Stillness and the Argument of Gray's *Elegy*

George T. Wright

A special decorum perhaps attends the controversies of scholars. That which rages around *The Turn of the Screw* has often been shrill, deep, and personal, like the story itself. Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* inspires more tranquil disagreement. The hysteria of James's governess and the calm of Gray's earnest ruminant are equally infectious. Where the story's passionate energy rushes its analysts into feverish examination of lines, tones, paragraphs, and single words, the critics of Gray's milder poem seem relatively passive and listless. Though they charge its argument with the sin of obscurity, they rarely examine it in detail, and although the diction and images are often very knotty and complex, the language of the poem has still not been closely studied.¹

As a result, it seems to me, critics often misread the central argument. Since the contrast between the poor and the great is undeniably important to the poem and easy to grasp, unwary readers have taken it as Gray's central point. Clearly, they say, Gray is aligning himself with the simple poor against the haughty great, and the epitaph with which the poem concludes shows Gray's modesty, his repudiation of pretension ("No farther seek his merits to disclose"). Like the poor, he too will renounce ambition and commit his soul into the hands of God.

Yet this reading of the poem has obvious weaknesses. Gray does not, in fact, choose a simple "unlettered" epitaph for himself but one that is cast in sophisticated heroic quatrains and has far too many lines for a "frail memorial." For many readers the chief flaw in the poem is the pretentiousness with which it closes, the "artificiality" which seems not to harmonize with what Gray is taken to be saying about his sympathy for the poor. Some critics—notably F.W. Bateson—have gone so far as to suggest that Gray's original ending of the poem

was superior to the revised one, that he should have kept the four stanzas that originally followed line 72 instead of replacing them with the fourteen we now have.² Those four stanzas, later discarded by Gray, read as follows:

The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow  
Exalt the brave, & idolize Success  
But more to Innocence their Safety owe  
Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless  
And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead  
Dost in these Notes their artless Tale relate  
By Night & lonely Contemplation led  
To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate  
Hark how the sacred Calm, that broods around  
Bids ev'ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease  
In still small Accents whisp'ring from the Ground  
A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace  
No more with Reason & thyself at strife;  
Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room  
But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.³

This ending does, indeed, stress the contrast between the poor and the great and shows the speaker's preference for the simple life. Readers who see this as the poem's central theme understandably regard this ending as natural and appropriate. Gray, however, did not, and we must ask why. He brooded over it, apparently for years, and eventually produced the longer and admittedly imperfect version. His genius had cooled, no doubt, and in the long labor of revision was unable to find, at least for the last nine stanzas, the powerful and majestic phrasing that marks the rest of the poem, including even the discarded ending. We do not know whether Gray recognized the textural inferiority of the new version, but we do know that he took great pains to get rid of the first one and to compose a conclusion that would, in his eyes, do.

The reason for his intense concern, as this essay will try to show, is that the first ending so diverges from the argument of Gray's poem that he could not let it stand. It is consistent with the poem that some critics think Gray wrote or should have written but not with the one he did write and was on his way to writing when he finished line 72. The central subject of the Elegy is not the contrast between the poor and the great, but the nature and meaning of epitaphs,⁴

²/Bateson, pp. 129–35. Bateson finds social significance in the Elegy, seeing it as, "in addition to all the other things that it is, . . . a tract for the times. It was a plea for decentralization, recalling the over-urbanized ruling class to its roots in a rural society based upon the benevolent despotism of the manor house" (p. 135).
³/Lonsdale, pp. 130–31.
⁴/It may be suggested that in originally calling the poem "Stanzas . . ." rather than "Elegy . . ." when he sent the first version to his friend Mason, Gray was choosing a title not only more modest but also more in accord with that version, which, as I argue above, lets go of what seems the poem's central argument up to line 72. Mason recalls that he himself suggested the title "Elegy," whether for the first or later version is not clear, but we do know that when Gray learned that a pirated version of the poem was on the verge of appearing, with the title "Reflections . . .," he had Dodsley publish the poem first and specifically insisted that "the Title must be, Elegy . . ." (Lonsdale, p. 110).
a subject to which the division of mankind into contrasting groups is a useful
argumentative device: if one can show that the same psychological feature is
characteristic of radically different groups of human beings, one has virtually
proved that the feature is universally human. In investigating the subject of
epitaphs, from the very first line in which “The curfew tolls the knell of parting
day,” Gray develops with great care and precision an argument that is not, as
critics have often charged, loose, disjointed, and sentimental but logical, con-
tinuous, and compelling. If we have misunderstood it, it is because of Gray’s
tough, Latinate English, with which not many critics have tried to grapple.
Consider, for example, lines 77–80:

Yet even these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
Impleos the passing tribute of a sigh.

