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THE PENGUIN BOOK OF ELEGY

POEMS OF MEMORY, MOURNING AND CONSOLATION

Edited by **Andrew Motion** and **Stephen Regan**

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'Poignant . . . memorable . . . impressively fresh and compelling . . . the reader is bound to come away from a collection like this asking what the poetry of lament might help to teach us about the task of grieving for the threatened loss of an entire world' Rowan Williams, *New Statesman*

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'Funny, angry and provocative . . . the anthology is a success . . . the editors' introduction is excellent – clear, informative and thought-provoking' *Daily Telegraph*

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Andrew Motion's most recent collection is *New and Selected Poems 1977–2022* (2023). He was UK Poet Laureate from 1999 to 2009, is co-founder of The Poetry Archive and Poetry by Heart, and since 2015 has lived in Baltimore, where he is Homewood Professor of the Arts at Johns Hopkins University.

Stephen Regan's books include *Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Literature in English 1789–1939* (2004) and *The Sonnet* (2019). He has taught at Ruskin College, Oxford; Royal Holloway, University of London; and Durham University, where he is Professor Emeritus. He is currently a Research Associate at the University of Melbourne.

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Poems of Memory, Mourning and Consolation

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ANDREW MOTION *and* STEPHEN REGAN

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Introduction

All poetry exists as a record of life snatched from the destructive flow of time, and so to some extent all poetry is elegiac. Whatever the ostensible subject of a poem, readers can always intuit the voice of the poet saying: 'I saw this, and I felt this, and tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, I won't.' This means that any collection of poems could, in a slightly devious sense, be called a book of elegies. But this *Penguin Book of Elegy* has a more particular purpose: we have brought together the best and most varied examples we can find of poems of loss and mourning written in English (and translated into English) between Classical antiquity and the present day. All of them respond to bereavement with some combination of sorrow, shock, rage, emptiness, bewilderment or hauntedness. Many of the poems additionally express a longing for consolation, giving voice at the same time to the wonder and incredulity that can arise from a sense of renewal. John Milton's vision of his dead wife, for instance – 'Methought I saw my late espousèd saint' – contains a similar experience of ghostly revelation to that which occurs in Seamus Heaney's meeting with his murdered cousin in 'The Strand at Lough Beg': 'I turn because the sweeping of your feet / Has stopped behind me'.

Marvellous encounters with the dead require a more than usually willing 'suspension of disbelief'.[1] But while this often produces work of sublime eloquence, it also tends to bring poets to the limits of language's ability to measure up to the richness and strangeness of human experience, where words either seem inadequate, or falter and break down altogether.[2] Faced with this likely disappointment, it is not surprising that elegiac poetry should often be characterized by a high degree of self-consciousness. Even while striving to become a lasting memorial, elegies often leave their creators and their audience

in a troubled state where thoughts and feelings fall short of the resolution they desire.

Paradoxically, this sense of disappointment gives elegiac poetry much of the energy its readers most admire, often allowing it to speak across boundaries of time and nationality, and to extend the sense of personal bereavement to include the loss of ideas, homeland, identity and opportunity. This kind of broadening is strikingly evident in much of the modern and contemporary poetry we have chosen, where individual grief and widespread cultural deprivation are both closely entwined and explicitly announced. Even in much earlier poetry, however, the broadening of perspective from personal mourning to communal loss is clearly apparent. A strong sense of communal sorrow flows through the poems by anonymous authors included here, and in keeping with the enlargement of perspective from solitary to shared endeavour, these poems frequently mix genres such as the ballad, song, epitaph, valediction and obsequy. The amplification of sorrow is also deeply felt in the examples we have included of poems in translation – mostly from mid-twentieth century European poets whose experience of war means that their work frequently combines personal with national lamentation.

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Our aim has been to collect poems that face and surmount loss in ways that are captivating and moving, while also mapping the large landscape of poetic mourning and exploring its traditions. Many of the poems included here, whether they acknowledge it or not, reach back centuries to Classical models and draw on well-established conventions of elegiac writing. The word elegy derives from the Greek *elogos*, a term that was originally used for a particular metrical structure of verse – the elegiac couplet – which consisted of alternating hexameter and pentameter lines. The poems written in these elegiac couplets drew on a wide variety of subject matter; in time, however, *elegos* came to be used as the word to describe the singing of sad or mournful songs, usually accompanied by a wind instrument – and it is this idea of lament, rather than metrical arrangement, that has come to define elegy in the sense that we understand it now. As early as Roman times the word *elegia* had come to indicate a prevailing tone of loss and sorrow in line with our own understanding of the terms, although the

poems of Catullus and Ovid show that its original focus had been enlarged to include poems of disappointed love, which in turn gave birth to a parallel tradition of 'erotic elegies' or lovers' complaints.

The most decisive Classical influence on the evolution of elegy in the Western tradition was the pastoral or bucolic poetry of Theocritus and Virgil: the way in which their poetry brought together commemorations of landscape and sacrificial fertility rituals – enacted to ensure the well-being of shepherds and their animals – led to the creation of a new form of pastoral elegy, which was initially associated with commemorative rites dedicated to the mythical shepherd-poet Daphnis. The first 'idyll' of Theocritus, for instance, is a lament by the shepherd Thyrsis for the death of Daphnis, tormented by the love-goddess Aphrodite. In later elegies such as Bion's 'Lament for Adonis' (an important influence on Shelley's *Adonais*), the figure of Daphnis is substituted by Adonis, the legendary favourite of Aphrodite, but the preoccupation with mythical shepherds continues. Classical pastoral elegy of this kind provides a potent model for later lamentations, as well as establishing a set of codes and conventions that survive to the present day. Although the term 'pastoral' has come to be associated in a general way with rural scenery, it has its etymology in the Latin 'pastor' (meaning shepherd), and both this and the related suggestion of 'pastoral' as caring and nurturing greatly enabled the transition from Classical to Christian models of elegy.

Typically, early pastoral elegy opens with an invocation to the Muses, calls on listeners to mourn the death of a young shepherd, registers the effects of his death on the surrounding landscape, summons a procession of mourners (usually nymphs or other kinds of guardians), and then embarks on elaborate funeral rituals including the offering of tributes and the laying of flowers on a grave. Stylistically, this structure includes a good deal of repetition (particularly in the form of refrains), as well as antiphony or the use of multiple voices. Rhetorically, it relies on a language of appeal and interrogation, with occasional outbursts of anger or complaint, before moving towards reconciliation and consolation. Very often these final stages of the poem anticipate new life in the changing seasons, in the revitalizing movement of water in streams, in returning sources of light, and in emblems of sexual power and rebirth that are drawn from the natural world.

