

Book Review of *Poetic Meditations on Death: A Gothic and Romantic Literary Genre of the Long Eighteenth Century (1693-1858)*, ed. Evert Jan van Leeuwen. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2014

H. George Hahn

The novelty of musings in moonlit scenes of ruined tombstones, towering yew trees, hooting owls, and bells tolling the hour explained the popularity of graveyard poetry in the mid-eighteenth century. But since then its poets have lain in a twilight sleep, more remembered than read. In two hundred years only a few articles, some passing comments in monographs, and only one complete book, Eric Parisot's *Graveyard Poetry* (2013), have attempted their resurrection. To further the attempt, in *Poetic Meditations on Death* Mr. van Leeuwen claims that his "anthology of graveyard poetry is designed to make available to students of English-language literature this once popular but now rather obscure genre of eighteenth-century verse."

Unlike other forms of lyrical poetry in the eighteenth century, a time when imitation was a virtue, Mr. van Leeuwen thinks the graveyard poem stands *sui generis*, but he might have argued a relationship with the traditional form of the pastoral elegy. By extending the case beyond John Draper's venerable *Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism* (1929) that itself had extended Henry Beers's direct linking of the graveyard school to Romanticism in *A History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century* (1899), Mr. van Leeuwen might have looked for precedents in the Old English lament and the Elizabethan soliloquy on death. Instead, he dubs the graveyard poem a theodicy because it "seeks to justify the ways of God to men," a naked claim only asserted. Certainly Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is anything but a theodicy and still less are most of the other poems in the anthology.

Focusing chiefly on the fathers of the form, Thomas Parnell, Edward Young, Robert Blair, and Thomas Gray, in his introduction Mr. van Leeuwen does mention family resemblances among most of the poems in his anthology: the gloomy atmosphere, funereal imagery, sweet melancholy, and the pondering of life's transience and divine purpose. But he ignores their formal analysis and the genre's structure as a monologue, its setting at a liminal hour, its solitary reflection, its remembrance of things past, its prosody, and its plaintive tone conveyed in whispered sibilants and plaintive assonance. A close reading of traits might have bound the poems closer as a genre. Scanted also in Mr. van Leeuwen's critical survey is notice of aesthetic contexts of the graveyard poem, such as the popularity of poetry of the landscape and the night, chiefly in Dyer, Thomson, and Collins; the craze for the folly, especially the graveyard; the attraction to ruins; the popularity of celebrity death scenes in art, particularly West's *Death of General Wolfe* (1770), David's *Death of Marat* (1793), and Deighton's *Death of Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar* (1805); and iconic death scenes in high-profile literature such as *Cato*, *Clarissa*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.

Other contexts ignored are war and disease. Deaths due to the high frequency of war—the Jacobite rebellions, the Wars of the Spanish and Austrian Successions, the Seven Years War, the American war, and the French wars of 1793–1815—certainly cast a national pall. And the high incidence of death by smallpox that in 1726 Voltaire estimated to be 20 percent (*Letters on England*, No. 11), and of many

younger than six, also darkened the times. Churches in thousands of towns and villages featured the names of slain redcoats and Jack Tars on inscriptions inside and children's names on small tombstones in their churchyards.

Missing also from the anthology are two justifications. First, the book's title dates: In thirty-four poems spanning 1693 to 1858 the questions shout: Why 1858? And how much later can the eighteenth century run? And second, the choice of poems is unexplained. Although Mr. van Leeuwen admits that "it would be wrong to classify any poem written in a graveyard, or concerning death, as a graveyard poem," he fails to account for his selection. Of course, he includes the standard stock by the three parson-poets, Parnell's "Night Piece on Death," a bit of Young's *Night Thoughts*, and Blair's *Grave*; and, of course, he includes Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. But why does he include Poe's "Spirits of the Dead" (1839) and E. B. Hale's "O Bury Me Not" (1845)? And why does he not include William Collins's eloquent "Ode Written at the Beginning of the Year 1746," ("How sleep the brave"), a sonnet in hushed sibilants and somber assonance cut off at twelve lines to commemorate the lives of English soldiers similarly cut off during the Jacobite rebellion? And where is Charles Wolfe's moving 1809 "Burial of Sir John Moore," direct, spare, and laden with emotion and the respect of his soldiers? Perfect candidates for inclusion, these poems are set at gravesites and written during the standard "long" eighteenth century.

Objections aside, Mr. van Leeuwen's book is valuable for its resurrection of the graveyard poets in a compact edition of their work about life's last stop.