

ON GRAY'S *ELEGY* (1)

—Gray's New Attitude towards Nature—

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Preface

The *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*, which is one of the most famous and greatest poems in English literature, has formed a part of the English heritage for two centuries ; and a true estimation of the poem and its author in the history of English literature has been firmly formed today. This is, for instance, seen in the following remarks of J. Crofts :

Mathew Arnold, for instance, extends his urbane compassion to Gray as a poet born in an age of prose ; but he deserves it rather as one dying on the eve of a poetic typhoon that obliterated all the standards and ideals by which he worked. For among the...poets...who were preparing to sing the praises of poetical Reformation Gray stands forth as the last champion of Apostolic Succession. (J. Crofts : *Gray*, ix)

To sum up, Gray is not only a survivor of the so-called Neo-Classicism, but a forerunner of the Romantic Movement. His poetry has much of the romantic elements besides its classicism. It can be said that the position of Gray's poetry, as it is today, in the history of English literature is much owing to its romantic elements. This is true of his *Elegy*. The *Elegy* is, as critics have said, in the van of the Romanticism, and is one of the most popular and oft-quoted pieces of verse in the English language. The hard-to-please Dr. Johnson remarked :

It abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. (Samuel Johnson : *Lives of English Poets*)

How to account for such praise, for such popularity ? And, how is it that the *Elegy* is called romantic ? To answer these two questions—that is a chief and final aim of the present paper.

A poem may be viewed from three aspects, that is, (1) What is a poem made of ? (2) What is a poem made into ? (3) How is a poem made ? These three are, in other words, the source of poetic material or the setting of poetry, the substance or the thought

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of poetry, and the form of verse. It is impossible, of course, clearly to distinguish one aspect of a poem from the others. A poem is of a subtle texture with all the aspects, which are so closely connected with one another.

Here, in answering the above two questions, I shall approach the *Elegy* in the first aspect. As for the other two aspects, they are to be reserved for another occasion.

Introduction

'Far-famed *Elegy in the Church-Yard*,' said Samuel Johnson, 'I believe, made Gray known to the public.'¹⁾ Indeed, most of us know him only as the author of the *Elegy*. But, besides a poet of English poetry, he was a writer of Latin verse, especially in his early life at Cambridge, and a good letter-writer.

As to his Latin verse, whose last one is *De Principis Cogitandi* (1742), 'his exercises in Latin verse were thought to be very good,'²⁾ W. Ketton-Cremer notes and says 'he began to be known in the [Cambridge] university as a writer of Latin verse.'³⁾ His letters have been highly esteemed among some critics. W. Hazlitt says, 'his letters are inimitably fine,' and continues, 'If his poems are sometimes finical and pedantic, his prose is quite free from affectation.'⁴⁾ W. Cowper also remarks, 'I once thought Swift's letters the best that could be written ; but I like Gray's better.'⁵⁾ In the letters Gray pours out his thoughts on the things of all sorts, such as melancholy, Shakespeare, poetic diction, nature, etc. I believe the days will come when his letters will be more highly esteemed.

As for his English poetry, 'Gray,' as David Cecil remarks, 'is one of the authors who have been more read, than written about,'⁶⁾ and is known by the *Elegy* alone. So I shall give a brief outline of his early life before introducing the *Elegy*.

Thomas Gray, who was the only survivor of twelve children of a London scrivener, Philip Gray, was born on December 26, 1716 ; and died on July 30, 1771. His health was weak. He grew into a sensitive and intellectual boy in the dispiriting atmosphere of his uneasy and gloomy family background. It is not too much to say that his personality in the later days had been formed in this early home life.