Although the dissemination of Classical pastoral elegy throughout

Renaissance Europe is generally seen to herald the foundation of elegy as a distinct poetic genre, the influence of the Old English elegy also played an important role. As many as nine such poems exist in the manuscript of the so-called Exeter Book, one of the most significant verse manuscripts to have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period (now held in Exeter Cathedral Library). These include 'The Wanderer', 'The Seafarer' and 'The Wife's Lament', all of which frame descriptions of exile and longing in a time of tumultuous change. J. R. R. Tolkien claimed that the Old English epic *Beowulf* was elegiac as well as heroic, a poem infused with sorrow and lament. The voice of mourning can often be found, as well, in medieval poetry – in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, for instance, and in the plangent dream vision of the anonymous *Pearl*. Given the long and well-established history of the genre, it is not surprising to find in modern elegies a strong and self-conscious sense of legacy and dialogue, but the very subject of mourning also generates among poets a strong sense of shared endeavour which manifests itself in a high incidence of echo and allusion.

These various forms of pastoral provided a poetic blueprint for the development of English elegy that began to take a coherent shape in the 1570s, most notably in the 'November' eclogue of Edmund Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*, with its clear echoes of Theocritus. Building on this example, English poets swiftly became adept at mingling mythological and familiar characters, adapting Classical settings to English landscape, and converting pagan figures such as Orpheus and Pan into Christian archetypes. The best-known distillation of these syncretic tendencies is Milton's 'Lycidas', which was first published in 1638 as part of a volume of elegies commemorating the death of Edward King, Milton's contemporary at the University of Cambridge, who had drowned in a shipwreck in the Irish Sea in August of the previous year. But if this makes 'Lycidas' the prime example of the influence of Classical pastoral on English Renaissance poetry, the poem also determines the course of much that follows in English elegiac writing. Its masterful, calm artistry, its large and comprehensively integrated patterns of imagery, and the sheer ambition of its vision make it not only the first great English elegy, but the first great elegy of the Christian era.

'Lycidas' begins by mourning in a mood that seems almost dutiful,

perhaps even a little sullen, as it registers 'once more' the solemn task of recording a premature death. It calls upon the Muses ('Begin then, sisters of the sacred well'), it questions the custodians of the dead ('Where were ye, nymphs, when the remorseless deep / Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?'), and it organizes the procession of mourners and the ritual of wreath-laying with a knowing acknowledgement of traditional practice ('Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed, / And daffadillies fill their cups with tears'). But this initial sense of obligation soon gives way to more genuine-seeming grief, which brings with it a revitalized poetic authority that is clinched in the poem's conclusion. Here the 'forced fingers rude' that previously threatened to 'shatter' the leaves of laurel, myrtle and ivy are said to have sensitively 'touched the tender stops of various quills'. More dramatic still, the speaker's formerly insistent pronouncement that 'Lycidas is dead' is now revoked: 'Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more, / For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead.' The imperative mood here is vital (gently instructing rather than commanding), as in later elegies, because it signifies that the speaker is prepared to take on the task of managing the experience of loss and of reordering the world that survives after it. It also prepares us for the magnificent apotheosis at the end of the poem, in which the dead youth, now under the tutelary guidance of Saint Michael, is transported from earth to heaven: 'Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth: / And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.'

In his influential study of the genre, *The English Elegy* (1985), Peter Sacks presents a largely Freudian reading of elegy that acknowledges the complex psychological processes at work in each poem of mourning. Sacks is surely right to detect in the driving rhythmical power of 'Lycidas' not only a desire for the resurrection of its subject, Edward King, but a yearning on Milton's part for poetic immortality.[3] The poem does, after all, reflect on the speaker's own 'destined urn' and 'sable shroud' in its invocation of the Muses, even suggesting poetic rivalry between the dead man and his successor. In writing a personal elegy, one addressed to another poet rather than a mythological figure, Milton established an important precedent. 'Lycidas' became the prototype for a grand series of later elegies that mourn dead poets while also brooding on notions of poetic rivalry and inheritance: Shelley's *Adonais* (for John Keats), Matthew Arnold's 'Memorial Verses' (for William Wordsworth),

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (for Arthur Henry Hallam), Swinburne's 'Ave atque Vale' (for Charles Baudelaire), and Elizabeth Bishop's 'North Haven' (for Robert Lowell).

The lively and varied critical reception of 'Lycidas' in its own time and since has been influential in shaping how other elegies are regarded. In this respect, the questions asked about Milton's poem serve as an index for how later elegies are appreciated and understood. Can such a high degree of artifice and invention, readers have often wondered, be consistent with genuine sorrow? To appreciate the poem fully, do we have to possess the same kind and degree of religious faith as the author? Some critics have shifted the debate away from these questions of sincerity, sympathy and belief by claiming that the success of any poem depends primarily on its rhetorical performance: that is, on whether or not we find its language persuasive. This, in turn, has led to an intensive study of the complex ways in which the resources of language are stretched in the process of trying to represent absence and loss. 'Lycidas' and other elegies that live in its wake persistently draw attention to their own materiality, their own substance as words on the page, as if to dispel any questions about absence and the failure of representation that might be at their heart. The proof of this tendency lies in the highly sensuous language often found in elegies, a prominent example in 'Lycidas' being the passage of floral tributes to the dead subject, in which we are shown valleys that 'purple all the ground with vernal flowers'. Similarly, a final glimpse of the speaker emphasizing the colour of his clothing confirms his physical survival: 'At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue: / Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new'.

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As the traditions of English elegy continued to develop, their emotional and psychological complexities became more often and more deeply aligned with the representation of a real or imaginary place – usually a landscape of some kind. One of the best-known examples from any period, Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751) conforms to this pattern, but it also marks a crucial turning point in the history of the genre by switching its attention away from privileged subjects towards the rural poor, and by presenting them in a demythologized context. The

tone of the poem, too, aspires less towards grandeur than it does towards stability and repose, focusing not on the familiar pastoral figure of the shepherd but on the more earthy and 'weary' ploughman. In the process, it supplies many of the imaginative resources that are developed in subsequent grief-landscapes, which (especially in the nineteenth century) regularly feature such details as the 'ivy-mantled tower' and the 'yew tree's shade'.

In creating this effect, Gray combines the Classical tradition of elegy with popular eighteenth-century poems that feature a rural prospect, creating what is in effect a group elegy rather than the commemoration of a single individual. This, despite the fact that the poem's consideration of lost potential is attached to the ideal of the exceptional person, in this case (and conventionally) another poet: 'Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest'. Other elements in the poem confirm its ambivalent politics. In what looks like a bold critique of 'the boast of heraldry, the pomp of power', for instance, differences of rank and status are obliterated by death the great leveller, and yet, as William Empson argued, the poem also wants to persuade us that 'we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death'.[4] In the same sort of way, the speaker-poet's appended epigraph, which closes the poem, appears to banish a desire for lasting recognition while simultaneously declaring a need for it.

