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“For thou can’st read”: Cultural Silence and Education in Gray’s *Elegy*

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Among literary critics, the remarkable success of Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is perhaps nearly as well known as the poem itself. By 1753, a commentator in the *Monthly Review* could conclude that “to enlarge in his praise, would be impertinence; as his church-yard elegy is in every one’s hands, and not more justly than universally admired.”¹ Nearly three decades later, Samuel Johnson, despite his well known distaste for Gray’s other poems, famously rejoiced to concur with the firmly established judgment of the “common reader”: “the *Church-yard*,” he observed, “abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.”² The macabre matter and tone of Gray’s poem was hardly new, but rather a variant of the poetic meditations on death that were in vogue by the mid-century, and the favourable reception of the *Elegy* was perhaps due partly to the “affecting and pensive cast of the subject, just like Hervey’s *Meditations on the Tombs*.”³ Yet, as Johnson’s evaluation suggests, the poem’s remarkably powerful and broad appeal during the eighteenth century was due significantly to its distinctive engagement with contemporary experience and sentiments. The *Elegy* was widely accessible – it seemed already familiar to its early readers, as Johnson alleges – because it evoked the inequitable

1. *The Monthly Review* 8 (1753), 477.

2. *The Lives of the English Poets* (Dublin, 1779), 3: 385.

3. William Mason, “Memoirs of William Whitehead,” *Poems by William Whitehead* by William Whitehead, ed. William Mason (York, 1788), 3:84.

education system that underpinned the institutionalized cultural inequalities it examines; the *Elegy* is, in part, about the situation of literacy education in contemporary England. Marking the limits of literacy both within and without the poem, the *Elegy* figures the cultural silence of the rural villagers as a function of the arrangement of institutions of aural power. It is the situation of the poetic environment, markedly removed from those institutions capable of producing sound, that effectively silences the uncouth peasants. This institutionalized inequality is written into the poem's linguistic engagement with classical literacy, which served throughout the eighteenth century as a distinctive sign of a superior education. Rather than seamlessly translate the classical tradition for an English readership, making immediately accessible the cultural capital of an elite education, the *Elegy* appropriately marks the irreducible distance of its original classical sources.

Gray dismissively imputed the popularity of his poem "entirely to the subject,"⁴ but among the tide of similar contemporary reflections on death the *Elegy* stands out because it subsumes the conventional treatment of death to an interrogation of the socio-economic determinants of public recognition. Certainly, the speaker memorably reiterates the traditional topos that "the paths of glory lead but to the grave."⁵ Yet, as Henry Weinfield suggests, in the *Elegy* this familiar motif functions primarily to rebuke the proud;⁶ regardless of the metaphysical implications of mortality, the poem itself attends far more to the activities and concerns of the living than to the end they share. As one contemporary observed in 1762, dismissing Gray's train of imitators, the *Elegy* distinctly pretermits the traditional imagery of mortality employed by other poets, who present but "another Gentleman in black, with the same funeral face, and mournful ditty, with the same cypress in his hand, and affected sentence in his mouth, viz. *that we*

4. Sir William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1807), I: 106.

5. Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," *The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longman, Green & Co. Ltd., 1969), I: 36.

6. Henry Weinfield, *The Poet Without a Name: Gray's Elegy and the Problem of History* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991), 67.

