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Thomas Gray

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THOMAS GRAY
ODE ON THE SPRING
AND
ELEGY IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

EDITED BY
D. C. TOVEY, M.A.

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This Edition of these two Poems is taken from Gray's *English Poems* edited by D. C. Tovey and published in the Pitt Press Series.

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INTRODUCTION.

THOMAS GRAY was born on the 26th of December, 1716. His father was Philip Gray, said to have been a scrivener or broker. This man amid other sources of income owned a house and shop in Cornhill which in the year 1706, or thereabouts, was let to two sisters Mary and Dorothy Antrobus. At this date, approximately, Philip was on the eve of marriage with Dorothy, and their marriage-contract left her still a partner with her sister in the business (millinery), they paying Philip Gray rent for his shop, and the three, apparently, living together in the house connected with it. Dorothy Gray was financially independent of her husband, with whom she lived unhappily, and from whom in 1735 she endeavoured to get a separation. She had at this time given birth to twelve children, of whom Thomas, the fifth, was the only survivor; the rest had died in infancy; and the future poet might have shared their fate but that his mother opened one of his veins with her own hand.

To his mother Gray owed his education both at Eton and Cambridge. There is nothing to contradict the impression made by Mrs Gray's 'Case for Counsel' (1735)¹ that his father was a brute, and perhaps crazy². The straitened circumstances

¹ First published by Mitford. Gray's *Works*, vol. 1. pp. xcvi sq.

² 'He daily threatens he will pursue her with all the vengeance possible, and will *ruin himself to undo her, and his only son*; in order to which he hath given warning to her sister to quit his shop, where they have carried on their trade so successfully, which will almost be their ruin' &c. Mrs Gray's 'Case for Counsel.'

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of the poet's earlier years, compared with the ease and comfort with which he lived at Cambridge after his father's death, point to the inference that it was not poverty but callous selfishness that made Philip Gray put the task of providing for his son upon this 'careful, tender mother.'

Dorothy Gray's brother, William Antrobus, was an assistant master at Eton, and thither in 1727 Gray was sent, perhaps¹ as his pupil. There is some reason to believe that Mrs Gray was a humble friend of Lady Walpole² (the daughter of Alderman Shorter); this perhaps was the starting point of the friendship at Eton between Horace Walpole and Gray. Two other names are linked with this friendship, Richard West and Thomas Ashton. West was the son of the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, and, on his mother's side, the grandson of Bishop Burnet. At Eton he was reckoned the most brilliant of the little *coterie*, there known by the name of the Quadruple Alliance. His early death in 1742 was to Gray a never-forgotten sorrow³. Ashton, the least interesting member of this group, entered into holy orders, and achieved some promotion in the Church; but became at last estranged from Walpole, his affection, as Walpole suggests, cooling when his friend ceased to be a prime minister's son, and hopes of preferment in that quarter lapsed in consequence.

Both Gray and Walpole were delicate children; and it speaks well for the Eton of that day that they were allowed to follow their own studious bent unmolested, and that our poet loved those fields in which he moved with little or no share or skill in the sports of boyhood.

Gray left Eton for Cambridge in 1734. He became a pensioner at Peterhouse. Another uncle, Robert Antrobus, had been a fellow of that college⁴. Gray had little sympathy with

¹ See note 4 *infra*.

² See *Gray and His Friends*, pp. 4, 5, 60, 61.

³ *Gray and His Friends*, pp. 15—17.

⁴ Dr Bradshaw says that this *Robert* was Gray's tutor at Eton. Mason also affirms that Gray's tutor there was a fellow of S. Peter's

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Cambridge studies, as then pursued; he gave up attending lectures; and in 1739 he went with Horace Walpole for a continental tour, of which Walpole bore the principal expense. That incompatibility of temper which travel so often discovers broke out in an acute form at last, and ended in the separation of the friends at Reggio in 1741¹. Gray went off with two friends of his and Walpole's, John Chute and Francis Whithed, to Venice, and thence returned home, accompanied only by a servant, arriving in London on the 1st of Sept. 1741. His father died on the 6th of November following.

Gray spent some time between London and Stoke Pogis (whither his mother and his aunt Mary Antrobus had gone to live with their widowed sister, Mrs Rogers), and finally, after hesitating between his old college and Trinity Hall², returned to Peterhouse (this time, I believe, as a fellow-commoner), in the autumn of 1742, graduating as LL.B. in 1744. His choice, even before he started on his foreign travels, was ostensibly the bar, but he never made any attempt to pursue that vocation, preferring that life of secluded study to which the possession of a competency enabled him to devote himself.

