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The Elegy

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In the summer of 1969, The Rolling Stones held a memorial tribute in Hyde Park, London, for their erstwhile guitarist, Brian Jones, who had died in July that year. Addressing an audience of over half a million people, Mick Jagger expressed the fundamental difficulty that faces any aspiring elegist: “I don’t know how to do this thing, but I’m going to try” (*Observer*, 6 July 1969). He then recited some of the most memorable and stirring lines from Shelley’s “Adonais”: “Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep— / He hath awaken’d from the dream of life” (Shelley 2003, 541; XXXIX, l. 1). Hundreds of white butterflies were released into the air. The occasion is worth noting because it demonstrates a familiar shift in elegiac art from the confession of inadequacy to the invocation of time-honored rituals and conventions. What occurred in Hyde Park in 1969 is all the more pertinent, given that the decade has often been characterized by its denial or suppression of grief. The 1960s are frequently associated with hedonism, with sexual and political emancipation, and with release from theological and metaphysical shackles. Looking back over half a century, we can see that beneath the apparent existential freedoms of our time there has been a deeply felt public need for sustaining rituals of mourning and a persistent readiness to draw upon the consoling powers of art and song in the face of loss.

In recent times, and especially since 1960, the tendency of the elegy to question its own verbal adequacy and its own ethical, compensatory value has intensified. Even so, the urge to confront the mystery of death and to make the dead live again, if only in the precincts

of poetry, has not diminished. American poets such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath are renowned for the violence and aggression with which they have written about the dead, disrupting traditional codes of mourning in the process. By contrast, a good deal of British and Irish poetry of the postwar period seems less given to violation and more evidently marked by irony and circumspection in its elegiac procedures. This is a poetry that reveals a “principled distrust of the imagination” and a sensitive awareness of “the aggrandizements, covert indulgences, and specious claims which it may incite” (Ricks 1984, 285). Christopher Ricks is writing here about the work of Geoffrey Hill, but his comments have a particular relevance to the poetry of mourning, as they help to explain why Hill’s “September Song” has come to be seen as a paradigmatic postwar elegy.

The title “September Song” seems innocuous enough, until we glance at the unnerving dedication: “*born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42.*” Even before the stark revelation of death, the poem’s ironic drift carries us from deportation to genocide: “As estimated, you died” (l. 4). That simple half line conveys the chilling precision of Nazi planning in the concentration camps, as well as the impossible task of numbering the dead, but it also points to the poem’s own confounded attempts to gauge what might be an appropriate response. More candidly and explicitly than in earlier elegies, the speaker of the poem reproaches himself for what must look like a self-interested appropriation of another’s suffering:

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)
(ll. 8–10)

Hill’s admission acknowledges the extent to which an elegy is always to some extent a reflection on the writer’s own mortality (and here the victim’s date of birth is close enough to the writer’s own for this to be an acute concern), but the uncertain line-break holds out the possibility that the elegy is nevertheless true. The poem resolutely resists the conventional elegiac ideal of seasonal return and renewal. The implied harvest in “September fattens on vines” (l. 11) only conjures up, by way of contrast, grotesque images of starvation, just as the smoke of “harmless fires” (l. 13) inevitably recalls more perilous flames. The ironic promise of peace and plenty turns the poem toward its final act of self-chastisement. There is no resurrection or renewal here, no likelihood of imaginative indulgence: “This is plenty. This is more than enough” (Hill 2006, 30, l. 14). Intensely preoccupied with making sense of history and tradition, Hill would come to regard the elegiac tenor in his work as unavoidable, while also seeking to resist it. The title of his first major book of poems, *For the Unfallen* (1959), gestures toward the living, as well as the dead, subtly implicating modern warfare in the distant battles of history. His “Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings” provides a potent model for a contemporary elegiac art that mourns the losses of its own century within a long historical perspective. As Henry Hart notes, “Elegies were a natural choice for a poet whose meditations struggled to make the past present” (Hart 1986, 16), but he shows convincingly how much of Hill’s work in the genre is iconoclastic and ironic.