*all must die!*⁷ Eschewing such a conventional treatment of death, the *Elegy* considerably minimizes the physical and spiritual aspects of mortality, defining death largely by the more abstract limitations it imposes on political and artistic development; death functions, in the poem, to curtail the development of the rural peasants, as it does that of the youth, whose eloquence and melancholic temperament attest to the artistic and social potential that has ostensibly been prevented by his unexpected passing. The mouldering proper to decaying bodies is displaced onto the “heaves of turf,” and death is euphemistically represented as a reluctant departure from “the warm precincts of the cheerful day.”⁸ Rather than directly address the sharp finality of mortality, the speaker imagines the death of the deceased peasants as “sleep,” aligning them with the living villagers.⁹ The poem, as George Wright observes, is “notably reticent about the manner in which the villagers have died,”¹⁰ and the imagined death of the speaker with which the poem culminates is similarly subdued – marked more by his new physical and textual presence in the churchyard than by his absence from the nearby scene. Rather than evoke only the physical or spiritual limitations common to all, invocations of death in Gray’s poem often serve to express the restrictions peculiarly associated with the poverty of the rural peasants. Death functions, as John Guillory suggests, as a metaphorized abstraction for the “blockage, failure, [and] inhibition” that represses the “poor.”¹¹ While the “Proud”¹² in opposition to whom the poem sets the humble peasants, are ultimately subject to the same physical limitations of mortality, for the poor, the constraints by which the poem defines death inhere equally in life; the unknown peasantry are condemned by their socio-economic limitations to a state of “death-in-life.”¹³ The “Chill Penury”¹⁴ which extinguishes the artistic potential of the living villagers is an aspect of “cold” death, and by figuring the stifled creativity of the disadvantaged peasants as a form

7. *The Monthly Review* 26 (1762), 357-58.

8. Gray, l. 1, l. 87.

9. Gray, l. 16.

10. George Wright, “Stillness and the Argument of Gray’s ‘Elegy,’” *Modern Philology* 74.4 (1977), 388.

11. Gray, l. 32.

12. Gray, l. 37.

13. Weinfield, xix.

14. Gray, l. 51.

of miscarried “pregnan[cy],” the poem conflates the limitations of poverty with the enervating force of death.¹⁵ The “circumscribed” lot of the rural peasants similarly recalls the “narrow cell[s]” of the dead, representing the social confines attendant on impoverished rural life in terms of the spatial constraints of the grave.¹⁶ For the poor, as they are imagined in the poem, the silence and obscurity of the grave are less a state of sharp alterity than a nearly indistinguishable continuation of the cultural limitations of their lives; “the poor and simple die . . . with the minimum of fuss”¹⁷ because they are, in one sense, effectively dead long before they are buried in the country churchyard.

This crucial distinction is predicated most directly on education, rather than strictly on economics in the *Elegy*. Not surprisingly, Gray’s poem is most often imagined as a poem predominantly about the “rich and poor,”¹⁸ perhaps because two of the most oft-quoted passages of the poem invoke this familiar distinction.¹⁹ But the *Elegy* attends more to the uneven distribution of “Knowledge” than to strictly economic imparities.²⁰ While material “Penury” underpins the cultural disadvantages the *Elegy* examines, the poem attributes their situation as much to their ignorance, ascribing their obscurity to the fact that “Knowledge to their eyes her ample page / Rich with the spoils of time did ne’er unroll.”²¹ In this stanza, as throughout the poem, the neglected villagers are most immediately defined by their ignorance; they are “rude,” “uncouth,” and “unlettered.”²² Above all, the forgotten villagers the speaker imagines are excluded from cultural life by their illiteracy – by their inability to read. Culminating with a written, conspicuously literate memorial, the *Elegy* repeatedly underscores the boundaries of written discourse, both within and without the poem. By ironically referring to the accounts of the poor as “annals,” the speaker highlights

15. Gray, l. 44, l. 46.

16. Gray, l. 65, l. 15.

17. Thomas R. Edwards, *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes* (Edinburgh: Chatto & Windus, 1971), 126.

18. Frank Brady, “Structure and Meaning in Gray’s *Elegy*,” *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, eds. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford UP, 1965), 177.