For all its inversions, the general meaning of the passage is easy enough to follow,
but the word “still” in line 78 invites some puzzlement. It has here not the tem-
poral meaning of “yet” (i.e., still standing, or still being erected, or still frail); it
does not signify that the memorial is “silent,” or built to be silent, or silent and
motionless, or built in silence; nor does it mean “nevertheless” (i.e., erected in
spite of its frailness, or although these bones hardly warrant one). None of these
readings is quite plausible, nor is the waggish suggestion that “still” is the only
noun in the line. But even when we understand that Gray is using “still” here in
its new obsolete sense of “continually, ever, always” (as in Florizel’s praise of
Perdita: “What you do/Still betters what is done” [The Winter’s Tale, 4. 4. 135–
36]), the old meaning spreads uneasily through the sentence. It is partly that
contemporary English must add “being” (some frail memorial continually being
put up) and so construct a passive past participle that to an eighteenth-century
English ear was barbarous; but it is partly also the strange time relationship that
results from combining an action that seems to occur once (“implores”) with an
agent that is constantly changing (one “frail memorial” after another).

If “still” thus renders the passage syntactically problematical, the effect, as
we shall see at length, is entirely appropriate. Feeling uneasy about the con-
struction, we are likely to lean back gently on the other meanings of “still,”
especially as we may already have felt their presence in this poem. For “still” is
central in the Elegy in both its adverbial senses (“always” and “even now”) and
in both its main adjectival meanings (“silent” and “motionless”). That the
adverbial meanings hover over the poem hardly needs argument: Gray is clearly
concerned with the relation between this life and eternity, between the casual and
the permanent. The slow and stately movement of the poem has often been noted,
most eloquently by Ian Jack, who speaks of “the great suspended chords that
sound through the poem and give it its characteristic inevitability.”5 The musical
metaphor and the dignified procession of elegiac stanzas remind us that the poem,
like all others, moves through time, although, as Jean Hagstrum has suggested,

5/Jack, p. 156.
the Elegy is "not basically dramatic or narrative" but "a succession of visually rendered scenes, each leading to a relevant verbalized reflection." As with many eighteenth-century poems, its philosophical reflectiveness, its generic tableaux, and even its elevated grammar locate it in a kind of eternal present. But the poem itself, by virtue of being spoken, breaks the silence of the eternal moment, and throughout the poem the sense of temporal stillness is constantly being countered by our sense that time is slowly passing, that day is giving way to night, the past growing ever more definitively dead, and the poet's own life (like ours) moving steadily to its inescapable conclusion.

This opposition between the relentless movement of time and the timeless of its inevitable destination is largely developed through the adjectival meanings of "still." The poem vibrates between the parallel oppositions of motion-stillness and silence-sound. In the very first lines the doubleness of this movement is stressed:

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.

Time sounds in line 1; there is motion and sound in line 2; motion alone measures time in line 3; and in line 4 the scene fades and the spatial world descends to darkness. Nothing more is seen to move or heard to sound, and from a scene so stilled we withdraw "to me," to the still point of this slowly turning world. In such gentle terms, visual and auditory, the poem proceeds, continually emphasizing the harmony between the two kinds of movement and stillness. The landscape is fading "on the sight"; and "a solemn stillness holds"—that is, grips and keeps both from moving and from breaking the silence—"all the air," as if life had come down to a timeless and spaceless moment of suspended breath—"that serene and blessed mood," so Wordsworth describes it,

In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul,
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

Gray, too—not Wordsworth's favorite poet—is looking into the life of things in just such a moment of suspended motion.

