

CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD AND ETON

1716-1734

I

IN the first years of the eighteenth century two sisters, Mary and Dorothy Antrobus, set up a shop in the city of London. It was variously described as a millinery business¹ and 'a kind of India warehouse',² and the sisters conducted it with tolerable success. About 1709 their partnership was interrupted by the marriage of Dorothy to a London scrivener and exchange broker named Philip Gray. An arrangement was made by which Mary carried on the business with such assistance as Dorothy, in her married state, could give her; and it was transferred to a shop forming part of a house in Cornhill which belonged to Philip Gray.³ He and his wife, and presumably Mary Antrobus as well, lived in the rest of the house. There were twelve children of the marriage, all of whom died in their infancy except the fifth, who was born on 26 December 1716, and was given the name of Thomas.

The Gray and Antrobus families, and their connections by marriage, shared much the same background of commerce and the professions. They were prosperous in a modest way, but never achieved any distinction or success. Philip Gray was the third and youngest son of a wine-merchant connected with the East India Company. One of his brothers had died at Madras in the Company's service; the other was a London merchant; there were four sisters. Mrs Gray's father, like her husband, was a scrivener, and her mother was the daughter of yet another scrivener. She had two brothers, Robert and William Antrobus. Robert spent his entire life as an assistant master at Eton; William was also a master there for many years, and

Thomas Gray

then migrated to a Northamptonshire rectory. Her eldest sister Anne married an attorney named Jonathan Rogers; her second sister Jane married William Oliffe, vaguely described as a gentleman of Norfolk.⁴

The married life of Philip and Dorothy Gray was a miserable affair, ruined almost from the outset by the husband's peculiarities of temper. He was tortured by a corroding jealousy. He was jealous of his wife's kind-hearted brothers and sisters, and of Mary Antrobus in particular; he was even jealous of the shop, although he expected Mrs Gray to provide herself with clothes and other necessaries, and to pay for their son's education, out of its profits. At the best of times he was surly and morose; and at intervals his gloom gave place to moods of uncontrollable fury, when he would attack his wife 'in the most inhuman manner, by beating, kicking, punching, and with the most vile and abusive language'. Scenes of this description were still taking place, with ever-increasing violence, twenty-five years after their marriage. Mrs Gray, a woman of great courage and devotion, endured it all stoically for the sake of her son.⁵

Such was the background of Thomas Gray's earliest years. In this uneasy household he grew into a sensitive and intelligent little boy, frightened of his father, adored by his mother, petted by childless aunts. A precocious only child, without cousins or close playmates of his own age, he became the centre of much elderly attention, but was obliged to rely for companionship upon himself and his books. His health, moreover, was feeble. There is a story that his little brothers and sisters had died of suffocation, owing to too great a fullness of blood, and that he 'would certainly have been cut off as early, had not his mother, with a courage remarkable for one of her sex, and withal so very tender a parent, ventured to open a vein with her own hand, which instantly removed the paroxysm'.⁶ Whatever the truth of this account may be, he was the only survivor of twelve children, the solitary living shoot from a weakening stock.

Childhood and Eton

His uncles, the masters at Eton, saw their nephew growing lonely and self-absorbed in the dispiriting atmosphere of his home. They determined to get him away into country air and into the society of other boys of his own age, and offered to arrange for his admission to Eton. His mother agreed, like the sensible woman she was. His father refused to contribute anything towards his expenses at school; but funds were forthcoming from the profits of the shop, and his uncles also gave some assistance. In 1725, before he was nine years old, Thomas Gray entered Eton as an Oppidan, and was placed low down in the Second Form.

II

It must have been an alarming experience for so timid and retiring a child, even with the reassuring presence of his uncles in the background, to be taken straight from home and plunged into the bewildering confusion of a great public school. Although Gray was an Oppidan, and did not have to endure the 'drubbing and tyranny' which he afterwards described as the accustomed portion of the Collegers,⁷ life at Eton in the eighteenth century was far from being a cloistered affair. But his years there were unquestionably the happiest that he was ever to know; and so he always regarded them.

His uncle William Antrobus became Rector of Everdon in Northamptonshire in 1726, and presumably left Eton at that time; but his uncle Robert remained, and carefully watched over the little boy as he progressed slowly up the school. He took great pains to instruct his nephew in botany, an interest which remained with him throughout life; and in particular he directed his attention to the properties of herbs and simples.⁸ It was his wish that Gray should take up the profession of medicine, and in his will he bequeathed 'to my nephew Thomas Gray all such books as relate to the study of physick, provided he be educated in that profession'. But Robert Antrobus died at the beginning of 1730; and Gray's study of physic never

Thomas Gray

developed beyond a life-long and sometimes rather excessive preoccupation with the care of his own health.