19. Gray, ll. 32, 36.

20. Gray, l. 49.

21. Gray, l. 51, ll. 49-50.

22. Gray, ll. 16, 79, 81.

the exclusion of the peasantry from the official written record; the fact that these annals are “hear[d]” rather than read suggests that they are essentially oral accounts less effective against the silence attendant on death.²³ Even as the speaker endeavours to discount class distinctions, his admonitory address to the proud, conspicuous in a predominantly private poem, necessarily marks the problematic limits of the written medium. The speaker can publicly address these privileged readers, but the illiterate poor with whom the poem is ostensibly most concerned are necessarily excluded from the written discourse of the poem; the *Elegy*, along with the epitaph it features, can only directly engage a “kindred spirit” possessed of a considerable level of literacy.²⁴ The poem accentuates this problematic divide when an apparently illiterate swain directs the passerby, and also the reader, to “Approach and read (for thou can’st read)” the inscribed epitaph.²⁵ The emphasis falling naturally on the pronoun that marks this fundamental distinction, this jarring qualification reminds the reader that their literacy is an acquired privilege informed by their social position, one which allows them to participate in a crucial process of memorialisation from which the illiterate poor are excluded. The systemic inequality to which this moment draws attention, as William Empson first suggested, necessarily invokes the poem’s contemporary educational system. Looking to the contentious “gem” stanza, he contends that “what this means, as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth century England had no scholarship system or *carrière ouverte aux talents*.”²⁶ The terminology Empson employs is anachronistic and blunt, and we must certainly be careful not to project modern preferences for equality onto a period in which opinions on education – particularly on the education of the poor – varied widely. But when the *Elegy* was published in 1751, the education system in England was certainly socially uneven and inequitable. While the century arguably saw a relative expansion of educational opportunities, the most prestigious public schools, such as Eton and Westminster, and the English universities, due largely to their high fees and associated costs (along with laws

23. Gray, l. 32.

24. Gray, l. 96.

25. Gray, l. 115.

26. William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral: A Study of the Pastoral Form in Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 11-12.

targeting Dissenters), became increasingly the schools of the social elite: the children of statesmen, bishops, and gentry.²⁷ Families with money to spare could send their children to grammar school, and charity and dame schools were open to all but the most impoverished families, though by contemporary accounts the instructors at many of these more accessible institutions were often unqualified.²⁸ But the schools most favourable to political or cultural achievement were financed considerably by fees generally within the means of only wealthier families. Nicholas Hans finds that the nine elite public schools “supplied almost one-third of the élite in England of the eighteenth century,” producing a far greater number of distinguished figures than the one hundred and seventy grammar schools represented in his study.²⁹ Though he draws on an admittedly limited and imperfect sample, the image of the education system Hans produces is roughly accurate; it was these less accessible public schools, and the English universities which they fed, that influential figures like Sir Christopher Wren, Thomas Warton, and Horace Walpole attended. Less privileged students like Gray, who attended Eton and Cambridge, were sometimes enrolled at these institutions, but they were certainly an anomaly in this educational stream, and a number of critics have suggested, as R. J. Ellis does, that the more prestigious backgrounds of his schoolmates gave “issues of social rank, social order and the advantages of being lettered... a particular piquancy” for Gray.³⁰ At Eton, for example, between 1753 and 1790 only thirty-eight of the 3,000 entrants were of “tradesman class.”³¹ Some scholarships did exist, but they were often distributed unfairly, leaving comparatively little opportunity for families not already socially or financially privileged to send their boys

27. Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1957).

28. See Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Education in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Woburn P, 1971), 17-38.

29. Nicholas Hans, *New Trends in Education in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1966), 19-20.

30. R. J. Ellis, “Plodding Plowmen: Issues of Labour and Literacy in Gray’s ‘Elegy,’” *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition*, ed. John Goodridge (Helpston: John Clare Society and the Margaret Grainger Mem. Trust, 1994), 38.

31. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Old School Tie: The Phenomenon of the English Public School* (New York: Viking P, 1977), 49

to Eton or to Oxford – to those institutions that furnished the social and cultural capital instrumental to achieving the forms of fulfillment the poem advances.

