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THE ELEGIST WHO SANG FOR ALL HE WAS WORTH

GRAY'S "ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD" holds the classic's share not only of charms which compound charms but also of problems which have balked inquiry and of distinctions which have gone unexamined and underestimated. I propose to follow one of the distinctions to the point where it casts charming light on the elusive unity and novelty of this mutant elegy.

The distinction that concerns me, the "dramatic" quality often noted in passing by common readers and practicing critics,¹ has been sensed in elements of the "Elegy" that look not unlike cast, sets, gestures, or speeches. But the drama is indeed so substantial that it is demonstrable in an overall action, the enterprise of paying contested tribute to some unlikely person(s). The protagonist of the plot, first paying and then being paid such tribute, is the young man who is, surprisingly, singled out in the last nine stanzas. There the "youth" (l. 118) is sought after and honored, I hope to show, because—earlier, before our eyes—he made the poetry which occupies the opening twenty-three stanzas and which commemorates forensically the poor men buried in an obscure cemetery. If this is what happens, Gray's "Elegy"—not a little quixotically—turns the elegiac routine into a challenging exploit and does so, at that, not once but twice. It is Popeian as well as Cervantist, for its second elegiac mission—eulogizing an unfortunate poet—develops the predicament glimpsed near the end of what has been called its "principal model",² Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady":

Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung. . . .
Ev'n he, whose soul now melts in mournful lays,
Shall shortly want the gen'rous tear he pays.

In such drama the two sequences of the "Elegy" are bonded together handsomely and sturdily by causality as well as parallelism.

If the youth of the closing sequence were not the poet of the unfortunate, he would be a cipher, too negligible for words of praise or defense. After all, he was a displaced person, cut off from the culture and commotion of London and Oxbridge to which "Fair Science" had attuned him, and estranged from the "rude" and "unlettered" men of the soil around him, who took him to be most eccentric (11. 16, 81, 101-108). He was a rootless person, without a wife, children, or even (until late, and then probably with a difference) a "friend" (1. 124). Deprived of the "homely joys" of the poor, he seems to have experienced no pleasures at all except those of observing nature, basking in the smile of "Fair Science", and reveling perhaps in the symptoms of melancholy (11. 30, 98-104, 119-120). He was an unemployed person; there is no sign of any "toil" (1. 29), whether lumbering, plowing, harvesting, gravedigging, quarrying, or stonecutting, or (for that matter, with respect for the white-collar) teaching, preaching, or clerking. Though the cottagers of the hamlet were on the whole doomed to carry their talents to the grave unrealized, they managed to give and receive satisfaction in other useful capacities—as husbands and fathers, friends and mourners, farm hands and artisans. But this stray youth, who (as Johnson might have said) hung loose upon society, seems to have been without any social function whatsoever.

If he were not the poet of the humble, there would be even less to be said for him. If the "tear" which he "gave to mis'ry" (1. 123) were nothing more than it seems to be, it would hardly be to the credit of a man with means enough for schooling and lounging. Without requiring him to emulate Pope's Man of Ross, we may well deny that sobs alone manifested "bounty", large or small; they hardly began to amount to "all he had" (11. 121, 123). In futility and sadness there was scant warrant for the interest taken by "some kindred spirit", for the appearance of a "friend", or for the assurance of beatitude (11. 96, 124-128). His "soul sincere" notwithstanding, he would seem to have kept his "frailties" uniquely undefiled by "merits" apart from poetry (11. 121, 125-126).

For this youth of the second part of the "Elegy", otherwise a blank and brooding ineffectual, poetry is the salvation. To begin with, the young man had at least some rudimentary prerequisites for ranking as a sophisticated and neglected poet of the poor. His "humble birth" (1. 119) leveled him with the cottagers by origin, if not also by early experience. Since "Fair Science" smiled

on him, he was capable of composition more correct, elegant, and knowledgeable than the "uncouth rhymes" which, in lieu of "fame and elegy", the "unlettered muse" put on the tombstones of the peasants (ll. 119, 78-82). Since he was accustomed not only to ramble after the "curfew" but also to "rove" from dawn to noon, he had the leisure for turning verses as well as (or maybe in the guise of) "mutt'ring his wayward fancies" (ll. 1, 98-108). If he had any gift for poetry in him, it was not choked by ignorance or drudgery. And it need not have been altogether overlooked by others. The epitaph above his head rates him, not as simply and flatly unknown to anybody, but as generally unnoticed; in calling him "a youth, to Fortune and to Fame unknown" (l. 118), it withholds renown unmistakably but leaves room for recognition among a small, select circle of people.

