

# ELEGY

*David Kennedy*



*the* NEW CRITICAL IDIOM



# ELEGY

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David Kennedy



First published 2007 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Typeset in Garamond and Scala Sans by Taylor & Francis Books  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kennedy, David, 1959-

Elegy / David Kennedy.

p. cm. – (The new critical idiom)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-415-36776-9 (hardback : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-0-415-36777-6 (pbk. : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-0-203-01999-3 (ebook) 1. Elegiac poetry, English–History and criticism. 2. Literary form–History. 3. Mourning customs in literature. 4. Grief in literature. 5. Funeral rites and ceremonies in literature. 6. Death in literature. I. Title.

PR509.E4K46 2007

821'.0409–dc22

2007011783

ISBN 10: 0-415-36776-X (hbk)

ISBN 10: 0-415-36777-8 (pbk)

ISBN 10: 0-203-01999-7 (ebk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-36776-9 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-36777-6 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-203-01999-3 (ebk)

## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

*The New Critical Idiom* is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Professor John Drakakis for commissioning a proposal for this book and for detailed feedback on the manuscript; and to Terry Gifford for first suggesting I write the book and make the approach.

The book was written during an AHRC Fellowship in Creative & Performing Arts 2004–7 entitled ‘Reviving Elegy: Towards a distinct contemporary poetry of private and public mourning’. Professor Peter Middleton of the University of Southampton set the project in motion with discussions and materials. The English Department at Leeds Trinity & All Saints was a generous host. I received tremendous support from the whole English team at Leeds Trinity but I am particularly indebted to Paul Hardwick for directing me to Chaucer’s ‘Book of the Duchess’; to Amina Alyal for directing me to the many references to unmanly tears in Shakespeare; and to Jane de Gay for drawing my attention to the passage from Virginia Woolf’s diaries which begins the book.

Cliff Forshaw discussed the project with me at some length, read several chapters and made valuable suggestions.

Alan Halsey kindly let me consult generally unavailable volumes by Coleridge and Shenstone.

Christopher Noble allowed me to quote from his online doctoral thesis on Victorian elegy; and Kate Lilley allowed me to quote from her unpublished doctoral thesis on masculine elegy.

My wife, Christine, deserves special thanks for her support and encouragement throughout the writing of the book.

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# 1

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## FORM WITHOUT FRONTIERS

In a diary entry for 27 June 1925, Virginia Woolf wrote 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel". A new – by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?' (Woolf 1982: 34). Woolf's idea for 'a new name' and its implied mingling of forms speaks to this study's two principal areas of enquiry. Her 'quarrel with grieving', as the title of Mark Spilka's study has it, her various attempts to write elegy-as-novel, and her struggles to deal with her mother's death typify the questions the elegist always has to answer: Can I grieve in writing? What is the best form for doing so? How do I balance writing about the deceased with the fact that writing grief makes me my own subject? At the same time, the possibility that a novel might be an elegy exemplifies the particular difficulties in giving an account of elegy written in the last hundred years or so. If a novel can be an elegy then we have already travelled some considerable distance from elegy as a sub-genre of poetry. And if a novel can be an elegy then so can almost any other cultural product; and if that is so then where does that leave poetic elegy? Finally, if a novel, the traditional picture of life, can be an elegy then this suggests that our experience of loss is not just confined



to our responses to death. Loss may, in fact, be inextricable from our general experience.

Following the implications of Woolf's 'new name', then, elegy is as likely to be a distinctive idiom, mode of enquiry or species of self-description as a distinctive form. In terms of poetry, the distance between canonical and contemporary elegy and between sub-genre and idiom is highlighted by the title of John Ash's poem 'Elegy, Replica, Echo: in memoriam John Griggs 1941–91' (Ash 2002: 24). Ash's 27-line elegy comprises a desultory account of the funeral and oblique references to transmigration and talking with the dead and suggests that the closer we move to our own time, the harder it becomes to talk about elegy with any sense of distinctiveness beyond the word itself. Indeed, Ash's title might be said to portray the way modern funeral elegies are fainter and fainter copies of an unobtainable original. The critical difficulty in writing about elegy *and* the generality of loss is brilliantly caught in another Ash poem which says of the death of his mother that 'It felt strange, but sad and regrettable only in the sense/that everything is sad and regrettable, or potentially so' (Ash 2002: 79).

