

# Thomas Gray's *Elegy* and the Politics of Memorialization

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Recent criticism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry has set out to demonstrate how the language of feeling mediates between literary thought and the historical moment from which it emerges, and has suggested that tropes of feeling bridge the relation between personal experience and the larger ideological narratives that structure social relations.<sup>1</sup> In casting social relations into relief through an attention to feeling, critics have drawn upon the same assumptions that structure Lauren Berlant's claim in *Cruel Optimism* that history and affect are coterminous with one another.<sup>2</sup> According to these critics, literary language works to make possible an understanding of the ideological and social angles of the historical present.

But what if poetry reveals how the language of feeling can obscure one's relation to one's historical moment just as easily as it illumines such relation? Thomas Gray's use of the elegy in his famous *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) is exemplary of historically and affectively minded poetry in the eighteenth century, and understands the relation between personal experiences and larger ideological forces—which Raymond Williams, for one, would classify as “history”—to include the everyday consequences of rank and status divisions in modernity.<sup>3</sup> By looking at Gray's poem, I suggest that the language of melancholy and seeming resignation surrounding the loss of the dead reveals poetry to be confounded by the status politics of modernity: poetry figures the inaccessibility rather than the comprehensibility of historical

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forces. Critics have long understood Gray's poem to be an active intervention in questions of rank, status, and social relation, and so too have seen the poem as an illumination of the ways in which the ideological ambiguities of rank and status division shape the historical present. In many critical accounts, the poem both represents and effects, however imperfectly, different modes of social organization.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I query some of these critical claims to suggest that, as it intervenes in debates about social relations, the *Elegy* reveals a deeply anxious poet-speaker who is hopelessly flummoxed by the complexities of the historical present and who does not quite know how to speak to the rank and status divisions that characterize modernity. Caught between a posture of resignation to the workings of history and a desire to critique modernity, the elegist reveals the work of poetry to be of a mediated quality: in a self-reflexive movement, the work is in fact a representation of the struggle to discover what the work of poetry is. If poetry does not illuminate the conditions of the historical present, then it instead speculates uncertainly about the nuances of rank and status relations. The case of Gray's poem is particularly important because this displacement leaves the poet-speaker of the *Elegy* caught somewhere between imagination and bafflement, trying to understand the utility of the labor of imagination. In trying and failing to tell the story of the poor villagers buried in the churchyard, Gray's elegist displays a form of imaginative thought that, as we shall see, has no clear claims to objective use-value. But such a project is also a resistance to modern standards of utility, such that the elegist's inability to reveal details about the dead is recast as politically revolutionary, even as it appears on its face to be inoperative and unproductive.

The *Elegy* has long been regarded as a poem in which the personal allegorizes the political, in that individual deaths become reflective of the realities of rank and status that characterize modern culture. One of the *Elegy*'s enduring critical legacies involves its political undertones, even if it remains up for debate what exactly the *Elegy*'s political project is. Critical attempts to explicate the poem have been preoccupied with its relation to politics and history. For instance, Suvir Kaul argues that the poem is an attempt to articulate a difference in standards of value between country and city, and John Guillory suggests that Gray's project coincides with the production of a national vernacular English.<sup>5</sup> Each of these readings seeks to reconcile the poet's historical situatedness with his sorrowful tone, suggesting that the language of melancholy is the means by which

the poem's political allegiances are revealed. Kaul, for one, claims that the poem draws clear, if overdetermined, lines of opposition between country and city, and that the poet deploys the tone of melancholy in an attempt to resolve ideological tensions between commodified and noncommodified standards of value.<sup>6</sup> The poet sees melancholy as a means of poetic organization and reconciliation. In one of the more influential readings of the poem of the past twenty-five years, Guillory also sees the poet shaping society. Guillory claims that the *Elegy* was an attempt to form a national vernacular language that anyone of any social station could read and be affected by.<sup>7</sup> While the poem seems, as John Sitter would have it, merely a case of pure escape from the world, it instead becomes, in Guillory's account, a bonding agent that holds society together.<sup>8</sup> For Guillory, the poem paradoxically idealizes retreat so as to bring all stations of people together under the banner of a common national language.<sup>9</sup>

In their shared commitment to explaining the politics of the poem's withdrawal, critical responses such as Kaul's and Guillory's hint that the poetry of isolation carries a social component.<sup>10</sup> These accounts raise an important set of questions: Is poetry an attempt to throw into relief one's relationship to history? Does it aim to make sense of history? Or is its function not to reconcile at all, but merely to bear witness to an irreversibly vertiginous and disorienting relationship between subject and history? In what follows, I advocate for a reading of Gray's *Elegy* that focuses more on how the poem's language of sorrow acknowledges history as confounding than on how it reconciles history. The catch in the elegist's project of memorializing the unknown poor—rather than the rich—is precisely that they are unknown: if the deceased subjects who rest in the churchyard are unknown to history, then the speaker has little information to utilize in his attempt to elegize. In response to this quandary, he instead speculates on the kinds of lives the dead might have lived had circumstances been different. He must imagine them as something other than what they were—that is, he must imagine them as if they were famous historical figures.