But of course the suspension is incomplete, the stillness illusory, and Gray goes on to offer exceptions to the general picture: "Save where the beetle. . . ."
The beetle drones, the sheep-folds tinkle, the owl complains of those who, like Gray, disturb the usual almost perfect twilight peace. But Gray is alone, the only intruder on a scene sparsely inhabited by other single creatures— one "solitary" owl, one beetle, one ploughman. Even the air, the herd, and the folds seem to act as units; the knell is single. And all the sounds to which the twilight has come down compose a "world" which is now perceived in any human way only by Gray.

Enough that it is perceived by someone. The speaker, even in the darkness, can still make out elms, a yew, and country graves, can still hear those faint evening sounds. But the men in the graves have experienced real stillness. "Each in his narrow cell forever laid," they do not move; and they are deaf to the sounds of life: "The breezy call . . . The swallow twittering . . . The cock's shrill clarion or the echoing horn." The dead are beyond time and motion (not even "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course"), and for Gray this means that they are beyond sensation and perception: they have no "ideas" in Locke's sense, either of primary or of secondary qualities. In Berkeley's terms, they neither perceive nor are perceived, they have ceased to exist: they are, as Gray repeats, "no more."

This, then, is the true stillness, which the quiet dark evening in the churchyard only foreshadows. So, for the moment, it appears. But "the great," who come from another milieu altogether, need not be scornful of these obscure dead: after all, says Gray in the famous stanzas that follow, such a silence is in store for them too. "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." True, the high-born can seem to counteract the silence with spatial and vocal constructs (trophies, anthems, urns, and busts), but we know how little these avail. Nothing will happen to the "storied urn" or because of it; the "animated bust" has no soul, no breath: life is beyond recall. The "dust" remains "silent," and "Death" has a "dull cold ear" that no sound reaches.

Hence no reason to pity the honest poor: the honors they lack have no power over the stillness of death. Does anything have such power? This is the implied question beneath the stanzas that follow (lines 45–60), and the hypothesis they propose for consideration (and, ultimately, reject) is that greatness of achievement is the only true memorial, the only counter to stillness. If it were so, it would follow that the lack of opportunity for such achievement is something for which we might justly pity the poor. Again the question is considered in terms both of motion ("Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,," and Hampden's heroic stance) and of sound ("Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre," and Milton's song).

In exploring these questions of "might have been" (reminiscent, incidentally, of Eliot's *Burnt Norton*, which, along with the rest of *Four Quartets*, has numerous

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in his edition of Gray's poems, tells us (p. 119 n.): "The 'silence . . . save where' formula . . . had become relatively common in descriptions of evening by the 1740s" and gives several instances. This study, however, takes the view that Gray shrewdly chose, from among the images and formulas available to him, those that suited his purposes. If the patterns of sound and silence, of stillness and motion, that occur in his verse can be found as well in the graveyard or other poetry of his contemporaries, it is nevertheless only in the *Elegy* that they contribute to a logical argument, or even constitute a kind of mythic pattern, that stands as a model for its age.
and profound echoes of the *Elegy*), Gray is raising still other issues which are important to a full reading of the poem. The "gem of purest ray" and the "flower . . . born to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air" resemble the talented villager whose gifts go either unnoticed or undeveloped: the village Hampden evidently uses his ability, though in a diminished form; the "mute inglorious Milton" is prevented from using his. Such greatness as they may or might have had is unascertainable ("unfathomed . . . unseen . . . mute"). It is like Berkeley's tree falling in the forest when no one is there to see or hear: it makes no sound, does not even happen. Nothing happens that is not perceived by someone—or, in the world of Gray's philosophically up-to-date audience, by Someone.

Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Noiseless as Berkeley's tree. Those actions that might have been—the village Cromwell's for example—have been reduced to stillness by not having been performed; those actions that *may* have been—the village Hampden's—have been reduced to invisibility and inaudibility by having escaped the notice of the great; and the Miltonic voice that might have broken the silence has been rendered mute. The good side of the condition, however, is that their vices and crimes have similarly not been given ground for development or exhibition and have thus also, thank God, been visited with a Berkeleyan stillness.

And now after this long digression on the unlived possibilities of the poor, Gray returns to the question of memorials which was last directly mentioned in lines 41–44. The digression has, in effect, told us that even if greatness of achievement is the handomest of all memorials, that the poor lack the opportunity for it is, after all, half a blessing (lines 61–72). Now, quite logically, Gray goes on to suggest that anyway they *do* have their memorials, not grand ones perhaps—on the contrary, the rhymes are uncouth and the sculpture shapeless—but simple stones marked by the minimum name, years, and Biblical phrase (lines 77–84). They *must* have them, he tells us, because everyone needs some kind of epitaph (lines 85–92).

