Thomas Gray's Sensibility and the Sublimity of Reserve

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Since the Victorians, the thinness of Gray's output has encouraged critics of various persuasions to view him as an inhibited, ultimately abortive poet whose temperament was not up to the challenges and pressures he had to face (Miltonic influence, the commercialisation of culture, the suppression of homosexual desire, etc.). Yet his few published poems did enjoy tremendous fame, at least during the last third of the eighteenth century, and he never was entirely forgotten. The present article attempts to make sense of Gray's paradoxical status in literary history, by focusing on three salient aspects of his work: first, a certain kind of belated Augustan or Neoclassical desire for perfection, which he carried to intransigent extremes, and which may partly explain the sense of novelty many of his poems elicited; secondly, a close engagement with the new empiricist epistemology, which resulted in his foregrounding the intensities and ambiguities of sensation; thirdly, a lurking, elusive political radicalism, which to an extent stemmed from his peculiar lyrical procedures, and contributed powerfully to his aura in the 1780s and 1790s.

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Gray écrivit peu et publia encore moins, si bien qu'on prit l'habitude, à partir du XIX^e^ siècle, de le considérer comme un poète inhibé ; les tendances récentes de la critique n'y ont pas changé grand-chose, qui expliquent la minceur de son œuvre par l'influence tétanisante de Milton, par la conjoncture hostile que représentait la commercialisation du marché littéraire, ou encore par l'homophobie dominante de son temps. Pourtant le prestige de Gray, à la fin du XVIII^e^ siècle, était énorme, et il n'a jamais été complètement négligé depuis. Le présent article s'efforce de rendre compte de cette situation paradoxale dans l'histoire littéraire, à travers trois aspects de son œuvre : d'abord, l'exacerbation d'une certaine exigence classique chez Gray, qui lui fit rechercher le rare ou le neuf en même temps que le bon goût ; ensuite, l'impact de l'épistémologie empiriste développée par Locke, qui se traduit par le relief accru de la sensation, dans son ambiguïté et son intensité ; enfin, un soupçon de subversion politique qui tenait moins à des prises de position explicites qu'à certaines procédures lyriques, et qui pourrait expliquer pour une bonne part l'aura dont put jouir Gray aux yeux des réformistes et des radicaux des années 1780 et 90.

Thomas Gray's place in canonical literary histories is a singular one: he is either the least of the major poets (a status largely earned through the wide, lasting appeal of his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"), or the greatest of the minor ones. On the whole, since the Victorians at least, the latter of these judgments has tended to prevail, and it has been couched, significantly, in terms of the leanness of Gray's utterance, of a peculiar reserve that manifests itself as self-deprecation and as scarcity. Thus, in 1880, Matthew Arnold (taking his cue from Thomas Wharton's account of Gray's last years) summarised the eighteenth-century poet's case by pronouncing that "*He never spoke out*"[1]—a case of inhibition if not quite of aphasia, reflected in a "scantiness of production" which, Arnold added, seemed unaccountable in "a poet of such magnitude" (Arnold 189, 191). Similarly, though from a very different perspective, Harold Bloom has written that "Gray is only a footnote, though an important and a valuable one, to the Miltonic splendour" (Bloom 1975, 127). What Arnold put down to the fated melancholia of a poet born in an "age of prose," Bloom ascribes to the "anxiety of influence," the long shadow cast by the Miltonic sublime over the belated endeavours of Enlightenment poets in thrall to primitivistic nostalgia. In both cases, Gray is ultimately a failed poet, or rather an abortive one; it is consistent with those perceptions that the elderly Wordsworth, for instance, should have compared his own failure to go on with *The Recluse*

[1] Italics in the original text.

with the former poet's inability to complete his ambitious poem on "The Alliance of Education and Government."[2] Such a view was, in fact, anticipated by Gray's own ambivalent comment, when discussing Dodsley's forthcoming new edition of his *Poems* in a letter to Walpole (1768), that he would be "but a shrimp of an author" (Gray 1935, III: 1017-8; this was marginally better than having one's works taken for those "of a flea, or a pismire," as he had written earlier in the same letter). This diminutive sense of his own authorship (one also thinks of the "wicked imp" or "vermin" of "A Long Story," Gray 1969, 147) seems to have been added on, and compounded by, the deeper existential anxieties betrayed as early as his first year at Cambridge by the burlesque letters to Walpole, in which he variously masquerades as a quasi-Lilliputian lost in his room, as the "little, naked, melancholy (…) Soul" of John Dennis let loose in an oversize afterlife, as a corpse (Gray 1935, I: 5, 9, 11), or as a disembodied waif in need of reviving:

> (…) they tell me too, that I am nothing in the world, & that I only fancy, I exist: do but come to me quickly and one lesson of thine, my dear Philosopher, will restore me to the use of my Senses, and make me think myself something (…). (Gray 1935, I: 18)

The probability that, as the erotic overtones of these lines might indeed suggest, Gray was a repressed or at least a closeted homosexual—a probability first raised and explored frankly in Jean Hagstrum's classic 1974 essay on "Gray's Sensibility" (in Downey & Jones, 6-19)—has tended, unsurprisingly, to strengthen prior views of him as unable to "speak out." Thus, in Robert F. Gleckner's account (1997), the anxiety of Miltonic influence combines with forbidden memories of Richard West to produce the daunted utterance of Gray the eternal ephebe; while, from a different critical standpoint, Linda Zionkowski (1993) has connected the poet's perceived effeminacy to his notorious reluctance vis-à-vis the emerging literary market, thereby adding extra plausibility to her own (1991) and Suvir Kaul's (1992) view of Gray as a beleaguered gentleman-scholar striving for cultural authority in the face of a sea-change in cultural practices.

Yet, enlightening as such insights have been, they may end up obscuring the tremendous amount of cultural authority Gray's admittedly few poems could command for quite some time in the late-eighteenth century and beyond—until, in fact, the triumph and canonisation of Romantic poetry began his relegation to the limbo of incomplete precursors. He had admirers well beyond those milieus we usually associate with the literature of sentiment. The young James Boswell, in his *London Journal*, reports professing his admiration for Gray with characteristic zest ("Well, I admire Gray prodigiously. I have read his odes till I was almost mad," Boswell 1950, 106), and when in Holland enjoined himself to "Be Gray. Be *retenu* and worship God" (Boswell 1952, 249). Adam Smith, whose tastes were rigorously classical for all his philosophical relevance to the Age of Sensibility, wrote in the sixth edition of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790) that Gray "joins to the sublimity of Milton the elegance and harmony of Pope" (adding, it is true, "nothing is wanting to render him, perhaps, the first poet in the English language, but to have written a little more," Smith 1976, 123-4); by this point, Johnson's strictures on the Pindaric odes in his *Lives of the Poets* (1781) had already earned him the wrath of a highly vocal section of the literary public, to the

[2] Cf. his words to George Ticknor, in 1838: "Why did not Gray finish the long poem he began on a similar subject? Because he found he had undertaken something beyond his powers to accomplish. And that is my case" (Ticknor II: 167; the admission is especially telling in view of Wordsworth's notorious severity towards his predecessor in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*).

point that a cartoon, now in the British Museum, depicted Apollo and the Muses flogging him naked around Parnassus[3] (see Roger Lonsdale and Alastair Macdonald, in Downey & Jones 73, 180-82). Perhaps more unambiguously than Pope before him, Gray had by the time of his death established himself as a cultural fetish, or in more eighteenth-century parlance as a sublime paragon of moral and poetic virtue.