Historiography thus becomes more speculative than factual. Rather than claiming that the poet asserts active control over his historical moment, I argue that Gray's elegist finds himself not so much active as reactive. His imaginative project is compensatory. Imagination steps in where knowledge of history fails, and the elegist attempts to make up for poetic confusion about the facts of history, even as he also draws attention to such confusion. In

this way, the elegist also reveals an anxiety about the usefulness of writing poetry. If elegiac poetry does not necessarily enlighten, then it is unclear what it accomplishes. As we will see, however, the power of poetry lies in its bearing witness to imagination itself as a form of subjectivity that cannot and need not produce total knowledge of the workings of modernity in order to be powerful. The *Elegy* appears to resign itself to the workings of history, but such resignation reveals a noninstrumentalized form of poetic force. The *Elegy*'s version of poetic power is one whose force relies on the obscuring, rather than the uncovering, of the mechanisms of history and modern culture.

#### MAKING WASTE MATTER

By and large, the graveyard poems of the eighteenth century have an explicitly pedagogical aim, forwarding the idea of death as "the great leveler."<sup>11</sup> In these poems, the processes of birth, life, death, and decay work against social processes of wealth accumulation and upward mobility. Edward Young, Thomas Parnell, and Robert Blair, among others, deploy the theme of death to comment on the shortsightedness of worldly ambition, and argue that since death renders everyone the same, regardless of rank or status, then the worldly pursuit of corporeal glory is nothing more than vanity.<sup>12</sup> Death is eternal; wealth is not. Since the rich cannot bring their wealth with them to the afterlife, they have nothing after death to distinguish them from the poor. One of the more familiar narratives about the British eighteenth century is that it signals an expanded interest in trade and commerce, and that, concomitant to these expansions, Britain witnesses what some have referred to as the "birth of a consumer society."<sup>13</sup> As John Brewer points out, the market in the eighteenth century "broaden[s]" to accommodate members not only from the aristocracy, as in previous ages, but also from urban settings.<sup>14</sup> The catch in such a broadening move, of course, is that as the world becomes larger some subjects will inevitably become lost in the crowd. The graveyard poets thus counter by claiming that in death, everyone, whether rich or poor, becomes obscure.

Gray's poem combines the didactic qualities of graveyard poetry with the mournful traits of elegy. The speaker of the poem commits himself to teaching readers about death's leveling capacity while also expressing sorrow that some never had any chance at wealth or glory during their lifetimes due to the stations into which they were born. Lorna Clymer has defined the elegy as a

form of poetry whereby the elegist assigns the dead subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> One remains attached to the dead in a manner that we might say resembles Sigmund Freud's conception of melancholia: in wanting to grant the dead subjectivity, one refuses to move on from their loss.<sup>16</sup> To this end, R. Clifton Spargo links the elegy to melancholy, writing that, in elegy, "The melancholic person ... imagin[es] an impossible recovery of the dead, sometimes quite literally a retrieval of the dead body."<sup>17</sup> In Freudian fashion, the mourner in Spargo's account does not linger interminably with the dead; the melancholic does.<sup>18</sup> In the *Elegy*, then, melancholy is the feeling that best describes the poet's response to loss and to his continued attempts to search out ways to talk about the lower-class dead. The elegist cannot get the dead off his mind, in spite or perhaps because of his inability to find the right words to say about them. He seems caught between a resignation to reality and a desire to recover.

The intersections in Gray's poem between elegy, melancholy, and namelessness produce a near-irreconcilable tension. The genre of elegy, when appropriated in the service of memorializing the anonymous, leads the elegist to refuse to expunge the dead from his consciousness—the very definition of melancholy. But such a mode of memorialization is by definition impossible, as the elegist knows nothing about the dead due to the anonymity of their social rank, and so has nothing to remember. As he meditates on the dead, memory morphs into imagination, such that poetry fundamentally transforms the makeup of memorialization in the absence of any real knowledge about the dead's true relation to their own historical moment.

The *Elegy* does not remember one person, but many.<sup>19</sup> Even though the poem concludes with a puzzling epitaph inscribed for one deceased and unnamed youth, the speaker seems preoccupied for the majority of the poem with the sheer number of headstones scattered across the graveyard. In essence, the speaker's melancholic elegizing prioritizes the general fact that death will come to everyone—a fact symbolized by the multitude of graves—before he can prioritize the individual elegizing of a single person. The thematic structure of the *Elegy* is thus grounded in the opposition of rank. This graveyard seems reserved for the poor—and for the elegist, who remarks in the poem's beginning that as a ploughman makes his way home at the end of the day's work, he "leaves the world to darkness and to me" (line 4). As the outside world has forgotten the churchyard, the poet is left to remember it, such that the poet becomes an avatar for the forgotten, a sur-

rogate voice for those who do not have voices.<sup>20</sup> Soon, we discover that the reason the outside world has forgotten the churchyard is simple enough: those buried here were neither rich nor ambitious. They were, however, useful:

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.