Elegy began as poetry and it is with poetry that any account of it must also begin. Ash's 'everything ... potentially so' connects with the way that elegy in English poetry has always been, in John Hollander's phrase, a mood rather than a formal mode (Hollander 1975: 200). Similarly, Dennis Kay has called elegy 'a form without frontiers' (Kay 1990: 7). Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* (1985), which gathers 39 poems commemorating his first wife Lesley who died from cancer in 1981, is a recent example of the importance of mood and diverse form. Some poems deal specifically with his wife's illness and death but most are autobiographical and describe the poet's progress through mourning towards a new life. The book includes sonnets, *terza rima*, blank and free verse and typifies elegy's remarkable hospitality to different styles and modes. Dunn's book can be said to combine two of elegy's principal meanings in English poetry: a song of lamentation, in particular a funeral song or lament for the dead; and, in addition, meditative or reflective verse, more properly termed elegiac poetry.

Elegy's shifting definitions have their roots in its classical origins. The word derives from the Greek *elegos* which, although it had some distant connotations of mourning, originally described a poem written in elegiac distich, a couplet composed of a hexameter followed by a pentameter. The subject matter of an *elegos* could be anything from politics to love and the Alexandrian Greeks used the form primarily for erotic verse and lovers' complaints. Among the Latin writers, Ovid continued this trend but started to extend the range of elegy's subjects. As we shall see in Chapter 2 'What was elegy?', elegy's other important derivation is the pastoral forms known as eclogues or idylls. Elegy's shepherds and its movement from grief to consolation have their origins in poems such as the 'Lament for Bion', Theocritus's 'First Idyll' and Virgil's Fifth and Tenth Eclogues.

Classical elegy's range of subject matter continued when the term started to be used in English poetry. Its first appearance, 'I tell mine elegie', is in Alexander Barclay's fifth *Eclogue* 'The Cytezen and Uplondyshman' (1514) in which two shepherds debate the familiar subject of town versus country life and relate a fable of the origin of society's different classes.<sup>1</sup> One of the first poems to be called an elegy by its author is George Gascoigne's 'The Complaint of Philomene' (1562). The word appears in the poem's dedication to Lord Wilton and Gascoigne's '*Elegye* or sorrowfull song' underlines the genre's classical origins by re-telling the myth of Philomela whom the gods turned into a swallow. Elegy's amatory and erotic connotations are also found throughout the sixteenth century. A sonnet from Michael Drayton's *Idea* beginning 'Yet read at last the story of my woe' offers the poet's beloved 'My life's complaint in dolefull elegies' (in Evans, ed., 2003: 101). Marlowe made frankly erotic translations of Ovid's *Elegia*. Similarly, John Donne's 'To his Mistress Going to Bed', written in the mid-1590s, was originally one of a group of untitled 'Elegies'. The generalized meaning of elegy continued to be used throughout the following centuries with an increasing emphasis on subjectivity and style. The eighteenth-century pastoral poet William Shenstone wrote a range of elegies with titles such as 'To a lady, on the language of birds' and 'He complains how soon the pleasing novelty of life is over'. He took permission from

classical writers' range of subject matter and the fact that 'there have been few rules given us by critics concerning the structure of elegiac poetry'. He argued that elegy's 'peculiar characteristic' is

a tender and querulous idea ... and so long as this is thoroughly sustained, admits of a variety of subjects; which by its manner of treating them, it renders its own. It throws its melancholy stole over pretty different objects; which, like the dresses at a funeral procession, gives them all a kind of solemn and uniform appearance.

(Shenstone 1768: 15–16)

The idea of elegy as a manner continued into the Romantic period and beyond but with an important modification. Coleridge was able to remark that,

Elegy is a form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It *may* treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject *for itself*; but always and exclusively with reference to the poet. As he will feel regret for the past or desire for the future, so sorrow and love become the principal themes of the elegy. Elegy presents every thing as lost and gone, or absent and future.

(Coleridge 1835: 268, original emphasis)

The key phrase is 'exclusively with reference to the poet'. Coleridge is stressing the authority and authenticity of individual feeling.

Shenstone's simile of 'the dresses at a funeral procession' underlines how quickly elegy became strongly identified with a poetry of mourning. Funeral elegy as a distinctive genre also has its origins in the sixteenth century. Dennis Kay has argued convincingly that this was a direct consequence of the English Reformation. The disappearance of the Catholic Requiem Mass and the proscription of prayers for the repose of the dead shifted the emphasis of funeral observances not only towards the secular but also towards the living. The fate of the soul of the deceased gave way to the state of his or her survivors (Kay 1990: 2–3). As we shall see in Chapter 2, Edmund Spenser is particularly important in the establishment of funeral elegy as a distinctive sub-genre in

