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JAMES MEANS

A Reading of The Grave

I

My purpose in this brief paper is to define and to discuss the theme of Robert Blair's The Grave (1743) which I take to be the inevitability of death and the folly of living for the things of this world. This theme, though not novel, has always been popular. It has found eager expositors and attentive audiences through the Christian centuries from the time of Saint Augustine to that of Pascal. Indeed, even as I write, our own Savonarola, Mr. Malcolm Muggeridge, hurls jeremiads from the television screen with a Calvinistic earnestness reminiscent of the Wesleys and the other early Evangelicals.¹

During the eighteenth century in England it was the evangelical priests, hymnodists, and poets who propagated this harsh—and yet appealing—message: men such as Issac Watts, the brothers Wesley, John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace," and his melancholy friend, the poet Cowper, who wrote so movingly of the religious peace he never found. But the subject of this study, Robert Blair, surpassed all these writers in the severity of his warning. Religious gloom has rarely been so intensely painted as in The Grave, nor made so commercially successful.²

¹ I use the term "Evangelicals" to designate the eighteenth-century revivalists both within and without the Church of England. Thus, I would term Watts, John Wesley, and George Whitefield all Evangelicals, though the first was a dissenter, the second an Arminian Anglican, and the third a Calvinist. For the finest treatment of this subject, the reader should consult L. E. Elliott-Binns, The Early Evangelicals: A Religious and Social Study (Greenwich, Conn., 1955) and the monumental achievement of Hoxie Neale Fairchild to which this study is indebted.

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This phrase "religious gloom" suggests one quite crucial point about The Grave—that Blair relies more on an appeal to his reader's emotions than on rational argument to win him over to the side of the angels. In this, Blair was a typical Evangelical and a man of his time. Gone are the theological subtleties of The Hind and the Panther (1687) or Bishop Burnet's bedside debates with Lord Rochester, which, as we all recall, resulted in the latter's sensational conversion and edifying death.

No, the orthodox had found that rational argument with deists, neo-stoics, neo-epicureans, or downright atheists frequently yielded no fruit; consequently, they changed their tactics. By mid-century, the Evangelicals had discovered that the most convincing "argument" with which they could confront an unbeliever was the grim fact of death itself. Ian Watt has made this point neatly in his discussion of Clarissa (1748): "The reason for this emphasis on death seems to have been the belief that the growing secularisation of thought could best be combated by showing how only faith in the future state could provide a secure shelter from the terrors of mortality; for the orthodox at least, death, not ridicule, was the test of truth." This morbid fascination with bodily dissolution—one of the most striking features of Clarissa and of The Grave—was not restricted to the lower orders. Many who despised the hysteria of a Methodist meeting wept over the protracted martyrdom of Clarissa Harlowe. Whether he heard Wesley with rapture or read Richardson with tears, the average Englishman of the 1740s responded to the emotional appeal of the apologetics of death. Let us turn now to Blair's treatment of this traditional theme.

II

Several of the so-called "Graveyard Poets," Blair and Young in particular, because they were clergymen, were well qualified to present

3 I do not intend to slight such great achievements in Anglican apologetics as Cudworth's True Intellectual System of the Universe (1678) and Bishop Butler's Analogy of Religion (1736), but one doubts whether either of these works was responsible for many conversions.


5 See, for example, Elizabeth Singer Rowe's Miscellaneous Works in Prose and Verse, 2 vols. (London, 1739). Her letters suggest that Mrs. Rowe was so much in love with easy and death that she must have found the actual experience somewhat anticlimactic.
in poetic form the harrowing pageant of illness, decay and death, which, as Van Tieghem has observed, they had "constamment sous les yeux."  

I have emphasized the traditional nature of the theme Blair chose to versify. The originality of The Grave lies in his treatment of this theme, which is anything but decorous. Elizabeth Barrett Browning once called Blair "a brawny, contemplative Orson," 7 and it is Blair's roughness, his Jacobean predilection for charnelhouse jests, his mingling of the serious and the grotesque, which so appealed to his nineteenth-century readers and critics. The poet John Clare, among others, termed The Grave "Shakespearean," and I suspect that it is this lack of decorum that Clare had in mind. 8

