The Composition of The Grave

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The Composition of *The Grave*

I.

Robert Blair's *The Grave* cannot be classed among those poems that have been struck off in the white heat of inspiration. In his letter to the Reverend Philip Doddridge, dated 25 February 1741/2, Blair stated that "the great bulk [of the poem] was Composed Several years before I was clothed with so Sacred a Character." [*i.e.*, that of "a Minister of the Gospel."]¹ Thus, it is more than probable, as Professor Thomas Rogers has observed, that at least some parts of *The Grave* had been written as early as 1731, the year in which Blair was ordained and appointed minister of the parish of Athelstaneford.² But the poem, as it existed at this time, underwent considerable revision and received substantial additions, before it was finally published in 1743.

Thanks to the chance survival of one holograph leaf of an early version of *The Grave*, and to the diligence of one of Blair's nineteenth-century editors, Robert Anderson, who recorded the variant readings of the fair-copy manuscript of 1741-42, which has since disappeared, we can trace in part the growth and revision of *The Grave* and perhaps arrive empirically at some of the principles which guided Blair in his decade-long revision of the poem.³

The earliest extant version of *The Grave* is a fragmentary holograph manuscript preserved in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library,⁴ and it reads as follows:

1. National Library of Scotland MS. 582, no. 679A. I should like to express my gratitude to the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for granting me permission to cite this manuscript.


3. The fair-copy variants are listed in *The Poetical Works of Robert Blair . . . to which is prefixed, A Life of the Author, by Robert Anderson, M.D.* (London, 1802). Anderson observes, p. xv: "The variations from the common editions are printed from the original MS. 1741-2, in the possession of Mr. Solicitor General [i.e., one of Blair's sons]."

THE GRAVE

The Grave — cold thing! we shiver, when thou’rt nam’d,
Thy lone damp Chambers fright us unto palesness;
Thy Solemn, Speechless, Solitary Gloom,
Dark as was Chaos: er the high-hung Sun,
Was roll’d together, or had try’d his beams;
Or if not thus, yet the dim Sullen taper,
By Glimmering thro’ thy low-brow’d miry Vaults,
Furz’d round, with mouldy Damps, and ropy Slime,
Let falls* a Supernumerary horror:
And bluish-burning, makes thy night more dreary.
Methinks I know thee, by thy trusty Eue,
Cheerless unsocial Plant! that loves to Dwell
’midst Sculls and Coffins, Epitaphs and worms;
Where light-held Ghosts, and visionary Shades
Unbody’d, thick, beneath the wan Cold Moon
Solemnly Stalking in her lone sojourn:
Glide by Each Other, in Imperial Silence;
Hush’d, as was ever foot, of midnight thief
That Slides his wary hand, belowe the pillow,
Of The Grey Jealous Gold-adoring Miser:* And carries off the finger-temping prize.
No other Merriment, Dull tree! thou knowes.
[an extra space is left in the MS.]
Oft o’er the bleak Churchyard att night I’ve Seen,
By glimpse of Moon-shine, thro’ the waving trees:
The Schoolboy, with his satchell in his hand,
Whistling aloud, to bear his Courage up:
And lightly tripping, oer the long flint Stones,
With nettles skirted, and with moss o’ergrown:
That tell in homely phrase who lye belowe;
Art last he Starts, and hears or thinks he hears,
The Sound of Something, putting art his heels,
Full fast he fly’s, and dare not look behind him,
Till out of breath, he overthrows his fellows,
Who gather round, and wonder art the tale:
Of Grizly Apparition! Strait and tall,
That walks att dead of night, or takes his Stand
O’er Some new-open’d Grave, and Strange to tell
Evanishes att Crowing of the Cock.
[an extra space is left in the MS.]
The new-made Widdowl! too I’ve often Spy’d,
Sadd Sight! Slow-moving thro’ the scattered tombs:
Listless, the Crawls along, in doleful black:
Whilst bursts of Sorrow, Gush from Either Eye,
Fast-falling down her now Untasted Cheek.
Prone, on the lowly Grave, of the Dear man,
She droops: whilst buisy-meddling Memory,
In Barbarous Succession, musters up,

5. Let falls*] Lets fall (1743)
6. I have corrected a few inaccuracies in the published text.
The past Endearments, of their Softer hours,
Tenacious of its theme, till her heart ske.
Deep-musing o'er the senseless turf she Sobs,
Nor heeds the passenger, who looks that way.⁷
Dull grave! thow Spoilst the dance, of youthful blood:

It is easy to see what Blair added to and changed in this early draught. One's general impression after comparing this version with the first edition is that Blair's main concern in his revision was to lend greater dignity — and especially an aura of religious "seriousness" — to The Grave. In some cases Blair made his alterations at the expense of that homely color and rude immediacy for which most of his readers remember him. But the major addition to these opening lines is an unqualified success.