As nothing in the "Elegy" keeps the youth from being a poet, so nothing keeps its first part from being his poetry. The identity of the young man is unchanged by the shifting of pronouns within part ii (from *thee* and *thy* to *he* and *him*), and it need not be changed by the shifting between parts i and ii. It hardly strains the amenities of grammar or dialogue to suppose that this forlorn intellectual, addressed in the second person when the later sequence begins ("Thee, who . . . dost in these lines their artless tale relate"—ll. 93-94), is not an amiable phantom, some off-stage "unlettered muse", but the very man who in the first person (when the world was left "to darkness and to me"—l. 4) was holding forth in part i. It does not strain probability to suppose that "these lines" relating the "artless tale" of the dead villagers are, not the unquoted and "uncouth rhymes" on the tombstones (ll. 77-84), but the ninety-two lines of verse (in elegant quatrains) which are set forth verbatim in part i, and which are signally "mindful of th' unhonored dead" (l. 93). If it does not suffice to regard the commemoration of the dead plowmen as sentiment reconstructed indoors, the gravestones in the moonlight (l. 10) allow for inditement on the spot. It is only fair to suspend disbelief that the larger as well as the smaller moiety of the "Elegy" was "written in a country churchyard."

But the grounds for hailing the moribund youth of the end as the estimable poet of the start include not only a soft chance and a bad need but also a good, hard reason. The youth's claim is certified with a word. On misery, as has been noted, a young man who was nowhere near penniless bestowed but a dubious "tear". Unlike the "pious drops" shed at deathbeds (l. 90), there is more to this than wets the eye. Appropriately in a work which rings with echoes of many voices, including Latin as well as English, recalling

Milton as well as Pope and Waller, the "tear" was literary rather than liquid. Such a *tear*, voiced and heard, is defined in Webster's *Second International Dictionary*, with a quotation from "Lycidas", as "expression of grief; a lament". In the "melodious tear" of "Lycidas" (l. 14) and the "tears of perfect moan" of an "Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester" (ll. 55-56), Milton's editors have concurred in seeing poems—"poems commemorating death", "mourning verses", "a funeral elegy", and "elegiac poetry".³ *Tears* that signify elegiac poems seem to mark Pope's "Epistle to Mr. Jervas" (ll. 47-48), his "Epitaph on . . . Digby" (ll. 17-20), and above all his influential "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady", where the "gen'rous tear" wanted for the elegist would take the form of verses like his own "mournful lays". Notably, in illustrating the *tear* which signifies "the expression of grief or sorrow", the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites more than the "melodious tear" in "Lycidas" and the comparable case in *Robinson Crusoe* ("I was happy in listening to her tears"—paragraph 13 of the second part). The *OED* cites also the very line of Gray's "Elegy" in which the youth "gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear". The "lay" engraved on the tombstone can affirm that the youth gave his "all" sincerely, for what he gave was a noble poem—that "real elegy" (as Grierson and Smith termed it)⁴ which is embodied in the first part of Gray's piece. Thereby he confirmed himself as both a fine poet (though neglected) and as a bountiful giver; he did for nearly inarticulate and wholly unhonored misery what it could not do for itself. Against the ill-will of the privileged classes, he vindicated the dignity of the lower orders.

The performance changed the attitude toward him of neither the poor nor the rich. If the "hoary-headed swain" is typical of the cottagers of the neighborhood, it may be safely said that the farm hands knew the late young poet, followed and recalled his erratic movements, missed him when he was absent, and watched his funeral procession (ll. 97-114). It must also be said, however, that these "rude" contemporaries were quite unaware of his being a writer, and of his having written homage to their forefathers and their kind: there is not the slightest hint that the old swain knows of the existence, much less of the purport, of the "lines" of part i. The youth's effect on the proud, ambitious persons lectured in the elegy (ll. 29-44) was likewise nil. Since there is no mention of those persons and their responses in the late reports of part ii, it must be assumed that the "lines" addressed to them never reached or touched them, and thus altered neither their disesteem for the poor nor their neglect of this poet. After as well as before writing the "lines", the youth was "to fortune and to fame unknown". The poet of the peasants became neither

the peasants' nor the gentlemen's poet. The strenuous eulogies with which he is associated—of the poor against lordly scoffers, of the poet himself against a lowly detractor—have an appeal elsewhere.

The youth impressed significantly the narrator who comes to the fore in stanza xxiv. In addition to collecting the responses of others—the inquiring stranger, the "swain", the epitaph-writer, the new "friend", and the Lord—the narrator himself praises the young poet for managing to relate the tale of the unhonored farm hands in a singularly "mindful" fashion.

