected Poems* (UWP, 2002).

ALISON BRACKENBURY's latest collection of poems is *Singing in the Dark*. New poems can be seen on her website, [www.alison-brackenbury.co.uk](http://www.alison-brackenbury.co.uk).

DAN BURT's first collection of poems, *Searched for Text*, was published by Lintott Press in 2008. His work has been recorded for the National Poetry Archive. He is an honorary Fellow of St John's College Cambridge and lives and writes in London.

MOYA CANNON edited *Poetry Ireland Review* and was writer-in-residence at Trent University, Ontario, and at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris. She was elected to Aosdána, the affiliation of Irish writers and visual artists, in 2004. Her most recent book of poems is *Carrying the Songs*.

The first of MILES CHAMPION's books of poems, *Compositional Bonbons Placate*, was

published by Carcanet in 1996. Since then, now resident in the United States, he has published several further collections, most recently *How to laugh* (2009).

MIRIAM GAMBLE lives and works in Belfast. She writes poems, reviews and critical essays and is a part-time tutor in creative writing at Queen's University.

DAVID GERVAIS is an Honorary Fellow in English at the University of Reading and, over many years, an editor of *The Cambridge Quarterly*. He has written on English and French literature and on printing. *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness'* (Cambridge University Press) includes dis-



cussions of modern English poets. He is completing books on Shakespeare, on Racine and on the European novel.

YVONNE GREEN's poems have been published in *Poetry Review*, *Arete*, *Magma*, *London Magazine*, *Modern Poetry In Translation*, *P.E.N.* and on BBC Radio 4 in Britain. She is a 2007 Smith Doorstop prize winner. She practised at the Bar in London and New York. She is descended from Kundal Khon, the last Court poet of the Emir of Boukhara.

JASON GURIEL is the recipient of the 2009 Editors Prize for Reviewing and the 2007 Frederick Bock Prize, both from *Poetry* magazine. He is the author of a collection of poems, *Pure Product* (Véhicule Press, 2009). His work is forthcoming in *Parnassus* and *The New Criterion*. He lives in Toronto.

MARILYN HACKER is the author of a dozen books of poems, including *Essays on Departure: New and Selected Poems* (Carcenet Press, 2006). She is also a major translator of French poetry, most recently of Vénus Khoury-Ghata.

Welsh-born poet JOHN JAMES is the former Head of Communication Studies at Anglia Ruskin University. As a poet, he came to prominence in the 1970s and he remains a key figure in the British avant garde.

HENRY KING is a PhD student at the Department of English, University of Glasgow.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for his collection *Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems 1977–1989*. He currently teaches on the Creative Writing programme at New York University and his most recent collection, *Warhorses*, was released in 2008.

FRANK KUPPNER's most recent books of poetry are *A God's Breakfast* and, recently published, *Arioflotga. What? Again? Selected Poems* appeared in 2000.

R.F. LANGLEY's *Collected Poems* were published by Carcanet in 2000 and *The Face of It* in 2007.

The Scottish author CARL MacDOUGALL is a television presenter, radio broadcaster, editor, compiler, reviewer, but principally a writer of fiction, novels and short stories.

LAREN MCCLUNG received an MFA from the Creative Writing Program at New York University. She currently teaches in New York City and is co-editing the anthology *Inheriting the War: Poetry and Prose by Children of the Vietnam War*.

CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON's *Collected Poems* was published by Carcanet in 2008. His *Selected Writings* and *Faint Harps and Silver Voices*, a collection of verse translations, are also available.

ROBERT MINHINNICK has twice won the Forward Prize for best individual poem. His books of essays have twice won Wales Book of the Year Prize. He edited *Poetry Wales* (1997–2008). His first novel, *Sea Holly* (Seren) was shortlisted for the 2008 Royal Society of Literature's Ondaatje Prize. He advises the environmental charity Sustainable Wales.

MARJORIE PERLOFF writes on twentieth and twenty-first century poetry and poetics, both Anglo-American and from a Comparatist perspective, as well as on inter-media and the visual arts. She is Professor Emerita of English at Stanford University and currently Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Southern California.

JODY ALLEN RANDOLPH earned her PhD in British and American Literature from the University of California. She has taught at the Universities of Oxford and California and at University College Dublin. *Close to the Next Moment: Interviews from a Changing Ireland*, was published in September.