A contrast might be drawn here with Basil Bunting, whose work after 1960 is similarly rooted in history, but far less vexed by its own elegiac tendencies. *Briggflatts* (1966), inspired by Bunting's visits to the Quaker hamlet of that name, is strongly autobiographical, but also deeply elegiac, a work of mourning for a lost love, a lost way of life, and an entire region. The mood of elegy derives in part from the death of the poet's son in 1952, and from the sorrowful notes of "A Song for Rustam," written in 1964 at a time when Bunting was preparing himself for the composition of his major work. In that mournful song, Bunting complies with convention by confessing the inadequacy of his artistic resources: "Words slung to the gale / stammer and fail" (Bunting 2000, 197, ll. 19–20). In *Briggflatts*, he would reassert the struggle with words, but retain the brisk couplet: "Pens are too light. / Take a chisel to write" (I. 116–117). He would also retain the lilting [l] and the long vowel [a:] at the end of a verse line or section: "furrows fill with may / paving the slowworm's way" (I. 12–13). The slowworm amid the blossom is an emblem of encroaching death, and like the mason's mallet timed "to a lark's twitter" (I. 15) it serves as a powerful elegiac motif in the sonata-like structure of the poem (Bunting 2000, 61–63). As Bunting anticipated, *Briggflatts* would become "a great hymn to death," embracing a culture shaped by St. Cuthbert's love of creation, as much as by its violent Viking inheritance (Burton 2013, 358). The poem's coda asserts its own artistic originality, while keeping open an imaginative connection with the elysian fields of pastoral tradition: "A strong song tows / us [...] / to fields we do not know." (Bunting 2000, 81, ll. 1–4)

Ten years after writing *Briggflatts*, Bunting composed "At Briggflatts Meetinghouse," an elegiac meditation on final things, but also a celebratory ode in praise of the transient beauties of nature: "Look how clouds dance / under the wind's wing, and leaves / delight in transience" (Bunting 2000, 145, ll. 10–12). Bunting's own death, another decade on, prompted an elegiac tribute from Tom Pickard, who had been so instrumental in encouraging the writing of *Briggflatts*. "Spring Tide" observes the seasonal movements of traditional elegiac poetry, but it pushes back against the usual symbolic associations of spring. Noting, in its dedication, the birth of Basil Bunting in spring 1900 and his death in spring 1985, the poem records the political struggle of the preceding year and the breaking of the Miners' Strike by the Thatcher government. Where it finds some brief transcendence is in the delicate image of kites and the child repeating the word as *keats*, a poetic felicity that justifies the Keatsian beauty of "rainbow-winged mosquitoes / stringed against the cockney clouds." The poem is insistent, though, on its northern heritage and its unillusioned view of a world of struggle. It returns us to the North Sea and a dark horizon, and it closes with a subdued and somber waking: "You, the dark spring tide / and the spring / were gone" (Pickard 2014, 103–104; 3. 18–20).

Tony Harrison came into Bunting's orbit in Newcastle in the late 1960s, but it was the poems recalling his Leeds childhood and the death of his parents that established his reputation in the 1970s and 1980s. Initiating an elegiac sequence that would never be completed, Harrison purposefully titled one collection of poems *From the School of Eloquence* (1978) and another *Continuous* (1981). These are hurt and hurtful poems, in which Harrison's grief swells into anger at the divisive effects of education and social class that had already separated him from his family. In fractured, nonconforming sonnets of 16 lines, he plays out

