Elegy Unto Epitaph: Print Culture and Commemorative Practice in Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”

MICHELE TURNER SHARP

From its inception in classical times, elegy has been a vehicle by which a poet negotiates his own poetic maturation and grapples with the risks and gains attendant upon the acquisition of public voice. In the elegies of Moschus, Bion, Spenser, and Milton, for example, poets use the death of a fellow poet as a means to secure their own poetic stature. The shape that an elegy takes, hence, must reflect the terms on which and arena within which the poet gives birth to himself as a public figure. Peter Sacks, in his book, *The English Elegy*, has done much to explain how elegies work. Reading widely in the tradition of pastoral elegy, Sacks describes how the elegiac poet confronts the abyss of death and, in the face of that abyss, confirms his own vitality. Using Freud’s writings as a theoretical framework, Sacks argues that an elegy performs a work of mourning whose dynamic of loss and gain models itself as oedipal conflict and resolution. The elegist must rupture his attachment to the dead in order to effect a renewed attachment with the living. Elegies accomplish this task by making recourse to the substitutive and differential powers of language to place the dead at a remove from the living, and posit a compensatory figure—a star or a flower, for example—that marks the transformation of loss into gain. Sacks’s fine theoretical work and his lucid interpretation of a number of canonical elegies have set the stage for much recent discussion of the genre. Relying on a psychoanalytic framework that divides
melancholia from the precincts of normative mourning and proper elegy, however, quickly forecloses discussion of the many elegies, particularly in the 20th century, that deviate from this norm. A comparative methodology, furthermore, leaves out of the discussion significant historical shifts that condition poetic utterance and the profession of literature. This lapse is particularly conspicuous in a genre like elegy that concerns itself explicitly with how poets enter a public field and the symbolic means by which they sketch the acquisition of mature vocative potential. A full understanding of elegy needs to move beyond a syntagmatic analysis and follow the genre in its evolution. Indeed, historical shifts in how poets communicate with and anticipate audiences must have a profound impact on the genre itself, altering both what elegies do and how they do it.

Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” written at mid-century, provides a good test case for judging how the incipient professionalization of literature affects and alters elegy. It must be noted that Gray’s “Elegy” diverges significantly from elegiac convention. First, although many have presumed the loss of Richard West to have formed an urgent context for the “Elegy,” West is not named, and, according to Roger Lonsdale’s extensive notes, Gray probably began his poem in 1746, several years after West’s death in 1742 (Poems 103-110). The “Elegy” is, however, undeniably shaped by the loss of West, if for no other reason than, as Joshua Scodel notes, Gray lost the one reader on whose sympathies he could rely without hesitation.1 Second, Gray’s poem lacks many of the genre’s conventional motifs. We find no procession of mourners, no catalogue of flowers, and no refrain of grief. Moreover, Gray’s poem eschews any of the standard figures that lent compensatory closure to earlier literary mourners, such as the flower of Bion’s Lament for Adonis or the star adopted by Spenser and Milton to

figure the risen dead. Finally, the “Elegy” ends with the imagined death of the poet. In *Lycidas*, the poet/swain in the poem, together with the author, anticipate “Pastures new” on the morrow. In Gray’s “Elegy,” the frail youth, “woeful wan” and “crazed with care,” lies beneath a stone and an inscription engraved by the hand of a writer who, by all accounts, would have let his creation die an obscure death. The contrast could hardly be more stark. If elegy’s central concern is securing the continued life of the poet as a living voice in the face of death, placing the poet’s death within its confines constitutes a most disturbing departure from the convention.

I suggest that the generic deviations that the “Elegy” makes from the tradition of pastoral elegy are intimately related to changes in the status of the writer and a concomitant and explicit revaluation of lyric as a written artifact. Timothy Bahti has pointed out that although lyric imagines itself as a vocative utterance or song, “there is no lyric without reading, for we cannot conceive of a poem that does not have at least the one reader who is its author” (7). The precipitous rise of print culture, which gained momentum at mid-century, however, gave reading and readers increased salience, while at the same time linking writers to texts in explicit and sometimes uncomfortable ways. Ongoing debates about copyright and about whether and how texts could be owned laid the groundwork for recognition of an author’s right to own literary property by virtue of his labor and ingenuity, which would be written into law in the copyright act of 1814.\(^2\) Increased numbers of readers and a rising demand for written words, together with the appearance of a robust infrastructure for the production and distribution of texts, made it possible for more and more writers to live by the

pen. The relatively autonomous circulation of texts in a print culture milieu, however, discomfited writers like Gray who doubted the capacity of readers to properly assimilate their texts. Linda Zionkowski argues that Gray’s worries shape his poems in ways that progressively minimize the scope of readers or reading, effectively recreating within the domain of print the small and intimate dimensions of the manuscript circle in which poems belonged to a small caste of elite and well educated readers. Rather than writing readers and reading out of the picture, however, I will argue that Gray’s “Elegy” makes the vexed potential that reading assumes in print culture central to its cohesive shape. The poem asks how commemoration remains possible when poets “speak” to unknown readers about decedents whom these readers cannot know. Moreover, Gray explores how poets acquire names when the rules of the game have become explicitly literary, when poets read and are read into posterity. What previous elegiac poets trope as a transmission of voice, Gray tropes as a transmission of texts. The turn to reading at the end of the poem is distinctive in the history of elegy, but it brings to a cohesive close a poem concerned throughout with how the attenuation of shared contexts complicates the purpose of commemoration. At the same time, however, when Gray hands his “Elegy” to its readers, he forms elegy and elegiac poets for their own future, a future, that is, in which writers lead posthumous lives sealed within the pages of their own books. In the process, Gray takes the genre of elegy across a divide from which it will not return.

