Themselves; by which alone
They do exist: they cannot show
A sigh, a word, a groan,
A colour, or a glimpse of light,
The sparkle of a precious stone,
A virtue, or a smell; a lovely sight,
A fruit, a beam, an influence, a tear;
But they another's livery must wear . . . .

This extended to adaptation, since some of Traherne's verse survives in two states: as Traherne initially conceived it, and after the normative correcting process that it underwent from his brother Philip. This has sometimes been deplored by editors: in his Penguin edition of 1991, for instance, Alan Bradford wrote "Editing the *Poems of Felicity* is largely a matter of damage control. The trick is to make Philip's hand disappear . . .". But since it is likely to have been actively desired by the author himself, it can only problematize the questions of intentionality that are central to an editor's rationale. In recent years, early modern specialists have become increasingly willing to allow for the workings of literary coteries, and recognize the phenomenon of communal authorship. But at undergraduate level and in the publishing world, this is counteracted by the fact that early modern literary studies are under increasing pressure, bringing about a reversion to well-known names and the cult of the single author.

Given the way canons work, an edition of this kind is the best way to ensure Traherne's being read by non-specialists. But at several points Jan Ross betrays awareness that separating him off from his readers, adaptors and collaborators can be artificial, and while not perhaps taking the bull by the horns, she is scrupulous in identifying problems of attribution. As she points out, the several scripts in the liturgical compilation *Church's Year-Book* may indicate not only that the manuscript was copied by several hands, but that its actual composition was collaborative. *Meditations on the Six Days of the Creation*, long attributed to Susanna Hopton, is relegated to an appendix with the cautious comment that "parts of it appear to have been influenced by Traherne", and the hope that scholars will re-examine it within the context of Traherne's extant work.

Otherwise, the fact that most Traherne manuscripts only survive in one copy helps to make the process of editing relatively straightforward. So far, this edition is brisk, practical and eminently usable, though light on scholarly apparatus. A forthcoming eighth volume will be dedicated entirely to commentary. But for now, Traherne's admirers inside and outside academe will be delighted that so much of his lesser-known work has been made so handsomely available, and that a plea made three and a half centuries ago by an anonymous annotator of the Lambeth Palace manuscript has finally been answered: "Why is this soe long detaind in a dark Manuscript, that if printed would be a Light to the World, and a Universal Blessing?".

A little ease

SALLY CONNOLLY

Karen Weisman, editor
THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF THE ELEGY
718pp. Oxford University Press. £85 (US $150).
978 0 19 922813 3

Edward Hadley
THE ELEGIES OF TED HUGHES
200pp. Palgrave Macmillan. £50 (US $80).
978 0 230 23218 1

Elegy is a very slippery, if very necessary, genre. Of the three main commemorative modes – epitaph, eulogy and elegy – it has the most complex history, conflicted consolatory agenda, and frequently thwarted formal expectations. The major studies on the genre thus far have tended to limit their consideration to, say, the poetry of a nation, as Peter Sacks does in *The English Elegy: Studies in the genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1985), or a particular period, as in Jahan Ramazani's *The Poetry of Mourning: The modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), or to focus on a specific theme in elegy, as Melissa Zeiger does in *Beyond Consolation: Death, sexuality, and the changing shapes of elegy* (1997). In *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, Karen Weisman seems far more interested in breaking down rather than drawing boundaries, and adopts an extremely eclectic editorial approach by including a wide-ranging variety of subjects, including Native American elegy, AIDS elegy and Jewish elegy.

Gregory Nagy's chapter on elegy in Ancient Greece informs us of how it starts out not as a poem occasioned by a death but rather as a metrical form, the elegiac distich (a couplet consisting of a hexameter and a pentameter), that could treat of any subject but tended most often to the mournful. In Roman times (examined here by both Paul Miller and Michael Roberts), the elegy continues to have shades of the plangent and plaintive but is almost invariably concerned with the matter of loving rather than mourning. It is not until we find ourselves in late sixteenth-century Britain that we find the word *elegy* used to mean a poem of meditation on, and commemoration of, a death. It was at this moment that poets seized on many of the pastoral trappings of Greek lament. As we learn from William Watterson's excellent essay on the re-emergence of the pastoral, "the decade following [Sir Philip] Sidney's death in 1586 marks the apex of the popularity of the form in English and a self-consciously antiquarian revival of it".

The various paraphernalia one may find in pastoral elegy might include a description of the "laureate hearse" decked out in floral finery; an interrogation of the Muses who fell asleep during their watch over the subject of the elegy; a description of the procession of mourners; and nature's horrified reaction to the death – John Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy" – which causes Spring in Shelley's "Adonais" to fling down "Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were" in disgust at Keats's death. This collection is particularly good at tracing the pastoral line of descent in elegy. Timothy Morton's ingeniously argued manifesto on "The Dark Ecology of Elegy" places the pastoral mode in the context of contemporary ecological concerns. With great polemical verve he asks what will happen when the natural world – traditionally the wellspring of many of elegy's consoling tropes, such as the natural order of things reasserting itself in the wake of a death, with the return of spring and new life – is, itself, dead. In a globally warmed world "there is no 'objective correlative' for this loss, since the elegiac convention is that the scenery is itself the analogue for what has been lost". Bonnie Costello addresses herself to the resilience of the pastoral mode and the manner in which it is updated to address contemporary concerns in "ecoelegy", poems about the passing of places, such as Susan Howe's "Thorow", an archaeological elegy for the Lake George region in the Adirondacks.

