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THE POET WITHOUT A NAME: GRAY'S "ELEGY" AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY

*City University of New York*

Ph.D. 1985

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THE POET WITHOUT A NAME:  
GRAY'S ELEGY AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY

by

Henry Weinfield

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
in English in partial fulfillment of the require-  
ments for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
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1984

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Nov. 28, 1984  
date

Allen Mandelbaum  
Chairman of Examining Committee

11/7/84  
date

Richard Feder  
Executive Officer

Frank Brody  
James Kasser  
Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

To My Father

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## PREFACE

The study of Gray's Elegy that is presented in this dissertation is divided into two parts. Part I, consisting of the first two chapters, is basically an examination of some of the main features of the critical literature on the poem, and, at the same time, an attempt to lay the foundations for the analysis that is developed in Part II. What distinguishes my own perspective from that of earlier critics is my belief that the Elegy is not only a profoundly original poem but one that in certain respects constitutes a turning point in the history of English poetry. Although the Elegy has always been considered one of the most beautiful poems in the language, only rarely has its originality been acknowledged, and there has been a general tendency to ignore the poem's thematic dimension. I argue, however, that in the Elegy certain themes that are of fundamental importance to the tradition as a whole are fully articulated for the first time. Specifically, where the problems of poverty, anonymity, and alienation--or what one might term the "problem of History," writ large--were not central to earlier poets, these problems are directly confronted in the Elegy, and in a way that not only has a profound impact on subsequent poets but that obliges us to reinterpret the previous tradition through the terms that the Elegy establishes.

Why did certain of the themes that Gray develops in the Elegy not assume the same importance to earlier poets? The answer to this question, I suggest, is that as long as the pastoral maintained its

hold on the literary imagination, the "problem of History" could not be confronted directly. For the pastoral, as I attempt to define it, or at least in its transcendental formulation, is the embodiment of a vision of social harmony in which the religious and utopian ideals of the aristocracy are superimposed upon a fictionalized image of the peasantry. Thus, the utopian world of the pastoral is insulated from the "problem of History." Concomitantly, the emergence of this problem in the Elegy signifies the "dissolution" of the pastoral in its older, transcendental formulation. Such, at any rate, is the argument propounded in this study, at least as far as the poem's relationship to literary history is concerned.

Chapter 3, comprising the whole of the second part of the dissertation, is written as a "step-by-step" analysis of the Elegy. In some cases, where the poem seems to warrant it, I have grouped several stanzas together into sections; in other cases--especially toward the middle of the poem, where Gray's discourse becomes astonishingly dense--I have treated each stanza singly. The procedure I have employed is a somewhat unusual one, but I believe that there would have been no other way to encompass the extraordinary complexity of the poem's dialectic. For the Elegy seems to me to be not only a philosophical poem but one whose "meaning" is temporally grounded in the poem's struggle to arrive at meaning. Broadly speaking, the poem's method of progression may be considered dialectical in the sense that Gray's attempt to arrive at truth obliges him to consider various conflicting perspectives that develop out of one another--with the result that the poem's scope becomes increasingly broadened and at the same time more finely delineated. For this reason, the poem's meaning

cannot simply be extracted from a spatial conception of the text as a static entity; it can only be reached through an interpretive process that maintains a point-by-point contact with the poem's unfolding.

If the Elegy has a subject, this is perhaps nothing less than the problem of locating meaning and value in human existence generally. But from another point of view, it is possible to discern two basic subject areas in the poem, as well as two basic modalities in terms of which these areas are being developed. The Elegy obviously confronts the problem of death, but this problem is completely entwined with the problem of "death-in-life," or what I earlier referred to as the "problem of History." The dialectical enmeshing of these problems, together with all of the myriad ramifications that proceed from them, is mediated by the poem's contrast between two social classes: the "rude Forefathers of the hamlet" and those to whom Gray sometimes refers as "the Proud." The problem of death impinges on both classes, of course, and, as such, it provides the frame for the timeless or universal verities that Gray attempts to articulate; but the problem of "death-in-life" is more clearly slanted toward those buried in the country churchyard, and, as such, it provides the frame for the socio-historical side to the poet's dialectic. Again, what is extraordinary is the way in which these enormously complex areas and modalities are both delineated and synthesized as the poem unfolds--but this bare and overly schematic outline hardly encompasses the richness of Gray's discourse.

I have dwelt at some length on the poem's thematic dimension, but equally important to my analysis is its relationship to language and to literary tradition. The breadth and density of Gray's

philosophical argument is achieved through a power of condensation that may be unequalled in English poetry; and the extent of Gray's originality, some features of which I have tried to sketch in here, really only emerges against the background of his mastery of the tradition. As the reader will see from glancing at the list of topics in the table of contents, there are many stories to be told. If the Elegy had been a philosophical treatise, it would have comprised volumes. But what we have is something much better: a poem of 128 lines. In it Gray poured the wealth of his knowledge, his vision, and his mastery over his craft.

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PART I

## CHAPTER 1

### POPULARITY, RESONANCE, ORIGINALITY: THE QUESTION OF EVALUATION

Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard was first published in 1751. Almost immediately, the poem became immensely popular, and among common readers, at least, it seems to have retained its popularity up to the present time. During the nineteenth century, it was called "the typical piece of English verse, our poem of poems";<sup>1</sup> and today, as Herbert W. Starr remarks, "it is still frequently referred to, with some truth, as the best known poem in the English language."<sup>2</sup> Significantly, we commonly speak of it simply as "the Elegy"--as if to pay deference to the centrality of its position in the canon.

What accounts for the extraordinary popularity of the Elegy, and why, given this popularity, has Gray himself nevertheless been accorded a rather peripheral position in the history of English poetry? These questions deserve to be raised from the outset; for if the popularity of the Elegy were taken as a simple reflection of its value as a poem, then the discrepancy between this assumption and Gray's actual status in the canon would pose something of a scandal to literary criticism. In this case, not only would Gray's position in the canon have to be revised, but this revision would also call into question a number of other received assumptions and categories of literary history and theory.

The fact of the matter, however, is that criticism has never really been troubled by this discrepancy; for it has tended to attribute the popularity of the Elegy to extra-poetic factors--either to the poem's

putative subject or to the generic feeling-state it is supposed to evoke in readers. It is likely that this strategy (if one may refer to it as such, for it has probably never been consciously employed) has served both to diminish Gray's status and to mitigate the discrepancy between the received image of Gray as a minor poet and the popularity of the Elegy; but in any event, its effect on the critical literature devoted to Gray has been profound.

We can see this strategy at work, for example, in Amy L. Reed's study, The Background of Gray's Elegy (1924), which is still considered the standard treatment of the poem by some scholars,<sup>3</sup> although in actuality it has very little to do with the Elegy as a distinct work of art. In her preface, Miss Reed describes her approach as an attempt

to explain the furore created by Gray's Elegy in 1751 on the theory that the poem came before its audience not as the presentation of novel thought but as the perfectly adequate expression of a widespread popular feeling, the "melancholy" of the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Given this approach, it is not surprising that in Miss Reed's study the Elegy disappears into the morass of its "historical background."

#### Three Equivocal Responses: Arnold, Richards, and Wimsatt

The tendency to attribute the popularity of the Elegy to extra-poetic factors can be traced to Matthew Arnold's essay on Gray, which is probably the most influential piece of criticism on the poet ever written. The theme of Arnold's essay, as the reader will recall, is that "Gray, a born poet, fell upon an age of prose";<sup>5</sup> and in his discussion of the Elegy, Arnold finds an opportunity to emphasize this point by mentioning an anecdote originally reported by Sir William Forbes in his Life of

Beattie (1806).<sup>6</sup> During a visit to Scotland in 1765, Gray apparently observed to a Dr. John Gregory that the Elegy "owed its popularity entirely to the subject, and that the public would have received it as well if it had been written in prose."<sup>7</sup> By way of Arnold's essay, then, Gray's remark (if indeed he made it) became a critical commonplace.

It would be difficult to disentangle the various ironic nuances in Gray's assertion. Its bitterness might have been occasioned by the disappointing reception of his Pindaric Odes; but in any event, a poet who has labored upwards of five years on a poem, as Gray did on the Elegy, could not have intended a remark of this kind to be taken literally. Few poets have placed so great an emphasis on poetic craft as Gray, and this is probably the main reason for the paucity of his output. Arnold's motivation in unearthing the anecdote, however, was to temper popular enthusiasm for the Elegy; and therefore, while seeming to modify the severity of Gray's assertion, he actually accepted it more or less at face value. The Elegy, wrote Arnold,

is a beautiful poem, and in admiring it the public showed a true feeling for poetry. But it is true that the Elegy owed much of its popularity to its subject, and that it has received a too unmeasured and unbounded praise.<sup>8</sup>

Arnold was too astute a critic not to be aware that if the popularity of the Elegy were merely a function of its subject, then a hundred poems would be equally popular. Nevertheless, by taking Gray's remark seriously, he seems to be saying that the poem has nothing very original to offer and that it does not really depart from the realm of the commonplace. The Elegy, he tells us, is a "beautiful" poem, but since he is using the term merely in a decorative sense, form and content are dichotomized.

Insofar as twentieth-century critics have attempted to evaluate the Elegy, they have tended to proceed along the dualistic lines laid down

by Arnold. This is true even of the New Critics, the "heresy of paraphrase" notwithstanding. Thus, I.A. Richards remarks:

The Elegy is perhaps the best example in English of a good poem built upon a solid foundation of stock responses.<sup>9</sup>

And thus, W.K. Wimsatt:

Perhaps we shall be tempted to say only that Gray transcends and outdoes Hammond and Shenstone simply because he writes a more poetic line, richer, fuller, more resonant and memorable in all the ways in which we are accustomed to analyze the poetic quality.<sup>10</sup>

Presumably, Richards' reader would have two kinds of responses to the poem, which he would then have to balance in one way or another: a series of "stock" (i.e. generalized) responses and a series of poetic (i.e. particularized) responses. And as for Wimsatt's observation, one would want to ask what the modes of analysis to which he has alluded could possibly be; for given his approach to the poem, it would be rather difficult for him to link any of the formal aspects of the Elegy that he might adduce to a criterion of poetic value. Just as Arnold would have been hard pressed to explain why the Elegy is a beautiful poem, and Richards why it is a good one, so Wimsatt would find it difficult to specify how it is that Gray writes a more "poetic" or "resonant" line than Hammond or Shenstone. If one drives a wedge between form and content, there is simply no basis for making an aesthetic judgment about the formal constituents of a poem, because words have meanings. There is probably as much "figuration," as such, in the poems of Hammond and Shenstone as in the Elegy; but the fact of the matter is that Hammond and Shenstone are rather pedestrian poets while Gray is an extraordinary one. However, since Wimsatt finds nothing in the content or conceptual development of the Elegy to distinguish it from the elegies of Hammond and Shenstone,

he is obliged to resort to mystical categories to document his intuition of Gray's superiority.

But the very fact that Gray should be placed in the same company as Hammond and Shenstone is indicative of the tendency of criticism to assume that the "subject" of the Elegy (on which its popularity is supposed to depend), as well as its relationship to genre and to poetic tradition generally, may be taken for granted as being given from the outset. But what is the subject of the Elegy? Curiously, this question has never really been explored, the assumption always having been that what the poem is saying is obvious. There are, of course, many poems, especially in the eighteenth century, that do present themselves in terms of a detachable subject: "The Vanity of Human Wishes," for example, is clearly about what its title signifies--which is not to suggest that it is lacking in complexity. But in the case of the Elegy, the situation is quite different, for the poem's thematic development is far too complex to permit any sort of a priori reduction. Although such topoi as the inevitability of death and, indeed, the vanity of human wishes can be extracted from the Elegy, of course, the poem contains other themes that are at least as important, and some of its themes are in conflict with others. Yet somehow, without having investigated the matter, criticism seems to have come away with the notion that what Gray is saying in the Elegy is not particularly original; hence, that whatever beauty the poem possesses is largely a function of Gray's admitted stylistic mastery; and finally, that for these reasons the poem's popularity may be attributed to extra-poetic factors and to the lack of discernment of ordinary readers.

Dr. Johnson's Remarks on the Elegy

As Roger Lonsdale points out, the first important piece of criticism on the Elegy was contained in Samuel Johnson's Lives of the Poets (1781).<sup>11</sup> Although Johnson disliked most of Gray's poetry, his remarks on the Elegy, which form the concluding paragraph of his "Life of Gray," are extremely laudatory. All of this is well known; but what has not generally been recognized is that Johnson's response to the poem is diametrically opposed to that of the critical mainstream since Arnold; for in evaluating the poem, Johnson stresses not only its resonance (as other commentators have since done) but also its originality:

In the character of his Elegy I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. The Church-yard abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning 'Yet even these bones' are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here persuades himself that he has always felt them. Had Gray written often thus it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him.<sup>12</sup>

The passage is extremely interesting, not only for its explicit observations but also for its implicit concerns. In the first place, almost as if he were anticipating and diagnosing the arguments of future critics (who do not seem to have been aware of this, however), Johnson suggests that although certain of the notions expressed in the Elegy are original to the poem, they strike such a powerful chord in the reader that he "persuades himself that he has always felt them," and may therefore be unaware of their originality. From this point of view (and here we are probably extrapolating rather more from Johnson's remarks than he would

have wished), the Elegy's resonance--and, by extension, poetic resonance in general--is a function not of "stock responses" but rather of originality, a term that means both discovering something new and returning to origins. The distinction is clearly a fundamental one, not only with regard to how we evaluate the Elegy but for critical theory in general. It raises a number of issues that we shall explore presently.

For the moment, however, we should note that in his comments on the Elegy Johnson seizes the occasion to record his belief that the experience of the common reader is more to be trusted than the dogmatic theories of a learned elite. This emphasis on the common reader is, of course, one of the cardinal principles of a critic who tended to regard poetic value pragmatically, as deriving from the consensus of the reading public over the course of time.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the Elegy, however, Johnson was responding to the poem of a contemporary, and therefore his emphasis on the experience of the common reader is especially striking. Not that he would have hesitated to deviate from the general consensus if he had felt so inclined, of course; but given his awareness of the poem's resonance for the audience of his time, he was glad to be able to concur.

Indeed, not only do Johnson's remarks anticipate and counter, in a rather uncanny way, both the arguments of later critics and the patronizing attitude that some have adopted toward the Elegy, but they may also be read as miming an important concern of the poem itself: its castigation of the contempt of the great and proud for those of inferior social status--as expressed, for example, in the following well-known lines:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,  
 The short and simple annals of the poor.<sup>14</sup>

This is not to say that Johnson's common reader should be identified with Gray's peasant, of course, but rather that the attitudes of the two writers converge. Thus, in prefixing a remark of a general nature to his discussion of the Elegy, Johnson is actually foregrounding an important thematic concern of the poem itself.

#### Bloom's Argument against Johnson

The question, however, is whether Johnson was accurate in finding the four stanzas he mentioned original. We may ask this question with Harold Bloom, for whom the problem of originality is, of course, a central concern. In The Anxiety of Influence, the initial manifesto of the theoretical position he began developing in the 1970s, Bloom disputes Johnson's contention by listing some of the writers whom he regards as Gray's "precursors." An examination of his argument will help us to open up the problem of originality, both in itself and as it pertains to Gray.

Swift, Pope's Odyssey, Milton's Belial, Lucretius, Ovid, and Petrarch are all among Gray's precursors here, for as an immensely learned poet, Gray rarely wrote without deliberately relating himself to nearly every possible literary ancestor. Johnson was an immensely learned critic; why did he praise these stanzas for an originality they do not possess? A possible answer is that Johnson's own deepest anxieties are openly expressed in this passage.<sup>15</sup>

We should note, first of all, that Bloom's argument runs parallel to that of Richards which was discussed earlier; for just as Richards reduced the Elegy to stock responses, so Bloom reduces it to literary history. But since Bloom chides Johnson for allowing his anxieties to distort his judgment, we might ask, in our turn, why he fails to explain how the "precursors" he mentions (the term is ambiguous in itself) militate against the originality of the stanzas. It seems that Bloom is

being somewhat evasive here, and, as we shall see, not without reason; for if he had provided the sources to which he alludes, this would have defeated his argument; moreover, it would have pointed up a rather important ambiguity at the heart of his own theory.

What Bloom is attempting to camouflage in this passage is the fact that he is approaching the issue of poetic originality at an entirely different level than Johnson had done. By confusing these two levels, Bloom makes it appear as though he had evidence in hand that would refute Johnson's contention; but in actuality, this "evidence" is irrelevant--not only to the level at which Johnson is approaching the issue of originality but also to the level at which Bloom is doing so as well. What is odd about all of this, moreover, is that the argument Bloom employs against Johnson is not only specious in itself but antagonistic to his own theoretical position.

Johnson, we recall, had referred to the "notions" expressed by the stanzas--that is, to their ideational content. It might be said that he was concerned not so much with the issue of poetic originality (which is a more modern preoccupation) as with originality of thought that manifests itself in poetry. Bloom, however, as a theorist of influence, conceives of poetic originality in a sense that is specifically mediated by the poetic tradition of a given language. Indeed, as he later informs us, though still in the context of his argument against Johnson, Bloom equates poetic originality with "individuality of tone."<sup>16</sup> What he means by this phrase is the intangible quality that permeates a poet's entire work, giving it its own peculiar resonance and setting it apart from the work of all others--the poet's signature, as it were. In other words, where Johnson had approached the issue of originality from the standpoint of content, in Bloom's formulation it is the dimension of style that is

salient. And as we shall see, when we come to examine the stanzas ourselves, the "sources" to which Bloom alludes are linked to the Elegy mainly in terms of the stylistic axis of the poem's style content dialectic.

Now, it might reasonably be argued that since style and content are ultimately inseparable (for what is style?), the evidence that Bloom adduces would not necessarily be invalid--in spite of the fact that it is geared to his own conception of originality rather than Johnson's. But the problem with Bloom's formulation--and this is why he conflates it with Johnson's--is that precisely because style and content are inseparable, it would be impossible to argue that a poet lacked "individuality of tone" solely on the basis of verbal or syntactical echoes that might be empirically adduced, even if such echoes constitute what critical theory would now term the "traces of inter-textual relationships." Because individuality of tone is an intangible quality, it cannot be denied solely on the basis of such echoes or traces; for if the poet is an original one in this sense, then his verbal "borrowings" (the term is not necessarily accurate) are a subsumed aspect of his style; and if he is not original in this sense, then even if he were to invent a new language, it would not answer the charge.

A simpler way of saying this, perhaps, is that if Bloom had been consistent with his own theoretical premises in his attack on the Elegy, he would have argued that the poem lacks individuality of tone. But this would have exposed the weakness of his position, for the one aspect of the Elegy that has always been taken for granted is its resonance. And what is resonance but individuality of tone?

Immediately after the passage we have quoted, Bloom expresses his own anxiety at being found out in the minor confusion he has perpetrated; for he then attempts to enlist Johnson himself in his attack on Gray:

Johnson, who hated Gray's style, understood that in Gray's poetry the anxiety of style and the anxiety of influence had become indistinguishable, yet he forgave Gray for the one passage where Gray universalized the anxiety of self-preservation into a more general pathos. Writing on his poor friend, Collins, Johnson has Gray in mind when he observes: "He affected the obsolete when it was not worthy of revival; and he puts his words out of the common order, seeming to think, with some later candidates for fame, that not to write prose is certainly to write poetry." Johnson seems to have so compounded the burden of originality and the problem of style, that he could denounce style he judged vicious, and mean by the denunciation that no fresh matter was offered. So, despite seeming our opposite, when we neglect content and search for individuality of tone in a new poet, Johnson is very much our ancestor.<sup>17</sup>

Whether or not Johnson had Gray in mind in his remarks on Collins (and Bloom is quite right in suspecting this as a possibility), one could argue that Johnson's dicta on style are sometimes overly generic, and that the same criticism could be (and indeed has been) leveled at Milton and Spenser. "For affecting the ancients," Ben Jonson argued, "Spenser writ no language." But be this as it may, the fact of the matter is that while Johnson disliked Gray's style in most of his poetry, he explicitly made an exception of the Elegy.

Of course, there is no denying that Gray's poetry is replete with allusions and verbal echoes, much as T.S. Eliot's is; but this, in itself, is no argument against its being original, either in Bloom's sense or in Johnson's. The fact that all poetic texts bear traces of earlier texts might be used as an argument against poetic originality in general; but in this case, the argument would apply to all poets, not only to those whose relationship to the tradition is as highly mediated as Gray's; and thus, from this point of view, Bloom's argument would fall under the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. To be sure, in some moods Bloom will argue that "there are no texts but only relationships between texts,"<sup>18</sup>

but he maintains an ambivalent attitude toward this extreme deconstructionist tendency because, as a general rule, he does not wish to negate the existence of the individual subject, whether it be the poet or the poem.

Indeed, the peculiar thing about Bloom's argument, as we suggested, is that it is antagonistic to his own theory. That the traces of "precursors" in a poet's work does not, in itself, militate against its originality has nowhere been argued more powerfully than in Bloom's recent writings. This is not always apparent because Bloom's master concept is poetic strength rather than originality. However, in practice, it would be impossible to disengage the two concepts from each other; for poetic strength, as Bloom employs the notion, is the establishment of poetic priority in relation to the tradition as a whole. Indeed, since in Bloom's view poets achieve strength by wrestling with their precursors, the fact that traces of these precursors may be found in "strong poems" poses even less of a threat to his theory than it would to one that stressed originality more overtly. For within the terms of Bloom's theory, the issue of poetic strength hinges not on whether traces can be discerned in a particular poem, but rather on whether the poem subsumes (or "transumes") its precursor texts, on the one hand--and hence the importance to Bloom of the trope of transumption or metalepsis--or is consumed by them, on the other.

Through the trope of metalepsis, Bloom argues, "the dead return, by a reversal, to be triumphed over by the living."<sup>19</sup> The danger of Bloom's theory, however, is that it provides no practical basis for determining, in a given instance, whether the traces of precursor texts are a sign of strength or weakness. And often Bloom's practical judgments are very

far from being sound--especially, one might add, where contemporary poetry is concerned. Thus, Bloom will read a poem such as John Ashbery's "As You Came from the Holy Land" as a "transumption" of its Renaissance precursor, when in fact it is nothing more than a weak parody of one of the greatest lyrics of the sixteenth century.<sup>20</sup> But in this and other instances, it is simply a matter of judgment as to whether or not one agrees with Bloom; the point is that there is no way of deciding the matter on the basis of Bloom's theory alone.

Are Gray's stanzas "consumed" (for this is the real question) by the precursors Bloom mentions? We shall now examine the sources themselves by turning to Roger Lonsdale's annotated edition of Gray's poetry,<sup>21</sup> which Bloom himself seems to have consulted. First, here are the stanzas:

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect  
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
With uncouth rhimes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,  
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by th'unletter'd muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply:  
And many a holy text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,  
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,  
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

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. 77-92)

Speaking generally, we might make the following observations. First, of the sources mentioned by Bloom and cited by Lonsdale (but the term "sources" is a misleading one in this context, as we shall see), one is in prose and three are in other languages, so clearly these four could have no bearing on the question of "individuality of tone." Secondly,

none of the sources have any real bearing on the "notions" expressed by the stanzas--that is, to the actual tenor of Gray's thought. The passage from Swift cited by Lonsdale, which happens to be in prose, is somewhat more closely connected to the insights Gray is developing than the other sources; but, as we shall see, Gray's perspective is diametrically opposed to Swift's in this case. Finally, with the exception of the Swift, the sources are connected to the Elegy only by way of phrasal echoes or borrowed metaphors which do not impinge on the tone of the Elegy but are easily incorporated by Gray; in the case of the passages from Lucretius, Ovid, and Petrarch, of course, these "echoes" and metaphors are further distanced by the linguistic divide.

From the standpoint of Bloom's theoretical premises, the two sources from the English poetic tradition that Lonsdale cites would be the most interesting items to consider. In Pope's Odyssey (xi. 89-90), Elpenor tells Odysseus, who has descended into the Underworld: "The tribute of a tear is all I crave, / And the possession of a quiet grave." Lonsdale relates these lines to line 80 of the Elegy: "Implores the passing tribute of a sigh." And in Paradise Lost (ii. 146-51), we have Belial's famous question, which the editor relates to the stanza beginning "For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey":

For who would lose,  
 Though full of pain, this intellectual being,  
 Those thoughts that wander through Eternity,  
 To perish rather, swallow'd up and lost,  
 In the wide womb of uncreated night  
 Devoid of sense and motion?

It would be easy to say merely that although these two passages have some connection to the general problem of death and annihilation that Gray is confronting in the Elegy, they obviously are remote from the actual tenor of Gray's thought. Very few readers would have picked up the echo

from Pope's Odyssey on their own. More, perhaps, would have heard the echo from Milton in Gray's stanza because of the resonance of Belial's rhetorical question; but even so, Gray's stanza is obviously not "consumed" by Milton.

But this is not the primary point that needs to be made in regard to the two passages. On the contrary, whether or not Gray was consciously aware of echoing them (which is irrelevant), they do have an important connection to the Elegy. When one examines this connection, however, one begins to get a glimpse into the nature of Gray's originality.

It would take a close reading of the Elegy to make this connection fully concrete, but a few general observations can be offered at this point. In the passages from Pope's Odyssey and Paradise Lost, the confrontation with death and annihilation occurs in an epic context: the evocation of the sublime is buttressed by the fact that in both cases it is staged in terms of heroic action. In the four stanzas from the Elegy, however, the context is very far from being an heroic one, for the scene is a country churchyard and the poet is meditating on the graves of anonymous peasants. Yet in the Elegy, as we shall see in Chapter 3, the heroic is not dispensed with but is retained from an antithetical perspective. For part of what is "mourned" in the Elegy is the loss of the heroic itself. It is ultimately for this reason that traces from the epic tradition can be discerned in the four stanzas, as elsewhere in the poem.<sup>22</sup> But far from militating against Gray's originality, these traces offer us a glimpse of what Bloom would call the clinamen, the creative swerve that enables strong poems to carve out a metaphysical space for themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Although it is in prose, the passage from Swift that Lonsdale cites

deserves to be considered because here there is at least a convergence of context and subject matter. In "Thoughts on Various Subjects" (1735), Swift writes:

There is in most people a reluctance and unwillingness to be forgotten. We observe even among the vulgar, how fond they are to have an inscription over their grave. It requires but little philosophy to discover and observe that there is no intrinsic value in all this; however, if it be founded in our nature, as an incitement to virtue, it ought not to be ridiculed.

If Gray was influenced by the notions expressed in this passage, which is not very likely, the influence would obviously have been wholly negative. And once again, the connection between the two writers is an indication of Gray's originality--as well as a more general shift in sensibility that seems to have occurred around the middle of the century. Nowhere is the plight of the poor rendered with greater empathy than in Swift's "Modest Proposal"; but neither Swift nor any of the other Augustans would have found any "intrinsic value" in the fact that the "vulgar" should also desire to be remembered after death. Yet this is precisely the attitude that Gray is reacting against in the Elegy--as in the stanza we have already quoted:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,  
The short and simple annals of the poor.

These examples should suffice to show that Bloom's argument is on very thin ground; but the question is whether any positive evidence can be mustered to corroborate Johnson's insight as to the originality of the four stanzas. Obviously, we will never know what Johnson had in mind; and I would argue that the poem's originality consists not in any particular detail but rather in Gray's total conception. Thus, my argument remains to be demonstrated in the reading of the poem that is

offered in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, a few preliminary observations can be made at this point.

Let us recall the second of the four stanzas that Johnson cited:

Their name, their years, spelt by th'unletter'd muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply:  
And many a holy text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.  
(ll. 81-84)

The word "elegy" has a tremendously ironical resonance in this context: it seems to leap off the page, and for an extremely interesting reason. First of all, what these lines are conveying, more or less explicitly, is that the names and years on the tombstones take the place of a fuller memorial to the individual. But precisely because the inscriptions are merely nominal, they only serve, ironically, to emphasize, first, the anonymity of those buried in the country churchyard and, second, the contrast between those who are lost to history and those whose presence is symbolically maintained by fame and elegy. Because they are lost to history, moreover, those who lie buried in the country churchyard cannot--as individuals--be the subjects for an elegy. And yet they are the subject of Gray's Elegy, which thereby redefines its own tradition at the same time that it expresses, self-reflexively, its awareness of the loss of the elegiac occasion. Thus, the primary subject of the Elegy is not the loss of a particular individual through death but, in an ironic reversal, the loss, for the majority of humanity, of the potential for individuation in life. This theme is obviously of major significance, yet it does not emerge prior to the Elegy, and in the stanza quoted above we have at least a glimpse of the creative process through which it emerged.

That Gray himself was conscious of the dialectical ironies he was

charting is corroborated by the fact that in its initial version neither the title of the poem nor the stanza we have been discussing contained the word "elegy." In the Eton Manuscript (see Appendix B), the poem was entitled "Stanza's Wrote In a Country Church-Yard," and in the version that has come to be known as the Stanza's, Gray had originally written: "The Place of Fame, & Epitaph supply" (my italics). In the process by which the Stanza's became the Elegy, the poetics of loss was extended to encompass the "problem of History," and this reshaping of traditional thematic and generic material has profound ramifications for the history of English poetry.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Edmund Gosse, Gray (London: Macmillan and Co., 1882), p. 97.
- <sup>2</sup>Herbert W. Starr, ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 9.
- <sup>3</sup>Morris Golden, Thomas Gray (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 160.
- <sup>4</sup>Amy L. Reed, The Background of Gray's Elegy: A Study in the Taste for Melancholy Poetry 1700-1751 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924), pp. 1-2.
- <sup>5</sup>R. H. Super, ed., English Literature and Irish Politics by Matthew Arnold, vol. 9 of The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 200.
- <sup>6</sup>Roger Lonsdale, ed., The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1969), p. 113; hereafter referred to as Lonsdale.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup>Arnold, p. 191.
- <sup>9</sup>I.A. Richards, Practical Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1929), p. 253.
- <sup>10</sup>W.K. Wimsatt, "Imitation as Freedom," in Forms of Lyric: Selected Papers from the English Institute, ed. Reuben H. Brower (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 156.
- <sup>11</sup>Lonsdale, p. 114.
- <sup>12</sup>Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, ed. G.B. Hill (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1967) III: 441-42.
- <sup>13</sup>In his "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765), for example, Johnson comments as follows: "To works, however, of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared; and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour." Johnson on Shakespeare, vol. 12 of The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 59-60.
- <sup>14</sup>"Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard," The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray, eds. H.W. Starr and J.R. Hendrickson (Oxford: The Clarendon

Press, 1966), ll. 29-32. All citations from Gray's poetry, unless otherwise noted, will be to this edition and will henceforward be included in the text.

<sup>15</sup>Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 149.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Bloom, A Map of Misreading (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 203-06.

<sup>21</sup>Lonsdale, pp. 132-34. All of Lonsdale's citations for these stanzas, including the items Bloom mentions, are contained in these pages.

<sup>22</sup>My discussion of Gray's antithetical relationship to the heroic is developed at a number of points in Chapter 3, but particularly in relation to stanza 15 of the Elegy; see below, pp. 112-17.

<sup>23</sup>Bloom, Anxiety, pp. 19-45.

## CHAPTER 2

### STRUCTURE AND MEANING: THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION FROM A FORMALIST STANDPOINT

The notion that the Elegy is lacking in originality, and that its popularity may be attributed to extra-poetic factors, has naturally had a strong impact on the manner in which the poem has been interpreted. It is not so much that "the most popular poem in the English language has received curiously little critical attention," as F.W. Bateson remarked in 1950,<sup>1</sup> as that the approach to the poem has been mainly confined to a relatively narrow formal problem. Until recently, the formalist approach was the prevailing one in Anglo-American criticism, of course; and from the standpoint of this general method, it is quite true, as Frank Brady asserts, that "few poems have been interpreted in such widely divergent ways" as the Elegy.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in some respects the Elegy has been regarded as a locus classicus for a range of theoretical issues that were among the most salient to the New Criticism, and, as a result, much of the interpretive literature is interesting not only for the light it sheds on the poem but in relation to larger critical issues. Yet the tendency of much of this literature to treat the poem as if it were a kind of elaborate puzzle may not, in the end, have increased our appreciation of its richness or of its importance to the tradition in very large measure.

In the manner in which it both continues and departs from nineteenth-century assumptions, the modern approach to the Elegy presents something of a paradox. As Lonsdale observes, during the nineteenth

century, discussion of the Elegy "tended to be pre-occupied with such matters as Gray's sources, the location of the churchyard and Gray's relationship to the 'Age of Reason', and to attempt little more critically than general appreciation of Gray's eloquence along the lines of Johnson's tribute."<sup>3</sup> There were exceptions, of course, but most critics during the period tended to take the poem's meaning for granted. Thus, commenting on the fact that Wordsworth professed to find it unintelligible, Hazlitt dryly remarked: "It has, however, been understood."<sup>4</sup>

From this perspective, Richards' notion that the Elegy is built upon a foundation of stock responses is merely a negative extension of the nineteenth-century view. But here is where the modern situation poses additional complexities. For at the same time that critics have continued for the most part to disregard what the Elegy is saying--that is, to disregard its philosophical content and thematic development--they began to focus their attention on the poem's structure and on what might be called its surface meaning, which early in the century came to be regarded as problematic. The contradiction between these two attitudes exemplifies the artificial separation of poetic surface from poetic depth which the late Paul de Man, in his seminal essay "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism," described as a characteristic of the formalist approach generally. As a result of this separation, de Man suggests, the temporal dimension of the poem, its "struggle with meaning," is lost, and the question of form, which "is never anything but a process on the way to completion," becomes reified as a static entity.<sup>5</sup> Although the various attempts to resolve the formal problem posed by the Elegy have resulted in interpretations that are sometimes diametrically opposed to one another, these attempts have all been hampered by the separation of surface

from depth noted by de Man. In analyzing them, we shall therefore be obliged to come to terms with some of the theoretical consequences of formalist criticism generally.

The present chapter does not, however, undertake to resolve the formal problem but only to present a critical overview of the various attempts that have been made to resolve it. Although in one sense the very assumption of a formal problem is the consequence of the separation of surface from depth, the problem--even considered in itself--cannot be resolved as long as this separation is maintained. What is required is an analysis of the poem's thematic development, and this will be attempted in Chapter 3.

#### The Formal Problem (From a Formalist Standpoint)

The formal controversy over the Elegy hinges on certain ambiguities in the text of the standard version (Appendix A). These ambiguities, it is important to note from the outset, are less prominent--or at least have been conceived as less prominent--in the draft of the poem contained in the Eton Manuscript (Appendix B), to which we alluded at the end of Chapter 1.<sup>6</sup> This "version" of the poem (if indeed Gray ever considered it as such) is generally referred to as the Stanza's. The Eton Manuscript is entitled "Stanza's Wrote In a Country Church-Yard," but the manuscript also contains most of the revisions that Gray eventually incorporated in the final text.

The basic problem posed by the standard version centers on Gray's use of pronouns. The first-person singular appears for the first and last time in stanza 1:

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
 The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Through the next twenty-two stanzas, the poem is written entirely in the third person; however, in lines 93-94, we have the following apostrophe:

For thee, who mindful of th'unhonour'd Dead  
 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate.

In the context of the final thirty-two lines of the Elegy (97-128), the ambiguous references of lines 93-94 pose a problem for interpretation of the poem as a whole, and thus these lines provide the crux of the formal problem.