Traditional representations of Gray as a mute or strangled poet have been qualified and questioned in various ways over the past three decades (Weinfield 1991; McGann 1996; Thomson 1998; Garrison 2009; Turner 2015). The aim of the present article is to further this reassessment, by focusing on three interrelated aspects of Gray's paradoxical (and transitional) status in literary history. I will first argue that the meagreness of his output can be understood in terms of his continued adhesion to a late Augustan or Neoclassical poetics, prioritising values of knowledgeable scholarship but also of novelty: an unusual proportion of his poems became "classics" because their unimpeachable rhetorical awareness enhanced both their purity and their originality, and this, in combination with Gray's reserved publishing habits, is what lent his work such authority. I will then suggest that his "sensibility," which was quite consciously informed by philosophical readings ranging from Lucretius to Locke, relied for its expression on a poetics of sudden, thrilling intensity, which further motivated his predilection for concentrated forms; and I will conclude by looking at the latent political significance of his work, by showing how the peculiar combination of ethical reserve and vividness of pathos that characterises some of his best-known poems could turn them into sites of recognition and identification for the alienated.

Gray as Late Augustan

Gray's voraciously eclectic reading tastes and literary experiments are well-known; from his early interest in Dante and Tasso to his later exploration of Erse and Norse poetry, he has long been recognised as a significant figure of the shifts in critical attitudes that took place from the mid-eighteenth century onwards (see for instance Van Tieghem I: 131-7). Even his proficiency as a Hellenist, reflected in the allegedly obscure Pindarics of "The Progress of Poesy," has been seen as a significant extension of Augustan habits of reference (Whalley in Downey & Jones 148-50). Yet these tastes and experiments remained, for much of his career at least, firmly grounded in a Neoclassical literary ethos. Gray's first Latin composition at Eton was closely patterned on the *Essay on Man* (Gray 1969, 290-3, Mack 137-9). The correspondence with West and Walpole repeatedly pits the amicable worship of Virgil and Horace against the scholastic aridity of the Universities' curricula, in a broadly Scriblerian vein that Gray would again tap in the unfinished "Hymn to Ignorance," with its clear indebtedness to the *Dunciad* (Gray 1969, 74-77). And if the admiration for Pope evinced by these early letters is hardly surprising in a young man of the late 1730s, it nevertheless suggests a determined allegiance to "Ancient" principles at a time when new directions had emerged in British poetry, from Aaron Hill to Thomson's *Seasons* (which Gray esteemed and sometimes echoed, but seldom mentioned; he thought its moralising "verbose," Gray 1935, III: 1291). More tellingly, perhaps, the early tastes of the Gray-Walpole coterie allowed for a modicum of Francophilia that not only made French romances acceptable from a hedonistic standpoint (see Gray 1935, I: 192 for his wish to "read eternal new romances of Marivaux and

[3] https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=793088001&objectId=1629356&partId=1

Crebillon"), but also extended to more austere authors like Boileau and La Bruyère, both of whom are mentioned in Gray's humorous transcript of a conversation between books in his study, with the latter also appearing in the epistle in which West exhorts him to "[t]ake Plato down, take Tully, take Bruyére" (*sic*) (Gray 1935, I: 94, 97). We know, moreover, that Gray's only foray into dramatic writing, the *Agrippina* begun in 1742, was partly prompted by his admiration for Racine's *Britannicus* (Gray 1969, 27; Gray 1935, I: 108-9, 262, 369). Such a literary background makes it reasonable to think that Gray's notorious reluctance to produce and publish was not just determined by his gentlemanly aspirations and antipathy towards the rising commercial public sphere, as historicist readings have emphasised (Kaul; Guillory 107-24), but also informed by a peculiarly intransigent kind of Neoclassical critical attitude. They can partly be seen, in other words, as stemming literally from the Horatian ideal of patient elaboration reasserted by Boileau ("Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre ouvrage," 231) and Pope ("Keep your Piece nine years," 599), made even more stringent by something like La Bruyère's notion of a "point de perfection" in art (La Bruyère 83), or his sharp distinction between merely beautiful and truly perfect works.[4] Indeed, and although Gray himself seems to have worked through outbursts of concentration rather than regular polishing, the composition of the *Elegy* may have spread over as much as eight years, and the Pindaric odes—which he did intend to publish from the outset—remained in progress from 1752 to 1757. That such deliberation in writing did not preclude at least some sense of literary authority is borne out by Gray's haughty choice of a Greek epigraph for the *Odes* (Pindar's φωνᾶντα συνετοῖσιν, Gray 1969, 161; translated as "vocal to the Intelligent alone," Gray 1935, II: 797), as well as by the fact that the throwaway "Simple Story" was the only previously published poem he retrenched from the 1768 edition, precisely on grounds of literary decorum (for a fuller reappraisal of Gray's attitudes to print, see Thomson 1998).

Closely related to this acceptance of scarcity is Gray's constant awareness of his predecessors, both Classical and in the vernacular. This is (notoriously) reflected in the allusive density of his poetic diction, which has been variously accounted for. Harold Bloom, who remarks that "as an immensely learned poet, Gray rarely wrote without deliberately relating himself to nearly every possible literary ancestor" (Bloom 1973, 149), seems to imply that the habit is merely a defence against (or a cover for) the Miltonic influence; John Guillory (87-89) has located its "compositional matrix" in the standard practice of keeping commonplace books, which he sees as bound up with the spread of normalised, middle-class literacy in early modern societies (although Gray's own, with its three substantial volumes, must have carried it to decidedly uncommon lengths); while Robert Mack, in his biography, has traced it to the late Classical model of the cento, a technique that "Gray almost certainly, in the class-room at Eton, first learned from Ausonius" (Mack 123). Indeed, Gray's reliance on the tropes of tradition has encouraged a recurring propensity to read his work as largely or even solely made up of public-school *topoi*, a propensity most memorably indulged in

[4] "Quelle prodigieuse distance entre un bel ouvrage et un ouvrage parfait ou régulier ! Je ne sais s'il s'en est encore trouvé de ce dernier genre" (La Bruyère 88). Gray echoed the Horatian advice in his assessment of Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination* ("it was publish'd at least 9 Years too early," Gray 1935, I: 224). Lest my emphasis on Gray's putative spiritual kinship with La Bruyère should seem arbitrary, I will suggest his comment that Warton and Collins were "each (…) the half of a considerable Man, & one of the Counter-Part of the other" (Gray 1935, I: 261) might be closely modelled on the parallel between Terence and Molière in *Les Caractères* I.37 ("Mais quel homme on aurait pu faire de ces deux comiques!").