this period. In the 'November' eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) and his pastoral elegy for Sir Philip Sidney, 'Astrophel' (1595), he begins to work with a range of figures and stylistic and structural patterns which later elegists would turn into characteristics of the genre. The use of recurring figures and patterns by poets such as Milton, Shelley, Tennyson, Arnold, Swinburne and Yeats emphasizes how funeral elegy, like elegiac poetry, is not a fixed form like a sonnet. Shenstone's simile of 'the dresses at a funeral procession' and Coleridge's emphasis on authenticity highlight how funeral elegy has depended, to borrow Shenstone's words and rework them, on the wearing or invocation of a solemn uniform. The elegist borrows this uniform from his predecessors to convince us of his seriousness and depth of feeling so that an elegy, more than any other genre of poetry, is a poem made out of other poems. When Milton refers to 'the oaten flute' in 'Lycidas' he echoes 'pipes of oaten reed' in Spenser's 'Astrophel'. Similarly, 'The soul of Adonais, like a star' at the climax of Shelley's poem echoes Milton's figuring of Lycidas as 'the day-star' that 'flames in the forehead of the morning sky'. Shelley's 'Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass' in 'Adonais' (LII) perhaps glimmers distantly behind the 'windowless dome' in John Ash's 'Elegy, Replica, Echo'.

Funeral elegy emerges with real distinctiveness at the beginning of the seventeenth century with the work of two poets, John Donne and John Milton. The connection between death and elegy is made clear by Donne's 'An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary' (1611) whose third section is entitled 'A Funeral Elegy'. Donne's lasting achievement, as Dennis Kay reminds us, was to create 'an innovatory non-pastoral funeral mode' by modifying Latin models and 'writing in an argumentative register appropriate to conversation, satire, and the dramatic expression of inner turmoil' (Kay 1990: 95). The argumentative register combined with direct vernacular can be heard throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in elegies as superficially diverse as Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' (1850) and Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (1939). Milton's 'Lycidas' (1637/1645) revived and reworked the tropes of pastoral elegy into a well-defined progress from grief to consolation and detachment. This

provided later elegists with a more attractive template than Donne's 'argumentative register' but Milton's influence can be traced in two other aspects of elegy. First, 'Lycidas' makes explicit pastoral elegy's function as a space of poetic initiation and succession. Second, its setting by the sea has become a recurrent trope visible, for example, in Hardy's elegy for Swinburne 'A Singer Asleep' (1910); in section IV of T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', 'Death by Water' (1922); and in Elizabeth Bishop's memorial for Robert Lowell 'North Haven' (1978). The sea figures, in the words of Ariel's song from *The Tempest*, the possibility of 'a sea change' into a 'rich and strange' consolatory apotheosis. It is a possibility with which later elegists have sought both positive and negative feedbacks.

The preceding paragraphs might appear to suggest that while there has always been blurring of elegy and elegiac poetry, of mode and mood, funeral elegy was somehow 'settled' at some point in the past. Indeed, in his seminal study *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1985), Peter Sacks was able to detail recurring primary and secondary conventions. The primary conventions include: a pastoral context; the use of repetitions, refrains and repeated questions; outbursts of anger and cursing; a procession of mourners; a movement from grief to consolation; and concluding images of resurrection. The secondary conventions include: division of mourning between several voices; questions of reward, contest and inheritance between elegist and subject; the elegist's reluctant submission to language and an accompanying protestation of incapacity; and his need to draw attention to his own surviving powers (Sacks 1985: 2). However, Jahan Ramazani was unable to take a similar approach in his study of modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney. Modern elegists, he points out, have tended to attack convention and often leave their readers and themselves inconsolable (Ramazani 1994: 1–4). What tropes we might be able to identify, such as digging and burial in Thomas Hardy's 'Ah, are you digging on my grave?' (1914), Wilfred Owen's 'Miners' (1918) and Seamus Heaney's so-called 'bog poems' (1972–75), are distant and isolated. More to the point, as W. David Shaw observes, the elegist's traditional reticence and anxieties become 'open sites of fracture

and breakdown' (Shaw 1994a: 147). Similarly, Celeste M. Schenck notes strong tendencies in modern elegy towards 'parody and inversion' and 'deliberate rupture of ceremonial patterns' which 'results in works that are generically mutant'. She borrows Abbie Findlay Potts's description of Shelley's *Alastor* (1816) to name such works '*élégies manquées*' (Schenck 1986b: 108). For Potts, an 'elegy manqué' offers no 'new light or new life' and often fails to get beyond 'a vague literary melancholia, an indistinct idyll of social failure' (Potts 1967: 244).