In the Eton Manuscript, there are four stanzas following line 72 that Gray eventually rejected, although he made use of some of the material from these stanzas for the standard version. For reasons that have to do with both the logic of the text itself and the state of the manuscript, it is plausible to assume that Gray originally intended these stanzas to form the poem's conclusion.<sup>7</sup>

The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow  
 Exalt the brave, & idolize Success  
 But more to Innocence their Safety owe  
 Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless

And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead  
 Dost in these Notes thy [corr. to their] artless Tale relate  
 By Night & lonely Contemplation led  
 To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate

Hark how the sacred Calm that broods around  
 Bids ev'ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease  
 In still small Accents whisp'ring from the Ground  
 A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace

No more with Reason & thysself at Strife;  
 Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room  
 But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
 Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

If Gray had concluded the poem with these stanzas (and there are

some critics who wish that he had), it would have been natural to link the references in the fifth and sixth lines above to the poet (or, more properly in formalist terms, the narrator) and his poem (or, again, the narrator's utterance). But in the context of the standard version, the pronomial references of lines 93-94 are at once more tenuous and, from an aesthetic point of view, more problematic. For in the process of revising and expanding the poem, Gray introduced the following changes: he changed the grammar of the reference in line 93 to the accusative case ("And thou" becoming "For thee"); introduced a hypothetical "kindred Spirit" (line 96) who is represented conditionally as inquiring after the fate of the "thee," and a hypothetical "hoary-headed Swain" (line 97) who is represented as informing the "kindred Spirit" of this fate in lines 98-116 (which are set off in quotation marks); and finally, of course, created the "Epitaph" to the "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" (lines 117-28), who is probably (but not necessarily) associated with the "thee" of line 93. Thus, Gray's revision incorporates certain at least quasi-dramatic elements (some commentators, indeed, have conjured an entire dramatis personae, complete with settings and props) that render whatever "natural" assumptions we might otherwise have entertained in regard to the references--and hence the poem's structure and meaning--problematic.

This, then, is the crux of the formal problem posed by the Elegy--at least from the formalist perspective in terms of which the problem has generally been presented. This perspective has, of course, conditioned the nature of the critical response to the poem, and, as a result, certain underlying assumptions have gone unexamined. For example, virtually all of the commentators have agreed that whereas the pronouns in

lines 93-94 of the Elegy are problematic, the corresponding ones in the Stanza's clearly refer to Gray himself (or to the "narrator," in formal terms), and it is on this basis, of course, that the Stanza's have so frequently been foregrounded and contrasted to the Elegy in the critical discussion--sometimes, indeed, as if they constituted a separate and even superior poem. From a more structuralist-oriented point of view, however, the status of pronomial "shifters" is always somewhat open to question; and since in the Stanza's as well as the Elegy, the pronouns are distanced by the second person, it could be argued that their referentiality is problematic already in the earlier version. This, of course, would vitiate the force of the contrast between the two versions. The distinction we are entertaining would not seem to be of paramount importance at this stage, for our concern is with the Elegy, after all, and both formalism and structuralism (however they are ultimately defined) would agree that in the Elegy, at any rate, the ambiguities pose a problem. But as we shall see later on, the overly-delineated contrast that has habitually been drawn between the Stanza's and the Elegy is indicative of a conflict within formalism itself, one that has had a determining impact on how the Elegy has been interpreted.

In its purely theoretical aspect, the formal problem posed by the Elegy raises a number of issues that we shall have to confront. However, the reason that the formal problem has assumed such prominence in the critical discussion has less to do with the purely theoretical issues it raises than with the concrete dissatisfaction with the standard version of the poem that some critics have felt since early in the century. This dissatisfaction fueled the modern critical debate, and before taking up the larger issues involved, we should examine how this debate unfolded.

Shepard's Biographical Hypothesis

The modern controversy over the Elegy was initiated by Odell Shepard in 1923.<sup>8</sup> Shepard, like other critics after him, felt that the Elegy is inferior to the Stanza's in regard to structure and tone, but at the same time he found himself confronted with an interpretive dilemma. On the one hand, he argued that in "the only easy and natural reading" of the Elegy, the "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" of the "Epitaph" must stand for Gray himself;<sup>9</sup> but, on the other hand, he felt that with this interpretation "the tone of the entire second part . . . is that of the sentimental and lachrymose self-pity which most boys put behind them in the early part of adolescence."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Shepard found it impossible to believe that so reticent a man as Gray would have indulged in self-revelation:

For a man to memorialize his own sincerity and generosity would be less a mark of . . . passion than of execrably bad taste. Here, then lies our problem--strong evidence in the text of the Elegy that Gray has done a thing which it seems highly improbable that such a man could have done. One feels like defending Gray against himself.<sup>11</sup>

Shepard's remarks are typical of the reaction against Romanticism of the period in which they were written, and from our present vantage-point they may strike us as somewhat ludicrous. But if it were really necessary to identify the Youth of the Epitaph with Gray himself, as in Shepard's "only easy and natural reading," then one could easily agree that some principle of taste had been violated. Of course, everything in the Elegy cries out against such a slavish interpretation of the text; and yet, because Shepard is caught on the horns of a dilemma, his reaction is as extreme as it is. For while he denounces the possibility

that Gray is indulging in self-revelation, he retains the naive assumption that the poet's "I" is an unmediated extension of his actual presence. In other words, he is trapped within a conception of what constitutes poetic expression which is at odds with his social and ideological assumptions. For this reason, we can discern in his remarks the seeds of what will later emerge as the formalist tendency to view the "I" in terms of a persona or invented narrator. This latter tendency, however (which, as we shall suggest, has problems of its own), does not yet exist as an alternative for Shepard, and thus the dilemma he confronts remains intractable in strictly formal terms.

Those critics who would deny that the Elegy is a coherent work of art have usually done so on the basis of Shepard's "only easy and natural reading"; but as Shepard himself finds this reading contradicted by his impression of Gray the man, he boldly sets out to "defend Gray against himself." Unfortunately, the task of defending Gray's character can only be accomplished at the expense of pointing out his deficiencies as a poet; for since the text itself is self-revelatory, it is necessary to show that Gray's intentions were otherwise. Accordingly, Shepard goes in search of "those flaws of structure which occur when a poet lays a manuscript aside for so long that he forgets his original mood or intention, or when he tries to weld into one piece separate scraps of work originally composed with no single whole in mind."<sup>12</sup> What he comes up with, essentially, is that there are two "seams" in the Elegy--one between the twenty-third and twenty-fourth stanzas (i.e. immediately before the crucial pronomial ambiguities we have noted) and one between the "Epitaph" and the rest of the poem.<sup>13</sup> Shepard's argument is merely circular: it is intended to show that the Stanza's constitute a poem that is "better

rounded off than the Elegy of the standard text,"<sup>14</sup> but it merely asserts that the "seams," in and of themselves, are indicative of flaws of structure. The question is whether these "seams," if one wants to refer to them as such, are justified by the poem as a whole. To deal with this question adequately, one would have to examine the Elegy from the standpoint of its thematic development, but as Shepard's analysis is restricted to the poem's surface--where the concept of structure is merely a static abstraction--his assertion carries no force.

But be this as it may, Shepard's attempt to explain the flaws of structure he has adduced then gives rise to the central hypothesis informing his article. What Shepard proposes, in essence, is that the "Epitaph" was originally written as a separate poem commemorating Gray's friend Richard West, who died in June 1742. Thus, according to Shepard's conjecture (for which, as he admits, there is no evidence whatever), there would have been a period during which Gray had two different pieces on his work table--the poem on West and the Stanza's. However:

In going over his papers, as we know that he did at Walpole's suggestion in 1747, Gray would see that although these two poems were concerned with two different persons they dealt with fairly similar subjects and were in the same stanza and mood. Now the evidence of patching that we have seen in the 24th stanza and the established fact that an earlier conclusion of the Elegy was abandoned to make way for another totally different conclusion make it seem a plausible suggestion that Gray set to work to join these two poems, that all of the present Elegy from the 19th stanza to the Epitaph is really a sort of bridge thrown between two pre-existing piers. In this suggestion we have a considerable extension of our original hypothesis [i.e. that the Epitaph was originally a separate poem commemorating West]. It involves the supposition that Gray fused together not only two poems but two personalities.<sup>15</sup>

Shepard presents the Elegy as a hopelessly inept performance, but it is difficult to imagine that any poet, let alone one so committed to

problems of craft as Gray obviously was, could be so obtuse as to fail to recognize--for several years--the connection between two compositions dealing with similar subjects and in the same stanza and mood. However, although Shepard maintains that the two pieces were initially unconnected, he then proceeds to suggest that both were probably begun during the summer of 1742, and that, consequently, the Stanza's may also "be associated in some way with West's death."<sup>16</sup> In other words, we are asked to believe that the "seams" in the Elegy result from the fusion of two unconnected poems, but that these poems (which are in the same stanza and mood) were begun around the same time and were both associated with the death of West!

The question of when the Elegy was begun has never been settled and has been a much debated issue among scholars.<sup>17</sup> Shepard's assumption that it was begun in 1742 is based entirely on the testimony of William Mason, Gray's friend and executor. We have no way of knowing whether Mason had firsthand knowledge of the originating circumstances of the Elegy, but, as Lonsdale points out, the case for dating the poem from 1742 is not strong, and on the basis of the available evidence it is more likely that it was begun several years later.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as Herbert W. Starr pointed out in a critique of Shepard's article, there is nothing in Gray's correspondence or in the manuscript record to suggest that the "Epitaph" ever existed as a separate poem. Starr observes that if it had originally been conceived as a separate poem commemorating West, or if it was intended to refer to West in the context of the completed Elegy, it is strange that Gray did not acknowledge this to Horace Walpole, who, after all, had also been an intimate friend of West.<sup>19</sup>

But to argue on the basis of the biographical record, as the

opponents of Shepard's hypothesis have done, is really to miss the point. Since the biographical record is inconclusive, the possibility argued by Shepard that Gray had personal reasons for suppressing the West connection cannot entirely be ruled out.<sup>20</sup> And there is no reason not to assume that West would have entered into Gray's feelings during the composition of the Elegy. He was Gray's closest friend, after all, and a poet of promise who died at the age of 25 before his promise could be fulfilled. Moreover, as Shepard hastens to point out (though this does not necessarily prove his hypothesis), Gray's "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" echoes a line from West's "Monody on Queen Caroline," in which he had referred to himself as "A muse as yet unheeded and unknown."<sup>21</sup> But the issue is not whether Shepard's hypothesis in regard to the originating circumstances of the Elegy is plausible, but whether it is valid as far as interpretation of the poem is concerned. In order to interpret the Youth as a reference to West, who is never named in the poem, one would have to transfer the locus of meaning from the text itself to the poet's hidden consciousness. Moreover, the intentional fallacy appears in a particularly glaring form in Shepard's hypothesis, for the intentions it ascribes to Gray are actually in direct contradiction to the text itself. If the Youth of the "Epitaph" is identified with West (or with anyone else for that matter), then clearly he is no longer unknown. It is also possible, however (and this is the direction my own reading of the poem will take), that Gray's intentions are literally embodied in the figure of the "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown."

Shepard's hypothesis is no longer taken seriously; but it should be noted that the hypothesis has important implications for how we conceive of the poem generically and for how we place it in the tradition.

Although Shepard himself is only superficially aware of these implications, he remarks, toward the end of his article, that the identification of the Youth of the "Epitaph" with Richard West "enables us to place Gray's poem definitely among the elegies, such as Lycidas and Thyrsis, which mingle general reflection with the grief of personal bereavement."<sup>22</sup> What Shepard is getting at here is that the Elegy ought to be classified as a pastoral elegy on the model of Lycidas (not that the latter is noted for "the grief of personal bereavement"). As a matter of fact, the notion that the Elegy was modeled on Lycidas was a received idea long before Shepard wrote his article, and it may have predetermined his hypothesis to some extent. Interestingly, this notion has probably been maintained by the majority of critics, including those whose approach to the formal problem is diametrically opposed to Shepard's.<sup>23</sup> Shepard, of course, does not elaborate on this rather important point, but in order to have done so he would have had to probe into the Elegy's themes. For the same reason, my own discussion of this issue must be postponed until Chapter 3; but in that chapter, I shall argue that the Elegy is a radical departure not only from Lycidas but from the pastoral tradition generally.<sup>24</sup>

#### The Formalist Strategy of Depersonalization

Shepard's article makes it clear that the formal problem posed by the Elegy, although it has usually been presented in the abstract, is inextricably bound up with the question of taste and hence with ideological considerations. Indeed, the formal problem comes into focus for Shepard only as a result of his perception that some principle of decorum is violated by what he considers the "only easy and natural reading" of the poem. Shepard's reaction is obviously a defensive one--partly against his own

"Romantic" conception of poetic expression, according to which the poet's "I" is an unmediated extension of his actual presence--but this reaction is not entirely idiosyncratic; for in the ensuing debate over the Elegy, the problem of decorum will be a constant against which the various attempts to resolve the formal issues posed by the poem will be played out.

From this perspective, it stands to reason that the attempt to recuperate a non-problematic conception of the Elegy would adopt the strategy of depersonalizing the poem; and indeed, such was the case. The postulation of a narrator or persona as a mediating link between the poet and the poem--not only for overtly dramatic poems, such as Browning's monologues, but for what we loosely refer to as "lyric" poems as well--was, of course, a cornerstone of the New Criticism; and notwithstanding the attempt of contemporary critical theory to move beyond formalism, it continues to play a dominant role in practical criticism. Thus, a strategy aimed at depersonalizing the Elegy, particularly in light of Shepard's ambivalent reading, would have been sanctioned by the climate of opinion in which the New Criticism arose; but perhaps it is equally true that the rise of the New Criticism was itself occasioned by the inability of the older "Romantic" criticism to resolve the kinds of issues posed by the Elegy.

On the face of the matter, it would seem that the problem of decorum foregrounded by Shepard's reading simply vanishes as soon as a dramatic conception of the narrator is postulated; for in this case it is no longer the poet who is identified with the Youth of the "Epitaph," but rather a "speaker" who is the poet's invention. Thus, seizing on this possibility, R.S. Crane argued as follows:

The Elegy is an imitative lyric of moral choice . . .  
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" . . .<sup>25</sup>

The problem is more complicated than this, however. For as Yvor Winters subsequently observed:

If we try to rescue the youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown by saying with Professor R.S. Crane that the poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by an imagined youth of the place and period, we shall have to imagine a local rustic who could have written a long poem in this language, or we shall have to imagine a youth all but indistinguishable from Thomas Gray, who (with very bad taste) inserted himself into the conclusion of a poem about people very different from himself.<sup>26</sup>

As Winters suggests, Crane's reading leads either to an absurd situation or to one in which the problem of decorum is merely postponed. The notion that the Elegy, with its contrasting reflections on the rich and the poor, could be spoken by a local rustic is, of course, absurd. Crane was probably arguing the second of Winter's alternatives, according to which the narrator would belong to the same social class as the poet. But in this case, either the problem of decorum is displaced onto the narrator, if one conceives of him primarily as the speaker of the poem--and if so, the narrator is a mere redundancy--or, if one conceives of him primarily as a character in an invented drama, the problem of decorum falls back upon the poet, for then one would have to question why the poet has conflated a character capable of sophisticated reflection with the illiterate rustics of his poem. But in any event--and one could argue that this must often be the case when a dramatic structure is artificially imposed on a lyric poem--it is apparent that the mere hypostatization of a narrator does not resolve the problem.

Ellis's "Stonecutter" Theory

A more thoroughgoing and elaborate attempt to resolve the formal problem in dramatic terms was made by Frank Ellis in an article entitled "Gray's Elegy: The Biographical Problem in Literary Criticism."<sup>27</sup> Ellis's polemical thrust in this article was directed against the "biographical fallacy"--the notion that a poem can be read as an autobiographical document; and at the outset Ellis indicates that the Elegy was "chosen as the vehicle for this argument because it has long been censured for its intrusive biographical detail" and because "adverse criticism of a purely formal nature, namely that the poem lacks a coherent structure, can so clearly be seen to rest on the assumption that the poem is excessively autobiographical."<sup>28</sup> However, Ellis maintains a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the biographical problem; for although he denies that the poet's experience can be reconstructed from his poem, which is what Shepard had attempted to do, he nevertheless believes that "the reconstruction of the poet's experiences from diaries, letters, accounts of friends, and public records, may illuminate his poetry."<sup>29</sup> The latter premise seems, on the surface, to be a reasonable one, and certainly less objectionable than the former; but in practice the two may lead to similar results, and as we shall see, Ellis's attempt to elucidate the Elegy by means of Gray's biography is not really more convincing than Shepard's had been. In fairness to Ellis, however, it should be noted that whereas Shepard's interpretation had been entirely dependent on his biographical hypothesis, Ellis's may be considered on its own merits, in spite of the fact that he links it to biographical speculations of his own. His theory about the poem's origins should be taken into account, however, for on the basis of this theory

Ellis develops certain insights into the poem's thematic concerns that are both interesting in themselves and connected to his attempt to resolve the formal problem.

One of the more flagrant examples of the biographical fallacy in criticism of the Elegy is the obviously absurd notion that Gray was actually in a country churchyard when he wrote the poem. As Ellis notes, this idea was originally put forward in an article published in 1783 which purported to be a continuation of Johnson's criticism but was eventually traced to a Prof. John Young of Glasgow University.<sup>30</sup> The reason Ellis mentions this theory, however, is to suggest that, on the contrary, Gray was in London when he began the Elegy, and that the poem was conceived in the summer of 1746 under the impact of the trial of the Scottish lords implicated in the Jacobite rebellion of 1745.<sup>31</sup> Ellis's argument is extremely tenuous. Although Gray's correspondence indicates that he was impressed by the pageantry and solemnity of the trial, and although the Elegy may have been begun during this period, there is nothing to prove that it originated under the impact of the trial. But even if we assume that Ellis is correct, his attempt to read the poem in light of the trial is unconvincing. To defend his theory, he combines phrases from Gray's correspondence and from accounts of the trial with phrases from the Elegy; but the connection he wants to establish is totally lacking in specificity, as the following specimen should indicate:

the Lord High Steward's "grand Procession,"  
 The Boast of Heraldry, the Pomp of Power;  
 the indictment of the prisoners for capital treason involving "a miserable and cruel slaughter of and amongst the faithful subjects of our said present sovereign Lord the king,"  
 . . . to wade thro' Slaughter to a Throne; etc.<sup>32</sup>

The philosophical reflections that Gray develops in the Elegy are

much too generalized to be linked to a single experience, and there is no reason why Gray could not have developed his perspective on ambition prior to the trial, since it is clearly consonant with Christian ethics. But if Ellis's biographical speculations are thus of little importance in themselves, they do enable him to focus on the fame-anonymity dialectic which, as we shall see in Chapter 3, is crucial to the poem. However, although Ellis's emphasis on the theme of anonymity is certainly valid, his actual treatment of the theme, in the context of his overall interpretation, is beset with an additional series of methodological difficulties. For having hypostatized an experiential point of origin for the poem, Ellis then proceeds to treat what is legitimately a thematic concern as if it were a structural principle organizing the entire poem--a principle, moreover, whose existence would enable us (1) to elucidate the process by which the Stanza's became the Elegy, and (2) to resolve the ambiguities posed by the standard version. Ellis's analysis is extremely ingenious, as we shall see; but in this analysis, a construct pertaining to the thematic level is displaced and accommodated to a genetic hypothesis, on the one hand, and an overt structural conception, on the other. These accommodations coincide respectively with the biographical fallacy (although Ellis had warned against it) and with what might be termed the "dramatic fallacy," which is related to the biographical fallacy by antithesis. Where the biographical fallacy treats the poem as an autobiographical document, the dramatic fallacy not only hypostatizes a "speaker" but turns this construct into an independent character. The two "fallacies" are antithetically related, however, for, in both, meaning is displaced from the poem to an actual speaking presence.

Ellis's ambivalent relationship to the biographical problem manifests

itself, first of all, in the overly-delineated contrast he draws between the Stanza's and the Elegy. We noted earlier that this strategy is typical of the formalist approach to the poem;<sup>33</sup> but what lies behind it, we can now see, is a swing of the pendulum between the biographical and dramatic fallacies, as criticism attempts to maintain its logocentric premises. Ellis thus continues a tendency that was already present in Shepard's discussion, although his conclusions, to be sure, are diametrically opposed to Shepard's. For although he rejects the more extreme consequences of a biographical reading (e.g. the notion that Gray was actually present in the churchyard), he nevertheless asserts that the Stanza's "were originally an 'artless Tale' about Thomas Gray,"<sup>34</sup> and that the four rejected stanzas from the Eton Manuscript "unequivocally identify the speaker of the poem as Thomas Gray."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, although he suggests that "nothing else of Gray's public or private experiences [besides his reading of Lycidas] could be inferred from the Stanza's in the absence of external documents,"<sup>36</sup> he makes copious use of such documents to interpret the Stanza's as a record of Gray's struggle with ambition. In other words, as far as the Stanza's are concerned, what we are given is a standard biographical reading in which meaning is consistently referred to its origins in Gray's life.

Although Ellis makes use of the term "speaker" in his discussion of the Stanza's (as in the passage quoted above), it is clear that since he identifies the speaker with Gray, this is an empty category as far as the Stanza's are concerned. However, by positing a speaker already in the Stanza's, Ellis is setting the stage for his interpretation of the Elegy, which is where his argument takes a radical turn. For what Ellis argues is that Gray, disturbed by the personal nature of the Stanza's,

"depersonalized them entirely" in his revision by imposing a dramatic structure on the poem.<sup>37</sup> Elevating the theme of anonymity to an overt structural principle, he suggests that the Elegy "is a poem which achieves total 'anonymity' despite its subjective genesis."<sup>38</sup>

The crux of Ellis's argument hinges (as one might expect) on his interpretation of the problematic pronouns of lines 93-94 ("For thee, who mindful of th'unhonour'd Dead / Dost in these lines their artless tale relate"). For Ellis, these pronouns do not refer to the narrator and to the Elegy itself, but rather to a "Stonecutter" and to the lines that this "rustic artist" inscribes on the tombstones of the poor.<sup>39</sup> Ellis infers the presence of this "Stonecutter" from stanzas 21-22, which are among those Johnson had singled out for attention. Interestingly, Ellis quotes these stanzas from the Eton Manuscript, rather than from the Elegy as he should have done:

Yet even these Bones from Insult to protect  
Some frail Memorial still erected nigh  
With uncouth Rhimes, & shapeless Sculpture deckt  
Implores the passing Tribute of a Sigh.

Their Names, their Years, spelt by th'unletter'd Muse  
The Place of Fame, & Epitaph supply  
And many a holy Text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

Line 82 in the standard version reads: "The place of fame and elegy supply"--not "Epitaph," as in the Eton Manuscript. But Ellis gives the latter text because it accords better with his interpretation, according to which the "Stonecutter," who inscribes epitaphs on the headstones of the poor, becomes in turn the "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" of the Elegy's "Epitaph."<sup>40</sup>

With the hypostatization of the "Stonecutter" as an actual presence in the poem, the rest of Ellis's dramatic scenario falls easily into place:

But who was there among the illiterate peasantry on whom the rustic artist could rely for a similar office? Who, in short, would write the epitaph-writer's epitaph?

Gray assigns this role to a literate outlander, the Spokesman of the poem, the "me" of line 4. But in order to introduce the Epitaph into the poem, a further dramatic complication had to be invented. Gray imagines that after the village Stonecutter is dead and buried, another melancholy wayfarer ("Some kindred Spirit") will enter the churchyard seeking to learn of the Stonecutter's fate. Still another peasant ("some hoary-headed Swain") will be able to tell the Enquirer of the irregular life of the Stonecutter and point to the Epitaph written by the Spokesman and now fixed over the Stonecutter's grave.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in Ellis's scenario, there are four independent characters, all of whom (apparently) may be classified among the "illiterate peasantry": the "Spokesman," who in one sense is "simply the vehicle of the poem,"<sup>42</sup> but, as the author of the "Epitaph," also a character in his own right; the "Stonecutter," who is the Youth of the "Epitaph"; the "kindred Spirit," who is also the "friend" referred to in the "Epitaph" (line 124);<sup>43</sup> and finally, the "hoary-headed Swain."

The advantage of Ellis's reading, of course, is that it resolves the pronomial ambiguities in a way that is consonant with the principle of decorum; or as Ellis himself remarks, "Shifting the reference from the Poet to the peasants and the peasant-poet fully satisfies the requirement of impersonality."<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, however, as John H. Sutherland demonstrated in a critique of Ellis's interpretation, this reading simply does not hold up under scrutiny:

It does violence to grammar and to logic to read "thee" as referring to a stonecutter who is not even mentioned in the poem--whose existence is only indirectly suggested by the abstract phrase, "th'unletter'd muse." Similarly, one must stretch common sense to the limit to make "these lines" refer to "uncouth rhymes" mentioned four stanzas before--rhymes which are described as being so short and rough that they provide nothing more than "names" and "years" instead of "fame" and "elegy."<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, as Sutherland points out, the "Stonecutter" theory accords rather poorly with the actual description of the Youth in the "Epitaph." Line 119, for example, reads: "Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth," and this alone would suggest that the Youth cannot be identified with the illiterate peasantry. To be sure, Ellis attempts to meet this objection by reading "Science" as "native intelligence";<sup>46</sup> but as Sutherland observes, Gray must have meant "knowledge gained as the result of education." The latter usage, which is the primary eighteenth-century meaning of "science," occurs frequently in Gray's writing, while the former is not recorded in the OED.<sup>47</sup>

Sutherland's objections may be regarded as definitive, but there is another problem that might be raised. In order to imagine the "Spokesman" as the author of the "Epitaph" on the "Stonecutter"--and Ellis asserts that the "Spokesman . . . is as much a creature of Gray's imagination as Caliban is of Shakespeare's"<sup>48</sup>--it is necessary to include him (as Ellis does in the passage quoted earlier) "among the illiterate peasantry." But in this case, we are asked to believe that a poem notable for its reflections on the lives of the poor could be spoken by an illiterate peasant--which is the absurd consequence that Winters had drawn from Crane's interpretation of the Elegy as an "imitative lyric."<sup>49</sup> Ellis, to be sure, does not make very much of this aspect of his interpretation; indeed, at another point in his argument he contradicts himself by observing that "the Spokesman . . . obviously derives from a social class and milieu different from that of the 'rude' peasants whom he describes."<sup>50</sup> But the contradiction is endemic to Ellis's argument; for if the "Spokesman" belongs to a different social class, then why would the "Stonecutter" have relied on him "for a similar office"? Ellis wants the "Spokesman"

to be both an actor in a dramatic situation and "simply the vehicle of the poem," but this is impossible.

It should be noted, however, that although Ellis's interpretation clearly founders on the contradictory nature of his "Spokesman's" social status, the dramatic structure he adduces is not necessarily destroyed in its entirety by this criticism. In an attempt to preserve this structure, Morse Peckham suggested that not the "Spokesman" but the "friend" of line 124 of the "Epitaph" ("He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend") should be regarded as the author of the "Epitaph." (Ellis, as we noted, had identified the "friend" with the "kindred Spirit" of line 96.) Thus, where Ellis conceives of the "Spokesman" as, in effect, an actor in the scenario, Peckham views this scenario as entirely a projection of the "Spokesman's" imagination. He proposes that the "Spokesman"

imagines the local Stonecutter-Poet whose function it is to compose epitaphs and carve them, imagines an inquirer who will ask about him [i.e. the "Stonecutter"] after his death sometime in the future, imagines the Swain who will be asked, imagines the epitaph that will be written for the Stonecutter, and imagines the Friend who will write it and who, perhaps, will succeed him as village epitaph-writer and carver.<sup>51</sup>

With Peckham's Rube Goldberg-like apparatus for interpreting the poem, it is unnecessary to conceive of the "Spokesman" as a peasant; but on the other hand, this interpretation makes it necessary to attribute the "Epitaph" to another erstwhile poet. Of course, there is nothing in the Elegy to indicate that the "friend" of line 124 has been gifted with poetical talent; but with a "Spokesman" of such vivid imagination, anything is possible! And of course, the "Spokesman" would himself be a product of Gray's imagination. Indeed, in Peckham's view, Gray has been

so zealous in depersonalizing the poem that the real author of the Elegy is not Thomas Gray but . . . the "Spokesman!"

It is not Gray who wrote an elegy in Stoke Poges, but an imaginary poet invented by Gray who composes a poem in an unidentified graveyard. Gray imagines the anonymous Poet, who is the Spokesman.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, if Ellis's conception is vulnerable to the criticisms of Sutherland that we noted, then Peckham's is all the more so. But in any event, with Peckham's interpretation we have reached a situation of infinite regress, in which the attempt to "depersonalize" the poem could lead to an indefinite number of further mediations.

#### The Grammatical Problem: A Parenthesis

It is interesting that in spite of his critique of Ellis's interpretation, Sutherland basically agrees that by changing the pronouns Gray depersonalized the poem. And yet, at the same time he notes that "there is no real evidence that Gray wished to change the reference of either 'thee' or 'these lines.'"<sup>53</sup> Indeed, as we suggested earlier, there is no objective basis for the assumption that Gray depersonalized the poem, since the problematic pronouns are already distanced by the second-person in the Stanza's. But there is a discrepancy between the two "versions," and this discrepancy points to what in fact is an objective problem in the text of the Elegy, although one that has hitherto been overlooked. The discrepancy and the problem it reveals is not one of voicing, as the critics have assumed, but simply of grammar.

Let us again compare the two "versions":

And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead  
Dost in these Notes their artless Tale relate  
By Night & lonely Contemplation led  
To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate

Hark how the sacred Calm that broods around, etc.  
(Stanza's)

For thee, who mindful of th'unhonour'd Dead  
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;  
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,  
Some kindred Spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say, etc.  
(Elegy)

There is no reason to interpret the shift to the accusative case as a sign that Gray has changed the reference and thereby depersonalized the poem; and even if we were to assume that he is addressing a "Stonecutter" (or some other person) in the Elegy, why should the accusative be more appropriate than the vocative? But then, why did Gray change "And thou" to "For thee"? There is a real mystery here because, while the corresponding lines in the Stanza's pose no difficulty, the grammatical organization of stanza 24 in the Elegy is problematic. The shift to the accusative case, together with the semi-colon after "relate," indicates that "For thee" is part of the predicate of a missing clause--and this is very peculiar in a poet such as Gray. Disregarding the semi-colon, we could, perhaps, read "For thee" as the object of "inquire"; but since "inquire" already takes "thy fate" for its object, the syntax would be doubled and extremely awkward with this reading. And if we search for the missing predicate in the stanzas immediately preceding, we will search in vain:

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,  
This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,  
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

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.

For thee, etc.

The grammatical organization of stanzas 22 and 23 is complete; and although the ear naturally turns back to line 85 because of the repetition of "For," the connection is merely an aural one because in line 85 the word is a conjunction and in line 93 a preposition. Thus, we are left with a grammatical quandary.

Gray is a master, and we may take it for granted that there are no unwitting solecisms in his verse. However, while there is no basis for the assumption that he depersonalized the references, there is, objectively, a grammatical problem in stanza 24--and this is the real problem posed by the Elegy in formal terms. And this problem, as we shall see, can be resolved. But the solution is so entirely bound up with the poem's thematic development that at this point it would be incomprehensible, and must therefore be postponed.

#### Bronson's Argument and the Principle of Univocity

The major advantage of Ellis's "Stonecutter" theory, as we noted, is that it resolves the formal problem posed by the Elegy in a way that is consonant with the requirements of "decorum." The fact of the matter, however, as Sutherland's critique demonstrated, is that as a theory Ellis's argument is untenable on internal grounds. Thus, criticism would seem to have been thrown back upon the objections to the Elegy's structure and tone that were initially voiced by Shepard. Ellis, we recall, had been aware that "adverse criticism of a purely formal nature, namely that the poem lacks a coherent structure, can . . . be seen to rest on the assumption that the poem is excessively autobiographical."<sup>54</sup> However, not all of the commentators who approached the Elegy, both before and after the appearance of Ellis's article, were as concerned with the

problem of decorum as he was. The reason for this is that if one interprets the poem as an "imitative lyric," in Crane's sense, then the problem of decorum is circumvented--although not, as Winters pointed out, done away with. Thus, Cleanth Brooks in 1947, and Frank Brady in 1965, equating the "Narrator" with the "thee" of line 93 and the Youth of the "Epitaph," offered interpretations of the Elegy in which the issue of decorum was not seen as a serious problem. Arguing that the Elegy's structure is determined by its contrast between the graves of the rich and the poor, Brooks, in what is probably the best-known treatment of the poem, suggested that the "Narrator" differs from both classes in that he chooses to be buried in the country churchyard whereas the poor have no choice in the matter.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, but with somewhat different consequences, Brady argued that the poem's conclusion provides the necessary contrast to its reflections on the poor; for just as the Narrator has his own perspective on the poor, so too they have a perspective on him.<sup>56</sup> Both of these interpretations provide justifications for the relationship of the final thirty-two lines to the preceding ninety-six. It should be noted, however, that the poem's structure needs justifying only in the context of the problem of decorum, and that the mere hypostatization of a Narrator does not put the problem to rest.

The problem was directly confronted by Bertrand Bronson, however, in a brief article entitled, appropriately enough, "On a Special Decorum in Gray's Elegy." Bronson not only equates the "me" of line 4 with the Youth of the "Epitaph," but he suggests that the "Epitaph" was consciously intended as a personal memorial and that, furthermore, Gray was fully aware of the difficulties this would entail. Thus, according to Bronson, the chief difficulty the poet faces in the Elegy is

how to devise a memorial in the form of inscriptional verses for oneself that shall be perfectly serious and emotionally sincere; that shall be neither objectionably self-abasing nor apparently self-satisfied; neither too cold and impersonal to communicate emotion nor too revealing of private emotion or self-commiseration.<sup>57</sup>

Bronson's argument as to how Gray triumphs over the poem's "inescapable egocentricity"<sup>58</sup> is really very simple. Focusing on the problematic twenty-fourth stanza, he notes that

for nearly ninety lines the poet had, as it were, disembodied himself, diffusing his identity in generalized, impersonal statement. . . . He has so long ceased to mention himself that we have been projecting into his lines our own train of thought all this while. It seems, therefore, perfectly natural to be addressing another as "thee." This transference is surely one of the subtlest effects in our literature. For now, we join the poet in addressing himself in the second person, continuing the identification as we imagine "some kindred spirit" inquiring about us. . . . The supposed answer [to the "kindred Spirit's inquiry] is further insulated from the man, Gray, by being attributed to an imaginary stranger, unknown both to him and to us, so that we are not aroused from our meditative imagining, nor divided from the poet. When, finally, the summary epitaph comes, it is still further removed from reach of Gray's apparent personal responsibility by being read on a headstone, unauthored, possessed of lapidary detachment and finality.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, Bronson feels that what begins as a personal statement nevertheless acquires universal connotations. From his point of view, then (although he never actually deals with the critical literature directly), it might be said that the entire controversy over the Elegy has been misdirected. For if the reader projects himself into the poem in the way that Bronson suggests, it would follow that analysis should begin from this premise rather than from the supposedly "objective" issues of referentiality and so forth. Thus, Bronson is able to justify the poem's structure and tone from within the terms of Shepard's "only easy and natural reading," but without either resorting to biographical

speculations or interpolating a dramatic context as the other critics had found it necessary to do. In effect, his is a phenomenological reading of the poem avant la lettre.

Bronson's conclusions seem to me to be substantially correct; and in Chapter 3, I shall argue that the principle of universality he implicitly adduces is, in fact, grounded in the Elegy's thematic development. However, Bronson's approach is divided between the formalist assumptions he maintains in common with the other critics and his feeling that our actual experience of the poem flies in the face of these assumptions. On the one hand, he maintains that the poem's conclusion is virtually an "autobiographical document,"<sup>60</sup> and on the other, he suggests that we do not experience it in this way. But what is ultimately at issue in Bronson's interpretation--and hence the doubleness of his approach--is the principle of univocity on which interpretation in the West has traditionally been founded.