Blair's insistence on realistic, and frequently repulsive, detail has impressed more recent critics as well. Even so fastidious a reader as the late Professor Saintsbury remarked on the "not inconsiderable vigour" 9 of The Grave, though he did not stoop to number the streaks of the tulip. One source of Blair's vigour derives, I think, from the sadistic relish with which he portrays humanity in the clutches of death. Perhaps the following passage, for which Blake designed a superb engraving, will confirm my assertion: 10

What Groan was that I heard? Deep Groan indeed!
With Anguish heavy-laden! Let me trace it:
From yonder Bed it comes, where the Strong Man,
By stronger Arm belabour'd, gasps for Breath
Like a hard-hunted Beast. How his great Heart
Beats thick! his roomy Chest by far too scant
To give the Lungs full Play! What now avail
The strong-built sinewy Limbs, and well-spread Shoulders?
See! how he tugs for Life, and lays about him,
Mad with his Pain! Eager he catches hold
Of what comes next to Hand, and grasps it hard,

6 La Poesie de la nuit et des tombeaux en europe au XVIIIe siécle (Paris, 1921), p. 11.
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Just like a Creature drowning! Hideous Sight!
Oh! how his Eyes stand out, and stare full ghastly!
Whilst the Distemper's rank and deadly Venom
Shoots like a burning Arrow cross his Bowels,
And drinks his Marrow up. Heard you that Groan?
It was his last. See how the great Goliath,
Just like a Child that brawl'd itself to Rest,
Lies still.

(II. 262 ff.)

Blair takes a grim satisfaction in the triumph of Death over the Pride of Life. Indeed, with its breathless catalogue of suffering this passage is utterly remorseless. But Blair obviously intended this tableau to be as edifying as it is unpleasant. The more terrible his portrayal of death, the more likely Blair was to realize his evangelical purpose: to awaken a sense of sin in what he termed a "licentious age" and to bring the unregenerate to repentance.¹¹

III

In its combination of classical and Christian elements, Blair's treatment of his theme is typical of eighteenth-century piety.¹² Nevertheless, in The Grave, the New Dispensation always preponderates. Edward Young took the most famous line in Vergil as the motto for his Night-Thoughts: "Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt." Blair, by way of contrast, chose a line from the Book of Job, "The House appointed for all Living," thus announcing on the title-page of The Grave that his treatment of the common theme would be scriptural.¹³

Blair's reliance upon Biblical allusion and imagery reflects the conviction held by many Evangelicals that Holy Scripture, as the revealed Word of God, presented not only a higher truth than the pagan literature had attained, but that the scriptures surpassed classical writings even when judged by purely literary standards.


¹² For example, one of Isaac Watt's most powerful lyrics, on the subject of the Last Judgment, is cast in the form of an Horation sapphic ode.

¹³ Biblical quotations are woven through the texture of The Grave. The Revelation of St. John is quoted at line 9; the Book of Job (Blair's favorite book, one might surmise) at 11. 228, 275 ff., and 506; Ecclesiastes at 11. 296 and 451, and St. Matthew's Gospel at line 486.
One of Blair's fellow-evangelicals, the Reverend James Hervey, made this point strongly, if rather melodramatically, in a letter dated 1 November 1746. In discussing the plan of his *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746), Hervey exclaims: "Away, my Homer; I have no more need of being entertained by you, since Job and the Prophets furnish me with Images much more magnificent, and Lessons infinitely more important." While Blair would doubtless have sympathised with the spirit of this outburst, he did not banish the classical authors from his poem; there are Homeric echoes in *The Grave*, as well as phrases culled from Vergil and Lucretius. These allusions, however, amount to no more than appliqué. They constitute one category of those "proper arts" which Blair told Doddridge he had felt obliged to use, in order to make his "serious Argument" acceptable to "a licentious age that cares for none of those Things."

Thus, unlike the great majority of eighteenth-century poets, Blair never celebrates the ancient world. He is no Mantegna revivifying with a reverent brush the remains of antique virtue. When Blair invokes ancient heroes, it is to condemn them and the cult of personal glory, as in the following passage:

Where are the mighty Thunderbolts of War?
The Roman Caesars, and the Graecian Chiefs,
The Boast of Story? Where the hot-brain'd Youth?
Who the Tiara at his Pleasure tore
From Kings of all the then discover'd Globe;
And cry'd forsooth, because his Arm was hamper'd,
And had not Room enough to do its Work?
Alas! how slim, dishonourably slim!
And cram'md into a Space we blush to name.

(11. 123 ff.)

