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‘Three cheers for mute ingloriousness!’: Gray’s *Elegy* in the poetry of John Clare¹

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Samuel Johnson considered that Thomas Gray’s *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* ‘abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo’. Roger Lonsdale argues that it ‘produces fewer or more complicated echoes in the bosoms of modern readers than in those of earlier generations’, but it is not just the Doppler effect of the passing centuries that complicates responses. The *Elegy* has always been a conduit for diverse needs and aspirations. When General Wolfe famously declared on the eve of the Battle of Quebec that he would rather have written the *Elegy* than capture the city, he was enlisting its patriotic potential, or perhaps using it in the manner of Roman generals at their victory parades, to whisper in his ear, ‘remember, you are mortal’.² For the nineteenth-century pioneers of the trade union movement the *Elegy* was a radical text which made their struggles poetic, and their banners often quoted the lines about the Village-Hampden who ‘with dauntless breast / The little tyrant of his fields withstood’.³

In the 1950s came the New Criticism, and with it the ‘stonecutter controversy’, an oddly compelling dispute over whether the ‘rustic moralist’ who appears in the central section of the poem is also the subject of its ending. The controversy’s hidden agenda, according to William Epstein, was Cold War anxiety: double-agents, secret codes, betrayal—not so much ‘a mirror in every mind’ as ‘a wilderness of mirrors’, to borrow a phrase from James Jesus Angleton’s paranoid counter-espionage theories.⁴

British critics, meanwhile, moved sharply away from the radical reading. William Empson, in 1935, questioned Gray’s pathetic fallacies, the hidden ‘gem’ and the ‘flower...born to blush unseen’. For Empson the waste these images represent is ‘stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it’. John Lucas, in 1990, concurs. The *Elegy*, he says, ‘underwrites an almost entirely complacent account of a “settled” society’ and ‘refuses to censure tyranny and oppression’.⁵

In his 1994 essay “‘Plodding plowmen’: issues of labour and literacy in Gray’s “Elegy””, R.J. Ellis revisits the stonecutter controversy, and finds a radical new solution to the problem. Ellis suggests that the ‘thee’ whom Gray addresses in line 93, as being one who relates in ‘these lines’ the ‘artless tale’ of the ‘unhonoured dead’, is

not the village gravestone-cutter, nor indeed the poet Gray, nor any of five other possible candidates he identifies, but may instead be identified with John Clare, the poet of the future, whose ‘constraint’ within the misrepresenting category of ‘peasant poet’ parallels the plight of Gray’s ‘Ighite’, ‘thee’.⁶ I am intrigued by this argument, partly because it offers almost a mirror image to my own view that Clare uses the *Elegy* as a site for poetic speculation about what was for him a vital question: what is the fate of the working-class poet, the ‘peasant’ poet?

In the *Elegy*, we may remind ourselves, an educated poet, ‘me’, loiters alone in a village churchyard, speculating on the fate of the archetypal villager buried there, whom he admires, defends against snobbery, and identifies with; then on the universal need to be remembered and the work of a ‘rustic moralist’ who makes memorials for the village-dead; and finally on the imagined fate of someone, perhaps the author himself, who is described by a villager to a visiting poetry-lover as having wandered around distractedly, died (possibly by his own hand), and been buried. The poet (if that is who it is) is commemorated by the pious epitaph which is quoted to end the *Elegy*. There are clearly problems involved in sorting out how exactly these various figures fit together: hence the stonecutter controversy. But the poem does not encourage such a line of questioning. Instead we are invited to engage in an undifferentiated mood of sympathy for the villager and the poet. The labouring villager becomes a ‘mute inglorious Milton’, who blends into the rustic moralist, who somehow becomes the estranged poet, Thomas Gray. Their fates, it is implied, are all the same.

Gray had his own reasons for wishing to merge the roles of villager and poet. Disaffected with both his own, mercantile class, and the glittering circles of his aristocratic friend Horace Walpole (with whom he had earlier quarrelled), the poet looks to the third class of society, represented by the villager, for solace. In doing so, he creates what we would call a ‘version of pastoral’, one which reflects his particular anxieties about poetry and identity. We are rightly warned by literary critics that pastoral is a fantasy, and not an authentic version of rural life. But the anxieties Gray expresses, and the issues he raises in the *Elegy* are real enough, and they are anxieties that Clare shares. What is a fulfilled life? What is the role of the poet? And how does one reconcile one’s class position and social environment, in an intensely class-conscious society, with being a writer, a bearer of literacy? Gray, educated at Eton and Cambridge, a scholarly man who spent most of his life pursuing antiquarian interests at Cambridge University, looks to the culture of the non-literate to try and understand himself and his position. Clare, born the son of a common thresher, follows the trail in the other direction, moving from villager to mute inglorious Milton, rustic moralist, and finally poet.