(lines 29–32)

Usefulness is separated out from ambition in this formulation. The villagers' preoccupation with the usefulness of anonymous agricultural labor opposes itself to the commercial ambition of the city. In asking "Ambition" not to mock the poor, the elegist cynically implies that the only real alternative to mockery is obscurity: the poor will be either ridiculed or given no regard at all. But even though the poor are the subjects of the *Elegy*, the elegist makes himself the poem's protagonist from its beginning. Where no one else is thoughtful enough to recognize or remember the poor, the elegist steps in to do what the ambitious are unwilling to. In rescuing the dead from obscurity—if not from death—the elegist also takes it upon himself to teach readers that the greatness of the great is mere vanity. In the following stanza, the elegist remarks soberly that "The paths of glory lead but to the grave" (line 36), as if to remind readers that the project of memorialization is not the only thing that results from death: death also produces the eradication of earthly ambition and wealth.

The politics of the *Elegy* and the role of the elegist each seem fairly straightforward up to this point, but the memorialization process becomes muddled as the elegist turns to the language of metaphor to explain why the obscurity of the poor should not be held against them:

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.

(lines 53–6)

The metaphor on first glance seems uncomplicated: just as a flower might bloom without anyone to appreciate its beauty, the villagers labor without anyone from the city to appreciate their work. It would appear, as William Empson has famously suggested, that the elegist is merely accepting social divisions as they are, conceding that some are simply not born to be famous.<sup>21</sup> But there is an irony in these lines: it may be that “Full many a flower is born to blush unseen” (line 55), but the elegist is not content to let them blush unseen. Otherwise, the poem would have ended here. There would be no poetry left to write, no elegizing left to perform. That the poem does not end here is evidence of the elegist’s attachment to the dead. The problem that frames the rest of the poem becomes how best to remember the dead.

Two questions, then, emerge from the metaphor. One, why should the elegist bother trying to know the dead? And two, what methods might render them knowable? The answer to both questions orbits unsettlingly around the figure of waste and tells us that the *Elegy* itself is a commentary not merely on the dead’s place in the world, but also on the poet’s own utility. In the span of seven stanzas, the elegist has gone from describing the villagers as useful to describing them as waste, implying that one kind of usefulness comes at the expense of another. In performing labor that is agriculturally useful, the villagers waste whatever other potential they might have had. The villagers thus simultaneously inhabit a position of utility and of insignificance. According to such logic, it would seem that the elegist need not bother memorializing the dead, because they left behind nothing worth remembering; their potential has been wasted. And yet it also has not been: in not achieving earthly glory, the villagers made themselves useful through hard labor, and such usefulness is, for the elegist, worth remembering on its own terms.

In proving that the dead are worthy of remembrance due to their labor, it would seem that the poem has both raised and resolved the question of waste. The villagers might have wasted one kind of potential, but they were useful in another way. The figure of waste returns, however, in the answer to the follow-up question: how best to remember or know the dead? If the dead are unseen and unknown because they wasted whatever potential they might have had to be public figures, then how can the elegist know them at all? How to remember those who left nothing worth remembering? To remedy this issue, the elegist transforms elegy from an epistemological genre (knowing about the dead) to a speculative one (imagining them). The elegist imagines the dead



as if they were famous; he creates an alternate version of history in which the nameless had names.

The elegist's desire to remember the dead belies another, deeper desire: to reverse the terms of waste. If the dead in this particular graveyard are figures for wasted talent, then the elegist concerns himself with putting the dead's potential to good use. Even if the dead are dead, their potential is not. Their potential is transformed into a poetic device. As he struggles to know how best to remember those of whom he has no memory, the elegist laments,

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.

(lines 45–8)

The images of glory in this passage hang by a thread. The word that holds the stanza together while also threatening to tear its logic apart is the seemingly innocuous adverb "Perhaps." By qualifying everything that follows in the stanza with "Perhaps," the speaker reminds us that he does not know anything about the dead, and that in the absence of knowledge, he is representing imagination as memory. By saying that "Perhaps" the person buried in this particular spot might have been great, the speaker also admits the indisputable fact that this villager was in fact not great, and may for that matter never have even had the potential to be great. Any "perhaps" must also imply a "perhaps not." The speaker imagines the anonymous as someone who might have been on "The paths of glory," even though he had earlier warned about the vanity and shortsightedness of such pursuits. He appears to realize here that the only way to speak of the anonymous dead is to think of them in terms of fame.

Imagination becomes here an attempt to identify with loss, because an engagement with the actual facts of the dead's lives is impossible. There is nothing to know about the dead, so identification is only possible by the fantasy of an alternate history, one that did not and never could have happened. The speaker's imagination becomes more specific in one of the poem's more famous stanzas:



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.

