

## Gray's *Elegy*: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution

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Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard* has so often been written about that one hesitates before entering the maze of critical studies by which it is sometimes illumined and sometimes obfuscated. It was Gray's only major poem that Samuel Johnson genuinely enjoyed and praised; one of the eighteenth-century poems chosen by the new critics to show that their tools were applicable to non-metaphysical poetry; a poem whose early manuscripts are available for study; whose metrics, decorum, and biographical, elegiac, and even marmoreal aspects have been examined.<sup>1</sup> Yet with all its long tradition of professional examination the poem remains distant for many readers, as if the criticism could not explain why Johnson thought that "The *Church-yard* abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo."<sup>2</sup> Few bosoms, I suppose, echo to subtle metrics, subtler ironies, or the blessedly defunct controversy over which stonemason did what.

One clue concerning why Johnson and the common reader were so pleased was offered by Ronald Crane in *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (1953). It is a clue which, if followed with some modifications, unravels many self-created mysteries, offers an important reason for the *Elegy's* enduring popularity (over and above its excellence and apparent sympathy with the poor) and, I believe, comes closer than previous discus-

<sup>1</sup>Many of these efforts are listed or reproduced in whole or in part in two useful volumes edited by Herbert W. Starr: *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1968), and *Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, The Merrill Literary Casebook Series (Columbus, Ohio, 1968). There are, of course, several other works on Gray after 1968. Many useful remarks may be found in Roger Lonsdale's edition of *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith* (London, 1969), pp. 103-141, James M. Kuist, "The Conclusion of Gray's *Elegy*," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 40 (1971), 203-214, and Lonsdale, "The Poetry of Thomas Gray. Versions of the Self," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 59 (1973), 105-123. See also Thomas R. Carper, "Gray's Personal Elegy," *SEL*, 17 (1977), 451-462.

<sup>2</sup>*Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1905), III, 441.

sions to representing Gray's intention. Crane observes that the *Elegy* is

an imitative lyric of moral choice rather than of action or of mood, representing a situation in which a virtuous, sensitive, and ambitious young man of undistinguished birth confronts the possibility of his death while still to "Fortune and to fame unknown," and eventually, after much disturbance of mind (hinted at in the Swain's description of him), reconciles himself to his probable fate by reflecting that none of the rewards of successful ambition can "sooth the dull cold ear of Death," which comes as inevitably to the great as to the obscure; that a life passed "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife," though circumscribing the exercise of virtue and talent, may yet be a means of preserving innocence; and that he can at any rate look forward to—what all men desire as a minimum—living on in the memory of at least one friend, while his merits and frailties alike repose "in trembling hope" on the bosom of his Father and his God.<sup>3</sup>

Though I do not agree with all of Crane's remarks, his outline remains the best, and lamentably ignored, statement regarding the psychological and moral "plot" of the poem.<sup>4</sup> It evokes a dialectical reading which examines the flux and counter-flux of an emotionally charged argument with one's self and arrives, finally, at a truth which cannot give absolute peace, but can reconcile the speaker to his own tempered "success" in this world by promising success hereafter.

I shall combine Crane's basic insight with collateral analyses of setting, character, and poetic language, and in the process suggest how the *Elegy* is concerned not with a choice of life or death, but a choice of eternity. Along the way I hope to elucidate the poem's seven principal parts: its initial tone and setting (ll. 1-28); the speaker's defense of the poor and insistence upon the futility of riches in keeping one from death (ll. 29-44); the difficulty of being successful if one is poor (ll. 45-64); the danger of being successful

<sup>3</sup>(Toronto, 1953), p. 176. See also Crane's remarks in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago, 1952), p. 99.

<sup>4</sup>Roger Lonsdale works toward, but halts before, Crane's reading while discussing the earlier manuscript version of the poem. See *The Poems of . . . Gray*, pp. 114-115. See also his "The Poetry of Thomas Gray" (n. 1, above), which urges a dialectic different from the one I discuss here: "It is as if there were two selves in the poem: a judicious, normative self, resting confidently on traditional wisdom and values, and a deeper unofficial self of confused and subversive passions which can only be acknowledged as the debate is closed in the concluding lines" (p. 105).

if one is rich or fortunate (ll. 65-76); the universal longing for some human memorial, as seen among the poor (ll. 77-92); the Swain's report, which indicates the speaker's acceptance of his lot (ll. 93-116); and, finally, the Epitaph, in which the speaker's earned resolution is projected in the future, as an emblem of his newly won control (ll. 117-128).

