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978-1-107-59475-3 - Ode on the Spring and Elegy in a Country Churchyard

Thomas Gray

Excerpt

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13

I. ODE ON THE SPRING.

Lo! where the rosy-bosom'd Hours,
 Fair VENUS' train appear,
 Disclose the long-expecting flowers,
 And wake the purple year!
 The Attic warbler pours her throat,
 Responsive to the cuckow's note,
 The untaught harmony of spring:
 While whisp'ring pleasure as they fly,
 Cool Zephyrs thro' the clear blue sky
 Their gather'd fragrance fling. 10

Where'er the oak's thick branches stretch
 A broader browner shade;
 Where'er the rude and moss-grown beech
 O'er-canopies the glade,
 Beside some water's rushy brink
 With me the Muse shall sit, and think
 (At ease reclin'd in rustic state)
 How vain the ardour of the Crowd,
 How low, how little are the Proud,
 How indigent the Great! 20

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14

ODE ON THE SPRING.

Still is the toiling hand of Care :
 The panting herds repose :
 Yet hark, how thro' the peopled air
 The busy murmur glows !
 The insect youth are on the wing,
 Eager to taste the honied spring,
 And float amid the liquid noon :
 Some lightly o'er the current skim,
 Some shew their gayly-gilded trim
 Quick-glancing to the sun. 30

To Contemplation's sober eye
 Such is the race of Man :
 And they that creep, and they that fly,
 Shall end where they began.
 Alike the Busy and the Gay
 But flutter thro' life's little day,
 In fortune's varying colours drest :
 Brush'd by the hand of rough Mischance,
 Or chill'd by age, their airy dance
 They leave, in dust to rest. 40

Methinks I hear in accents low
 The sportive kind reply :
 Poor moralist! and what art thou?
 A solitary fly!
 Thy Joys no glittering female meets,
 No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
 No painted plumage to display :
 On hasty wings thy youth is flown ;
 Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone—
 We frolick, while 'tis May. 50

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CHURCH-YARD.

THE Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moeping owl does to the moon complain 10
Of such as, wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

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16

ELEGY WRITTEN IN

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
 The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
 The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
 No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. 20

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
 Or busy housewife ply her evening care :
 No children run to lisp their sire's return,
 Or climb his knee the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
 Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke :
 How jocund did they drive their team afield !
 How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke !

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure ; 30
 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
 The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
 Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to These the fault,
 If Mem'ry o'er their Tomb no Trophies raise,
 Where through the long-drawn isle and fretted vault
 The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. 40

Can storied urn or animated bust
 Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
 Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
 Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of death?

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A COUNTRY CHURCH-YARD.

17

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
 Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
 Or wak'd to extasy the living lyre.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll; 50
 Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
 And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
 The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
 The little Tyrant of his fields withstood,
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood. 60

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
 The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
 To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
 And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbad: nor circumscrib'd alone
 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;
 Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,
 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
 To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame, 70
 Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
 With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

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18

ELEGY WRITTEN IN

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
 Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray ;
 Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
 With uncouth rhimes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,
 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh. 80

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd muse,
 The place of fame and elegy supply :
 And many a holy text around she strews,
 That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
 This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
 Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires ; 90
 E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
 E'en in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead,
 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate ;
 If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
 Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,—

Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,
 "Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
 Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
 To meet the sun upon the upland lawn. 100

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A COUNTRY CHURCH-YARD.

19

[Him have we seen the Green-wood Side along,
While o'er the Heath we hied, our Labours done,
Oft as the Woodlark piped her farewell Song,
With whistful eyes pursue the setting Sun.]

"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech,
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove, 110
Now drooping, woeful-wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

"One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
Along the heath, and near his fav'rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he:

"The next, with dirges due in sad array
Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him born.—
Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay,
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn." 120

[There scatter'd oft, the earliest of the Year,
By Hands unseen are Showers of Violets found;
The Redbreast loves to build and warble there,
And little Footsteps lightly print the Ground.]