The elegant compromises of Gray's poem were challenged by the Romantic poets in general, but in particular by William Wordsworth, and in a way that can be said to develop Gray's project rather than reject it. Not only does Wordsworth's extensive poetry of loss more obviously use the language of common speech than Gray manages to do, it is also more definitely inclined to address the hardships of the rural poor. Given his distrust of ostentatious poetic figuration, which he clearly signals in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), it's no wonder that he avoided writing conventional elegies in the style of 'Lycidas', despite his great admiration for Milton. Wordsworth writes emphatically in the famous Preface about his preference for 'simple and unelaborated expressions' over the more extravagant and ornamental verses of some of his contemporaries.[5] One of his major achievements was to give a new and striking prominence to the obscure figure of Lucy, who had been sung about in English ballads, and to elevate the values of the local and ordinary in lyric form:

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her Grave, and, oh
The difference to me!

In lines such as these, the elaborate conventions associated with pastoral elegy are stripped away and replaced with something apparently very simple. Yet the longer we contemplate the poem, the more we realize that its plain diction is deployed to release complex thoughts: about the degree of Lucy's unknownness and the reasons for it, and about the characteristics we're meant to deduce from her being 'Fair, as a star when only one / Is shining in the sky!' (the reference is to Hesper, a star appearing early in the evening and remaining until dawn). Wordsworth seems to invite incredulity or even mockery, given that Lucy's obscurity and singularity might be read as backhanded compliments. The details of her being like a flower half hidden and a star shining on its own have a sly sort of humour that is at once unusual in elegy, and, in its mixture of bathos and bafflement, reflective of the poem's truth to life – and death.[6]

The closest that Wordsworth comes to writing a formal elegy is in his 'Elegiac Stanzas, suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont', which he wrote following the death of his brother John at sea in 1805. The painting, which shows a dark and overcast castle on a threatening coast, and a ship heaving through tumultuous waves, displaces Wordsworth's previously bright memories of Peele Castle, with images that are now taken to represent his turbulent state of mind. Associating grief with the place itself in a way that anticipates the later elegies of Tennyson and Thomas Hardy, Wordsworth sees in the 'rugged Pile' an emblem of strength and resilience, buttressed by 'the unfeeling armour of old time'. The purpose of this 'armour', however, is not to suppress or deny feeling but to reorganize it into an acceptance of what cannot be altered: 'A power is gone, which nothing can restore; / A deep distress hath humanised my Soul.' The ending of the poem is subdued and might even be read mistakenly as platitudinous (like the end of 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways', which was written not long before). In fact it is final proof of the value that lies in the stoical acceptance of our earthly condition: 'Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.'

The major elegy of the romantic period is undoubtedly Shelley's *Adonais*, inspired by the death of Keats in Rome in February 1821. Unlike Wordsworth, Shelley had no qualms about seizing on the conventions of Greek pastoral elegy, clearly signaling his indebtedness to Theocritus, Bion and Moschus. The example of 'Lycidas' is equally clear: like Milton, Shelley starkly announces the reasons for his grief – 'I weep for Adonais – he is dead' – then moves towards a revocation: 'Peace, peace! He is not dead, he doth not sleep –'. Similarly, he calls on tutelary spirits and other guardians, charging them with neglect much as Milton did, while also summoning a procession of mourners (a strange congregation of 'Desires and Adorations, Winged Persuasions and veiled Destinies'). But the poem repeatedly animates these conventions by combining them with striking innovations. Most remarkable of all of them, the poet-speaker includes himself in the mourning procession, appearing as 'one frail Form, / A phantom among men' who furiously directs his anger at those who have (as he sees it) hastened the death of the young poet by attacking his work. In the process, Shelley helped to establish the myth that Keats was mortally wounded by the savage reviews of his work in *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*: 'the curse of Cain / Light on his head who pierced thy innocent breast, / And scared the angel soul that was its earthly guest!'.

Another notable disruption of convention is the setting of *Adonais*, which is part mythological and part nineteenth-century Mediterranean, populated by 'the green lizard' and 'the golden snake'. The mourning itself proceeds while Keats lies beneath 'the vault of blue Italian day', with 'that high Capital' of Rome providing a fitting backdrop of 'ages, empires, and religions', and in the closing stages of the poem Shelley rejects Milton's Christian consolations to move uneasily through the realm of Platonic idealism, before eventually inclining towards 'Heaven' and 'Eternity': 'The One remains, the many change and pass; / Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly'. In the end, the Eternity that Shelley secures for Keats is poetic immortality – but this is not achieved without a continuing sense of compromise: 'I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar', Shelley writes, conceding his eventual loss of control as he glances ahead to the time of his own death. Many readers have noticed how, in the closing lines of the poem, it seems that

'the soul of Adonais, like a star', not only 'Beacons' but *beckons* 'from the abode where the Eternal are'.

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One of the first readers of *Adonais* was Arthur Henry Hallam, whom Tennyson would later elegize in *In Memoriam*. Hallam died in Vienna on 15 September 1833 and his body was transported by sea from Trieste, delaying his burial until 3 January 1834. Tennyson appears to have started writing the series of lyrics that would eventually comprise his poem shortly after receiving news of Hallam's death in October 1833, although the poem was not completed and published in book form until 1850, the same year that Tennyson became Poet Laureate. In its Section 11, the speaker imagines Hallam's body on the journey to its burial ground in Cleveden, Somerset, punctuating a meditation on the surrounding rural landscape with recurring thoughts of the sea:

> Calm and deep peace in this wide air,
> These leaves that redden to the fall;
> And in my heart, if calm at all,
> If any calm, a calm despair:
>
> Calm on the seas, and silver sleep,
> And waves that sway themselves in rest,
> And dead calm in that noble breast
> Which heaves but with the heaving deep.

What looks like simple repetition in these lines works in complex ways to create delicate adjustments of thought and feeling, registered throughout the poem in a habitual contrast of inner and outer landscapes. The tight *abba* rhymes in each quatrain, reminiscent of the opening quatrains of Petrarch's love sonnets, mimetically capture the rhythms of grief, subtly articulating both a continual longing for intimate union and a repeated dispersal of that imagined possibility.

In Memoriam is a poem replete with traditions, strewn with flowers and flocks, and even featuring an 'Old Yew' that reminds us of the yew in Gray's 'Elegy'. In several ways, though, it departs from its predecessors and discovers in grief a network of psychological

and emotional difficulties previously unmapped in elegiac poetry. Writing about that yew tree, for instance, Tennyson says that his speaker lacks the tree's powers of endurance ('Sick for thy stubborn hardihood') and attributes his failure to human weakness. Here and elsewhere the language of the poem is at once intimate and visceral, often transporting us from familiar pastoral terrain to new urban landscapes – most memorably in Section 7, where the speaker revisits the empty house of his dead friend: 'Dark house, by which once more I stand / Here in the long unlovely street'. The passage is a powerful demonstration of Tennyson's uncanny ability to convey feelings of desolation through the simple but precise notation of external phenomena, as in the famously bleak alliterative monosyllables of the final line: 'On the bald street breaks the blank day.'