a bitter drama between working-class solidarity and self-improvement, repeatedly sticking the boot into his own educated sensibility. The grim pun in “Book Ends” prepares us for a stark confrontation between learning and loss, with the image of book ends cleverly suggesting both separation and togetherness in the relationship between father and son. The poem is all the more affecting for its casual opening, imbued with the cadences of conversational speech: “Baked the day she suddenly dropped dead / we chew it slowly that last apple pie.” (I. 1–2) The syntactical inversion is rhythmically true, but it also cunningly allows the attention to focus on the familiarity of the domestic setting, eventually letting the opening word “Baked” explode in the final word “books”: “what’s still between’s / not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books” (I. 15–16). The uncomfortable contraction of “us” and “is” in the penultimate line is a telling instance of Harrison’s insistent disruption of conventional lyric smoothness in his sonnets. Sometimes, a single isolated line of rough-hewn iambic pentameter is just as effective: “Your life’s all shattered into smithereens” (Harrison 1987, 126, I. 13). Harrison’s distinctive achievement as an elegist is in combining an educated knowledge of convention that goes back to the classics with a working-class struggle for articulacy. As he tries to devise an inscription for the mother’s gravestone, he imagines his father quipping: “*You’re supposed to be the bright boy at description / and you can’t tell them what the fuck to put!*” (II. 11–12). In other ways, though, Harrison’s dilemma is that of any other elegist: “I’ve got to find the right words on my own” (Harrison 1987, 127, II. 13).

Harrison’s father is mourned in several elegiac sonnets, including “Marked with D,” which powerfully invokes the language of prayer (“Our Father”) to recall the daily bread of the baker, while (again with a grim pun) denying either resurrection or social advancement to “The baker’s man that no-one will see rise / and England made to feel like some dull oaf” (Harrison 1987, 155, ll. 13–14). In “Continuous,” father and son find common ground for once in a shared love of gangster films—“James Cagney was the one up both our streets.” (l. 1)—though that admission is prompted by a rueful comparison of the cremation service with a day out at the cinema (Harrison 1987, 143). The desecrated graves of Harrison’s parents in a Leeds cemetery are the focal point of his controversial and confrontational *v.* (1985), which in the style of Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) contemplates the changing social order and ends with the poet’s own epitaph. Written in the aftermath of the Miners’ Strike of 1984–1985, *v.* is one of the great elegiac works of the postwar years, despairingly pitting the depleted pastoral resources of apple and hawthorn against the violence of the times, and finding solace only in song. “A Kumquat for John Keats” (1981) deserves its place among the best of English bitter-sweet self-elegies, while “The Heartless Art” (1985) shows Harrison at his most skeptical and self-reproachful, penning an elegy for a friend and neighbor in America and opportunistically storing up the name Seth to rhyme eventually with death.

Don Paterson, who has acknowledged Harrison’s influence on his own hard-hitting and wryly self-questioning poems, is keenly aware that seeking a rhyme for death might seem heartlessly detached or dubiously self-serving. In “Phantom,” his seven-part elegy for Michael Donaghy, his willingness to confront these moral and esthetic scruples underwrites the risk he takes in composing a poetic conversation with the spirit of his friend and fellow poet. The closing section draws on Dante’s encounters with the dead, but it also vividly recreates the voice of Donaghy and emulates his style.

*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?*

(Paterson 2012, 167,
Section VII, ll. 47–50)

The interrogation here is skillfully done, with Paterson allowing his doubts about the legitimacy of elegy to surface through Donaghy's own misgivings about the genre in his poem "The Excuse." The metapoetic dimension of "Phantom" does not diminish the emotional power of its intimate address. Paterson works toward the final confrontation with his dead friend in a speculative mode, delicately approaching it through the image of the skull in Francisco de Zurbarán's painting, "St Francis in Meditation" (1639), until the skull becomes his own.

Paul Farley, a close contemporary of Paterson and Donaghy, shows superbly well how a modern elegy might position itself between heaven and earth, reaching out for transcendence while fearing a fall to the ground. "Laws of Gravity" is an elegy for his father, a Liverpool window cleaner, in which the ladder functions as a metaphysical conceit. Like Harrison, Farley uses the language of his father's occupation to denote the struggles and aspirations of working-class life, while also marking his distance from them. The son fondly imagines that the father had sublime visions at the top of the ladder and that his ledger book contained a kind of poetry, so that their "stories overlap" (Farley 1998, 8, l. 56), but a shared fear of failing and falling is what most obviously persists. Even as it seeks to elevate the father, the elegy senses the laws of gravity and notes how its own verse "descends the page" (l. 67). The poem's precarious balancing act is movingly summed up in the son's closing homage to his father: "I'll hold the foot for you" (l. 67). If the elegiac poetry of the past 50 or so years has sometimes questioned its own procedures and doubted its own consolatory powers, it has nevertheless sought to extend and modify, rather than simply reject, the well-established conventions of the genre.