A quick survey of the discussion surrounding Gray’s famous elegy reveals considerable disagreement about the most fundamental aspects of the poem. Critics have bent their energies to determining what or whom the poem is really about, to sketch-

---

ing the dimensions of the speaker’s emotive or ethical response to the loss of this albeit elusive object, and to assessing the rapport between speaker and poet. For Gray’s first biographer, William Mason, the poem centered on the poet’s sorrow for the loss of his dear friend, Richard West. Mason, thus, suggested in his *Memoir* that the poem was begun, if not completed in its original version, shortly after West’s death. Horace Walpole, who received a finished poem in 1750, disagreed with Mason about when Gray began his poem, and two centuries of critical debate has ensued. Gray’s 20th century biographer, R. W. Ketton-Cremer, for example, sides with Walpole about the date, but he agrees with Mason that the poem’s original motivation “must surely have been the death of West.” Ketton-Cremer notes, however, that the “Elegy” “transcends the private sorrows of its writer” (98). Eugene McCarthy likewise argues that West’s death is a vital, though not exhaustive, context for the “Elegy.” Other readers have imposed ever-widening frames for the poet’s grief. Lonsdale, for example, whose notes to the poem handle the dating argument with convincing dispatch, believes that the real heart of the “Elegy” is the poet’s own struggle to find an idiom within which to frame a new kind of self, one that is deeper, confused, and driven by subversive passions (*Poems* 22). Taking a different tack, Henry Weinfield argues that the “Elegy” confronts and is shaped by the problem of history, one of whose most compelling manifestations for the poet is the obscure anonymity into which poets and poems must fall in an age no longer heroic. The result is a poem that foregrounds the dissolution of the pastoral idiom in a way that makes the “Elegy” the antithesis of elegy proper. If the “Elegy” is (still) an elegy, it is because it mourns the impossibility of being an elegy in a more restricted sense, writes Weinfield (120). For Suvir Kaul, the “Elegy” mourns its poet’s vexed attempt to mark out a place for himself or his poem beyond the pale of history or above the logic of commodities. Taking particular issue with John Sitter’s argument that the “Elegy,” like much mid-century poetry, maps a
flight from history, Kaul argues that the “Elegy” is a site where “particular versions of English history” take tenacious hold of both poem and poet. What seems to be a “defensive refiguration” or retreat is in fact an “offensive strategy” in which the poet voices a high culture protest to the rising tide of bourgeois values that neither poet nor poem can contest in any real way (149). The result, for Kaul, is a poem riven by its own necessary failure to articulate a free and secure value for itself independent of commodity culture, and in which pathos intervenes to gloss the socio-cultural contradictions that it cannot resolve (127).

The trouble that critics have taken to locate a context for the poet’s expression of grief stems, obviously enough, from the fact that the poem makes its occasion anything but clear. Indeed, previous models in the tradition of pastoral elegy invariably begin by quickly sketching a concrete occasion for utterance. In elegies by Bion, Moschus, Spenser, and Milton, the present crisis of death urges the elegiac poet to break his silence and undertake the difficult task of commemoration. Within the logic of traditional elegy, this step is integral to the process of poetic maturation. When the poet rises to the occasion, he finds a proof of his own daring that earns him the blessing of the dead and the right to assume the laurels of song. In one way, thus, the end of the poem is implicit in the beginning, for finding the courage to speak out becomes a ground on which the poet finds within himself those resources on which his life depends. But beginning is not entirely its own end, for the poet’s speech is bound by the burden of a tradition within which he is a latecomer, a belated second son, an echo of past poets and their poems. Keeping faith with the tradition confronts the elegiac poet with his own secondary status, which is also to say with his own death. Remaining within the tradition, however, and heeding its ethical injunction to remember the newly deceased also dictate that the poet break with tradition in order to frame a new context and authorize a new singer.
Within the tradition of pastoral elegy, poets rely on the urgency of the present occasion to overcome what would otherwise be an overwhelming burden. Indeed, as an inaugural genre, elegy challenges the poet to begin without requisite strength or expertise, for these credentials are gained in the song itself. Milton’s imminently self-conscious elegy, *Lycidas*, gives explicit scope to the dilemma of beginning. Before beginning, Milton pauses to sketch the difficult task ahead of him:

Yet once, more, O ye Laurels, and once more  
Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never sere,  
I come to pluck your Berries harsh and crude  
And with forc’d fingers rude,  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year. (1-5)

With their “yet once more,” these lines stress the threat of redundancy within which the poet comes to the “ivy never sere” of the tradition. Moreover, the poet’s immaturity is an explicit theme. His verse will be harsh and grating, and his fingers rude upon the strings of lyric, but “bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear” move him to song: “For *Lycidas* is dead, dead ere his prime” (6, 8).