(1) *Gray*, ed. Crofts ; "Life of Gray" by S. Johnson p. 3

(2) W. K-C., p. 4

(3) *ibid.*, p.22

(4) *Gray*, ed. Crofts ; 'Lectures on the English Poets, 1818' p.25

(5) *ibid.*, p.17 'Cowper's letter to Joseph Hill, April 1777'

(6) *Poets and Story-tellers*, by David Cecil, p.47

At Eton he got acquainted with R. West, his most intimate friend, who was to die in 1742, and H. Walpole, the son of the Prime Minister, with whom he was to quarrel and to part at Reggio on their continental tour. From thence, in 1734, he proceeded to Cambridge, where, except for a two years' tour in France and Italy in company with Walpole (1739—1741), he remained for the rest of his life. During this period he would often visit Stoke Poges where his mother with her sisters was living. He never married, and never engaged himself in any work outside the university. 'In addition to a representative scholar-artist,' says David Cecil, 'he was a representative man of the eighteenth century world.'⁽⁷⁾ Critics⁽⁸⁾ call him the 'gentleman,' the 'scholar,' or the 'recluse' of Cambridge. Temple gives an especially full account of Gray's character :

'Perhaps he was the most learned man in Europe. He was equally acquainted with the elegant and profound parts of science, and that not superficially but thoroughly. He knew every branch of history, both natural and civil ; had read all the original historians of England, France, and Italy ; and was a great antiquarian. Criticism, metaphysics, morals, politics, made a principal part of his study ; voyages and travels of all sorts were his favourite amusements ; and he had a fine taste in painting, prints, architecture, and gardening....'⁽⁹⁾

Gray's English poetry began with the *Ode on the Spring* in 1742, which, in the same year, was 'sent to Fav. not knowing he was then Dead,'⁽¹⁰⁾ though a tragedy *Agrippina* had been begun a year before. Within the next three months of the same year he completed four poems. It may be, as many critics say, that the death of his most intimate friend West enhanced the mood of creative activity. But this surge was not continued so long. His poems are a thin sheaf. The thirteen poems which were published in his lifetime and the twenty-six posthumous poems including the *Agrippina* are all the the English poems Gray wrote. It is noticeable that many of them are fragments.

David Cecil⁽¹¹⁾, in accordance with the different aspects of his complex nature, divides Gray's poems into three categories : the first of the historical and aesthetic strain, the second of his own personal relation to life, and the third of satirical and humorous verse.

7. *Poets and Story-tellers*, by D. Cecil p.50

8. D. Cecil : 'gentleman' ; W. P. Jones : 'scholar' ; Rintaro Fukuhara : 'recluse'

9. *Gray*, ed. Crofts : "Life of Gray" pp. 5—6 Johnson quotes these sentences from a letter written to his friend Mr. Boswell by the Rev. Mr. Temple, rector of St. Gluvias in Cornwall.

10. cf. *The Poems of Gray & Collins* (O. U. P.), p.18 'Fav.' is the nick-name of West.

11. see the *Poets and Story-tellers* by D. Cecil, p.57

Otherwise they may be divided into three stages : the first stage is from the *Ode on the Spring* (1742) to the *Elegy* (1750) ; the second, from the *Long Story* (1750) until the *Welsh Odes* (1761) ; the third, the rest (1761—1771). The 'early poems,' in general, are the poems in the first stage and, of course, belong to D. Cecil's second category. In the first stage there are the *Ode on the Spring* (1742), *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, *Sonnet on the Death of Richard West*, *Hymn to Ignorance*, *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat* (1747), *Alliance of Education and Government* (1748), and the *Elegy* (1750).