As the work of Douglas Dunn amply testifies, the contemporary elegy has also shown a remarkable trust in lyric forms, including the sonnet, and lyric devices of rhyme and meter. Dunn's *Elegies* (1985) is dedicated to his wife, the artist and curator, Lesley Balfour Dunn, who died in 1981. Like Thomas Hardy's "Poems of 1912–13," these conjugal elegies recall the blissful days of early love and grieve over missed opportunities, but they do so without bitterness or blame. At the same time as acknowledging the painful emptiness of the present, they tenderly evoke the pleasures and privileges of the past. The opening poem, with its allusions to Katherine Mansfield's short story "Bliss," establishes a voice that is candid and confiding, seeking consolation and continuity in memories of a shared artistic and literary life: "I flick / Through all our years, my love, and I love you still" (Dunn 1985, 9, ll. 11–12). The sonnets in *Elegies* keep alive a dedication to art and beauty in the face of death, though the decorative mobiles of aeroplanes and birds in "A Silver Air Force" and "Sandra's Mobile" are delicate and fragile. "The Kaleidoscope" rehearses familiar elegiac conventions, but these are modestly confined to ordinary domestic rituals and settings. There is a subdued urge for transcendence in

the opening infinitive, “To climb these stairs” (l. 1), with the speaker offering himself consoling fictions that he “[m]ight find” (l. 5) his wife alive again. The sonnet risks sentimentality in closing with a rhyming couplet, but the rhythm is skillfully measured and controlled: “Grief wrongs us so. I stand, and wait, and cry / For the absurd forgiveness, not knowing why” (ll. 13–14). For all its epistemological uncertainty, the poem cannot refrain from summoning a theological vocabulary of “prayer and hope” (l. 8). In many contemporary elegies, a residual religious imagery seems to reassert itself in the absence of any other sustaining scheme of belief, and here the speaker of the poem notes how domestic objects and situations are transformed by grief into a sacramental offering and communion: “My hands become a tray / Offering me, my flesh, my soul, my skin” (Dunn 1985, 20, ll. 11–12).

Vestiges of sacredness inform Andrew Motion’s early elegies for his mother, who had a riding accident when he was 17 and died in hospital after remaining in a coma for nearly 10 years. “In the Attic” invests the mother’s clothes with “patterns of memory // a green holiday, a red christening” (ll. 12–13), and the speaker kneels in that “upstairs” place, trying to relive the time she wore them. The attic dust takes on symbolic meaning as the poem contemplates the mother’s “unfinished lives” (Motion 1978, 52, l. 14). The language of prayer and religious ritual also shapes “The Legacy,” which opens with scattered ashes and presents the poet at his mother’s desk, “watching the lamp resurrect / her glistening lives” (ll. 5–6). The poem reflects on immortality as “light” (l. 8), as many earlier elegies have done, but here the word has suggestions of insubstantiality as well. Where the poem can more readily discern an idea of immortality is in the act of writing, with poetry as a kind of legacy, “transcribing itself for ever” (Motion 1978, 58, l. 15). The transcription of loss has, in fact, been an enduring quality of Motion’s work since *The Pleasure Steamers* (1978), with his poetry showing an acute sensitivity in the way that it inhabits the lives and afterlives of others, whether it be Anne Frank (in “Anne Frank Huis”) or Harry Patch, one of the last survivors of the First World War (in “The Death of Harry Patch”). Among his finest elegies, “Fresh Water” draws powerfully on the river symbolism of traditional elegiac verse to mourn the death of a friend, Ruth Haddon, in the Marchioness riverboat disaster on the Thames in 1989. The death of the poet’s father in 2006 prompted new ways of exploring absence and preserving the illusion of presence. “All Possibilities” subtly fuses memory and miracle: “My dead father, who never knew what hit him / is taking his evening walk through the village” (Motion 2009, 56, ll. 1–2). “The Mower” gives a new twist to the archetypal image of death by recalling childhood memories of grass cutting. The speaker imagines his father coming back after death, “but cutting clean through me then vanishing for good” (Motion 2009, 58, l. 52). Motion extends the pastoral resources of the elegy without any straining for effect. “The Gardener,” an elegy for Lieutenant Mark Evison who was killed in Afghanistan in 2009, commemorates a soldier who liked “lending a hand” (l. 5) in the garden and watching the popular TV show, *Gardeners’ World* (Motion 2015, 112). The typography of the poem, with its irregular lineation, catches the speech of the soldier’s mother, while his death is foreshadowed in the compost heaps and the cherry tree of the garden.