To Aristotle in the Metaphysics, "Not to have one meaning is to have no meaning."<sup>61</sup> This, in essence, is the principle of univocity, and it is easy to see that it is the underlying assumption of all the criticism on the Elegy we have examined--including Bronson's interpretation, though more ambivalently in his case. Until recently, of course, the principle of univocity was an unquestioned (and usually unconscious) tenet of criticism in general. As applied to the Elegy, this principle would suggest that the "thee" of line 93 must refer to a specific individual in order for the poem to be coherent. The problem, however, as we have seen, is that any attempt to provide a univocal solution to the ambiguities posed by the text must either arrive at Shepard's conclusion, that the poem is deficient in regard to structure and tone, or, if it

seeks to justify the poem, must do so on the basis of some idea or construct that is not in the text itself--and hence the tendency of so much of this criticism to swing between the biographical (or intentional) and dramatic fallacies. All of this is a consequence of the need to maintain the principle of univocity. But on the other hand, it must be admitted that Bronson's non-univocal conclusion raises the question of whether interpretation that is not governed by Aristotelian logic can be rigorous or whether it must resign itself, as the Deconstructionist School would suggest, to the mere "play of ideas." Between these two extremes there is, perhaps, a middle course that can be charted, which, applied to the Elegy, would suggest that the poem's meaning ultimately depends on our inability to assign fixed referents to the problematic pronouns, and furthermore, that this inability is an aspect of Gray's poetic intention. But in order to demonstrate that such is in fact the case, we shall have to pay close attention to the poem's thematic development.

Given the acceptance of the principle of univocity by formalist criticism generally, as well as the separation of poetic surface from poetic depth that goes along with it, it is easy to see why the debate over the Elegy should have come to a halt in the 1960s and why so little should have been written on the poem thereafter. Bronson's divided approach indicates that while criticism no longer had any room to maneuver within a univocal theoretical orientation, it was not yet ready to free itself from that orientation. Yet in spite of the extensive literature that by that point had accumulated on the Elegy, the richness of the poem's struggle with meaning had not really been mined at all. Like the "gem of purest ray serene" of stanza 14, the Elegy was in danger of sinking deeper into "the dark unfathom'd caves of ocean."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>F.W. Bateson, "Gray's Elegy Reconsidered," English Poetry: A Critical Introduction (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1950), p. 181.

<sup>2</sup>Frank Brady, "Structure and Meaning in Gray's Elegy," in From Sensibility to Romanticism, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 177.

<sup>3</sup>Lonsdale, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup>William Hazlitt, The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P.P. Howe (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967) V: 118.

<sup>5</sup>Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 20-35. De Man argues that in spite of the organicist premises of the New Criticism, which derive from Coleridge, the rejection of the principle of intentionality led to the reification of the poem as a static entity. De Man's discussion in this essay of the "hermeneutic circle" will be taken up later on in Chapter 3. See below, pp. 146-48.

<sup>6</sup>See above, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup>Lonsdale, p. 104.

<sup>8</sup>Odell Shepard, "A Youth to Fortune and to Fame Unknown," Modern Philology XX (1923): 347-73.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 349.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 352.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 352.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 360.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 362.

<sup>17</sup>The fullest discussion of the debate over the Elegy's origins is provided by Lonsdale, pp. 103-10.

<sup>18</sup>Lonsdale, p. 107.

<sup>19</sup>Herbert W. Starr, "'A Youth to Fortune and to Fame Unknown': A Re-estimation," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy, pp. 41-50.

<sup>20</sup>In arguing why Gray would have been reticent in acknowledging West as the Youth of the "Epitaph," Shepard (p. 365) points out that West's death from consumption may have been "hastened" by suspicions that his mother, abetted by a family friend whom she subsequently married, had poisoned his father. Norton Nicholls, in his "Reminiscences of Gray," quoted Gray as saying that West's illness was brought about by "the fatal discovery which he made of the treachery of a supposed friend, and the viciousness of a mother whom he tenderly loved; this man under the mask of friendship to him and his family intrigued with his mother; and robbed him of his peace of mind, his health and his life. See Correspondence of Thomas Gray, ed. P. Toynbee and L. Whibley (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) III: 1300; hereafter abbreviated as Corresp. R.W. Ketton-Cremer, Gray's biographer, adds that "the friend in question was presumably John Williams, the secretary of West's father." See Thomas Gray (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 55.

<sup>21</sup>Shepard, p. 370.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 372.

<sup>23</sup>This is true, for example of Frank Ellis's interpretation of the Elegy. See below, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup>See below, Chapter 3, pp. 125-29.

<sup>25</sup>R.S. Crane, The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), p. 176. Crane, as a member of the neo-Aristotelian "Chicago School," derived his category of the "imitative lyric" from the Poetics. But as Käthe Hamburger points out, Aristotle explicitly omits a consideration of lyric poetry from the Poetics because his central theme in that work is mimesis, and he felt that mimesis pertains to drama and epic but not to lyric. "Aristotle," notes Hamburger, "drew the dividing line between mimetic and elegiac art, where he separated ποιῆν from λέγειν." See The Logic of Literature, trans. Marilyn J. Rose (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 233. The Chicago School was sometimes opposed to the New Critics, and Crane's argument is specifically directed against Cleanth Brooks's interpretation of the Elegy; however, both schools tended to see lyric poetry in dramatic terms.

<sup>26</sup>Yvor Winters, Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1967), p. 157.

<sup>27</sup>Frank Ellis, "Gray's Elegy: The Biographical Problem in Literary Criticism," PMLA LXVI (1951): 971-1008.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 971.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 991.

<sup>31</sup>W.M. Newman, in an article which Ellis had apparently not seen when he published his own, had previously connected the Elegy to the trial of the Scottish lords; however, Newman's argument is mainly focused on the poem's origins and is not connected to a larger interpretive conception. W.M. Newman, "When Curfew Tolloed the Knell," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy, pp. 17-22.

<sup>32</sup>Ellis, p. 976.

<sup>33</sup>See above, pp. 26-27.

<sup>34</sup>Ellis, p. 981.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 980. Ellis points to the fact that in the line "Dost in these Notes their artless Tale relate" in the Eton Manuscript, Gray had originally written "thy" and then corrected it to "their" (see Appendix B). But even if we assume with Ellis that the reference in "thy artless Tale" is to the poet himself, Ellis's conclusion that the speaker is alluding to his own history does not necessarily follow; for the reference may be to the tale of "the unhonour'd Dead" (in the previous line) which he has been telling. By this reasoning, although the essential meaning of the line would not have been altered, Gray would have changed the pronoun in order to eliminate an unwarranted ambiguity.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 982.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 985.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 986.

<sup>39</sup>The suggestion that "thee" in line 93 refers not to Gray but to a "fictitious village poet who had commemorated the 'unhonoured Dead'" had earlier been made by Herbert Starr ("'A Youth to Fortune and to Fame Unknown': A Re-estimation," p. 44). And as Starr points out (p. 44), Shepard had entertained--and rejected--the possibility that the reference is to a poeta ignotus (Shepard, p. 348).

<sup>40</sup>The significance of Gray's emendation of "Epitaph" to "elegy" will be discussed in Chapter 3; see below, pp. 148-53.

<sup>41</sup>Ellis, p. 985.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 986.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>John H. Sutherland, "The Stonecutter in Gray's 'Elegy,'" in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy, p. 80.

<sup>46</sup>Ellis, p. 1003.

<sup>47</sup>Sutherland, p. 80.

<sup>48</sup>Ellis, p. 991.

<sup>49</sup>See above, pp. 34-35.

<sup>50</sup>Ellis, p. 989.

<sup>51</sup>Morse Peckham, "Gray's 'Epitaph' Revisited," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy, pp. 77-78.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>53</sup>Sutherland, p. 80.

<sup>54</sup>See above, p. 36.

<sup>55</sup>See Cleanth Brooks, "Gray's Storied Urn," The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1947), pp. 105-23. In Chapter 3, Brooks's discussion of the Elegy will be analyzed on a number of different levels: in relation to Gray's use of personification, in relation to the importance of the "Death the Leveler" topos, and in relation to the socio-political attitudes that Brooks ascribes to Gray. See below, pp. 83-84; 87-92.

<sup>56</sup>Brady, pp. 177-89.

<sup>57</sup>Bertrand H. Bronson, "On a Special Decorum in Gray's Elegy," in From Sensibility to Romanticism, p. 172.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., pp. 175-76.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>61</sup>Cited by Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 23.

PART II

## CHAPTER 3

### A READING OF GRAY'S ELEGY

#### Stanzas 1-4:

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r  
The mopeing owl does to the moon complain  
Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

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.

In his "Life of Denham," Dr. Johnson refers to "a species of composition that may be denominated local poetry, of which the fundamental subject is

*Landscape as Prelude* some particular landscape to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishments as may be supplied by historical retrospection or incidental meditation."<sup>1</sup>

Johnson's reference is to what is now usually called "topographical poetry," and topography, the description of a landscape, is implicitly linked in his definition to topos or theme; for the prevailing metaphor of such poetry is simply that a particular landscape gives rise to a particular set of reflections. And since both description and reflection depend on the standpoint of the observer, the issue of topography is also

related to that of perspective.<sup>2</sup>

The issues of topography and perspective confront us immediately in the opening stanzas of the Elegy, for the poem begins with a description of a rural landscape at twilight, but our perspective on what is being described does not become firmly established until the end of the fourth stanza--and our perspective on why it is being described, not until much later. The description is of the greatest possible simplicity but is pregnant with undisclosed meaning. We are thrown into the landscape, in effect, but we have no way to gauge where we are, until--in cinematic fashion--the focus shifts from background to foreground, from the scene beyond the churchyard to the churchyard itself in which the poet's meditation is (putatively) situated.

The term "landscape" seems appropriate in connection with the opening stanzas, and in fact Gray himself uses it in line 5; but the pictorial analogy is somewhat misleading, for all of the elements that compose the scene are in motion--or rather in a kind of slow motion that gives the effect of stasis or timelessness. This basic dialectic of motion played off against stasis (about which we shall have more to say later) lends itself also to a musical analogy, and in fact the pictorial is linked to the musical in the opening stanza by the tolling of the Curfew, which is what seems to set the figures in the landscape--as well as in the poem itself--into motion. Ian Jack observes that the Elegy is "the poem par excellence of recurrent patterns and subtle variations from the norm,"<sup>3</sup> and on the tonal level this is immediately evident in stanza 1, for the tolling of the Curfew reverberates with the lowing of the herd winding slow-ly o'er the lea. We cannot as yet ascertain the significance of the Curfew, or indeed of any of the other symbols presented in stanza 1,

for Gray's topoi are at this stage completely embedded in his topography. But pressing the musical analogy further, we might say that this bell will reverberate throughout the poem--like the ground bass of a passacaglia.

Gray's description in stanza 1 has a phenomenological immediacy that is governed by three factors: (1) the use of the present tense; (2) the paratactical symmetry of the clausal construction; and (3) the fact that the description is linked to the "me" of line 4. The combined effect is to project the reader into the scene and to make him experience the poem from the standpoint of this interior "me." As we noted in Chapter 2, this is the only point in the Elegy at which the first-person pronoun actually appears, but the ensuing reflections will nevertheless be anchored upon it. In order to distinguish this "me" from the poet--and especially since a great many questions hinge on the nature of the pronominal ambiguities, as we have seen--we shall refer to it henceforward in terms of a "lyric-I."<sup>4</sup>

Being almost purely descriptive, the initial four stanzas of the Elegy are in the nature of a prelude to a meditation that will follow. For the moment, however, we can have no real thematic grasp of what this meditation will encompass, and we must be wary of reading too much from the outset into the images that are presented. But much can already be learned by focusing on the stylistic and rhetorical issues that present themselves for analysis.

Paradoxically, however, part of what is disclosed from the outset is the poem's curious ambivalence about disclosing its meanings--or rather disclosing them too soon. This is already evident in line 1, where the word "Curfew" has an overly technical, and hence evasive, quality--as if an attempt were being made to limit the significance of the evening

bell to its literal meaning. Lonsdale mentions that the curfew, dating from William the Conqueror's time, was still rung at Cambridge when Gray resided there, and he suggests that Gray might have taken the word from Il Penseroso: "I hear the far-off Curfeu sound" (line 73).<sup>5</sup> Certainly the Elegy follows in the wake of Milton's poem and of the penseroso tradition generally. But what concerns us here is that the factual neutrality of "Curfew" is immediately countered by the word "knell" in line 1, which in turn is countered by the phrase "parting day." The issue of death--which would make the Curfew also a passing bell--is thus being raised from the outset, but in an ambiguous way; for it is unclear precisely how the connection between death (as such) and the diurnal cycle is being intended. On the surface, it appears that the connotation of death is the vehicle of a metaphor whose tenor is the end of the day; but which of these takes poetic priority is another matter. Since the adjective "parting" has a human specificity, "parting day" is what Ruskin would have termed a "pathetic fallacy"--and this makes one wonder whether the diurnal cycle should not be taken as a metaphoric substitution for death in a specifically human context rather than the other way round.<sup>6</sup> Not that this ambiguity in itself is unique to Gray. But what is important is that already in line 1, certain questions about the relationship between Man and Nature, as mediated perhaps by the problems of death and consciousness, are implicitly being raised. And these questions will turn out to have not only an ontological but also a political significance in the poem.

It is interesting, therefore, as Norton Nicholls informs us in his valuable memoir of the poet, that Gray "had at first written 'tolls the knell of dying day' but changed it to parting to avoid the conchetto."<sup>7</sup>

This is certainly plausible. However, other indications suggest that what Gray wanted to avoid was not merely a conceit as such (and "parting day" is also, though to a lesser extent, a conceit) but any explicit reference to the problem of death. Indeed, none actually occurs until line 36; and throughout the earlier stanzas, as we shall see, the issue is consistently deferred and circumvented by euphemism. This presents us with an enigma--though one whose solution must also be deferred for the present.

But in any event, what is fascinating is that both adjectives--the original "dying" and the revision of "parting"--come from separate passages in the Divina Commedia. Gray acknowledged *Dante's Presence and the Experience of the "Threshold"* to Nicholls that the opening line of the Elegy was imitated from Purgatorio viii, 5-6;<sup>8</sup> but as Lonsdale notes, a second passage from Dante, Inferno ii, 1-3, stands behind the entire first stanza of Gray's poem.<sup>9</sup> Both of these passages are quoted below (with the Mandelbaum translations), but in somewhat greater length than as they are echoed by Gray, so as to set them in context:

Era già l'ora che volge il disio  
 ai navicanti e 'ntenerisce il core  
 lo di c'han detto ai dolci amici addio;  
 e che lo novo peregrin d'amore  
 punge, se ode squilla di lontano  
 che paia il giorno pianger che si more.  
 (Purgatorio viii, 1-6)

It was the hour that turns seafarers' longings  
 homeward--the hour that makes their hearts grow tender  
 upon the day they bid sweet friends farewell;  
 the hour that pierces the new traveler  
 with love when he has heard, far off, the bell  
 that seems to mourn the dying of the day.<sup>10</sup>

Lo giorno se n'andava, e l'aere bruno  
 toglieva li animai che sono in terra  
 da le fatiche loro; e io sol uno  
 m'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra  
 sì del cammino e sì de la pietate,  
 che ritrarrà la mente che non erra.  
 (Inferno ii, 1-6)

The day was now departing; the dark air  
 released the living beings of the earth  
 from work and weariness; and I myself  
 alone prepared to undergo the battle  
 both of the journeying and of the pity,<sup>11</sup>  
 which memory, mistaking not, shall show.

What the two passages from Dante share in common is that both are among the most crucial "threshold moments" in the Commedia (and a fortiori in all of Western literature). This is to say that in both there is a mystical withdrawal from the quotidian of "work and weariness" that not only encapsulates the moto spiritale of Dante's poem but is also a prelude to its central action. In spite of the obvious differences separating the two poets, it is essentially for this reason that Dante represents an important point of departure for Gray in the Elegy. Of course, in the Elegy the transitional experience of the twilight hour is not translated into an objective drama centering on the poet's spiritual progress as it is in the Commedia, for the cultural predicates for such a drama are not accessible to Gray. Nevertheless, the sense of a spiritual quest that Gray derived at least partly from Dante is embedded in the landscape of stanza 1.<sup>12</sup>

In certain important respects, Gray's perspective in the Elegy remains firmly grounded in the rationalism of his time, and in a way that would not seem to have allowed for Dante's influence to have taken a very deep poetic hold. The Elegy is neither a Christian allegory such as Pilgrim's Progress (which Dr. Johnson compared to the Commedia),<sup>13</sup> nor an overtly Dantean poem in the Romantic mode such as Shelley's Triumph of Life. Where the Commedia centers on the spiritual progress of Dante himself, though understood as Everyman, Gray is an invisible presence in the Elegy; and where Dante is vouchsafed a vision of eternity, Gray has no

final truths to offer and no access to the Underworld whatsoever. Nevertheless, the language of the opening stanzas corresponds in certain obvious ways to traditional accounts of the mystical experience, and particularly to the sensorial/spiritual paradoxes that such experiences often emphasize. In Plotinian or neo-Platonic terms (and Gray, as we shall see, is a thorough-going Platonist, both in regard to his thought and his poetic practice), in order for the mind to take hold of its true object, there must be a removal from the narrow experience of the senses. And since the visual and the visionary are inversely related, the fading of the landscape in stanza 2 is a prelude to meditative clarity. In the context of the transitional experience of the twilight hour, however, this process makes itself felt at first as an intensification of the sensorial dimension; for as the landscape fades on the sight, it glimmers. Moreover, this paradox extends itself also to the oppositions of sound and silence and motion and stasis. The air holds a solemn stillness: it is pregnant, as we said, with latent or undisclosed meaning. And this stillness, being both motionlessness and silence, is intensified, in spite of Gray's qualifying clauses ("Save where . . ."), by the droning of the beetle and the drowsy tinklings lulling the distant folds. The peculiarity of Gray's description in the first three stanzas is that from a strictly mimetic standpoint, the landscape is actually crowded with a plethora of different entities in motion, all of which are connected to different sounds. Yet the impression we derive from these stanzas, partly as a result of their tonal convergences, is, on the contrary, that of silence--or what Eliot, thinking perhaps of Dante, called "the still point of the turning world."

With the transition from stanza 2 to stanza 3, and as a concomitant

to the fading of the landscape, Gray's imagery becomes increasingly weighted toward the symbolic rather than the naturalistic pole of literary experience. For while the "mopeing owl" and the "ivy-mantled tow'r" might plausibly appear in a setting such as the one described, they are also, of course, literary conventions that are associated with melancholy and attached to particular generic expectations. In spite of their "conventionality," however, these images are rendered memorable by Gray's mastery over diction and syntax and his ability to make use of the quatrain form to condense meaning into small formal units. Indeed, as a general rule it seems to be the case that as Gray's language moves closer to the symbolic and "purely literary" pole, his syntax becomes correspondingly more complex. The adverbs "now" and "yonder" in lines 5 and 9 are deictics that situate the utterance in terms of the immediate experience of the "lyric-I"; and as we have suggested, this naturalistic illusion will be maintained throughout the poem and will be confirmed at important transitional points. However, the archetypal status of Gray's imagery suggests that the naturalistic perspective is above all a framing device for a vision that is essentially allegorical, in the sense of being focused on universals and, indeed, on the problem of value itself. This, however, is an issue that must be deferred until later.

In stanza 4, the ostensible subject of the Elegy--insofar as it focuses on those buried in the country churchyard--is finally introduced. The "rude Forefathers of the hamlet" are the subject of the poem, and the phrase is the grammatical subject of the stanza, but this subject has been suspended until the final line of the quatrain in order to heighten its dramatic impact. This dramatic suspension of the subject is particularly interesting here, moreover, because while the subject itself

is plural, it is referred to initially in the singular ("Each in his narrow cell . . .").

In stanza 4, although we do not realize this until we come to line 16, the perspective has shifted from the landscape beyond the churchyard to the churchyard itself. The parallel pronomial phrases of line 13 point us in the direction of the Forefathers, who are now heaped up with

*The Great Sleep  
of Nature*

Nature, as it were. No longer being alive, they are no longer separate entities; and yet the fact that they are referred to initially in the singular emphasizes the individuality they once possessed. (The problem of individuation, which will loom so large in the poem, is here hinted at for the first time.) Having departed from life, the Forefathers sleep forever; they are now eternally a part of the perpetual sleep which is Nature.

Earlier we suggested that already in line 1, certain questions about the relationship between Man and Nature are implicitly being raised; and we noted, furthermore, that in the opening stanzas of the poem, any explicit reference to the problem of death is studiously avoided. With the introduction of the Forefathers, these issues begin to take on more substance, for the thematic relationship between the Curfew and the "passing bell" that would be rung to toll the knell of a parting life is now clear. The Curfew would be rung by men, of course, but in a certain sense it is Nature that rings the changes, and at this point in the Elegy, everything appears to be subsumed by the great sleep of Nature. The rude Forefathers sleep in the bosom of Nature as they slept at the end of a day of labor--and this puts the image of the plowman, plodding homeward his weary way, into perspective. It is not a question of death, but of sleep. Death exists as a problem only at the point at which consciousness poses

the separation between Man and Nature. In Nature's "diurnal course" (to quote Wordsworth in "A slumber did my spirit steal"), all things are perpetually asleep.

The point, then, is that in this opening movement of the poem, there is a very great weariness, a desire for sleep, a desire to be free of labor and therefore of History, a desire to return to where (as in Keats's "Nightingale" ode) there is consciousness neither of death nor of "hungry generations." One should beware of referring this desire to Gray in autobiographical terms: it merely exists in the poem as universal desire, and it is in this form that we comprehend it.

Stanzas 5-7:

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,  
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:  
No children run to lisp their sire's return,  
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

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!

Serving as a kind of prelude, the opening stanzas of the Elegy had situated Gray's meditation in terms of a landscape perceived at twilight and

evocative of the crepuscular emotions associated

*The Lives of the  
Forefathers: The  
Embedding of  
Perspectives*

with the penseroso tradition generally. But

with the introduction of the Forefathers, who

sleep forever in their narrow cells, there is

an immediate shift of perspective. The melancholy twilight imagery now

gives way to the imagery of a cheerful dawn: the swallow replaces the owl, and the "ecchoing horn" the Curfew. The plowman's weariness, permeating the opening stanzas, has been left behind, and everything now partakes of the spirit of a brisk allegro.

The shift of perspective that occurs in stanza 5, however, is not merely a matter of imagery or tonality in an isolated sense, but has important philosophical and structural consequences. We shall deal with the philosophical issues that are posed later on; but on the structural plane, we might note that stanzas 5-7 take the form of a series of imaginary tableaux which together constitute a single poetic movement--one that is both discrete unto itself and at the same time embedded in the perspective of the earlier stanzas. This is not to suggest that the imagery of the first four stanzas is any less "imaginary" in an ultimate sense than that of the following three: we have no way of knowing whether, and to what extent, the opening stanzas reflect an actual experience, and in any event this is not what is important. In the opening stanzas, however, as we have seen, the illusion, at least, is fostered that the "I" is actually present in the churchyard. Given the perspective of this "lyric-I," which has now been established, Gray's evocation of the lives of the Forefathers in stanzas 5-7 constitutes a secondary level of representation.

Each of these stanzas depicts the rural life of the Forefathers at a particular time of day and in relation to the activity on which the rhythm of their lives is focused--or in other words, before, after, and during the labor of the day. Although the scene shifts from dawn to evening and finally to the heat of the day, the note that is struck in stanza 5 remains constant, and the picture of the Forefathers that

*The Beatus  
ille Topos*

emerges is harmonious in every detail and singularly devoid of melancholy. Drawing upon the conventions of the Beatus ille ("Happy the man") topos, which derives its name from the opening of Horace's second Epode, Gray has represented the Forefathers in terms of the classical conception of what constitutes a good, happy, and fulfilled life.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Gray's representation of the Forefathers in these stanzas is only a moment in the poem's dialectical progression, and thus cannot entirely be taken at face value.

In itself, the description of the dawn in stanza 5 is the very opposite of pathetic--and yet, ironically, it is precisely this that determines the stanza's pathos, for the description, of course, is drawn from the perspective of the eternal sleep of the Forefathers, who will never again be roused from their "lowly bed." (The adjective "lowly" conveys the fact that the Forefathers lie beneath the ground, but it also points to their humble origins, and thus very subtly begins to bring an important thematic burden to light.) By suspending the predicate until the final line of the quatrain, much as in stanza 4 he had suspended the subject, Gray manages to juxtapose feeling-states and perspectives which are nevertheless discrete unto themselves. This is what is so remarkable about stanza 5 in particular, although to some extent the general procedure carries over to stanza 7. Thus, when the "no more" of line 20 is finally sounded, it reverberates all the more powerfully against the "for ever" of line 15--as indeed both phrases reverberate, in a symbolic sense, against the tolling of the Curfew. Gathering momentum, the phrase is then repeated at the beginning of stanza 6--though in variation, so as to avoid simple anaphora.

The dramatic effect produced by the suspension of the predicate is

amplified by the "recurrent patterns and subtle variations from the norm" of stanza 5. Lines 17 and 18 both contain a subject and a modifying phrase, with the caesura in both cases falling before the preposition, and the resulting parallelism is strengthened by the fact that both lines contain compound adjectives modifying terminal nouns.<sup>2</sup> Simply because line 19 contains two subjects, however, this initial pattern is then broken, and as a result there is an increase in tension that is finally resolved in line 20:

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,  
 The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,  
 The cock's shrill clarion,  
 or the ecchoing horn,

No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

The same principle functions on the tonal level, moreover. In "the cock's shrill clarion, or the ecchoing horn," the hard c's, soft i's, r's, l's, and o's of the two line-halves echo one another; and in this line both "clarion" and "ecchoing" are trisyllables that are speeded up and elided to fit a single weak position in the meter:

clarion / ecchoing

There are moments in the Elegy at which Gray's technique seems almost miraculous for the complexity it is able to balance and the sheer beauty it is able to sustain. Stanza 5 is surely one of these.

The scene depicted in stanza 6, as Lonsdale indicates, can also be found in Horace's second Epode (to which we have alluded), in Virgil's Georgics, and in Lucretius;<sup>3</sup> but in wending our way through these

sources, we come upon a number of striking ambiguities. In the first place, Gray's representation of the scene is mainly indebted to Lucretius, for it is Lucretius who renders it from the standpoint of a negated figure:

"No longer will you happily come home  
To a devoted wife, or children dear  
Running for your first kisses, while your heart  
Is filled with unspoken gratitude."<sup>4</sup>

The passage is in quotation marks because, as it happens, Lucretius is presenting this pathetic scene only for the purpose of satirizing it. It occurs in the famous section toward the end of Book III of De Rerum Natura in which the Epicurean poet inveighs against the fear of death, pointing out that when we engage in maudlin ruminations over our own death, we absurdly project ourselves into a future from which we shall be absent--but as if we could be there to witness it. As far as Lucretius is concerned, "Death / Is nothing to us" (iii. 830-31)--in both senses of the statement.

In representing the same basic scene, but in itself rather than against the background of a negated futurity, Horace and Virgil are imitating as well as reacting against Lucretius; for both represent it as an example of rural piety and without the slightest satirical intention. (Horace, it is true, puts his praise of rural retirement in the mouth of the usurer Alfius, who has no intention of practicing what he preaches; and thus the entire second Epode is framed by a satirical intention; but this is another matter, for Horace's description itself is without satirical emphasis.)<sup>5</sup> Since Gray's representation of the scene is also meant, at least initially, to be taken in a straightforward manner, it has probably passed through the alembic of Horace and Virgil.

His debt to Lucretius, however, indicates the presence of a darker undercurrent--which indeed makes itself felt in the manner in which stanzas 5-7 are embedded in stanzas 1-4.

We can now begin to come to grips with some of the deeper philosophical issues that are implicitly being posed by the Elegy up to this point; for given the tonal contrast between stanzas 5-7 and 1-4--a contrast which in some respects is more pronounced than the one Milton draws in L'Allegro and Il Penseroso--it is possible to discern an emerging conflict between two antithetical (but partially overlapping) visions of human destiny. Again, the central question has to do with the relationship between Man and Nature, but this primary and all-encompassing dialectic has now become more clearly focused on the mediating issue of labor. The terms of this conflict can best be appreciated by aligning

	the two sections of the poem with two texts
<i>Ecclesiastes and the Georgics:</i>	from antiquity that focus paradigmatically on
<i>Antithetical Visions of Labor and Human Destiny</i>	the problem of labor from antithetical per- spectives: Ecclesiastes, on the one hand, and Virgil's <u>Georgics</u> , on the other.

The feeling-tone of the opening stanzas--notwithstanding Dante's underlying presence--is clearly dominated by the tendency represented by Ecclesiastes; for given a vision in which everything is subsumed by the cycles of Nature, "What profit hath a man of all his labour that he taketh under the sun?" Human activity, from this perspective, in its attempt to deny the reality of death, is merely "vanity and vexation of spirit." The melancholy vision of Ecclesiastes has obvious affinities in Greek and Roman literature (Lucretius himself comes to mind), and many descendants among the moderns. We need not expand upon this issue

further except to say that in its modern version, as Romantic melancholy, this tendency leads from Gray to Keats and then to Tennyson, whose greatest poetry is imprinted by it:

Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
And after many a summer dies the swan.  
("Tithonus," ll. 3-4)

By contrast with the tendency represented by Ecclesiastes, Virgil's Georgics is the most important, and in some respects the earliest, elaboration of a positive conception of labor in the ancient world. The eighteenth century understood this very well, although not always in the most radical sense, and thus it is not surprising that Gray should have been so profoundly influenced by this aspect of Virgil; indeed, as Lonsdale indicates, stanzas 5-7 are fairly littered with echoes of the Georgics, both in the original and in Dryden's translation.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the Virgilian ideals of cheerful labor and healthy moderation can be found in other Latin poets; but in the Georgics these ideals are connected to the possibility of shaping reality in accordance with human happiness; and what is more, they are given a solid metaphysical basis in a vision of Nature--and human nature--that is diametrically opposed to either the cyclical vision of Ecclesiastes or the chaotic atomism of Lucretius. As Jacques Perret argues in his important study of the poem, "In no thinker of antiquity except Virgil does one find the idea, so often implied in the first book of the Georgics, that nature, like human endeavor, is working toward definite ends, and that contemplation of the universe ought therefore to inspire men to work."<sup>7</sup>

Virgil's elaboration of a positive conception of labor in the Georgics has an important bearing on a series of issues that we shall later take up in connection with the pastoral, at the point at which

these issues confront us more fully in the Elegy itself.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as Virgil himself informs us (with a certain ambiguous sadness) at the conclusion of the Georgics, the latter is in part a reaction against the perspective that he had previously entertained in the Eclogues:

All this I've sung of cultivating fields,  
Of tending flocks and caring for the trees,  
While by the deep Euphrates noble Caesar  
Thunders triumph, grants the reign of law  
To grateful subjects, claims his path to heaven.  
All this time sweet Naples nourished me,  
Her Virgil, in the flower of humble peace,  
In study: I who played at shepherds' songs  
In callow youth, and sang, O Tityrus,  
Of you at ease beneath your spreading beech.<sup>9</sup>

In the Georgics, then, Virgil is concerned with the possibility of making immanent--through an historical process founded on labor--the vision of harmony that is projected in transcendental terms in the Eclogues and in the pastoral tradition generally.

It is interesting, therefore, that in turning away from the pessimism of the ancient world, Virgil, as Perret observes, makes use of the myth of the Golden Age. This myth is, of course, central to pastoral tradition and to Virgil's own Eclogues; but since it represents the necessity for labor as the consequence of a decline from a previous state of plentitude, its inclusion in the Georgics is surprising, to say the least. However, in the Georgics Virgil presents the myth not in the original form in which it had been handed down by Hesiod in Works and Days, but in a new and optimistic interpretation:

The Father willed it so: He made the path  
Of agriculture rough, established arts  
Of husbandry to sharpen human wits,  
Forbidding sloth to settle on his soil.  
Before Jove, farms and farmers were unknown;  
To mark off or divide the land was wrong,  
For things were held in common, and the earth  
Brought forth her substance then, more generously,

When none imposed demands upon the ground,  
 Jove endowed the serpents with their venom,  
 Commanded wolves to prowl and seas to rise,  
 Shook honey from the leaves, hid fire away,  
 Stopped up the streams of wine, so that mankind  
 By taking thought might learn to forge its arts  
 From practice: seek to bring the grain from furrows,  
 Strike out the fire locked up in veins of flint.  
 Then rivers first bore hollow boats, and sailors  
 Numbered the stars and named them: Pleiades,  
 The Hyades, the radiant Northern Bear.  
 Men discovered how to trap and hunt,  
 How to circle forests with their hounds;  
 Some plunged their casting nets deep in broad rivers,  
 While others trailed their dripping lines at sea.  
 Harsh iron emerged, and saws with whistling blades  
 (For earlier, men split their logs with wedges);  
 Then followed all the civilizing arts:  
 Hard labor conquered all, and pinching need. 10

In other words, in bringing an end to the Golden Age, Jupiter is acting for the benefit of humanity. Virgil's reinterpretation of the myth thus runs parallel to the (mainly) Protestant doctrine of the "fortunate fall," which Milton expounds in the twelfth book of Paradise Lost:

for then the Earth  
 Shall all be Paradise, far happier place  
 Than this of Eden, and far happier days.  
 (ll. 463-65)

But what is striking about Virgil's conception, as Perret's analysis indicates, is not merely that the eschatological vision governing it is posed in immanent terms, but that this vision is predicated on the progressive transformation of Nature through technology:

Jupiter is attempting to force man to invent technology, and to wrench him from the torpor that would have stifled his intelligence. . . . From all this, however, one fact clearly emerges: technology and the necessity for labor are not simply a pis-aller, not a burden man must bear in consequence of the universe's gradual decline. On the contrary, the very evil against which we must struggle was introduced into the world only in order that there be work and technology--and this work is conjointly ordained to beautify the world and to exalt the human race.<sup>11</sup>

Virgil's conception of labor in the Georgics is thus an extremely radical one when considered in relation to its time. But it might also be argued, of course, that his unwavering idealism, coupled with his defense of imperialism, has conservative implications. As L.P. Wilkinson points out, for example, the problem of slavery is never once mentioned in the Georgics, even though at the time at which Virgil wrote the use of slave labor on the large estates (or latifundia) had for some time been forcing the peasantry off the farms, and had thus created a "lumpen proletariat" in Rome itself.<sup>12</sup> It may be unfair to tax Virgil with a criticism of this kind: a poem that aims at representing a religious or utopian vision should not have to accommodate itself necessarily to the demands of realism; and in any event, a polemic against slavery is certainly implicit in Virgil's conception of the nobility of working the soil. However, what is true for Virgil does not necessarily apply to the many imitators of the Georgics during the eighteenth century. If most of these now strike us as cloyingly sentimental and fundamentally conservative in their spirit, this is an indication of how even the most progressive conceptions can be vulnerable to conservative infiltration.

Gray's representation of the Forefathers in stanzas 5-7 comes perilously close to succumbing to the same tendency toward banality that we associate with many eighteenth-century pastorals. However, in the case of the Elegy, this does not occur, and essentially for two reasons. In the first place, as will become clear in stanza 8, Gray is himself aware of this danger, and his consciousness of the problem as the poem develops will then, from the reader's standpoint, be reflected back upon stanzas 5-7, as a corrective to the overly-idealized depiction of

labor contained therein. But even before we arrive at stanza 8, the fact that Gray's representation of the Forefathers is embedded, as we noted, in the perspective of the opening stanzas has the effect of distancing us from an ethos which would otherwise appear anachronistic and sentimental. The Forefathers, after all, now belong to the past--not only as individuals but in a generic sense. In other words, what is now past is not only the lives of the Forefathers individually, but--in the context of the social transformations of the eighteenth century--the life of the peasantry as a whole, and, perhaps most important of all, the idealizing mode stemming from Virgil and the Beatus ille tradition generally, in terms of which that "life" (if indeed it ever corresponded to reality) had formerly been represented. To be sure, Gray is drawing upon the moral center of the Virgilian perspective on labor in stanzas 5-7, and he is doing so, as we noted, partly as a corrective to the melancholy temper of the opening stanzas. But ultimately, he is able to draw upon the Virgilian ethos only because the embedding of stanzas 5-7 has the effect of distancing his representation of the Forefathers from a world-view whose naiveté and lack of dimension make it inadequate as a final "resting place" for his meditation. In itself, the Virgilian ethos can only be reaffirmed from the standpoint of its pastness--which is not to deny its meaningfulness to the present. Paradoxically, however, the meaningfulness of this perspective to the present is rendered possibly only by the fact that its representation as nostalgia is simultaneously the representation of its annulment.