Johnson's savage attack on stanza I.2 of "The Progress of Poesy,"[5] but no less blatant in Guillory's assertion that the "Elegy" relies for its effect on "the peculiar force of banalities expressed in a specific linguistic form" (91). What such a view simply fails to acknowledge (leaving aside Johnson's partly idiosyncratic animosity) is the Neoclassical writer's subtly dynamic, productive relationship to those tropes which he does marshal in order to establish his credentials, but which he must also shift around, adjust and inflect if he is to achieve merit and (eventually) originality: in Pope's famous dictum, "What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest*" (Pope 153, italics in the original text). This is especially so in Gray's case, where this relationship does not simply take the form of overt emulation (which in the second half of the 17th century had become a legitimate way of negotiating Ancient precedents: see Weinbrot 1985), but turns the most comprehensive attention to prior language into a *sine qua non* for valid or new expression, rather as La Bruyère's sobering opinion that "Tout est dit, et l'on vient trop tard depuis plus de sept mille ans qu'il y a des hommes et qui pensent" (82) coexisted in the first book of his *Caractères* with the assumption that modern gleanings might still produce valuable works, and perhaps even a perfectly regular one. Such an unassuming *agôn* with literary tradition might go some way towards explaining not just the concentration of Gray's published output, but also its sheer diversity and scope, at least within the field of lyrical poetry. As Marilyn Butler has pointed out, his were "various, discrete exercises, rather than efforts to excel in marketable genres"; and although she sees his versatility as "characteristic of an amateur's work" (Butler 72), it may equally suggest an ambition to carry existing genres and modes to a *nec plus ultra*. Indeed, Gray's poetry is hardly more remarkable for its allusive density than for its ability to generate new *topoi* from the sophisticated handling of allusion, to the extent that half of his poems—the "Elegy," of course, but also the "Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West," the Eton "Ode," the "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat," as well as "The Bard," "The Progress of Poesy" and even the Latin ode on the Grande Chartreuse—had become modern classics within a few years of his death. This generative process may be briefly illustrated by looking at three of the four English poems Gray wrote in 1742, during his first, most sustained productive phase. Although not equally canonical, they may begin to help us see how readers such as the classical scholar Gilbert Wakefield might ascribe to him "a strength of imagination, a sublimity and tenderness of thought, equal to any writer; with a richness of phrase and an accuracy of composition, superior to all" (iii).

Gray's Commonplaces: New Wine in Old Bottles

The "Ode on the Spring" (Gray 1969, 47-53) garnered comparatively little attention until recent times, despite its inaugural position in both the 1753 *Designs* and the 1768 *Poems*. Yet one may agree with Jerome McGann's assertion that "the entire shape of [Gray's] work is already articulate in [it]" (McGann 24). Indeed, even Johnson's condescending assessment that it has too many words like "honeyed," and that its morality "is natural, but too stale" (Johnson 1464) summarises the whole range of misunderstanding and simplification Gray's poetry has met with. The dense poetic diction of its first two stanzas, in particular, serves to problematise the poetic speaker's relationship to the very notion of a Spring Ode, in response to West's more straightforward invitation, in his own "Ode to May," to celebrate Nature's

[5] "The second stanza, exhibiting Mars's car and Jove's eagle, is unworthy of further notice. Criticism disdains to chase a school-boy to his common-places" (Johnson 1466).

renewal: how does one hail the most pristine energies of life, when they are undistinguishable from the greatest poetry in Lucretius and Virgil, and perhaps when one's own spirits are none of the highest? The answers are surprisingly many. Gray's complex rhyming pattern (*ababccdeed*) suggests the "turns" of a compressed sonnet, while the use of trimeters in lines 2, 4 and 10 gives each stanza a light, Horatian finality or even jauntiness (e.g. "their gathered fragrance fling," l. 10)[6], balancing the artificiality of its language, but also highlighting the sudden transitions from one to the next. This avoidance of blank-verse ponderousness is what makes lines 1-10 convincing, along with the latent tension between the bright Neoclassical painting of "rosy-bosomed Hours" or "the purple year" (ll. 1 and 4), and the more surreptitious registering of desire in the zephyrs' "whispering pleasure as they fly" (l. 8; to Gray, of course, West was "Favonius," the Latin name for Zephyr). Stanza 2 introduces a change of scale, and on the whole swaps Classical for vernacular references (notably Shakespeare and Milton) as it zooms in on the poet and his Muse, "[a]t ease reclined in rustic state" (l. 17), inflecting the topos of pastoral repose towards a majestic indirection ("A broader browner shade," l. 12, which successfully replaces the superlative of the first MS. version by suggesting a more indefinite inward focus) and social commentary that is all the more pointed for being slightly out of place ("How indigent the great," l. 20).

The stage is thus set for the key shift to what Gray saw as "[t]he thought on which my (…) ode turns" (Gray 1935, I: 299), namely the insect parabola, or ode-within-the-ode, of stanzas 3-5, starting with the description of the "insect youth" whose "busy murmur" is suddenly perceived to people the noontide stillness (ll. 21-30), before drawing a moralistic analogy between the transience of their fate and that of man's (ll. 31-40), and finally turning the tables on the moralist, himself a "solitary fly" (l. 44) whose dull gloom is unfavourably contrasted with the insects' intensity of present enjoyment ("Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone— / We frolic, while 'tis May," ll. 49-50). As Gray later admitted to Walpole, stanza 4 in particular had been unconsciously inspired by Matthew Green's 1732 poem "The Grotto" ("From Maggot-youth thro' change of state / They feel like us the turns of Fate," Green 6). This, in turn, must have drawn on Thomson's evocation of the ephemeral tribes first published in *Spring* (1728) and removed to *Summer* in the first complete edition of his *Seasons* (1730), a well-known passage making the same point about the vanity of both insect and human lives. What Johnson deemed "too stale" (although, ironically, he thought the conclusion of the poem "pretty") is, therefore, the sophisticated reworking of an emerging topos, at once energised by Gray's brisk rhythms into a new bluntness of pathos ("And they that creep, and they that fly, / Shall end where they began," ll. 33-4), and, of course, made inadequate by the abrupt recantation of stanza 5. At the same time, the ode also works dialectically, inflecting the mock-heroic tradition authorised by Book IV of the *Georgics* towards sheer lyrical delight (l. 27, "And float amid the liquid noon," avowedly echoes a phrase by Virgil), and this quasi-serious absorption in insect pleasures (Gray later composed detailed Latin verse on the orders of insects, Gray 1969, 337-42) only heightens the loneliness of the poetic speaker at the end. Where Green's own insects "preach" (Green 5) and satirise, Gray's simply live and enjoy, with a hedonistic and even erotic suggestiveness that gives new resonance to the poem's Georgic opening (cf. "whispering pleasure as they *fly*," l. 8; my emphasis), without cancelling its ironic remoteness. If the "Ode on the Spring" does not quite

[6] To a large extent, the opening of the "Ode on the Spring" echoes, in tone as well as theme, two earlier Latin poems to West, one in Sapphics ("Ad C. Favonium Aristium," Gray 1969, 306-8) and the other in Alcaics ("Ad C. Favonium Zephyrinum," Gray 1969, 310-2).

claim to effect anything so momentous as a "transvaluation of traditional values" (McGann 26), its concatenation of topoi does result in considerable novelty of contents as well as tone.