The forthright quality with which Milton’s elegist addresses the difficult task incumbent on the elegiac singer, and the tenacity with which he calls the resources of the tradition into question, give *Lycidas* a prominent place in what Sacks identifies as a skeptical trend in elegy. But although the elegiac speaker doubts his readiness for the task, he never questions his own profound response nor that of his recipients. Edward King was an obscure clergyman and minor poet, but Milton’s poem is a high stakes game in which the writer’s own poetic immortality is on the table together with the fate of the corrupt clergy. The poet’s strong faith in the urgency of the situation, notes Sacks, gives *Lycidas* its taut “sinew of address [and] compelling tone of engagement.” Furthermore, writes Sacks, the “near-magical manner in which Milton keeps changing fictive addressees is . . . crucial to the development of the poem, for the long passage
from the personified laurels to the Genius of the shore may be read as an intensifying exercise in making up or evoking a presence where there is none—a fundamentally elegiac enterprise” (96). In other words, the speaker’s faith in the depth of his response to a compelling context of loss allows him to build an expanding set of connections to potential recipients and to build their response as a core aspect of the work of mourning.

Gray’s poem follows Milton’s example in its tendency to doubt its inherited idiom, but it extends and deepens the skeptical thread of Milton’s elegy by exploring what happens to the genre of elegy in the face of legitimate concerns about viable contexts shared, on the one hand, between the poet and the ostensible object of his mourning, and, on the other, between the poet and his reader/hearer. Unlike that of his predecessor, Gray’s poem begins with anything but “bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear.” In the place where previous elegies pose the compelling context of loss, Gray’s “Elegy” poses a gap between the speaker and the occasion, which in turn stands in for a gap between the speaker and any and all potential hearers. The first stanzas of Gray’s “Elegy” foreground the poem’s unique dilemma by clearing the scene of defining traits. Darkness falls and the “glimmering landscape” fades on the sight. The curfew tolls, the lowing herds wind “slowly o’er the lea,” the ploughman plods wary home. In the dusky light, visual and aural cues intermingle, draining the scene of urgency. As Weinfield notes, these stanzas paint the scene in a slow motion whose primary effect is one of stasis and timelessness (44). Indeed, the “glimmering landscape,” the beetle’s “droning flight” and the “drowsy tinklings [that] lull the distant folds,” seal the speaker’s lethargy and threaten to lull him to sleep. The difficulty that the poem takes to get to the point places the poet’s uncertainty about his rapport with the ignoble dead, together with his uncertainty about the resources of poetry to bridge this gap between the poet and the subject of his poem, at the fore. On the one hand, as darkness and silence mount, the speaker seems ready to hear the
whispering shades of the rural dead tell their own tales. On the other hand, however, there are abundant clues that all he hears are the resounding echoes of the pastoral tradition. The poem sketches this conflict in the troubled syntax of the third stanza and the broad use of emphasis and deictics in the fourth. In the third stanza, for example, enjamed lines replace the serene end-stopped lines of the first two stanzas, and subjects, verbs, objects, and prepositional phrases are broadly inverted within and between lines. At the same time, McCarthy notes, the hard consonant sounds of “molest,” “ancient,” “solitary,” and “mantled tow’r,” for example, contrast with the pattern of rhythmic tolling of long vowel sounds in the preceding stanzas in a way that suggests growing uneasiness (126-28). The content of the stanza, moreover, intensifies the poem’s distress by introducing a note of complaint and molestation, which, in tandem with the up-ended quality of the lines, heralds the rising of the village dead in stanza four and their power to disturb both poet and poem.

The trouble that the village dead take to force their way into the poem hints at what Raymond Williams terms the poem’s latent understanding that pastoral poetry cannot have it both ways. It cannot tell the real story of these rural dead and their dismal end and still remain in the “cool sequestered vale” of pastoral, which is also to say that it cannot be history and poetry at the same time (74). The trouble, however, is that elegy must be both history and poetry, for it must remember not just the dead in general, but these dead. In order to lay the dead to rest, however, elegy must also part company with realism, for it must cover the site of loss with panegyric. Gray’s poem trades on this understanding by approaching the rural dead in a way that emphatically marks their place in the landscape. In line 13, “Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade,” for example, the caesura, anchored by a comma between the third and fourth foot, causes the second half of the line, the “yew-tree’s shade,” to deepen the shadow of “those rugged elms” beneath which the dead lie. The use of deictics—“those rugged elms,”
“that yew-tree’s shade”—further underscores the specificity of the spot, and the “where” in the following line, “Where heaves the turf in many a mould’ring heap,” marks it again. The use of alliteration in this line—heaves/heap and many/mould’ring—adds to the emphatic quality, as does the virtual echo of heaves in heap, which, in its turn, folds the many mould’ring dead into a narrow syntactic and tonal cleft between the line’s second and final words. At the same time, the choice of the verb, “heaves,” to describe the effect of the “many a mouldering heap” gives the line a sudden, sickening turn. The quiet precinct of the churchyard becomes an unquiet sea of death in which the sleep of the rude Forefathers, forever laid “each in his narrow cell,” seems vexed by a restlessness that will severely tax the poet’s resources.