Clare's most intense engagement with the *Elegy* occurred in his early writings. It has become almost a reflex to dismiss as shallow and imitative the way his early work echoes eighteenth-century texts, but I would argue that Clare is often able to rework these texts in genuinely creative ways. Gray's village evening, for example, is a moment of studied picturesque calm:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
 The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (ll. 1-4)⁷

Clare steals the metre, the pattern of first words ('The...The...And...'), and the paternalistic curfew bell, but then re-writes the village evening in terms of stormy weather and witch-lore:

The driving clouds in dark condensation hung
 The village bell its warning summons rung
 & every witch that doubtful forced to roam
 Was by the welcom call conducted home
 (from an untitled poem, *Early Poems*, I, p. 512, ll. 1-4)⁸

Gray's dead sleep in rustic mounds, beneath the trees :

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
 Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
 Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
 The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. (ll. 13-16)

Clare's dead sleep beneath the 'horrid blotch' of 'Obscurity' (l. 6), where they are sharply and melodramatically politicised:

Beneath whose buried shade of deep disguise
 The sons of Merit unrewarded sleeps—
 While Learning mourns & Ign'rance delights
 To see worth perish in Eternal night
 ('To Obscurity. Written in a Fit of Despondency',
Early Poems, I, p. 386, ll. 7-10)

Clare is happy to use eighteenth-century conventions of personification (his figure of 'worth', for example, comes from Johnson's satires), but he casts aside Gray's caution on the crucial questions of social and educational injustice.

We have seen that Gray's pathetic fallacy of the 'flower...born to blush unseen' is a site of particular political interest to critics. Clare is strongly drawn to this 'flower' image and explores it in several ways, clearly aware of its relevance to himself as both a potential 'flower...born to blush unseen', and a lover of flowers, especially if they are wild and unseen. Gray writes:

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (ll. 55-6)

One response to this is to upturn it, which Clare does in a cheekily parodic couplet:

Full many a flower, too, wishing to be seen,
Perks up its head the hiding grass between.
(‘Sonnet XXVIII. In Hilly Wood’, *The Village Minstrel* (1821), II,
p. 176, ll. 9-10)

Clare is of course the champion of living things, and his particular affection for the powers of renewal in weeds, thistles and grass, the way in which vegetation constantly ‘perks up’ uninvited, has been discussed by several critics.⁹ In his ‘Address to an Insignificant Flower Obscurely Blooming in a Lonely Wild’, Clare reminds us, again taking a phrase from Gray and changing its purpose, that ‘Theres many a seeming weed proves sweet’:

And tho thou seemst a weedling wild
Wild & neglected like to me
Thou still art dear to natures child
& I will stoop to notice thee

For oft like thee, in wild retreat
Aray'd in humble garb like thee
Theres many a seeming weed proves sweet
As sweet as garden flowers can be

& like to thee, each seeming weed
Flowers unregarded like to thee

Without improvement—runs to seed
 Wild & neglected like to me...

& like to thee, lives many a swain
 With Genius blest—but like to thee
 So humble, lowly, mean & plain
 No one will notice them nor—me

So like to thee, they live unknown
 Wild weeds obscure—& like to thee
 Their sweets are sweet to them alone
 —the only pleasure known to me

Yet when I'm dead lets hope I have
 some friend in store as I'm to thee
 That will find out my lowly grave
 & heave a sigh to notice me
 (*Early Poems*, I, pp. 216-18, ll. 1-12, 29-40)

The faltering lurch between 'thee' and 'me' sharpens the ambiguity of Gray's personae, while the last stanza touches lightly on Gray's idea of a 'kindred spirit' who comes to seek and celebrate the dead poet.

In an untitled fragment, Clare again brings Gray's flower-image to bear upon his own plight:

The humble flowers that buds upon the plain
 & only buds to blossom but in vain
 By senseless rustics with unheeding eyes
 Still trodden down as they attempt to rise

So like the humble blossom of the Fields
 Uncultured Genius humble life consceals
 (*Early Poems*, I, p. 240)

And we can see in another early poem how much the purely linguistic beauty of Gray's 'flower' image interests Clare, as he adapts it to his own thoughts on poetry:

There is a charm which poesy lays hold of nought beside

Can ere atta[i]n to—its superior powers
 Maketh the meanest trifle dignified
 Even on deserts she can plant her flowers
 ('Sonnet', *Early Poems*, II, 386, ll. 1-4)

A compensation is offered to the oppressed villager in the *Elegy*, and it is the familiar one that everyone must die, death is the great leveller. Roger Lonsdale offers eight sources for the phrase 'awaits alike th' inevitable hour' (four of them from Horace), and one could doubtless find more.¹⁰ Gray writes:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
 Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave. (ll. 33-6)

Clare's response is less sonorous, more rhetorically modest:

So death serves all—& wealth & pride
 Must all their pomp resign
 E'en Kings shall lay their crowns aside
 To mix their dust wi' mine!