The "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" (Gray 1969, 56-63), Gray's first (if anonymously) published English poem, as well as one of the most popular and influential after the "Elegy," results from a similar reconfiguration of recognisable modes and motifs, but on a greater scale, with harsher contrasts and increased impact. As its title signals, and as many critics have noted (Aubin 172, Kaul 70-72), its opening stanzas invoke and rehearse the tradition of the "prospect poem," popularised in the second half of the seventeenth century on the model of Denham's *Cooper's Hill*. From the outset, however, the high civic note of that tradition is curiously muted, as our attention is deflected downward, from the monumental architectures of Eton College and Windsor Castle to the humbler grounds along the river's edge, where generations of pupils have played, and still play:

> Ye distant spires, ye antique towers,
> That crown the watery glade,
> Where grateful Science still adores
> Her Henry's holy shade;
> And ye that from the stately brow
> Of Windsor's heights the expanse below
> Of grove, of lawn, of mead survey,
> Whose turf, whose shades, whose flowers among
> Wanders the hoary Thames along
> His silver-winding way. (ll. 1-10)

An unobtrusive weight of ages, perceptible in the shift from "Henry's holy shade" (Henry VI, of course, was a saintly and long-suffering king) through the repeated (haunted?) "shade" of line 8, to the wanderings of "the hoary Thames" (announcing the mute "Father Thames" of l. 21), seems in retrospect to anticipate the vocal, indeed strident melancholia of the poem's second half. This, beginning with the abrupt tonal shift of lines 51-2 ("Alas, regardless of their doom, / The little victims play"), climaxes in the hypotyposis of ll. 61-90, enumerating the "ministers of human fate" (l. 56), the "vultures of the mind" (l. 62) lying in wait for the hapless children. Gray's allegorical train, as Roger Lonsdale has noted, is of epic origin, and comes from the dark vision of Hell's entrance in Book VI of the *Aeneid* by way of Statius and Spenser, among others (Gray 1969, 60-1). Although epic elements would regularly enter into the composition of a prospect poem, their presence here amounts to a radical negation of the Messianic perspective that conventionally framed its purpose. With its grim and grinning personifications, the summation of pessimistic wisdom that ensues aligns Gray's poem not so much with the prospect tradition as with the more demonic variants of the eighteenth-century ode; yet it has nothing of the elating or edifying tendencies of Collins's "Ode to Pity" or "Ode to Fear." Rather, it ends its downward progress on a vision of common human ills that is at once vividly pathetic and deeply prosaic:

> Lo, in the vale of years beneath
> A grisly troop are seen,
> The painful family of Death,
> More hideous than their Queen:
> This racks the joints, this fires the veins,
> That every labouring sinew strains,
> Those in the deeper vitals rage:

Lo, Poverty, to fill the band,
That numbs the soul with icy hand,
And slow-consuming Age. (ll. 81-90)

Mediating between those opposite lyrical registers—the prospect poem and the dark pathos of the (anti-)ode—is the figure of the child, through whom the nostalgic privatisation of the landscape was effected in stanza 2 ("Ah, happy hills, ah, pleasing shade, / Ah, fields beloved in vain, / Where once my careless childhood strayed, / A stranger yet to pain!" ll. 11-14), and whose carelessness has evoked by contrast his future ordeals. The elegiac topos of the irretrievable separation between the former child and the adult he has become, which holds together the disparate poetic materials of the "Eton Ode," is in fact Gray's invention,[7] the result of his careful re-composition of prior discourses, as well as of his fearful and overdetermined appropriation of Miltonic tropes (see Gleckner 134-50, especially). That it was perceived as profoundly original is confirmed by later explorations of it in texts as different as Wordsworth's own "Immortality Ode" or Charlotte Smith's sonnet "To the South Downs":

Ah! hills belov'd—where once a happy child,
Your beechen shades, 'your turf, your flowers among,'
I wove your blue-bells into garlands wild,
And woke your echoes with my artless song (Smith 1784, 6)

The contrast between careless youth and thought-worn manhood also provides Gray's poem with a generically acceptable closure, even if the high compression of its famous last lines ("No more; where ignorance is bliss, / 'Tis folly to be wise," ll. 99-100) makes for complex ironies similar to those of the "Ode on the Spring," rather than a properly hopeful dialectical resolution. Here, again, the tendency of later critics to see all gnomic utterances as platitudes may blind us to the actual provocativeness of Gray's paradoxical humanism: Gibbon, for one, commented in his *Memoirs* that "[a] state of happiness arising only from the want of foresight and reflection shall never provoke my envy; such degenerate taste would tend to sink us in the scale of beings from a man to a child, a dog, an oyster" (quoted in Clark 285).

The less spectacular "Ode to Adversity" (Gray 1969, 70-74) seems almost calculated to allay the wrath of stoically-minded readers, and indeed Johnson, while deciding it was entirely modelled on Horace's ode to Fortune (I.35), magnanimously conceded that the author "ha[d] excelled his original by the variety of his sentiments, and by their moral application" (Johnson 1465). Although belonging squarely in that group of 1742 poems that stemmed from Gray's relationship to West and his premature death, critics are still unsure whether it predated the "Eton Ode" or was written as a corrective to it and the "Sonnet" (compare Lonsdale in Gray 1969, 69, and Mack 316-7, 328). Depending on the chronology, it tends to be read either as evidence of Gray's earnest engagement with, and possible victory over, the darker implications of mourning, or as an abject retreat into compliance with ideological imperatives (as for instance in Kaul 94-100). Its very title has fluctuated accordingly, since it featured as "Hymn to Adversity" in the 1753 and 1768 editions, despite the poet's usual

[7] The eighteenth-century interest in childhood, a product of long-term changes in family structures and practices, is also evident towards the end of Thomson's *Spring*, or in Shenstone's *The Schoolmistress*; but in those texts childhood is merely thematised from a pedagogue's point of view, rather than internalised as in Gray.