Gray’s “Elegy” frames an impossible task for itself and collapses under the weight of an injunction that it cannot fulfill. In order to accomplish its work, the “Elegy” must tell the “short and simple annals of the poor” (32) in terms appropriate to their memory. But although its success as an elegy depends on this point, Gray’s poem and its speaker come up empty-handed in the face of this simple task. Indeed, the rural dead function as precisely that context pastoral is least able to handle effectively. Stanzas 5-7 play the theme of waking against a network of images that Gray inherits from the accumulated wealth of the pastoral tradition. As Lonsdale helpfully documents, lines 21-24 read back Lucretius iii ll. 894-96, giving Gray the “blazing hearth,” “busy housewife” and lisping children who shall “no more” welcome the return of their masters, husbands, or fathers. Milton’s Lycidas ll. 26-27, “Under the opening eyelids of the morn, / We drove a field,” provides the substance of Gray’s line 27: “How jocund did they drive their team afield!” Lonsdale also finds echoes of Pope’s Dunciad, Dryden’s Eclogues, Thomson’s Winter, and Spenser’s Shepheardes Calendar in Gray’s line 28: “How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!” The dense allusive fabric, however, brings the village dead forth only under the shroud of absence and loss, under the heading of the “no
more,” which comes from Lucretius, and forms a refrain in the fifth and sixth stanzas. “No more” shall the “cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn” rouse these fathers from their beds.

    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. (21-24)

The theme of the no more and the no longer segues into the “Oft” with which the seventh stanza begins, setting up what Weinfield identifies as the speculative trajectory of the poem. The effect of these stanzas, however, is to further underscore the difficulty of bringing the rural dead forth. Turning his thoughts from the village churchyard with its uneven turf toward the inside of a proud edifice, the speaker views with disdain the tombs and trophies, the “storied urn and animated bust,” which the rich have raised to their own glory, for “Honour’s voice” cannot “provoke the silent dust, / Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death” (43-44). But returning from the “long-drawn aisle and fretted vault” (39) to the “neglected spot” (45), he finds himself equally unable to locate terms appropriate to the village dead. Indeed, the “Elegy” not only allows the terms of city life—ambition, pride, desire of empire, and the taint of wealth and commodity culture—to enter the precincts of the poem, but inscribes these terms in the rural churchyard and in the lives and deaths of the hapless poor. In stanza 12, the speaker wonders if “some heart once pregnant with celestial fire” or “hands that the rod of empire might have swayed” are buried beneath the turf (46, 47). Stanza 13 finds the elegist countering that “Knowledge to their eyes her ample page / Rich with the spoils of time did ne’er unroll” (49-50). Deprived by “Chill Penury” of their “noble rage,” and without the means to secure education, wealth, or power, these poor folk have been unable to leave a lasting mark on the world. As a consequence, the village dead must remain like gems “of purest ray serene” hidden in the “dark
unfathomed caves” of the deep ocean, or like flowers who blush unseen. By stanza 15, the poor become village Hampdens, mute inglorious Miltons, and Cromwells guiltless of their country’s blood, and, by stanza 16, we suspect that if these poor dead have been innocent of empire’s excess or deprived of the spoils of time, it is perhaps only by virtue of their isolation and poverty, which may be no virtue at all. When the speaker explains that these poor dead kept out of trouble because “their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone / their growing virtues, but their crimes confined” (65-66), it seems at best a back-handed complement, and one that violates the injunction in elegy against finding fault with the dead.

The ostensible purpose in stanzas 8-18 is to frame the virtues of the rural dead by contrasting them with the vitiated lives of the urban elites. Their effect, however, is to underscore the paucity of the poet’s own resources and to widen the gap between the speaker and the ostensible object of his elegiac utterance. As a result, the energy of the poem’s invective rebounds on the poet himself, underscoring his inability to place the dead, to quiet their restless souls, and hence, to find himself securely among the living. The tone of these stanzas thus becomes increasingly angry. The mind “rich with the spoils of time” with which he has come equipped to the village churchyard fails him in the hour of need, leaving the rural dead restless in their narrow cells, churning up the turf. As the “Elegy” approaches its climactic nineteenth stanza, moving past the “struggling pangs of conscious truth,” the “blushes of ingenuous shame,” the richly burdened “shrine of Luxury and Pride,” and the suffocating “incense kindled at the Muse’s flame,” the speaker is plunged into a deep despair equivalent to the “Ay me!” with which Milton’s elegist follows the dalliance of his “frail thoughts” with “false surmise” (154, 153). The many gems “of purest ray serene” that lie in the ocean’s “dark unfathom’d caves” remain hidden from view. Honor cannot “provoke the silent dust” of the rich to new life, nor, however, can the pathos-ridden tones of this poem,
rich with the spoils of time, mitigate their loss, compensate the
effects of “chill penury,” or lay them to rest. Weinfield writes that
the poem teaches its readers that Knowledge and Memory are
“controlled by the upper echelons of society and consequently
are not available to the poor.” He notes, however, that the poem
does not implicate Knowledge and Memory themselves in creat-
ing the abject poverty of the villagers (72). But the “Elegy” does
teach its learned poet that neither his knowledge nor the
memory stored up in all the books he has read can be sufficient
to bring forth the rural scene. Poet and poem, richly formed by
the spoils of time and nurtured at the hearth of knowledge,
cannot remember these dead, beneath these trees, in this ne-
glected spot. The poem cannot remember them because its poet
does not know them. The rural dead recede ever further from
the poet, sinking into the recess of the “cool sequester’d vale of
life” and the “noiseless tenor” of their death (76, 77), while the
poet finds himself muttering still and to little purpose.