## I

No one in particular is being mourned as the *Elegy* opens. Instead, the speaker is examining his own thoughts in or near a country churchyard, the ancient burial ground for the humble poor of the village and, as we later see, the ultimate resting place of the speaker himself. But it soon becomes clear that the speaker is, on the one hand, like the humble rural living and dead in their obscurity, and painfully unlike them in his discontent, and that he is really mourning his own repressed potential. The opening four stanzas consistently show his separation from his environment. He is a living man in the home of the dead; a poetic man in a town of farmers; a man who attempts to see though the sun is setting; and a man who "molests" the "ancient solitary reign" of the owl in the church tower (l. 12). He is, in short, alone in a world that he does not accept and that does not accept him:

The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (ll. 3-4)<sup>5</sup>

The speaker's alienation is obvious in his attitude towards the graves about him. There "The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep" (l. 16), and are in a "lowly bed" (l. 20). Death as a comforting sleep contrasts sharply with the speaker's perceptive and disturbed mind. Of even more importance is his great emotional distance from the dead, since it reflects a sharp difference in his real and their presumed outlook when they were alive. The vision of the life of the rude forefathers includes an early rise (ll. 17-20) in order to tend the harvest, the furrow, the team of horses that drives the plow, and the ax that chops the trees (ll. 25-28). It is a picture in which the close relation of living man and living

<sup>5</sup>Quotations are from *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray*, ed H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford, 1966). There are useful notes in *Selected Poems of Thomas Gray and William Collins*, ed Arthur Johnston (Columbia, So. Carolina, 1970), and Lonsdale.

nature parallels the close relation of "mould'ring" man and mould'ring nature in the preceding stanzas. We are encouraged to re-create the motion of the day time, of the harvest and ploughing, the blazing hearth, nourishing wife and mother, and loving, active children. The contrast between the life and death of the humble poor is best seen in stanzas four and seven.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,  
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

.....  
Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,  
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;  
How jocund did they drive their team afield!  
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!  
(ll. 13-16, 25-28)

However, the similarity between these parts of the human condition is at least as important as the difference—whether dead or alive, whether asleep or awake, the forefathers are related positively to nature, whereas the speaker is separated from the living and the dead, from the life of man and of nature. This separation is exemplified in the pronouns that the speaker uses for those in the country churchyard: nothing "shall rouse them from their lowly bed./ For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn" (ll. 20-21); and it is *they* and *their* which consistently appear in lines 25-28 quoted above.

The speaker's distance from those (seemingly) mourned is reiterated in the following section of the poem, where we once again hear *their* and *these*, but now with a new ring. These lines do not offer the conventional reconciliation to death that even Crane seemed to have thought was there. For one thing, the speaker is not ready for such a reconciliation; for another, he still is apologetic, both for the poor in general and for himself in particular:

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to These the fault,  
If Mem'ry o'er their Tomb no Trophies raise,  
Where thro' the long-drawn isle and fretted vault  
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. (ll. 37-40)

Not having earthly success is a fault, is, according to Johnson, an "offense; slight crime; somewhat liable to censure or objection"; or at the very least a "Defect; want; absence."<sup>6</sup> As Gray put it in

<sup>6</sup>A *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755).

the Eton College manuscript, "Forgive, ye Proud, th' involuntary Fault" (l. 37);<sup>7</sup> though excusable, not achieving public memorial for public acts remains an inadequacy. Even if the speaker is merely characterizing the attitude of the Proud, it is an attitude with which he himself is sympathetic.

The speaker's desire for an elaborately mourned death, rather than a lowly bed, is made even clearer in the third section of the poem, where though "The paths of glory lead but to the grave" (l. 36), the speaker solaces his existence not with realizations of the universal end of man, but with how grand he and those around him might have been if not for external constraints. Perhaps Flattery cannot "sooth the dull cold ear of Death" (l. 44), but it can soothe the life of those unjustly limited by society, circumstances, and immediate environs. The earlier alienation from his surroundings again appears in the final line below:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (ll. 53-56)

The speaker's genius will be wasted in the country; his potential for controlling the empire of arms or government or arts will be blasted by his poverty and limitations of knowledge. What most troubles him, however, is not the checks upon his fantasized greatness, but the checks upon his and others' ability to do good:

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,  
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,  
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,  
And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes

Their lot forbad. . . . (ll. 61-65)

The traditionally viewed reconciliation to death, then, is nothing of the sort. Such bad theology is not likely to be the thematic climax of an eighteenth-century poem; instead, the "paths of glory" line is a temporary and unsatisfactory resting place that must soon be passed. It is a defensive thumbing of the nose at the rich and powerful, a way of saying, "Don't be proud, you too will

<sup>7</sup>As quoted from [Rintaro Fukuhara and Henry Bergen], *An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* . . . *The Three Manuscripts* (London, 1933), p. 3. Subsequent quotations from the Eton manuscript are from this version.

be just as dead as a poor farmer buried outside the church." But these and subsequent remarks show that the speaker remains oriented towards earthly success, and still regards those without it as at fault and unfairly victimized. Paradoxically, the speaker's paean to earthly glory and the possibility of the benevolent exercise of power evokes its own antithesis. In the midst of thinking that "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest" (l. 59), he also realizes that the neglected grave may hold "Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood" (l. 60). The speaker passes over that line for a moment, utters the stanza (ll. 61-64) quoted above, boldly carries it to the next stanza, and sharply breaks the line with the heaviest caesura in the poem as if, while thinking or writing, he realizes the grimmer implications of power, Cromwell, and slaughter. It is this next section (ll. 65-76) and not that with, in its context, the emotionally spurious line regarding the paths of glory, that initiates the poem's true movement towards reconciliation. If one might be Milton, one might also be a corrupt court poet; if one has money with which to do good, one might also do evil. And if one ruled a nation one might have been forced, or have elected, to "wade through slaughter to a throne,/ And shut the gates of mercy on mankind" (ll. 67-68).<sup>8</sup> The speaker realizes that obscurity "nor circumscrib'd alone/ Their [and his own] growing virtues, but their crimes confined" (ll. 65-66). Again, as the Eton manuscript put it, "more to Innocence their Safety owe/ Than Power and Genius e'er conspired to bless" (ll. 75-76). But the published elegy is superior to the Eton version in part because it does not stop with personal safety in this world, nor with the simple resolution of pursuing "the silent Tenour of thy Doom" (l. 88; pp. 5-6, *Three Mss.*). The final version gives us a speaker concerned with spiritual not physical safety, one who is concerned with those about him, indeed with those beneath him. The complexity of his "problem," and therefore the satisfaction to speaker and reader in resolving it, are greater.

Though he now is moving towards resolution, he is far from it, as can be seen in the continued dissociation of himself from the humble dead about him. It is still "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife" that "Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray"; and it is "They" who "kept the noiseless tenor of their way" (ll.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Robert Blair, *The Grave* (London, 1743): "Here! all the mighty *Troublers of the Earth,*/ Who swam to Sov'reign Rule thro' Seas of Blood" (p. 13). The entire section, ll. 208-231, is relevant to Gray's own thought in ll. 65-76.

73-76); and in the next section it is "Their name, [and] their years" that are "spelt by th' unletter'd muse" on the country gravestones (l. 81). Before the poem can end honestly, before the speaker wholly appreciates the full connotations of the inability of the emblems of worldly success to recall death or bind the generations in social and theological harmony, he must bridge the distance between the "me" of line 4 and "they" of numerous lines. He begins to do this, I have suggested, in his realization that all men might be diabolic as well as angelic when tempted by opportunity. He learns to characterize ambition not as a benevolent sway of empire (l. 47) but as "the madding crowd's ignoble strife" (l. 73). He takes another step when he looks for a common denominator of rich and poor, good and bad, and finds it not in the fact of death, but the fact of remembered life and the consequent links between classes and generations.