At some time between the drafting of the earlier version and that of the 1741/2 fair copy, Blair prefixed an invocation of eight and one-half lines — strikingly Miltonic in tone — to that rather stark apostrophe which opens the earlier draught. As Milton had invoked the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, so Blair calls upon the succours of Christ Himself, thus consciously following the example of England's greatest divine poet. The fact that this invocation was something of a late development may indicate that in the years following his ordination in 1731, and under the influence of men like Isaac Watts,⁸ Blair came increasingly to view the composition of The Grave as a religious duty, not merely as a literary diversion.

While they are not so important as the addition of the invocation, the thirteen verbal changes Blair made between the manuscript and the first edition are not, I think, so successful. In fact, taken as a whole, they seem to represent a suppression of Blair's characteristic vein of strong, sensuous language in favor of a studied gentility of phrase, at two removes from raw experience.⁹ For instance, in the first line of the holograph, the epithet in "The Grave — cold thing!" becomes, in the first edition, "dread" — an alteration which takes us one step away from the clammy chill of death to our thoughts about it. Similarly,

⁷. who looks that way] inserted over that saunters by obliterated

⁸. Blair probably met Watts for the first time in 1729, two years before his ordination. In his letter to Doddridge, dated 25 February 1741/2, Blair noted that he had received "many Civilities" from Watts, "when att London about twelve years agoe."

⁹. Blair's "familiarity of expression" bothered Philip Doddridge, who — perhaps unfortunately — suggested the final revisions which I shall discuss later. See Doddridge's letter to the Rev. Mr. Samuel Clark, dated 5 April 1743, in the Correspondence and Diary of Philip Doddridge D.D., ed. John Doddridge Humphries, 4 vols., (London, 1830), IV, 236.
while in the holograph "we" shiver (line 1) at the name of the grave, the word "men" — a more general and less affecting subject — is introduced into the first edition. This tendency to suppress the blunt, sensual element in his expression is evident in most of Blair's other revisions. Thus, at line six, the "dim Sullen taper," which is described as "bluish-burning" (l. 10), becomes the "sickly Taper," while the colorful and significant compound-epithet is dropped altogether. I need not comment on every one of these variants: having both texts, before him the reader can collate them himself and will find in almost every case the tendency I have described.

One especially significant revision, however, occurs at lines 14-17, where Blair described the "light-heeld Ghosts, and visionary Shades" as being "Unbody'd" and "thick" (i.e., they are numerous) as they "Glide by Each Other, in Imperiall Silence." In the first edition we perceive the hand of the censor. In this later text, Blair equivocates on the existence of his spirits: after "Beneath the wan Cold Moon," he has inserted the parenthetical phrase "(as Fame reports)." Wishing, perhaps, to avoid the imputation of credulity, Blair weakens the effect of the passage by introducing what must still have been in the mid-eighteenth century a rather "modern" note of doubt.

II.

After the holograph the next state of The Grave which we can reconstruct with any degree of certainty is the now lost fair copy of 1741-2: this was probably the very manuscript which Blair asked Watts to forward to Doddridge in the Winter of 1741-2 and which underwent extensive eleventh-hour revision at the hands of the latter. My assertion is supported by the fact that Anderson's date for the manuscript, 1741/2 — presumably based on the authority of Blair's son,

10. My line references are keyed to the holograph, not the first edition.

11. It should be recalled that in the mid-eighteenth century a belief in ghostly visitations did not stigmatize one as being necessarily ignorant or credulous. Dr. Johnson, for one, was uncertain on this point, but as his Prayers and the Cock Lane Ghost incident demonstrate, he certainly wished to believe in such occurrences. It is interesting to note that, as Englishmen ceased to believe in ghosts, the place of spirits in serious literature was reduced from that of agents (e.g., Hamlet and Macbeth) to that of a picturesque element in the background of the action, as in The Grave and late eighteenth-century poetry generally.

12. There were undoubtedly several manuscripts now lost which represented stages of composition that intervened between these two survivors.
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Robert — agrees with the date of Blair’s letter to Doddridge, 25 February 1741/2, in which he writes:

I have Desired Dr. Watts to transmitt to yow a Manuscript Poem of mine Entitled the Grave.18

Furthermore, in that revealing letter which he wrote to the Reverend Samuel Clark on the 5th April 1745, and to which I have already referred, Doddridge, speaking of the part he played in dressing the poem up for publication, preserved one valuable detail for critics of The Grave:

You will . . . find many lines which contain very little poetry, and have a familiarity of expression which I cannot approve. It passed through my hands in manuscript and received considerable alterations . . . . Perhaps, it was altered in at least fifty places, which would have been judged either dead or low.14

In Anderson’s text there are forty-one lines which were in the 1741/2 manuscript but which Blair cancelled or revised for the first edition. Additionally, there are two entirely new lines in the first edition which Anderson did not find in the manuscript. These forty-three cases in which the manuscript readings vary from those of the first edition roughly account for those fifty alterations for which Doddridge claimed responsibility. I think it more than probable, therefore, that the manuscript variants listed in Anderson’s text are in fact the very passages to which Doddridge objected and which he persuaded Blair to revise.