In November 1745 a reconciliation was effected between Gray and Walpole³. The young men had never lost esteem for each other. Walpole especially wrote of Gray kindly even during their estrangement, and mentioned him always with

College (*William* was of King's). Since Robert died in 1729, it is clear that Gray, even if he entered Eton under him, must have passed into other hands before he left school. Perhaps from Robert to William?

¹ A close examination of Gray's correspondence would show that Ashton was a mischief-maker in this matter, probably by retailing to Walpole some unkind comments received from Gray.

² I have not space to exhibit the evidence on which these statements are based. Gray's correspondence has never been published with any care for chronological sequence; if it ever should be, it will be found that my statements are correct.

³ A lady is said to have done much to bring this about. This lady I conjecture, doubtfully, to have been a maiden sister of John Chute.

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pride and affection, modified only by gentle complaints of his censorious temper.

From this point the history of Gray is more and more identical with that growth of his mind and of his studies which I have tried to trace in my notes. In 1756 he removed from Peterhouse to Pembroke College on the other side of the street, in consequence of a cruel practical joke played upon him by some fellow-commoners, of which the college authorities refused to take sufficient notice. It should be remembered that he was at this time the famous author of the *Elegy*.

In 1762 he attempted indirectly through Walpole and Sir Henry Erskine, a creature of Lord Bute's, to obtain the Professorship of Modern History at Cambridge. It was given to a Mr Brockett, of Trinity, who had been tutor to Sir James Lowther, son-in-law of the prime minister. In 1766 it was offered to Gray unsolicited, probably at the suggestion of Stonhewer, secretary to the Duke of Grafton. Gray accepted it, but delivered no lectures.

Cambridge was in the main the poet's residence during the whole of his life from 1742 to his death in 1771. The year 1759 was spent by him for the most part in London, in researches in the British Museum; he stayed at times with his mother and aunts at Stoke Pogis; and was occasionally the guest of Walpole, Wharton and other friends. He visited different parts of England and Scotland, and was one of the first Englishmen to appreciate the beauty of lake and mountain scenery. He died in Pembroke College on the 30th of July, 1771, and was buried in Stoke Pogis Churchyard, in the same tomb with his mother.

In the notes attention has designedly been called to the hostile criticisms of Johnson upon Gray's poetry. I have felt that this prejudice is not to be dismissed in a word; like all Johnson's antipathies it is well worth investigating. I have referred it elsewhere to the dislike which the man who has written for his bread is inclined to feel towards the man who writes for his own amusement, and there was certainly in the matter of literary taste and bias a line of demarcation which

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might be overstepped, but which is very clearly traceable, between the adventurers who came up to town to live by their wits, and the *dilettantists* who from a secure social or academic position could make or welcome experiments. The hardworking man of letters believed in the conditions under which he had slowly made his way to fame. It is only his prose style that can be said to be quite distinctive of Johnson, by virtue perhaps of an inevitable law which in one direction or the other makes the style the man. When he wrote 'London' and 'The Vanity of Human Wishes,' the language of the age was, a few conventionalisms apart, rapidly becoming the language of its poetry, the very thing which Gray declared it never could be for a permanence, except in French. A less exact observer than Gray, Johnson had not perhaps noticed how largely not only Dryden but Pope had borrowed from the older diction of Shakespeare and Milton¹. At any rate he set his face against any attempt to repeat that example; he hated these borrowings from antiquity, these things strange yet not new, whether they were offered him by Gray or by Percy, whether they appeared with 'strutting dignity,' as he would call it, in a revived ornateness, or in the simplicity of ballad poetry; and he struck out both to the right and to the left. Accustomed as we are to think of the simple pathos of the *Elegy* as clothed in language sufficiently trite, it should startle us to find that the man whose name is often used as a synonyme for pompous diction found it blemished by that defect, as well as by offensive archaisms and affected inversions. We get to the root of Johnson's objections in one clear instance which sets his meaning beyond mistake. He made two versions of a chorus of the Medea. One of these is an attempt without bias; it represents his own notion of how the thing ought to be done; he gave it to Burney for his History of Music:—

The rites deriv'd from ancient days
With thoughtless reverence we praise,

¹ See Gray to West, April, Thursday, 1742 (quoted in part on *Agrippina*).

