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James A. Means

The Grave in America: 1753-1860



In his study of *Elizabethan Romance in the Eighteenth Century*, Harko G. de Maar stated that Robert Blair's *The Grave* "was not merely popular, it exercised an immense influence on the literature of Europe and America for more than sixty years."¹ This sweeping assertion ought to be modified; for, as I have shown elsewhere, *The Grave*, though first published in 1743, did not really achieve popularity until the 1780s.² Moreover, to determine the influence of *The Grave* upon the composition of later poems is no easy task: that there are echoes of *The Grave* in Gray's *Elegy* (1751) and in Thomas Warton's *The Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747) hardly justifies de Maar's extravagant language. In the article I referred to above, I have tried to indicate the influence of *The Grave* on later British poets and men of letters. For the sake of historical accuracy, I should like to extend that discussion here by tracing the career of *The Grave* in America.³

One American poem, the composition of which was undoubtedly influenced by *The Grave*, provides a slender prop for de Maar's claim. That poem is William Cullen Bryant's *Thanatopsis* (1817). But before outlining Bryant's indebtedness to Blair, it might be useful to provide an historical context for such a consideration by glancing briefly at the early printings of *The Grave* in America.

The Grave first appeared in British America in 1753, only

ten years after the first edition had issued quietly from the London printing-house of Mary Cooper. "The Fourth Edition" was published in New York under the imprint of Hugh Gaine, perhaps the best-known of colonial printers. George Watson Cole has observed that *The Grave* was "one of the earliest books" from Gaine's press, "the most prolific press of its time in New York."⁴ Gaine issued a second reprint of the poem in the same year. Nearly twenty years passed, however, before the next American edition of *The Grave* appeared in Boston, in 1772. It would appear that the English publication history of *The Grave* was being repeated in the colonies: two editions in the same year, followed by three decades of almost total neglect, and then a renewal of interest towards century's end. All told, *The Grave* went through at least eleven American printings--in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and New Jersey--before 1800.⁵

Evidence that *The Grave* was being read beyond these Eastern cities comes to us, ironically enough, from the travel-diary of Robert Hunter, a young London merchant, who travelled from Quebec to North Carolina during the years 1785-86. While visiting his cousin Archibald McCall in Tappahannock, Virginia, Hunter made the following entry for Christmas Day, 1785:

In the evening Kate [McCall's daughter] read me a poem of Blair's upon the grave. We drank tea together and afterwards amused ourselves with reading and conversing to each other.⁶

After 1800 *The Grave* began to appear in the smaller towns and even remote parts of the country. For example, there were printings in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1809 and 1816. In 1815 an edition was published in New Ipswich, New Hampshire, and in 1819 in Hallowell, Maine. *The Grave* even followed the frontiersmen westward, as is indicated by a printing in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1814.⁷

According to the recollections preserved in his autobiography, it was about this time (*circa* 1811) that Bryant became acquainted with *The Grave*. The impression Blair's lines made on the sickly young poet can hardly be over-estimated:

I remember reading, at this time, that remarkable poem, Blair's "Grave," and dwelling with great pleasure upon its finer passages. I had the opportunity of comparing it with a poem on a kindred subject, also in blank verse, that of Bishop Porteus on "Death," and of observing how much the verse of the obscure Scottish minister excelled in originality of thought and vigor of expression that of the English prelate.⁸

Albert F. McLean, Jr., in his critical study, *William Cullen Bryant*, has shown how Bryant grafted a few of Blair's original and vigorous lines onto the stock of his own equally stirring--if less orthodox--poem:

The presumptive evidence is strong that one of these "finer passages" from Blair was the following: "What is this world?/ What but a specious [sic. error for 'spacious'] burial-field unwall'd,/ Strew'd with Death's spoils . . ." Bryant, in "Thanatopsis," referring to the earth as "one mighty sepulchre," was to describe the hills, sea, and other scenic natural objects as "the solemn decorations all/ Of the great tomb of man."⁹

I doubt that any other American poet was so deeply in sympathy with the somber tones of *The Grave* as was the young Bryant, but two other American poets--Emerson and Poe--mentioned it in passing. One is not surprised to discover that while Emerson did not particularly care for *The Grave*, Poe seems to have known it by heart. Emerson recorded his first reading of *The Grave*, at the age of thirteen in a letter to Edward Bliss Emerson, dated 10 November 1816:

Last night I read "The Grave" a Poem by Robert Blair, which William bought for me. It is a short, serious Poem in blank verse & is esteemed as excellent; but in one place even the heedless R.W.E. found a great fault. It was a simile which I thought to be a very great fall from sublimity after speaking of the body he says--"Like a disabled pitcher out of use."¹⁰

The author of *The Raven* was more sympathetic. It is tempting, though ultimately profitless, to speculate to what degree Poe was indebted to *The Grave* for the "gothick" trappings of his tales and poems. At any rate, I am aware of no verbal echoes of *The Grave* in any of Poe's writings. We can, however, be sure that even as a young man Poe was well acquainted with *The Grave*, thanks to an anecdote recorded by his room-mate at West Point, Mr. T. H. Gibson, whose short sketch of Poe was first published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for November, 1867:

The first conversation I had with Poe after we became installed as room-mates was characteristic of the man. A volume of Campbell's *Poems* was lying upon our table, and he tossed it contemptuously aside with the curt remark: "Campbell is a plagiarist"; then without waiting for a reply he picked up the book, and turned the

leaves over rapidly until he found the passage he was looking for. "There," he said, "is a line more often quoted than any other passage of his: 'Like angel visits few and far between,' and he stole it bodily from Blair's *Grave*. Not satisfied with the theft he has spoiled it in the effort to disguise it. Blair wrote: "Like angel visits *short* and far between."¹¹ Campbell's 'Few and far between' is mere tautology."¹²

The enthusiasm of Bryant and Poe mirrored that of the English belle-lettrists of the first half of the nineteenth century. Such different personalities as Thomas Campbell, Walter Savage Landor, and John Clare recorded their appreciation of the spirit and, as they frequently termed it, the "Shakespearean vigor" of *The Grave*. But Poe was the last American writer, so far as I can determine, who left behind him any mention of *The Grave*.

In America, as in Britain, *The Grave* attained the zenith of its popularity during the twenty years from 1780 to 1800. Two editions were published in Philadelphia in 1786 and 1787 and one in Boston in the latter year. The decade of the 1790's witnessed the appearance of two more editions in Philadelphia (1791 and 1793), one in New Jersey (1797) and another in Boston (1793).¹³ Thus, in the space of six years, 1786-93, four editions of *The Grave* were called for in Philadelphia alone.

But popular interest in *The Grave*, as distinct from the literary interest of poets such as Bryant and Poe, waned after the turn of the century. The gloomy Calvinist tenor of *The Grave*, its insistence on the inevitability of death and the vanity of all worldly pursuits, no longer spoke to a secular society whose people were turning from the Puritanism of their fathers to the more congenial and accommodating creeds of the Unitarians and the Methodists.

So, during the 1840s one discovers only two American editions--both printed in New York. During the 1850s, *The Grave* went through two editions in Philadelphia (1851 and 1857), and one in New York in 1858. So far as I am aware there was only one edition printed during the decade of the 1860s--in Philadelphia. This impression seems to have been the last American edition of *The Grave* and signals the end of its career as a "popular" poem.

One is led to the conclusion that de Maar exaggerated in claiming that *The Grave* exercised "an immense influence" on American literature. The fact is, however, that the American reading public called--almost continuously--for editions of *The Grave* from 1753 until the 1860s and that two American writers of the first rank were deeply impressed by the power

of Blair's rugged lines. In the early years of our century, a greater critic than de Maar, George Saintsbury, remarked on the "not inconsiderable vigor" of *The Grave*, which, he declared, "secured it a reputation . . . it can hardly lose whenever it is fairly read."¹⁴ The century-long popularity of *The Grave* in America tends to confirm Saintsbury's judgment. Except in the case of *Thanatopsis*, *The Grave* left no enduring mark on American poetry; but there can be no doubt that it was a standard work in the libraries of literate Americans from well before the Revolution until the outbreak of the Civil War.

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NOTES

1. (Zalt-Bommel, 1928), p. 208.
2. I have discussed the historical context of *The Grave* and its later reputation in Great Britain in my introduction to the Augustan Reprint Society facsimile of the first edition (Los Angeles, 1973).
3. Misinformation about the alleged immediate popularity of *The Grave* abounds, most of it stemming from the wildly inaccurate remarks of George Gilfillan, who edited *The Poetical Works of Beattie, Blair and Falconer* (Edinburgh, 1854). Six years separate the first and second editions of *The Grave* (1743) and the third edition (1749). Hardly an indication of "immediate" popularity.
4. *A Catalogue of Books, Relating to the Discovery and Early History of North and South America, Forming a Part of the Library of E. D. Church*, 5 vols., (New York, 1951), V, 2001.
5. Lucile M. Morsch, *American Imprints Inventory, No. 9. Checklist of New Jersey Imprints. 1784-1800*, (Baltimore, 1939), p. 107.
6. *Quebec to Carolina in 1785-86*, eds. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (San Marino, California, 1943), p. 213. I am indebted to Edward Ayres, Esq., for this reference.
7. Douglas C. McMurtie and Albert H. Allen, *American Imprints Inventory, No. 6. Checklist of Kentucky Imprints, 1811-*

1820, Louisville, 1939).

8. In Parke Godwin's *Life of William Cullen Bryant*, 2 vols., (New York, 1883), I, 37.

9. *Op. Cit.*, (New York, 1964), pp. 67-68.

10. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 6 vols., (New York, 1939), I, 24.

11. The quotation is slightly inaccurate. Blair wrote--

. . . its Visits
Like those of *Angels*, short and far between.
(ll. 588-589)

Blair himself adapted this line, and several others, from John Norris, whose "The Parting" (*A Collection of Miscellanies*, London, 1692) has the following lines:

Like *Angel's* visits, short and bright.

12. Quoted by Hervey, *Israfel, The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2 vols., (New York, 1927), I, 283.

13. I have compiled these figures from the *National Union Catalogue*.

14. *A History of English Prosody*, 3 vols., (London, 1906-10), II, 492.