The rhymes near him are "uncouth," the tombstones "frail," and the statuary "shapeless" (ll. 78-79), but they do function as protection from "insult"—they mark off a holy burial ground and insist that the person has not been forgotten—and implore "the passing tribute of a sigh" (l. 80). The speaker's view of the humble dead, and hence of the humble living, is changing. He had felt that "Mem'ry o'er their Tomb no Trophies raise" (l. 38); he now feels that the "frail memorial [is] still erected nigh" (l. 78) and reaches out to the passing visitor. He had felt that it was a fault that "pealing anthems" did not swell "the note of praise" for the poor (l. 40); he now feels it proper that the "unletter'd muse" (l. 81) is at work, "And many a holy text around she strews,/ That teach the rustic moralist to die" (ll. 83-84). In the process of reading such rustic poetry, the speaker himself has been instructed, has learned to find the proper way of living, dying, and gaining immortality. What were merely "The short and simple annals of the poor" (l. 32) have become neither short (because they extend beyond the grave) nor simple because (if I may take one of the word's several meanings here) they contain profound spiritual teachings. At this point, then, the earlier tension between the speaker and his environment is relaxed, and he is capable of generalizing in such a way that questions of rich and poor, lettered and unlettered muse, are subsumed under the larger rubric of human rather than marmoreal recollection. "For who," he says, "to dumb Forgetfulness a prey" (l. 85), *ever* left this world without looking back with tender longing for life and remembrance? And such longings seek human satisfaction. It is in the following stanza that the speaker wholly breaks down the

previous conflict between *me* and *they*, and affirms his living relationship with the dead about him. He moves from *they*, to *who*, to *some*, to *our* in describing the villagers and his relationship with them.

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,  
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;  
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,  
Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires. (ll. 89-92)

The last line above is a startling inversion and an essential sign of the speaker's evolved moral choice, for it insists upon the community between the living and the dead, and does so by attributing the fire of life to the dead and the expiring ashes to the living. It also is one of the most tortured and misunderstood lines in the Gray canon, and one his eighteenth-century commentators and readers, no less than the modern, did not understand. The completed Eton College manuscript reads: "And buried Ashes glow with Social Fires." Here the dead are, conventionally, the ash still glowing because still remembered by the living. The Wharton manuscript's "And in our Ashes glow their wonted Fires," moves us closer to the final version, but weakens the sense of continuity by means of *glow* rather than *live*. Gray's letter to Horace Walpole of February 11, 1751, and his first two editions, use the ambiguous

Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries  
Awake, and [& in the letter] faithful to her wonted Fires.

The confusing comma and the entirely different line obliterate the speaker's change in character as exemplified in the shift from *they* to *our*. The third through seventh editions correct the inappropriate comma, but do not clarify the poem's essential theme:

Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,  
Awake and faithful to her wonted Fires.

The Pembroke manuscript offers: "And in our Ashes *glow* their wonted Fires," but has "*ev'n*" and "*live*" in the right margin, and points us toward the ultimate reading of the line. Not until the eighth edition of 1753, however, do we find this brilliant, difficult couplet in print:



Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,  
Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.<sup>9</sup>

Gray insists upon continuity not only as a call from the tomb, but as a sign that the speaker is able to hear and see and be influenced by what was hitherto alien. The dead are attributed wonted but living fire, and the living speaker expiring ashes, as if Gray recognized that one has greater life when well settled in a role prescribed by God than when restlessly devouring oneself with aspiration. Such a "fire," then, assumes eternal "fire" with God.

The new line still puzzled an uncomprehending William Mason in 1775. He suggested "Awake and faithful to her first desires" as an improving amendment. It was scarcely more clear to John Young who, some eight years later, found the couplet absurdly hyperbolic and thus unconvincing. By 1785 John Scott was aware of the "posthumous connexion of the intellectual and corporeal part of man," but could go no farther, and rested on the crutch of Gray's apparent poetic license to deal with what he thought nearly inexplicable. In the same year George Wright labeled the passage "ambiguous," and grumbled: "neither the truths of revelation, nor the dictates of right reason, support the sentiments, or countenance the extravagant ideas" therein.<sup>10</sup> We are, I think, forced to conclude either that Gray's belated choice of a strikingly unconventional image is an error, or that it embodies an important, if neglected, part of the poem's structure. The latter seems to me more probable—the line supports the hypothesis that the poet has broken the barriers between himself and the humble poor, recognizes their virtuous willingness to rest within God's decision of a worldly place for them, honors them, and tries to link himself to them in life as he will have to do in death. It is, indeed, that conscious effort and positive decision that finally

<sup>9</sup>For a recording of these variants, see Starr and Hendrickson, p. 41; Johnston, p. 45; Lonsdale, p. 134. They are also in Fukuhara and Bergen, and Francis Griffin Stokes, *An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard . . . The Text of the First Quarto With the Variants of the MSS & of the Early Editions (1751-71)* (Oxford, 1929). Gray's letter to Walpole is in *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley (Oxford, 1935), I, 342.