(lines 57–60)

By imagining other lives for the dead, the speaker finds a way to talk about the dead without knowing anything about them and without being beholden to the facts of history. This stanza is notable for being the only place in the poem where the elegist lists any proper names.<sup>22</sup> It stands in stark contrast to the rest of the poem, which up to this point has been littered with images of nameless figures who either labor in the fields or lie lifeless in their graves. Critics have been quick to read this moment as a commentary on seventeenth-century English politics, but Gray is not just making a statement here about republican politics or the English Civil War.<sup>23</sup> He is also referencing historically famous figures so as to demonstrate the fraught relationship between anonymity and fame. The “Perhaps” of the previous stanza becomes here a “may.” Like “Perhaps,” “may” stands between the greatness that might have existed for the dead and the anonymity that isolates the dead from the rest of the world. The possibility of what might have been only reinforces the reality of what never was. Milton, after all, is not buried in this churchyard. But the only way for the elegist to uphold the genre of elegy as a project of remembering the dead is to transform the anonymous into famous historical subjects. Since the *Elegy's* dead lack their own proper names, they are referred to by the names of others—John Hampden, Milton, and Oliver Cromwell. In assigning them surrogate names, the elegist's fixation with the dead takes fuller form. The definitiveness of proper names provides him a shape to cling to, as opposed to the shapeless abstraction of total anonymity with which he had been faced throughout the first half of the poem.

The catch in this naming strategy, however, is twofold. Firstly, the elegist's attempt to give the dead the same kind of fame that belongs to famous historical figures only reinforces that to be poor is to have no place in the cultural matrix. The more the elegist compares the dead to the famous, the more he draws attention to the fact that the dead cannot be famous on their own terms. He bequeaths to them a fame not their own. It would appear that Gray's choice of subject is a politically radical move; it would seem that this choice positions the poor as deserving of the same measure of poetic attention as the rich. And

yet, in being able to speak of the poor only through the language of greatness, the elegist replicates the privileging of social fame against which he earlier spoke. Guillory has similarly suggested that Gray's poem represents a shuttling between different social ranks and statuses. For Guillory, Gray's elegist assumes the role of both aristocrat and peasant and sees the peasantry as taking up the noble and honorable traits of the aristocracy. The goal of such fluid movement between social positions, Guillory argues, is to craft a poem that speaks to all of humanity and not just to one segment of the population.<sup>24</sup> Where Guillory's approach sees Gray's poem as fundamentally unifying, however, we might also say that Gray's shuttling between different status positions—using the language of glory to speak about the poor—is fragmentary and erratic. It leaves his language in flux, and so too does it leave the status positions of his subjects unstable, as he does not know whether to speak of the dead as anonymous or famous. Instead of universalizing anything, Gray's poem unsettles the foundation of elegiac language, leaving elegy seemingly powerless to speak to or have any effect on modernity itself.

Secondly, then, in imagining the poor as if they were someone else, the elegist reveals a mode of memorialization that has a tense relationship with the category of history. Because of gaps in his knowledge about the dead, he must imagine alternate versions of persons' places in society rather than remember them. By assigning the names of Milton or Cromwell to the dead, Gray's elegist removes historical fact from consideration in the discourse of memorialization. The elegist initially appears committed to uncover the dead's place within the historical present—situating them in spatial relation to the city and in temporal relation to modernity. As his project develops, however, we witness the elegist moving further from the task of uncovering such relation and closer to an obscuring of such relation. As he moves from memory to speculation, he concedes that the poor exist in a space outside of recorded history and that they cannot be reconciled to historiography except in a negative sense—that is, a sense in which they are imagined as that which they are not. The phenomenon of waste stands as a figure for the dead's being obscured from the annals of recorded history: since they did not fulfill their potential to be famous, there is nothing to know about them. The dead thus cannot be assimilated easily into the historical record except as figures for alternate histories that did not happen.

At the same time, however, the phenomenon of waste enables the elegist's imaginative project. It drives the speaker to imagine

the dead as if they had not wasted whatever potential for greatness they might have had. The elegist's imaginative vision would not be possible had there been no waste, since there would be no reason to imagine an alternate history for the dead otherwise. The forces of modernity—be they commercialism, consumerism, the rise of urban life—have prevented the poor from exercising any potential they might have had to influence the course of history in the way a Milton or a Cromwell did. And while the elegist's tone initially sounds accepting of and resigned to such a phenomenon (gems and flowers are not always meant to be seen), his impulse to imagine them according to their seemingly wasted potential tells us that the phenomenon of waste—while perhaps inevitable and irreversible—is a vexing one for the speaker. It leads the speaker to wish fame for the dead, but it also makes poetic imagination possible in the first place.