His appearance in mourning for his uncle Robert fixed a curiously vivid impression in the mind of Jacob Bryant, a boy who had come to Eton the previous half. 'I remember he made an elegant little figure in his sable dress, for he had a very good complexion, and fine hair, and appeared to much advantage among the boys who were near him in the school, and who were much more rough and rude.' Bryant was more than eighty years old when he wrote down the reminiscences which include this passage, and his memory sometimes played him false; but if his little vignette of the demure child in his mourning clothes was accurately drawn, it is our earliest picture of Gray.⁹

He had reached the Upper School in 1729; and, much though he must have grieved at his kindly uncle's death, he had already learnt to look after himself and to pursue his own independent line. His passion for books, his eager acquisition of all sorts of knowledge, developed very early. He began to feel the first stirrings of his own creative powers. When he was asked, at the height of his fame, 'if he recollected when he first perceived in himself any symptoms of poetry, he answered that he believed it was when at Eton he began to take pleasure in reading Virgil for his own amusement, and not in school-hours, or as a task'. Although he never figured as one of the leading scholars at Eton, his exercises in Latin verse were thought to be very good, and Jacob Bryant could quote a passage from one of them seventy years later.¹⁰

His poetry was to be deeply influenced by his love and understanding of English history; and this may likewise be traced back to his Eton days. Windsor Castle, with its wealth of associations and legends, dominated all the smiling landscape. The Castle was seldom visited by King George the Second; but its chapels and halls, its galleries and wards and terraces were in consequence all the more accessible to a studious little boy from Eton. And at Eton itself the memory

Childhood and Eton

of a very different monarch haunted him. A few years before, the fine bronze statue of King Henry the Sixth had been placed in the centre of School Yard; and every day, as he passed to Chapel and to the long hours of work in Lower and then in Upper School, the story of the Founder was brought home to him in all its sadness. 'The murther'd Saint', 'the meek Usurper', 'her Henry's holy Shade'—time and again that devout and gentle presence was to figure in his poems.

When he was thirteen or fourteen, he became one of a small group of friends who had drifted together in the general turmoil of the school. Superficially they were very much of the same type—delicate in health, disinclined to take part in games or adventure, poetical and romantic in temperament, a trifle conceited, rather old for their years: the sort of little clique that has existed in every school in every century. They called themselves the Quadruple Alliance.

The leader of the group was a year or so younger than the others, a precocious and talented child called Horace Walpole. He was the youngest son of Sir Robert Walpole, the First Minister, born in the eighteenth year of his marriage to a wife to whom he was persistently unfaithful, and who had begun to return his indifference. Horace Walpole, like Gray, was adored and indulged by his mother; but the disagreements between Sir Robert and his wife were conducted with decorum, and Horace never knew parental conflicts of the type which saddened the childhood of his friend. He was a pale and fragile little boy, vivacious, self-possessed, somewhat conscious of his position as the son of the great Minister, but associating quite happily with companions whose background was very different from his own.

Richard West was a boy of Gray's own age, tall and slender, thin-faced and pale-complexioned, so shy and retiring that only a few perceptive friends realised his promise as a scholar and poet.¹¹ Within that small circle his reputation was high, and it was thought likely that he would eventually outshine his comrades of the Quadruple Alliance. Stories were told of his

Thomas Gray

power of versifying in his sleep, and of how, plunged deep in studious abstraction, he would snuff a friend's candle when he meant to snuff his own.¹² He was the only son of a distinguished lawyer, who for a few years was Lord Chancellor of Ireland, and his mother was a daughter of Bishop Burnet. Their marriage was not a happy one; and although West's father died when the boy was only ten years old, his character was affected by the disturbed background of his early life as Gray's had been by very similar conditions.

The fourth member of the Alliance was Thomas Ashton, the son of a schoolmaster at Lancaster. He afterwards developed into a very unattractive figure, and his general unpopularity in later years makes it impossible to obtain a fair impression of him at this early age. It is sufficient to say that as a boy he displayed qualities which won him a place in a singularly fastidious group, and that he continued on equal terms with its members long after their schooldays were over.

The intimacy of the Quadruple Alliance was enhanced by the fanciful and high-sounding names which its members bestowed upon themselves. Gray was known as Orosmales, a variant of Oromasdes, the chief Zoroastrian divinity; Walpole was Celadon, the name of many a shepherd swain in poetry and romance; Favonius, the gentle and kindly west wind, and the occasional variant of Zephyrille were obvious titles for West; and Ashton became Almanzor, a character in Dryden's *Conquest of Granada*. They also coined similar names—Tydeus, Plato, Prato, Puffendorf—for other friends; for the Alliance was in no way exclusive, and Walpole particularly had several close friends outside the little circle. In fact it was to one of these, George Montagu, that Walpole addressed from Cambridge the description of his Eton days which so frankly sums up the attitude of his set to the ordinary life of the school:

Dear George, were not the playing fields at Eton food for all manner of flights? No old maid's gown, though it had been tormented into all the fashions from King James to King George, ever under-