All these features of *In Memoriam* make it one of the most moving poems in the tradition. Equally striking is the way it explores its own work of mourning. Time and again Tennyson recognizes the urge to speak of loss while also harbouring deep reservations about the value of doing so, since he expects his words to fall short of their purpose; 'I sometimes hold it half a sin,' he says at one point, 'To put in words the grief I feel', and elsewhere he admits that his desire for spiritual reunion with Hallam exceeds what language is able to convey. In all these respects *In Memoriam* manifests the deeply ambivalent nature of elegy: at every turn it proves that the need to remember is inseparable from the need to forget, and the longing to hold on is indivisible from the contrary need to let go: 'I cannot think the thing farewell'.

In Memoriam found immense popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century. Queen Victoria included extracts in her *album consolativum*, compiled after the death of Prince Albert in 1861, and she later confided to Tennyson that she had been comforted by reading the poem. In the early twentieth century, however, with the emergence of a new modernist spirit in poetry, its reputation began to pale. Thomas Hardy wrote to Henry Newbolt in 1909 saying that although he had done his duty to the poem by 'adoring it in years past', he now found it unsatisfactory: 'While the details of its expression are perfect, the form as a whole is defective, & much of the content has grown commonplace nowadays.' In particular, Hardy objected to 'the awful anticlimax of finishing off such a poem with a highly respectable middleclass wedding', when 'it ought to have ended with something like an earthquake'.[7]

Hardy no doubt had *In Memoriam* in mind when he began to compose his own 'Poems of 1912–13' shortly after the death of his first wife Emma Gifford on 27 November 1912. Decisively breaking with the solemn metrical and stanzaic regularity of Tennyson's poem and its predecessors, Hardy embarked on a series of elegies (eventually completing twenty-one of them), all written in different forms. Although some readers have tried to order the sequence so that it describes a movement from sudden grief to psychological recovery, none of the attempts is convincing – because the aim of the poems is not resolution but protracted and intense uncertainty. As Michael Millgate points out in his biography of Hardy, they were written in a mood of guilty remorse and reawakened love, with Hardy often returning in his imagination to the happy scenes of courtship that he had enjoyed with Emma in the early days of their marriage.[8]

The variety of forms used in 'Poems 1912–13' gives Hardy the opportunity to view his loss from a wide range of mental and emotional points of view. Ever the versatile craftsman, he modulates his voice to sound by turns indignant, bitter, defiant, distraught, bemused and tender. 'The Going', for instance, draws on the familiar euphemism of death as a departure, but the poem's confrontational tone and brisk idiom are strikingly modern: 'Why do you make me leave the house / And think for a breath it is you I see'. Even more arresting is the speaker's imagined sense of sinking in the dislocated and heavily punctuated phrasing of the final stanza, where the dead woman is lovingly rebuked by the poet-speaker, who imagines himself becoming her partner in the shades: 'I seem but a dead man held on end / To sink down soon'. The same sense of simultaneous connection and separation appears at the end of 'The Voice', which after evoking lost love in a series of waltz-like rhythms (dactylic tetrameter), ends in physical and psychological collapse, 'faltering forward'.

Hardy's sequence powerfully contends with the established conventions of elegiac poetry and registers his complicated sense of loss in highly original and often idiosyncratic ways. Despite these innovations, it was immediately widely admired and immediately influential. This was partly because the book in which 'Poems 1912–13' originally appeared, *Satires of Circumstance*, was published in 1914, and therefore became an unavoidable example for poets who would soon want to write elegies on a scale never previously seen, on the

battlefields of the Western Front. Wilfred Owen, who planned to call a volume of his poems *English Elegies* (but was killed before completing the manuscript) was the greatest of many who built on Hardy's foundations. His first successful war poem, for instance, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', mixes the response of a distinctly modern sensibility with emblems of conventional mourning – bells and flowers and prayers – in ways that remind us of Hardy's tactics. And their influence persists to the present day, in terms of tone as well as structure: Christopher Reid's 'A Scattering' is one of several recent elegies which adopt the loosely linked shape of Hardy's sequence.

W. B. Yeats, who professed a strong dislike for 'certain poems written in the midst of the great war', on the grounds that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry', nevertheless wrote one of the great elegies of the twentieth century in response to a casualty of that war.[9] 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' honours the death of a young Irish soldier (the son of Yeats's friend and patron, Lady Augusta Gregory) who was killed when his aircraft crashed on the Italian front in 1918. Yeats adds significantly to the traditions of elegy in his tribute, reinvigorating it with images drawn from Irish art and culture. Although Robert Gregory is repeatedly praised as if he were an English Renaissance courtier ('Our Sidney and our perfect man'), he is also identified as a specifically Irish artist, whose potential was still to be realized: 'We dreamed that a great painter had been born / To cold Clare rock and Galway rock and thorn'. Furthermore, as Yeats's early nationalist aspirations turned to disappointment, he composed several other political elegies that combined the patriotic, commemorative mode of Irish songs and ballads with the more personal and introspective mode of lyric poetry, and blended elements of irony and sarcasm with more familiar mourning gestures (in 'September 1913', for instance, and 'Easter 1916').

When Yeats died in 1939, Auden had just left England for America, and the elegy that he wrote for his great predecessor soon afterwards is remarkable not just for the liberties it takes with the conventions of the genre, but for the directness with which it seeks to explain the role of poetry in the modern world. This is clear from the flatly documentary opening lines – 'He disappeared in the dead of winter: / The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted' – where we get a reference to global transport systems rather than mythological landscapes, and a simple but effective cliché rather than

rhetorical grandeur. It is an apt introduction to a poem in which Auden recognizes common human fallibility in his subject, as well as abundant talent: 'You were silly like us; your gift survived it all.'

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Auden's elegy, written by an English poet in America about an Irish poet who died in France, reminds us that genres travel. At one level, elegy might be said to have an obvious universal application: everyone dies. At another level, though, elegy has national characteristics that often derive from particular religious and social structures. American elegy is a case in point, being less inclined to draw on the traditions of Classical myth and landscape that underpin the European model, and instead drawing its own cultural and spatial boundaries. Peter Sacks speculates that the 'severe repression and rationalization of grief' in early Puritan America helped to create a 'nakedly expressive style' of writing that persists right through to the work of the 'confessional' poets of the 1950s and '60s.[10] One might add that different kinds of repression have helped to create the no less 'nakedly expressive' but powerfully committed work of Black writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks and more recent poets such as Jericho Brown, in whose poetry the commemoration of personal loss is often inseparable from the losses caused by racial injustice.