<sup>10</sup>Mason, *The Poems of Mr. Gray. To which are prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings*, 2nd ed. (London, 1775), p. 108; [Young], *A Criticism on the Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard*—an "imitation" of Johnson's criticism of Gray—(London, 1783), pp. 66-67; Scott, *Critical Essays on Some of the Poems of Several English Poets* (London, 1785), p. 228; Wright, *The Grave. By Robert Blair: To which is added Gray's Elegy in a Country Church Yard* (London, 1785), p. 50, n. 146.

make the speaker seem to win God's favor, and certainly ours; they also imply Christian self-knowledge that surpasses the passive acceptance by the poor.

The bond between *our* and *their* is made even clearer in the penultimate section of the poem, and helps to explain the referent of "thee" in line 93. In the process of writing a self-centered poem of alienation, the speaker realizes the benefits of obscurity and praises those who are more like himself than he cared to admit. He can thus objectify, stand outside of himself for a moment and see precisely where he is. As the anonymous author of "The Inspector" said in 1751, in this "Reverie . . . he gives what he imagines will be the Account of himself, when dead, from the mouth of some humble Cottager." And as John Young remarked far later, "Gray . . . has put what is to be said [of himself as speaker] in the mouth of another."<sup>11</sup> The "me" of line 4 is now a "thee," his externalized self who is "mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead" and "Dost in these lines their artless tale relate" (ll. 93-94). In the changing subject of his poem the speaker finds his true poem and, though he is not joyful, accepts his homely identity. Because he relates *their* artless tale he can properly hope that "Some kindred Spirit"—that is, another lonely, poetic, but resigned humble man—"shall inquire thy fate,/ Haply some hoary-headed Swain may" tell his story (ll. 96-97), just as he is implicitly telling the others' story as he relates "their artless tale" (l. 94). It is clear that the Swains do not understand him, and that the speaker's contemplative nature will forever set him off from his fellows. It also is clear that, by the time of the Swain's description, the speaker's earlier alienation from his town has disappeared, and that he has, in Crane's terms, made a moral choice. The Swain regards him as an integral part of his perceived view of nature: at sunrise his feet brush away the dew as he goes "To meet the sun" (l. 100); he is at "the foot of yonder . . . beech" (l. 101); he pores "upon the brook that babbles by" (l. 104); and he is "Hard by yon wood" (l. 105). The speaker who began the poem by portraying an evening landscape from which he was utterly distinct, comes near to the end of the poem with the Swain's portrayal of him as a thing in nature (now mysteriously removed):

<sup>11</sup>"The Inspector," No. 1—this number is not by John Hill—as in *The London Advertiser and Literary Gazette*, March 5, 1751; Young, *A Criticism on the Elegy*, p. 74. The relevant section of "The Inspector" was quoted approvingly in the Miller translation of Charles Batteux, *A Course of the Belles Lettres* (London, 1761), III, 103.

'One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,  
 'Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;  
 'Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
 'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he. . . .'  
 (ll. 109-112)

The Swain's, and thus Gray's, final tribute to the speaker's resolution of his hostility to his surroundings comes when he visualizes him being carried directly into the humble churchyard, his grave made under a tree (at l. 13 the speaker viewed the other tombs beneath "rugged elms"), and his "kindred Spirit" reading the Epitaph. The poem's fourth voice—the speaker as "me," the speaker as objectified "thee," and the Swain as imagined by the speaker—are the others—now proves the power of the unlettered muse's holy texts. He confirms the speaker's new role by confirming his reliance upon "some fond breast" who will remember him; he indicates the first speaker's satisfactory moral choice (the recognition of a kinship with the humble, that leads to acceptance of his lot); and he suggests that one of the rewards for a proper life here is a proper life hereafter.