#### ELEGIAC WORK

Here, we see the *Elegy* beginning to tilt to reflect just as much on the elegist himself as on the deceased whom he mourns. The question turns from the potential of the deceased to the usefulness of the elegist's attempt to situate them within the historical narrative. As Stefan H. Uhlig has pointed out, the *Elegy* is an allegory of poetic work as much as it is a commentary on the villagers, as the poem constantly pulls back to draw its readers' attention to the obscure and vexing nature of poetic toil. "Though we could hardly say with any factual precision what 'he' is up to," Uhlig writes, "the elegist is figuratively caught up in some deeply felt, creative and obscurely worthwhile enterprise."<sup>25</sup> But what exactly is the worth of such enterprise? If the villagers were characterized by the usefulness of their toil in the early stanzas of the *Elegy*—even if their toil was useful in one sense but also a sign of wasted potential in another—then is the elegist's memorializing work itself also a form of "useful toil"? Or are his efforts merely wasted on the dead? In memorializing the lower-class dead in a way that does not in fact benefit them—they are already in their graves, after all—is the elegist reenacting the concept of waste that, as we have seen, so deeply unsettles him?

Elegy becomes here, I contend, a genre that reflects not merely on the dead and their relation to the set of social relations that structure their world, but also on poetry's capacity to represent such relations. As the elegist reflexively comments on the usefulness of poetry, he also reveals imagination itself as the

residue of a brand of subjectivity that, in obscuring the realities of the present, also bears witness to a resistance to the workings of modern status divisions—a resistance that does not have to conform to objective standards of utility in order to deserve the name of subjectivity. That is, the elegist uncovers the writing of poetry to be the speaking of a different kind of value, one that sees a usefulness in the figure of waste as much as in hard labor—i.e., the “useful toil” that the villagers performed during their lives.

Once he is done reflecting on the possibilities that might have been available to the poor had they not been themselves, the elegist begins to reflect on the process of poetic reflection. In a dizzying and disorienting turn, a perplexing “thee” enters the scene: “For thee, who mindful of th’ unhonour’d Dead / Dost in these lines their artless tale relate” (lines 93–4). The elegist signals here that the *Elegy* is not simply for the unhonored dead. It is also for those who are “mindful of th’ unhonour’d Dead.” Critics have long speculated to whom the pronoun “thee” in fact refers: whether it refers to the stonecutter who carves the epitaphs on the headstones, to the poet himself, or to someone else entirely.<sup>26</sup> Whomever the poet is addressing here, it is clear that the *Elegy* begins here to wonder aloud at the utility of the memorializing impulse. For, as we see in the poem’s closing lines, the addressee of this “thee” is a dead man walking. According to the word of “some hoary-headed Swain” (line 97), this young man would walk aimlessly across the landscape day in and day out until his sudden and unexplained death. But during life, he was invested in the project of memorializing the dead, either by writing poetry himself or by carving out lines on headstones, and this process is seen to converge with his death: the only things we know about the young man are that he was in the business of memorializing, and that he is now dead. The swain points us to the epitaph on the young man’s headstone, with which the poem closes:

*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.

(lines 117–28)

The epitaph is a microcosm of the speaker's struggle across the rest of the poem to remember the anonymous or "unhonour'd" dead. While the function of the genre of epitaph, like that of the genre of elegy, is to make the dead known to others, the author of this particular epitaph does not give us anything specific to work with at all. Paul H. Fry has suggested that the epitaph is a genre of writing that is simultaneously expressive and nonexpressive: its brevity and reduction of life to a few general remarks ends up "bury[ing]" true expression.<sup>27</sup> In other words, one can write an epitaph without really revealing any details about the deceased.

More than anything, the brevity, vagueness, and triteness of the epitaph seem to admit the quietist impulse inherent to memorialization. Writing about William Wordsworth's use of the motif of the epitaph in the Winander Boy episode from *The Prelude*, Frances Ferguson has suggested that Wordsworth seems to have his language arrested by the loss of the boy, such that there is a convergence between memorialization and silence. "[T]he poet becomes most himself," Ferguson writes, "when he is temporarily least articulate."<sup>28</sup> The poet's silence resonates in an echo chamber and thus amplifies the loss.<sup>29</sup> In a similar manner, the epitaph that ends the *Elegy* achieves melancholic poignancy via minimal expression, but not only does it say little to nothing, it also asks its readers to do nothing. As if to reinforce that to memorialize the dead is an inoperative project, the *Elegy* ends with an epitaph that quite literally calls for passivity: the readers should not ask questions about the deceased beneath this particular grave, but should rather abandon him to God. In this way, the *Elegy* itself assumes the shape of a chiasmus: it begins with death, which then leads to speculative memorialization, which in turn leads to another death that brings the poem to conclusion. There is a circular quality to mourning: the mourning of death is followed only by more death. What, we might ask, is the use of memorialization? What is the value of the poet's work?