Childhood and Eton

went so many transformations, as those poor plains have in my idea. At first I was contented with tending a visionary flock, and sighing some pastoral name to the echo of the cascade under the bridge: how happy should I have been to have had a kingdom, only for the pleasure of being driven from it, and living disguised in an humble vale. As I got farther into Virgil and *Clelia*, I found myself transported from Arcadia, to the garden of Italy, and saw Windsor Castle in no other view than the *capitoli immobile saxum*. . . . I can't say I am sorry I was never quite a schoolboy; an expedition against bargemen, or a match at cricket may be very pretty things to recollect; but thank my stars, I can remember things that are very near as pretty. The beginning of my Roman history was spent in the Asylum, or conversing in Egeria's hallowed grove; not in thumping and pummelling King Amulius's herdsmen.¹³

That was the atmosphere of the Quadruple Alliance—the classical allusions and gentle pastoral dreams, the self-sufficiency, the shrinking from contact with the herd.

III

In the lustre of these new-found friendships the distresses of Gray's home life faded into insignificance. Nothing is now known about the way in which his holidays were passed, and the relations of the growing boy with his father are equally obscure. The house in Cornhill may not have been so quarrelsome and disturbed a place as is generally supposed. Mrs Gray's account of her troubles, as detailed in a case submitted for counsel's opinion a few years later, was certainly most lamentable;¹⁴ but the *ménage* somehow held together for a length of time which seems hardly conceivable without long stretches of comparative peace. It is likely that both parents were gratified by the unusual promise of their only child; and this impression is strengthened by the painting, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, which shows him at the age of fourteen or fifteen. We shall never know whether his father or his mother commissioned it; but it is the portrait of a boy of whom his family were very proud. Although it has always

Thomas Gray

been attributed to Jonathan Richardson, doubts have long been felt as to whether he ever painted quite so badly; and the authorities seem hitherto to have ignored a passage in Jacob Bryant's reminiscences of Gray, where it is ascribed with much greater probability to Arthur Pond.¹⁵ The boy is seated, holding a book, beside a table on which are volumes labelled 'Temple' and 'Locke', and a pen and standish. These indications of studious tastes are offset by the richness of his dress—embroidered blue coat lined with peach-coloured silk, black velvet breeches, white stockings, red leather slippers. The head is more competently painted than the rest of the picture: the expression of a lively, self-possessed, precocious boy is skilfully caught; and although it is on the whole a mediocre piece of work, the gay colouring and superficial likeness may have given much satisfaction to an unexacting household in Cornhill.

This portrait alone throws some light on Gray's home background at this time. For all his family affections, his heart was at Eton; and there his happiness, during these later years, was absolute. The companionship of his friends, the beauty and tradition of his surroundings, the constant exploration of new territories in poetry and history and classical literature—everything was harmonious and delightful. He was experiencing, as never again, that cloudless serenity of mind which he was one day to describe in an unforgettable phrase—'the sunshine of the breast'. When he came to write the *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, it was through no haze of retrospective sentiment that he viewed those idyllic years. Even while they were passing, he seems to have known instinctively that they were the golden period of his life; and afterwards their mere recollection could refresh and console him.

Ah happy hills, ah pleasing shade,
Ah fields below'd in vain,
Where once my careless childhood stray'd,
A stranger yet to pain!

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R. W. Ketton-Cremer
Excerpt
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THOMAS GRAY

From a painting attributed to Jonathan Richardson the Elder, but possibly by
Arthur Pond, in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

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I feel the gales, that from ye blow,
 A momentary bliss bestow,
 As waving fresh their gladsome wing,
 My weary soul they seem to sooth,
 And, redolent of joy and youth,
 To breathe a second spring.

The idyll was broken all too soon. The musings under the noble trees, the saunterings beside the Thames, the Virgilian quotations, the private jokes, the daily companionship of the Quadruple Alliance came to an end. Before its members lay the world of men and affairs; and all but Walpole were faced with struggles, with duties, with the distasteful necessity of adopting a profession. Gray and Ashton went to Cambridge in 1734, and Walpole followed a few months later; while West, so gentle and retiring, so dependent on his friends, was separated from them all and made his way reluctantly to Oxford. Nothing was left of Eton but a long after-glow of remembered happiness, which found expression in Gray's ode, in Walpole's letters, in the sad little poem which West composed as he wandered in solitude through the Walks at Magdalen:

The thought, which still my breast invades,
 Nigh yonder springs, nigh yonder shades,
 Still, as I pass, the memory brings
 Of sweeter shades and springs.

Lost and inwrapt in thought profound,
 Absent I tread Etonian ground;
 Then starting from the dear mistake,
 As disenchanted, wake. . .

Oh! how I long again with those,
 Whom first my boyish heart had chose,
 Together through the friendly shade
 To stray, as once I stray'd!

Their presence would the scene endear,
 Like paradise would all appear,
 More sweet around the flowers would blow,
 More soft the waters flow.¹⁶