Walt Whitman's great elegy for Abraham Lincoln, 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' is in many respects the foundational American elegy, being as much a lament for the dead of the Civil War as it is for Lincoln himself, and observing decorum while also following its own bold path among swamps and cedar trees. As Whitman imagines Lincoln's coffin being carried 'Through day and night . . . with the cities draped in black', we see it borne on a series of images taken from the entire country's vast and variegated landscape, ranging from his own 'Manhattan with spires' to 'the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn'. Many succeeding poets have chosen to adopt the same kind of expansiveness in their elegies – Allen Ginsberg in *Kaddish* is one obvious example – but in the process they have also adapted it to catch a greater sense of volatility than their European counterparts. Jahan Ramazani has argued convincingly that modern American elegy often expresses grief in ways that are remarkably violent, traumatized and

unresolved, focusing his attention on mid-twentieth century work by poets such as John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell.[11] Lowell is perhaps best remembered now for the troubled elegies of *Life Studies* that focus on family loss: 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow', for instance, and 'Sailing Home from Rapallo'. But his stature as an elegist also rests on the achievement of more obviously public and political poems not included here – poems such as 'The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket' (1946) and 'For the Union Dead' (1960). In both these poems Lowell's personal losses are imbued with a deep sense of betrayed idealism – a note which is amplified in the work of contemporary African American poets such as Terrance Hayes, whose *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* are at once intimate self-portraits and indictments of the abuse of state and political power.

Lowell was himself the subject of the fine elegy 'North Haven', which Elizabeth Bishop wrote soon after his death in September 1977. Its lines return to an island off the coast of Maine where they had previously spent time together and speak affectionately of Lowell while meditating on loss and renewal. In these respects, her island pastoral observes the traditional tropes of elegy, being 'full of flowers' and populated by goldfinches and other birds that seem not only to guarantee nature's benevolent return but also to mirror the artistic urge for perfection and permanence: 'Nature repeats herself, or almost does: / *repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise*'. That careful qualification 'almost does' is a troubling reminder of what cannot be recovered, despite the best efforts of art and nature. Even so, the gentle remonstrance and encouragement in the poem contrast markedly with the more explosive responses to death in the work of other American poets at this time. 'North Haven' is the final, subtle maturing of the mourning note that Bishop had already sounded in 'Sestina' and 'First Death in Nova Scotia' (collected in *Questions of Travel*, 1965), and also in 'One Art' (1976), a villanelle that seeks to impose order on a lifetime's experience of contingency and loss.

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Compared to Bishop, recent American elegists might seem exceptionally interested in the expression of forms of violation – and in the violation of forms of expression – rather than in restraint. But

it's worth emphasizing that the focus on disruption has been noticeable from the earliest days of American poetry – in poems written by Phillis Wheatley in the eighteenth century, through the work of Harlem Renaissance poets such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes in the 1920s, and into the present day. Cullen, for instance, opens his 'Threnody for a Brown Girl' with an echo of conventional European forms of lament – 'Weep not, you who loved her' – only to end it by demanding: 'Lay upon her no white stone / From a foreign quarry'. With the same need for independence in mind, his near-contemporary Langston Hughes crosses European models with jazz and blues and gospel songs. A more recent African-American poet Margaret Walker elegizes Malcolm X, and Jericho Brown writes an elegiac sonnet opening with the names of flowers and closing with the names of fellow Black Americans unjustly 'cut down'.

It's clear from these examples that American political elegy has its own distinctive strategies – and the same goes for its more personal counterparts. Poems written by daughters for their parents make an interesting case in point. In the poetry of Amy Clampitt, familial grief is blended with reflections on the deprivations of history, the losses experienced by marginalized communities, and ecological threat. 'A Procession at Candlemas' records a daughter's journey by bus along Route 60 to visit her dying mother in hospital. For all its modern imagery of highways and filling stations, the poem is steeped in myth and history, and the feast of Candlemas, which is associated with rites of purification, gives Clampitt the chance to reassert the figure of the mother in a genre often dominated by patriarchal figures of authority. Deploying powerful symbols drawn from Classical and biblical myth (from the worship of Athena as well as from that of the Virgin Mary), the poem roots its sorrow in the larger losses of American history, alluding to both the sufferings of Native American people and the violent destruction caused by modern warfare. Most forcefully of all, Clampitt brings her search for origin and meaning back to the image of the female body and the physical realities of childbirth.

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In contrast to these modern American elegies, a good deal of British and Irish poetry of the post-war period is less inclined to disrupt

tradition than to treat it with irony and modest circumspection. Michael Longley, for instance, has written several poems about sectarian violence and the Holocaust that temper grief by various kinds of ethical and emotional reserve. And Geoffrey Hill's poems, which are fundamentally drawn to an elegiac mode, also express resistance to it as they seek to make sense of history and its atrocities. Hill is acutely conscious of the ethical complications of mourning for the victims of history, distant from him in so many ways, and is troubled by the potential for impertinence and vulgarity that lies in seeming to assume that his work is equal to the tasks he sets it. 'September Song', an elegy for an un-named ten-year-old victim of the Holocaust, is a well-known example: a parenthetical insertion at the centre of the poem draws attention to the culpabilities of self-interest, while simultaneously undercutting them: '(I have made / an elegy for myself / it is true)'.

Other recent British and Irish elegists may share Hill's sense that the form carries a risk of self-aggrandizement, but most have shared his trust in traditional lyric structures and sought to modify conventions rather than reject them. The sonnet seems to have had a particular appeal – partly, no doubt, because it has a longstanding reputation as the pre-eminent poetic form of love and devotion, and partly because it licenses the intensity that is essential to elegy. In addition, sonnets have the advantage of being available for use in sequences, or as waystations among other literary forms. Tony Harrison's *from The School of Eloquence* (1978), Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* (1985) and Seamus Heaney's 'Clearances', in *The Haw Lantern* (1987), all mobilize the technical resources of the form to concentrate their expressions of grief. It's also noticeable that many recent British and Irish poets have pursued the same goal of intensity by invoking the language of religious ceremony and prayer in their elegies, even when their poems have no intention of looking for religious consolation. Dunn's 'The Kaleidoscope' is notable for its simultaneous invocation and denial of sacramental rites, both seeking transcendence and candidly confessing to feelings of absurdity and bewilderment.

These religious elements are all survivals of the ancient pastoral mode, which is even more obviously refurbished by Ted Hughes, especially in those poems written from the perspective of one who works on the land and tends to animals. In 'Sheep' and other

poems concerned with lambing (see, for instance, 'February 17th'), Hughes writes movingly and unsentimentally about the death of animals, reinvigorating the pastoral tradition by writing unflinchingly about the harshness of farming. A more modest but powerful reworking of the pastoral tradition occurs in Heaney's 'The Strand at Lough Beg', written in memory of his second cousin Colum McCartney, a farm worker and the victim of a random sectarian assassination in Northern Ireland in 1975. Here the liminal 'strand' where 'cattle graze / Up to their bellies in an early mist' provides a benign pastoral setting for an imagined encounter between the poet and his dead relation. Remarkably, Heaney has McCartney's shade reprimand him in the later penitential *Station Island* (1984) for having 'saccharined' his death with 'morning dew'. Here, and in many other contemporary elegies, ranging from Linton Kwesi Johnson's 'Reggae fi Dada' through Paul Muldoon's 'Incantata' to Jackie Kay's 'Burying My African Father', there is evidence of a continuing need to break boundaries. In each case, the poet's purpose is not simply to re-work conventions in ways that suit the changed social and political circumstances of the modern world, but to withstand the scepticism of its ironical gaze, and to avoid the pitfalls of cliché and sentimentality.