—The leaves how once they cloath'd the trees
 Nones left behind to tell
 The branch is naked to the breeze
 Nor known from whence they fell

A few more years as they—the same
 Are now I then shall be
 With nothing left to tell my name
 Or answer—'who was he?'
 ('Falling Leaves', *Early Poems*, I, pp. 337-8, ll. 17-28)

Clare takes some comfort in the thought of Kings mingling their dust with his, and brings down their pretensions linguistically and metrically (putting them into common ballad metre). But the imagined question 'who was he?' refers not to the mighty but to himself, and the message of the withered leaves that are his subject is that whatever happens to the dust he himself will be forgotten: the 'levelling' effect

of death is a Pyrrhic victory. Tony Harrison reaches similar conclusions in one of his film-poems, as he wanders around a London cemetery:

Lords and Ladies, late and early nipped
 beneath heartsease, forget-me-not and yew.
 What are they now? A stone with chiselled script
 saying SIR WILLIAM CASEMENT—who?
 ('Loving Memory: Cheating the Void', 1987)¹¹

Harrison has a little fun at the sculptural pretensions of a titled nonentity, but the film which accompanied the poem ironically reveals at this point a team of Youth Training recruits silently cleaning Sir William's caryatids: more mute inglorious Miltons (and *useless* toil). As Harrison says, they 'have no choice but bow and scrape to him', and for Harrison as much as Clare, Gray's compensation is of very limited significance.

Clare's gloomy acceptance of his own oblivion, his own ultimate 'muteness', is a characteristic early response. Yet he understands too the importance of memorialising the dead, however ineffective a form of personal immortality memorials may be. In one untitled poem, he watches the youths of Helpstone creating the only memorial they are ever likely to get, and thinks, perhaps, about Gray's ambiguous view of memorials ('Can storied urn or animated bust / Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?', ll. 41-2):

Where on bridge wall or gate or trees smooth bark
 Curois[i]ty oft leaves the pad to mark [pad = path]
 The artless vanity of village swains
 Who spend a leisure hour with patient pains
 & put to sculptors purposes the knife
 To spin a cobweb for an after life
 In rudest form that untought s[c]ience frames
 Nicking the letters of their little names
 Pleasd with the feeblest shadow of renown
 That warms the bosom of the humblest clown
 (*Early Poems*, II, p. 492)¹²

And he planned his own memorial—which scrupulously effaces any extraneous fame-seeking—with a care just as gloomily meticulous as anything in Gray's *Elegy*:

I wish to lye on the North side of the Church yard just about the middle of the ground w[h]ere the Morning and Evening Sun can linger the longest on my Grave I wish to have a rough unhewn stone something in the form of a mile Stone so that the playing boys may not break it in their heedless pastimes with nothing more on it then this Inscription [‘HERE Rest the HOPES and Ashes of JOHN CLARE’] I desire that no date be inserted there on as I wish it to live or dye with my poems and other writings¹³

Clare also wrote elegies to others, significantly to the two teachers who had educated him. In memorialising his dame school teacher Mrs Bullimore he quotes Gray directly, as well as remembering the ‘uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture’ which deck Gray’s ‘frail memorial’:

Then farwell tutor of the infant mind
 Now thou art gone and left thy flock behind
 Free from all trouble callumney and scorn
 ‘Slow through the church-yard-path I saw thee born’
 I saw thy grave remembering with a sigh
 That I my self in such a one must lie
 And often since I’ve stood to view the stone
 By kindred gave to make thy memory known
 Whose uncooth ryhmes imperfectly apply’d
 Without the aid of sculptures gaudy pride
 From neighbourings friends and kindred passing by
 Near fails to raise the heart-affecting sigh
 (‘Lines on the Death of Mrs Bullimore’, *Early Poems*, I, pp. 197-9,
 ll. 63-74)¹⁴

And in ‘To the Memory of James Merrishaw a Village Schoolmaster’ he remembers Gray’s exhortation to the proud not to sneer, and expands the line that completes the *Elegy* and its epitaph, ‘Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth’ (l. 119), into a compendium of Merrishaw’s abilities:

Mind not what Booklearnt men or critics say,
 Thine is the debt and be it thine to pay...
 He who pursue’d that arduous task to rear
 Young tender shoots to blossom and to bear...
 He who so skilld in arts would yield to none

And Science own'd him for her darling son
 On Music's farthest shore he'd saf[e]ley land
 Touching her magic notes with powerful hand.
 Thro Mathematics hidden depths he'd pry,
 Trace all her windings with a skilful eye.
 And in Geometry his searching view
 Could draw a figure admirably true.