General Wolfe on the eve of the battle of Quebec has come to be regarded as perhaps the supreme example of the power of Gray's *Elegy* to move the heart of man : 'I would rather have been the author of that piece [the *Elegy*] than beat the French tomorrow.'¹²⁾ This popular poem was completed, in the early summer of 1750, through many years and versions. But the exact dates of the composition of the *Elegy* are unknown ; there have always been conflicting opinions as to the dates and the whole process of its composition. On this matter there are maintained two opinions. One of them is that of Mason, who was one of Gray's friends. In his view, the greater part of the poem was written during the 'sad and eventful' summer of 1742. Mason writes in his *Memoir of Gray* : "I am inclined to believe that the *Elegy in a Country Church-Yard* was begun, if not concluded at this time [the summer of 1742]." On the contrary, D. C. Tovey insists that there can be no doubt that 'a goodly part of the *Elegy* was composed at intervals between August 13, 1746 and June 12, 1750.'¹³⁾ But the most acceptable would be the opinion of W. Ketton-Cremer, who says :

It seems more probable, in my own submission, that Gray merely wrote a few of the opening stanzas in 1742, and continued to work upon the poem at irregular intervals during the next eight years.¹⁴⁾

12. cf. James Currie's letter to his father, where J. Currie recorded the story of Quebec which he heard from Prof. John Robinson, who had been in a boat in company with Wolfe.

cp. Sir W. Scott's letter to Robert Southey : 'I [Wolfe] said, "I can only say, gentlemen, that, if the choice were mine, I would rather be the author of these verses than win the battle which we are to fight tomorrow morning."'

13. *Gray's English Poems*, ed. with notes by Tovey, p.130 As evidence Tovey points out Gray's letter to Wharton on Aug. 13, 1746, Walpole's letter to Mason on Dec. 1, 1773, the estrangement of Gray and Walpole from 1741 until 1745, the death of Gray's maiden aunt Mary Antrobus in 1749, and Gray's note to the Pembroke MS. Tovey's opinion is conceivable enough.

14. W. K-C., p.97—98

At any rate, the completion of the poem in the early summer of 1750 is evident from Gray's letter to Walpole from Stoke at the date of July 12, 1750, which refers to the completed *Elegy*.

'...; having put an end to a thing, whose beginning you have seen long ago, I immediately send it you. You will, I hope, look upon it in the light of a thing with an end to it;....'

By 'a thing' in the letter is meant the *Elegy*, no doubt.

It may be that 'the original impulse of the *Elegy*, as of so much more of Gray's earlier poetry,' as W. Ketton-Cremer writes, 'must surely have been the death of West,'¹⁵⁾ and that his impulse to bring the poem to a close was connected with the death of his aunt Mary Antrobus after seven years. But the revisions of the *Elegy* continued to be made up to 1768.

The original version of the *Elegy* consisted of the first eighteen stanzas as they exist at present ; and at some date or dates, four stanzas¹⁶⁾, which are rejected in the final

15. *ibid.*, p.98

16. four rejected stanzas :

The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow
Exalt the brave, & idolize Success
But more to Innocence their Safety owe
Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless

And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead
Dost in these Notes their artless Tale relate
By Night & lonely Contemplation led
To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate

Hark how the sacred Calm, that broods around
Bids ev'ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease
In still small Accents whisp'ring from the Ground
A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace

No more with Reason & thyself at Strife ;
Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room
But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life
Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

form, were added to them as the concluding stanzas. Finally,¹⁷⁾ Gray added to the first eighteen stanzas eleven more stanzas and three stanzas of the *Epitaph*.

Gray had, originally, no thought of publishing the *Elegy* at all. But it circulated widely in manuscript copies owing to Walpole's carelessness, until on Feb.10, 1751 from the proprietor of the *Magazine of Magazines* Gray received a letter asking for his sanction for publication ; thereupon he refused it and wrote to Walpole on Feb. 11, 1751 :

...& therefor [I] am obliged to desire you would make Dodsley print it immediately [W^{ch} [which] may be done in less [less] than a Week's time] from your Copy, but without my Name,...; he must... print it without any intervals between the stanzas, because the sense is in some places continued beyond them ; & the title must be, *Elegy, wrote in a Country Churchyard*.

The *Elegy* appeared anonymously on Feb.15 in the same year in a quarto pamphlet with the title "*Elegy wrote in a Country Church Yard*." Since then it has been continuously published, and translated into Latin and the chief European languages.