This need to contend with scepticism and the related tendency of modern elegy to question its own verbal adequacy are reflective of changes in our contemporary attitudes to death and the afterlife, and recent elegies suggest that poets are increasingly attracted to ironies of one kind or another. Claims made by the imagination on behalf of the deceased are more likely than before to be exposed to self-questioning, and doubts about the value of ritual – even of those which are intended to sustain belief – are more prominently a part of the mourning process. Where nature once provided some reassurance about the possibility of renewal, if not return, now it is more likely to remind us of ecological fragility and even extinction. Yet for all this, the urge to confront the mystery of death, and to find ways to make the dead live again, remains undiminished. One of the finest modern elegies, Denise Riley's poem for her son Jacob, 'A Part Song', is testament to this. Here, a mother speaks to her dead son while apparently suspecting that the conventions of the elegiac form might be exhausted, and that her own expressions of grief are likely to seem stilted and contrived. 'She do the bereaved in different voices',

Riley says, adapting the phrase that T. S. Eliot considered as a title for *The Waste Land*.[12] The echo is both dramatic and sadly self-ironising. Yet even as it chides itself, her poem cuts through such aesthetic reservations, determined to establish connection: 'By finding any device to hack through / the thickening shades to you, you now / Strangely unresponsive son'. By virtue of this imaginative struggle, the poem earns its response – which at the close of the poem arrives in a voice that belongs to the long history of the form as well as to the poet's immediate present: '*My sisters and my mother / Weep dark tears for me . . .*'

Such adaptations and inclusions remind us that elegy has proved to be an exceptionally versatile form of poetry, deeply implicated in literary history by virtue of its self-conscious invocation of echo and allusion. Every example is aware that what purports to be a unique expression of sorrow in fact takes its place as part of a tradition, and by some means or other borrows from the past while seeking to establish itself as the inaugural voice. This spirit of dialogue and inheritance has helped to consolidate the achievements of elegy as a poetic form over the centuries and has also ensured its continuing force in contemporary culture. Despite cynicism and despair, elegy continues to allow the imagination to contend with what Wallace Stevens called 'death's own supremest images',[13] while simultaneously commemorating what has been lost, and even celebrating what remains.

Andrew Motion and Stephen Regan

Notes

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; Or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), volume 2, p. 2.

2 Gregory Nagy, 'Ancient Greek Elegy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 13.

3 Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 90.

4 William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 4.

5 *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), volume 1, p. 124.
6 For a larger discussion of Wordsworth and comedy, see Matthew Bevis, *Wordsworth's Fun* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2019).
7 Thomas Hardy, *The Collected Letters*, ed. Richard L. Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), volume 4, p. 5.
8 Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 429–47.
9 W. B. Yeats (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. xxxiv.
10 Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p. 313.
11 Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 4.
12 'He do the police in different voices' was a line originally used by Charles Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) and adopted by T. S. Eliot as a working title for the poem that would become *The Waste Land*. See *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 2011).
13 Wallace Stevens, 'The Owl in the Sarcophagus', in *The Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 436.

A Note on the Text

It might seem strange to follow an Introduction which gives a chronological history of elegy with an arrangement of Contents that is alphabetical. But to us it makes sense for at least two reasons. Firstly, and as our Introduction makes plain, elegies of all periods are constantly in dialogue with one another, and an alphabetic arrangement highlights this reciprocity. Secondly, while offering readers the satisfaction of finding authors they already admire, we also want to give them the surprise and delight of finding poems previously unknown – and we think the plan we've adopted will increase the chances of that happening. Death itself might be as predictable as taxation, but the way poets have responded to it is infinitely various.

ANONYMOUS

Cock Robin

Who killed Cock Robin?
I, said the Sparrow,
With my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin.

Who saw him die?
I, said the Fly,
With my little eye,
I saw him die.

Who caught his blood?
I, said the Fish,
With my little dish,
I caught his blood.

Who'll make the shroud?
I, said the Beetle,
With my thread and needle,
I'll make the shroud.

Who'll dig his grave?
I, said the Owl,
With my pick and shovel,
I'll dig his grave.

Who'll be the parson?
I, said the Rook,
With my little book,
I'll be the parson.

Who'll be the clerk?
I, said the Lark,
If it's not in the dark,
I'll be the clerk.

Who'll carry the link?
I, said the Linnet,
I'll fetch it in a minute,
I'll carry the link.

Who'll be chief mourner?
I, said the Dove,
I mourn for my love,
I'll be chief mourner.

Who'll carry the coffin?
I, said the Kite,
If it's not through the night,
I'll carry the coffin.

Who'll bear the pall?
We, said the Wren,
Both the cock and the hen,
We'll bear the pall.

Who'll sing a psalm?
I, said the Thrush,
As she sat on a bush,
I'll sing a psalm.

Who'll toll the bell?
I, said the Bull,
Because I can pull,
I'll toll the bell.

All the birds of the air
Fell a-sighing and a-sobbing,
When they heard the bell toll
For poor Cock Robin.

The Corpus Christi Carol

He bore him up, he bore him down,
He bore him into an orchard brown.
Lully, lullay, lully, lullay!
The falcon has borne my mate away.

In that orchard there was a hall
That was hanged with purple and pall;
Lully, lullay, lully, lullay!
The falcon has borne my mate away.

And in that hall there was a bed:
It was hanged with gold so red;
Lully, lullay, lully, lullay!
The falcon has borne my mate away.

And in that bed there lies a knight,
His wounds bleeding day and night;
Lully, lullay, lully, lullay!
The falcon has borne my mate away.

By that bed's side there kneels a maid,
And she weeps both night and day;
Lully, lullay, lully, lullay!
The falcon has borne my mate away.

And by that bed's side there stands a stone,
'The Body of Christ' written thereon.
Lully, lullay, lully, lullay!
The falcon has borne my mate away.

The Three Ravens

There were three ravens sat on a tree,
  Downe a downe, hay down, hay downe.
There were three ravens sat on a tree,
  With a downe;
There were three ravens sat on a tree,
They were as blacke as they might be.
  With a downe dery downe.

The one of them said to his mate,
Where shall we our breakefast take?

Downe in yonder greene field,
There lies a knight slain under his shield.

His hounds they lie downe at his feete,
So well they their master keepe.