The poem’s original version drew to a swift conclusion in the
face of this difficulty. In place of the “Far from the madding
crowd” stanza were four stanzas in which the poet counseled
himself to leave off his struggle. These stanzas voiced the poet’s
resignation to his lot in life and inevitable death in an even,
balanced tone. Against the intense and building emotion of the
preceding stanzas, the poet desires a “sacred Calm” that “Bids
ev’ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease.” He counsels quiet:

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. (Poems 130-31)

Why Gray made the substantial changes to the poem that he did
has been a topic of intense discussion, but most recent critics
concur that the original ending, with its injunction that the poet
resign himself to the obscurity that both shrouds and protects
the rural poor was too studied an artifice. Ian Jack, for example, writes that Gray was ultimately uncomfortable with the poem's original invocation of stoicism, for he had come to see passion as a fundamental and undeniable facet of human existence (146-7). Lonsdale adds that the "very symmetry and order [of the ending] represented an over-simplification of his own predicament. . . . A simple identification with the innocent but uneducated villagers was mere self-deception" (Poems 115). In "Versions of the Self," Lonsdale discusses the new ending and what it accomplished at greater length. Here, he strengthens his case in favor of a real, feeling self, beset with "confused and subversive passions," who breaks through the studied but inadequate decorum of more a traditional idiom and its response to death. In the new stanzas, Lonsdale argues, Gray turns the poem explicitly toward his own uneasiness about the future and the urgent need he feels to be remembered. McCarthy likewise notes the personal tenor of the new stanzas and suggests that Gray had come to see the studied resignation of the original ending to be a paltry, weak sort of consolation. The closure of the original ending was too close, McCarthy hazards, to the likes of "historical consolation" and "calm melancholy," which Gray, in a 1746 letter to Wharton, suggested were conducive of "a stiller sort of Despair" at odds with the "real Content or Comfort" that hope creates in the human mind (qtd. in McCarthy 117).

The temptation to write the poet himself and his own needs into a poem whose closing stanzas part company with the coherent closure of the original version is driven by an emotional intensity that, as McCarthy puts it, "seems to make some identification of poet with narrator inevitable" (144). For this reason, McCarthy reads the poem as mapping the dramatic movement of an individual narrator toward a revised understanding of his place in the world. When the speaker utters those sentiments Samuel Johnson would find "original" in the four stanzas following the "Yet ev’n these bones" in line 79, he sets aside the "psychological stricture" of alienation and isolation
within which the earlier phases of his poem had been caught, and "he sees the unity of humanity: he and the poor and the wealthy are all one in human instinct," McCarthy writes (139).

I agree with McCarthy that "Gray is in a real sense present" in his poem and in the progress of his narrator; the meeting of poet and poem, however, needs further attention. For Johnson, the closing stanzas were "original" because these stanzas in particular appeal to the "common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices. . . . The 'Churchyard' abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo," Johnson continues (642). What is most original, however, is the force with which the "Elegy" writes reading into the space of human life and remembrance. Indeed, the "Elegy" finds its end by focusing its attention on a set of questions about reading and reception that condition the adequacy of the written trace to the purposes of commemoration. The closing stanzas recapitulate the widening gap between object and speaking subject played out in the earlier stanzas as a gap between writer and reader. What lends the poem its unity is that the ways in which the speaker has "missed" the rural dead inform the way he knows that he himself will be missed by his readers. For Weinfield, the condition of anonymity that the "Elegy" brings to the fore marks its departure from the precincts of elegy in all but the most cursory sense. The closing stanzas, however, make broad use of the generic resources elegy offers while also sketching the guise that elegy, as elegy, must assume in the era of print.