(*Early Poems*, I, pp. 55-8, ll. 64-5, 72-3, 76-83)

However much this material draws on Gray, and on the idealised schoolteachers of Shenstone and Goldsmith, it differs from them in that it memorialises named, real, and (by their own lights) fulfilled lives, which contrast with the unfulfilled, potential lives of Gray's villagers. Clare similarly insists on the 'real' in imagining the contents of Gray's 'mouldering' heaps. Gray writes:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
 Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
 Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre. (ll. 45-8)

Clare insists on showing us 'mangled bones' in his re-working of this:

Perhaps these mangled bones
 When they was blest with life tho long ago
 Hath trac'd sweet musick thro her highest tones
 Perhaps a genius powerful and strong
 Well skill'd in all the majesty of song
 Dwelt in this dust...
 ('Lines Written While Viewing Some Remains of an Human Body
 in Lolham Lane', *Early Poems*, I, p. 17, ll. 6-11)

As a young lime-burner at Pickworth in Rutland, Clare had come across human bones, and he described the experience in a poem that gloriously parodies Goldsmith's famous patriotic lines in *The Deserted Village* about the time 'ere England's grief began / When every rood of land maintained its man' (ll. 57-8):

How contemplation mourns your lost decay
 To view thy pride laid level with the ground

To see where labour clears the soil away
 What fragments of mortality abound

Theres not a Rood of Land demands our toil
 Theres not a foot of ground we daily tread
 But gains increase from times devouring spoil
 But holds some fragment of the human dead

(‘Elegy Hastily Composed...in the Ruins of Pickworth’,
Early Poems, I, pp. 402-4, ll. 37-44)

In brief conclusion, enough bones have perhaps been uncovered in this essay for me to propose that Clare’s early imitations of the eighteenth-century poets were not as conventional or slavish as is often asserted. Gray’s *Elegy* offered enticing parallels to Clare’s feelings about his own predicament, and he was able to adapt its images and sentiments to his own style with characteristic boldness and ingenuity.

NOTES

1. Versions of this paper have been given in seminars at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and the University of Oxford. I am grateful to all those who have offered comments and suggestions, including the late Bill Ruddick. ‘Three cheers for mute ingloriousness!’ is from Tony Harrison’s sonnet ‘On Not Being Milton’.
2. Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets: a Selection*, Introduced by John Wain (London: Dent, 1975), p. 470; Roger Lonsdale, ‘The Poetry of Thomas Gray: Versions of the Self’, *Proc. Brit. Ac.*, 59 (1973), 1-19; *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), ‘James Wolfe’.
3. Information on trade union banners came from Rodney Lines of the WEA. The ‘Village-Hampden’ lines also had their place in the formation of the Australian national identity, as Robert Hughes records:
 The commonest tag in Australian ideas about the convicts’ class identity came from Gray’s ‘Elegy’, where, musing on the decent obscurity of the village dead, the poet evoked a yeoman resisting the power of the enclosing landowner: ‘Some village-Hampden that with dauntless breast / The little tyrant of his fields withstood.’ Hence, wrote J. L. and B. Hammond in 1913 in their influential study *The Village Labourer, 1760-*

1832, ‘the village Hampdens of that generation sleep by the shores of Botany Bay.’ (*The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787-1868* (1987; London: Pan Books, 1988), p. 159.

4. William H. Epstein, ‘Counter-Intelligence: Cold-War Criticism and Eighteenth-Century Studies’, *ELH*, 57 (1990), 63-99.
5. William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935; London: Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 4; John Lucas, *England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688-1900* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 45.
6. R.J. Ellis, “‘Plodding plowmen’”: issues of labour and literacy in Gray’s “Elegy”, in *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition*, ed. by John Goodridge (Helpston, Cambs: The John Clare Society and the Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994), pp. 27-43.
7. Quotations from Gray and Goldsmith in this essay are taken from Roger Lonsdale (ed), *The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith* (London: Longman, 1969), pp. 103-141 and 678.
8. *The Early Poems of John Clare 1804-1822*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger (two vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), henceforth *Early Poems*.
9. See John Lucas, *John Clare* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), pp. 61-6; John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, ‘John Clare: the trespasser’, in Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips and Geoffrey Summerfield (eds.), *John Clare in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 111-12, 114.
10. Lonsdale *Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*, p. 123 notes 33-6.
11. Tony Harrison, *The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 97. ‘Cheating the Void’, produced by Peter Symes, was broadcast on BBC2 on 6 August 1987.
12. Tim Fulford reminds me that in Book I of *The Task* Cowper describes the work of such ‘rural carvers’ in a similar way.
13. *John Clare: By Himself*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet Press, 1996), pp. 245-6.
14. Gray’s words are ‘Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne’ (l. 114).

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