This is the crucial point in the whole poem's argument, the point that struck Dr. Johnson as utterly original, the point that in the first version of the poem was never made, though it is clearly the natural next step in Gray's meditation. It is only human to want to be remembered by someone, to yearn for some memorial however humble: "Ev'n from the tomb the voice of nature cries," cries out against the silence of death, "Implores the passing tribute of a sigh," even so faint a disturbance of the stillness as a sigh. And what more natural, then, than for the speaker, after having so fully and gradually established how universally human is the need for a memorial, to turn at last to his own?

Altogether natural, but, as we have seen, it was not part of Gray's original

10/So he says in the last paragraph of his otherwise unfriendly *Life of Gray*.
plan. Instead of getting to the crucial points of the poem—that the poor do have, and that we all need, memorials—the four rejected stanzas continued the praise of innocence and showed the speaker choosing not an epitaph but a life of “sacred Calm,” with its divine overtones, in preference to the “anxious Cares” of urban life. Bateson and others have thought that ending proper and pleasing, but we can see why Gray was dissatisfied with it. If stillness and resistance to it compose his argument, then the unmodulated choice of stillness is a choice of death. Furthermore, the original ending appears to have lost the train of thought, to have abandoned the idea of how the record of a vanished life is marked in the world, and this abandonment is peculiar, indeed extraordinary, because the speaker, there in the graveyard, has still said not a word about the gravestones that are presumably there before his eyes. Instead, in the concluding stanzas of the first version, he has given up completely the illusion of a scene in favor of pious sententiae. The drama dissolves, and with it our sense of the speaker as a perceiver. The central framework of the poem is dismantled, notably the progression from one kind of stillness to another through three stages: from quietness (as of evening) through death (as of villagers) to that stilllest of all conditions, the condition of not being at all remembered by anyone, oblivion.11

For in the first five of the new stanzas (19–23) Gray makes at last that point toward which the poem has steered from the beginning, that we all need epitaphs. Through these stanzas, too, the double image of sound and motion persists: the bones of the poor are protected from “insult” (vocal denunciation or physical outrage?) by rhymes (which must be heard) and sculpture (which must be seen). We see the “frail memorial,” but it evokes from us a “sigh.” If stanza 22 (“For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey . . .”) develops a spatial description of longing, stanza 23 (“On some fond breast . . .”) is dominated by the more audible sorrow signaled by tears and the crying of “the voice of Nature.”

Even in stanzas 24–29, where Gray fancifully conjures up the figure of the “hoary-headed swain” retrospectively describing the poet’s last days and funeral,12

11/Not that the poem finds anyone so unfortunate, but the idea (the special horror of the epitaphed man) is powerfully suggested and must have been if not the origin at least an important source of that familiar Romantic image, the man who leaves no trace: Scott’s “wretch” who “doubly dying, shall go down / To the vile dust from whence he sprung, / Unwept, unhonoured, and unsung” (“The Lay of the Last Minstrel,” canto 6, lines 12–16); or Byron’s castaway who “sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan, / Without a grave, unknelled, unconfined, and unknown” (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, canto 4, stanza 179). The theme of oblivion is ancient, of course, but the note of pathos is new. For the Romantics the man who leaves no trace, like his counterparts the man of mysterious origins or the exile, is of particular interest in being free of time and place, though in an unenviable and even terrifying way.

12/That “thee” in line 93 refers to a village stonecutter, as Ellis argues at length, or to anyone other than Gray himself, I find impossible to accept. It seems unbelievable that Gray, in altering the end of the poem, should divert our attention from the memorials (which are relevant) to their anonymous village maker (who is only marginally so) and should end the poem by discussing that craftsman’s personal relation to God. The only possible craftsman whose personal relation to God can legitimately be introduced here as bearing specifically on the issues already being debated is Gray himself, the speaker whose perceptions include the great and the poor, stillness and motion, stillness and sound, the life of sensation and perception, and the higher existence made possible by God. Note also that the “thou” in the corresponding lines of the first version cannot refer to a stonecutter since in that version the stones are never mentioned. That “thee” in the final version refers to someone different from the “thou” of the first seems highly dubious.
the narrative is conducted largely by the same balance between visual and auditory images:

“His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.”