These final revisions, whether or not Blair made them willingly, show the same euphemistic principle at work that I pointed out in my discussion of the holograph. A mild example is the apostrophe at line 85, which in the fair copy reads as follows:

Invidious gravel thou separat’st chief friends
Whom love has bound . . . .18

The harsh, simple diction of this line is replaced in the first edition by a more melodious but less powerful expression:

Invidious Grave! how dost thou rend in sunder
Whom Love has knit, and Sympathy made one.
(ll. 85-86)

A more interesting example of the heightening of “low” diction occurs in the well-known passage on suicide. Here are those lines as they appeared in the 1741-2 manuscript:

Self-murder!—Name it not: our island's shame!
That makes her hooted at: shall the foul hand,
Acting the trion's part, be crimson'd o'er
With blood of its own lord! Forbid it heaven!
Shall nature, swerving at her first command,
Be her own butcher? Shall we on disgust
Presume to set ourselves at liberty
Without once asking leave? Dreadful attempt...16

Here is the first-edition text:

Self-Murder! name it not: Our Island's Shame!
That makes her the Reproach of neighbouring States.
Shall Nature, swerving from her earliest Dictate
Self-Preservation, fall by her own Act?
Forbid it Heav'n! Let not upon Disgust
The shameless Hand be foully crimson'd o'er
With Blood of its own Lord. Dreadful Attempt!
(II. 404 ff.)

The objectionable words, apparently, are "hooted at," "foul," and "butcher"—words which Doddridge might well have judged too familiar for a divine poem. But, unfortunately, there is a rude violence in the phrase, "Shall nature... be her own butcher?" which is lost in the altered version: "Shall Nature... fall by her own act." The same objection might be made against Blair's deletion of this wonderfully visual sentence with its stinging verb in the tail: "Self-Murder... our Island's Shame!/ That makes her hooted at." The revised line, though admittedly more elegant, seems tame by comparison.

Blair was, at least by instinct, a plain speaker; and, like most plain-speakers, his language is sometimes rough and his images occasionally ludicrous. For instance, at line 521, the "prude" in the fair copy becomes, in the first edition, "the long-demurring Maid." Similarly, in his characterization of Sin (II. 600-633), Blair applies a vulgar but colorful compound-epithet in the manuscript:

Oh! Where shall Fancy find
A proper name to call thee by, expressive
Of thy intrinsic filth? Big-bellied ill!17

But, in the first edition, we see evidence once again of Doddridge's fastidious hand, for the passage now reads:

Oh, where shall Fancy find
A proper Name to call thee by, expressive
Of all thy Horrors? Pregnant Womb of Ills!
(II. 621 ff.)

17. Anderson, p. 44.
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In these particular cases, I prefer the less polished readings of the 1741-2 manuscript to those of the first edition, which, as I have suggested, we may attribute as much to Doddridge as to Blair. Had The Grave never passed through Doddridge's hands, Blair's early critics might have found it even more Shakespearean in tone than they did. But, in all fairness, one must not be too hard on Doddridge, for there is more than an even chance that, had Blair been denied his critical advice and practical help, the world might never have seen The Grave at all. Blair had confessed in his letter of introduction to Dr. Doddridge (25 February 1741/2) that his previous attempt to interest a bookseller in his manuscript had met with failure:

Yesterday I had a letter from the Dr. [i.e., Isaac Watts] Signifying his Aprobation of the piece in a manner most Obliging . . . but at the Same time he Advertises me that he had offered it to 2 book-sellers of his Acquaintance, who he tells me did not care to run the risk of publishing it — they can scarce think (considering how critical an age we live in with respect to such kind of writings) that a person living 300 miles from the great Monopolis of a Nation could write so as to be Acceptable to the fashionable & polite.18

We may never know how much persuasion Doddridge had to exert, but in less than a year's time his efforts had succeeded where Watts's had failed: for in March, 1743, a small first edition of The Grave was offered for sale by Mary Cooper at The Globe in Paternoster Row.19 But, as it turned out, the hesitancy of Watts's booksellers was justified; for forty years after its first publication The Grave was virtually ignored by "the fashionable and polite."

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18. National Library of Scotland MS. 582, no. 679A.
19. The Gentleman's Magazine (XIII:1743), p. 168. I characterize the first edition as "small," because Pinkerton, who wrote in 1785 that he had carefully collected and compared all the available editions of The Grave, was ignorant of any earlier than the third (Edinburgh, 1747), which he erroneously supposed to have been the first edition. See his Letters of Literature (London, 1785), pp. 276-277, the first published critical notice of The Grave. In addition, the auction catalogue of Jerome Kern's library notes that an old manuscript inserted in his first-edition copy of The Grave recorded that Blair's relatives did not possess copies of any edition earlier than that of 1747. See The Library of Jerome Kern, published by The Anderson Galleries (New York, 1929), p. 14.