His hawkes they flie so eagerly,
There's no fowle dare him come nie.

Downe there comes a fallow doe,
As great with yong as she might goe.

She lift up his bloudy hed,
And kist his wounds that were so red.

She got him up upon her backe,
And carried him to earthen lake.

She buried him before the prime,
She was dead herselfe ere even-song time.

God send every gentleman,
Such hawkes, such hounds, and such a leman.

Sir Patrick Spens

The King sits in Dunferline toun,
Drinkin the blude-reid wine
'O whaur will A get a skeely skipper
Tae sail this new ship o mine?'

O up and spak an eldern knight,
Sat at the king's richt knee;
'Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor
That ever sailt the sea.'

Our king has written a braid letter
And sealed it wi his hand,
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,
Wis walkin on the strand.

'Tae Noroway, to Noroway,
Tae Noroway ower the faem;
The King's dauchter o Noroway,
Tis thou maun bring her hame.'

The first word that Sir Patrick read
Sae loud, loud laucht he;
The neist word that Sir Patrick read
The tear blindit his ee.

'O wha is this has duin this deed
An tauld the king o me,
Tae send us out, at this time o year,
Tae sail abuin the sea?'

'Be it wind, be it weet, be it hail, be it sleet,
Our ship maun sail the faem;
The King's dauchter o Noroway,
Tis we maun fetch her hame.'

They hoystit their sails on Monenday morn,
Wi aw the speed they may;
They hae landit in Noroway
Upon a Wodensday.

'Mak ready, mak ready, my merry men aw!
Our gude ship sails the morn.'
'Nou eer alack, ma maister dear,
I fear a deadly storm.'

'A saw the new muin late yestreen
Wi the auld muin in her airm
And gif we gang tae sea, maister,
A fear we'll cam tae hairm.'

They hadnae sailt a league, a league,
A league but barely three,
When the lift grew dark, an the wind blew loud
An gurly grew the sea.

The ankers brak, an the topmaist lap,
It was sic a deadly storm.
An the waves cam ower the broken ship
Til aw her sides were torn.

'Go fetch a web o silken claith,
Anither o the twine,
An wap them into our ship's side,
An let nae the sea cam in.'

They fetcht a web o the silken claith,
Anither o the twine,
An they wappp'd them roun that gude ship's side,
But still the sea cam in.

O laith, laith were our gude Scots lords
Tae weet their cork-heelt shuin;
But lang or aw the play wis playd
They wat their hats abuin.

And mony wis the feather bed
That flattert on the faem;
And mony wis the gude lord's son
That never mair cam hame.

O lang, lang may the ladies sit,
Wi their fans intae their hand,
Afore they see Sir Patrick Spens
Come sailin tae the strand!

And lang, lang may the maidens sit
Wi their gowd kames in their hair,
A-waitin for their ane dear loes!
For them they'll see nae mair.

Half-ower, half-ower to Aberdour,
Tis fifty fathoms deep;
An there lies gude Sir Patrick Spens,
Wi the Scots lords at his feet!

The Wife of Usher's Well

There lived a wife at Usher's Well,
And a wealthy wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And sent them oer the sea.

They hadna been a week from her,
A week but barely ane,
Whan word came to the carline wife
That her three sons were gane.

They hadna been a week from her,
A week but barely three,
Whan word came to the carlin wife
That her sons she'd never see.

‘I wish the wind may never cease,
Nor fashes in the flood,
Till my three sons come hame to me,
In earthly flesh and blood.’

It fell about the Martinmas,
When nights are lang and mirk.
The carline wife’s three sons came hame,
And their hats were o’ the birk.

It neither grew in syke nor ditch,
Nor yet in ony sheugh;
But at the gates o’ Paradise,
That birk grew fair eneugh.

‘Blow up the fire, my maidens,
Bring water from the well;
For a’ my house shall feast this night,
Since my three sons are well.’

And she has made to them a bed,
She’s made it large and wide;
And she’s ta’en her mantle her about,
Sat down at the bed-side.

Up then crew the red, red cock,
And up and crew the gray;
The eldest to the youngest said,
‘Tis time we were away.’

The cock he hadna craw’d but once,
And clapp’d his wings at a’,
When the youngest to the eldest said,
‘Brother, we must awa’.

‘The cock doth craw, the day doth daw,
The channerin’ worm doth chide;
Gin we be miss’d out o’ our place,
A sair pain we maun bide.’

'Lie still, lie still but a little wee while,
Lie still but if we may;
Gin my mother should miss us when she wakes,
She'll go mad ere it be day.'

'Fare ye weel, my mother dear!
Fareweel to barn and byre!
And fare ye weel, the bonny lass
That kindles my mother's fire!'

from *Pearl*

14

More marvels then did daunt my soul;
I saw beyond that merry mere
A crystal cliff that shone full bright,
Many a noble ray stood forth;
At the foot thereof there sat a child, –
So debonair, – a maid of grace;
Glistening white was her array, –
I knew her well, I had seen her ere.
As gleaming gold, refin'd and pure,
So shone that glory' neath the cliff;
Long toward her there I look'd, –
The longer, I knew her more and more.

15

The more I scann'd her face so fair,
Her beauteous form when I had found,
Such gladd'ning glory came to me,
As rarely had been mine before.
Longing me seized to call her name,
But wonder dealt my heart a blow;

I saw her in *so* strange a place,
Well might the shock mine heart appal.
Then lifted she *her* visage fair,
As ivory pure her face was white;
It thrill'd mine heart, struck all astray,
And ever the longer, more and more.

16

More than my longing was now my dread;
I stood full still; I dared not speak;
With open eyes and fast-closed mouth,
I stood as meek as hawk in hall.
I took it for a ghostly vision;
I dreaded what might there betide,
Lest what I saw should me escape
Ere I it held within my reach;
When, lo! that spotless child of grace,
So smooth, so small, so sweetly slight,
Arose in all her royal array, –
A precious piece, bedight with pearls.

Dahn the Plug'ole

A muvver was barfin' 'er biby one night,
The youngest of ten and a tiny young mite,
The muvver was poor an' the biby was thin,
Only a skelington covered in skin;
The muvver turned rahnd for the soap off the rack,
She was but a moment, but when she turned back,
The biby was gorn; and in anguish she cried,
'Oh, where is my biby?' – The angels replied:

'Your biby 'as fell dahn the plug'ole,
Your biby 'as gorn dahn the plug;

The poor little thing was so skinny an' thin
'E oughter been barfed in a jug;
Your biby is perfekly 'appy,
'E won't need a barf any more,
Your biby 'as fell dahn the plug'ole,
Not lorst, but gorn before.'