Making its way toward its epitaphic close, Gray's poem leaves off its divisive habit and embraces a set of qualities that all humans, whether rich or poor, have in common. In this way, the elegist moves beyond what, in the "Defence of Poetry," Percy Shelley would call the "dull vapours of the little world of self" to effect a broader, more comprehensive understanding of his place in the world. This look beyond the self contributes to the conclusion of mourning and the resumption of life. As Johnson
noted, there is, indeed, a tonic quality to these stanzas. The “Elegy” uses the palpable movement toward consolation and calm, however, to introduce the terms of reading and reception that will be its own future. The “Elegy” may offer general insights about human nature, but what it says is most relevant in the context of the poet’s local habitation in the composed word and the tradition of poetry. Paul Williamson’s discussion of the “Elegy” helps focus our attention in this direction. Williamson places Gray’s “Elegy” alongside Milton’s *Lycidas* in order to trace salient structural affinities between the two poems. Highlighting the word “yet,” which opens the twentieth stanza, Williamson reminds us that in the context of elegy, the “yet” “signifies an anastrophe, a ‘turning back’ to a point in the argument which seems already past” (67). In *Lycidas*, this turn comes with the lines beginning “Weep no more, woeful shepherds,” which preface the dead poet’s transmutation into a realm beyond death, a risen star, the “genius of the shore” whose beneficent gaze grants the uncouth swain confidence in his own resources, and does so in a way that holds out the promise of immortality on which its author had set his sights. In *Lycidas*, the turn from sorrow to joy is structured by the speaker’s giving up the dalliance of “false surmise” and accepting the utter finality of Lycidas’s loss beneath the waves. At this moment in the poem, the speaker casts his eye back on the vanity of his own lines and his impertinent desire to resurrect the dead. While he has dallied with false surmise “for so to interpose a little ease,” the “shores and sounding Seas / Wash [the dead Lycidas] far away” (154-155). *Lycidas*, however, can find its end because its poet recognizes the strictures under which his song and its hopeful vision operate. Lycidas the man cannot rejoin the living, but he can guide the living poet through the “perilous flood” of life and letters. For Sacks, this is part of the castrative logic of elegy, the injunction that the elegist submit to a limited scope in order to regain his equilibrium. Williamson’s remarks about Gray’s “Elegy” suggest that this submission is to the straightened scope of the written
artifact. Where *Lycidas* turns to its vision of the “genius on the shore” and to “fresh woods, and Pastures new” on the morrow, Gray’s “Elegy” turns to the “inherent frailty of the ‘memorial’ […] the dubious existence conferred by the artifact, by the tombstone, the epitaph, and so by elegy itself” (67-8).

Williamson argues convincingly that Gray’s poem reinterprets the function and purpose of elegy. In particular, Gray’s “Elegy” affirms the “intrinsic value of poetic utterance” itself in the place where other writers, such as Robert Blair, Thomas Parnell, and Edward Young, affirm a Christian faith in a life after death (40). In this way, the “Elegy” returns to a more classical model in which personal resurrection was not a primary issue. Gray’s return to older models in “Elegy”, Williamson suggests, gives the poem both its familiarity and originality. But Gray’s backward glance has a distinctly modern twist, for the “dubious existence conferred by the artifact” on which consolation depends in Gray’s “Elegy” is framed by reading. The existence is dubious because it closes poets’ lives in the circuit of their written traces open to unknown and far distant readers.

The stanzas and Epitaph added in 1750, thus, turn their attention repeatedly to the written word and the difficulties it poses. First, having failed to *tell* the “short and simple annals of the poor,” the elegy turns, in stanzas 20-24, to the “frail memorials,” “uncouth rhymes,” and “shapeless sculpture” with which the poor themselves have striven to secure their own, albeit limited, immortality. This turn in the poem casts the poet in a more humble pose; he leaves off trying to speak *for* the rural dead and lets them speak for themselves. In doing so, moreover, the speaker returns to his readiness to hear the true tales of the dead, but rather than opening his ears, he opens his eyes to read the words they themselves have left. But Gray’s treatment of these memorials is highly ironic, for he lets us see that in them the dead consign their fates in written form to non-readers. Those who, seeing the frail memorials and reading the uncouth rhymes, respond with the “pious drops the closing eye requires”
(91) are not the kindred spirits on whose memory these rural dead might have counted. The busy housewives and lisping children who miss the rude Forefathers laid in their narrow cells cannot cipher the rural epitaphs. Their ways of remembering the dead would have been, as William Wordsworth describes in his poem “The Brothers,” passed on by word of mouth. “We have no need of names and epitaphs; / We talk about the dead by our firesides,” explains the Priest in that poem to a long lost son of the rural hamlet whom he mistakes for a tourist. On the other hand, those who can make out the name and years, “spelt by th’ unletter’d muse,” that supply the “place of fame and elegy” (82-83) are excluded from the rural community in a way that severely limits their ability to know or remember these dead. The epitaphic texts the “Elegy” here foregrounds as a response to its own shortcomings become, thus, a kind of pure cipher, a writing whose content is effectively erased. Like the heaving turf in stanza four, they merely gesture toward the dead.

The way in which these stanzas foreground texts that cannot be read by those who can understand and cannot be understood by those who can read sets up the final phase of the “Elegy”: the description of the poet by the “hoary-headed Swain” followed by the reading of the Epitaph the poet leaves for himself. These concluding stanzas build on the ironies of reading and reception that the preceding four stanzas have brought to our attention, and they do so in a way that makes poet and poem subject to these ironies. When Gray places the description of the hapless poet in the mouth of the Swain, he conveys the extent to which this poet remains a cipher to the denizens of the rural hamlet. But the fact that the hoary-headed Swain does a poor job of describing the poet is not the point of the interlude. Although the situation between the Swain and the youth whom he missed one morn is emblematic of a general condition of alienation, of mutual missing that runs through the poem, the terms with which the Swain misses the poet are important.
As Lonsdale’s annotations confirm, the Swain speaks a language of ventriloquized bits culled from Milton, Spenser, Shakespeare, Blair, Thomson, Horace, and Gray himself, in the guise that he wore in his “Ode on the Spring.” It is a language whose “weakness” is quickly apparent, Lonsdale writes (“Versions” 24). The verses are “poetically inferior,” as Weinfield puts it. “Though beautifully composed, the monologue, when considered in isolation, lacks both the originality and the resonance of the earlier stanzas” (142). Why Gray would admit such poor verse into his poem is a puzzle. Lonsdale suggests that their inferiority should make the reader understand that this version of the self is neither an adequate nor authentic picture. Nonetheless, writes Lonsdale, the Swain “guide[s] the inquiring ‘kindred spirit’ to the epitaph on the poet’s gravestone, ... [which] must be intended to offer a definitive version of the self” (“Versions” 25). Clarence Tracy adds that the pastoral, but “counterfeit” identification with the peasantry replays the portion of Lycidas that comes between the opening lament and the poet’s hope that just as he mourns Lycidas, so might the “gentle Muse / With lucky words favour my destin’d Urn” (44). For his part, Weinfield argues that the inferiority of the Swain’s speech recapitulates important motifs from the pastoral tradition whose vitality the poem has drained. For Weinfield, thus, the Swain’s monologue is integral to how the poem foregrounds the problem of history and what it portends for pastoral. Weinfield argues that the poem uses the inadequacy as a negative to sketch a new kind of utopia awaiting a new idiom (142). In this way, the debased pastoral looks forward to a rejuvenated pastoral.