practice; here taxonomy also determines interpretation, between the fluid dialectics of the ode and the purposed univocity of the hymn (on the uncertain relation between those two forms, see Curran 63). Yet what those very uncertainties seem to demonstrate is that "Adversity" is, in any case, a highly original performance, naturalising the "Furies" of classical mythology and the "Eton Ode" into common-sense figures of ethical guidance (according to what Geoffrey Hartman has called the logics of "accommodation of the visionary temperament to an English milieu," 319), and, conversely, raising subjective distinctions to mythopoeic significance (one thinks of the famous letter to West: "Mine, you are to know, is a white Melancholy, or rather Leucocholy for the most part…", Gray 1935, I: 209):

> Oh, gently on thy suppliant's head,
> Dread goddess, lay thy chastening hand!
> Not in thy Gorgon's terrors clad (…)
>
> Thy form benign, oh Goddess, wear,
> Thy milder influence impart,
> Thy philosophic train be there
> To soften, not to wound my heart.
> The generous spark extinct revive,
> Teach me to love and to forgive,
> Exact my own defects to scan,
> What others are to feel, and know myself a man. (ll. 33-35, 41-48)

Considered next to its obvious English forbears, Gray's "Adversity" further secularises the rapt contemplation of Milton's *Il Penseroso* (in its general votive tone) while restoring the pathos of fallible, lived experience to the seemingly Olympian wisdom of Pope's *Essay on Man* (cf. the final rhyme *scan*/*man*). This acclimatisation and chastening of melancholia, on the other hand, had been an English topos since Milton at least, but Gray's emphatic apotropaic gesture is new enough, and anticipates one major aspect of Wordsworth's poetry, illustrated, among others, by the earnestness of his "Ode to Duty," whose pattern, according to Wordsworth himself, was imitated from the "Ode to Adversity" (407).

The Lyre of Sensibility

Gray has often been considered a pioneer of the literature of sensibility on account of his foregrounding of a confessional, disempowered lyrical self, along with themes of misfortune and solitude, in poems like the 1742 "Odes" and the *Elegy*. He has been described, at times, as a "sensitive fugitive from his society" (Sitter 13), and some such perception, as I shall suggest, certainly played a crucial part in fostering the hero-worship that characterised the last decades of the century. Yet there is another, more literal sense in which Gray *is* the bard of sensibility, namely, as Kenneth Maclean suggested (Downey & Jones 138-9) and S.H. Clark (1991) established at length, as a rigorous exponent in verse of the new empiricist epistemology that took its cue from Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*. Although his undergraduate letters betray, as we saw, a classicist's ambivalence towards philosophy, Gray's first portrait, painted as early as his thirteenth or fourteenth year, shows him sitting next to books which include, in a significant pairing, "Locke" as well as "Temple" (Mack 101). Towards the end of his Grand Tour with Walpole, he had begun the Latin "Metaphysic [Poem]" that became known as *De Principiis Cogitandi*, the aim of which, had it been

completed, was to convey Lockean thought in verse in the same way that Lucretius had poetised Epicurean thought (he would later jokingly refer to it as "Master Tommy Lucretius"; see Gray 1935, I: 183 and 225). As George Rousseau has argued, Locke's empiricist paradigm had its conditions of possibility in modern advances in physiology, particularly in his quondam tutor Thomas Willis's investigations of the nervous system, solicitude for which became a prominent feature of eighteenth-century medical and cultural discourse (see Rousseau 160-84; 211-42); in the *De Principiis,* Gray accordingly presents the soul/body dualism as mitigated, indeed made viable, by the mediating agency of man's ever-trembling, ever-alive neural network:

> Idcirco innumero ductu *tremere undique fibras*
> *Nervorum* instituit : tum toto corpore miscens
> Implicuit late ramos, et *sensile textum,*
> Implevitque umore suo (seu lympha vocanda,
> Sive aura est) ; tenuis certe, atque levissima quaedam
> Vis versatur agens, parvosque infusa canales
> Perfluit… (Gray 1969, 323, ll. 39-45; my emphasis)

> Therefore [Nature] arranged *that the fibres of the nerves should tremble in every part* in innumerable ducts; and, distributing them throughout the body, she interwove the branches everywhere, a sensitive network, and filled them with their own fluid (whether call it lymph or air). Certainly, a delicate and almost imperceptible driving-force circulates it, and flows through the tiny channels once it is admitted. (Transl. Lonsdale, Gray 1969, 329; my emphasis)

These "sensile," "trembling" nerves are reminiscent of one of Pope's most memorable turns of phrase, in the section of the *Essay on Man* where he ironically suggested the effect disproportionately acute senses would produce on human organisms: "Say what the use (…) [Of] touch, if tremblingly alive all o'er, / To smart and agonize at ev'ry pore?" (Pope 511; this is the exact passage Gray had drawn on in his Eton verse). Shorn of their irony, Pope's lines became a central trope of eighteenth-century sensibility, largely, it may be said, through their reverberations in Gray's poetry. Locke's epistemology, increasingly seen as resting on *aesthesis*, combines in *De Principis Cogitandi* with Newton's speculations over the imperceptible matter or corpuscles he thought light consisted of, to produce Gray's emphasis on touch as the most fundamental of the senses.[8] This point is spectacularly made in the now near-famous passage describing, in a telling contrast, the first stirrings of sentience in the warmth of the womb, and then (in a brilliant rewriting of Lucretius's description of the new-born child in book V of *De natura rerum*) the preternatural onset of sense-as-pain upon entrance into the world:

> Primas tactus agit partes, primusque minutae

[8] Gray's *tenuis atque levissima quaedam vis agens* corresponds to the "ether" hypothesised by Newton, whose system cohabits with the vocabulary of Lucretian atomism throughout the poem (cf. Gray 1969, 327, ll. 192-96: "Nam quodcunque ferit visum, tangive laborat / Quicquid nare bibis, vel concava concipit auris, / Quicquid lingua sapit, credas hoc omne, necesse est / Ponderibus, textu, discursu, mole, figura / Particulas praestare leves, et semina rerum"; "for whatever strikes the eyesight or struggles to be felt, whatever you absorb through the nostril or the hollow ear receives, whatever the tongue tastes: you must believe that fragile particles, the seeds of things, furnish all this with weight, texture, motion, mass, and shape," transl. Lonsdale, Gray 1969, 332).