The complexity of these questions is only heightened when we consider that the author of the epitaph (whoever he may be) asks readers to perform the exact opposite action that the elegist has performed throughout the poem itself. The epitaph's

insistence on closure is of particular interest because it stands in stark contrast to the body of the *Elegy* itself. As we have seen, the body of the poem is grounded in speculation about the dead. The tension between these dual approaches to death is palpable. By asking the reader not to imagine, the writer of the epitaph opens the reader's mind to the possibility of doing just the opposite. We are asked to let the deceased young man rest in peace, but his presence in a poem also places him squarely in the middle of literary history and practically begs readers to imagine his life, death, identity, and place in society. Spargo has argued that the melancholic aspect of the elegy form lies in its signaling the elegist's refusal and/or inability to release the deceased from the fore of one's consciousness, even if the rest of society has already done so.<sup>30</sup> In the epitaph that closes the *Elegy* we see that even a plea to the reader not to linger with the dead cannot in fact enact such separation. The poem teeters between resignation and resistance. No critical reader can resist the urge to inquire into his story in the same way that the elegist himself models throughout the poem's first twenty-nine stanzas. Another way of putting this is to say that the previous twenty-nine stanzas of melancholic preoccupation with the unnamed dead allegorize the kind of imaginative inquiry against which the epitaph speaks, testifying thus to the impossibility of letting go of the dead even in the presence of a plea not to think on the dead.

What, then, is the task of the poet? Is it to let go of the dead, as the epitaph requests, or is it rather to cling to the dead, as the body of the poem enacts? And what is the utility of either option? In putting these two competing approaches to memorialization in tension with one another, we see that the work of the poet—and by extension, of elegiac poetry—is of a reflexive sort. It is a work whose prime characterization is that it functions as a labored debate over what the work of poetry in fact is, and how the work of poetry speaks to the subject's relation to society and to the historical present. In its reflexivity, it is a work of questioning and uncertainty, rather than a work in which the end goal has already been decided in advance. The villagers' labor was performed with a definitive end, with a product in view; this was why it had earned the descriptor "useful." The work of poetry, however, is much less certain, as the two competing approaches to memorialization reveal that there is no definitively accepted process for accomplishing the granting of honor to the dead, which memorialization allegedly sets out to accomplish. This is not the kind of "useful toil" that the villagers perform, in which there is

a definitive end and a definitive product. The work, rather, lies in the questioning over which is the most effective process for remembering the nameless dead.

In view of the question of the usefulness of the elegist's work, we are given a picture of how poetic work within the world of the *Elegy* is the kind that turns back on itself and that is thus the most peculiar kind of work. It is a kind of work in which the process obscures and in some senses even negates the possibility of a product. Whereas the villagers figure the possibility of wasted potential, the elegist is a figure for potential and talent put to full use. But a full display of talent cannot equate to a work that has a clear aim, as evidenced by the elegist's uncertainty about how best to remember the dead and how best to place them within a larger historical narrative. The elegist has not "waste[d] [his] sweetness on the desert air" (line 56), as he suggests that the villagers have; but in not wasting his creative potential, he leaves the value of his work unresolved, as it is unclear what in fact he has accomplished by his elegiac words. The only accomplishment he has to stand on definitively is that he has reinforced the inevitability of death.

The utility of the poet's work is unclear, then, but the mystery surrounding its worth is also at the same time inseparable from its revolutionary potential. The world that the poem critiques is a world in which persons are tools or instruments. They are valuable not for their humanity but for what they produce, and in an economy of scarcity the villagers sacrifice themselves to lives of agricultural labor so that the city dwellers might be free to pursue fame. The *Elegy*, though, draws attention to itself because in its appearance of passivity it models a kind of work that is not subsumed by product. In all of its interpretive ambiguity, the *Elegy* performs a labor on behalf of the poet that resists modernity simply by not performing modernity's ideology—by letting modernity happen but not participating in it. What sounds in the poem like quietism or acceptance of injustice, as Empson has so famously pointed out, is in fact a nuanced and subtle resistance to modern divisions of rank and status. Rather than being invested in concrete utility, the *Elegy* leaves us with a brand of work that makes no clear claims to utility. The *Elegy* looks like resignation, and yet its representation of a work without definitive meaning presents, in all its murkiness, a counter to modernity's definitive instrumentalization of individuals and their work.

Finally, then, the *Elegy* presents us with a model of poetry that allegorizes not only resistance to the present and not only a



confoundedness by modernity, but rather the link between both states. For the poem's solution to not knowing how to reconcile the dead's relation to history is to deploy elegiac poetry itself as a form of work that lingers with waste and that exemplifies a form of labor without definitive product. In this way, the poem reveals that to be confounded is not always to lack poetic agency, for the elegist's own imaginative pursuits, as well as the poetic voice enabled by such imaginative work, emerge from his inability to know how to situate the dead in relation to history. Whatever else it accomplishes, Gray's *Elegy* allows for a conception of poetry as a mode of thought that interferes with the movements of history in spite of or perhaps because of the limits of the poet's or speaker's ability to speak with total accuracy about the poem's subject. The speaker of the *Elegy* cannot speak with total accuracy about the dead, but this lack of factual speech in no way diminishes the power of the poem. Perhaps, this poem teaches us, poetic power emerges from the limits imposed upon the poet by the outside world, rather than from the poet's total control of the poem's subject, which is sometimes—necessarily—beyond absolute knowledge.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004); Shaun Irlam, *Elations: The Poetics of Enthusiasm in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999); Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2005); and Lisa M. Steinman, *Masters of Repetition: Poetry, Culture, and Work in Thomson, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Emerson* (New York: Macmillan, 1998). Goodman, for one, has argued that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry utilizes affective discomfort so as to communicate to readers a clear vision of the historical present not accessible through other mediums (pp. 3–4, 38–66, and 106–43). Similarly, Pfau argues that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poetry uses feeling as a register for expressing both the self and the impoverished nature of modernity (pp. 15 and 309–78).