Placed in the context of the poem as a whole, it is apparent that the pastiche portrait of the poet from the point of view of the hoary-headed Swain replays the speculative trajectory of the speaker’s approach to the rural dead. The Swain’s “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” (99-101) echoes the speaker’s earlier invocation of “The breezy call of
incense-breathing Morn,” and his attempt to imagine the daily activities of the rural poor: “Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield, / Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke” (25-26). What the Swain says, thus, plays the poet’s own verse back while also reversing its polarity. In the earlier section of the poem, the rural dead functioned as a limit case against which pastoral discovered its failure. Now, the illiterate denizens of the rural hamlet form a limit case for reading. As Tracy put it, the Swain’s speech eases the “difficult transition from the opening part of the poem to the Epitaph” (43), but this is not so much because it paves the way for the entry of the poet’s own hopes and fears, his private melancholy, by way of Lycidas. Rather, the weakness and counterfeit quality of the verses pave the way for the poet’s entry into his poem by way of its future reading. The Swain’s monologue, thus, interpolates a phantasm of reading, a caricature of the poet’s person in the eyes of those who may “chance” to read his poem. Moreover, the shift in grammatical mood from subjunctive to indicative, to which Weinfeld calls our attention, underscores how plausible this vision is. If the poet recognizes the Swain’s portrait as inhabiting the realm of fact rather than fiction, however, it is because his own movement through the poem has taught him how difficult it is to read a “short and simple” text phrased in uncouth rhyme, though one’s mind be richly fitted with the spoils of time and knowledge. But rather than resigning himself to silence—as he had done in the stanzas with which the “Elegy” had originally concluded—the speaker puts himself forth, but in a way cognizant of the ironies likely to drive his own reception. He cannot be quiet, even though he knows that his speech may be no more articulate than the muttering, babbling brook (107, 105). This is also to say that he consents to be read.

The description of the poet by the Swain that makes the poet into a caricature of what poets might look like to readers, both well and ill-formed, ably sets the stage for the epitaphic trace that the poet leaves for himself. The epitaph recapitulates the myriad
gaps between writers and readers, between those who leave a mark by which to be remembered and those for whom that mark is destined, that the poem has already put in evidence. It also proffers a limited remedy. In the first place, the force of an epitaph is explicitly negative. It marks an absence. Further, leaving the epitaph to the “kindred spirit” who may one day inquire his fate, Gray places his hope in a future act of whose success he cannot be fully certain. Just as the “frail memorials” stand in for what the rural dead cannot have, “fame and elegy,” the epitaph supplies the place of what the author cannot have, a robust and sympathetic relation to an audience on whose readerly facility he can rest assured or whose appreciation he can credit. But at the same time, the epitaph compensates, albeit in an ironic and limited way, for the many ways in which his readers—in the guise of the Swain, for example—will have “missed” him. It does so by casting its reader not as the Swain but as the “kindred spirit,” and by making the reading with which it ends the answer to its dilemma. When the Swain says, “Approach and read (for thou canst read)” (116), the answer is a foregone conclusion. Reading becomes the author’s last, best hope.

Gray’s turn in his “Elegy” to reading seems, at first glance, obvious. What writer would not offer up reading as the last best hope for his written production? In the context of elegy and of lyric, however, this marks a distinct departure, and one that acquires weight as print becomes a commodity consumed by unknown readers. No longer can the writer pretend, even to himself, that the situation between a writer and reader approximates that between a speaker and auditor. Gray is at the beginning of this change. Although he wrote primarily for an intimate circle of friends, his writing incorporates the multiple points of view and makes reference to the gaps in understanding that become particularly pronounced in the commodified written word. If intimate friends, who “have a Mind to understand one another,” can be at odds with one another when they speak face to face, as John Locke had put it a century before (479), how
much more is this potential multiplied in a broader and more public context. What is distinctive about the “Elegy” is that it places its faith precisely on such perilous ground. Gray’s “Elegy” acknowledges the moral and human need for remembrance, but it also sketches the resources and limits that print brings to the task. However imperfect the medium of print, Gray bears witness in his “Elegy” to an understanding that private remembrance must perhaps fall even further short of the mark, for it must die when the bereaved heart stops beating. Print offers to reach a wider audience and hence to enhance the author’s feeling response across multiple readers. At the same time, however, the gaps and lacunae inherent to the medium shift the practice of commemoration away from telling specific content, for such content loses its relevance for readers who become ever more distant. Rather, elegy becomes epitaph, an abbreviated, gnomic trace or shadow of the writer’s heartfelt response in the face of loss.