Stanza 8:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,  
 The short and simple annals of the poor.

Ambition and Grandeur have apparently been eavesdropping on the preceding stanzas, and they are inclined to regard Gray's sermon on the Forefathers

*The Diatribe  
 against Ambition  
 and Grandeur and  
 the Demands of  
 Realism*

with a certain amount of skepticism, not to say levity. For if they know anything at all, these avatars of the upper classes, it is that "useful toil" (of the sort performed by the Fore-

fathers, in any event) happens to coincide with poverty and obscurity.

This admittedly rather prosaic fact of life has not yet been entered into the discussion; but from the vantage-point of Ambition and Grandeur, it is not entirely unworthy of consideration.

It is through Ambition and Grandeur, therefore--and paradoxically, through the diatribe against Ambition and Grandeur--that the somewhat narrow idealism of stanzas 5-7 is, if not entirely repudiated, at least incorporated in a larger vision. The "decorum" of stanza 8 (to borrow the term that Bertrand Bronson applies to the Elegy in a different context)<sup>1</sup> is thus exceedingly complex. On the surface, Gray's diatribe against Ambition and Grandeur is a defense of the ethical and religious values associated with his representation of the Forefathers--i.e. a defense of Christian-cum-pastoral humility. But what emerges from the diatribe is the implicit recognition that the perspective of stanzas 5-7 is too lacking in a sense of historical irony to satisfy the demands of realism. By attacking Ambition and Grandeur, who, as alienated presences, are rather obvious targets, Gray is able to point up the limitations of that

perspective without explicitly repudiating it--indeed, while seeming to reaffirm it. Not that Ambition and Grandeur do not deserve whipping: on the contrary, the vehemence of Gray's invective seems to suggest that these cynics, while privately sneering at "the short and simple annals of the poor," would in public be extremely unctuous in their support of the pastoral ethos projected in stanzas 5-7, since the myth of social harmony perpetuated by that ethos is clearly in their interests. These scions of the eighteenth-century upper classes are not altogether unlike the usurer Alfius, whom we met up with in Horace's second Epode:

When the usurer Alfius had uttered this, on the very point of beginning the farmer's life, he called in all his funds upon the Ides--and on the Kalends seeks to put them out again!<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, although Ambition and Grandeur are alienated presences, Gray's diatribe against them tacitly points up the limitations of the perspective drawn in stanzas 5-7, and at the same time suggests that the problem of value cannot simply be boiled down to a choice between Christian humility and worldly ambition. For the truth of the matter is that "useful toil" and "homely joys" are one thing (although the second of these adjectives has ambivalent connotations), but poverty and the obscurity that goes along with it (Gray's rhyme conveys this conjunction with absolute precision) are quite another. If the word "poor" strikes a powerful chord in closing the stanza, this is at least partly because the issue of poverty has been significantly absent hitherto; indeed, one might almost say that in stanzas 5-7, which present a picture of sufficiency, however simple and unadorned, it has been studiously avoided. The reason for this has something to do with the fact that such polarities as poverty and wealth, obscurity and fame, absence and presence--

polarities which now begin to take a firm grip on the poem--are only meaningful from an historical perspective that conceives of the division of men into classes. As long as Nature, corresponding to the abstract idealism of the pastoral, had provided the primary frame of reference, the issue of poverty could only be alluded to by circumlocution and euphemism. Curiously--but this will not become clear until stanza 9--the same holds true for the problem of death itself.

The connection that is established in stanza 8 between "useful toil," on the one hand, and poverty and obscurity, on the other, marks the emergence--not only in the Elegy but in the history of English poetry--of a major thematic concern: i.e. the problem of alienation. As the poem develops, the problem of alienation will unfold as a counterweight to the problem of death, and therefore we shall sometimes refer to it as the problem of death-in-life. As we shall later argue, moreover, this problem is precluded from emerging as long as the pastoral retains a psychological hold on the literary imagination. Indeed, our investigation will suggest that the pastoral, considered as a utopian mode of representation, arises from the historical necessity of circumventing the problem of alienation (or "death-in-life") which, writ large, is the problem of History in itself.

In any event, the emergence of the historical aspect of Gray's dialectic in stanza 8, and the shift from a descriptive to a reflective mode, coincides with the first of what will be a series of personified abstractions appearing in the poem. Personification obviously plays a central role in Gray's poetry, but his use of the figure has never been treated systematically, and in fact has often been misunderstood. The issue of personification

*The Problem of  
"Death-in-Life"*

*The Role of  
Personification*

is a complicated one in general, of course, and especially where the eighteenth century is concerned. For one thing, as Bertrand Bronson has pointed out, the eighteenth-century custom of capitalizing nouns indiscriminately often makes it difficult to distinguish when personification is being used in the true sense.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, what we would normally call personification often functions purely as a grammatical figure in the work of the period. Such is the case, for example, in the opening lines of The Vanity of Human Wishes,

Let Observation with extensive View,  
Survey Mankind from China to Peru,

where the effectiveness of the couplet would actually be diminished by an attempt to visualize "Observation" or otherwise endow it with human characteristics. In Johnson's couplet, "Observation" is less a being than a capacity or function. By treating this capacity as a grammatical subject, the poet avoids the necessity of having to stipulate a human agent: he is thus using personification as a figure of condensation, which is one of the common uses for the figure during the period, and certainly a valid one. In the hands of the weaker poets, of course, personification was often an empty rhetorical flourish; but the wholesale condemnation of the figure, under the aegis of Coleridgean or symbolist poetic theories, fails to take account of the grammatical possibilities that it affords.

Gray's use of personification is, from the outset of his career, an organic aspect of his technique, without which it would have been impossible for him to convey his conceptions. The reason for this is simply that the primary impulse of Gray's poetry is a platonizing one, a fact that is immediately evident in the early odes.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one might characterize the early odes as representations of symbolic action

(to borrow Kenneth Burke's central concept), in which abstract motivational impulses come into collision with the equally abstract forces that determine human destiny. This is a moral poetry of the species rather than the individual, in which the poet's aim is to derive knowledge of paradigms rather than particulars. A brief passage from the Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College, in which Gray also makes use of the figure of Ambition, might serve to illustrate the point:

Ambition this shall tempt to rise,  
Then whirl the wretch from high,  
To bitter Scorn a sacrifice,  
And grinning Infamy.  
(ll. 70-74)

Ambition, here, is an abstract impulse within the individual; and, as such, Gray's figure exemplifies what the sixteenth-century rhetorician Richard Sherry called pathopoeia: "whereby the passions of the mind . . . are personified."<sup>5</sup> But this internal impulse is treated as an external agency for the perfectly legitimate reason that it exerts a real impact on human beings: the individual who succumbs to it becomes caught up in forces beyond his control--such, in any event, is the moral tenor of the passage. Personification is obviously central to a platonizing poetry of this kind, where the emphasis is on the dramatic representation of abstract forces that make individual psychology a microcosm of a cosmic drama. It thus functions simultaneously as a figure of elaboration, insofar as it enables the poet to represent these forces from the standpoint of a morally apprehended totality, and as a figure of condensation, insofar as it enables him to grasp the particulars of experience in the form of a paradigm.

Gray's use of personification in the early odes differs from his

use of the figure in the Elegy, however, for in the Elegy his field of representation embraces the socio-political realm. As a result, personification in the Elegy functions not merely in relation to abstract forces within and outside the individual, but also in relation to particular types and classes of individuals. Thus, in line 29, Ambition refers both to the motivational impulse itself, which operates to a greater or lesser degree in all individuals, and also to ambitious persons. In the first sense, the figure concretizes an abstraction, and in the second it functions synecdochally, to summon up a conception of ambitious persons in general. However, in this second sense the figure also has a metonymic function; for since ambition is clearly being associated with wealth and power, it is also associated with the class of those who possess them. The overlap of figuration that occurs in the context of Gray's use of personification in the Elegy is indicative of the processes of condensation and association that contribute to the poem's resonance. But the role of personification is not limited to those processes of condensation and association. Indeed, it may be considered Gray's master trope in the Elegy; for as we shall see, his use of this figure is directly connected to his investigation of the problem of value.

Stanza 9:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,  
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
 Awaits alike th'inevitable hour.  
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Just as in stanza 8 the problems of poverty and obscurity are directly confronted, so in stanza 9 the problem of death is no longer referred to euphemistically as "sleep." "Lowly bed" in line 20 is a metaphor that distances us from the reality of death; "grave" in line 36 is a metonymy that brings us closer to this reality. The dialectically enmeshed problems of "death-in-life" and death thus emerge in successive stanzas, and in the context of Gray's polemic against Ambition and Grandeur (and all that these figures imply).

The reason, of course, that Ambition and Grandeur are not to have contempt for the poor is that "the paths of glory lead but to the grave."

*The "Death the  
 Leveler" Topos*

We have here an expression of the "Death the Leveler" topos, which of course is everywhere to be found in the tradition, and which Gray is therefore content to render as a simple truism--as if to indicate by this gesture that there is nothing more to be said. The fact that there is a full stop after the third line in the quatrain (and stanza 9 is the only instance in the Elegy in which this occurs) intensifies this effect.

Considered in the abstract, the problem of death would appear to be so weighty as to reduce all other concerns to a merely secondary importance, and most critics have assumed that this is what actually happens in the Elegy, which is one reason, perhaps, for why its originality has so rarely been recognized. The assumption that Gray's meditation reaches a kind of terminus in the realization that all are equal

Brooks's Interpretation in the face of death is, in fact, the basis for Cleanth Brooks's interpretation of the poem, to which we alluded earlier:<sup>1</sup>

The paths of glory lead but to the grave, but so does the path along which the "plowman homeward plods his weary way." The graves are different . . . But both are graves--the fact of death cannot be glossed over--this is the matter on which Gray's irony exerts its force.<sup>2</sup>

Brooks's argument, as we shall see, is strategically linked to his attempt to accommodate the Elegy to a conservative ideological perspective--conservative, because the notion that death "is the matter on which Gray's irony exerts its force" tends to nullify the importance of the problem of poverty (or, more broadly, of "death-in-life") in the poem.<sup>3</sup> Logically, of course, Brooks is correct that if the paths of glory lead but to the grave, then so does the plowman's path. But poetically, Brooks is wrong; for while the fact of death cannot be glossed over, this, in a sense, is precisely what the euphemisms of the earlier stanzas have accomplished.

It might be argued, as Brooks himself does, that these euphemisms are merely sentimental,<sup>4</sup> but this would be to view the situation too narrowly. In relation to the "pastoral" perspective of stanzas 5-7, they are sentimental, perhaps, but in relation to the poem as a whole they are not. Indeed, there is a sense in which they are actually safeguards against a very real ethical and poetic danger that Gray faced in the Elegy, precisely because of his confrontation with the problem of death: the loss of a humanist perspective, on the one hand, and the loss of his poem, on the other. For since all paths do lead to the grave, this awareness could lead to the leveling of everything connected to this world, and not only the alienated values of Ambition and Grandeur. In

this case, everything would become "vanity and vexation of spirit," as it does for the Ecclesiastes poet. If Gray had followed this poetic path to its logical conclusion, as Brooks assumes he has, it would have been impossible for him to develop his material beyond the static dogmas of a conventional religious attitude. The historical dimension of his meditation would have been nullified from the outset, and this would have left none but a religious basis for meaning and value.

But however primary the "Death the Leveler" topos would appear to be in the Elegy, the fact of the matter is that Gray articulates it only in a negative context--as a corrective to the attitudes of Ambition and Grandeur, who, by raising themselves above their fellow human beings in order to maintain the illusion of their invulnerability, become less human in the process. In other words, the theme serves to strengthen a humanist perspective rather than to nullify it; and for this reason, it is invoked not for its own sake--and certainly not to revel in the horrors of the grave, as with much of the poetry of the "Graveyard School"--but, however paradoxical this might seem, in the context of larger ethical issues. This is why, when Gray is referring to death in relation to the Forefathers, he calls it "soft names in many a mused rhyme."

Stanza 10:

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.

In stanza 10, the theme of Memory--which will be associated with a constellation of issues, including fame, history, and poetry itself--

*The Theme of Memory* begins to be developed against the socio-economic background of the poem's contrast between the Forefathers and the "Proud" (i.e. the poor and the rich), and against the metaphysical background of its examination of the problems of death and "death-in-life." Memory, which is the traces of the past on the present, is at once the physical and the metaphysical bridge between death and life, absence and presence; and in the unfolding dialectic of Gray's discourse, it somehow permeates and brings together the various constituents of the poem's search for meaning and value.

Stanza 10 continues the polemic that was begun in stanza 8; but where the latter had evoked the pathos of "the short and simple annals of the poor"--and hence the limitations of the earlier "pastoral" perspective--stanza 10, by contrast, but quite as antithetically, evokes the pomp and solemnity of the funeral rites that commemorate the great and powerful. And here one is confronted with an extraordinary paradox: for in spite of Christian humility, the trophies raised over the tombs and the pealing anthem which swells the note of praise (the latter having been deflected from God onto man)<sup>1</sup> are no mean thing! They are tokens of recognition and of a kind of fulfillment in the world, to which, it may be, all human beings would aspire if they could. Again, all of this is evoked from the negative standpoint of the polemic--and

the arrogance of pride is an alienated perspective, of course--but it is evoked nonetheless.

On the surface or representational level of meaning, the Proud are being admonished in stanza 10 not to blame the poor for the fact that they will not be remembered by history--and in stanza 12, it will be made clear that the "fault" lies not with anything intrinsic to the poor as individuals but, precisely, with "Chill Penury" (line 51). However, this representational level is undercut by a remarkable sequence of lexical and syntactical displacements. In the first place, the word "tomb" in line 38 is a catachresis in reference to the humble graves of the poor; but the trope makes it possible for Gray to evoke a positive state of affairs through the overt statement of a negative, and to do so, moreover, without breaching the poem's decorum. This procedure explains why, in line 39, the adverb "where" can effect a transition for which in actuality there is no grammatical antecedent. The prose sense that "where" condenses would be something like the following: "as it [Memory] does for the great and powerful who, when they die, have elaborate funerals in great churches where . . ." and so on. The syntax leaps across this chasm because the articulation of what the poor do not have is really for the purpose of evoking what the rich (but not only the rich--the unstated reference is meant to include all those who have symbolic presence in the society) do have.

In the figure of Memory in line 38, Gray makes use of personification in an entirely different manner than he had done in stanza 8. Ambition and Grandeur, we noted, represent motives within the individual as well as ambitious and grandiose persons and the class to which such persons would be most likely to belong.<sup>2</sup> Memory, however, is not meant

to be considered as a human faculty in this context, except insofar as the preservation of historical memory requires actual human beings: it is rather to be considered as a transfinite agency, much as in Greek mythology Memory is depicted as the mother of the Muses. But what is peculiar about the personification of Memory is that this turns an effect into a cause. It is apparent that those who have trophies raised over their tombs will be remembered--i.e. by their nations or by history in general--because this is the function of the trophies. But why should Memory initiate this process? It would seem that the personification has a merely ornamental function in this context, but in fact, such is by no means the case. Indeed, the coinciding of cause and effect in the personification corresponds to the reality of the situation, which in turn it emphasizes. For in order for an individual to be remembered by history, that person would have to have been present to his society in a manner that would have marked him out beforehand as an individual to be remembered. In other words, the memorial process is both the cause and the effect of its concrete manifestations--and this is what the figure of personification enables the poet to represent.

Memory and Ambition are thus both figures of condensation; but even on superficial examination, it is apparent that the values associated

*Personification  
and Value: Brooks's  
Interpretation  
Continued*

with the two--and personification is only meaningful in the context of a system of clearly delineated values--are fundamentally different.

Ambition in stanza 8 is plainly a vice, and we are led to take a dim view of it essentially from a Christian ethical perspective. (The fact that we are simultaneously led to see the limitations of that perspective is another matter.) Memory, however, has no

such immediately obvious negative connotations, but would seem to be a beneficent agency--especially insofar as we conceive of it as the mother of the Muses in a humanist context. It is true, of course, that the fame imparted by Memory, although a "good" in itself, often falls to the ambitious--which means that at a subterranean level of analysis, there is an implicit collision between the Christian and humanist perspectives. This conflict of values accounts for the ambivalence of stanzas 8 to 11, and indeed it will make itself felt throughout the poem. But as far as the personifications themselves are concerned, it is nevertheless apparent that Ambition and Memory do not fall out smoothly on the same ethical plane.

Thus, while personification is an organic aspect of Gray's technique in the Elegy, the valences attached to the individual examples of this figure are quite different and sometimes diametrically opposed. It will be noted, however, that this argument runs counter to Cleanth Brooks's discussion of how personification functions in the poem; and since Brooks's analysis is the best-known treatment of the subject, it must now be examined.

To Brooks, the personifications "are actually the allegoric figures, beloved by the eighteenth century, which clutter a great abbey church such as that at Bath or Westminster."<sup>3</sup> As such, "they are used ironically. That is to say, they are contrasted with the humble graves of the country churchyard, and they are meant, in contrast, to seem empty, flat, and lifeless."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the personifications are less an aspect of Gray's technique for Brooks than an aspect of the poem's content and a structural principle that serves to delineate its contrast between the rich and the poor. This means that the personifications

may be considered monolithically and without regard to their individual value determinations. Interestingly, this allows Brooks to accommodate the Elegy to a New Critical perspective, in spite of the well-known nominalist bias of the New Criticism against allegory; for by arguing that Gray adopts an ironical attitude toward the personifications, Brooks suggests--although he does not go so far as to make this explicit--that in fact we are not dealing with personification at all in the usual sense but rather with a kind of parody of personification. The implication is that Gray is not concerned with Ambition and Memory as such but rather with the personifications Ambition and Memory.

The strategy behind Brooks's argument is not merely to accommodate the Elegy to a nominalist aesthetic framework, however, but also, as we have suggested, to accommodate it to a conservative ideological perspective--in keeping with the view that death is the matter on which Gray's irony exerts its force. But in order to comprehend this, we have to analyze how the concept of irony that Brooks interposes would operate in regard to the individual personifications themselves.

As it turns out, Brooks's concept of irony is either redundant or incoherent, depending on whether the valences attached to the personifications in question are negative or positive. The reason for this has to do with the very nature of personification. Since personification (or, more specifically, pathopoeia) treats abstractions as agencies--that is, since it delineates them as forms--any given personification must already be constituted within a definite system of formal values, and must therefore embody a simple and unambiguous attitude which cannot then be altered by an additional attitude without destroying the poem's internal coherence. This is not to say that

ambiguities will not arise as a result of the context in which the personification is situated--and our analysis of Memory has already indicated that they do, in fact, arise in the Elegy--but rather that the personification itself occupies a definite ethical dimension.

In the case of Ambition in stanza 8 or Flattery in stanza 11, for examples--and both of these are personifications that represent human characteristics--it is clear that irony is already given in the appellation, so that to assert that Gray regards these figures ironically is merely tautological. Flattery is always a vice, and Ambition, when it overwhelms the character, which is what the personification establishes, is similarly vicious. By their very names, these figures announce that they are alienated presences who cannot, therefore, be regarded otherwise than ironically.

Of course, Brooks's argument is not really directed at these figures, but rather at those we have referred to as transfinite agencies--Memory in stanza 10 and Knowledge in stanza 13. Memory imparts fame and Knowledge imparts itself, and both fame and knowledge are, of course, desiderata, other things being equal; yet if we accept Brooks's argument, we are obliged to regard Memory and Knowledge as metonymic of the upper classes, and hence on the same ethical and social plane as Ambition and Flattery. The implication that follows from this is that fame and knowledge are somehow bad--not merely when they are acquired by morally deficient individuals (such as Ambition and Flattery), but bad in themselves. Indeed, Brooks goes so far as to say that "what Knowledge has to give is associated with madness, not sobriety."<sup>5</sup> And if fame and knowledge are bad, then it follows that the poor are better off

without them--hence, that they are better off being poor. Thus, what we ultimately come round to (although, of course, Brooks does not make this explicit) is a rather convenient defense of the status quo, under the aegis of Christian humility and pastoral withdrawal from the world. And all of this follows from what is overtly a formal analysis of Gray's use of personification!

That the ideological implications of Brooks's argument are untenable will become clear from our examination of the thematic development particularly of stanzas 12 to 15. But what is already clear is that these implications are plausible only if one accepts the reductive terms of Brooks's analysis, according to which not only Ambition and Flattery but also Memory and Knowledge are to be identified with the upper classes. It does happen to be true, of course, that Memory and Knowledge are associated with the rich and powerful, but this is another matter entirely. For if Memory raises no trophies over the graves of the poor, and if Knowledge fails to unroll her ample page to them, this is not the fault of Memory and Knowledge but rather of "Chill Penury." We are not asked to take a dim view of Memory and Knowledge per se, but we are led to the awareness that these abstract functions are controlled by the upper echelons of society and consequently are not available to the poor. The distinction is an important one, for if we accept Brooks's argument that the personifications in toto correspond to the poet's ironical attitude toward the pretensions of the rich and powerful, then what we have done, in essence, is to factor out the problem of poverty--or, more broadly, of "death-in-life"--which is an

essential aspect of the poem's dialectic. What this leaves us with, on the one hand, is a rather sentimental poem that espouses the ideology of pastoral withdrawal, and, on the other, a nihilistic view of culture as a merely illusory attempt to deny the reality of death.

Stanza 11:

Can storied urn or animated bust  
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?  
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,  
Or Flatt'ry sooth the dull cold ear of Death?

Stanza 11 recapitulates and brings to a close the "Death the Leveler" theme which had initially been posed in stanza 9. Thus, with res-

*The "Death the Leveler" Topos Concluded*

pect to the symmetry of this section of the poem, stanza 11 is to stanza 10 as stanza 9 to stanza 8: in both cases, the reality of death is invoked as an admonition against hubris. But as a result of the emergence of the theme of memory in stanza 10, the nature of the hubris addressed in stanza 11 has to do with the desire of human beings to perpetuate themselves symbolically. This is one of the functions of works of art, and thus the question of art itself, which will loom so large in the stanzas immediately succeeding, is opened up.

In the context of the "Death the Leveler" topos, the incidental ironies of stanza 11 are somewhat obvious. Brooks observes that "the most 'animated' bust (anima = breath, soul) cannot call the fleeting anima of the dead man back to its 'mansion.' And the

mansion receives its qualification in the next line: it is no more than silent dust."<sup>1</sup> We might add that the literal meaning of "mansion" as a great house enriches the metaphor because the rhetorical question pertains to those who hope that their wealth will insulate them from reality. But, again, all of this is wholly traditional, and the fact that the theme is intrinsically ironical does not render its statement either interesting or poetic. On the contrary, the stanza owes its power to a much deeper irony, and one which is conveyed by the concreteness of the images in line 41: the fact that the question of art and its relationship to "immortality" is being posed, albeit by negation. Even Brooks acknowledges this in a way; for after all, his essay is entitled "Gray's Storied Urn." In stanza 11, the "storied urn" appears in a negative context; but the connection between Gray and Keats is less antithetical than it would appear.

Stanza 12:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid  
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire,  
 Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,  
 Or wak'd to extasy the living lyre.

In stanza 12, the thematic center of the Elegy shifts to the problem of unfulfilled potential, and Gray's treatment of this problem

*The Problem of  
 Unfulfilled  
 Potential (1)*

is indeed at the heart of his accomplishment in the poem. The thematic shift that occurs in stanza 12 is immediately

evident from the opening word "Perhaps," which indicates that we are now in the realm of pure speculation. But the problem of unfulfilled potential is by no means thematically unmotivated, for it is latent in the poverty-obscurity connection that was established in stanza 8; its salience, however, had been partially suppressed by the "Death the Leveler" focus of stanzas 9 to 11.<sup>1</sup>

In line 13 ("Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade"), the demonstrative pronoun had served to root us in the site of the meditation, and now, in line 45 ("Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid"), it returns us to the country churchyard. But whereas in stanzas 5 to 7 the lives of the Forefathers had been represented in terms of pastoral fulfillment--with the pathos at this point deriving from the fact that their lives are no more--the perspective in stanza 12 has been reversed and the pathos now focuses on the fact that those buried in the churchyard were, in effect, "buried" during their lifetimes by the conditions of their existence, conditions which made it impossible for them to realize their potential as individuals. Thus, stanza 12 marks a shift in the locus of the poem's central pathos from the problem of death to that of "death-in-life," and from the sphere of Nature to that of History. These metaphysical counters will eventually be entirely confounded with one another, of course; for the problem of death, for man, is that of not having sufficiently lived, and human nature cannot be considered apart from history. But what is striking is that death, which would normally be considered the major focus in the dialectics of loss constituting the elegy as

a genre, is taken over and subsumed by "death-in-life."

As a correlative to the thematic shift described above, the grammatical center of the poem shifts in stanza 12 to the subjunctive mood--to a might have been whose

*The Subjunctive  
of the Elegy*

pathos is antithetical to the no more

and for ever that had marked the final-

ity of death in stanzas 4 to 6. Those buried in the country churchyard are undifferentiated, having failed to leave a mark on history; but the subjunctive enables Gray to maintain a realistic and entirely unsentimental hold on this perspective while at the same time evoking the hypothetical possibility of an individual who might have emerged from the generic anonymity of his class: it enables him, in short, to express the real and the ideal, the abstract and the concrete, the present and the absent, simultaneously and in terms of each other.

Gray's use of the subjunctive to express the pathos of unrealized potential coincides with his use of synecdoche in stanza 12. The stanza is constructed around two symmetrical instances of this figure. Paradoxically, the reason that synecdoche is employed is that the concept of the individual is itself an abstraction that can only be concretized by being linked to parts of the body that stand in for the whole. But while the heart and the hands stand for the whole individual, they are, in their stark literalness, fragments of the whole; and thus synecdoche is countered by the ironical pathos of a concreteness which was doomed to remain abstract.

Stanza 12, like most in the Elegy, forms a single sentence. The verb in the main clause ("is laid") is singular because what is being evoked is a hypothetical individual, but it is nevertheless connected to two nominatives (the heart and the hands), and this is made possible syntactically by the fact that these are in the predicate position. The heart, being singular, requires a modifier, while the hands, being plural, do not. Thus, the parallelism is maintained without the duplication of all grammatical elements; and perhaps for this reason, the inversion in line 47 (it is, of course, the hands that might have swayed the rod rather than the other way round) is not felt to be one. Variation is also produced by the fact that the adverb "Perhaps" expresses a subjunctive idea in the indicative mood while lines 47 and 48 contain actual subjunctives.

The potentiality-actuality relationship developed in stanzas 12 to 15 is extremely ambiguous and difficult to parse. This section of the poem is framed by the fact that the poet, figuratively speaking, is staring into the emptiness of the grave and speculating on a fullness that might have been. But does this might have been point to a fullness that was destined to remain unknown or to an emptiness that might have been full if other conditions had obtained? Both of these possibilities are latent, and ultimately the ambiguities are unresolvable because they exist in the realm of pure speculation--for Gray as much as for the reader. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of pure content, at least, the images in stanza 12 are expressive of fullness; and thus we are led to the first of our two alternatives. The force of the

images is carried by a latent indicative that is framed by the subjunctive; and if we foreground this indicative, we find that the heart was at one time pregnant with celestial fire, and that the hands were as adept as those that have actually swayed the rod of empire or waked the living lyre to ecstasy.

The feeling of waste is both intensified and mitigated by the suggestion of a fullness that was destined to leave no historical traces. But this interpretation leaves us with two further possibilities: (1) that the potential for creative expression may have existed but that creative expression itself never occurred; and (2) that creative expression actually occurred but has been lost to history. The latter interpretation is not given in the stanza to the same extent as the former, however, for it is clearly impossible to have swayed the rod of empire while remaining unknown. And yet this interpretation is by no means an empty extrapolation; for to have waked the lyre to ecstasy while remaining unknown--i.e. to have been a poeta ignotus--is eminently possible. Indeed, in this context one might consider the case of Thomas Chatterton, "the marvellous Boy," who was born in 1752, the year after the publication of the Elegy.<sup>2</sup> Chatterton's story suggests that there were forces operating during the period that opened up new possibilities for expression for members of the working classes while at the same time, of course, repressing those possibilities.

It is important, however, that at this stage of the poem, the "rod of empire" and the "living lyre"--which are symbolic instruments in the hands of two distinct types of "rounded" individuals--are seen in terms of a basic complementarity. From the balanced perspective of classical humanism, the via activa and the via contemplativa are

parallel paths, for both may lead to fulfillment and greatness and both are dependent on each other. (The "paths of glory" may "lead but to the grave," if considered under the aspect of eternity, but given the limitations of the human condition, they are apparently not wholly to be despised.) The creative process (i.e. "celestial fire") is generic, manifesting itself in various directions, and the perspective on power itself is singularly devoid of melancholy or ressentiment. This is not because Gray has a naive attitude toward power, of course (indeed, we have already seen that this is not so, and later on the relationship between power and evil will be explicitly raised),<sup>3</sup> but rather because, other things being equal, presence (or being) must be seen as a "good" in itself when measured against absence (or nothingness). And precisely because Gray is speculating on what might have been from the standpoint of what could not have been, the apparent innocence of his attitude toward history does not strike us as sentimental.

Those buried in the country churchyard are, of course, lost to history, but in contemplating their fate Gray is at the same time meditating on the nature of history. To Gray in the Elegy, history is more than the chronicle of those who have made an impact on history: it encompasses of the problematics of loss, and it thus enters the domain of lyric poetry--which is something profoundly new in the history of English poetry. And yet, it is as a chronicle of those who have achieved renown that History presents itself--and in a sense, one can only conceive of it otherwise by negation. Gray's use of the subjunctive is of radical significance in this regard, for it enables him to convey presence and the "presence of absence" simultaneously.

Stanza 13:

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page  
 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;  
 Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,  
 And froze the genial current of the soul.

As we noted, the imagery of stanza 12 leads us to interpret the problem of unfulfilled potential primarily in terms of a fullness that failed

*The Problem of  
 Unfulfilled  
 Potential (2)*

to leave a trace of itself. But this interpretation, if taken to an extreme, verges on sentimentality, for it implies that extraordinary creative capacities can flourish under conditions of poverty and deprivation.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it conceives of the creative process as unmediated by social and historical factors--much as, in the pastoral, the poet is represented as a shepherd.<sup>2</sup>

To the extent that such an interpretation is latent in stanza 12, stanza 13 follows as a necessary corrective. For what happens, in effect, is that the subjunctive meets up with an implicit conditional. Indeed, the hands might have swayed the rod of empire or waked the lyre to ecstasy if (but his is an enormous "if") Knowledge had unrolled her ample page and Chill Penury had not frozen the genial current of the soul; but of course, these circumstances did not occur. From this point of view, the concept of potentiality becomes equivalent to "innate intelligence," or some such abstraction, and hence the might have been of stanza 12 no longer underscores a fullness that failed to leave a trace of itself but, on the contrary, an emptiness or poverty that was simply incapable of emerging from its generic confines. And this, of course, is true; and, though obvious, it needs to be stated explicitly in order to counteract the tendency, on the one hand (the left), to sentimentalize

the situation, and on the other hand (the right), to "impute to These the fault" for not having imposed their mark on the world. The simple point being made is that knowledge is a prerequisite to creative power (for knowledge is a kind of power), and under conditions of deprivation one is deprived also of knowledge.

Knowledge is described as "rich with the spoils of time," and this suggests to Brooks that it is being associated with the "ignoble competition . . . of the 'madding crowd.'"<sup>3</sup> But the military metaphor, though perfectly apt, does not signify that Knowledge is an alienated presence that should be viewed ironically. On the contrary, if time is understood simultaneously in its negative and positive aspects--i.e. as embracing both discontinuity and continuity--then it becomes clear that knowledge is that which is simultaneously won back from time and preserved against time, for it is the basis on which the future is constructed. The personification of knowledge thus emphasizes the sense in which History is an active process, which has as its basis the accumulation of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> History, in this teleological sense, is "man-made" time (for Hegel, man is the inventor of time)--to be set over against mere transience or death. This, of course, is not to suggest that knowledge (with a small "k") must always be viewed in such exalted terms--Gray has no illusions on this score--but rather that Knowledge as a function is being seen in its universal relation to the human enterprise.

If Knowledge has failed to unroll her ample page to the poor, this is not because her riches are merely in the service of the upper classes. Those riches are ultimately in the service of humanity as a

whole; but in relation to this issue, a conservative interpretation such as Brooks's might easily meet up with a leftist analysis that conceives of knowledge as equivalent to ideology. Both perspectives, however, would be equally misguided. In Marxian terms (as distinct from those of contemporary cultural leftism), Knowledge's riches would constitute use-value--which is immeasurable, since it ultimately corresponds to that which increases the creative capacities of humanity as a whole--while the riches of Ambition and Grandeur would constitute exchange-value. Under conditions in which use-value and exchange-value are in contradiction--i.e. in which exchange-value mocks the useful toil of the producers of value-- Chill Penury is necessarily a member of the dramatis personae. Knowledge is a kind of power, but its power to distribute the riches of knowledge can be appropriated by the rich and powerful, and arrested by their servant--Chill Penury.

Stanza 14:

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.

The connection that has been drawn between obscurity and poverty, on the one hand, and between unfulfilled potential and ignorance, on the other, suggests that the Elegy, although a lyric poem without an explicit didactic focus, nevertheless has an implicit programmatic dimension. Nobody would argue that the poem does not deplore

"Chill Penury," but the ideological consequences that may be derived from this will depend on how one interprets the poem's tone. The crucial issue is whether one believes that the poem is expressing--and consequently buttressing--an attitude of resignation to a state of affairs that is intrinsic to the nature of things and therefore as inevitable as death, or whether one believes that it contains an implicit polemic against this state of affairs. The Elegy has been interpreted in both of these directions by critics of opposite political persuasions. During the French Revolution, for example, as Frank Ellis points out, it was translated by revolutionists and monarchists alike.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, academic critics of a conservative temper have tended to view it as a conservative poem of resignation; but paradoxically, such would also appear to be the case among critics on the Left--including those who might at one time have entertained the possibilities of "proletarian culture."

Much as it is impossible to reduce the Elegy's subject to a particular construct, so it is equally impossible to pinpoint the poem's tone in terms of a particular attitude. The reason for this, essentially, is that as Gray's meditation unfolds, the various perspectives it adopts are continually being revised and reinterpreted against one another, so that the major problems of death and death-in-life on which it is focused are sometimes congruent and sometimes antithetical to each other. A "conservative" reading of the poem would argue that these problems are ultimately symmetrical in the Elegy; a "platonic" (or perhaps "marxist-

humanist") reading would argue that they are ultimately asymmetrical and that the poem's tragic emotion is generated not only in terms of that which is inevitable (and bounded by Nature) but also in terms of that which is amenable to human intervention (and bounded by History).