It is interesting to compare Blair's contemptuous dismissal of Alexander with Pope's celebration of his exploits in *The Temple of Fame* (1715):

High on a Throne with Trophies charg'd, I view'd
The Youth that all things but himself subdu'd;
His feet on Sceptres and Tiar'd trod,
And his horned Head bely'd the Libyan God.

(11. 151 ff.)

16 See also Thomson's roll-call of the ancient sages in *Winter* (1726), ll. 431–540. It is worth mentioning that, as Pope grew older, his attitude
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Pope’s majestic presentation of Alexander is that of the Renaissance humanist, while Blair’s viewpoint is that of the orthodox Christian, scanning from the Mount of Revelation the misshapen ruins of pagan presumption.

Similarly, in another passage, Blair heaps scorn on the attempts of the ancients—and, by implication, of some moderns as well—to achieve immortality through the creation of monuments and other works of art:

Absurd! to think to over-reach the Grave,
And from the Wreck of Names to rescue ours!
The best concerted Schemes Men lay for Fame
Die fast away: Only themselves die faster.
The far-fam’d Sculptor, and the lawrell’d Bard,
Those bold Insurers of Deathless Fame,
Supply their little feeble Aids in vain.
The tapering Pyramid! th’ Egyptian’s Pride.
And Wonder of the World! whose spiky Top
Has wounded the thick Cloud, and long out-liv’d
The angry Shaking of the Winter’s Storm;
Yet spent at last by th’Injuries of Heaven,
Shatter’d with Age, and furrow’d o’er with Years,
The Mystick Cone with Hieroglyphicks crusted
Gives Way. Oh! lamentable Sight! at once
The Labour of whole Ages lumbers down;
A hideous and misshapen Length of Ruins.

Ambition! half convicted of her Folly,
Hangs down the Head, and reddens at the Tale.

(ll. 183–99. 206–7)

The building of the village church, however, Blair regards as a “pious Work”:

See yonder Hallow’d Fame! the pious Work
Of names once fam’d, now dubious or forgot,
And buried ‘midst the Wreck of Things which were.

(ll. 28–30)

Like the pagan monuments, the church is subject to time and will eventually fall into ruin; the names of its builders are already

towards “heroism” became more Swiftian: “Heroes are much the same, the point’s agreed, / From Macedonia’s madman to the Swede.” (An Essay on Man, IV, 219–20.)
fading into oblivion. But its building was, nevertheless, a praise-worthy endeavour, because this temple is dedicated to the worship of God, not to the gratification of human ambition.

I have dwelt so long on Blair’s attitude towards classical antiquity because it illustrates a crucial point about The Grave: the fact that it is an anti-Enlightenment poem. The Grave expresses a basically anti-humanistic, or non-secular, view of life which Hiram Haydn has identified as one element in the movement he calls the Counter-Renaissance. In the uncompromising spirit of the Hebrew prophets, or of Bunyan, Blair utterly rejects anything—apart from the Gospel—that tends to make men feel at home in the world, or that distracts them from leading a holy life and preparing to face death and judgment. Blair’s portrayal of death is therefore all the more brutal, his emphasis on the ephemerality of life all the more harsh, because he consistently undermines and condemns all the human endowments and secular pursuits from which natural man seeks to derive a momentary pleasure or a temporary distraction from the inescapable fact of mortality.

IV

Blair devotes a large section of The Grave, following his discussion of antiquity, to the smashing of the most common idols, or “possessions” as he terms them, that tend to alienate mankind from God. The hundred lines in which Blair discredits the natural and acquired gifts men most desire—Beauty (11. 237–56), Physical Strength (11. 257–85), Erudition (11. 286–96), Eloquence (11. 297–318), Scientific Skill (11. 319–36), and Wealth (11. 337–49)—have an emblematic quality about them. The personified “possessions” themselves have more in common with the allegorical charac-

17 One inevitably recalls Pope’s lines from the Epistle to Bathurst (Moral Essay III): “And what? no monument, inscription, stone? / His race, his form, his name almost unknown? / Who builds a Church to God, and not to Fame, / Will never mark the marble with his Name.” (ll. 283 ff.)

18 Blair’s use of the word “fane” (from the Latin fanum) may be ironic; the church is a “hallowed fane” unlike the profane ones he later condemns in the passage beginning at line 183.