While the discrete dimensions of the deceased recede from view, the writer rises to fill the scene of his readers’ desires. The context that moves the poet to his elegiac expression is difficult to discern in this poem, but for its early readers, Gray was everywhere present. His “Elegy,” indeed, uncannily sets the stage for what would become a pronounced tendency to read writers through the medium of their work. Rather than being an origin of the work, the writer becomes its creature, a textualized image composed within the space of its reading. Though Gray seemed largely indifferent to its progress in the world, his “Elegy” created an enduring persona for Gray as the pensive poet. As John Young wittily remarked in his caricature of Johnson’s invective against the sensitive poet, if Gray had not a mournful disposition, he soon acquired one, becoming “at length, bona fide, a melancholy man. The features of his mind plied gradually to the cast of the mould his imagination had formed for it” (3). Young was (probably) joking, but numerous readers took Gray’s person to be one and the same with his persona
in the "Elegy." Mason, for his part, did much to paint Gray as sensitive and habitually melancholy, and the portrait endured in numerous biographical and poetical sketches of the poet and entered firmly into the public imagination. In his "Sonnet: Addressed to Gray," Thomas Warton, for example, would paint the poet "slowly pacing through the churchyard dew, / At curfew-time, beneath the dark green yew." In 1807, Samuel Egerton Brydges took it as a matter of course that Gray's poetry painted the picture of his soul. Brydges argued that only true sufferers can depict suffering with the glow of originality; he also claimed to have learned "from several who knew him intimately" "that the sensibility of Gray was even morbid; and often very fastidious and troublesome to his friends. He seemed frequently overwhelmed by the ordinary intercourse, and ordinary affairs of life" (406). The letter to Boswell from the Rev. William Johnson Temple that Johnson included in his "Life of Gray" to describe the poet's character demonstrates how profoundly the "Elegy" literally created the terms by which its author was remembered. Temple's answer to the question, "Is it worth taking so much pains to leave no memorial but a few poems? seems to gloss Gray's Epitaph. Temple writes,

[1.]et it be considered that Mr. Gray was to others at least innocently employed; to himself, certainly beneficially. His time passed agreeably; he was every day making some new acquisition in science; his mind was enlarged, his heart softened, his virtue strengthened; the world and mankind were shown to him without a mask; and he was taught to consider everything as trifling and unworthy of the attention of a wise man, except the pursuit of knowledge and practice of virtue in that state wherein God hath placed us. (qtd. in Johnson 637)

In 1837, thus, it would be easy for Bulwer Lytton to tell readers in a review of Mitford's *Works of Thomas Gray*, newly expanded to four volumes, "the man and the poet appear in perfect harmony with each other" (qtd. in Macdonald 173).

In a recent study of the modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney, Jahan Ramazani has demonstrated the distinctive break that these elegies make with the tradition of Moschus, Spenser, and
Milton. Modern elegies, Ramazani demonstrates, rarely work according to the dynamic of loss and gain that Sacks has carefully identified as characteristic to the genre. For Ramazani, elegies in the modern era set themselves against the increasingly homogenous and depersonalizing facets of modern culture by emphasizing a full range of the elegist’s turbulent, sometimes angry, sometimes affectionate responses to the situation of loss. As a result, modern elegies more often than not break with the decorum of earlier modes of mourning and become melancholic, self-centered, or mocking. In this way, however, modern elegies counter the tendency of 20th century culture to subsume persons into the institutions of modern life. In the process, these deviant elegies manage to give some time, space, and concrete dimension to lives otherwise easily lost. Looking at Gray’s mid-18th century elegy, however, suggests that the departure of the genre from the conventions established by classical and early modern authors comes at an earlier moment than Ramazani suspects. Although the “Elegy” references the topoi of pastoral elegy, it steers far clear of its traditional end. Most important for study of the genre is the way that Gray’s “Elegy” points us in the direction of understanding these departures in the context of the shifting tides of reading and writing in which, for better or worse, any poet after the mid-18th century must swim. Gray did much to limit his participation in the emergent literary marketplace, and he often held himself aloof from his readers. He did not capitalize on the market for letters and the possibilities it opened for the writer in the way that Johnson, for one, did. His “Elegy,” however, both anticipates the whelming tides of print and dips its toe into them in a way that, for all his seeming disdain of such endeavor, fashioned the poet for his audience and crafted a cultural artifact of enduring dimensions. The “Elegy” comes, indeed, to an end that is not the end of elegy, but rather

---

than finding life and health, the poet in Gray’s “Elegy” finds the life in letters that would be the defining condition of the poet in the age of print.

WORKS CITED


**Michele Turner Sharp** is an assistant professor of English at East Carolina University, where she teaches courses in 18th and 19th century British Literature. She has published essays in *ELH, Studies in Romanticism*, and *Criticism*. She is completing a book on Romantic-era elegy.