Another of the youth's admirers, reported by the narrator, is "some kindred spirit" who, on coming to the churchyard for "lonely contemplation", asks the passing old swain about the author of the "lines" (11. 93-97). Since it is the meditative stranger who makes the youth's "fate" a subject for conversation and who is told of the demise and engraved tombstone, he must have known about the poet and his poem, not the grave and the epitaph, before coming into the graveyard. Since he has come to the cemetery described by the poet rather than to the youth's home, the stranger is concerned with the youth as the bard of the churchyard, and not in any other capacity. In short, the stranger has read the "lines", has responded to them with the enthusiasm of a kindred spirit, and has come to the cemetery to relive the young poet's experience for himself on the exact spot. In the response of the stranger as in that of the narrator is evidence that the "lines" were read with sympathy—with so much sympathy in this case as to bring a stranger to the "neglected spot" (1. 45) and into conversation with the kind of common man celebrated in the stanzas.

By his song the young man won an epitaph, a place in heaven, and even a kind of friendship (11. 121-124). The epitaph is the work, as we have seen, of somebody who thought highly of the "tear". The friend gained, according to the epitaph, must be someone who liked the "lines" so much as perhaps to seek the youth's acquaintance, certainly to be a "friend" in the well-attested sense of sympathizer, well-wisher, favorer, or appreciator. Whether he ever became a companion or even a correspondent, whether he now gives ease to the departed spirit by remembering him (in keeping with stanza xxiii), this "friend" is above all else important as a reader and admirer of the youth *qua* poet.

The "friend" thus joins the "kindred spirit", the narrator, and the epitaph-writer in verifying the transformation of the youth from a "mute, inglorious Milton" into something better. By composing and somehow cir-

culating these "lines", the youth ceased to be inglorious. One great effect of the writing of the "lines" was to win to the youth, if not relief for his loneliness while alive, then (what would be for the *poeta ignotus* even more exhilarating) sensitive commendation of his nearly buried talent. He has fulfilled himself, then, in some measure: though he has won no acclaim or renown, he has earned and elicited appreciation as a poet. Commemoration of others became his own self-realization.

The epitaph-writer, in the last two stanzas of the "Elegy", speaks of the Lord as well as for himself and a friend. On his word the Lord was so impressed by the large bounty shown in the youth's "tear" as to recompense the young man with a friend here, and perhaps to judge hereafter that his "frailties" are outweighed by his "merits". By understanding and writing, the youth managed to escape the doom of keeping "that one talent which is death to hide lodged in (him) useless."

Certainly, the writing of the elegiac "lines" on the rustics left many matters unchanged for the youth—his sickness unto death, his distance from fortune and fame, his melancholy, his alienation alike from men of affairs and men of the farms, and perhaps even his solitary ways. Yet the creation and circulation of the "lines" changed his life by crowning it with a life's work. It is not of consequence to this exaltation that the youth and the narrator, like the "friend" and the epitaph-writer, may seem separate beings only for some readers, and may well coalesce for others. Even if the admirers of the youth in part ii are contracted into a very small circle—or for that matter put down as creatures one and all of the youth's imagination—the train of events stays fundamentally undisturbed. Gray's "Elegy" remains a drama in which a neglected poet creates a magnificent encomium to the insulted and injured of the countryside and then receives—perhaps in sober fact, perhaps in his or another's mind—recompense in kind. The homage of the second part, in any event, follows from that of the first by an exceedingly strict construction of poetic justice; and two acts of commemoration—each overcoming marked resistance—go to make one double elegy.

NOTES

1. *Dramatic* (as a word and as an idea) is used by Cleanth Brooks, "Gray's Storied Urn", *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York, 1947), pp. 96-113 (in particular pp. 107-111); and by Frank Ellis, "Gray's *Elegy*: The Biographical Problem in Literary Criticism", *PMLA*, LXVI (1951), 971-

1008 (in particular pp. 984-987). The commentaries on the "Elegy" before and since these two landmark essays are for the most part registered, if not reprinted, in two 1968 anthologies of criticism edited by Herbert W. Starr: *Thomas Gray: Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (Columbus, Ohio) and *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey).

2. F. W. Bateson, "Gray's 'Elegy' Reconsidered", *English Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1950), pp. 181-193 (in particular pp. 188, 191).
3. The glosses come, respectively, from Harris F. Fletcher, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), p. 68n; Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., *Paradise Regained, The Minor Poems, and Samson Agonistes* (New York, 1937), p. 184n; James Holly Hanford, ed., *The Poems of John Milton* (New York, 1953), p. 142n; and Frank Allen Patterson, "Notes on the Poetry", *The Student's Milton* (New York, 1936), p. 58.
4. *A Critical History of English Poetry* (London, 1947), p. 226.