<sup>2</sup> See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2011), p. 4. Berlant suggests that “the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect, [and] it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended

now whose very parameters ... are also always there for debate" (p. 4).

<sup>3</sup>In *Marxism and Literature*, for instance, Raymond Williams writes that the grand historical narrative emerges not only from a top-down understanding of cultural institutions themselves, but also from an attention to the "affective elements of consciousness and relationships" of the individuals who reside in the present (*Marxism and Literature* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977], p. 132).

<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 87, 93, and 111–21; and Suvir Kaul, *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: A Study in Ideology and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 128, 132–3, and 140–1. For both Guillory and Kaul, the poem aims to shape society, even if its interventions remain ideologically ambiguous. As Guillory puts it, "The poem actively reflects upon [class] structure and does not merely reflect it" (p. 93), and the logical end of the reflection, in Guillory's account, lies in the crystallizing of a vernacular poetic language (p. 121). And for Kaul, the poem's use of pathos signals an attempt to channel difficult questions of rank, status, city, and country into "the morally correct emotion," such that the complexities of modernity find their resolution "under the legitimizing aegis of the literary" (p. 141). In another vein, Henry Weinfield presents a reading that sees Gray's elegist as bravely resisting modernity. Weinfield argues that poetry is for Gray an activist project, and that the *Elegy* is a courageous confrontation of the economic injustices of present history. See Weinfield, *The Poet without a Name: Gray's "Elegy" and the Problem of History* (Carbonville IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1991), especially p. xi.

<sup>5</sup>See Kaul, pp. 127–8; and Guillory, p. 121. Critical attempts to trace a line between the poet and the politics of his historical moment go back at least to William Empson, who famously argues that Gray's poetics are hypocritical. For Empson, Gray argues in the *Elegy* that one should simply accept status inequalities as they are. There is no changing them. Gray's statements of sympathy for the poor are in fact, Empson argues, statements of apathy: the poor should be content with the sympathy they receive in poetry and should ask for nothing more. See Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935; rpt. New York: New Directions, 1974), pp. 4–5.

<sup>6</sup>See Kaul, pp. 132–3.

<sup>7</sup>See Guillory, p. 121.

<sup>8</sup>See John Sitter, *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 97–100. Sitter argues that the *Elegy* presents a speaker isolated from the city and thus ensconced in the solitude of the churchyard. In making the conscious choice to elegize the poor, the elegist also chooses to turn his back on society, which has no interest in hearing his words.

<sup>9</sup>Guillory, p. 121. As a practical account of the *Elegy's* canonization, Catherine Robson gives a compelling and captivating reading of the process by which Gray's *Elegy* came to assume a prominent place in school curriculums. See Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 123–90.

<sup>10</sup>In another reading on the poetry of isolation, Marilyn Butler has suggested that mid-eighteenth-century poets' varying postures of retreat are

merely performative poses, and that these poets are in fact deeply invested in being remembered. See Butler, *Mapping Mythologies: Countercurrents in Eighteenth-Century British Poetry and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Parisot, *Graveyard Poetry: Religion, Aesthetics, and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poetic Condition* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2013), p. 2. This term may originate from Homer's Athena in *The Odyssey*: "But the great leveler, Death: not even the gods / can defend a man, not even one they love, that day / when fate takes hold and lays him out at last" (*The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles, in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature, Shorter Second Edition*, ed. Peter Simon, 2 vols. [New York: W. W. Norton, 2009], 1:274–563, book 3, lines 269–71).

<sup>12</sup> Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, for instance, meditates on the maxim that "All our ambitions Death defeats" (*Night Thoughts*, ed. Stephen Cornford [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989], p. 169, line VI.816). See also Robert Blair, *The Grave* (London: Printed for M. Cooper, 1743); ECCO ESTC N018218. Blair's poem laments with horror the ways that death "spoil'st the Dance of Youthful Blood" (p. 8). For another prominent example of the genre of the graveyard poem, see Thomas Parnell, *A Night-Piece on Death*, in *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: Printed for B. Lintot, 1722), pp. 152–7; ECCO ESTC T042652. For a discussion of the history of graveyard poetry, see John W. Draper, *The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism* (1929; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1967); and William Lyon Phelps, *The Beginnings of the English Romantic Movement: A Study in Eighteenth Century Literature* (Boston: Ginn, 1893).

<sup>13</sup> This phrase is drawn from the collection *Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Brewer, "Commercialization and Politics," in *Birth of a Consumer Society*, pp. 197–8, 198.

<sup>15</sup> See Lorna Clymer, "Graved in Tropes: The Figural Logic of Epitaphs and Elegies in Blair, Gray, Cowper, and Wordsworth," *ELH* 62, 2 (Summer 1995): 347–86, 358.