This inequality of opportunity is an aspect of the sensory environment of the *Elegy*, which figures the cultural silence of the illiterate villagers as a physical silence effected by the arrangement of the poetic milieu itself. Throughout the *Elegy*, recognition depends on the outward manifestation of talent; social distinction is only possible if potential artistic or political energy is publicly externalized. The image of the unfathomed gem to which the speaker has recourse indicates that it is only when this potential is publicly manifested and perceived within an established aesthetic, economic, or political framework that it can distinguish an individual. For the undistinguished, nameless villagers, however, as Wright suggests, “those actions that *may* have been... have been reduced to invisibility and inaudibility by having escaped the notice of the great.”³² While this conception is predicated on the full range of the senses, throughout the poem the difference between public recognition and nameless oblivion is most often figured as a matter of sound – an ephemeral phenomenon conspicuously dependent on perception for its existence. The isolated villagers pass by nameless and forgotten because they are effectively “mute” in life as in death.³³ Yet, as the early invocations of noisy rural life indicate, the peasants are not literally “noiseless,” but rather they are never heard.³⁴ Thus, in death, it is not the “frail monuments” themselves which protect the poor from insult, but the vocalized “tribute of a sigh” which these memorials implore from the sympathetic witness.³⁵ Since Forgetfulness is “dumb,” memorials must speak for the dead.³⁶ The trophies of the proud, alike, are foregrounded as the location “where... the pealing anthem swells the note of praise,” and the ostentation the speaker rebukes serves to evidence the yearning for recognition the proud share with the humble villagers.³⁷ When he visualizes what seems to be his own passing, the speaker privileges vocalized

32. Wright, 386.

33. Gray, l. 59.

34. Gray, l. 76.

35. Gray, l. 78, l. 80.

36. Gray, l. 85.

37. Gray, ll. 39-40.

memorialisation. It is the oral record of the “hoary-headed swain” that draws the kindred spirit, as it does the reader, to the written epitaph.³⁸ Alone, the written script is silent, but it prompts a vocalization from the reader that, as Lorna Clymer suggests, “creates a relationship with the deceased and her inscription”; “the silent voice of the tombstone, otherwise inert language, is heard when it is read.”³⁹ Throughout the poem, it is this yearning not only to speak, but to be heard, that is figured as the universal desire that cuts across class boundaries.

By formulating a setting markedly removed from sources of sonic power, the *Elegy* figures the legal and socio-economic impediments of the educational system as a spatial and historical distance. Throughout the *Elegy*, vocally empowered institutions and agents are consistently distanced from the immediate scene, developing a sensory environment in which the public vocalization that could distinguish the obscure peasants seems effectively impossible. The “massive calm” which annoys Empson, who intuitively links it with the social “complacency” the poem, is an integral aspect of the *Elegy*’s representation of the contemporary institutional environment; the illiterate peasants exist in an atmosphere unfavourable to vocalization.⁴⁰ The ringing bell which memorably opens the poem signals the proximity of an institution capable of arresting public attention, as it does that of the reader. As a “curfew,” this bell is etymologically linked with the abstract conception of death which the poem privileges; the term, which derives from the French *couvre-feu* (cover the fire), affiliates this ringing with the troubling repression of “celestial fire” attendant on penury.⁴¹ Yet, while the effect of this knell draws on the conventional conception of death, the sound itself which sends the peasants home to their “lowly bed[s]” is evidently produced by a nearby institution— one with the socially established power, naturalized as death, to cease the activity of the villagers.⁴² This bell strikes the “essential note” of the *Elegy*, as

38. Gray, l. 97.

39. Lorna Clymer, “Graved in Tropes: The Figural Logic of Epitaphs and Elegies in Blair, Gray, Cowper, and Wordsworth,” *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 62.2 (1995), 348.