The poet’s silent but visible expression, “smiling as in scorn,” is paralleled by the vocal movement, “Muttering his wayward fancies…”

These later stanzas, too, continue to be marked by the negative imagery prominent from the beginning: “noiseless . . . uncouth . . . shapeless . . . unlettered . . . dumb . . . unhonoured . . . artless . . . lonely.” Death is a matter of resignation, forgetfulness, absence, against which the human soul cries out for active remembrance. The Elegy is notably reticent about the manner in which the villagers have died, about the causes of death (or, indeed, about the causes of anything). The dead are not those whom disease, old age, or accident has assaulted, but those who are “no more” engaged in the activities of life. Indeed, the whole poem is constructed of negative definitions and passivities; from the very beginning everything alive is withdrawing, the dead are no longer active, the proud should not be arrogant, the villagers have had opportunities to develop neither their virtues nor their vices. It is not surprising, then, that the poet’s death at the end of the poem should be described entirely in terms of absence:

“One morn I missed him on the customed hill,
Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
Another came, nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he.”

Against this utter absence, the poem, as always, pits faint sound and motion:

“The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.”

Funeral dirge and funeral procession, however, soon end. The epitaph endures, and like good verse it endures in space and time. Although it is not in motion, the eye that reads it (if it can read) must move, and when it is read it is heard, it breaks the silence. No matter how modest, then, an epitaph works against the stillness to which all human action and achievement are in time reduced.

But the Epitaph itself, far from being bland and sentimental, gives the argument an almost ironic turn. Up to this point Gray’s perspective has been entirely human, and it is from a human point of view that life appears to be as he has described it, a process of gradual diminution and loss of energy, withdrawal, forgetfulness, absence, countered only by hushed cries of pious protest: a perceptual world constantly under threat of becoming Nothing. If epitaphs, if poetry, can do a little to preserve the reality of a vanishing experience, God, whose presence in this universe of perception has not previously even been hinted at, can do everything. Given his existence, epitaphs are merely bland and pale. In his “bosom” is our peace, a peace in which merits and frailties “alike . . . repose.” As the natural framework becomes a cosmic order, the moral opposition replaces the perceptual one of stillness and motion, but both are evidently resolved in God,
who comprehends all oppositions and, as in Berkeley, serves as the only and Absolute guarantee against absolute stillness.

The Epitaph thus makes the point that epitaphs are superfluous. In effect, it utterly overturns the earlier perspective of the poem so that instead of a time-space stillness, it is suddenly, miraculously, time and space that have dissolved to reveal a more permanent imageless ground of being. The funereal but still self-pitying "no more" that set the tone of the early stanzas now echoes in the more austere "No farther": we need brood no more, we have found what we want, we need worry the frame of this world no longer. The abstraction of the imagery here at the end of the poem casts back over the earlier vivid though passive scenes a doubting shadow. The poem's argument, winding through the turns of its logical design and its imagistic patterning, has come to rest at last in a certainty that dispels all the anxieties that beset creatures who act, as the poem has, as if they were merely mortal. Since God is there, epitaphs and elegies, as well as articles on them, are finally futile—though, our nature being what it is, we need them still.

If this is a well-constructed argument, as I think it is, the poetry in which the miraculous turn occurs is altogether disappointing. Gray did not have available to him the techniques of distortion, derangement, and decreation that might have made such a shift of perspective convincing. The divine point of view is always hard to present in literature, and when one's talent is for the picturesque landscape or the human group, one may not be prepared to meet God face to face. In the poem Gray, while acknowledging a divine standard which renders all human action vain, hardly dares lift his eyes to the God who redeems all his losses, and the final, the eternal, stillness that suffices for him seems to the modern reader, in the absence of a dynamic imagery, merely inert. It remained for Wordsworth to develop a vision grand enough, at least on occasion, to see the divine as powerfully involved in the mortal, and for Eliot in Four Quartets to explore with a wider command of thought and symbol the paradoxes of stillness.13

University of Minnesota