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20 ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCH-YARD.

THE EPITAPH.

*Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A Youth, to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.*

*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompence as largely send: 130
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.*

*No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose,
The bosom of his Father and his God.)*

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NOTES.

I. ODE ON THE SPRING.

THIS poem is touchingly connected with the story of Gray's friendship with Richard West. In his *Commonplace Books* (sometimes called the *Stonehewer MSS.*) preserved at Pembroke College, Cambridge, Gray's transcript of it bearing the title "Noon-tide, an ode" has the note "at Stoke, the beginning of June 1742 sent to Fav: not knowing he was then Dead." It was a response to the verses which West, whom, playing on his name, Gray was wont to call 'Favonius' (the Western Wind), had sent him (May 5, 1742), invoking 'May.' These verses Gray acknowledged on the 8th of May; received another from West in cheering strain enclosing translations from Catullus on the 11th; responded brightly on the 27th; and must have written once more about a week later a letter enclosing the poem before us, which was returned to him unopened¹, West, as he afterwards discovered, having died on the first of June. The first of Gray's and the last of West's original efforts in English Verse were on the same theme, and both these kindred spirits as they wrote thought more of friendship than of fame.

Gray's MS. at Pembroke does not, as far as I remember, exhibit any essential variation from the text of Mason, except perhaps in the more frequent use of capitals: accordingly the text is here given from vol. 1 of Mason's 4 vol. edition 1778, as printed by A. Ward and sold by Dodsley and others.

Mitford has illustrated the poem with his customary care and diligence, and almost all the fire of quotation which has been brought to bear on it has been derived from his magazines. In 1768 Gray

¹ See *Gray and His Friends*, pp. 164—172.

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added notes of his own, which must be taken to indicate the passages which he really had in mind; and to these are added the more precise references which Mitford supplied.

Mason inferred from the title 'Noon-tide' that Gray originally intended to write three poems descriptive of Morning, Noon, and Evening. He remarks that the *Elegy* opens with a picture of Evening, and the fragment on *Vicissitude* with a picture of Morning. We have seen however under what conditions the *Ode on the Spring* was in fact produced; and it is perhaps not possible to say at what date Gray transcribed the poem and headed it otherwise. But if, as I think, his transcript contains the reading of ll. 19, 20 as we here print it, the correspondence which Mason attributes to original design was an afterthought, if it entered into Gray's mind at all¹. It is not the time of day which is Gray's subject in any of the three poems; but it would be very like him designedly to distinguish them by adapting in each case the hour to the theme.

It may be, as Mitford affirms, that the Ode is founded on 'Horace's Ode *ad Sestium* (i. iv.)'; but the resemblance goes no further than this, that Horace passes from a description of the return of Spring, not much resembling Gray's, to reflections on the brevity of human life.

1. **the rosy-bosom'd Hours.** The expression is traced by Wakefield to Milton, *Comus* 986:

"Along the crispèd shades and bowers
Revels the spruce and jocund Spring:
The Graces and the rosy-bosomed Hours
Thither all their bounties bring."

Thomson, as Mitford indicates, had already borrowed from Milton in

"The *rosy-bosomed Spring*

To weeping fancy pines." (*Spring*, 1010.)

Did Milton take the word from the Greek *ροδόκολλπος*, which is to be found in a Lyric fragment preserved by Stobaeus (*Ecl.* i. 174) as an epithet of *εἴνομιλα*? It may be difficult to fix the sense of *ροδόκολλπος* as used in this fragment; but whether Milton had come across it or not, he probably used 'rosy-bosomed' after the analogy of *ροδοδάκτυλος* 'rosy-fingered' as an epithet of Morn in Homer. So also Thomson and Gray; Dr Bradshaw's suggestion that the meaning may be 'with bosom full of roses' after the analogy of 'rosy-crowned,' *Progress of Poesy* 28, is

¹ For, with the earlier reading of these lines, the poem was certainly called "*Ode on the Spring*." See n. ad loc.