Even at the earliest stages of the elegy in English, we find intimations of the genre's insecurity over its own purpose. Elegy's main purpose, of course, is to effect consolation and closure by distancing the mourned object from the mourning mind. In Milton's "Lycidas" (1638), there is a disturbing unease about elegy's efficacy when the mourning Swain comments, "For so to interpose a little ease, / Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise". This tallies almost exactly in sentiment with the description of elegy as a "sad mechanic exercise, / Like dull narcotics, numbing pain" that we find more than two centuries later in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Such uncertainty could only be amplified by the Victorian crisis of faith. Erik Gray touches on this issue in his chapter "Victoria Dressed in Black: Poetry in an elegiac age" which considers the problem of composing elegy in a death-obsessed era. Elegy's ostensibly consolatory agenda would be further tested by the shock of the two world wars. Poems about the dead become increasingly "anti-elegiac" during and after the First World War as they resist consolation and – as Dylan Thomas did later – refuse to mourn by way of protest. Patricia Rae explores the "lie" exposed in Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" in the poetry of the interwar period where "the dead . . . are not heroes". Rather, according to Stephen Spender, "they are freezing or rotting lumps of isolated insanity". R. Clifton Spargo has already written extensively on anti-elegy in *The Ethics of Mourning* (2004), and here he brings his arguments right up to the present day in his essay on "The Contemporary Anti-Elegy".

So far, so chronological, but this is where Weisman takes an unexpected editorial turn, devoting the latter half of her collection to a section that goes by the rather unwieldy title of "Knowledge, Theme, and Practice". In her introduction, she acknowledges that these are necessarily loose categories that "overlap and underline" each other, for, as she rightly argues, "any heuristic employed to deal with so expansive a subject as elegy is bound to betray its vulnerabilities". The editor is wise to aim for inclusivity, even if this means that the structural problems inherent in the genre also, to some extent, become those of the *Handbook*. This latter section is concerned with the broadly elegiac rather than the strictly poetic. We find several chapters that consider aspects of gender and sexuality transhistorically alongside essays that explore the elegiac in drama, film and photography. Weisman's approach throws up interesting juxtapositions and prompts further inquiry. Are there really no American films that feature the word "elegy" in the title, as we learn in Paul Coates's chapter on "Elegy and the Elegiac in Film"? What does this suggest about the American approach to death? The sheer historical breadth and generic scope of the *Handbook* invite the reader to draw links between fields. For example, Patricia Rae's consideration of poems about war memorials such as Siegfried Sassoon's "On Passing the New Menin Gate" speaks to Kirk Savage's fascinating essay on "The War Memorial as Elegy", which considers the influence of Sir Edwin Lutyens's Somme Memorial on Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.

The speaker of Robert Hass's poem "Meditation at Lagunitas" muses "All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking", but the way in which we think about that loss and how to elegize our dead is constantly changing. Perhaps the most enduring and productive tension in the genre is that between the procrustean aspects of elegy – such as formal and pastoral conventions – and the protean nature of the functions such poems serve. It is these, often apparently opposing, elements that provide the friction from which many of the best essays in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* draw their power.

Edward Hadley's monograph *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* seems a particularly timely study in the light of a renewed interest in Hughes's poems of loss sparked by the publication last year of Hughes's "Last Letter". This poem deals with the circumstances of Sylvia Plath's suicide in a direct and elegiac manner that many critics had found to be wanting in *Birthday Letters* (1998). Yet the title of this last collection points out the epistolary rather than elegiac intent of the collection, in which Hughes seems far more concerned with communication than consolation. Hadley argues that Hughes has been "largely unacknowledged" as an elegist and sets out to rectify the situation.

The book is structured, Hadley points out, much like a triangle, resting on the broad base of Hughes's elegies for the war dead from *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and tapering towards his poems for Plath, and, finally, the elegies written by others occasioned by Hughes's own death in October 1998. Hadley is particularly good on the pastoral, or rather, as he has it, rural realism of Hughes's work, and he develops an argument close to that of Costello's notion of "ecoelegy" in his chapter on Hughes's *Remains of Elmet* (1979), which charts the decline of the Calder Valley in Yorkshire. Edward Hadley does not shy away from the problems of "substitution and deferment" in *Birthday Letters* and the questions these evasive tactics raise about "responsibility and its abdication". The conclusion, a reading of the elegies to Hughes himself, is especially thought-provoking, and readers are provided with a very useful critical bibliography. *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* is a welcome addition to the field of Hughes studies.

Connolly, Sally. "A little ease." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5634, 25 Mar. 2011, p. 24. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200560241/TLSH?u=txshracd2588&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=19b19e8f. Accessed 23 Aug. 2021.