19 The whole topic of post-Renaissance intellectual pessimism has been treated exhaustively and brilliantly in Professor Haydn’s The Counter-Renaissance (New York, 1950). Another excellent study is Paul Hazard’s La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715 (Paris, 1961).
ters in a medieval morality or in *The Faerie Queen* than with the sort of personification one commonly encounters in eighteenth-century poetry. 20

Thus, in these lines the traditional nature of Blair's material is particularly evident. As L. P. Wilkinson has remarked, in his sensitive study of Horace, the Roman poets had made this theme—"the vanity of even the noblest gifts and actions to save a man from death" 21—a commonplace motif in their funeral elegies. But, unlike Horace, Villon, or Ronsard, Blair does not lament the decay of Beauty; rather, he glories in her passing, as these lines amply show:

Beauty! thou pretty Play-thing! dear Decret!
That steals so softly o'er the Stripling's Heart,
And gives it a new Pulse, unknown before!
The Grave discredits thee: Thy Charms expung'd,
Thy Roses faded, and thy Lillies soil'd,
What hast thou more to boast of? Will thy Lovers
Flock round thee now, to gaze and do thee Homage?
Methinks! I see thee with they Head low laid,
Whilst surfeited upon Damask Cheek
The high-fed Worm in lazy Volumes roll'd
Riots unscar'd. For this, was all thy Caution?
For this, thy painful Labours at thy Glass?
T' improve those Charms, and keep them in Repair,
For which the Spoiler thanks thee not. Foul-feeder!

(11. 237 ff.) 22

20 Professor Thomas Rogers makes a similar point in his unpublished dissertation, "Robert Blair and The Grave" (University of Pennsylvania, 1955), when he observes (p. 202) that "except for the widow and the friend, the examples [of human characters] in The Grave seem rather artificial, far fetched for the moral rather than observed in life."


22 The subject of "my lady's painting" found expression not only in *Hamlet*, but it had been common in medieval and Renaissance paintings and engravings, as Bridget Gellert has observed in "The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of Hamlet," *Studies in Philology*, LXVII:1 (1970), 58. In many of these representations, "Death was depicted as holding a mirror up to a woman, and showing her a skull instead of her own face." (Loc. cit.) Louis Martz has used a painting which exemplifies this theme, "La Madeleine au Miroir" by Georges de la Tour (1593–1652) as the front cover of his recent book, *The Poetry of Meditation*. In *The Pilgrimage of Life* (1962), p. 77, Samuel C. Chew connects this motif with the medieval "Death and the Maiden" theme.
Blair is no Christian humanist who regards beauty, strength or intelligence as gifts of God. On the contrary, good Calvinist that he was, Blair treats all these possessions as positive evils, because, in his view they tend to alienate man from God by fostering an illusion of security. Blair is at pains to emphasize their ephemerality: like the monuments of antiquity, beauty, strength, and even an exalted mind, are equally subject to decay.

Blair's treatment of his theme—the universal dominion of death—is thus everywhere consistent. The decay of one's mind and body, like the decline of empires, attests to the radical insufficiency of the creature and to his dependence upon an omnipotent creator. Blair's exhortation is the familiar one of all evangelists: forsake vanity and turn again to God. If the greater part of his poem expresses a bitter, funereal gloom, it is perhaps some comfort that, towards the end of *The Grave*, Blair traces a brief vignette depicting the peaceful death of a faithful Christian:

_Sure! the last End_  
Of the Good Man is *Peace*. How calm his _Exit!_  
Night-Dews fall not more gently to the _Ground,_  
Nor weary worn out _Winds_ expire so _soft._

(11. 712 ff.)

V

I shall close my reading of *The Grave* with a brief comment on the passage in which Blair argues strenuously against any justification for suicide. These lines are interesting for two reasons: first, because the moral question of suicide had been revived in the mid-seventeenth century by the followers of Hobbes and by the neo-Stoics and had become an important religious issue in Blair's day, just as it remains a grave social problem in our own.

Secondly, as we shall see, Blair's contribution to the debate is firmly grounded on the chief article of this Calvinist faith—that is, the absolute sovereignty of God. Here are Blair's lines:

23 The five major points of Calvinist theology stand quite obviously behind *The Grave*. As Fairchild points out, in his *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, I, 232: "The stern creed of Calvin was still a vital force" during the first half of the century in Scotland. Like other ministers of the Kirk, Blair would have taken the Calvinist position on Grace, Justification, and Human Depravity for granted as the orthodox point-of-view. Unfortunately, none of Blair's sermons seem to have survived, but his correspondence supports my view of his Calvinism.
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Self-Murther! 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.