40. Empson, 12.

41. Gray, l. 1, l. 46.

42. Gray, l. 20.

Lyle Glazier suggests,⁴³ but the oppressive constraints it evokes are as much social as physiological. In one register, this institution is the nearby church which teaches “the rustic moralist to die.”⁴⁴ Yet, this bell simultaneously invokes the university, which could confer the cultural credentials necessary to break the silence of cultural death; such a bell rang at Cambridge at nine in the evening throughout the first half of the century (while Gray attended the school), as Roger Lonsdale observes in his notes to the poem.⁴⁵ Yet, this source of vocal power is outside the world of the peasantry the *Elegy* imagines. This structure is present only in the “ivy-mantled tower” which, the speaker observes, is “yonder”—at a distance from the country churchyard associated with the peasantry.⁴⁶ From an elevated position on this tower, an owl, unlike the villagers, is able to voice its complaints, but this empowered place is inaccessibly distant from the silenced villagers, who are associated, throughout the poem, with the earth far below. The sonic power that the villagers are systemically denied is housed in the church this tower evokes. The peasants, however, are consistently located outside this institution—a symbolic position emphasized by the spatial descriptors of the poem, which often function to delineate the cultural boundaries of their “circumscribed” world. The shift in descriptive pronouns from “those” and “that” to “this” distinctly positions the peasantry in the churchyard outside the church, associating them peculiarly with the neglect and deathly silence of the immediate scene.⁴⁷ The invocations of Milton, Cromwell, and Hampden (all three of whom had attended Oxford or Cambridge) produce a similar effect, pointing to instances of memorable achievement that exist, like the applause of senates, at a marked historical remove from the present. Indeed, the space within the church, in which the pealing anthem “swells,” seems strangely larger and more open than the world outside, which is oppressed by the stifling silence effected by the curfew bell.⁴⁸ Cleanth

43. Lyle Glazier, “Gray’s *Elegy*: ‘The Skull Beneath the Skin,’” *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Gray’s Elegy*, ed. Herbert W. Starr (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1968), 34.

44. Gray, l. 84.

45. Roger Lonsdale, ed. (London: Longman, Green & Co. Ltd., 1969), 117.

46. Gray, l. 9.

47. Gray, ll. 13, 45.

48. Gray, l. 40.

Brooks suggests that the poet chooses a neglected spot outside the church to align himself with the innocent peasantry,⁴⁹ but the poem represents this burial less as a choice than as a natural (and naturalized) effect of the culturally isolated environment in which he has inserted himself. The cultural obscurity to which the epitaph refers pertains not to the initial speaker, but to the obscure figure he imagines he must be in this unfavourable environment: a youth, despite his potential, rendered silent and obscure by his situation – simultaneously socio-economic and spatial.

This oblique engagement with the contemporary determinants of “Knowledge” and cultural recognition fundamentally underpins the poem’s distinctively mediated relationship with the classical tradition, which, as a sign of a distinguished education, is at a marked remove from the immediate discourse of the *Elegy*.⁵⁰ The cultural inequalities of the eighteenth-century education system in England were a function, in part, of the position of classical literacy training. As training in Greek and Latin was pushed to the periphery of the programs at less prestigious grammar schools and the Dissenting academies,⁵¹ the most elite public schools and the English universities generally remained dedicated to traditional classical curricula. This adherence to the classical tradition has conventionally been characterized as a moribund backwardness – a “narrow, formal, and academic outlook... out of contact with the growing demands of the age.”⁵² But classical literacy training remained a crucial marker of social distinction throughout and beyond the eighteenth century. As Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy explains, since “Latin could only be obtained by being bought... the possession of the classics became a rude but definite class distinction.”⁵³ As vernacular literacy became increasingly practical, classical literacy “continued to define the most elite educational capital against the actual social importance” of the vernacular, as Guillory

49. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947), 119–20.