<sup>16</sup> For Sigmund Freud, mourning is the normal process of grief, whereby after a stage of grieving, one no longer fixates on the object of loss. Melancholia, by contrast, is a preoccupation with an object of loss that seems to have no end. See Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), 14:243–58.

<sup>17</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> In Spargo's view, to hold onto the dead is to reenact an imaginative protection of the dead from the forces of the outside world (see pp. 1–13, esp. p. 6).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, in *Thomas Gray and William Collins: Poetical Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 33–9. Subsequent references to Gray's *Elegy* are from this

edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text and notes by line number. Scholars have long speculated that the *Elegy* was in fact written for Gray's close friend Richard West, who died in 1742. Odell Shepard goes so far as to argue that the "thee" in line 93—"For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd dead"—is actually West. See Shepard, "A Youth to Fortune and to Fame Unknown," *MP* 20, 4 (May 1923): 347–73. For a recent reading of West's possible influence on Gray's poetry, see Robert F. Gleckner, *Gray Agonistes: Thomas Gray and Masculine Friendship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Kaul describes the division between churchyard and outside world as emblematic of a correspondent division between country and city. The country is the space of the poor, and is separated out from the city, which is the domain of the rich, or a space of what Kaul refers to as "bourgeois humanist ideologies" (p. 141).

<sup>21</sup> In Empson's reading, Gray appreciates the beauty of the flower, and thus also the labor of the poor, but is not interested in forwarding any solution to any problems of inequality that the separation between rich and poor might signify (pp. 4–5).

<sup>22</sup> The only exception to this claim is the final line of the poem, where Gray directly names God (line 128).

<sup>23</sup> Both Kaul and Richard C. Sha, for instance, see the allusions to John Hampden, Milton, and Oliver Cromwell as signs for Gray of a tension between the enthusiasm and the divisive nature of revolutionary political thought. See Kaul, p. 139; and Sha, "Gray's Political *Elegy*: Poetry as the Burial of History," *PQ* 69, 3 (Summer 1990): 337–57, 344.

<sup>24</sup> See Guillory, pp. 111–21.

<sup>25</sup> Stefan H. Uhlig, "Gray, Wordsworth, and the Poetry of Ordinary Life," in *The Meaning of "Life" in Romantic Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Ross Wilson (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 33–56, 42. In the quoted portion of the text above, Uhlig refers specifically to the end of the poem, in which a "hoary-headed Swain" (line 97) testifies to the puzzling daily activities of a young man (quite possibly the elegist himself) who would once wander across the landscape until suddenly dying. I deal at length with this portion of the poem in this article.

<sup>26</sup> The uncertainty about the authorship and aim of the poem's epitaph coalesced in the critical tradition around what became known as the "Stonecutter Controversy." The Stonecutter Controversy was in essence a controversy about direct address. The "thee" of the lines "For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead / Dost in these lines their artless tale relate" (lines 93–4) is never directly identified within the body of the poem. In response to this ambiguity, Cleanth Brooks claims that the "thee" is actually the speaker himself. In Brooks's reading, the speaker refers to himself in the second person (see "Gray's Storied Urn," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's "Elegy": A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Herbert W. Starr [1947; rpt. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968], pp. 23–32, 28). According to this reading, the epitaph at the end of the poem, addressed to the "thee" of these lines, is actually an epitaph for the speaker himself. Guillory and David Fairer are among the more recent critics to take up Brooks's position (See Guillory, p. 116; and Fairer, *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, 1700–1789* [London: Pearson, 2003], p. 158). In an equally speculative reading, Frank H.

Ellis claims that the “thee” is a stonecutter who inscribes the epitaph at the end of the poem on the gravestone itself (see “Gray’s *Elegy*: The Biographical Problem in Literary Criticism,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray’s “Elegy,”* pp. 51–75, 60.) The speaker of the poem, in Ellis’s reading, would be suggesting that the stonecutter is the one who is “mindful of th’ unhonour’d Dead,” and that “these lines” are the epitaph and the inscription on the gravestone. For a deconstructive reading of the Stonecutter Controversy itself, see Brian McGrath, *The Poetics of Unremembered Acts: Reading, Lyric, Pedagogy* (Evanston IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 55–73.

<sup>27</sup> Paul H. Fry, “The Absent Dead: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Epitaph,” *SiR* 17, 4 (Fall 1978): 413–33, 414.

<sup>28</sup> Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 167–72, 172.

<sup>29</sup> The lines from the Winander Boy episode to which Ferguson refers read as follows: “There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs / And Islands of Winander!” (William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 2d edn. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959], book 5, lines 389–90 [364–5], qtd. in Ferguson, p. 167). In a sense, these lines alone, Ferguson contends, seem to tell the whole story of the boy and his death: they “rhetorically obviate the necessity for telling the tale ... by placing the cliffs and islands in the role of audience; *they* already know the story which Wordsworth is telling” (p. 167).

<sup>30</sup> See Spargo, pp. 11–3.