William Empson's well-known discussion of stanza 14, in the "Proletarian Literature" chapter of Some Versions of Pastoral, represents the classic statement of the position that Gray's tone in the Elegy reflects a conservative political outlook. Finding that the Elegy "is an odd case of poetry with latent political ideas,"<sup>2</sup> Empson argues as follows:

*Empson's  
Interpretation*

What this means [the stanza as a whole], as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system or carrière ouverte aux talents. This is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it. (It is true that Gray's society, unlike a possible machine society, was necessarily based on manual labor, but it might have used a man of special ability wherever he was born.) By comparing the social arrangement to Nature he makes it seem inevitable, which it was not, and gives it a dignity which was undeserved. Furthermore, a gem does not mind being in a cave and a flower prefers not to be picked; we feel that the man is like the flower, as short-lived, natural, and valuable, and this tricks us into feeling that he is better off without opportunities. The sexual suggestion of blush brings in the Christian idea that virginity is good in itself, and so that any renunciation is good; this may trick us into feeling it is lucky for the poor man that society keeps him unspotted from the World. The tone of melancholy claims that the poet understands the considerations opposed to aristocracy, though he judges against them; the truism of the reflections in the churchyard, the universality and impersonality this gives to the style, claim as if by comparison that we

ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death.

Many people, without being communists, have been irritated by the complacency in the massive calm of the poem, and this seems partly because they feel there is a cheat in the implied politics; the "bourgeois" themselves do not like literature to have too much "bourgeois ideology."<sup>3</sup>

Empson's argument is certainly ingenious, but if there is a "cheat in the implied politics," it is Empson's rather than Gray's; for what Empson has done is to pose his own conservative interpretation in the language of the Left. His argument subtly echoes the "commodity fetishism" chapter of Capital, in which Marx points out that the economic "laws" that obtain under capitalism tend to be regarded as though they were laws of Nature and hence inevitable.<sup>4</sup> But the fact of the matter is that Gray is not comparing the social arrangement to Nature in order to make it seem inevitable. On the contrary, in the metaphorical substitutions of stanza 14, Gray is making use of natural symbols that already embody human values in order to convey something on the order of an inverted carpe diem theme, which has already been prepared for by the preceding stanzas. Both the gem and the flower symbolize beauty, purity, innocence, and so on--and of course the gem in particular does not merely embody abstract values but is valuable in economic terms as well. It is ludicrous of Empson to argue that "a gem does not mind being in a cave and a flower prefers not to be picked," because in attacking Gray's use of the pathetic fallacy he is making use of it himself. In actuality, of course, neither the gem nor the flower would have any feelings in the matter at all: they serve to concretize a human pathos, and they are set in relation to the theme of unfulfilled potential that has been developed throughout the poem, and more or less

explicitly in stanzas 12-13. And as far as poetry is concerned, the pathetic fallacy is no fallacy at all; for language simply has no other means of concretizing internal feeling-states than through external objects.

Empson notes that "the sexual suggestion of blush brings in the Christian idea that virginity is good in itself, and so that any renunciation is good"; but in fact, this verb is a clue to the inverted carpe diem theme that is being developed in the poem. This becomes apparent when we examine stanza 14 against its clearest "source" in the English tradition, Edmund Waller's famous lyric, "Go lovely rose."

(The italics, indicating words that are echoed in stanza 14, are mine.)

Go, lovely rose!  
Tell her that wastes her time and me  
That now she knows,  
When I resemble her to thee,  
How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,  
And shuns to have her graces spied,  
That hadst thou sprung  
In deserts, where no men abide,  
Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth  
Of beauty from the light retired;  
Bid her come forth,  
Suffer herself to be desired,  
And not blush so to be admired.

Then die! that she  
The common fate of all things rare  
May read in thee  
How small a part of time they share<sup>5</sup>  
That are so wondrous sweet and fair.

In Waller's lyric, the blushing of the girl is in contradiction to the blooming of the rose, for the one denotes withdrawal and the other emergence---though perhaps on a deeper level these two antithetical meanings coincide, since there is a suggestion that the

girl's loveliness is intensified by her modesty. In stanza 14 of the Elegy, the primary meaning of "blush" is clearly "bloom," but something of Waller's delicately ambiguous shading has been retained. The flower's reticence is intrinsic to its beauty, much as the pathos we feel in connection with the unfulfilled potential of the poor is intensified by the fact that they have remained "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife" (line 73). (The Keatsian formula for this will be: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter still.") But this is very far from saying that the poor "are better off without opportunities" or that "we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death."

The context for Gray's echoes of Waller is the theme of unfulfilled potential that he has been developing in the previous stanzas of the Elegy. And one might ask why, if he were expressing an attitude of conservative resignation, he would have evoked this problem in the first place.<sup>6</sup> He might simply have concluded with Pope, in the Essay on Man (although we should not hold Pope to this attitude), that "Whatever is, is right" (iv. 394). But the fact that Gray is not expressing such a view is corroborated by The Alliance of Education and Government, a fragment in the Augustan verse-essay mode which is the only explicitly didactic poem that Gray ever attempted, and of vital importance for our understanding of his political philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Begun no later than 1748 and probably abandoned by 1749,<sup>8</sup> the composition of The Alliance is overlapped by that of the Elegy, and the intimate connection between the two is immediately apparent. Both the subject of The Alliance and the pattern of imagery it employs indicate that it ought to be read as a companion-piece to the

*Gray's Implicit  
Didactic Focus*

Elegy, and particularly in relation to stanza 14. The poem's basic argument is given in its title. "I mean to show," wrote Gray to Wharton, "that [education and government] must necessarily concur to produce great & useful Men."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the poem argues that in order for both the individual and the society as a whole to flourish--that is, to fulfill their potential--"equal Justice with unclouded Face" must "scatter with a free, tho' frugal, Hand / Light golden Showers of Plenty o'er the Land." (The last of these lines echoes line 63 of the Elegy: "To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land.") In the absence of a system dedicated to this end, "fond Instruction on the growing Powers / Of Nature idly lavishes her Stores." The organic analogy is developed throughout The Alliance, not because the social arrangement is being viewed in terms of inevitability, but, on the contrary, because the flourishing or languishing of human powers is being viewed as an "organic" process that is conditioned by the nature of the social system. In the opening 21 lines, which are quoted below, the gem and the flower of stanza 14 make an appearance, and there are other echoes between the two poems as well; for instance, the word "genial" in line 3 of The Alliance occurs in stanza 13 of the Elegy, where it has similar connotations:

As sickly Plants betray a niggard Earth,  
 Whose barren bosom starves her gen'rous Birth  
 Nor genial Warmth, nor genial Juice retains  
 Their Roots to feed, and fill their verdant Veins:  
 And as in Climes, where Winter holds his Reign,  
 The Soil, tho' fertile, will not teem in vain,  
 Forbids her Gems to swell, her Shades to rise,  
 Nor trusts her Blossoms to the churlish Skies:  
 So draw Mankind in vain the vital Airs,  
 Unform'd, unfriended, by those kindly Cares,  
 That Health and Vigour to the Soul impart,  
 Spread the young Thought, and warm the opening Heart.  
 So fond Instruction on the growing Powers

Of Nature idly lavishes her Stores,  
 If equal Justice with unclouded Face  
 Smile not indulgent on the rising Race,  
 And scatter with a free, tho' frugal Hand  
 Light golden Showers of Plenty o'er the Land:  
 But Tyranny has fix'd her Empire there,  
 To check their tender Hopes with chilling Fear,  
 And blast the blooming promise of the Year.

(ll. 1-21)

Clearly, then, a simple comparison of The Alliance of Education and Government and the Elegy disposes of Empson's argument. But to be fair to Empson, it should be noted that although stanza 14 has a specific reference to the situation of the poor, the problem of death-in-life that the poem as a whole raises has a bearing on the human condition in general, over and above the socio-economic dialectic. In articulating this side to the argument, Empson is on firmer ground, although to some extent his interpretation remains a reductive one even in this regard:

And yet what is said is one of the permanent truths; it is only in degree that any improvement of society could prevent wastage of human powers; the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy, cannot but be felt deeply, and is the central feeling of tragedy. And anything of value must accept this because it must not prostitute itself; its strength is to be prepared to waste itself, if it does not get its opportunity. A statement of this is certainly non-political because it is true in any society, and yet nearly all the great poetic statements of it are in a way "bourgeois," like this one; they suggest to many readers, though they do not say, that for the poor man things cannot be improved even in degree.<sup>10</sup>

It is quite true, as Empson observes, that one aspect of the tragic emotion generated by the Elegy stems from the inevitability of waste imposed upon us by our finitude. But in the context of stanzas 12 to 14, at least, the waste that Gray is lamenting is clearly one of kind rather than of degree. The gem and the flower remain a gem and a flower even if unperceived (Bishop Berkeley to the contrary), but the same

does not hold true for the human situation, in which the potential-actuality relationship is far more complex and ambiguous. The heart may have been pregnant with celestial fire (and from this point of view, the individual was already like the gem or flower), but for lack of the appropriate conditions the individual was unable to become himself (and from this point of view, the unperceived gem and flower stand in relation to sheer absence).

Contrary to Empson's assertion, moreover, it is not the articulation of tragic inevitability that is "bourgeois"; what is "bourgeois" is the omission of the tragedy of what is not inevitable. And far from being an accurate reflection of Gray's argument in the Elegy, Empson's final statement in the passage quoted above is merely tautological; for if things improve for the poor man in degree, then eventually he ceases to be poor, and this, of course, is a difference in kind. Or to pose the matter in Marxist terms: "Quantity becomes quality."

Finally, although Empson's interpretation of the Elegy is a conservative one that is couched in the language of the Left, we should note that an adherent of "proletarian literature" would certainly find the poem anathema on ideological grounds. For one thing, Gray is clearly working in the "high style," and he is the very antithesis of a "popular" poet--which is why the enormous popularity of the Elegy is so ironical a fact. For another, what Gray is clearly asserting in the Elegy is that the conditions of deprivation do not lend themselves to poetic capability. On both accounts, then, Gray could be accused of "elitism." But if he had

been able to respond, Gray would have pointed out that the concept of "proletarian literature" is not only a "version" of pastoral that is premised on a sentimental illusion but one that is all the more vicious in accepting deprivation as a normal basis for culture. Ironically, the category of proletarian literature is one that undercuts its own revolutionary doctrine; for if the poor were able to attain to poetry, it would follow that the conditions of deprivation and exploitation do not inhibit them and hence are not wholly to be despised.

Stanza 15:

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast  
 The little Tyrant of his fields withstood;  
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,  
 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

The theme of unfulfilled potential that has been developed in the three previous stanzas reaches a climax in stanza 15, as a result of the naming of three figures who embody different types of greatness and who are symbolically linked with the Revolution of 1642. Hampden, Milton, and Cromwell--these are the only names that occur in the Elegy--were originally Cato, Tully, and Caesar in the Eton Manuscript. The revision is crucial, for it poses the issue of heroic presence in immediate historical terms, and in the process it complicates the political (and ethical) associations that are linked to this theme. Cato and Cicero betoken republican virtue, and Caesar the beginnings of empire, and so with the Roman names there would have been something of a binary opposition between

liberty and tyranny. With the shift to an English frame of reference, however, the implication that Cromwell was guilty of his country's blood--and Milton, of course, was Cromwell's Latin secretary--suggests that the stanza cannot be understood in terms of such simple political counters.

Like other stanzas in the Elegy, stanza 15 is constructed on a base of anaphoric symmetry, with each of the repeated elements corresponding to one of the three compound subjects of the sentence. But what is remarkable is the way the predicate, "here may rest," balances the stanza from within the middle term of the sequence--an effect that is intensified by the falling of the caesura after the seventh syllable, which is rare in the English pentameter line in general and in Gray's practice in particular. The first subject, which is attached to a relative clause, extends over two lines; the second occupies half a line; and the third, a single line. Again, within the context of anaphoric symmetry, there is a good deal of syntactical variation.

In the context of the problem of unfulfilled potential that has been developed since stanza 12, the effect of the phrase modifying Cromwell--or rather the Cromwell who might have been--is extremely ironical, of course, and it signifies yet another shift of perspective in the poem's aim at inclusivity. In the previous stanzas, absence has been to presence as a negative to a positive; but now, quite abruptly, we are forced to become aware of a new problematic that looms on the horizon--though one which will not actually be developed until stanzas 17-18, and which we

shall therefore bracket for the moment.

The naming of three figures who played a crucial role in English history--and Milton and Cromwell are what Hegel would have called "world-historical" figures--is an indication that the Elegy should be considered not merely in relation to the elegiac tradition, but also--albeit anti-thetically--in relation to a tradition of "heroic" poetry. In this regard, it is important to note that Gray's four-line stanza of alternating rhymes, which came to be regarded as the "elegiac stanza" in the eighteenth century (partly, no doubt, as a result of the Elegy itself), was often referred to as the "heroic stanza" during the seventeenth. Criticism, however, has tended to view the poem rather narrowly in the context of the elegies of James Hammond and William Shenstone, both of whom employ the four-line alternating stanza and both of whom are mainly working in the decadent pastoral mode of the period. Hammond's Love Elegies, which Dr. Johnson dismissed as "worthless,"<sup>1</sup> are mainly imitations of Tibullus; they were published in 1743 and were probably known to Gray.<sup>2</sup> Shenstone, who was influenced by Hammond--he refers to the four-line alternating stanza as "Hammond's meter"--published his elegies in 1764, but they had circulated in manuscript for some twenty years, and thus may have been seen by Gray before the completion of the Elegy.<sup>3</sup> It is unlikely, however, that Gray would have been influenced in any important way by either poet. Hammond is never mentioned in his correspondence; Shenstone receives praise for

*Gray's Antithetical  
Relationship to  
the Heroic*

"The Schoolmistress," which is pronounced "excellent in its kind,"<sup>4</sup> but all other references to his poetry are disparaging. In the "Prefatory Essay on Elegy" that Shenstone added to the volumes he published in 1764, he observed that "it is in particular the task and merit of elegy to shew the innocense and simplicity of rural life to advantage. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Shenstone's notion can be seen as applicable to Gray's Elegy only if one conceives of the latter in sentimental terms. Writing to Wharton, Gray remarks: "But then there is Mr. Shenstone, who trusts to nature and simple sentiment, why does he do no better? he goes hopping along his own gravel-walks, and never deviates from the beaten paths for fear of being lost."<sup>6</sup>

In the "Observations on English Metre" that Gray collected in his commonplace book during the period (1752-58) when he and Mason were planning a history of English poetry, neither Hammond nor Shenstone is cited under the section on stanzas of four lines with alternating rhymes. Mention is made of poems by Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, and Gascoigne, but the most interesting entry, from our point of view, is Dryden's Annus Mirabilis. Dryden's poem may fairly be said to epitomize the seventeenth-century heroic (but non-epic) mode, and in his Preface he indicates that his choice of meter was a concomitant of this mode:

I have call'd my Poem Historical, not Epick,  
though both the Actions and Actors are as much  
Heroick, as any Poem can contain. . . . I have

chosen to write my Poem in Quatrains or Stanza's of four in alternate rhyme, because I have ever judg'd them more noble, and of greater dignity, both for the sound and number, then any other Verse in use amongst us.<sup>7</sup>

Later on in the Preface, moreover, Dryden refers to Sir William Davenant, who, in the Preface to Gondibert, defends his use of the same meter in similar terms.<sup>8</sup>

Gray, of course, was profoundly influenced by Dryden, to whom he pays ample tribute in both The Progress of Poesy and the Stanza's to Mr. Bentley. "If there was in his own numbers any thing that deserved approbation," Gray told James Beattie, "he had learned it all from Dryden."<sup>9</sup> Nor would the influence of Dryden have been merely stylistic. Although he is sometimes thought of as a "reactionary" because of his association with the Royalist cause, Dryden, as Earl Miner points out, was "a historical progressivist with great faith in what man might achieve in time."<sup>10</sup> Dryden's belief in progress is very much in evidence in Annus Mirabilis, and this is one of the factors that connects the poem (however antithetically) to the Elegy as well as to the more overtly Drydenesque Alliance of Education and Government.

Consequently, it is not surprising that in spite of the temperamental differences between the two poets, there is an intimate connection between the rhetorical eloquence of Dryden's heroic verse and the effects for which Gray was striving in the Elegy. In the following extraordinary stanza from Annus Mirabilis, for example,

Go, Mortals, now, and vex your selves in vain  
 For wealth, which so uncertainly must come:  
 When what was brought so far, and with such pain,  
 Was onely kept to lose it neerer home,<sup>11</sup>

the adverb "when" creates the same kind of grammatical condensation that, as we have seen, Gray uses to effect in the Elegy.<sup>12</sup> Examples could be multiplied.

Ian Jack calls attention to Gray's reference to Annus Mirabilis in the commonplace book; but according to Jack, "it is in an earlier poem than Annus Mirabilis, the Heroick Stanza's to the memory of Cromwell, that we find Dryden coming closest to Gray's use of the meter."<sup>13</sup> Jack's argument is an astute one, especially in light of the ironic reference to Cromwell in stanza 15, although Jack does not explicitly make this connection. Moreover, since the Heroick Stanza's is an elegy on an heroic figure, it marks a convergence of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century conceptions of the meter. But from a strictly stylistic viewpoint, the differences between Annus Mirabilis and the Heroick Stanza's are negligible, and therefore it would seem that Jack's argument is based on a priori assumptions about the Elegy's genre. If the genre is taken as a fixed category with rigid boundaries, then it would seem far-fetched to connect Gray's poem to Annus Mirabilis; but in fact, as we shall later observe, the elegiac genre was considered an especially fluid one by the eighteenth century. The question of whether, and in what sense, the Elegy is an elegy is a problematic one that we shall have to consider later on--most especially since the poem itself manifests an awareness of the problem.<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, if we set aside a priori generic assumptions, it becomes clear that the formal connection between Gray and Dryden

has rather complex thematic and, indeed, generic ramifications. The crucial point to be discerned, however, is simply this: Whereas Dryden's heroic poems celebrate actors and actions that have an immediate bearing on the public stage of history, the Elegy poses the issue of the heroic from the standpoint of those who have been denied access to this public stage. The heroic quatrain of the seventeenth century becomes the elegiac quatrain of the eighteenth, essentially because of the disappearance of the heroic as a viable mode; the Elegy maintains contact with the heroic, but only from the standpoint of loss. Thus, whereas in Dryden's Heroick Stanza's the heroic and elegiac strains converge from the standpoint of the heroic, in the Elegy it is the loss of the heroic itself that is lamented.

This loss of the heroic, which in a certain sense is tantamount to the alienation of poetry from itself, thrusts itself up athematically, as it were, from within the overt thematic problem of social alienation predicated on class divisions. The condition of poverty, as a result of which the Forefathers were "buried" during their lives, is somehow experienced (both by Gray and by the reader) as being contiguous with the conditions situating poetry; and the converse of this is also true. Nor is this a "loose" association whose consequence is the sentimental insertion of the poet "into a poem about people very different from himself," as Winters argued.<sup>15</sup> An examination of the social basis for poetry at the time at which Gray wrote would yield ample evidence of the fact that the poet is increasingly marginal to society. Gray's consciousness of this process--his consciousness of a lost center--is more profound than that of any of his contemporaries because it exists not only at the level of content but at the level of form; indeed, it is responsible

for transforming the very basis for poetry, as the Elegy demonstrates. To a writer such as Johnson, on the other hand, the awareness of the tenuousness of the poet's relationship to society--as in the remarkable "Life of Savage," for example, or the well-known lines in The Vanity of Human Wishes: "There mark what Ills the Scholar's Life assail, / Toil, Envy, Want, the Patron, and the Jail"<sup>16</sup>--does not coincide with an awareness of a lost center, does not manifest itself at the deepest levels of form. This is Johnson's strength, and this is perhaps why we tend to view him as central to his age; but ironically, it may be that Gray's vision of a lost center is closer to the period's actual center of consciousness.

The contiguous relationship between poverty and poetry makes itself felt most succinctly in the "mute inglorious Milton" of line 59; a

*"Some mute  
inglorious Milton":  
A Point of Tropo-  
logical Convergence*

figure whose implications are extremely various. On the most obvious level, the figure is an oxymoron--for to be mute and inglorious is clearly to be no Milton at all. However,

if we think of the figure as a poeta ignotus, which is one of the several possible interpretations of the potentiality-actuality relationship developed in the previous stanzas, we are thinking of him basically in terms of metonymy--Puttenham's "misnamer" in The Arte of English Poesie<sup>17</sup>--for from this point of view the trope is equivalent to the abstract category. (Kenneth Burke, in his essay "Four Master Tropes," views metonymy as a figure of reduction,<sup>18</sup> and one could say that a "mute inglorious Milton" reduces the field of possible poetae ignoti.) But there is also a sense in which metaphor (which Burke sees in terms of perspective) is operative here, since the fame of a Milton provides

the perspective against which to measure anonymity. From yet another point of view, however, the figure is a representation of what cannot literally be represented, a name for that which is nameless, and (in the context of the paradox of the One and the Many) a part for the whole--hence a synecdoche. (Burke views synecdoche in terms of representation.) As such, however, the figure straddles both ends of the absence-presence dialectic, and thus is being galvanized by irony--though, as Burke suggests, it may be that irony is less a trope than the dramatic interaction of tropes. A "mute inglorious Milton" is a representation of what cannot be represented, but the actual Milton is himself a "representative poet," and the Poet (considered in the abstract) has a representative function for humanity as a whole. The synecdoche is polarized by its ironical context in the absence-presence dialectic, each of these poles has manifold implications, and each is dependent upon the other pole.

But if Gray's "mute inglorious Milton" marks an extreme point of tropological convergence in the poem, this is because the figure not only essentializes the absence-presence dialectic that has been developed up to this point but, in doing so, refocuses this dialectic in terms of the poetic process itself, where the salient contrast is no longer between the rich and the poor as such but between the poet of achieved presence and his "mute inglorious" antitype. Although one is reminded at this point of Arnold's comment that Gray "never spoke out,"<sup>19</sup> one must beware of interpreting the figure in autobiographical terms; for such a reading would fail to take account of the fact that the poem's foregrounding of the poetic process cuts against the grain of its overt thematic thrust. There is certainly a self-reflexive aspect to Gray's

vision that reverberates with his existential situation, but this self-reflexivity does not originate from a simple autobiographical impulse; on the contrary, it originates from the loss of heroic content, in consequence of which the poetic process has been rendered problematic and has become an object unto itself--so that what had previously existed on the level of form has now assumed the status of a content.

The Elegy thus marks the emergence of a new self-reflexivity in English poetry, and there are clearly historical reasons for this. But

from a purely abstract standpoint, it may be noted that there is a certain logic--apart from all historical contingencies--about the fact that the fame-anonymity dialectic should turn in upon itself to foreground the poetic process. In the first place, one of the most important aspects of the poetic process is precisely its memorializing function. It is not for nothing that the Muses are the daughters of Memory. But if we turn the equation around to regard the memorializing function as primary--since without it civilization could not have developed--then the poetic process must be seen in its origins as a subsumed aspect and the primary vehicle of this function. As Eric Havelock argues in A Preface to Plato, without the prosodic and lexical recurrences of verse it would have been impossible for a preliterate society such as Homer's to transmit crucial cultural information from generation to generation.<sup>20</sup>

The implicit paradox in all this, however, is that what the poetic process memorializes, in addition to some content, is precisely itself. At the point at which society becomes capable of transmitting information in written form, the poetic process becomes less and less the

vehicle of an independent cultural content and more and more the transcendental embodiment of what we can only term the sacred, since it is cherished for itself rather than for the utilitarian value of what it contains. At this point, the poem not only encloses what the culture wishes to preserve but is its own object of preservation.

There is thus a logical connection between the issue of presence that Gray is raising from a social point of view and the very nature of the poetic process; and, as a matter of fact, this connection is implicit in the pastoral tradition. But the existence of such a connection in the abstract gives us no understanding of how or why it is manifested from the standpoint of absence or poverty in the Elegy and foregrounded as a subject for poetry itself. The question that confronts us, then, is how the new self-reflexivity that enters the tradition with Gray's Elegy is related to the previous tradition.

The presence of Milton in stanza 15 is a sign of the direction our investigation must take, and the crucial text in this regard is, of course, Lycidas, which, as we noted in Chapter 2, has often been regarded as the "model" for the Elegy, even by critics whose interpretations of Gray's poem are in other respects diametrically opposed.<sup>21</sup> The salient connection between the Elegy and Lycidas has to do with the fact that Milton's poem is a pastoral elegy, and indeed the culmination of that genre in European literature; concomitantly, however, to assume that the Elegy is modeled upon Lycidas is to fail to take the generic significance of the pastoral elegy into account. For when one recognizes that the pastoral, in its transcendental mode, is a utopian response to the same problem of alienation that is directly confronted in the Elegy, it becomes clear that, far from being modeled upon Lycidas,

the Elegy constitutes what is in fact the dissolution of the pastoral. But in order to pose this connection concretely, we have to examine how and why the pastoral emerges as a utopian response to history, why such a response is motivated by "historical necessity," and why its symbolic dissolution in Gray's Elegy corresponds to a new imperative.

The image of the poet as a shepherd, which is central to the pastoral as a distinct genre, is informed, in the first place, by the myth of the Golden Age, according to which the original condition of mankind was characterized by harmony and natural sufficiency, without the necessity of either labor or law. Here is Ovid's account of the Golden Age myth in the Metamorphoses (in Arthur Golding's Elizabethan translation):

*The Pastoral and  
the Myth of the  
Golden Age*

Then sprang up first the golden age, which of  
itself maintainde,  
The truth and right of every thing unforst and  
unconstrainde.  
There was no fear of punishment, there was no  
threatning lawe  
In brazen tables nayled up, to keep the folke in awe.  
There was no man would crouch or creepe to Judge  
with cap in hand,  
They lived safe without a Judge in every Realme and  
Lande.  
The loftie Pyntree was not hewen from mountaines  
where it stood,  
In seeking straunge and forren landes to rove upon  
the flood.  
Men knew none other countries yet, than were themselves  
did keepe:  
There was no towne enclosed yet, with walles and  
ditches deepe.  
No horne nor trumpet was in use, no sword nor helmet  
worne.  
The worlde was suche, that souldiers helpe might  
easily be forborne.  
The fertile earth as yet was free, untoucht of spade  
or plough,  
And yet it yeelded of itselfe of every things inough.<sup>22</sup>

At the heart of the pastoral, then, is nostalgia--nostalgia for a mode of life which certainly could never have existed but which the poet locates in the dim confines of the past. For this reason, however, as W.W. Greg pointed out in his landmark study of the form early in the century, there has often been a good deal of confusion as to its origins:

We are often, for instance, told that it is the earliest of all forms of poetry, that it characterizes primitive people and permeates ancient literature. Song is, indeed, as old as human language, and in a sense no doubt the poetry of the pastoral age may be said to have been pastoral. It does not, however, follow that it bears any essential resemblance to that which subsequent ages have designated by the name.<sup>23</sup>

Greg's distinction between the pastoral and the poetry of the "pastoral age" is an important one because, as he observes, "a constant element in the pastoral is the recognition of a contrast, implicit or expressed, between pastoral life and some more complex type of civilization."<sup>24</sup>

Frank Kermode has expressed this point similarly by suggesting that "the first condition of the Pastoral is that it is an urban product";<sup>25</sup> and to this one might add that as an urban product, the pastoral must camouflage its origins. The reason for this is intrinsic to the form's utopian basis. By superimposing the values of a civilized upper-class onto a fictional agrarian landscape, the pastoral projects the vision of a reconciliation between Nature and History, such that civilization appears as an unmediated extension of Nature itself.

As Greg remarks, the importance of the pastoral as a form lies in the fact that it is "the expression of instincts and impulses deep-rooted in the nature of humanity."<sup>26</sup> But from a Marxist perspective, it might be observed that these instincts and impulses are connected

to the fundamental problem of History: the division of labor and the attendant alienation of men into classes, which is at once the product and the origin of cultural development. The pastoral, from this point of view, is a utopian form insofar as it projects an image in which the highest attainments of civilization--including poetry itself--are possessed without the necessity of History. The utopian synthesis implicit in the pastoral involves a kind of telescoping of the problem of historical necessity, with the result that the actual process of History is submerged and circumscribed, as it were. Yet at the same time, the pastoral points to the final mastery of man over Nature--to the end of History, both in the sense of its practical conclusion and also of its telos. This vision of historical necessity is expressed in its most succinct form in English poetry in Paradise Lost, when the Angel Michael, in a passage noted earlier,<sup>27</sup> tells Adam that in the fullness of time "the earth / Shall all be paradise, far happier place / Than this of Eden, and far happier days" (xii. 463-65). In the pastoral, however, such a conception could not be articulated--precisely because it is embodied as if the thing in itself had already been attained.

That the problem of alienation, or what we have termed "death-in-life," does not emerge as a major thematic postulate prior to the Elegy is due in large measure to the accumulated momentum of the pastoral tradition; indeed, one might go so far as to say that the submergence of this problem constitutes the religious task of the pastoral as a utopian mode. Concomitantly, it follows that the emergence of the problem of alienation as a major thematic construct in the Elegy signifies the dissolution of the pastoral as a major mode, and marks

the Elegy as a major turning-point or watershed in the tradition.

What was necessary in order for such an overturning to have occurred was an enormous struggle with the previous tradition, a struggle that critics have failed to recognize. This struggle was not merely a subjective one, in the sense that Bloom's Freudian theory of influence proposes--where the problem facing the poet is mainly one of clearing a space for himself out of the web woven by his precursors--but an objective engagement with reality aimed at arriving at poetic knowledge appropriate to its time.

Clearly, there are objective historical reasons beyond the tradition of poetry for why the utopian synthesis of the pastoral should for so long have blocked the problem of alienation from emerging. On the principle that ideas can only be concretized in a meaningful form when they are appropriate to their time, it follows that the problem of alienation would not have emerged as a major thematic construct prior to the Elegy because the determinism of class origins was taken for granted as a given. Only at the point at which the rigid hierarchies of class had begun to break down would the problem of alienation have come into focus--and this seems to have occurred around the middle of the eighteenth century. It is impossible to explain this process with any specificity; one can adduce such factors as the progressive development of capitalist forces, the rise of the middle class, and so on, but these are merely abstractions that will not take us very far. The case of a poet such as Chatterton, to whom we have already referred,<sup>28</sup> provides an objective correlative in sociological terms for the opening up of new possibilities, and, concomitantly, for a new perspective on social limitation. But it is the history of poetry itself--because it

can be perceived as an interrelated sequence, or, as the eighteenth century would say, as a "progress"--that provides the most concrete basis for such speculations on the relationship between consciousness and historical change.

In any event, it is clear that by the middle of the eighteenth century the pastoral as a viable mode had run its course. What remained was largely a husk, denuded of its authentic utopian impulse. This impulse, indeed, is turned against the pastoral in the Elegy; for by the time at which Gray wrote, the conventions of pastoralism had become synonymous with the cynical decadence of court life. Amid "the puerile conceits of the Petit Trianon,"<sup>29</sup> in Greg's phrase, where we find Marie Antoinette playing at being a milkmaid, the final image cast by the pastoral is shadowed by the Revolution.

But the Elegy bears an antithetical relationship not only to the pastoral in general but to the pastoral elegy in particular--and it is from this point of view that the salience of Lycidas makes itself felt. For much as *Lycidas and the Pastoral Elegy* the pastoral elegy is addressed to the death of the poet, so Gray's Elegy is addressed to the death of those who lacked the conditions to attain to poetry in the first place. Lycidas is a fictional name for an aspiring poet whose actual name (Edward King) is known to us; Gray's "mute inglorious Milton" is a name for the unknown many who cannot be named. Thus, from the outset, it is clear that the metaphysical basis for the pastoral elegy is inverted in Gray's Elegy; but in order to grasp the complexities of this transformation, we have to arrive at a closer understanding of the pastoral elegy as a distinct genre.

If, as has been suggested, the task of the pastoral is to effect a utopian reconciliation between Nature and History, it follows that the figure of the poet himself must be central, in dramatic terms, to the vision that is projected. For it is the poet, after all, who is envisioning a world in which such a reconciliation has already been effected; and since the pastoral is precisely this vision, it is logical that it should be peopled by poets. Consequently, there is a correspondence between the inside of the pastoral as a genre--where, through the image of the poet as shepherd, the vision of an already attained harmony is projected--and the outside through which this vision is engendered--i.e. the poet's desire for such a world.

The pastoral elegy builds upon this metaphysics by addressing the problem of death from the standpoint of the Orphic myth. For just as Orpheus gave voice to Nature, humanizing it, in effect, so the death of the poet threatens to tear the unity of the pastoral world asunder, threatens to point up its fictionality. Thus, addressing the dead poet, Milton writes:

But O the heavy change, now thou art gone,  
 Now thou art gone, and never must return!  
 Thee Shepherd, thee the Woods, and desert Caves,  
 With wild Thyme and the gadding Vine o'ergrown,  
 And all their echoes mourn.  
 The Willows and the Hazel Copses green  
 Shall now no more be seen,  
 Fanning their joyous Leaves to thy soft lays.  
 As killing as the Canker to the Rose,  
 Or Taint-worm to the weanling Herds that graze,  
 Or Frost to Flowers, that their gay wardrobe wear,  
 When first the White-thorn blows;  
 Such, Lycidas, thy loss to Shepherd's ear.

(ll. 37-49)

Yet within the closed world of the pastoral, a world that excludes the tragic, there is never any serious danger of this actually happening,

and in fact the reestablishment of an organic relationship between man and Nature is an a priori condition of the form. It would seem that death is introduced only for the purpose of being transcended; and in Lycidas, this is essentially the consolation that Milton's "uncouth Swain" offers us in the poem's magnificent dénouement:

Weep no more, woeful Shepherds weep no more,  
 For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,  
 Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor,  
 So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,  
 And yet anon repairs his drooping head,  
 And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled Ore,  
 Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:  
 So Lycidas, sunk low, but mounted high,  
 Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves,  
 Where other groves, and other streams along,  
 With Nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,  
 And hears the unexpressive nuptial Song,  
 In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love.  
 There entertain him all the Saints above,  
 In solemn troops, and sweet Societies  
 That sing, and singing in their glory move,  
 And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.  
 Now Lycidas, the Shepherds weep no more;  
 Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore,  
 In thy large recompense, and shalt be good  
 To all that wander in that perilous flood.

(ll. 165-86)

Dr. Johnson was repelled by Milton's "irreverend combinations"; the "trifling fictions" of the pastoral, he felt, ought not to be mingled with "the most awful and sacred truths."<sup>30</sup> But from an aesthetic point of view, there can be no doubt that Milton's synthesis of the two strains is perfectly seamless. Death is ultimately a foreign element to the organic harmony of the pastoral world, and therefore Lycidas "is not dead, / Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor" (my italics). Similarly, "Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves," the soul is eternal, and so Lycidas "sunk low, [is] mounted high."

It is worth noting, in this regard, that there is no logical transition to this the poem's dénouement. After the "pilot of the Galilean lake" has given his parable of the good and bad shepherds (ll. 113-31), the river Alpheus is invoked:

Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past  
That shrunk thy streams; . . .  
(ll. 132-33)

There is no explanation for why the "dread voice," which connects the death of a man to the death of Nature, has disturbed the harmony of the pastoral world, and no explanation for why this harmony has now been restored. Nor could there be; for in the context of the pastoral world, whose "Ivy [is] never sere" (l. 2), death can be incorporated only insofar as its existential meaning has been factored out from the outset.

We return from Lycidas to the Elegy, conscious, as Harold Bloom would say, of the belatedness of Gray's vision. Gray, of course, was thoroughly conscious of his belatedness in regard to the heroic tradition, and this consciousness, paradoxically, is one of the indices of his originality. It is expressed most explicitly in The Progress of Poesy, where the poet represents himself obliquely as coming in the wake of Milton, at a time when the "Lyre divine" is heard no more (ll. 107-13). Not that Milton himself was unconscious of the problem of belatedness in his handling of the ancient genres, however. Indeed, in Lycidas the "uncouth Swain" through whom Milton speaks, although he is an archetypal fixture of the timeless pastoral world, tells us in the poem's opening lines that he has come "Yet once more" to take up his appointed laurels. But, as in the opening lines of Paradise Lost, this is Milton's announcement that he can accept the challenge posed

by time and continue to fulfill--without irony--the role of the heroic poet. The only ironical thing about Lycidas, indeed, is that it is a poem from which irony--the "dread voice" telling us of death and of the unabsorbed residues of History--has been entirely expunged. This is not surprising, for irony, as Vico and Northrop Frye remind us, belongs not to the Golden Age but to the low mimetic age that bears its name.