RAYMOND ANTROBUS

(1986–)

Sound Machine

> 'My mirth can laugh and talk, but cannot sing;
> My grief finds harmonies in everything.'
> *James Thomson*

And what comes out if it isn't the wires
Dad welds to his homemade sound system,
which I accidently knock loose
while he is recording Talk-Over dubs, killing
the bass, flattening the mood and his muses,
making Dad blow his fuses and beat me.
But it wasn't my fault; the things he made
could be undone so easily –
and we would keep losing connection.
But praise my Dad's mechanical hands.
Even though he couldn't fix my deafness
I still channel him. My sound system plays
on Father's Day in Manor Park Cemetery
where I find his grave, and for the first time
see his middle name, OSBERT, derived from Old English
meaning *God* and *bright*. Which may
have been a way to bleach him, darkest
of his five brothers, the only one sent away
from the country to live up-town
with his light skin aunt. She protected him
from police, who didn't believe he belonged
unless they heard his English,
which was smooth as some up-town roads.
His aunt loved him and taught him
to recite Wordsworth and Coleridge – rhythms
that wouldn't save him. He would become

Rasta and never tell a soul about the name
that undid his blackness. It is his grave
that tells me the name his black
body, even in death, could not move or mute.

MATTHEW ARNOLD
(1822–1892)

Memorial Verses

April, 1850

Goethe in Weimar sleeps, and Greece,
Long since, saw Byron's struggle cease.
But one such death remain'd to come;
The last poetic voice is dumb –
We stand to-day by Wordsworth's tomb.

When Byron's eyes were shut in death,
We bow'd our head and held our breath.
He taught us little; but our soul
Had *felt* him like the thunder's roll.
With shivering heart the strife we saw
Of passion with eternal law;
And yet with reverential awe
We watch'd the fount of fiery life
Which served for that Titanic strife.

When Goethe's death was told, we said:
Sunk, then, is Europe's sagest head.
Physician of the iron age,
Goethe has done his pilgrimage.
He took the suffering human race,
He read each wound, each weakness clear;
And struck his finger on the place,
And said: *Thou ailest here, and here!*
He look'd on Europe's dying hour
Of fitful dream and feverish power;
His eye plunged down the weltering strife,
The turmoil of expiring life –
He said: *The end is everywhere,*

Art still has truth, take refuge there!
And he was happy, if to know
Causes of things, and far below
His feet to see the lurid flow
Of terror, and insane distress,
And headlong fate, be happiness.

And Wordsworth! – Ah, pale ghosts, rejoice!
For never has such 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.
Wordsworth has gone from us – and ye,
Ah, may ye feel his voice as we!
He too upon a wintry clime
Had fallen – on this iron time
Of doubts, disputes, distractions, fears.
He found us when the age had bound
Our souls in its benumbing round;
He spoke, and loosed our heart in tears.
He laid us as we lay at birth
On the cool flowery lap of earth,
Smiles broke from us and we had ease;
The hills were round us, and the breeze
Went o'er the sun-lit fields again;
Our foreheads felt the wind and rain.
Our youth return'd; for there was shed
On spirits that had long been dead,
Spirits dried up and closely furl'd,
The freshness of the early world.

Ah! since dark days still bring to light
Man's prudence and man's fiery might,
Time may restore us in his course
Goethe's sage mind and Byron's force;
But where will Europe's latter hour
Again find Wordsworth's healing power?
Others will teach us how to dare,

And against fear our breast to steel;
Others will strengthen us to bear –
But who, ah! who, will make us feel?
The cloud of mortal destiny,
Others will front it fearlessly –
But who, like him, will put it by?
Keep fresh the grass upon his grave,
O Rotha, with thy living wave!
Sing him thy best! for few or none
Hears thy voice right, now he is gone.

W. H. AUDEN

(1907–1973)

In Memory of W. B. Yeats

(d. Jan. 1939)

I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly
accustomed,
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,
A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

2

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

3

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

WILLIAM BARNES

(1801–1886)

The Music o' the Dead

When music, in a heart that's true,
Do kindle up wold loves anew,
An' dim wet eyes, in feäirest lights,
Do zee but inward fancy's zights;
When creepèn years, wi' with'rèn blights,
  'V a-took off them that wer so dear,
  How touchèn 'tis if we do hear
    The tuèns o' the dead, John.

When I, a-stannèn in the lew
O' trees a storm's a-beätèn drough,
Do zee the slantèn mist a-drove
By spitevul winds along the grove,
An' hear their hollow sounds above
  My shelter'd head, do seem, as I
  Do think o' zunny days gone by,
    Lik' music vor the dead, John.

Last night, as I wer gwaïn along
The brook, I heärd the milk-maïd's zong
A-ringèn out so clear an' shrill
Along the meäds an' roun' the hill.
I catch'd the tuèn, an' stood still
  To hear't; 'twer woone that Jeäne did zing
  A-vield a-milkèn in the spring,–
    Sweet music o' the dead, John.

Don't tell o' zongs that be a-zung
By young chaps now, wi' sheämeless tongue:
Zing me wold ditties, that would start
The maidens' tears, or stir my heart

To teäke in life a manly peärt, –
The wold vo'k's zongs that twold a teäle,
An' vollow'd round their mugs o' eäle,
The music o' the dead, John.

The Wife a-Lost

Since I noo mwore do zee your feäce,
Up steäirs or down below,
I'll zit me in the lwonesome pleäce,
Where flat-bough'd beech do grow;
Below the beeches' bough, my love,
Where you did never come,
An' I don't look to meet ye now,
As I do look at hwome.

Since you noo mwore be at my zide,
In walks in zummer het,
I'll goo alwone where mist do ride,
Drough trees a-drippèn wet;
Below the raïn-wet bough, my love,
Where you did never come,
An' I don't grieve to miss ye now,
As I do grieve at hwome.

Since now bezide my dinner-bwoard
Your vaïce do never sound,
I'll eat the bit I can avword
A-vield upon the ground;
Below the darksome bough, my love,
Where you did never dine,
An' I don't grieve to miss ye now,
As I at hwome do pine.

Since I do miss your vaïce an' feäce
In praÿer at eventide,
I'll praÿ wi' woone sad vaïce vor greäce
To goo where you do bide;
Above the tree an' bough, my love,
Where you be gone avore,
An' be a-waïtèn vor me now,
To come vor evermwore.

Woak Hill

When sycamore leaves wer a-spreadèn,
Green-ruddy, in hedges,
Bezide the red doust o' the ridges,
A-dried at Woak Hill;

I packed up my goods all a-sheenèn
Wi' long years o' handlèn,
On dousty red wheels ov a waggon,
To ride at Woak Hill.

The brown thatchen ruf o' the dwellèn
I then wer a-leävèn,
Had shelter'd the sleek head o' Meäry,
My bride at Woak Hill.

But now vor zome years, her light voot-vall
'S a-lost vrom the vloorèn.
Too soon vor my jaÿ an' my childern,
She died at Woak Hill.

But still I do think that, in soul,
She do hover about us;
To ho vor her motherless childern,
Her pride at Woak Hill.