> Laxat iter caecum turbae, recipitque ruentem (…)
> Necdum etiam matris puer eluctatus ab alvo
> Multiplices solvit tunicas, et vincula rupit ;
> Sopitus molli somno, tepidoque liquore
> Circumfusus adhuc : tactus tamen aura lacessit
> Iamdudum levior sensus, animamque reclusit.
> Idque magis simul ac solitum blandumque calorem
> Frigore mutavit caeli, quod verberat acri
> Impete inassuetos artus : tum saevior adstat,
> Humanaeque comes vitae Dolor excipit; ille
> Cunctantem frustra, et tremulo multa ore querentem
> Corripit invadens, ferreisque amplectitur ulnis. (Gray 1969, 324, ll. 64-80)

> Touch takes the leading part and first lays open the dark route for the tiny throng, and absorbs the force of their onrush (…) Even before the child has struggled from his mother's womb and broken through his many layers of covering and burst his bonds; while he is still drugged with soft sleep and bathed in warm fluid, a slight breath has already stimulated his sense of touch and released his soul. This happens all the more at the moment when he exchanges the familiar soothing warmth for the cold of the atmosphere, which strikes at his unaccustomed limbs with a bitter onslaught. Then, yet more cruelly, Pain, the companion of human life, is waiting to receive him and tears out with violent hands the child who in vain delays and utters many querulous cries, clasping him in its iron embrace. (transl. Lonsdale, Gray 1969, 329-30)

Gray's lexicon of savage violence ("acri impete," "saevior," "corripit invadens"…) bears a close analogy to the tearing passions and the "icy hand" of Poverty in the "Eton Ode," a poem whose pathos, as Hagstrum pointed out (Downey & Jones 13), stems directly from its author's highly personal engagement with the basic tenets of empiricism. Touch, therefore, is primarily the touch of misfortune.

Yet its Lucretian frame of allusion, along with Gray's keen sense of wonder and beauty, ensures that *De Principiis Cogitandi* also carries its reader *ad luminis oras*. The passage above quoted, for example, segues immediately into an evocation of light, in which gazing is typically inseparable from drinking ("Tum species primum patefacta est candida Lucis (…) Tum primum, ignotosque bibunt nova lumina soles": "[t]hen, for the first time, the bright face of Light is revealed (…) then it is that the newborn eyes first drink in the sunlight unknown before," ll. 81-84). Indeed, delights and torments alternate throughout the poem, just as its figuration of Nature tends to oscillate between the "kindly parent" ("Alma Parens," l. 136) and the cruel stepmother ("saeva (…) natura," l. 159). This is consistent both with the qualified pessimism of the Latin poet and, to an extent, with the Lockean anthropology that came to dominate eighteenth-century thinking, in which man's life is essentially defined by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Gray, whose precise religious bent remains, despite the young Boswell's assumptions, quite uncertain to this day,[9] seems sometimes to embrace a rather agnostic version of this model, as in *De Principiis*, where the self-reflexive faculty is celebrated for its ability to determine what to desire or shun, and sometimes to integrate it within a slightly more orthodox perspective, as in the later ode on "The Pleasure Arising from Vicissitude," which tends to cast the temporal contrast of pleasure and pain as a

[9] Cf. Walpole's remark that "Gray was a deist, but a violent enemy of atheists" (qtd in Butler 77), which in itself does not sit so easily with the Lucretian allegiances of *De Principiis*, though by the late 1740s Gray had distanced himself from Epicureanism. The correspondence certainly suggests evolution, from occasional irreverence to a reserved earnestness (see Mack 382), but there is no charting it accurately.

providential dispensation meant to assuage the latter and heighten the former. In both cases, however, both pleasure and pain are characterised in terms of a tactile intensity that resists any kind of watertight separation between the two—pain being often, in eighteenth-century accounts, a keener variant of the sensation that produces pleasure in the first place. "Vicissitude," for instance, comes to an early climax as the sky-lark "warbles high / His trembling thrilling ecstasy / And lessening from the dazzled sight, / Melts into air and liquid light" (Gray 1969, 203, ll. 13-16); here, the bird's delight is apprehended through the ambivalent verbs "trembling" (see above) and "thrilling," which still faintly retained its earlier Spenserian meaning of "piercing" or "transfixing," and those verbs make for a smooth transition to the images of self-obliterating *jouissance* in the following lines, where the Virgilian harmony of "liquid light" comes together with the Shakespearean transience of "[m]elts into air." Gray's English poetry offers varied instances of such a thrill. There is a particularly subtle, subdued one in the "Elegy":

> The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
> The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
> The cock's shrill clarion or the echoing horn,
> No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. (Gray 1969, 120-1, ll. 17-20)

At first sight, the alliterations and paronomasia of lines 17-8 ([b], [ɪ:], [z], [s], [ð], [ʃ]) appear simply calculated to invest common village occurrences with suitable dignity. But line 19, raising the consonantal phoneme [ʃ] to a shriller pitch and juxtaposing it with the harsher [ĸ], retrospectively gives them a more poignant value through the implicit contrast between the sensory plenitude of daily life (only partly modified by the church-going suggestions of "incense-breathing morn") and the final solemnity of a Last Judgment ("shrill clarion") whose likelihood is, however, deliberately withdrawn by the text, returning us instead to the mute, mouldering heaps of the country churchyard: "*No more* shall rouse them from their lowly bed" (l. 20, my emphasis).

A similar kind of ambiguous intensity may be seen as informing the structure of the sister odes which consolidated Gray's reputation for sublimity. The inaugural apostrophe of "The Progress of Poesy," for instance ("Awake, Aeolian lyre, awake, / And give to rapture all thy trembling strings," Gray 1969, 161), is seemingly straightforward, and quite adequate to the grand public statement that Gray's poem, in the tradition of Pindar's first Pythian ode and Dryden's "Alexander's Feast," clearly aims for. At the same time, its mythic lyre's "trembling strings" closely resemble the quivering nerves of the hearer/poet; and even the image of multiple fountains that sustains and modulates this opening invocation ("From Helicon's harmonious springs / A thousand rills their mazy progress take," ll. 3-4) appears reminiscent of the network of neural "ducts" in *De Principiis Cogitandi*. Gray's ode has most often been read as a Whiggish "progress poem" with primarily civic or broadly cultural concerns (James Steele in Downey & Jones 218-20; Kaul 189-202; Weinbrot 1984), or, conversely (if more seldom), as a learned screen deflecting attention from the thinly veiled homoeroticism of some of his earlier texts (Mack 451-58). Perhaps a more balanced view would be that it attempts to bestow objective, moral and political dignity—by *composing* it, as it were—to the perilous "rapture" of aesthesis, which again resonates in stanza III.1 to celebrate the sympathetic virtues of Shakespeare's drama ("This can unlock the gates of joy; / Of horror that and *thrilling* fears, / Or ope the sacred source of sympathetic fears," ll. 92-94; my emphasis). The resulting balance is precarious, not just because the ode's many picturesque

and musical effects tend to emancipate themselves from public rhetorical statement (Hagstrum 302; Zionkowski 342-3), but because the lyre's "thrill" either borders on destructive excess, as in the case of Milton ("The living throne, the sapphire-blaze, / Where angels tremble while they gaze, / He saw; but blasted with excess of light, / Closed his eyes in endless night," ll. 99-102[10]), or threatens to lose itself in private, elusive reverberation, as in the case of Gray the modern poet ("Yet oft before his infant eyes would run / Such forms as glitter in the Muse's ray / With orient hues, unborrowed of the sun," ll. 118-20). The ode's concluding lines, with their rather abrupt retreat into an intermediate region "[b]eneath the Good how far—but far above the Great" (l. 123), may well reflect Gray's scepticism over the possibility that contemporary poets might still exert some kind of civic leadership (which Mason adduced as an explanation for Gray's delay in composing "The Bard," Gray 1775, 92); at the same time, they suggest that the "[t]houghts that breathe and words that burn" (l. 110) of poetry now belong to the autonomous province of sensibility, from hence partly unmoored from the public and ethical spheres.