Seasonal and pastoral motifs have a powerful presence in the poetry of Anne Stevenson, whose sequence of “Sonnets for Five Seasons” mourns the death of her father, Charles Leslie Stevenson, in 1979. The tightly compressed form of the sonnet is used inventively to explore

a protracted winter and an anxious spring. A numbing grief gives way to modest hope in nature's restorative patterns, but the elegy cannot altogether abandon its vestigial theological vocabulary: "Birches knelt under ice. Roads forgot / their way in aisles of frost. There were no petals" ("The Circle." Stevenson 2005, 373, ll. 10–11). In the later "Elegy" for her father, a shared love of music ensures his continuing presence: "his audible image returns to my humming ears" (179, l. 54). The death of Frances Horovitz, whose own *Elegy* for her father was published as a pamphlet in 1976, sent Stevenson back to the pastoral mode and the lyrical ballad in "Willow Song." Horovitz (also the subject of Gillian Clarke's elegy "The Hare") is the inspiration behind "The Fiction-Makers," and she is one of a number of poets celebrated and mourned in *A Lament for the Makers* (2006), Stevenson's Dantesque dream vision, written after the death of Peter Redgrove and dedicated to Philip Hobsbaum.

Ted Hughes is the subject of Stevenson's "Invocation and Interruption," and her skills in poetic dialogue are evident again in her dream encounter with "the man in black feathers" in *A Lament for the Makers* (Stevenson 2006). Hughes had himself set new standards for the elegy, with early poems such as "Griefs for Dead Soldiers" and "Six Young Men" mourning England's war dead, and later poems such as "Remains of Elmet" and "Mill Ruins" mourning the casualties of history and the passing of a whole way of life in rural West Yorkshire. *Moortown* (1979), originally titled *Moortown Elegies*, was dedicated to the memory of Jack Orchard (Hughes's father-in-law) and includes "The Day He Died," one of the most compelling reworkings of pastoral convention in postwar poetry. Hughes draws on the familiar idea that nature itself mourns the loss of a loved one ("The bright fields look dazed," l. 14), but he also offers a new take on the idea of managing the land: "From now on the land / Will have to manage without him" (Hughes 2003, 533, ll. 21–22). *Birthday Letters*, published just a few months before Hughes's death in October 1998, is a powerful elegiac collection of poems, primarily addressed to Sylvia Plath. "Daffodils," a reworking of an earlier poem of that title, suggests the extent to which the book is also a revision of himself and his relationship with Plath. The poem opens in a casually colloquial style—"Remember how we picked the daffodils?" (l. 1)—but it acquires a metaphysical charge reminiscent of seventeenth-century poetry, closing with the painful conceit of the scissors, a wedding present used to cut the flowers, somewhere in the earth, "Sinking deeper / Through the sod – an anchor, a cross of rust" (Hughes 2003, 1125–1126, ll. 64–65).