All these estimates offer telling insights into modern elegy but none takes into account the extent to which poetry itself and wider attitudes to experience have become overwhelmingly elegiac. The reasons for wider elegiac attitudes are complex but, from an English perspective, would certainly include what Blake Morrison identified in Philip Larkin's poetry as 'post imperial tristesse' (in Corcoran 1993: 87). One would also have to take account of the rise of the postwar heritage industry and its commodified nostalgia. In a wider sense, philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben have argued that we live in a profoundly melancholic age and that melancholy involves not only an attachment to loss but also the pleasurable anticipation of loss (Žižek 2000: 657–63). Attitudes to death and mourning have also undergone significant changes in the last 20 years or so. Where commentators such as Philippe Ariès (1981: 559–616) and Geoffrey Gorer (1965: *passim*) were able to write with some justification of the denial of death and mourning throughout much of the twentieth century this is no longer the case. Death and mourning have become participatory, public spectacles. Live television coverage of events such as 9/11, the Beslan school siege and the 2004 Asian tsunami and documentaries that seek to explore 'what happened next' have detached grief from personal loss. Anyone who lives in a city will have seen flowers placed at the sites of road accidents; and, since the end of the Second World War, national identity has become synonymous with remembrance.

The dominance of elegiac poetry also has interesting origins within poetry itself. Large areas of contemporary poetry seem, in Coleridge's terms, to '[present] every thing as lost and gone, or

absent and future' to the extent that poetry often seems like a sub-genre of elegy as opposed to the other way round. This may at some level be symptomatic of poetry's fallen cultural status, a kind of self-mourning. However, two aspects of poetry are closely linked to contemporary poetry's overwhelmingly elegiac mood. First, as William Watkin has argued in a wide-ranging study of loss and commemoration in contemporary writing, all elegies 'have a lot to teach us about the non-representability of absence and the permanent trace of all this in all forms of representation' (Watkin 2004: 59). Second, contemporary poetry is dominated by the speaking 'I'. We have become so accustomed to this that we hardly notice it but a comparison of, say, Robin Skelton's *Poetry of the Thirties* (1964) with an anthology of British and Irish poetry of the 1980s and 1990s, *The New Poetry* (1993), reveals this as a distinctly contemporary phenomenon. The dominance of the speaking 'I' converges with the elegiac because, as Adrian Kear argues in a study of the public mourning of Princess Diana, identity is itself 'a melancholic structure in that, in order to maintain subjective consistency and illusory integrity, the ego has to repudiate or foreclose those identifications that enabled it to come into being' (in Kear and Steinberg, eds, 1999: 183). The self develops and asserts itself by holding loss within itself.

In the following chapters, I do not attempt to offer a comprehensive survey of elegy. Instead I discuss a range of elegies from the canonical to the contemporary in order to explore established and emergent reading practices. Chapter 2 'What was elegy?' outlines the classical Greek origins of elegy, the entry of the genre into English literature and the characteristics of the genre. Chapter 3 'The work of mourning' surveys the psychoanalytic ideas that underlie criticism of elegy. Chapter 4 'The needs of ghosts' focuses on the modern elegy's scepticism about and rejection of transcendence and consolation, exploring how AIDS and breast-cancer elegies typify this anti-elegiac turn. Chapter 5 'Female elegists and feminist readers' surveys female elegy, feminist scholarship and work by female psychoanalysts which challenges dominant Freudian models of the work of mourning. Chapter 6 'After mourning: virtual bodies, aporias and the work of dread' explores other challenges to established thinking about

death and elegy that have come recently from cultural studies, philosophy and literary criticism. Finally, Chapter 7 'Elegy diffused, elegy revived' addresses the diffusion of the elegiac mode in contemporary poetry; the diffusion of elegy beyond poetry; the changed nature of the relation between public and private; and the revival of elegy as a distinct consolatory form by a small number of contemporary poets.



## 2

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### WHAT WAS ELEGY?

Chris O'Connell's play *Hymns* (1999) portrays four young men reuniting to mourn the loss of a close male friend who has committed suicide. Their struggle to come to terms with their grief results in an unstable mixture of jokes, arguments, reminiscences and confessions. The dialogue is interspersed with passages of intense physical theatre. In one physical sequence from Frantic Assembly's 2005 production, the four men leap around and over a table, taking it in turns to lie on it like a corpse. The play climaxes with the smashing of the urn containing the friend's ashes. This is followed by a question 'Why do men die before women?' which is answered 'Because they want to' (O'Connell 2005: 57). The play ends with more jokes as three of the men climb a ladder into the darkness above the stage in what looks like a literal attempt to rise above the trauma of loss.

*Hymns* is not, of course, an elegy. Nonetheless, the play can be said to stage the characteristic scene of many elegies: men mourning the untimely deaths of other men. Similarly, although the subjects of elegies are not usually suicides, the play's closing question and answer converge with the way the genre often dramatizes the possibility that an untimely death may have been