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The rites that taught us to combine
 The joys of music and of wine,
 And bad the feast and song and bowl
 O'erfill the saturated soul;
 But ne'er the Flute or Lyre apply'd
 To cheer despair or soften pride,
 Nor call'd them to the gloomy cells
 Where Want repines and Vengeance swells,
 Where Hate sits musing to betray
 And Murder meditates his prey.
 To dens of guilt and shades of care
 Ye sons of Melody repair,
 Nor deign the festive dome to cloy
 With superfluities of joy.
 Ah, little needs the Minstrel's power
 To speed the light convivial hour;
 The board with varied plenty crown'd
 May spare the luxuries of sound.

Here there is scarcely a word that would seem affected in the conversation either of Johnson's day or our own; and the same may be said of most of Johnson's verse no less than of Goldsmith's. But now take the same passage rendered by him in the style, as he conceived it, of the Elegy:

*Err shall they not, who resolute explore
 Times gloomy backward with judicious eyes;
 And scanning right the practices of yore,
 Shall deem our hoar progenitors unwise.*

They to the dome where smoke with curling play
 Announced the dinner to the regions round,
 Summon'd the *singer blythe* and *harper gay*
 And aided time with *dulcet-streaming* sound.

The better use of notes, or sweet or shrill,
 By quiv'ring string, or modulated wind,
 Trumpet or lyre—to their *harsh* bosoms *chill*
 Admission ne'er had sought, or could not find.

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Oh! send them to the *sullen* mansions *div*
 His baleful eyes where Sorrow rolls around;
 Where *gloom-enamour'd* Mischief loves to dwell
 And Murder, all *blood-bolter'd*, schemes the wound.

Where *cates luxuriant* pile the spacious dish,
 And purple nectar glads the festive hour,
 The guest without a want, without a wish,
 Can yield no room to Music's soothing pow'r.

Mrs Piozzi calls this a burlesque and a parody, and that it was written, as she says, 'with some merry malice' is undoubtedly true; an absurd touch here and there, as in the second line, betrays this; otherwise we might almost take it quite seriously, indeed an unguarded critic might be betrayed into quoting it as distinctively Johnsonian. But the adjectives following their substantives, the archaisms, the epithets double and hyphenated and always indispensable, belong to Gray, not to Johnson, and have much to do with that charge of obscurity which sounds so strange to modern ears. The inversions too of subject or object with the verb are Gray's, and no one else perhaps in his day would have written, as he undoubtedly did,

Awaits alike th' inevitable hour,

to the bewilderment of printers ever since. But chiefly by reviving and consequently enlarging our poetic vocabulary does Gray appear as an innovator. He was of all the innovators of his day in this respect perhaps the most conscious and deliberate, a fact which justifies the pains which Mitford and others have taken in tracing his diction to its probable sources.

In another and later direction the results of Gray's effort, so tardy and in volume so scanty, were still more noteworthy. The fact that the 'Progress of Poesy' and the 'Bard' were published together has obscured for us the generic difference between them. Before he wrote the 'Bard' Gray's mind had received a new bias; he had begun those studies in Scandinavian literature which modified his treatment of that poem. His characteristic

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hesitation over it might have left it a belated fragment but for the music of Parry, the blind Welsh harper, which gave him a stimulus just in time. Its effect, especially in combination with the two 'Norse Odes,' was far-reaching indeed. In the huge Ossianic mirror Gray saw, without recognizing, his own distorted image. Yet he had helped to prepare a public for Macpherson. The wand which the student-poet waved so cautiously, in bolder hands conjured up wider visions, many of which were only phantasmagoric. But when the world had shaken off these portentous shadows, it found its poetic horizon mysteriously enlarged; it was in this case a happiness that there is no controlling power to keep due measure between a novel experiment in literature and its possible effect. Between Gray and Scott intervene not only the Ossianic Mist, but the *Reliques* and that tide of Romanticism of which Percy and Macpherson, involuntary associates, opened the floodgates; a tide which returned to us in greater volume from abroad. Still the two poets somehow contrive to join hands; in that spiritual succession which criticism loves to trace back, we pass by such names as Mason and Warton and find in the 'Bard' and the 'Norse Odes' the first memorable exemplars of new studies put to poetic use by a mind delicate, fastidious, and a little hampered by conventions belonging to a very different tradition; and with these and 'Christabel' we link the 'Lay of the Last Minstrel.' It was given to Gray and to Coleridge, minds most critical, most receptive, but in the way of production most inert, to stimulate and fashion the labours of a spirit more robust, and capable, in that new world of romance in which Gray was a pioneer, of working with surprising rapidity and a versatile energy almost inexhaustible.