For example, we recall that the speaker's initial view of the dead around him was of their peaceful sleep in bed (ll. 16, 20), while he himself was undergoing the trials of a restless decision. In the Epitaph, however, "*HERE rests his Head upon the lap of Earth*" (l. 117). Earlier he lamented that "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest" (l. 59); now he himself rests as "*A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown*" (l. 118). Moreover, the isolated, familyless character of the opening stanza now gains a friend from heaven, a father in God, and the hope of a permanent "abode" with them (ll. 125-128). Perhaps of greatest importance, however, is that in shifting his perspective from external to internal regarding the choice of life, the speaker has abandoned the moral and theological arrogance that threatened the salvation of his soul, for he was questioning God's will and attempting to make divine decisions with human abilities. As Johnson was to tell the uneasy Boswell on August 21, 1766, "To prefer one future mode of life to another, upon just reasons, requires faculties, which it has not pleased our Creator to give us."<sup>12</sup> Yet—"Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid/ Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire" (ll. 45-46), Gray's speaker cried before the resolution

<sup>12</sup>*Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill and rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford, 1934-1950), II, 22. See also *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1952), I, 190.

of his conflict, and before he realized the true meaning of celestial fire. The Epitaph's final stanza makes clear that he now is beyond such dangerous impertinence. Heaven has recompensed him with its own and with human friendship not for his worldly achievement but for his sincerity of soul, spiritual bounty, sympathy for his fellows, and the ability to discover and adhere to the divine will. He lived, or projected, a humble life and like other rustic moralists learned to die by reading holy texts, in his case supplemented by poetry rather than learned tracts. On this interpretation, "*Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth*" (l. 119) does not mean that he was learned, as the line often is read; it means that, unlike Johnson's scholar in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), he was not made unhappy by the demands of and opportunities in a life of the mind, however attractive that life might seem. Johnson's nobly motivated scholar was guided by Reason's "brightest ray" (l. 145);<sup>13</sup> he also was destroyed or defeated by his vain human wish for success and power. By the end of Gray's *Elegy*, to be learned is to be frowned upon if such learning has not been divinely ordained. That line regarding science, moreover, probably is a replaying of line 49, and thus a further suggestion of the real, if painfully established, bond between the poet and the humble poor. We recall that "Knowledge to their eyes her ample page/ Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll" (ll. 49-50). At that point knowledge—science—was rich, not subject to flux or death, and cruelly withheld her treasures and repressed the villagers' potential. By the poem's conclusion, the speaker has redefined that goddess' role, for he has redefined his own character and aspirations. By rejecting knowledge he is rejecting temptation and the possible discovery of his own degradation. He has gained a spiritual knowledge that supplies not a frown from Science but a friend from God.

Such an earned resolution has significant implications.

*No farther seek his merits to disclose,  
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,  
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)  
The bosom of his Father and his God.* (ll. 125-128)

Acceptance of God's choice for him of an unambitious protected life is now regarded as an urgent moral imperative. The speaker

<sup>13</sup>Johnson's poetry is quoted from *Samuel Johnson. Poems*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, vol. 6 (New Haven and London, 1964).

wrongly tried to fathom the depths of his own possible achievements; he wrongly thought that true achievement could come only with opportunity and could be memorialized only through the world's rich monuments. He improves himself by accepting the present life, by leaving the decision regarding the value of his merits to God, and by urging the reader not to investigate one's inner being. The poem suggests that such a learned limitation upon man's curiosity is a sign of moral worth, since his merits and frailties, both undeveloped in this life, come from God the benevolent Father, and are hidden in what must be a positive "trembling hope." Gray offers us a sign of the movement from solipsism to unselfish acceptance: the last word of the poem's opening stanza is *me*; the last word of the final stanza is *God*. John Young noticed this movement, if not the particular sign of it, when he said that "the Elegy ends better than it begun. Meditation guides to Morality; Morality inspires Religion; and Religion swells out into devotion."<sup>14</sup>

The conservative quality of Gray's position, and its obvious relation to theodicy, are suggested in lines that could be a gloss to the poem and to the speaker's decision. In the *Enquiry into the Causes and the Origin of Moral Evil* (1721), John Clarke says:

The true Principle of religious Virtue . . . is a conforming to the Circumstances and Relations of Persons and Things upon This View, that *God* is the original Author of them; that, what we call the Laws of Nature, are indeed the Rules prescribed by Providence, under whose immediate Care and Inspection all Things are; that every one of these is appointed for wise and good Ends; and that therefore it is the Duty of intelligent and voluntary Agents, to comply as much as is in their power, with what they thus find to be the Will of God; and to promote as far as they are able, what they see to be his Design, in Obedience to his Will, in Expectation of becoming thereby acceptable to Him, and capable of Reward from Him.