The unabsorbed residues of history seep down through the succeeding century until they crystallize in Gray's Elegy, which is the poem of irony par excellence. In the Elegy, it is not so much that the heroic tradition is deconstructed by irony as that it makes its return via irony. Where in Lycidas irony is banished, in the Elegy it is the heroic--and, in a certain sense, poetry itself--that it is in exile. The polarities have been inverted, and yet they remain constant. Moreover, although in the Elegy the heroic is reduced to the zero degree, this occurs without loss of poetic power. Indeed, although the poem would seem to occupy a position of poverty vis-a-vis the previous tradition, there is a sense in which its scope is greater and its pathos more resonant than what has come before--so that it obliges us to reinterpret the tradition in its own terms, as if that which had come before was an abstract and too-early vision of what has finally been rendered concrete. In this sense, Gray's "mute inglorious Milton" might be viewed, in Harold Bloom's phrase, as a "transumption" of its illustrious precursor.

Stanzas 16-18:

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: nor circumscrib'd alone  
 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;  
 Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling of conscious truth to hide,  
 To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,  
 Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride  
 With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

As the problem of unfulfilled potential has been developed in stanzas 12 to 15, absence has been to presence as a negative to a positive. This is to say that Value has been submerged in Being or has been viewed as an extension of it. But in line 60, with the implication of the actual Cromwell's guilt, we are forced to become aware of the narrowness of this metaphysical scheme. To be sure, the phrase "guiltless of his country's blood" seems to have come almost as a spontaneous afterthought, as if from the necessity of finding a rhyme for "withstood," and the heavy syntactical parallelism of stanza 15 makes us read the line at first from the standpoint of the problem of unfulfilled potential. But in the end, the phrase has the effect of rupturing the metaphysical fabric of stanzas 12 to 15 and of opening it up to a new problematic.<sup>1</sup>

In stanzas 16 to 17, then, the problem of unfulfilled potential is brought into alignment with the problem of evil. The connection

<i>The Problem of Evil</i>	between the arrogance of power and evil was already perhaps implicit in stanzas 8 to 11,
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but the shift of perspective that occurs between stanzas 17 and 18 is

nevertheless a radical one--and it is interesting to note that this transition is the only one in the poem that is marked by a full enjambment between stanzas. (Twenty-six of the poem's thirty-two stanzas conclude in a full stop, an indication of how completely the quatrain form has been absorbed as the basic unit of progression.) The enjambment is produced by the suspension of the main clause from stanza 16 to 17;<sup>2</sup> and this suspension, in turn, is thematically occasioned by the fact that although line 60 ("Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood") had shifted the discourse in an ethical direction, the new perspective is not really established until the turn in stanza 17.

Other things being equal, the analogues of power and presence in stanza 16 are positively valenced, or at least neutral, because in secular terms they betoken fulfillment. Stanza 16 is very much in transition, and we are being pulled in several directions at once, but for the most part (as line 66 will then confirm) we are still on the side of the "virtues."<sup>3</sup> It is true that criminals as well as virtuous men may command applause or despise threats, but line 63 acts as a kind of ethical magnet for the other terms in the sequence, because "To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land"<sup>4</sup> is clearly to be virtuous; and it is important to note that Gray's polemic in stanzas 17 and 18 will not be directed against power as such, since the latter can have good as well as evil consequences, but rather against power which is sought for its own sake and wielded in the interests of evil. The parallelism operating in stanza 16, which associates three ethically neutral analogues of power with a positive one, thus represents a kind of coda to the absence-presence dialectic of stanzas 12-15 while at

the same time begging the ethical question.

Line 64 ("And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes") deserves special attention because in this line the absence-presence dialectic of stanzas 12 to 15 is recapitulated and essentialized through the linking of History to the paradox of the One and the Many. The personal history of the "historical individual" becomes, by synecdoche, part and parcel of his nation's history. "Read," as Lonsdale points out, has the primary meaning of "discern";<sup>5</sup> the individual is aware of his impact on History and thereby experiences what in secular terms is the apex of personal fulfillment. But the literal meaning of the verb supplies the line with its force and metaphorical richness. The individual who has "gone down" in History does not, of course, read but is read about; but in Gray's metaphorical reversal, the act of reading (about) oneself is tantamount to a triumph over death.

The vicious consequences of power sought for its own sake are adumbrated in stanzas 17 and 18 with a directness and economy that requires little commentary. In stanza 17, the focus is on the violence and cruelty that may result from the unbridled ruthlessness of the quest for power, and in stanza 18 it is on the deceit and corruption that result therefrom. The imagery of lines 66-67, as Lonsdale indicates, is typically Shakespearean,<sup>6</sup> but the power of these lines stems from Gray's ability to revitalize old metaphors by giving them a subtle twist. Where "wade through blood" would have been a cliché, Gray has revitalized the strength of the verb by linking it to the abstraction that the metaphor had originally concretized ("slaughter"). "The gates of mercy" is a formula of the popular literature of devotion, but in the bitterly ironic context of Gray's line, and as

linked to "on mankind," its effect is very powerful. As it might in Bunyan, the formula has a kind of distanced pathos, because its naiveté is comprehended and set against the subtle snares of the sophisticated world.

Stanzas 17 to 18 flow together with the accumulated momentum of Gray's polemic, and in these stanzas the motivic strains of stanzas 12 to 15 are taken up in retrograde, as it were. The poet and the political leader had been juxtaposed in stanzas 12 to 15 from the standpoint of potential virtue (although at this point the ethical dimension had not yet fully emerged), and now they are again set in tandem, but this time from the standpoint of potential crime. We noted earlier that in Gray's treatment of the metaphysics of presence, poetry itself is foregrounded because it is simultaneously the vehicle of Memory and that which is to be remembered.<sup>7</sup> In stanza 18, however, poetry--indeed, art in general--is seen as what it all too often is: the vehicle of corruption and ideology. Moreover, implicit in lines 72-74 is the notion that poetry, when in the service of Luxury and Pride, not only facilitates and partakes of evil but is itself a kind of idol worship. The "shrine of Luxury and Pride" is linked motivically to the "storied urn and animated bust" of stanza 11--those "Trophies" which, from the perspective of stanza 18, we might say were raised as fetishes to call the soul back to the body. That which links poetry to the symbolic triumph over death is what can make it a diabolical instrument of superstition and hubris--and hence the Old Testament flavor of these lines.

The vision of evil contained in stanzas 17 to 18 thus casts the emphasis on self-realization and fulfillment in stanzas 12 to 15 into

question, and in the process it obliges us to reconsider the political implications of the poem. Since the potential for vice is balanced against the potential for virtue, it could be argued that Gray is espousing a kind of pessimistic quietism, as a result of which one would not be inclined to attempt to alter the situation of the poor. Empson, we recall, had claimed that Gray in stanza 14 is comparing the social arrangement to Nature in order to make it seem inevitable;<sup>8</sup> and Brooks had argued that death is the matter on which Gray's irony exerts its force.<sup>9</sup> But in fact, there are really two principles that Gray is asserting, and he is asserting them both separately and in terms of the contradiction between them; for neither of these principles can be either factored out or harmonized with the other, since each has a separate (albeit one-sided) claim to truth. On the one hand, as we have seen in stanzas 12 to 15, Gray maintains the belief--as enunciated by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics--that a fully human existence requires the harmonious development of the faculties. But on the other hand, now in stanzas 17 and 18, Gray asserts the Platonic claim--it is derived, as we shall see, from the Republic--that the potential for vice is equal to the potential for virtue, and that both depend on education, opportunity, and so forth. There is no attempt on Gray's part to sentimentalize the situation; but the problem of evil does not lead him, as Brooks would suggest, to assume an attitude of quietism. On the contrary, as our earlier discussion of The Alliance of Education and Government has suggested, it would certainly have led him to advocate a transformation of social institutions, and particularly those relating to education.<sup>10</sup>

The Alliance is a Platonic tract; and as Lonsdale notes,<sup>11</sup> during

the period in which Gray was at work on both poems, he took extensive notes on Book VI of the Republic, where Plato deals with the philosopher's contribution to the state. Lonsdale quite rightly links the following passage from Gray's Commonplace book, in which Gray summarizes one of Plato's arguments, to both The Alliance and the Elegy:

Those Excellences & Endowments required to form a Mind susceptible of true Philosophy; as a quick & retentive Understanding, high Spirit, & a natural Greatness, & Simplicity of Soul (more particularly, if attended with what the World calls Blessings; Opulence, Birth, & Beauty of Person) are the most likely to draw off the Youth that possesses them, from that very Pursuit they were design'd for: and lighting (as he expresses it) in an improper Soil, that is corrupted by a bad Education, & ill-regulated Government become the readier instruments of Mischief to Mankind, by so much more, as Nature meant them for their Good. for every extraordinary Wickedness, every action superlatively unjust is the Product of a vigorous Spirit ill-nurtured; weak Minds are alike incapable of anything greatly good, or greatly ill.<sup>12</sup>

It is obvious, then, that for Gray (as for Plato) the problem of evil stems not from education or knowledge, as Brooks's argument would suggest,<sup>13</sup> but from bad education. (Indeed, Plato's purpose in writing the Republic was, among other things, to transform Greek educational practice.) Given a corrupt society, and the corrupt morals and educational system that go along with it, Gray would argue that vice is as likely to result from strong capabilities as virtue--and so the poor are at least spared the possibility of committing great crimes. This does not, however, make their poverty a good thing. Stanzas 17 and 18, in other words, do not cancel out the perspective of stanzas 12 to 15, they broaden it. What we have, then, is an ethical vision which is at once tragic, in that it comprehends the problem of evil, and utopian, in that it sees the possibility and necessity for the

eradication of evil. The crucial nexus linking the tragic and utopian strains in this ethical vision is History. The tragic, for Gray, as far as his ethical vision is concerned, is located not in what is intrinsic to the human condition per se, but in what is conditioned by a given set of cultural forces. Thus, the metaphysics of presence, as developed in stanzas 12 to 15, is framed by both the problem of death (stanzas 8-11) and the problem of evil (stanzas 17-18), but it is by no means cancelled out by them.

Stanza 19:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
 Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;  
 Along the cool sequester'd vale of life  
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

In the Eton Manuscript (see Appendix B), the four stanzas that Gray eventually rejected appear after line 72; and as we noted in Chapter 2, some scholars have tended to prefer the "version" of the poem that concludes with these stanzas.<sup>1</sup> But having come so far in tracing the Elegy's thematic progression, we can safely say that if the poem had indeed concluded with the four rejected stanzas, its closure would have been too abrupt and its structure inadequate to the demands of its development. This can be demonstrated through a brief summary of the poem's progression through stanza 18. First comes the description of the landscape (stanzas 1-3), which eventually focuses on the graves of the Forefathers (stanza 4). This leads to the evocation of the lives of the Forefathers (stanzas 5-7), and then to the attack on Ambition and Grandeur, in the context of which the contrast between the rich and the poor is posed against the universality of death (stanzas 8-11).

From here the poem takes up the problem of unfulfilled potential, first in itself (stanzas 12-16) and then in relation to the problem of evil (stanzas 17-18). What is revealed by even so bald a summary as this is that the Elegy would not have been "rounded off," so to speak, if it had not returned to focus on the actual images presented by the graves of the Forefathers, which, curiously, have not really been described at all up to this point. We see this with the benefit of the standard version, of course, but if Gray had not resituated his meditation in terms of the images themselves--a process which, in fact, occurs in stanzas 20 and 21--the poem's various thematic threads would have been left hanging and its attempt to arrive at an "organic" terminus would have been unresolved. Moreover, had the poem concluded with the four rejected stanzas after line 72, we would have been left with a dénouement of pessimistic withdrawal from the world, and this would have constituted a retreat from the Elegy's humanistic concerns--its attempt to recuperate a sense of the meaningfulness of human strivings even in the face of evil and death. Such a retreat, vitiating the poem's thematic complexity, would, however, have been in keeping with the interpretations of Gray's more conservative critics--which accounts for their preference for the "version" in the Eton Manuscript.

What immediately determines the renewed focus on the destiny of the Forefathers in stanza 19 is the fact that the vision of evil of stanzas 17 and 18 is so clearly connected to those who occupy the center of society, a center from which the Forefathers are removed both in actual fact and as if by a metaphysical barrier. For as Gray interprets the situation, if the virtues of the Forefathers were

circumscribed by the conditions of their existence, these virtues were nevertheless solid ones; for by remaining aloof from the struggle for wealth and power (though not necessarily by choice), the Forefathers were at least able to maintain their hold on a certain basic integrity--which cannot be said of those consumed by the "madding crowd's ignoble strife." Thus, in stanza 19 the contrast between the

*The Opposition  
between Town and  
Country as a  
Division between  
Classes*

rich and the poor confronts us simultaneously as an opposition between Town and Country and as a division between "classes" (if we may tentatively employ this term). The first of these oppositions is the traditional pastoral formulation, of course, but the second is really antithetical to the pastoral ethos.

Earlier we noted that Ambition, Grandeur, and their affines are metonymically linked to the "upper classes";<sup>2</sup> and clearly this is a fair, if somewhat vague, assumption. But it should be noted that the metaphor of social class is not part of the vocabulary that Gray has at his disposal, since it is predicated on the emergence of sociology. (It was really through Marx, of course, that this metaphor became part of the intellectual vocabulary.) Nevertheless, the metaphor of the center and its peripheries, which Gray does employ, and which is part of the classical apparatus of the pastoral, seems to verge in stanza 19 on something akin to a class conception avant la lettre. For where in the pastoral the dichotomy between Town and Country served to delineate a moral conception but not a social one--since it was precisely this social distinction between the classes that the pastoral sought to suppress--in the Elegy the social distinction is emphasized by the moral one. Gray is able to make use of the lateral metaphor

of the center and its peripheries because the Elegy, after all, is addressed to those buried in a country churchyard; but his use of the metaphor corresponds to a hierarchical distinction between social classes.

Throughout the Elegy, as has been suggested, the problem of Value is implicitly being raised in a number of different forms and from a number of different perspectives. There are two dimensions to Gray's concern with the problem of Value, however. On the one hand, in the tradition of classical ethics, Gray is concerned with the question of what constitutes a virtuous, good, or full life--that is, with spiritual values that have a bearing on mankind in general. But because this concern with universal value is mediated by the poem's contrast between the rich and the poor, Gray must also address the values of two distinct "classes." Thus, the concern with Value in its older, transcendental formulation comes into contact with historical contingencies.

Now, in stanza 19, because the moral and social opposition between the two "classes" has reached a point of climax, the two dimensions of Gray's concern with Value come into direct contact with each other--and this occurs around the question of nobility. We have seen that in formal and thematic terms the Elegy bears an antithetical relationship to the "heroic" tradition in English poetry,<sup>3</sup> but in stanza 19 what is foregrounded is the ethical and social implications of this issue. Linguistically, "nobility" as a virtue and "the nobility" as a social formation or class are homologously linked, of course--and from a Nietzschean point of view, the former must always be understood as

an outgrowth of the latter. Indeed, in The Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche goes so far as to argue that "a concept denoting political superiority always resolves itself into a concept denoting superiority of soul."<sup>4</sup> But whether or not this hypothesis is accurate, it is clear that through the process of time, in any event, the two formulations of nobility become at least somewhat independent of each other--and Nietzsche, for his part, would argue that this is a result of the "slave morality" of Christianity. Prior to the Elegy, however, the discrepancy between the two formulations is not really experienced; indeed, in the pastoral tradition, the utopian ethos of noblesse oblige is maintained precisely through the representation of aristocratic values through the peasantry. But in the Elegy, this discrepancy is felt as an outright contradiction. Not only does nobility not correspond to the nobility in the poem--which presumably is the class to which Ambition, Grandeur, and their affines in the sequence of deferred metonymies correspond--but there is even a sense in which this spiritual value devolves upon the Forefathers (i.e. the poor or the peasantry) themselves.

Insofar as such a reversal takes hold in the Elegy, it corresponds to the pattern adumbrated by Hegel in the crucial "Lordship and Bondage" section of the Phenomenology of Mind. In Hegel's dialectic, the Servant, by dint of his servitude, develops capabilities originally associated with the Master, but which the Master, himself limited by his domination of the Servant, has been able to develop only in a more circumscribed form.<sup>5</sup> From this Hegelian perspective, the ironies accruing to the terms crowd and ignoble in line 73 are extremely complex. That which is "ignoble" is, on the one hand, of

common or plebeian origin, and, on the other, characterized by baseness or meanness.<sup>6</sup> But the "madding crowd's ignoble strife," which is in apposition to the vision of evil of stanzas 17 and 18, is situated at a metaphysical center which is presumably occupied by the nobility--again, insofar as Ambition, Grandeur, and their affines are linked to this class. Although the theme of unfulfilled potential, as developed in stanzas 12 to 15, had suggested that the full emergence of the individual is a process allotted only to the few who are at the metaphysical center of the society, this center now turns out to be occupied by an undifferentiated crowd of lost souls who are as anonymous in their way as the Forefathers, but in a malignant rather than in a pathetic sense. Against this grim perspective (which anticipates modern visions of society as a wasteland), the virtues of the Forefathers--sobriety, integrity, and so forth--appear in shining relief. Indeed, there is even a sense in which these "homely" virtues begin to subsume the aristocratic ones of heroism and nobility, for a positive conception of Value has passed from the center to the margins of society.

But if such a metaphysical reversal takes hold in stanza 19, it does so only to a limited extent and only by process of elimination, as it were. To identify nobility with the Forefathers would be to indulge in a kind of sentimentalism which Gray himself eschews when he tells us that their virtues were circumscribed by the conditions of their existence (ll. 65-66). And by the same token, it is only provisionally that we can view Ambition and Grandeur as being linked to the nobility. If these figures are considered in relation to a social matrix, we have something like a tenor-vehicle situation (in

the context of metonymy rather than metaphor), in which the tenor is indefinitely postponed throughout the sequence. The reason for this, of course, is that since nobility can no longer be seen as homologous with the nobility, there literally is no tenor. The nobility has, in a sense, disappeared and the center is now occupied by an unnamed and invisible class. The "madding crowd's" struggle for power and wealth is unequivocally "ignoble," but there is no negation of the negation that would ground a positive conception of nobility in social practice. Thus, the concept of the noble--like the concept of the heroic in literary terms--though it continues to be of the utmost meaningfulness, is entirely unhinged as far as a social matrix is concerned. It corresponds to a lost center and can only be broached from the standpoint of nostalgia.

It goes without saying, of course, that the decentering of aristocratic values from their putative social matrix, which Gray, however unconsciously, is representing in the Elegy, corresponds to the bourgeois transformation of economic and social relations. On numerous occasions, Marx makes the point that the bourgeois transformation strips away the fictions of feudal society to reveal power relationships in their most naked form. In the context of the bourgeois transformation, both the aristocracy and the peasantry as such (and they only exist "as such" under the aegis of rigid feudal hierarchies which are themselves largely fictional) are seen as disappearing classes. Thus, in the Elegy, the center is occupied by an ignoble crowd; and in The Deserted Village (1768-70), Goldsmith's great poem, the disappearance of the peasantry itself is depicted:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
 Where wealth accumulates, and men decay;  
 Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;  
 A breath can make them, as a breath has made.  
 But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,  
 When once destroyed, can never be supplied.<sup>7</sup>

Goldsmith's vision is a conservative one (which is not to detract from the beauty of the lines quoted above), because the loss of the peasantry is mourned unambivalently as the loss of an anterior plenitude. In the case of the Elegy, however, the situation is far more complex, and this is because the desire for self-realization and the desire for purity are in conflict with each other. The peasantry has the aura of purity for Gray, as it does for Goldsmith and later for Wordsworth; but for Gray it also betokens limitation. Given actual historical circumstances, neither of the two conflicting desires can be factored out or subsumed by the other, and therefore the dilemma remains intractable. Consequently, for Gray in the Elegy, there can be no theoretical solution to the problem of how to live; for what is required in practice is a continual balancing of one perspective against the other.

Stanza 20:

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect  
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
 With uncouth rhimes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,  
 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

In stanza 20, the Elegy returns to the point in stanza 4 at which the meditation on the Forefathers was begun, and this is indicated by the demonstrative pronoun in line 77. The transition to the theme of unfulfilled potential in stanza 12 was also, as we noted, marked by the demonstrative;<sup>1</sup> but by stanza 20, what we may call the poem's

speculative trajectory has been completed, and as a result the meditation has turned to a deepened consideration of the actual images presented by the graves. Certain themes that had previously been developed will now, in stanzas 20 to 24, be taken up once again, but this time in retrograde, as it were; for where the pathos of "death-in-life" had initially emerged from the pathos of death, the situation is now reversed. The reason for this, as we shall see, is that the framing contrast between the rich and the poor has now been left behind. Having been brought to a climax in stanza 19, the socio-economic dialectic now gives way to a confrontation, in anagogical terms, with the human condition in its universality.

Stanza 20 is clearly in apposition to stanzas 10 and 11, where the memorialization theme had initially been posed. But where the desire of the rich and powerful to perpetuate themselves through tangible memorials had been attacked as a form of hubris, the same motivation on the part of the poor is now comprehended from the standpoint of its essential pathos. This pathos, however, is much more complex than it would appear on the surface. On the one hand, the poor are seen as pathetic in their feeble--and almost laughable--attempts to memorialize themselves: Gray's adjectives "frail," "uncouth," and "shapeless" come close to replicating the disdainful smiles of Ambition and Grandeur in stanza 8, but without actually doing so, of course. But on the other hand, and much more importantly, since the desire to be remembered is now seen as universal to the species ("Yet ev'n these bones . . ."), humanity as a whole is now comprehended as pathetic in its relationship to death. What has emerged, in other words--and this is absolutely crucial to our

understanding of the poem--is the pathos of the universal. The poor  
*The Pathos of* are the vehicle of this pathos--as by a  
*the Universal* synecdoche--because of the "poverty" of  
 humanity as a whole in relationship to death. The pathos of this re-  
 lationship was not immediately present when the theme of memoriali-  
 zation had initially been posed, precisely because this was in the  
 context of the diatribe against the Proud, whose memorials were seen  
 as being aimed at buttressing their own arrogance and vanity rather  
 than at acknowledging the human condition. The poor are incapable of  
 such pretensions, however, and consequently it is from their stand-  
 point that the pathos of the human condition emerges in all of its  
 universality.

It is in stanza 20, then, that the anagogical dimension of the  
Elegy is finally foregrounded, for it is from the standpoint of the  
*The Foregrounding of* universal that the metonymic conjunction of  
*the Anagogical and* poverty and death ultimately derives its  
*the Sublation of* meaning. To be sure, Gray delineates only  
*the Socio-economic* the negative side to this dialectic, but  
 the pathos of the universal clearly has a positive and even a  
redemptive aspect as well, which manifests itself in both existential  
 and transcendental terms. From an existential point of view, it is  
 what enables us to enter fully into our potential as human beings:  
 such, in any event, is the emphasis on authenticity that Christianity  
 extends in various directions, up to and including such thinkers as  
 Heidegger and Sartre. But there is also a transcendental and even  
 a utopian resonance in the fact that poverty is the vehicle of the  
 principle of universality in the poem; for this recalls the Christian

injunction that "the meek shall inherit the earth"; and of course, in this respect the Marxist eschatology is merely a logical extension of the Christian.

The foregrounding of the Elegy's anagogical dimension is thus concomitant with the submergence of its socio-economic dialectic. But it is also true that if the socio-economic dialectic had not previously been developed, the universal would have come too soon, and would, in consequence, have been merely sentimental. Similarly, if the Elegy had failed altogether to take hold of the universal--in other words, if it had concluded with the four rejected quatrains after stanza 19--the poem's structure would have remained unresolved; for the meaningfulness of the socio-economic dialectic is ultimately dependent on the anagogical dimension. From a spatial point of view, just as the problems of poverty and death are metonymically conjoined, so the socio-economic dialectic and the pathos of the universal are dependent on each other, and hence always present in the poem. But as far as the poem's temporal unfolding is concerned, we might say that the pathos of the universal had to be suspended thematically until the socio-economic dialectic had been fully developed because it lies both beneath and beyond that dialectic.

Stanza 21:

Their name, their years, spelt by th'unletter'd muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply:  
And many a holy text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

In Heidegger's concept of the hermeneutic circle, understanding begins as the intuition, or foreknowledge, of a totality which can

*The Hermeneutic  
Circle*

never be fully grasped because, as Paul de Man notes, "the implicit foreknowledge is always temporally ahead of the explicit interpretative statement that tries to catch up with it."<sup>1</sup> De Man points out that when the concept of the hermeneutic circle is applied to the act of critical interpretation, the intuited totality in question is the poetic text itself;<sup>2</sup> but he adds that the concept is also applicable to the poetic act as well, for both are essentially acts of interpretation.<sup>3</sup> This last insight of de Man's is particularly original (it coincides with his critique of the "organicist" poetics of the New Criticism),<sup>4</sup> and therefore deserves to be cited at some length:

Only when understanding has been achieved does the circle seem to close and only then is the foreknowing structure of the act of interpretation fully revealed. True understanding always implies a certain degree of totality; without it, no contact could be established with a foreknowledge that it can never reach, but of which it can be more or less lucidly aware. The fact that poetic language, unlike ordinary language, possesses what we call "form" indicates that it has reached this point. In interpreting poetic language, and especially in revealing its "form," the critic is therefore dealing with a privileged language: a language engaged in its highest intent and tending toward the fullest possible self-understanding. The critical interpretation is oriented toward a consciousness which is itself engaged in an act of total interpretation [my italics]. The relationship between author and critic does not designate a difference in the type of activity involved, since no fundamental discontinuity exists between two acts that both aim at full understanding; the difference is primarily temporal in kind. Poetry is the foreknowledge of criticism. Far from changing or distorting it, criticism merely discloses poetry for what it is.

Literary "form" is the result of the dialectic interplay between the prefigurative structure of the foreknowledge and the intent at totality of the interpretative process. . . .<sup>5</sup>

De Man's formulation of the hermeneutic circle is particularly

relevant to the point in the Elegy that we have now reached; for as the contrast between the rich and the poor recedes into the background, the poem is thrust back upon its origins--which are nothing more or less than Gray's attempt to grasp hold of the elusive totality which is his poem. As we noted in the context of stanza 20, this process of "circling back" manifests itself, in representational terms, in the belated description of the graves of the Forefathers, and, in anagogical terms, in the foregrounding of the pathos of the universal. But in stanza 21, it manifests itself also in the foregrounding of the poetic process itself--not merely in the abstract, as was the case in stanzas 12 to 15, but from the self-reflexive standpoint of the poem's own process of composition. Here, then, is the point at which the tendency of Gray's language to achieve "the fullest possible self-understanding" makes itself felt most concretely.

The names and years on the graves of the Forefathers are, in a sense, like the bones of the dead in stanza 20: there is nothing to "flesh them out," as it were, and so this is a naming which is merely nominal, and which is therefore tantamount to anonymity--indeed, which brings the pathos of anonymity into the sharpest possible focus. These names and years have the significance of traces that lead nowhere; consequently, to say that they supply the place of fame and elegy is to say that they accomplish the very opposite.

But the pathos of anonymity reaches beyond the Forefathers to focus in upon the "unletter'd muse" of line 81. Since the "existence"

*The Principle of  
Poetry Assimilated  
to the Principle  
of Anonymity*

of the "unletter'd muse"--like that of the Forefathers themselves--can only be inferred by traces which she herself has inscribed,

she is both constitutive of the principle of anonymity and herself constituted by that principle.<sup>6</sup> But since the "unletter'd muse" is also, however paradoxically, a muse in her own right, the principle of poetry is itself assimilated to that of anonymity. In other words, what the metaphor concretizes is a dramatic reversal of the contiguity between poetry and Memory which has hitherto obtained in the Elegy.

The "unletter'd muse" is clearly one of the lesser (if not orphaned) daughters of Memory; for not only is she nameless and unknown but, being capable only of "uncouth rhimes," she is entirely unable to confer fame. And yet, ironically, it is she who has been allotted the task of strewing holy texts around the graves of the poor, texts whose value, the implication is clear, is vastly superior to those which are merely "poetic" (i.e. to those belonging to a secular tradition). There is thus a sense in which the "unletter'd muse" not only puts the category of poetry into question but, by doing so, assimilates it to herself anagogically, thereby transcending what at first would appear to be the merely contradictory nature of her own figural identity. For in contrast to stanza 18, where poetry was castigated as an ideological adjunct of power and wealth, its value is not so much being challenged in the present context as affirmed. Indeed, in stanza 21 there is a sense in which poetry and Christianity are reconciled at the very point at which they are most sharply dichotomized. From this point of view, however, poetry emerges as a transcendental principle that is remote from and resistant to all secular appropriation.<sup>7</sup>

It may be noted that the "unletter'd muse" bears a striking resemblance to the "mute inglorious Milton" of stanza 15, not only

because both figures can be interpreted in both a negative and a positive light but because both reflect upon the poetic process itself, and in a way that is rather uncanny. The "mute inglorious Milton" is the antitype of the real Milton, and so we are drawn strangely into literary history. Similarly, the relationship of the "unletter'd muse" to the Forefathers ironically replicates Gray's own relationship to his subject matter. But in stanza 21, the question of self-reflexivity is raised not only by the figure of the "unletter'd muse" but by an additional uncanny gesture--the actual utterance of the word "elegy" in line 82.

The effect of this word in the stanza is to create an ironical tension between the poem and its title. On the discursive level, what

*Self-reflexivity:  
The Question of  
Genre*

is being implied is simply that no elegies can be addressed to the Forefathers because they failed to imprint themselves as individuals on their time. This idea, in itself, is by now thoroughly familiar. However, since Gray's poem is itself addressed to the Forefathers, line 82 seems to be informing us, from beneath the referential level, that the poem as a whole is not an elegy and that its title is therefore a misnomer.

Our concern here is not, of course, with whether the Elegy should be considered an elegy, since it goes without saying that this is merely a label which can be used to encompass a range of diverse thematic material. The genre is obviously not limited to the funeral elegy, and the eighteenth century was certainly well aware of this. Nevertheless, there is a tendency during the period to regard the funeral elegy as having a kind of primary status within the

genre as a whole. We see this, for instance, in Joseph Trapp's Lectures on Poetry of 1742. "Under the Title of Elegy," Trapp observes, "is generally and primarily understood a mournful Poem, bewailing the Loss of some Person lately dead; and sometimes has any other melancholy plaintive Circumstance for its Subject."<sup>8</sup> And in a similar vein, Trapp notes: "Among our modern Poems, we have few entitled Elegies; those only that are made on Funeral Occasions: But we have many that may be call'd so, in the larger Sense of the Word, as it was used by the Ancients."<sup>9</sup>

Gray's Elegy is obviously an elegy in this larger sense of the word; but since the term "elegy" appears in both the title and stanza 21, we are confronted with an apparent contradiction: on the one hand, the possibility that the poem is a funeral elegy is left open by its title, and, on the other, the possibility that it is not an elegy at all is left open by the stanza. That Gray himself was fully conscious of these ironies--indeed, that he deliberately encoded them--is indicated by the fact that "elegy" appears neither in the title nor the text of the earlier version of the poem in the Eton Manuscript, as we pointed out in Chapter 1.<sup>10</sup> There is no real contradiction in the standard version, of course, for the generic marker is being used in two different senses in the title and stanza 21. However, the ironical tension that is created by the ambiguity alerts us to the fact that the Elegy is an elegy precisely insofar as it is not a funeral elegy. It is addressed to those to whom no funeral elegy can be addressed; and yet, since this is precisely what the Elegy laments, the generic indication in the title remains crucial.

Gray's letter to Walpole of February 11, 1751, in which he asks

Walpole to arrange for the Elegy to be printed, deserves to be quoted at some length in this connection because of the psychological light it sheds on these matters. "As you have brought me into a little Sort of Distress," he tells Walpole, who had sent the manuscript of the poem to various people,

you must assist me, I believe, to get out of it, as well as I can. yesterday I had the Misfortune of receiving a Letter from certain Gentlemen (as their Bookseller expresses it) who have taken the Magazine of Magazines into their Hands. they tell me, that an ingenious Poem, call'd Reflections in a Country Churchyard, has been communicated to them, wch they are printing forthwith: that they were inform'd, that the excellent Author of it is I by name, & that they beg not only his Indulgence, but the Honor of his Correspondence, &c: as I am not at all disposed to be either so indulgent or so correspondent, as they desire; I have but one Way left to escape the Honour they would inflict upon me. & therefore am obliged to desire you would make Dodsley print it immediately (wch may be done in less than a Week's time) from your Copy, but without my Name . . . & the Title must be, Elegy wrote in a Country Church-yard [my italics]. if he would add a line or two to say it came into his Hands by Accident, I should like it better. . . .<sup>11</sup>

We see, then, that Gray's insistence on having "Elegy" in the title, and his desire to remain anonymous (or at least to appear to desire to remain anonymous), are linked. No doubt he took pleasure in the fame that the Elegy achieved; but it is interesting nonetheless that he should have wished to play out in life the thematic burden of his poem--as if to disappear inside it.

But whatever Gray's attitude to these matters may have been, it is clear from the reflexive tensions of stanza 21 that the problem of anonymity is not simply confined within the limits of the poem's referentiality. The reason for this, ultimately, is that by stanza 21 the problem of anonymity (like that of poverty) no longer confronts

us merely as a condition that is associated with the Forefathers in isolation: it is now a metaphor for the human condition as a whole. Concomitantly, the poetic process itself, in the profundity of its relationship to the human condition, is now characterized by its essential namelessness. This namelessness no longer has a merely negative meaning, however; for from the standpoint of the poem's anagogical dimension, it is the correlative of a vision in which the category of identity is itself transcended.

Stanza 22:

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,  
This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,  
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

The Elegy is, of course, a profoundly religious poem, if the term "religious" is writ large; but, as we have seen, its relationship to Christianity is complicated by its attempt to develop a humanist perspective. Under the aegis of the Christian mythos, the problems of poverty and anonymity lose their existential significance as problems and instead take on a positive coloration as virtues or as signposts along the path to Christ. It is significant, therefore, that the "holy texts" inscribed on the graves of the Forefathers do not come into focus until stanza 21, and then only as a result of the sublation of the socio-economic dialectic; for if the poem had adopted an explicitly Christian formulation from the outset, its thematic development would have been aborted. For the same reason, moreover, the "Christian perspective" of stanza 21 should be regarded not as the

perspective of the poem as a whole but rather as an approximation of an as yet unarticulated vision, for which Christianity can nevertheless provide the transcendental symbols. From the standpoint of stanza 21, to be sure, it would seem that the principle of anonymity--and hence the Christian renunciation of self--is being valorized, not only with respect to the Forefathers but, beneath the poem's referential surface, with respect to the poetic process itself. However, such a valorization of anonymity poses serious ethical and even aesthetic dangers of which Gray is by no means unaware. Indeed, insofar as the Christian mythos aims at the total negation of the self, it may lead to a form of hubris whose consequences are even more insidious than the secular hubris of Ambition and Grandeur. To renounce the self is to place oneself above the common limitations of humanity, and hence to wish to become a god; consequently, whether the motivation takes a purely religious or a derived artistic form, it constitutes a kind of Faustian bargain in reverse, and, as such, is compromised from the outset by its insincerity.