50. Gray, l. 49.

51. John Lawson and Harold Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1973), 196.

52. C. J. Curtis, *History of Education in Great Britain* (London: University Tutorial P, 1961), 110.

53. Gathorne-Hardy, 33.

suggests.⁵⁴ While many grammar schools and Dissenting academies could undoubtedly provide a considerable level of classical literacy, they could not confer the same cultural credentials as the prestigious public schools and the English universities; they were not, as one Dissenter admitted, the “Schools and Universities supported by the united influence of wealth and public authority.”⁵⁵ Gray’s *Elegy* is often seen as an appealingly accessible translation of this prestigious classical tradition for a broader vernacular readership. Guillory, in his analysis of the “institutional/linguistic” role of Gray’s poem, contends that the *Elegy* absorbs the classical tradition, furnishing the reader with the “cultural entitlement... defined by classical literacy... at a discount” – “at the cost only of acquiring the vernacular literacy requisite to reading the poem.”⁵⁶ The *Elegy*, Helen Deutsch similarly claims, creates “a common language that makes [its] storehouse of classical learning accessible to all,” allowing the reader to “acquire Gray’s hard-earned learning as if they had always possessed it.”⁵⁷

Rather than seamlessly translate its classical sources for English readers, however, the *Elegy* draws attention to the linguistic distance of the classical tradition associated with the prestigious education denied to the rural villagers. The diction of the poem, which features an uncommon frequency of words of Saxon derivation, such as “lea” and “glebe,” often produces a distinctively English sound, as Dustin Griffin observes, as does the alternate rhyming pentameter quatrain form used by a number of English poets, including John Dryden and James Hammond.⁵⁸ But this vernacular sound fits uneasily with the conspicuously Latinate syntax of the poem which, rather than “manag[e] to sound English,” makes it clear that the translation is not, and cannot, be perfectly complete; the original words have been translated into English, but the underlying grammatical structure has

54. John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton and Literary History* (Columbia UP, 1983), 119.

55. Eliezer Cogan, *An Address to the Dissenters on Classical Literature* (Cirencester, 1789), 14.

56. Guillory, 121.

57. Helen Deutsch, “Elegies in Country Churchyards: The Prospect Poem In and Around the Eighteenth Century,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 195.

58. Gray ll. 2, 26. See *Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 167.

only been partially translated.⁵⁹ Since the eighteenth century, critics have remarked the “tough, Latinate English” of the *Elegy*,⁶⁰ observing that many of the phrases are inverted, that a number of verbs are missing the auxiliaries necessary in English, and that many of the phrases “open up the syntax in a manner found more in Latin than in English.”⁶¹ Students and literary critics alike have understandably complained that many of the lines of the poem are not “natural” for English readers⁶² – that some “do not even make grammar.”⁶³ Even some contemporary readers apparently found the language of the poem unnaturally Latinate. John Young, imitating Johnson’s distinctive critical voice, found the poem “communicated in a mode of arrangement, unpleasing to an English reader in his own language, but of which he admits the propriety in Latin composition,”⁶⁴ and editorial inconsistency suggests that Robert Dodsley was confused by Gray’s Latinate verb usage.⁶⁵ Arriving at the fifth line of the poem – “And all the air a solemn stillness holds” – many readers have had to “hesitate, and endeavour to discover which of the two is the holder, and which is held.”⁶⁶ Not the whimsies of a pedant with a preference for Latin, such difficult phrasings draw attention to the fundamental differences between these two languages. As a practised translator of Greek and Latin, Gray was familiar with the distinctive linguistic characteristics that hindered his own attempts to render Tacitus into English; Gray found that he could write in fifty lines what the Roman author had written in five words.⁶⁷ Writing to Christopher Anstey concerning the Latin translation of the *Elegy*, Gray observed that “every language has its idiom, not only of words and phrases but of customs and manners, which cannot be represented in the tongue of another nation... without constraint and difficulty.”⁶⁸

59. Griffin, 167.

60. Wright, 383.

61. Hutchings, “Syntax of Death: Instability in Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,’” *Studies in Philology* 81.4 (1984), 498.

62. Hutchings, 503.

63. Anonymous, “Gray’s Elegy,” *Times Literary Supplement*, July 27, 1933, 501.

64. John Young, *A Criticism on the Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard* (London: 1783), 30.

65. Hutchings, 498.

66. Young, 19.

67. *Correspondence of Thomas Gray* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), I:193.

68. *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, II:748.