Novelist and essayist ELIZABETH REEDER is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. Her BBC Radio 4 broadcasts include a Woman's Hour Serial, stories, and abridgments of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and Sara Wheeler's *Magnetic North*. Current writing includes a book of lyrical essays, *direction is the moment you choose*, and a novel.

TONY ROBERTS was educated in England and America. Since featuring in a Peterloo introductions volume, he has published two poetry collections, *Flowers of the Hudson Bay* (Peterloo) and *Sitters* (Arc). A third collection, *Outsiders*, will be published by Shoestring Press in 2010. His poems, reviews and essays have appeared widely in the literary press.

PHILIP TERRY has taught at the universities of Caen, Plymouth and Essex, where he is currently Director of Creative Writing. His fiction, poetry and translations have been widely published in journals in Britain and America. His books include the anthology of short stories *Ovid Metamorphosed* (2000), *Fables of Aesop* (2006) and the poetry collection *Oulipoems* (2006). *Shakespeare's Sonnets* appeared in 2010.

JEFFREY WAINWRIGHT has published several collections of poems and two books of criticism, *Poetry the Basics* (2004) and *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (2005). He has translated plays by Péguy, Corneille and Koltès for radio and stage.

RORY WATERMAN studied English Literature at the University of Leicester (BA, 2005) and Durham University (MA, 2006). He is currently an AHRC-funded Ph.D. student at the University of Leicester, and is writing a thesis on post-War British poetry. His own poetry appears in various magazines.

The Scottish poet, critic, translator, novelist and linguist CHRISTOPHER WHYTE is currently working on the definitive edition of the poems of Sorley MacLean. His first poetry collection, *Uirsgeul / Myth* (1992) was a joint winner of a Saltire Award. In 2002 he received a second Saltire award for his work on Sorley MacLean. He currently lives in the Újlipótváros, Budapest, Hungary.

GREGORY WOODS is Professor of Gay and Lesbian Studies at Nottingham Trent University. In addition to his poetry collections, he is the author of critical books, including *Articulate Flesh: Male Homoeroticism and Modern Poetry* (1987) and *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (1998), both from Yale University Press. His most recent book of poems is *Quidnunc*.

ALEX WYLIE attended the Universities of Central Lancashire and Durham before going to Queen's, Belfast to read for a doctorate in modern and contemporary poetry. His poetry has appeared in *Stand*.

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Definition, Usage and a list of Elegy Examples in common speech and literature. Elegy is a form of literature which can be defined as a poem or song in the form of elegiac couplets, written in honor of someone deceased. Elegy Definition. Elegy is a form of literature that can be defined as a poem or song in the form of elegiac couplets, written in honor of someone deceased. It typically laments or mourns the death of the individual. Elegy is derived from the Greek work *elegus*, which means a song of bereavement sung along with a flute. The forms of elegy we see today were introduced in the 16th century. Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, by Thomas Gray, and When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed, by Walt Whitman are the two most popular examples of elegy. Features of Elegy. David Gervais, "'Alms for Oblivion': Elegy in English Verse", *PN Review*, 37.2 (2010). John Goodridge, "Pastoral and Popular Modes in Clare's Enclosure Elegies," in *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-taught Tradition* (1994), 139-55. Barbara Hardy, *The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry* (1977). Gail Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue for Passion: Grief and its Political Uses* (2000). Ellen Lambert, *Placing Sorrow: A Study of the Pastoral Elegy Convention from Theocritus to Milton* (1976) Dan Latimer, *The Elegiac Mode in Milton and Rilke: Reflections on Death* (1977) An elegy is a mournful poem, usually written in remembrance of a lost one for a funeral or as a lament. An elegy tells the traffic story of an individual, or an individual's loss, rather than the collective story of a people, which can be found in epic poetry. An elegy generally combines three stages of loss: first there is grief, then praise of the dead one, and finally consolation. An elegiac couplet is a poetic form comprised of alternating hexameter and pentameter verses, which was used for themes on a smaller scale than epic poetry. Greek and ancient Roman poets used elegy also for humorous themes and satire. The definition of elegy became more limited thousands of years later, and was quite popular with English poets starting in the sixteen century. Examples of Elegy in Literature. Example #1.