The Forefathers, however, would not have been likely to valorize poverty and obscurity, for the simple reason that this was their lot in life. Consequently, much as they had earlier provided the perspective against which to measure the secular hubris of Ambition and Grandeur, so now they provide the perspective for gauging a spiritual hubris which, though never overtly represented in the poem, is clearly a latent tendency in the Elegy as a whole and perhaps in Gray himself. Stanza 22 is thus an affirmation--or reaffirmation--of the poem's essential humanism, and, as such, it is in direct contrast to stanza 11 in particular. This contrast makes itself felt

in the fact that in both of these stanzas (and nowhere else in the poem) Gray has made use of the rhetorical question as a way of asserting fundamental truths. For where in stanza 11 the universality of death had been invoked as an admonition against Ambition and Grandeur, so now in stanza 22 the desire to hold onto life and to leave a trace of oneself after death is posed as a universal desire whose meaningfulness to a humanist perspective must be insisted upon, since, as a defining characteristic of the human, it cannot be abrogated without bad faith.

The central figure of stanza 22 is, of course, "dumb Forgetfulness," and this figure is clearly antithetical to the figure of Memory

*The Figure  
of "Dumb  
Forgetfulness"*

in stanza 10. In our discussion of that stanza, we noted that Memory is unable to remember those who are not in some sense already remembered by their society--which is to say, those who have failed to leave an imprint upon it during their lives.<sup>1</sup> A similar condensation of the active and passive voices is contained--but even more interestingly--in the figure of "dumb Forgetfulness" in line 85. "Dumb Forgetfulness" yields forgetting and being forgotten, which reduces further to death and being forgotten, for the souls who drink of the waters of Lethe (of which "dumb Forgetfulness" might be taken as the genius loci) forget all that has happened to them on earth. Consequently, in the figure of "dumb Forgetfulness," the two major problematics in the Elegy--death and "death-in-life" (whose ramifications, as we have seen, are so many and various)--are assimilated to each other. This assimilation occurs from the standpoint of the universal, for all human beings are a prey to dumb Forgetfulness in

both of the senses we have delineated. Nevertheless, in the context in which it occurs, the figure is sufficiently nuanced to retain virtually all of the distinctions Gray has previously entertained. Thus, while all human beings are to some extent a prey to dumb Forgetfulness in both senses, and while all are always and to the same extent a prey to forgetting (i.e. death), all are not to the same extent a prey to being forgotten, for here the specificity of the socio-economic dialectic comes into play. We move in the direction of the universal, of the ontological, but without forfeiting the specificity of the historical, and this, of course, is at the essence of Gray's accomplishment in the Elegy.

If the figure of "dumb Forgetfulness" is thus a kind of microcosm of Gray's dialectic, this is an indication that the poem has now begun to close the circle on itself. The evocation of a "cheerful day" which must be left behind returns us to the pathos of stanzas 5 to 7, in which the "pastoral" description of the lives of the Forefathers had set the ground for the ensuing philosophical meditation. We are thus once again in the realm of description, but what is now being described is grounded in a psychological realism that is very different from the literary pictorialism of the earlier stanzas, for it pertains to the experience of a "concrete universal" and can thus be grasped from the inside. Indeed, through the rhetorical question of stanza 22, the existential situation of the individual in confronting the human condition is evoked, and thus the terrain of the meditation shifts from the metaphysical to the psychological. The confrontation with death as an actual lived experience had not previously been evoked in the poem in an explicit way, but clearly this

confrontation is at the heart of the Elegy. It could not previously have been evoked because as long as the Forefathers--whose existence, after all, is nothing more than a series of hypothetically constructed images in the poet's mind--occupied the referential center of the poem, all access to the phenomenology of this experience as an experience was blocked. As we have seen, however, the Elegy is not simply a poem about the Forefathers as a particular class: on the contrary, the Forefathers provide the perspective against which the human condition can be measured. It is in stanza 20, as we have noted, that Gray begins to grasp hold of the human condition as such in metaphysical terms; but the psychological aspect to this confrontation is also crucial, and the rhetorical question of stanza 22 provides the bridge from the metaphysical to the psychological.

The ambiguities surrounding the word "resigned" emphasize the individual's dilemma in confronting death--and hence also the dilemma in rendering the experience meaningful from a humanist perspective. Analysis again yields a synchronicity of the active and passive voices of the verb, but this time the two meanings are in contradiction to each other. For all individuals must resign--that is, leave or give up--"this pleasing anxious being"; but since none has ever done so without casting "some longing ling'ring look behind" (this is the force of the rhetorical question), it may be said that no one is ever really resigned to death. The paradox here is that it is human nature to be unable to accept Nature. And here we might again quote the passage from Paradise Lost (ii. 146-51) which Gray, as we noted in Chapter 1,<sup>2</sup> is echoing in stanza 22:

For who would lose,  
 Though full of pain, this intellectual being,  
 Those thoughts that wander through Eternity,  
 To perish rather, swallowed up and lost  
 In the wide womb of uncreated night,  
 Devoid of sense and motion?

Belial's rhetorical question is, one might say, domesticated in the Elegy; for there is no question of rebelling against what is obviously an inexorable fact of Nature, and yet neither can the individual "go gently into that good night." A microcosm of Milton's cosmic dialectic exists within each individual, and thus the problem for humanism is to balance conflicting values and perspectives so as to forfeit nothing that is essential to the dignity and meaningfulness of life.

Stanza 23:

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.

Beginning with stanza 20, the dominant thematic emphasis has been on the desire of the individual (as represented through the Forefathers)

to be remembered after death; but in stanza

*The "Parting Soul":*  
*The Closing of*  
*the Circle*

22, through the figure of "dumb Forgetfulness," the various issues relating to memory and those relating to death as an actual experience that the individual must undergo are merged in such a way as to shift the thematic emphasis from the former to the latter. Consequently, what has been uncovered for stanza 23 is the existential situation of the "parting soul." The thematic significance of memory continues in effect, however; for in the calculus of human need that Gray is delineating, just as the individual desires to be remembered after death,

so too the dying individual requires to be "remembered" by someone whose life will be diminished by his passing. The two needs exist on the continuum of what is "natural" to the species, and find their common denominator in the need for human relatedness generally; and indeed, "Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries."

The experience of the "parting soul" is, of course, the deepest of all the mysteries, for it is simultaneously one that is lived and one that culminates in a complete rupture with life. This theme--if one can refer to it as such, for since the experience is ineffable it can only be named but not penetrated--finally emerges in stanza 23, but it is clearly at the root of the Elegy as a whole, as is indicated by the fact that the adjective "parting" occurs in the very first line of the poem: "The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day."<sup>1</sup> For a poem whose thematic material undergoes so many complex permutations, it should be noted that the Elegy contains remarkably little lexical redundancy, and the fact that the word "parting" is now being repeated is interesting not only for semantic reasons but as an indication that the poem is now in the process of closing the circle on itself. In fact, however, the figural significance of "parting" in line 89 is the opposite of what it had been in line 1. In the earlier context, what is literally being evoked is the onset of evening, and thus the implication of death is metaphorical both in respect to what is being described and to the fact that it is being endowed with human significance. However, since Nature in the opening stanzas is being conceived as a cyclical--and hence "undying"--process, the adjective "parting" represents an appropriate muting of the concept of death. The ambiguous intersection of Nature and that which is specific to

humanity--consciousness of death--results in a metaphor that pulls in opposite directions.

In stanza 23, however, the "parting soul" is literally a dying soul, and thus the adjective has here a metonymic significance, for Death is being viewed not as something other than what it is but--simultaneously (and oxymoronically)--as a process of separation or discontinuity (i.e. a partition) and as a process of transition or continuity (i.e. a departure). Thus, the "parting soul" is in one sense a consonant and in another a dissonant echo of the cyclical conception of Nature that is given in the opening stanzas.

This is only one side to the problem, however, for the ambiguities in the concept of Death that we have noted are themselves mirrored by a similar set of ambiguities in the concept of Nature, and thus the metaphysical ratio is a continuously shifting one. Nature as a cyclical process--what we might call the Wordsworthian or Whitmanian conception of Nature--is consonant with the notion of Death as transition, but in this case the concept of Death as such loses its salience--and of course, Death is salient only for human beings, who are conscious of discontinuity. From another point of view, however, since Death is an aspect of Nature, the principle of discontinuity is implicit in Nature itself. It will be noticed that although these conceptions of the relationship between Death and Nature have opposing emphases, they are tautological in the sense that the concept of Death is subsumed by that of Nature in both cases. However, Nature can also be conceived--as it often was in the eighteenth century--as a life force, and hence as opposed to Death from within the terms of a simple dualism. Indeed, this is clearly how it is

being conceived in stanza 23 ("Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries"), which is the only point in the poem at which the word "Nature" actually occurs. In stanza 23, "Nature" thus occurs in a context in which its meaning is aligned with human nature and opposed to both the cyclical and the nihilistic conceptions of Nature. Both of the latter conceptions are to some extent adumbrated in the Elegy; but, by what we may call a metalepsis, we read the "parting soul" of line 89 back into the "parting day" of line 1, so that the earlier representation of Nature, which had seemed to subsume and negate human strivings, is itself humanized.

The human subject--Gray's "parting soul"--is faced with precisely the dilemma that the poet in his poem is faced with: the dilemma not so much of justifying the ways of God to men, for this is beyond its capabilities, as of formulating a relationship to Nature (and hence to society) which is ethical in the fullest sense, which is balanced between the extremes of delusion on the one hand and cynical resignation on the other. Gray's humanism thus stands midway between Satan's ultimately sterile rebellion against Nature and the Romantic counter-sublime of Wordsworth or Whitman, in which Nature threatens to overwhelm the individual entirely. Encompassing both of these extremes in the Elegy, Gray accedes to neither, but continually searches for what is ultimately an elusive classical balance. The process is an endless one because--as in Keats's "Vale of Soul-Making"<sup>2</sup>--the "parting soul" is always in the position of having to shape its own soul and, hence, its relationship to what is human.

Stanzas 24-29:

For thee, who mindful of th'unhonour'd Dead  
 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;  
 If chance, by lonely contemplation led,  
 Some kindred Spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,  
 'Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn  
 'Brushing with hasty steps the dews away  
 'To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

'There at the foot of yonder nodding beech  
 'That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,  
 'His listless length at noontide wou'd he stretch,  
 'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

'Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,  
 'Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he wou'd rove,  
 'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,  
 'Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

'One more 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.

'The next with dirges due in sad array  
 'Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him born[e].  
 'Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,  
 'Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

With the apostrophe to the "thee" of stanza 24, we have finally arrived at the point at which the problem of structure and meaning that was presented in Chapter 2 begins to come into focus. Having traced the poem's thematic development thus far, however, we can now see (although this will require elaboration) that the point at which the formal problem comes into focus is also the point at which the poem's thematic development reaches a climax. Since this climax stems from the evocation of the "parting soul" in stanza 23, everything that follows may in a certain sense be regarded as an attempt by dramatic means to

impose closure on a meditation that has come full circle but is essentially open-ended. Nevertheless, although the remaining stanzas do not extend the poem's philosophical trajectory, in these final thirty-six lines the implicit eschatological premises of the Elegy are concretized in a way that was not previously possible.

In order to bring the formal issues raised by stanza 24 into alignment with the poem's thematic development, we should first reiterate the grammatical problem that, in *The Grammatical Problem* Chapter 2, we found to be intractable from a strictly formalist standpoint.<sup>1</sup> In essence, this is simply that the prepositional phrase "For thee" is either grammatically redundant (and therefore stylistically awkward) or part of the predicate of a missing clause. For if we regard "For thee" as the object of "inquire," then, as the following transposition makes clear,

If chance, by lonely contemplation led,  
Some kindred Spirit shall inquire thy fate,  
For thee,

"thy fate" and "For thee" replicate each other very awkwardly. Since "And thou" in the Stanza's poses no problem, it is difficult to see why Gray, with his exquisite mastery over syntax, would have committed what is apparently a solecism. Most critics have assumed that Gray changed the case of the pronoun in order to distance the reference; but, as we observed in Chapter 2, the reference was already distanced by the second-person pronoun in the Stanza's, and there is no grammatical reason why a shift from the vocative to the accusative should have this effect.

But if we allow "For thee" to "dangle" for the moment, giving it the dramatic emphasis it requires by pausing significantly after

the comma, we shall see that Gray's revision is not only a masterful stylistic stroke but a key to the poem as a whole. In order to understand this, however, we have to return to our thematic analysis.

We have suggested that the poet's attempt to grasp hold of the universal, beginning in stanza 20, was already latent in the opening stanza of the Elegy, although it could not make itself known explicitly until the socio-economic dialectic had been thoroughly explored. And if we now return to the very first line of the poem--as we also were obliged to do by the echo of "parting" in stanza 23--we find that the grammatical problem of stanza 24, the problem of identifying the "thee" of line 93, and indeed the larger issues of structure and meaning, are simultaneously brought into focus:

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day . . .

For thee.

To ask whom the "thee" represents is, in effect, to send to know for whom the bell tolls! The reverberating passage we are led to, of

*Donne's 17th  
Meditation*

course, is from the seventeenth Meditation of John Donne's Devotions upon Emergent

Occasions (1624). The text is here quoted almost in its entirety because of its importance to the Elegy:

Perchance hee for whom this Bell tolls, may be so ill, as that he knowes not it tolls for him; And perchance I may thinke my selfe so much better than I am, as that they who are about mee, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for mee, and I know not that. The Church is Catholike, universall, so are all her Actions; All that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concernes mee; for that child is thereby connected to that Head which is my Head too, and engrafted into that body, whereof I am a member. And when she buries a Man, that action concernes me: All mankinde is of one Author, and is one volume; when one Man dies, one Chapter is not torne out of the booke,

but translated into a better language; and every Chapter must be so translated; God emploies several translators; some peeces are translated by age, some by sicknesse, some by warre, some by justice; but Gods hand is in every translation; and his hand shall binde up all our scattered leaves againe, for that Librarie where every booke shall lie open to one another: As therefore the Bell that rings to a Sermon, calls not upon the Preacher onely, but upon the Congregation to come; so this Bell calls us all: but how much more mee, who am brought so near the doore by this sicknesse. There was a contention as far as a suite, (in which both pietie and dignitie, religion, and estimation, were mingled) which of the religious Orders should ring to praiers first in the Morning; and it was determined, that they should ring first that rose earliest. If we understand aright the dignitie of this Bell that tolls for our evening prayer, wee would bee glad to make it ours, by rising early, in that application, that it might bee ours, as well as his, whose indeed it is. The Bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute that that occasion wrought upon him, hee is united to God. Who casts not up his Eye to the Sunne when it rises? but who takes off his Eye from a Comet when that breakes out? Who bends not his eare to any bell, which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell, which is passing a peece of himself out of this world? No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee. . . .<sup>2</sup>

The marvelous irony in all this--which is as if Gray had anticipated the attempts of formalist criticism to fix the reference for the "thee" of line 93--is that we are not to send to know for whom the bell tolls in the Elegy because no man is an island entire of it- self. The "thee" can be none other than mankind in general (or, as Hegel would say, man considered as a species-being); and as the link to the Donne Meditation shows, this conception of the universal is grounded in the Elegy from the outset.

The phrase "for thee" signals the climax of both the Donne

Meditation and the Elegy, but critics have not been aware of the influence of Donne's text on Gray's poem because in the Elegy the phrase is separated from the trope of the passing bell by 92 lines. It is difficult to imagine that Gray was not fully aware of the influence of the Donne text, at least at the point at which he made the substitution of "For thee" for "And thou" in his revision of the Stanza's, but it is possible that he was not conscious of this influence when he began the poem. He acknowledged to Norton Nicholls, as we noted earlier, that the opening lines of the Elegy were imitated from the Purgatorio,<sup>3</sup> but the Donne Meditation, whose influence is far more important, is never mentioned in Gray's correspondence. The connection of Dante's concern with the universal to Donne's is, of course, obvious; but the Donne Meditation is so palpably impressed on the structure of the Elegy that, if Gray had been fully conscious of Donne's influence from the outset, it might have been impossible for him to develop his material beyond what for the eighteenth century would have been a mere devotional truism. What makes the Elegy so profoundly original a poem is the manner in which the principle of universality it locates is mediated by a complex historical dialectic. For Donne, the principle of universality is immanently grounded in the institution of the Church: "The Church is Catholike, universall, so are all her Actions; All that she does belongs to All." Gray begins with the same analogical premises, and his absorption of them is at least partly mediated by the resonance of Donne's text; but immediately he encounters a series of historical ironies that must be pursued on their own account and that render Donne's predicates--catholicity, universality, and belongingness--problematic, not so much in themselves as in their

actual connection to social practice. These ironies must therefore be fully developed before the principle of universality can be allowed to emerge in its own right. It is for this reason that the evidence of Donne's influence is deferred from its point of contact for 93 lines.

With regard to the formal problem, then, the fact that the influence of the Donne Meditation manifests itself at the poem's origins (i.e. it goes back to line 1) indicates that we cannot refer the "thee" of line 93 to Gray himself--except insofar as he too is "a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine." It is not sufficient to say, as Bertrand Bronson does, that the reference is essentially autobiographical but that the decorum of the poem is nevertheless maintained by a distancing technique. As we noted in Chapter 2, Bronson, like other formalist critics, takes the principle of univocity for granted.<sup>4</sup> And yet his insight, that "it is our voice which has been speaking our own train of thought all this while,"<sup>5</sup> implicitly allows for a non-univocal solution to the formalist impasse, a solution which is corroborated by the relationship of the Donne Meditation to the Elegy. Bronson regards the phenomenological experience of the reader that he describes as, in effect, a poetic illusion that does not really alter the autobiographical nature of the reference. Yet if we extend his insight farther than he himself was willing to do, we might say that this phenomenological experience is really what is primary and that the formal constituents of the text must be understood from this point of view. Indeed, if the reader is moved by the poem, then the "me" of line 4 ("And leaves the world to darkness and to me") is already felt to be his own. This would mean that the "me" is not merely exchanged for the "thee," through a factitious attempt to avoid

personal reference, but--as in Buber's conception of the I-Thou relationship--is already implicitly a "thee" from the outset.

Bronson's insight serves as a basis upon which one might construct a provisional model of the lyric--notwithstanding the notorious difficulties involved with this category. The basic principle of such a model would be simply that the reader incorporates--and thereby actualizes--what we might call the lyric- or suffering-I as his own. Since the case of the Elegy is obviously problematic, a more typical example of the lyric, such as Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud," will better serve to illustrate the point. If the reader is moved by this poem, this is clearly not, in the first place, because of Wordsworth's loneliness but because of his own. In actuality, however, it is not simply the reader's subjectivity in an isolated sense that is engaged; for just as the poet's experience takes on the allegorical lineaments of Everyman's by being shaped in terms of the "lyric-I," so with the reader's a similar process occurs.

This conception of the "lyric-I" does not necessarily have to coincide with an actual pronomial reference, but in the case of the Elegy it would correspond to the "me" of line 4. This "me" would then have to be distinguished from the poet, who is actively shaping the poem (and hence the "lyric-" or "suffering-I") from the outside, and whose presence manifests itself solely through the intentionality of this shaping process.<sup>6</sup> Failing to make this distinction, we would have to assume, in the manner of nineteenth-century criticism, that the Elegy actually was written in a country churchyard.

But the "lyric-I" also enables us to avoid hypostatizing a

"speaker," and hence to avoid conflating purely lyric forms with forms such as the dramatic monologue or soliloquy. In the latter forms, to be sure, speech is imitated, but in purely lyric forms there is no discernible mediating link between the poet and his poem, and so the category of the "speaker" or "persona" is misapplied.<sup>7</sup> The lyric poet, in the process of composing the poem, is neither speaking the poem--for this would mean that the poem exists prior to its composition--nor inventing a speaker as a separate consciousness--for this would mean that there is an ironic distance between the poet and the poem, which in the case of what we are defining as lyric poetry is not apparent. Thus, insofar as a speaker enters into the process, this could only be the reader of the poem. The reader, however, in the process of rehearsing the poem, actualizes and incorporates two experiences simultaneously: the experience of the "lyric-I" (which, as we have suggested, is implicitly a "thee") and the experience of the poet's shaping of the poem. The first is primarily emotional; the second, primarily intellectual.

The heuristic value of the metaphor, then, is that it enables us to avoid the antinomies of logocentric models of the poetic process in which meaning is referred either to the poet himself or to the "speaker" of the poem. Of course, since the "lyric-I" corresponds neither to an actual entity nor to a structure, the concept ultimately resists formalization. At the same time, however, it points to the sense in which the poetic process itself, being allegorical, resists formalization.

Clearly, the Elegy would correspond to this model of the lyric only through its first twenty-three stanzas. But paradoxically--and

hence the relevance of the model nonetheless--the point at which the Elegy ceases to be a lyric poem is the point at which the generic principle underlying the lyric (i.e. the principle of universality) is thematized in the poem. This point, of course, is marked by the apostrophe to the "thee" in stanza 24, which simultaneously brings the lyric stage of the poem's development to a close and opens it up to new generic possibilities.

In spite of the fact that the "thee" is presented in quasi-authorial terms (and we shall go into this in a moment), the apos-

*The Theme of  
Anonymity: The  
Blurring of Persons  
and Pronouns*

trophe of stanza 24 and the monologue of the "hoary-headed Swain" have a poetic effect that is very far from leading us back to Gray the man in an isolated sense.

On the contrary, their effect is to "shatter the boundaries" of the text, as it were, so that instead of an "omnipotent" poet contemplating the "unhonour'd Dead" from the outside, we are presented with a series of relationships (the sense of the verb "relate" in line 94 is crucial) in which what is being related enfolds the individual who is relating it. As a result, the subject-object distinctions that normally characterize the work of art in formal terms seem to break down. The "thee" is presented as relating an "artless tale"; but no sooner is he addressed than--without even the normal full stop after the stanza break--he himself is enfolded by the general theme as the subject of a similarly artless tale that is putatively related by the Swain to a "kindred Spirit," who himself is then addressed as "thou" by the Swain in lines 115-116:

'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay,  
'Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

The "thee" and the "thou" are kindred to each other, semiotically as well as thematically, for both are under the sign of the universal, and the Swain's address to the "kindred Spirit" is itself, of course, enfolded by the apostrophe to the "thee." Moreover, after the imagined death of the "thee," another will have taken his place:

'Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he.  
(ll. 111-12)

The result of this blurring of persons and pronouns--in which the second-person pronoun corresponds to the "relater" of the tale, to what is being related itself, and even to the reader or interpreter of the tale (which recalls Bronson's insight and the model of the lyric that we have just developed)--is to make us lose touch with the poet qua poet, and hence to create the illusion that the Elegy is an anonymous creation. This, of course, is an aesthetic illusion that Gray is shaping from the outside. But this illusion is itself in the service of combatting what to Gray is a serious ethical illusion: namely, that the poet is a kind of god who is indemnified from the common lot of mankind. We have already seen that in Gray's treatment of the evil effects of power, the poet has not been accorded a privileged status.<sup>8</sup> In stanza 24, however, the self-reflexivity of Gray's enterprise reaches a climax by actually causing a rupture in the poem's structure.

"All mankinde is of one Author, and is one volume," writes Donne. Donne's topos of the universe as a Book is not, like the topos of the passing bell, directly echoed in the Elegy, but we can see how it is related to the moral conception that Gray is developing. God being the "one Author" (and "God," we might note, is the final word of the

Elegy), there can be no other authorial presence that is not enfolded in the general theme. The logocentric implications of Gray's conception are precisely rendered by the diction of lines 93-94:

For thee, who mindful of th'unhonour'd Dead  
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate.

The tale is an artless one because the "short and simple annals of the poor" would seem to leave no room for art or artifice; but the adjective applies also to the manner in which the "thee" is imagined to be relating the tale, and this gives a Romantic emphasis of sincerity and spontaneity to the conception. Moreover, it is important that this is a tale that is related: the implication that it is spoken aloud, as in an anonymous oral tradition, suggests that the "thee" is merely the vehicle of the process rather than its author. We have commented at length on the Platonic strain in Gray's thought and poetic practice, and the notion that the poet is the vehicle of the poetic process is, of course, the notion that Plato develops in the Ion. It goes without saying that the Elegy itself is very far from being an "artless tale," or one that has issued forth in "profuse strains of unpremeditated art," but since "these lines" are referred to in a way that would make them seem equivalent to the "uncouth rhimes" on the graves of the Forefathers, our attention is turned away from Gray's artistry. Ellis, as we saw in Chapter 2, partly because of his sensitivity to the fame-anonymity dialectic in the poem, took this metaphoric effect literally, and thus for him "these lines" are actually the "uncouth rhimes" on the graves--an interpretation that made it necessary for him to hypostatize a "rustic Stonecutter" to whom the apostrophe would then be addressed.<sup>9</sup> From a univocal standpoint, it would be more

reasonable, as Sutherland argues, to link "these lines" to the Elegy itself.<sup>10</sup> But in fact, to assign a fixed reference either to the "thee" or to "these lines" is to miss the point of the structural conception that is being developed here: their meaning is poetic rather than logical (in the Aristotelian sense), and is a function of the blurring of the boundaries of the text.

Nevertheless, although the "thee" cannot simply be referred to Gray himself, the fact that it clearly reflects upon his situation as a poet--as indeed upon the situation of poetry in the mid-eighteenth century generally--is of crucial importance. Through its relationship to the Donne Meditation, we have seen that the "thee" signifies the principle of universality; but since the "thee" is also "mindful of th'unhonour'd Dead," and since this mindfulness is what distinguishes the poet as a "representative man," the "thee" is not merely passively subsumed in the universal but is itself the active signifier of this principle. The significance of the poet's "lonely contemplation," his spiritual withdrawal from the World in general and from the social class to which he belongs, is that it enables him to see things with greater clarity and in a larger perspective. Consequently, the fact that the apostrophized "thee" is a figure of the poet enables Gray not only to recall the Elegy's dialectic up to this point but, by reflecting upon the process that has engendered the poem, to concretize, in a more explicit way than was previously possible, the poem's underlying eschatological--and indeed, utopian--vision: its vision of communitas, in short, in which the artificial distinctions that separate human beings into classes have been annulled. What is

*The Utopian  
Vision of  
Communitas*

especially ironical about the formalist attempt to resolve the pronomial ambiguities, then, is that the blurring of the pronouns coincides with a blurring of class distinctions that is in the service of this vision.

Thus, in stanzas 25 to 29, the "boundary conditions" that have marked the Elegy as a lyric poem up until this point are turned inside-out, as it were, so that instead of an "impersonal" speculation on the lives of deceased peasants--i.e. in which the "lyric-I" is a disembodied presence--we are now presented with a hypothetical scenario in which a stylized figure of the peasant is imagined to be describing the fate of the now-deceased "thee" to a "kindred Spirit." The relationship of the Swain's monologue to pastoral tradition is immediately evident: not only does the "hoary-headed Swain" echo the "uncouth Swain" of Milton's Lycidas (an echo which, in turn, reminds us of the "uncouth rhimes" on the graves of the Forefathers), but, as described by the Swain, the "thee" is clearly a kind of poeta ignotus or "melancholy Jacques" figure. Thus, where in the first 23 stanzas (stanza 24 being transitional) the mimetic basis of Gray's discourse was realistic but the dominant grammatical mood subjunctive--since the poet was addressing himself to the lives of real peasants, whose existence, however, was hidden to him--in the Swain's monologue (although it is presented as hypothetical and is thus enfolded by the subjunctive frame of Gray's realism), the discourse is constituted by the literary conventions of the pastoral but the grammatical crossings make the Swain's monologue a kind of obverse reflection of the discourse of the first 23 stanzas--in which, however,

the monologue is embedded. However, the reason that the grammatical mood of the Swain's monologue is indicative is that the literary conventions of the pastoral enable the poet to represent as fiction what could not be represented as reality. That which could not be represented as reality but can be represented as fiction is precisely the vision of classlessness that governs the pronomial ambiguities of stanza 24. Only in the context of the pastoral can the poet and the peasant inhabit the same metaphysical plane, for the pastoral is constituted precisely by this utopian vision; and hence the pastoral content of the Swain's monologue.

But here we come upon a crucial problem--or aporia--that has to do with the status of the pastoral conventions Gray has made use of in the monologue. This problem has less to do with the surface issues of structure and meaning that concerned the formalist critics than with the deeper question of the poem's style-content dialectic. Given the vision of classlessness that we have argued is at the root of the poem, the structural necessity for Gray's pastoral scenario is abundantly clear. The real problem, however, is that in order to represent both the vision of classlessness and the consciousness that this vision remains to be achieved, Gray has had to make use of the very fictional mode whose historical specificity and meaningfulness have been transcended by the Elegy itself. The problems of poverty, obscurity, and alienation--those themes that, we have argued, cannot be encompassed by the pastoral--enter the tradition in a major way through the Elegy, and it is for this reason that the poem represents what we have termed the "dissolution" of the pastoral in its transcendental mode.<sup>11</sup> However, since Gray has had no other resources for

representing his utopian vision than through the very pastoral conventions that the Elegy has superannuated--and this is because there simply are no other resources available--there is a sense in which the Swain's monologue must, by the nature of the case, be poetically inferior to the reflections that have preceded it. Though beautifully composed, the monologue, when considered in isolation, lacks both the originality and the resonance of the earlier stanzas, and there is a sense in which it verges on sentimentality. This is not because Gray's vision of communitas is sentimental, but because the means that he has at his disposal to represent it--and there are no other means--have been undermined by the poem itself.

Stanzas 30-32

The EPITAPH

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth  
A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown,  
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,  
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,  
Heav'n did a recompence as largely send:  
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,  
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.

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.

And so we come at last to the "Epitaph," which has been pointed out

*The epitaph in* to us by the "hoary-headed Swain":  
*the Churchyard and*  
*the Epitaph in the*  
*Elegy*

'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay  
'Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'  
(11. 115-16)

The difficulty in reading the "Epitaph," however, is that we have to approach it in two ways simultaneously: first, as an extension of Gray's reflections on the Forefathers in the initial twenty-three stanzas--and hence as "actually" (or "already") present in the country churchyard (i.e. to the "lyric-I"); and secondly, through the mediation of the "kindred Spirit" in the monologue spoken by the Swain--and hence from the standpoint of a hypothetical future that may "chance" (line 95) to occur after the imagined death of the "thee." The second of the two alternatives is logically the more probably one because, although the "Epitaph" is situated in the present by the demonstrative adverb "here," its "presentness" is enfolded by the Swain's monologue and by the hypothetical future that is broached in stanza 24. However, because of the uncanny way in which it is set off from and framed against the rest of the poem--and also because of the way in which it takes up the poem's various thematic burdens in reprise--the "Epitaph" presents itself as a kind of mirror image or microcosm of the Elegy as a whole. In other words, we are given the illusion that this epitaph "actually" exists within the churchyard, and hence that the "Epitaph" is coextensive with the representational realism of the initial twenty-three stanzas. As with the pastoral orientation of the Swain's monologue, however, this illusion is ultimately in the service of the poem's vision of classlessness.

Another way of expressing the difficulty of approaching the "Epitaph"--but this was already implicit in our discussion of the problem of univocity with respect to stanzas 24 to 29--is that the poem successfully resists any attempt to identify the "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" either with a specific person or (what

amounts to the same thing, though for rather more complex reasons) with a specific class. If we identify him with the Forefathers--as in Ellis's "rustic Stonecutter" theory--we are confounded by the assertion that "Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth" (line 119). Faced with this discrepancy, Ellis argued that "Fair Science" refers to something like native intelligence in this context;<sup>1</sup> but as Sutherland pointed out in rebuttal, "science" to the eighteenth century generally means knowledge gained from education, and does so on every other occasion in which it occurs in Gray's work.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, if we identify the Youth with Gray himself, with an undifferentiated narrator, or with someone like Richard West--as in Shepard's theory<sup>3</sup>--we are confounded by the obvious thematic and figural resemblances between the description of the Youth and the earlier reflections on the Forefathers.

But if it is impossible to classify the "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" in social terms, this has to do with the sense in which he is an allegorical embodiment not merely of the poeta ignotus figure but of the poet as such, and not merely of the poet, but of the poet's desire for realization insofar as it is simultaneously

projected into the future and sprung back

*Convergence of  
the Historical  
and the  
Eschatological*

upon the historical ground of present loss.

All of this remains to be demonstrated, of

course; but from a theoretical point of

view, there is no necessary contradiction in the fact that the Youth should be represented as a poet and that it should nevertheless be impossible to identify him with a specific person or class. To be sure, Gray's representation of the Youth has a realistic basis in the

social history of his time: Chatterton, as we observed earlier, came from the rural proletariat,<sup>4</sup> and Gray himself was of relatively "humble birth." But his depiction of the Youth is not essentially governed by realism: on the contrary, it is aimed at a future for which there are no images. The Youth of the "Epitaph" is literally a "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" because what he concretizes is the problem of History. If he is represented as a poet, this is because, in Gray's implicit eschatology, the poet is the bearer of the principle of universality, and hence classless.

In examining the "Epitaph," therefore, we have to focus on both the resemblances and the discrepancies between the description of the Youth and the earlier reflections on the Forefathers. And it is interesting, in this regard, that the opening lines of stanza 30 reverberate against what is perhaps the central figure of the potentiality-actuality dialectic of stanzas 12 to 15:<sup>5</sup>

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth  
A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.  
(ll. 117-18)

Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest.  
(l. 59)

The tense distinction is important here, but what underlies it does not become clear until the description of the Youth is examined against the background of stanza 13:

Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,  
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.  
(ll. 119-20)

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page  
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;  
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul.  
(ll. 49-52)

The major break in the chain of resemblances between the Youth and the Forefathers is, as we noted, in regard to knowledge; but the question of knowledge is implicitly connected to that of poetry in the "Epitaph." If we relate the Youth back to the "thee" of lines 93-94,

For thee, who mindful of th'unhonour'd Dead  
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate,

and by the echo of "here rests" to the "mute inglorious Milton," this connection comes into focus. However, if the Youth thus fits the description of a poeta ignotus, this has a more positive implication than it did earlier: he is not merely one who might have attained to poetry under other conditions, but is apparently one who in some measure at least possessed the capabilities to do so. To be sure, this possibility was latent in the potentiality-actuality dialectic of the earlier reflections, but in that context it was strongly countered by the lines on knowledge quoted above from stanza 13.<sup>6</sup>

This brings us to the significance of the second of the personifications in stanza 30: the figure of "Melancholy." The latter, of course, is an intrinsically ambivalent projection, and it may be that the history of English poetry is bound up with this ambivalence.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, however, Brooks interprets the figure in a wholly negative light, contending that the Youth (whom he identifies with the "narrator") "had the knowledge requisite for entering into the competition for fame, but he was incapacitated by Melancholy" (my italics).<sup>8</sup> As Lonsdale points out, this argument substitutes a "but" for the "and" of line 120, although the conjunction Gray employs indicates that "Melancholy" is being given a positive meaning in tandem with "Fair Science."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Gray invokes her in a similar spirit

to Milton in Il Penseroso, for whom she is the presiding deity of poets and solitary thinkers generally:

But hail thou Goddess, sage and holy,  
Hail, divinest Melancholy.  
(ll. 11-12)

This is not to deny the ambivalence of the "Epitaph" as a whole. Melancholy, we said, is intrinsically ambivalent, and in the line on "Fair Science" Gray has used a negative assertion to yield a positive result.<sup>10</sup> But if the description of the Youth remains ambivalent, this is because the poet's vision of realization has been superimposed onto a ground of historical loss. In the earlier reflections on the Forefathers, the possibility of realization was kept at an antithetical distance from the poet's realism by the subjunctive; in the "Epitaph," however, these two modalities are brought into alignment with each other.