A close attachment to the land ensures that Seamus Heaney, like Hughes, is always at ease with the conventions of pastoral elegy. *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) mourns his own loss of childhood innocence while acknowledging (in "Requiem for the Croppies") a long history of sacrifice in the struggle for Irish freedom. Versions of the pastoral are given a powerful elegiac function in *Field Work* (1979), especially in "The Strand at Lough Beg" (in memory of his second cousin Colum McCartney, the victim of a random sectarian assassination), and "Casualty" (for a fisherman, Louis McNeill, "blown to bits" in a pub bombing [Heaney 1998, 155], l. 38). Remarkably, Heaney has McCartney's shade reprimand him in the title poem of the penitential *Station Island* for having "saccharined" his death with "morning dew" (Heaney 1998, 261, Section 8, l. 76). Heaney's family elegies, including the early "Mid-Term Break" (for his infant brother), "Clearances" (a sonnet sequence for his mother), and "Uncoupled" (for his cattle-farmer father), are among some

of the most poignant and deeply moving poems of loss in the English language. A strong sense of his own approaching death gives the family poems in *Human Chain*, his final collection, an extraordinary tenderness and intimacy.

Michael Longley has likewise established his reputation as a writer who shaped the Troubles elegy with moving and memorable poems of loss, including “Wounds,” “Wreaths,” and “The Ice-Cream Man,” while also revealing his powers as a love poet and a nature poet. Longley’s elegies for the victims of sectarian violence are models of ethical and aesthetic restraint, chastened by his acknowledgment in “Kindertotenlieder” that “[t]here can be no songs for dead children” (Longley 2006, 61, l. 1). His scrupulous art conditions his later poems of loss for friends and fellow poets in *Snow Water* (2004) and *A Hundred Doors* (2011), and also tempers his candid self-elegies in these books, as he ponders his own mortality amid the changing landscapes of his beloved Co. Mayo. Longley’s close contemporary Derek Mahon sedulously avoided any explicit elegiac response to the Troubles, though his best-known poem, “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford,” can justly claim its place as a poem of mourning that eloquently speaks for the victims of war and political oppression. Its epigraph is taken from Giorgos Seferis: “Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels” (Mahon 1979, 79). Mahon’s suave, ironic style recalls that of Louis MacNeice, to whom he pays tribute in a finely measured elegy, “In Carrowdore Churchyard.”

Paul Muldoon has written some of the most bewildering, experimental elegies of the past few decades: “Incantata” (for the artist Mary Farl Powers), “Yarrow” (for his mother, Bridget Regan), “Turkey Buzzards” (for his sister Maureen), and “Sillyhow Stride” (for Warren Zevon). Muldoon’s style is densely allusive, cryptic, and digressive. It flouts traditional elegiac codes and conventions, but it is also strangely consoling, with its occasional intimacies being all the more effective for being unexpected, and its formal intricacies of rhyme and rhythm offering steadiness in the face of futility. “Cuthbert and the Otters” was commissioned for Durham Book Festival in the summer of 2013 and modulated into an elegy for Seamus Heaney later that year. The otter, an emblem for both saint and poet, appears magically in the funeral procession at Bellaghy (recalling the carrying of Cuthbert by his fellow monks), but much is concentrated in a single line paying homage to the translator of *Beowulf*: “I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead” (Muldoon 2015, 4, l. 21). In sharp contrast to Muldoon’s prolonged meditation, Ciaran Carson’s “In Memory” takes just a single well-shaped sentence to record the life of the naturalist who peered into wells and to note how, after his death, “that unfathomable / darkness / echoes / still” (Carson 2014, 21, ll. 16–19).

To mourn the loss of a great writer is one of the motivating impulses that has shaped the tradition of the English elegy from “Lycidas” onward. It helps to explain the persistence and prestige of the elegy, and it takes us to the core of the genre, which has always been, to some extent, about the continuing vitality of the imagination in the face of darkness and about the need of the living to carry on. If the contemporary elegy has sometimes appeared skeptical and anticonsolatory, it has also been remarkably resilient as a form, registering and responding to changing ideas of death and the afterlife in our own time. Very likely, poets will continue to be drawn to the elegy, satisfying a hunger in themselves “to be more serious” and validating their own belief in poetry as a form of survival, “If only that so many dead lie round” (“Church Going.” Larkin 2012, 37, ll. 60–61).

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