There is, finally, one further aspect of the new empiricist paradigm that may bear relevance to Gray's poetics. As S.H. Clark has perceptively noted, Locke's originality lay less in his conception of the mind as a *tabula rasa* than in his recognition (in book II of the *Essay*) that personal identity inheres in the hoard of memory, in a store-house of ideas that are themselves subject to decay and obliteration—in other words, that "one does not merely grow from voidness, one must return to it" (Clark 283). Such an awareness of the friable nature of memory would account quite convincingly, as Clark goes on to suggest, for the tone of elegiac reminiscence that characterises so much of Gray's poetry, whether in the "Eton Ode" or in the *Elegy* itself:

> For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
> This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
> Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
> Nor cast one longing lingering look behind? (Gray 1969, 132-3, ll. 85-88)

"Forgetfulness" is ambiguous here. Although it primarily denotes the general oblivion that threatens the dead, it may also hint at the gradual numbing of the sensitive mind ("[T]his pleasing anxious being") through the process of mental decay that ends in death. And indeed, the whole of the *Elegy* can be seen as one long or "longing lingering look" upon the "warm precincts" of sentient life, with its many heightenings, such as the lines quoted above, tending to enhance or to enshrine the self's most thrilling impressions in the face of mortality. This might well lend new plausibility to Gray's account of his failure to complete long poems, first given in Norton Nicholls's reminiscences and often seen as some kind of alibi for his excessive fastidiousness ("he had been used to write only Lyric poetry in which the poems being short, he had accustomed himself, & was able to polish every part; & that the labour of this method in a long poem would be intolerable, besides which the poem would lose its effect for want of Chiaro-Oscuro," Gray 1935, III: 1291). It was, after all, only natural that Gray's poetry of intense, concentrated sensation—which he rightly called "Lyric"—should find its sporadic expression in equally concentrated forms. As he put it to Mason: "Extreme

[10] "The Bard," of course, revolves around a similar excess of vision, first invoked in III.1 ("'Visions of glory, spare my aching sight,'" l. 107) and fulfilled in the conclusion of the poem ("He spoke, and headlong from the mountain's height / Deep in the roaring tide he plunged to endless night," ll. 143-4; Gray 1969, 196, 200).

conciseness of expression, yet pure, perspicuous, and musical, is one of the grand beauties of lyric poetry" (Gray 1935, II: 551); that he added "[t]his I have always aimed at, yet never could attain" probably reflects the radical intransigence of his poetics more than anything else.

Negative Empathy and Radical Reserve

Gray's politics are only slightly less opaque than his religious opinions. He was, of course, a Whig, which is rather unsurprising in view of his life-long association with Walpole. His attachment to Whig views of liberty does surface in many parts of the "Progress of Poesy," as well as in the main design of "The Bard"; but his correspondence often suggests that the actual statesmen who ought to have represented his ideals fell far short of them. More specifically, James Steele has argued that Gray aligned himself ever more closely, in the course of the 1750s, with the earnest, militant version of Whiggism that became embodied in the Earl of Chatham, of whom he remained a fervent admirer to the end of his life: "Gray's world vision, then, was consistently that of a whiggish, imperialistic bourgeois, latterly a Pittite" (Steele in Downey & Jones 238). Such a depiction may be fairly accurate, and offers plausible insights into the projection of Gray's anxieties of heroism onto the geopolitical stage, yet it leaves many areas of uncertainty, notably regarding the poet's attitudes to domestic society and politics at a time when Pittism could easily coexist with a modicum of radicalism. Thus, Steele notes his approbation of the Wilkite cause in 1769, and also his revulsion at the "villainous populace of London" during the Spitalfields disorders of 1765 (203-4), yet says nothing of a possible contradiction between these positions—which, in the letters, are indeed far from univocal. This is Gray's actual comments on the Spitalfields weavers themselves, as distinguished from the "populace" that laid siege to Bedford House:

> I saw the Weavers at the door of the house of Lords on Thursday. as far as my eye can judge, I do not believe, they were 5000, & they neither appear'd insolent, nor intimidated. The noise was great, & I assure you, there were many blank faces in fine coaches to be seen, & much bowing & smiling, & civil words thrown at random among the ragged regiment. tomorrow is the day, when worse is expected, & it is certain numbers are flocking to Town from Norfolk, Essex, &c: the London Militia are order'd out, & no one can say, where this may end. (Gray 1935, II: 876)

The weavers are described with a hint of derision as a "ragged regiment," but there is also a suitable dignity in demeanour that is neither "insolent," nor "intimidated"; it is unclear whether the "blank faces" in the "fine coaches" are more derided for their opportunistic condescension to the "ragged regiment," or for their habitual futility; and the "worse" that is expected may include further disturbances, large-scale repression, or probably both (though it might well be averted, Gray adds, if Pitt returned to the ministry).

This hesitant tone may, of course, be referred to the ambiguities of Gray's own social position and standing. His rejection of professional authorship was bound up with his preference for a life of gentlemanly independence, and scholars like Steele have emphasised the solidity, or even the prestige, of his family background and connections; but upon the death of his father in 1741 Gray did come close to something that would have felt very much like poverty, at least according to his earlier upper-middle-class standards. There is, besides, abundant evidence of his marked reserve towards the upper stratum of British society, from the widespread view that resentment of his *de facto* subaltern status played a substantial part

in his rift with Walpole, to his refusal of the Laureateship in 1757, to the varied thrusts at "the Great" scattered in the poetry and correspondence—whether in the "Ode on the Spring," in the conclusion of "The Progress of Poesy," in his jibes against Lord Shaftesbury (Gray 1935, II: 583), or in his comment that "nobody has occasion for Pride but the Poor (…) every where else it is a sign of folly" (Gray 1935, I: 385). While it may be over-convenient to equate Gray's whole complex of ambivalences with the anxieties of the emerging bourgeois subject, as Guillory does (115-8), it is certain that some of his poems—and to an extent the quasi-mythical image of benevolent self-sufficiency that surrounded them after the publication of Mason's *Memoirs*—did appeal strongly to many *déclassé* or radical bourgeois of the 1780s and 1790s. Marilyn Butler, writing that "both his churchyard and his bard were adopted as symbols of levelling or nationalist feeling," goes on to remark that by 1795 a radical popular antiquarian like John Brand could eulogise Gray as "the Poet of Humanity" (Butler 85, 133); and indeed more recent research tends to confirm the key role of "The Bard," with its genuine sympathy for Celtic culture, in sparking the Welsh revival's resistance to English cultural hegemony (Prescott 2006). In 1786, Gilbert Wakefield—who would be expelled from his college twelve years later on account of his religious heterodoxy and Jacobin sympathies—published an annotated edition of Gray's poems that was remarkable even then for the burning fervour of its tone. Still more tellingly, perhaps, James Garrison's survey of Continental responses to the *Elegy* reveals that among its many French imitators was Merlin de Douai, then (1788) a successful provincial case lawyer, whose subsequent rise to permanent membership of the *Comité de Salut Public* sheds a complex but eerily apposite retrospective irony on Gray's village Hampdens. Merlin, indeed, prefaced his rendering of the poem with an epistle to its author that featured lines such as these:

> O toi dont la grande âme offrit un pur hommage
> À la faible indigence, au mérite inconnu (…) (qtd in Garrison 53)

Such pre-revolutionary resonance cannot, it is true, be directly related to any explicit subversive statement by Gray himself, whose probable Deism was dutifully wrapped in Anglican observance during his mature years, and whose many admirers included non-committed or even conservative figures like Anna Seward and James Boswell. Yet it had to do, at some deep level in the cultural transmission process, not so much with the themes of his poems, as with some of their formal and communicational literary properties: their combination of dignified reserve with intense if unspecified pathos made them into formidable loci of identification for the disaffected.

The "Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West" (Gray 1969, 67-68), although distinctly apolitical and not originally intended for publication, is a case in point. Gray's only sonnet, written at a time when the form was particularly unfashionable in English, echoes West's epistle *Ad Amicos* from five years earlier, but also reworks poem 310 of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*[11] in two different, though possibly related ways. First, as critics now broadly agree, by encoding homoerotic desire within the conventions of Petrarchan mourning (Bentman 216-7, Gleckner 120 ff.), so successfully in fact that some have read its elegiac tone as, ultimately, enacting and consecrating society's repression of that desire (Haggerty 88-90). Secondly, through emphasis on the absolute character of loss: Gray's sonnet suppresses the

[11] This is the *locus classicus* for the contrast between the springtime renewal of life and love on the one hand, and the bereavement of the lyrical self on the other.

element of Christian consolation present in the *Canzoniere*, and the identification of the dead love object as the only audience he had or wished to have (where Petrarch's grief had been wrought into an enormously successful myth of Humanist self-fashioning) results in the deeper pathos of the famous concluding lines, with their quasi-chiastic structure emphasising the speaker's painful self-confinement: "I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear, / And weep the more because I weep in vain." Although Kaul, for instance, has seen Gray's sonnet as partly stemming from, and feeding back into, the poet's sense of cultural isolation in a commercial age (84-93), this added, negative pathos met with huge resonance when it finally appeared in Mason's 1775 edition—not only because the deferred publication made the author's grief appear all the more touching for having been manfully silenced, but also because it paradoxically opened a cultural space where discrete solitudes could now commune in the very intensity of inconsolable grief, as the success of sonnet cycles like Charlotte Smith's or William Lisle Bowles's would go on to attest. The literary significance of Gray's text, unexpectedly confirming Boileau's dictum that "[u]n sonnet sans défaut vaut seul un long poème" (236), has been well summarised by Stuart Curran: "Gray's elegiac sonnet, the suppressed record of his unfulfilled secret life, is the motive force underlying the entire Romantic revival of the sonnet, a model for hundreds of poets" (30). We may add that, by contributing so powerfully to the revelation of a whole submerged continent of ostensibly unspecific middle-class sorrow, it also had undeniable social and political significance; and of course Charlotte Smith, for one, became a successful novelist of radical reformist sympathies.

John Sitter (106) suggests that mid-century poetical melancholia was not political, and adds wittily that its sole grievance was "the Way Things Are." Yet this may obviously be interpreted in two opposite directions: either that phrase naturalises the existing order of "Things," or the identification of a certain "Way Things Are" crystallises a malaise that may take more actively critical forms—as in William Godwin's *Things as They Are, or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*. The critical history of Gray's "Elegy" offers a spectacular illustration of such an alternative. Thus Empson's glib putdown of what he dubbed "the complacence in the massive calm of the poem" (5) has encouraged generations of scholars—including Guillory, as we saw—to see Gray as the archetypal bourgeois spokesman; and later queer or Bloomian approaches, though accounting in sophisticated ways for the poet's anxieties rather than for his "complacence," have only enhanced Empson's view of the *Elegy* as a major locus of cultural repression (cf. Empson 4: "The sexual suggestion of *blush* brings in the Christian idea that virginity is good in itself, and so that any renunciation is good"). Yet what the early reception history of the "Elegy" suggests is that in this case the symptom might well be more significant than the repression, or rather that it is not a symptom at all, but a sign that the repression was far from completely effective. However mystifying Gray's idylls of peasant toil might seem two or three centuries later ("How jocund did they drive their team afield," l. 27; "Along the cool sequestered vale of life / They kept the quiet tenor of their way," ll. 75-6), they never quite cancel out the *punctum*, or the main point, of the poem:

> 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.
>
> But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
> Rich with the spoils of time did never unroll;
> Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,

And froze the genial current of the soul. (Gray 1969, 125-7, ll. 45-52)

These stanzas, which concentrate some of Gray's most vitally personal imagery, pit the thrill of the aspiring soul against the stifling effects of things as they are with a vividness that leaves ample latitude for ulterior resentment, especially when one takes into account the absence from the poem of the hortatory religious tones of the "Graveyard School." In 1794, for instance, the young Coleridge wrote a "Monody on the Death of Thomas Chatterton"—then an icon of literary radicalism—where the new topos is (barely) reworked into a shrill attack on Britain's cultural and political establishment (""Thee, CHATTERTON! yon unblest stones protect / From Want, and the bleak Freezings of neglect!", Coleridge I: 140). More fundamentally still, Gray's suspicion that "[s]ome mute inglorious Milton" might rest under the country-churchyard turf was, as John Brand's sentiment forty-four years later would seem to confirm, anything but trivial when it was first publicly expressed in an anonymous poem (on this point, see Weinfield, especially 4-16). Indeed, the whole "Elegy" may be said to effect what Jacques Rancière calls a new "*partage du sensible*," in other words a re-distribution of the aesthetic space (the space of experience, as well as that of aesthetic representation) whereby previously unheeded things, practices, subjectivities—such as dead labourers, the lives they led and the lives they could not lead—become visible and may take on new political significance. And although Gray's poem was not political as such, it was precisely its pathos of resignation, combined with the deliberate vagueness of its aspirations and the all-enveloping obscurity from which it seems to resonate, that made it so open to appropriation.[12] What later readers have seen as repression might be better understood as the projection of an ethos of sublime restraint that was the highest claim to moral authority in the face of "greatness". Gray's reserve was the best way he had of speaking out.

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[12] Cf. Hazlitt's well-known sally on Wordsworth's reported comment that parts of it were unintelligible: "it has, however, been understood!" (235).

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