Such conduct is offered as "an Obligation of Gratitude, and in Expectation of Reward." Whatever is proper to be done under such an obligation is God's "Will and Command," and is "therefore obligatory to all Men in their respective Stations upon the Authority of God. And this is what is in Scripture meant by *Faith* in general, viz. such a firm Persuasion of the Existence of God, and such an entire dependence upon his Government, as may

<sup>14</sup>A *Criticism on the Elegy*, p. 84.

influence Men's Actions, to do what they find to be agreeable to his Will."<sup>15</sup>

"Do what they *find* . . . agreeable" to God comes close to defining the search within Gray's speaker and poem. Unlike the virtuous but passive townspeople, he has had to seek God's will, has had to surrender conventional learning for self-knowledge. In the process, and paradoxically once again, he has gone beyond their achievement because he has resisted a temptation to which they were, it seems, not subject. As Gray allows us, but not the increasingly modest speaker, to see, that speaker emerges as more attractive than his humble peers because he chooses to be their retired social and moral equal. He has discovered what they already had; in the process of finding God's will, he finds himself, and embodies the oxymorons in these lines from the Prologue to Johnson's *Irene* (1749): "Learn here how Heav'n supports the virtuous mind,/ Daring, tho' calm; and vigorous, tho' resign'd" (ll. 9-10).

If this interpretation is convincing, it also suggests that the poem's true resolution is not in the commonplace and irreverent belief that "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." The speaker of that line is unregenerate, since the final fifty-two lines of the poem deny the ultimate validity of that popular old saw. All must die in this world, to be sure; but the grave is only the momentary place of sleep before God judges.<sup>16</sup> To select "glory" and restlessly judge one's own potential is rashly to usurp God's powers, to play Mammon in Heaven, a creature who sees gold beneath him and does not know that it can corrupt as well as ennoble. Common human extension of kindness to the dead while one is living leads to similar human extension of oneself after death and, in turn, gains Heaven's recognition. Samuel Johnson's short epitaph on Claudy Phillips (1740) offers an instructive analogue to Gray's convention. Phillips, a musician, will "Rest here, distress by poverty no more" because he gave innocent pleasure and "calm" to others in their lifetimes. As a result, he will "Sleep undisturb'd within this peaceful shrine,/ Till angels wake thee with a note like thine." Phillips' selfless and consoling

<sup>15</sup>London; pp. 164, 168-169, respectively.

<sup>16</sup>For contemporary support of this reading, see Young's *Criticism*: "It is not true, that 'the path [sic] of glory leads *but* to the grave.' Nor is it *because* of glory that it leads thither at all" (p. 28). Wright observes of "Each in his cell for ever laid" (l. 15): "The term *for ever* laid, as it tends to mislead weak minds, to question the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, should be altered to *forgotten* laid."

music on earth is warrant for being comparably rewarded in heaven.

Gray's poet learns to tell the tale of the dead around him and to preserve their memory; a "kindred Spirit," perhaps the friend whom heaven has sent, inquires after him and preserves his memory. In any case, the poem finally looks through the grave to eternity, and does so because the speaker has abjured his desire for personal fulfillment—really self-aggrandizement and power—which is as likely to produce merciless as merciful acts. Though he never is a joyful member of the village's life, he uses his active mind and learns to resign himself to ordinary human affection; he associates himself with his neighboring, humble people and landscape and, in the process, leaves the definition of his hidden, true character to God. Ironically, through this surrender he also improves his character, cools his moral fever, and changes his focus from choice of life to choice of eternity. The poem which begins as an elegy for the speaker's unfulfilled promise ends as an elegy, now appropriately written in a country churchyard, for a man who learns to accept and praise his limited world and its people, and thus hopes to be accepted and praised in the limitless world of God and His people. The paths of moral choice lead beyond the grave.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>The elegiac lyric commonly includes the sort of process of self-discovery and moral choice embodied in Gray's poem, though of course the specific choice is a function of the poem's specific "problem" raised. "Lycidas," for instance, begins with tears and ends in joy because the narrator has come to understand that apparent injustice in this world is compensated for in the next. Blair's *The Grave*, often reprinted with Gray's *Elegy*, begins with an exploration of the inevitability and horror of the grave, but changes course once the speaker says: "But know! that Thou must *render up thy Dead*,/ And with high Int'rest too!" (p. 34). Consequently, the poem ends in joy: "Prodigious Change!/ Our Bane turn'd to a Blessing! *Death* disarm'd/ Loses her Fellness quite" (pp. 36-37).