Indeed, throughout the poem, this linguistic inaccessibility is often figured as a spatial distance concurrent with the institutional isolation of the poetic environment. The classical literacy of the speaker, to which his allusions to Virgil and Horace attest, align him with the institutions outside the immediate setting, and the first stanzas, as Howard Weinbrot suggests, “consistently show his separation from the environment.”⁶⁹ In the scene which opens the poem, the speaker is distanced from the working ploughman, and throughout the *Elegy* he is at a marked remove from the peasants – those sleeping both underground and those in their homes. Not surprisingly, critics have often imagined the distinction between the educated speaker and the unlettered villagers in terms of distance; Peter Sacks sees a “cruel distance” between the literate reader and the illiterate swain,⁷⁰ and Wallace Jackson argues that the villagers are “distant... from the learned and melancholic poet.”⁷¹ The shift in allusive register attendant on the speech of the swain confirms that the classical training the speaker possesses is foreign to the isolated setting the poem imagines – that he has come from one of the institutions beyond the circumscribed bounds of the rural world. Unlike the scholarly discourse of the initial speaker, the speech of the rude swain alludes almost exclusively to a vernacular literary corpus, and he understands the written epitaph of the speaker as a “lay” in the English oral tradition.⁷² In fact, the inscrutable speaker seems to speak in a language unknown to the rustic swain, who hears his musings only as “muttering[s].”⁷³ Yet, this linguistic inaccessibility is simultaneously an aspect of the spatial arrangement itself; the swain can hear only mutterings because the speaker is always at a distance. The tree this figure regularly visits is “yonder,” as is “yon wood” he frequents, and the “upland lawn” and the hill the speaker climbs are at a remove from the “lowly” village.⁷⁴ Indeed, the ascension associated with the speaker, who moves up the upland lawn

69. Howard Weinbrot, “Gray’s *Elegy*: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution,” *SEL* 18.3 (1978), 539.

70. Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (London: The John Hopkins UP, 1985), 136.

71. Wallace Jackson, “Thomas Gray: Drowning in Human Voices,” *Criticism: A Quarterly Review for Literature and the Arts* 28.4 (1986), 371.

72. Gray, l. 115.

73. Gray, l. 106.

74. Gray, l. 101, l. 105, ll. 100, 20.

to “meet the sun,” is at odds with the lowness associated with rural labour, and his “wayward” movements are incompatible with the narrowness and circumscription of village life.⁷⁵ This educated alien figure can only fully enter the isolated rural world in a markedly mediated form, his character imperfectly translated into the vernacular. The epitaph certainly offers a more eloquent representation than can the swain, but, as Sacks suggests, a level of intimacy and immediacy is lost in this transition.⁷⁶ The epitaph alludes to Virgil and Horace, but the learned speaker is interred below, maintaining his distance from the rural world. As the swain’s words suggest, the speaker, brought into the churchyard, is now “beneath yon aged thorn”—under a native vernacular sound.⁷⁷

Considering the lapidary polish of the *Elegy*, literary critics have been understandably reluctant to position the poem within its historical contexts. Biographical and formalist analyses of the *Elegy* abound, but Gray’s poem has rarely been extensively connected with contemporary political and ideological contexts.⁷⁸ As Richard Sha rightly observes, “although no poem escapes history, Gray’s *Elegy* is most often talked about as if it has.”⁷⁹ Yet, if we hope to properly understand a poem concerned considerably with the mechanics of cultural achievement and distinction, we must examine how the sensory and topographical aspects of the poetic setting are engaged with the institutions and structures that are, appropriately, around and beneath the *Elegy*.

75. Gray, l. 100, ll. 25-27, l. 106.

76. Sacks, 137.

77. Gray, l. 116.

78. The most notable exceptions to this trend are the cited studies of Guillory, Weinfield, and Sha.

79. Richard Sha, “Gray’s Political Elegy: Poetry as the Burial of History,” *Philological Quarterly* 69 (1990), 338