

Book Review of Eric Parisot. *Graveyard Poetry: Religion, Aesthetics and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poetic Condition*. (British Literature in Context in the Long 18th Century.) Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. x + 184. ISBN: 9781409434733.

In *The Citizen of the World* of 1762 Oliver Goldsmith classified four variations of graveyard poetry: that of the solitary youth glooming among tombs; of learned rustics weeping in the fields; of Parnassus bathing in tears; and of “Britannia [who] sits upon her own shore and gives a loose to maternal tenderness.” Writing in his time and place, Goldsmith gently mocks the popular poetry of death.

And, although Eric Parisot’s *Graveyard Poetry* overlooks Goldsmith’s contemporaneous classification, the book extends it to recognize the religious quotient in the type. Doing so, it gives us the most direct and important study of the genre since John Draper’s signal work of 1929, *The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism*. And thus it joins other major studies that explain the loneliness, melancholy, and gloom indigenous in graveyard poetry: Raymond Dexter Havens’s “Literature and Melancholy,” *MLN* 24 (1909), Amy Reed’s *Background of Gray’s Elegy: A Study in the Taste for Melancholy Poetry, 1700-1751* (1924), Eleanor Sickels’s *The Gloomy Egoist: Moods and Themes of Melancholy from Gray to Keats* (1932), and John Sitter’s *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (1982).

But eclipsing Hoxie Fairchild’s first two volumes of *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (1939 and 1942), Parisot’s is the only study of how changing religious practices from public sermons to private reading, reflection, and sensibility produced a new aesthetic and poetics. And thus the book lays an important plank in the bridge from religion to poetry. That plank is a careful reading of sermons on death. These sermons conform to the textures and colors of individual sects, but collectively they show a singular concern with life’s last stop. And all of the parson-poets, as I call them—Thomas Parnell, Robert Blair, and Edward Young—agree that poetry is, as Parisot claims, “a legitimate language of religion.” Indeed, Young says, “There is something in Poetry beyond Prose-reason; there are Mysteries in it not to be explained, but admired; which render mere Prose-men Infidels to their Divinity.” Many of the graveyard poems stop at dying; others speculate on death, on what lies beyond the grave. And doctrinal brands are clear in their emphasis on, say, predestination, faith, and good works. But their premise is “God as the spontaneous and divine fountainhead of poetic inspiration.” And their template is the sermon’s delivering moral instruction through passion.

My reservation about *Graveyard Poetry* is its scanting of contexts other than homiletics. The vital and pathological contexts, for example, reveal much. About the early eighteenth century’s population of some 6 million, Roy Porter in *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1982) notes that average life expectancy was about thirty-five and that in the 1740s some three in four children died before the age of six. A passing sigh at many a tombstone in some 14,000 village churchyards confirms still the daily ride of the Fourth Horseman on his Pale Horse of Death and Pestilence. And most often that pestilence was smallpox, abated a bit by inoculation in the 1740s but not widely routed until Edward Jenner and vaccination in 1798. In his *Letters on England*, no. 11, in 1726, Voltaire estimated that 60 percent contract smallpox, and 20 percent die of it. And David Shuttleton in *Smallpox and the Literary Imagination, 1660-1820* (2007) cites mortality rates from the disease at 15 to 90 percent. A simple walk past the tombstones in the churchyard to his sermon in the pulpit must certainly have weighed heavily on a vicar’s thoughts about his text.

Another missing context is war, for the Second Horseman took his red toll. Here the churchyard is no index, for with the exception of the Scottish rebellions of the 'Fifteen and the 'Forty-five, no battles in the eighteenth century were fought on British home soil. Rather the concurrent wars of early empire— Queen Anne's War, the wars of the Spanish and the Austrian succession, the Seven Years' War, the wars in India—left many an Augustan Rupert Brooke under some corner of a foreign field. And the loss of so many Jack Tars at sea makes Felicia Hemans's later verses on watery graves poignant: "The sea, the blue lone sea hath one, / He lies where pearls lie deep; / He was the lov'd of all, yet none / O'er his low bed may weep." Deeply buried in the memories of their families and inscribed in parish registers and tablets, thousands of those English soldiers and sailors must have been part of every vicar's consciousness as well. Only their names came home, and, without doubt, like the home dead in the churchyard, they could not but cast a pall on his sermons.

Still, Parisot's reading of the poems is as compelling as his argument for the sermons is definitive. Central focus is on the standard Graveyardists, Parnell, Blair, Young, and Gray with glances at Thomas Warton, William Broome, and James Hervey. A curious omission is William Collins's elegant "Ode, Written in the Beginning of the Year 1746" ("How sleep the brave"). An ode only in its register of high praise, it is rather an elegiac sonnet set in a graveyard and cut off at twelve lines, a formalistic memorial of English soldiers, their lives cut off before their time in the Jacobite invasion of 1745.

Regardless, Parisot's sensitive analysis of the work of the parson-poets leads neatly to the classic of the genre, Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* of 1751. For example, Parnell's "Night Piece on Death" (1722), with its graveyard tour after dark, its contrast of the humble tombs of the poor and the marble tombs of the mighty, and its tolling clock, introduces the basic conventions. Blair's *The Grave* (1743) intensifies the form by affects of melancholy and horror. And Young's *The Complaint; or Night Thoughts* (1742-45) wrestles with the personal loss of family members. The three see death finally as positively Christian: Parnell as the portal to happiness in heaven, Blair as a benevolent end, and Young as the gift of a providential God. Not so Gray.

While incorporating the conventions, Gray's poem, however, makes leaps of the transcendent imagination not present in the earlier poems. Standing in the churchyard, Gray makes three transcendent leaps: he imagines morning and evening moments of the humble folk buried there, then he makes an imaginative leap into the church to inveigh against the pomp of the cenotaphs and statues of the wealthy, and, in a remarkable third leap, he imagines himself dead and imagines the reaction of a typical villager. God is absent as the Romantic self takes precedence, dead and alive.

Parisot's book reminds us well that the graveyard poems of the 18th century's first fifty years bid fair to claim fatherhood of English romanticism with its rural setting, its contemplative tone, its pervading melancholy, its isolation and loneliness, its consummate sensibility, its preoccupation with death, and its imaginative leaps. But the book's singular—and definitive— contribution is the discovery of the sermonic influence on graveyard poetry.

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