But perhaps the most glaring discrepancy in the chain of resemblances that connect the Youth to the Forefathers is not any particular quality with which he is associated but the very fact that he is the subject of an epitaph at all. At the point in the poem at which Gray had been reflecting on the actual images presented by the graves, we had the following very important lines:

Their name, their years, spelt by th'unletter'd muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply.  
(ll. 81-82)

In the Eton Manuscript, as we noted, Gray had originally written "Epitaph" instead of "elegy," but made the change around the time he also changed the title from "Stanza's" to "Elegy." As we noted, the obscurity of the Forefathers during their lives precluded the possibility of their being memorialized in an elegy (or epitaph), and

thus the appearance of their names and years on the stones has the effect of intensifying the feeling of anonymity associated with them. In the "Epitaph," however, this ratio is reversed; for here we are presented with a generic Youth who is literally anonymous--and whose merits and frailties we are to seek no farther (much as we are not to send to know for whom the bell tolls) because in any event the poet has no intention of disclosing them. But this generic Youth is nevertheless the subject of an epitaph--which again suggests that the "Epitaph" is partly in contradiction with the earlier reflections.

What is clear, in any event, is that the "Epitaph" combines aspects of the might have been that Gray envisions beyond the graves with the is or was that he visualizes immediately in connection with the graves. (We are speaking putatively here because the entire process may be considered as grounded in the imagination.) Thus, the "Epitaph" as a construct symbolically reconciles the spheres of presence and absence which in the earlier reflections had been delineated grammatically and, from a thematic point of view, in terms of distinct social classes. The question, however, is what meaning this symbolic reconciliation, or synthesis, holds in store for the poem as a whole.

The issue ultimately hinges on the nature of the "trembling hope" in the penultimate line, for this is the point at which the poem's implicit eschatology finally emerges from its elegiac vision of loss. There can be no doubt, of course, that the "trembling hope" of line 127 is explicitly rooted in the Christian belief in an afterlife. But in the context of the symbolic reconciliation that we have described, this

hope also aims at an historical future in which the Earthly Paradise invoked by the Angel Michael will have been achieved:

for then the Earth  
 Shall all be Paradise, far happier place  
 Than this of Eden, and far happier days.  
 (xii, 463-65)

To be sure, this hope is only implicit, and at the historical juncture at which Gray writes it can only be evoked through the vocabulary of Christian salvation. Moreover, whereas for Milton, because he is working fully within the Christian mythos, it can be expressed as a possibility on the same horizon as the salvation of the individual soul, for Gray, because of the (new) historical realism of the tapestry on which he is working, it can be intuited only from the antithetical standpoint of present loss. And yet it is implicit in the Elegy all the same.

We might say, moreover, that the sleep of the Forefathers--that metaphorical sleep by which the problem of death is circumvented--is ultimately predicated on this "trembling hope" for the future. In the meantime, however, the "Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" rests "upon the lap of [Mother] Earth" and reposes in "the bosom of his Father and his God." And here the poet also rests. For though his poem has taken him beyond the pastoral and the limits of Christian stoicism, he has nowhere else to go.

## Notes

Stanzas 1-4:

<sup>1</sup>Lives of the Poets, I, 77. Johnson's definition of "local poetry" is made with reference to Denham's poem, Cooper Hill.

<sup>2</sup>The importance of perspective in Gray's poetry in general and in the Elegy in particular was first emphasized by Frank Brady, "Structure and Meaning in Gray's Elegy," pp. 177-89.

<sup>3</sup>Ian Jack, "Gray's Elegy Revisited," in From Sensibility to Romanticism, pp. 160-61. Jack's excellent discussion of Gray's versification in the Elegy is the fullest treatment of the subject.

<sup>4</sup>A provisional model of the lyric, centering on the concept of the "lyric-I," will be developed on pages 168 to 170 of the present chapter. I argue that the Elegy corresponds to this model through its initial twenty-three stanzas; the model, however, is presented at the point at which dramatic complications begin to impinge on the poem's structure.

<sup>5</sup>Lonsdale, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup>Certain issues connected to Gray's use of the "pathetic fallacy" will be taken up in the context of stanza 14, with reference to William Empson's argument that the Elegy is conservative in its ideological leanings. See below, pp. 103-05.

<sup>7</sup>Corresp. III, 1297.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Lonsdale, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup>Purgatorio, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), viii, 1-6.

<sup>11</sup>Inferno, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), ii, 1-6.

<sup>12</sup>Dante was not very much admired--or even read--by the Augustans; it was not until after the appearance of H.F. Cary's translation in 1814 that he became popular. (See Werner P. Friedrich, Dante's Fame Abroad: 1350-1850 [Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1960], pp. 212-30.) However, Gray translated the story of Ugolino as early as 1737 or 1738, and his personal affinity to Dante is stronger than that of any English poet since Milton. As Paget Toynbee noted in Dante in English Literature (1909), with the exception of the scholar Thomas Tyrwhitt, Gray was "more intimately acquainted than any other Englishman of the eighteenth century" with Dante's poetry (cited by Lonsdale, p. 23).

<sup>13</sup>See T.H. Warren, Essays of Poets and Poetry, Ancient and Modern (London: John Murray, 1909), p. 229.

Stanzas 5-7:

<sup>1</sup>See Lonsdale, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Commenting on the grammatical sequencing of Gray's versification in the Elegy, Ian Jack (pp. 160-61) notes that the poem contains fifteen or more examples of the "balanced adjectival line" (adjective-noun-adjective-noun) of which line 17 provides an example. Jack also suggests that the adjective-noun-verb-adjective-noun pattern of a line such as "Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage" (line 51), of which there are almost a dozen examples in the Elegy, may be viewed as the English equivalent of the Latin "golden line," in which two adjectives are followed by a verb and then two substantives.

<sup>3</sup>See Lonsdale, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup>Lucretius, De Rerum Natura (The Way Things Are), trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), iii, 902-05. Gray would probably have known this passage in the Dryden translation (see Lonsdale, p. 121) as well as in the original, but Humphries's modern translation is closer both to the original and to Gray's imitation in stanza 6. The passages from the Georgics cited below are rendered in a modern version rather than in Dryden's translation for the same reason.

<sup>5</sup>See below, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup>See Lonsdale, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Perret, "The Georgics," in Virgil, ed. Steele Commager (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 34.

<sup>8</sup>See below, pp. 120-29.

<sup>9</sup>Virgil's Georgics, trans. Smith Palmer Bovie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), iv, 559-66.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., i, 121-46.

<sup>11</sup>Perret, pp. 32-33.

<sup>12</sup>See L.P. Wilkinson, The Georgics of Virgil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 49-55.

Stanza 8:

<sup>1</sup>See above, Ch. 2, p. 47 et passim.

<sup>2</sup>Horace, The Odes and Epodes, trans. C.E. Bennett (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 369.

<sup>3</sup>See Bertrand H. Bronson, "Personification Reconsidered," ELH XIV (1947): 163-77.

<sup>4</sup>Earl Wasserman, in what is perhaps the best-known treatment of personification in eighteenth-century poetry, argues that the use of the figure during the period should be viewed in the context of the empiricist philosophical tradition. It is interesting, therefore, that Gray is never once mentioned in Wasserman's rather lengthy article. See Earl R. Wasserman, "The Inherent Values of 18th Century Personification," PMLA LXV (1950): 435-63.

<sup>5</sup>Cited by Wasserman, p. 440.

Stanza 9:

<sup>1</sup>See above, Ch. 2, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Brooks, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup>Brooks's conservative premise has important implications for the function of personification in the Elegy. This aspect of his analysis will be treated below, on pp. 87-92.

<sup>4</sup>See Brooks, p. 114.

Stanza 10:

<sup>1</sup>This point was suggested to me by my adviser, Prof. Allen Mandelbaum.

<sup>2</sup>See above, pp. 80-81.

<sup>3</sup>Brooks, p. 109.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>5</sup>Brooks, p. 114. Having suggested that Knowledge is being viewed ironically, Brooks then attempts to distinguish it from "Fair Science" in the "Epitaph" (p. 115). But as several commentators have noted, "knowledge" and "science" are synonymous to the eighteenth century. It will be recalled that Ellis, in order to preserve his own interpretation, had attempted to read "Fair Science" as "native intelligence"; see above, Ch. 2, p. 42.

Stanza 11:

<sup>1</sup>Brooks, pp. 112-13.

Stanza 12:

<sup>1</sup>The potentiality-actuality relationship is, of course, fundamental to Aristotle's metaphysics from which it is derived; and it may be noted that during the period in which Gray was at work on the Elegy, he was especially preoccupied with Aristotle's thought. Interestingly, in the same letter of 1746 in which Gray may be referring to the Elegy for the first time, there is also an interesting reference to Aristotle. Aristotle, he says, is "the hardest Author by far I ever meddled with" (Corresp. I, 241).

Philip Wheelwright provides a gloss on the potentiality-actuality relationship in Aristotle's philosophy that is interesting in regard to the problem of unfulfilled potential as developed in the Elegy:

If a thing's actual character fulfilled all the implications of its definition--e.g. if man, defined as a rational animal, were in the fullest measure to realize everything that both "animal" and "rational" connote--it would be "complete" and "perfect" (teleios) of its kind, and hence divine. But, among mortals at any rate, perfect completeness or complete perfection is never found. In each actual embodiment there is always, to a greater or lesser degree, a "falling short" (steresis) of what the thing ideally (i.e. by definition) is.

(See Aristotle, Selections, ed. Philip Wheelwright (New York: Odyssey Press, Inc., 1951), p. XXXII.)

Wheelwright glosses the Aristotelian steresis variously as a "falling short," a "lack of form," a "lack of final character," "incompleteness," "notyetness," "absence," and "privation" (Ibid., p. 333). In stanzas 12 to 15 of the Elegy, the pathos deriving from this steresis is located specifically in terms of material poverty and social class; but later in the poem, as we shall see, its universality in terms of the human condition becomes apparent.

<sup>2</sup>There is an additional irony in the connection between Chatterton and Gray. Chatterton originally sent his "Rowley Poems" (i.e. the poems he represented as being the work of a 15th-century poet Thomas Rowley) to Horace Walpole, no doubt because of the latter's interest in antiquities. Walpole was at first receptive to Chatterton, but when he discovered that the poems were a "forgery," he broke off the correspondence. The despairing Chatterton poisoned himself at the age of 19, and Walpole has often been considered indirectly responsible for this tragedy. He is exonerated, however, by Wilmarth S. Lewis, Rescuing Horace Walpole (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 134-41. Chatterton is not mentioned in Gray's correspondence.

<sup>3</sup>See below, pp. 130-34.

Stanza 13:

<sup>1</sup>The conservative ideological assumptions of such a view will be taken up in the context of William Empson's discussion of stanza 14. See below, pp. 101-10.

<sup>2</sup>The pastoral, as a utopian response to the division of labor, and the Elegy's relation to this issue, will be discussed later in the present chapter. See below, pp. 120-25.

<sup>3</sup>Brooks, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup>Gray's essentially platonic attitude toward this issue will be discussed in relation to his didactic poem, The Alliance of Education and Government. See below, pp. 106-08.

Stanza 14:

<sup>1</sup>Ellis, p. 1001.

<sup>2</sup>William Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Marx, Capital, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1979), I, 71-83.

<sup>5</sup>Edmund Waller, The Poems of Edmund Waller, ed. G. Thorn Drury (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 128.

<sup>6</sup>Since T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets represent a paradigmatic case of the modern poem of conservative resignation, it is interesting to

note that Eliot borrowed rather heavily from the Elegy. Indeed, George T. Wright, arguing that the Quartets were modeled upon the Elegy, provides an extensive list of Eliot's borrowings from Gray. (See George T. Wright, "Eliot Written in a Country Churchyard," ELH XLIII [1976]: 227-43.) It is likely that Eliot's borrowings were unconscious, however, because his political attitude is antithetical to Gray's. Eliot's relationship to the subjunctive, for example, as in the opening lines of "Burnt Norton," is illustrative of the political differences between these two poets (who in other respects are so similar):

Time present and time past  
 Are both perhaps present in time future,  
 And time future contained in time past.  
 If all time is eternally present  
 All time is unredeemable.  
 What might have been is an abstraction  
 Remaining a perpetual possibility  
 Only in a world of speculation.  
 What might have been and what has been  
 Point to one end, which is always present.  
 Footfalls echo in the memory  
 Down the passage which we did not take  
 Towards the door we never opened  
 Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
 Thus, in your mind.

But to what purpose  
 Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves  
 I do not know.

(See T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 [New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971], 11. 1-17.)

<sup>7</sup>There is something almost inevitable about the fact that Gray was unable to complete The Alliance, and it is worthwhile commenting on this matter since it has a bearing on the style-content dialectic in Gray's poetry as a whole. In the first place, the Augustan verse-essay had been so fully appropriated by Pope that a poet as attuned to the problem of originality as Gray would have found it a quite intractable medium unless he was fully centered in the Augustan aesthetic, which was not the case with Gray. According to both Mason and Walpole, in any event, Gray abandoned The Alliance on the grounds that certain of its parts bore too strong a resemblance to the Dunciad (see Lonsdale, p. 87). Gray is a poet of lyric density rather than discursive expansiveness, and in this respect he is a more "modern" poet than the others of his age. Norton Nicholls's "Reminiscences" (Corresp. III, 1291) are enlightening on this issue:

I asked him why he had not continued that beautiful fragment beginning 'As sickly plants betray a niggard earth' He said, because he could not; when I expressed surprise at this, he explained himself as follows; That he had been used to write only lyric poetry in which the poems being short; he had accustomed himself, & was able to polish every part; that

this having become habit, he could not write otherwise; & that the labour of this method in a long poem would be intolerable; besides which the poem would lose its effect for want of Chiaro-Oscuro; for that to produce effect it was absolutely necessary to have weak parts.-- He instanced in Homer, & particularly in Milton, who he said in parts of his poem rolls on in sounding words that have but little meaning.

One is here reminded of Poe's argument that a long poem is a contradiction in terms. But in any event, as Nicholls's "Reminiscences" indicate, the reason that Gray wrote as little as he did seems to have something to do with the nature of his artistry--a kind of artistry in which density substitutes for length as such.

<sup>8</sup>See Lonsdale, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup>Corresp. I, p. 310.

<sup>10</sup>Empson, p. 5.

Stanza 15:

<sup>1</sup>Johnson, Lives of the Poets, II, 315.

<sup>2</sup>See J. Fisher, "James Hammond and the Quatrain of Gray's Elegy," Modern Philology XXXII (1935): 302.

<sup>3</sup>See J. Fisher, "Shenstone, Gray, and the 'Moral Elegy,'" Modern Philology XXXIV (1937): 273-94.

<sup>4</sup>Gray, Corresp. I, 295.

<sup>5</sup>William Shenstone, Works (London, 1764), I, 4; cited by Morris Golden, Thomas Gray, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup>Gray, Corresp. II, 566.

<sup>7</sup>John Dryden, Poems: 1649-1680, ed. Niles Hooker and H.T. Swedenberg, Jr., Vol. 1 of The Works of John Dryden (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), pp. 50-51.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>9</sup>Lonsdale, p. 174.

<sup>10</sup>Earl Miner, "Introduction" to John Dryden: Selected Poetry and Prose (New York: The Modern Library, 1969), p. xxvi.

<sup>11</sup>Dryden, "Annus Mirabilis," Poems: 1649-1680, ll. 125-28.

<sup>12</sup>See above, p. 86.

<sup>13</sup>Jack, p. 154.

<sup>14</sup>See below, pp. 150-53.

<sup>15</sup>See above, Ch. 2, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup>Samuel Johnson, "The Vanity of Human Wishes," Poems, ed. E.L. McAdam, Jr., Vol. XI of The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1964), 11. 159-60.

<sup>17</sup>George Puttenham, The Arte of English Poesie, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936; reprinted 1970), pp. 180-81.

<sup>18</sup>Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 503-17.

<sup>19</sup>Arnold, The Collected Prose Works, IX, 189.

<sup>20</sup>Eric Havelock, A Preface to Plato (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 36-60 et passim.

<sup>21</sup>See above, Ch. 2, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup>Ovid, Metamorphoses, trans. Arthur Golding (Londong, 1612), 11. 29-42.

<sup>23</sup>W.W. Greg, Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama (1906; New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1959), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Frank Kermode, English Pastoral Poetry (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1952), p. 14.

<sup>26</sup>Greg, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup>See above, p. 73.

<sup>28</sup>See above, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup>Greg, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup>Johnson, Lives of the Poets, I, 165.

Stanzas 16-18:

<sup>1</sup>It may be noted in passing that the contradiction that Gray confronts in line 60 of the Elegy marks the point at which the Aristotelian conception of Value comes into conflict with the Platonic. For Plato, the Good is a transcendental concept, but for Aristotle it is employed variously, according to the context in which it is to be applied. Whitney J. Oates, in Aristotle and the Problem of Value (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), argues that Aristotle's conception of Value is ultimately contradictory for this reason. The point in the Elegy at which the contradiction between the Aristotelian notion of fulfillment or happiness and the Good emerges is thus the point at which the Aristotelian perspective gives way to a Platonic one. This is perhaps overly schematic: Aristotle, of course, remained a Platonist in many crucial respects, but, as Oates maintains, not as far as the Being-Value relationship is concerned.

<sup>2</sup>This grammatical suspension is reminiscent of those that occur in stanzas 4 and 5. See above, pp. 63-64 and 67-68.

<sup>3</sup>But the word "virtues," although contrasted with "crimes," is itself ambiguous because of its Roman, or Renaissance-humanist, connotation of the "heroic manliness" (i.e. virtū) appropriate to the political leader.

<sup>4</sup>See above, pp. 107-08.

<sup>5</sup>Lonsdale, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>See above, pp. 86-87.

<sup>8</sup>See above, pp. 103-04.

<sup>9</sup>See above, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup>See above, pp. 106-08.

<sup>11</sup>Lonsdale, p. 89. But it is interesting that those scholars, such as Lonsdale, who have pointed out the influence of Plato on Gray's thought in the Elegy have located this influence only in the negative context of stanza 17. Gray was a Platonist, and he was influenced by Plato's utopianism as well as by his pessimism. That this has not been sufficiently recognized is another indication of a general tendency to view the Elegy in a conservative ideological context.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Brooks's analysis of Gray's use of personification suggests that Knowledge (in stanza 13) has pejorative connotations. See above, p. 90.

Stanza 19:

<sup>1</sup>See above, Ch. 2, pp. 24-28 et passim.

<sup>2</sup>See above, pp. 76-81. It should be noted, moreover, that the issue of referentiality is also somewhat problematic in the case of those buried in the country churchyard. In line 16, they are referred to for the first and last time as "the rude Forefathers," and in stanza 8 they are associated with poverty and obscurity; but henceforward, they are always referred to by the third-person plural pronoun.

<sup>3</sup>See above, pp. 112-17.

<sup>4</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 31.

<sup>5</sup>G.W.F. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 234-40.

<sup>6</sup>See Webster's Third International Dictionary (unabridged), 1967.

<sup>7</sup>Oliver Goldsmith, "The Deserted Village," Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith, ed. Arthur Friedman (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), IV, 11. 51-56.

Stanza 20:

<sup>1</sup>See above, p. 94.

Stanza 21:

<sup>1</sup>De Man, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>4</sup>See above, Ch. 2, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>De Man, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup>If we analyze the "unletter'd muse" in mimetic terms, it is possible to associate her with the "rustic Stonecutter" of Ellis's interpretation (see above, Ch. 2, pp. 40-41 ), and without necessarily accepting the dramatic implications of Ellis's argument. It is clear that in an actual churchyard, someone along the lines of Ellis's "rustic

Stonecutter" would have fulfilled the function that Gray ascribes to the "unletter'd muse." However, the "unletter'd muse," as we have suggested, is both constitutive of the principle of anonymity and herself constituted by that principle; it may be observed that Ellis's Stonecutter introduces an unnecessary level of mediation while at the same time circumscribing the tropological richness of Gray's figure. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in spite of its drawbacks, Ellis's interpretation is one of the few to see the importance of the fame-anonymity problem in the Elegy.

<sup>7</sup> It could be argued, from a Marxist or perhaps from Deconstructionist point of view, that by affirming poetry from a Christian standpoint, Gray is merely reinstating the ideological dimension which he had polemicized against in stanza 18--in other words, that his desire to make of poetry something "pure" is itself an expression of the material forces from which it is in flight. It is difficult to respond to this line of reasoning, except to say that by reducing art to the sphere of ideology, it loses the specificity of art qua art. In any event, it is clear that at least the desire to transcend the ideological is reflected in the Elegy.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Trapp, Lectures on Poetry (Menston, England: The Scolar Press, 1973), p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> See above, Ch. 1, pp. 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Corresp. I, 340-41.

#### Stanza 22:

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 86-87.

<sup>2</sup> See above, Ch. 1, pp. 15-16.

#### Stanza 23:

<sup>1</sup> As we noted in the context of stanza 1, Gray's explanation for why he changed "dying" to "parting" in line 1 of Eton is that he "wished to avoid the concetto" (see above, p. 59). Given the metaphorical significance of "parting" for both of the contexts in which the word appears, however, this explanation is clearly insufficient.

<sup>2</sup> See Letters of John Keats, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 249-51.

Stanzas 24-29:

<sup>1</sup>See above, Ch. 2, pp. 44-46.

<sup>2</sup>John Donne, Selected Prose, ed. Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 100-01.

<sup>3</sup>See above, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup>See above, Ch. 2, pp. 46-50.

<sup>5</sup>Bronson, "On a Special Decorum in Gray's Elegy," p. 176.

<sup>6</sup>The term "intentionality" is here being used in the sense in which Paul de Man employs it in "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism." In his critique of the New Criticism, de Man argues that the rejection of the principle of intentionality leads to "a hardening of the text into a sheer surface that prevents the stylistic analysis from penetrating beyond the sensory appearances to perceive [the] 'struggle with meaning' of which all criticism, including the criticism of forms, should give an account. For surfaces also remain concealed when they are being artificially separated from the depth that supports them" (p. 24; see above, Ch. 2, p. 23). De Man, of course, does not hold to a naively "Romantic" conception of intentionality, according to which the poetic process is an unmediated extension of the poet's presence. However, in order to maintain a conception of intentionality without falling into the same Romantic fallacies that originally led to the rejection of the principle of intentionality by the New Critics, one would have to distinguish in some manner between the poet's shaping process and the "lyric-I" of the poem.

<sup>7</sup>See above, Ch. 2, pp. 33-36 et passim.

<sup>8</sup>See above, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup>See above, Ch. 2, pp. 40-41.

<sup>10</sup>See above, Ch. 2, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup>See above, p. 121.

Stanzas 30-32:

<sup>1</sup>See above, Ch. 2, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>See above, Ch. 2, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>See above, Ch. 2, pp. 28-33.

<sup>4</sup>See above, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup>See above, pp. 117-19.

<sup>6</sup>See above, pp. 99-101.

<sup>7</sup>In a letter to West of 1742, Gray writes: "Mine, you are to know, is a white Melancholy, or rather leucocholy for the most part; which though it seldom laughs or dances, nor ever amounts to what one calls Joy or Pleasure, yet is a good easy sort of state . . . But there is another sort, black indeed, which I have now and then felt, that has somewhat in it like Tertullian's rule of faith, *Credo quia impossibile est*; for it believes, nay, is sure of every thing that is unlikely, so it be but frightful; and, on the other hand, excludes and shuts its eyes to the most possible hopes, and every thing that is pleasurable; from this the Lord deliver us!" (*Corresp.* I, 209).

Gray's distinction parallels the two opposed Renaissance attitudes toward melancholy that Milton concretizes in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. As John Carey and Alastair Fowler note, "the first, originating in Galenic medicine, viewed [melancholy] as a source of stupidity, fearfulness and illusions; the second, originating in Aristotle's *Problemata* and adopted by Ficino in *De Studiosorum Sanitate Tuenda*, stressed that all who have become eminent in philosophy, poetry or the arts have been of melancholy temperament. At the beginning of *L'Allegro* Milton exorcises the Galenic melancholy: in *Il Penseroso* he celebrates the Aristotelian" (*The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler [London: Longman Group Limited, 1968], p. 131.)

<sup>8</sup>Brooks, pp. 109-10.

<sup>9</sup>Lonsdale, p. 139.

<sup>10</sup>I am indebted to Stuart Liebman for this insight.

Appendix A

Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard\*

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight, 5  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r  
The mopeing owl does to the moon complain 10  
Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap, 15  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,  
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,  
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, or the ecchoing horn, 20  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:  
No children run to lisp their sire's return,  
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield, 25  
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!

\* The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray, eds. H.W. Starr and J.R. Hendrickson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966).

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure; 30  
 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,  
 The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,  
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
 Awaits alike th'inevitable hour. 35  
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

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. 40

Can storied urn or animated bust  
 Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?  
 Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,  
 Or Flatt'ry sooth the dull cold ear of Death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid 45  
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire,  
 Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,  
 Or wak'd to extasy the living lyre.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page  
 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll; 50  
 Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,  
 And froze the genial current of the soul.

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, 55  
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast  
 The little Tyrant of his fields withstood;  
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,  
 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood. 60

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: nor circumscrib'd alone 65  
 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;  
 Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,  
 To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame, 70  
 Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride  
 With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
 Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;  
 Along the cool sequester'd vale of life 75  
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect  
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
 With uncouth rhimes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,  
 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh. 80

Their name, their years, spelt by th'unletter'd muse,  
 The place of fame and elegy supply:  
 And many a holy text around she strews,  
 That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey, 85  
 This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,  
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
 Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,  
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires; 90  
 Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,  
 Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

For thee, who mindful of th'unhonour'd Dead  
 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;  
 If chance, by lonely contemplation led, 95  
 Some kindred Spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,  
 'Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn  
 'Brushing with hasty steps the dews away  
 'To meet the sun upon the upland lawn. 100

'There at the foot of yonder nodding beech  
 'That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,  
 'His listless length at noontide wou'd he stretch,  
 'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

'Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn, 105  
 'Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he wou'd rove,  
 'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,  
 'Or craz'd with care; or cross'd in hopeless love.

'One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,  
 'Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree; 110  
 'Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
 'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he,

'The next with dirges due in sad array  
 'Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him born[e].  
 'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay, 115  
 'Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

## The EPITAPH.

*HERE rests his head upon the lap of Earth  
A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown,  
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,  
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.* 120

*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,  
Heav'n did a recompence as largely send:  
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,  
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.*

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

APPENDIX B

Stanza's Wrote in a Country Church-Yard  
(The Eton Manuscript)\*

The Curfeu tolls the Knell of parting Day,  
The lowing Herd wind slowly o'er the Lea,  
The Plowman homeward plods his weary Way,  
And leaves the World to Darkness & to me.

Now fades the glimm'ring Landscape on the Sight,  
And now the Air a solemn Stillness holds;  
Save, where the Beetle wheels his droning Flight,  
Or drowsy Tinklings lull the distant Folds.

Save, that from yonder ivy-mantled Tower  
The mopeing Owl does to the Moon complain  
Of such as wandring<sup>1</sup> near her secret Bower  
Molest her ancient<sup>2</sup> solitary Reign.

Beneath those rugged Elms, that Yewtree'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<sup>3</sup> sleep.

For ever sleep, the breezy Call of Morn,  
Or Swallow twitt'ring from the strawbuilt Shed,  
Or Chaunticleer so shrill or ecchoing Horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly Bed.

For them no more the blazeing Hearth shall burn,  
Or busy Huswife ply her Evening Care;  
No Children run to lisp their Sire's Return,  
Nor climb his Knees the coming<sup>4</sup> Kiss to share.

\* Taken from the original manuscript now preserved in the Memorial Buildings of Eton College; reprinted in Gray & Collins: Poetical Works, ed. Austin Lane Poole (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 181-87.

<sup>1</sup> stray too is written above wandring.

<sup>2</sup> & pry into is written above Molest her ancient.

<sup>3</sup> Village has been struck out and Hamlet written above.

<sup>4</sup> envied is written above and doubtful? is written in margin.

Oft did the Harvest to their Sickle yield;  
 Their Furrow oft the stubborn Glebe has broke;  
 How jocund did they drive their Team a-field!  
 How bow'd the Woods beneath their sturdy Stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful<sup>1</sup> Toil,  
 Their rustic Joys & Destiny obscure:  
 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful Smile  
 The short & simple Annals of the Poor.

The Boast of Heraldry the Pomp of Power,  
 And all, that Beauty, all that Wealth, e'er gave  
 Awaits alike th'inevitable Hour.  
 The Paths of Glory lead but to the Grave.

Forgive, ye Proud, th'involuntary Fault,  
 If Memory to these no Trophies raise,  
 Where thro' the long-drawn Ile, & fretted Vault  
 The pealing Anthem swells the Note of Praise.

Can storied Urn, or animated Bust,  
 Back to its Mansion call the fleeting Breath?  
 Can Honour's voice awake<sup>2</sup> the silent dust,  
 Or Flattery sooth the dull cold Ear of Death?

- I. Perhaps in this neglected Spot is laid  
 Some Heart, once pregnant with celestial Fire,  
 Hands, that the Reins of Empire might have sway'd,  
 Or waked to Ecstasy the living Lyre:
4. Some Village Cato<sup>3</sup> with dauntless Breast  
 The little Tyrant of his Fields withstood;  
 Some mute inglorious Tully here may rest;  
 Some Caesar, guiltless of his Country's Blood.
2. But Knowledge to their eyes her ample Page,  
 Rich with the Spoils of Time, did ne'er unroll:  
 Chill Penury had damp'd<sup>4</sup> their noble Rage,  
 And froze the genial Current of the Soul.
3. 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 wast its Sweetness on the desert Air.

<sup>1</sup> homely is substituted for useful in margin.

<sup>2</sup> provoke is substituted for awake in margin.

<sup>3</sup> A word is lost through the fraying of the paper at a crease.

<sup>4</sup> depress'd repress'd written above.

Th' Applause of listening Senates to command,  
 The Threats of Pain & Ruin to despise,  
 To scatter Plenty o'er a smiling Land  
 And read their Hist'ry in a Nation's Eyes,

Their Fate<sup>1</sup> forbad: nor circumscribed alone  
 Their struggling<sup>2</sup> Virtues, but their Crimes confined  
 Forbad to wade thro' Slaughter to a Throne,  
 And shut the Gates of Mercy on Mankind

The struggling Pangs of conscious Truth to hide,  
 To quench the Blushes of ingenuous Shame,  
 And at<sup>3</sup> the Shrine of Luxury & Pride  
 With<sup>4</sup> Incense hallowd in<sup>5</sup> the Muse's Flame.

The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow  
 Exalt the brave, & idolize Success  
 But more to Innocence their Safety owe  
 Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless\*

And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead  
 Dost in these Notes their<sup>6</sup> artless Tale relate  
 By Night & lonely Contemplation led  
 To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate

Hark how the sacred Calm, that broods around  
 Bids ev'ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease  
 In still small Accents whisp'ring from the Ground  
 A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace

No more with Reason & thyself at Strife;  
 Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room  
 But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
 Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

<sup>1</sup> Lot written above.

<sup>2</sup> growing written above.

<sup>3</sup> Crown written above at.

<sup>4</sup> Burn is struck out and With inserted above.

<sup>5</sup> kindled at written below, by instead of in written above.

<sup>6</sup> In thy the y is struck out and eir written above.

\* The brace around these four eventually rejected stanzas is Gray's.

Far from the madding Crowd's ignoble Strife,  
 Their sober Wishes never knew to stray:  
 Along the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
 They kept the silent<sup>1</sup> Tenour of their Way.

Yet even these Bones from Insult to protect  
 Some frail Memorial still erected nigh  
 With<sup>2</sup> uncouth Rhime, & shapeless Sculpture deckt  
 Implores the passing Tribute of a Sigh.

Their Name, their Years, spelt by th'unletter'd Muse  
 The Place of Fame, & Epitaph supply  
 And many a holy Text around she strews,  
 That teach the rustic Moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness, a Prey,  
 This pleasing anxious Being e'er resign'd;  
 Left the warm Precincts of the chearful Day,  
 Nor cast one longing lingring Look behind?

On some fond Breast the parting Soul relies,  
 Some pious Drops the closing Eye requires:  
 Even from the Tomb the Voice of Nature cries,  
 And buried Ashes glow with Social Fires.

For Thee, who mindful &c: as above.

If chance that e'er some pensive Spirit more,  
 By sympathetic Musings here delay'd,  
 With vain, tho' kind, Enquiry shall explore  
 Thy once-loved Haunt, this long-deserted Shade.

Haply some hoary headed Swain shall say,  
 Oft have we seen him at the Peep of Dawn  
 With hasty Footsteps brush the Dews away  
 On the high Brow of yonder hanging Lawn

Him have we seen the Green-wood Side along  
 While o'er the Heath we hied, our Labours done,  
 Oft as the Woodlark piped her farewell Song  
 With whistful Eyes pursue the setting Sun.

Oft at the Foot of yonder hoary<sup>3</sup> Beech  
 That wreathes its old fantastic Roots so high  
 His listless Length at Noontide would he stretch,  
 And pore upon the Brook that babbles by.

<sup>1</sup> noiseless written above.

<sup>2</sup> With substituted for another word, perhaps In, which has been inked out.

<sup>3</sup> spreading is written above, nodding in the margin.

With Gestures quaint now smileing as in Scorn,  
 Mutt'ring his fond Conceits<sup>1</sup> he would he<sup>2</sup> rove,  
 Now drooping, woeful wan,<sup>3</sup> as one forlorn,  
 Or crazed with Care, or cross'd in hopeless Love.

One Morn we miss'd him on th' customd<sup>4</sup> Hill,  
 By<sup>5</sup> the Heath<sup>6</sup> and at<sup>7</sup> his fav'rite Tree.  
 Another came, nor yet beside the Rill,  
 Nor up the Lawn, nor at<sup>8</sup> the Wood was he.

<sup>9</sup>The next with Dirges meet in sad Array  
 Slow thro<sup>10</sup> the Church-way Path we saw him born  
 Approach & read, for thou can'st read the Lay  
 Wrote<sup>11</sup> on the Stone beneath that<sup>12</sup> ancient Thorn:

There scatter'd oft the earliest of ye Year<sup>13</sup>  
 By Hands unseen are frequent<sup>14</sup> Vi'lets found  
 The Robin<sup>15</sup> loves to build & warble there  
 And little Footsteps lightly print the Ground.

<sup>1</sup> wayward fancies *is written above*.

<sup>2</sup> went to *is struck out*, loved *is written above and struck out*, finally would he *is written above*.

<sup>3</sup> *The line originally stood* Now woeful wan, he droop'd. *drooping is inserted above and he droop'd is struck out*.

<sup>4</sup> ac [customd] ac *struck out*.

<sup>5</sup> Along *written above*.

<sup>6</sup> side *is written after Heath and struck out*.

<sup>7</sup> Near *written above at*.

<sup>8</sup> By *written above*.

<sup>9</sup> *Between these stanzas is written and struck out* There scatter'd oft, the earliest.

<sup>10</sup> By *written above*.

<sup>11</sup> Graved carved *written above*.

<sup>12</sup> yon *written above*.

<sup>13</sup> Spring *struck out and year written above*.

<sup>14</sup> Showers of *written above*.

<sup>15</sup> Redbreast *written above*.

Here<sup>1</sup> rests his Head upon the Lap of Earth  
 A Youth to Fortune & to Fame unknown  
 Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth  
 And Melancholy mark'd him for her own

Large was his Bounty & his Heart sincere;  
 Heaven did a Recompence as largely send.  
 He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a Tear.  
 He gained from Heav'n; twas all he wish'd, a Friend

No further seek his Merits to disclose,  
 Nor seek<sup>2</sup> to draw them from their dread Abode  
 (His frailties there in trembling Hope repose)  
 The Bosom of his Father & his God.

<sup>1</sup> The Epitaph *is written along the outer margin at right angles to the other stanzas.*

<sup>2</sup> think *is written above seek.*

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