Unheard of Tortures
Must be reserv'd for such: These herd together;
The Common Damn'd shun their Society,
And look upon themselves as Fiends less foul.
Our Time is fix'd; and all our Days are number'd;
How long, how short, we know not: This we know,
Duty requires we calmly wait the Summons,
Nor dare to stir till Heav'n shall give Permission:
Like Centrys that must keep their destin'd Stand,
And wait th'appointed Hour, till they're reliev'd.
Those only are the Brave, that keep their Ground,
And keep it to the last. To run away
Is but a Coward's Trick: To run away
From this World's Ills, that at the very worst
Will soon blow o'er, thinking to mend ourselves
By boldly vent'ring on a World unknown,
And plunging headlong in the dark; 'tis Mad;
No Frenzy half so desperate as this.

(11. 403-9 413 ff.)

This passage may seem disproportionately long to the modern reader, as Professor Rogers has suggested. But perhaps, as is so often the case, we want a sense of history. The British proclivity to suicide struck Blair and his orthodox contemporaries as nothing less than a national tragedy. Edward Young underscored the sense of national disgrace in his "Night the Fifth," published in the same year as The Grave:

O Britain, infamous for Suicide!
An Island in thy Manners! far disjoin'd
From the whole World of Rationals beside,
In ambient Waves plunge thy polluted Head
Wash the dire Stain, nor shock the Continent

Young’s tone is as strained as his image is ludicrous, but his charge is not misdirected. I might mention a few of the more notorious examples: Thomas Creech, the well-known translator of Lucretius, committed suicide in 1700, and this act received widespread publicity. In his Cato (1713), the most admired tragedy of the century, Addison depicted the self-destruction of his stoic protagonist as an heroic exit from life. The suicide of Addison’s cousin, Eustace Budgell, in 1737, the year Samuel Johnson arrived in London, created a sensation. Thirty years later, in 1773, we find Boswell and Johnson discussing the case during their tour of the Hebrides.26 In 1732, the Italian free-thinker, Alberto Radicati, Count of Passerano, published A Philosophical Dissertation upon Death, in which he denied that there was anything inherently wicked in suicide. For disseminating such opinions, Passeran, along with his book-seller and his publisher, was taken into custody. Six years later, Pope brought Passeran into his first Epilogue to the Satires (1738) in a passage which ridicules the stoic notion of suicide as an heroic act:

If Blount dispatch’d himself, he play’d the man,
And so may’st Thou, Illustrious Passeran!
But shall a Printer, weary of his life,
Learn from their Books, to hang himself and Wife?
(11. 123–26)

Counter-blasts from the orthodox were numerous. One of the most influential spokesmen for the angels, William Sherlock, devoted several pages to a discussion of suicide in his immensely popular Practical Discourse Concerning Death, which first appeared in 1689. Here is the essence of Sherlock’s argument: “The more unnatural the Sin is . . . the greater the Sin is . . . and if the Nearness of the Relation increases the Sin, no Body is so near to us as ourselves, and therefore there is no such unnatural Murder as this . . . And if it be a Sin to destroy our own Lives, it is the most mortal and damning Sin, for it destroys Soul and Body together, because it makes our Repentance impossible.” 27 Blair restates Sherlock’s contention that

26 See Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, edited by Allen Wendt (Boston, 1965), pp. 150–51: “We talked of a man’s drowning himself.—Johnson. ‘I should never think it time to make away with myself.’—I put the case of Eustace Budgell.”

suicide is the most serious of sins; and, as we know that Blair possessed a copy of Sherlock "On Death," it seems very likely that the long discussion of suicide in The Grave is indebted to Blair's reading of the Practical Discourse.28

Blair's abhorrence of suicide, like his attacks on pagan vanity and human "possessions," expresses his disgust at all human attempts to throw over the moral traces. For Blair, however, self-destruction is the blackest of sins, much more serious than the pride men take in their beauty, learning, or wealth, since it represents the ultimate repudiation of God's sovereignty. According to Blair, salvation depends on man's faithful obedience to the often unfathomable dictates of the deity. Perhaps now one can see why Blair chose a line from the Book of Job as his motto for The Grave.

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