There are three copies of the *Elegy* extant in Gray's own handwriting : (1) the Fraser MS., now at Eton College, called the 'Mason,' or the 'Original,' or the 'Eton' MS. also; (2) 'Wharton,' or 'Egerton' MS., now in the British Museum; (3) 'Pembroke' MS. now at Pembroke College, Cambridge.

- N. B. 1. The text of the *Elegy* used in this essay is of the 'Edition of 1768'.
 2. For the quotation of Gray's letters, *The Correspondence of Thomas Gray* edited by Poget Toymbee and Leonard Whibley (3 vols. Oxford 1935) [Corr.] is used in all cases. Johnson's criticism on Gray in his *Lives of the Poets* is quoted from the *Gray*, ed. by J. Crofts, and the quotations from W. Ketton-Cremer are all from *Thomas Gray, a Biography* [W. K-C.].

17. In the edition of 1753, a beautiful stanza immediately before the *Epitaph* was cancelled finally :

There scatter'd oft the earliest of ye Year
 By Hands unseen are frequent Vi'lets found
 The Robin loves to build and warble there
 And little Footsteps lightly print the Ground.

WHAT is a poem made of? or What is the material of the poem?—this is a fundamental subject of my consideration. I shall approach Gray's *Elegy* in the aspect of its material, and examine his attitude towards Nature.

1

The *Elegy* is, in a way, a landscape poem.

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 mooping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

—11. 1-12

Within this exquisite geographic setting of a gloomy nightfall scene of a country churchyard, the poem develops its whole story. As might be expected from the title *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Gray draws the raw materials for the poem from a country churchyard, probably of Stoke Poges, at night-fall, where he stands and contemplates on 'the rude forefathers of the hamlet' laid for ever in their 'narrow cell':

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.

—11. 13-16

In Stoke Poges his mother was living with her sisters, and he often visited there. This little rural village, Stoke Poges, was to Gray one of the most familiar places in his actual life. He felt closely intimate with everything in Stoke Poges. In the churchyard of the village he finds the poetic material for the *Elegy*. This is a way of Gray

to compose a poem. He finds the sources of the poetic material in what there is or was near himself. As to the *Ode on the Spring*, for instance, the material is drawn from the spring come to the village of Stoke.

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.

—*Ode on the Spring*, 11. 1-10

In the *Sonnet on the Death of Richard West*, from the sudden death of his intimate friend.

I fruitless mourn to him, that cannot hear,
 And weep the more because I weep in vain.

—*Sonnet on the Death of West*, 11. 13-14

In the *Ode on the Death of a favourite Cat*, from the death of the cat which he would often see at the home of Walpole.

Her conscious tail her joy declar'd;
 The fair round face, the snowy beard,
 The velvet of her paws,
 Her caot, that with the tortoise vies,
 Her ears of jet, and emerald eyes,
 She saw; and purr'd applause.

—*Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat*, 11. 7-12

And in the *Eton Ode*, from the reflective prospect of his own old school.

Ye distant spires, ye antique towers,
 That crown the watry glade,
 Where grateful Science still adores
 Her Henry's holy Shade;

—*Eton Ode*, 11. 1-4

The sources are all from what exist closely near by the poet himself, his own deeply personal feelings, or happenings and events in his own everyday life. This is not only characteristic of his early poems, but is also reflected in almost all his poems except his translations and the Pindaric Odes.

Stoke Poges in the eighteenth century lay deeply secluded in the Buckinghamshire countryside. To this tranquil village Gray withdrew every May or June to live with his mother and aunts, and often remained there until autumn. Summer after summer, taking his slow contemplative walks through the field and woods, he would observe every aspect of the obscure life of the little rural community and of the natural scenery of the countryside. He felt at home in Stoke Poges. Away from his bookshelves and 'the madding crowd's...strife,' the poet's eyes look on the wilder scenes of the village, wherein he finds the consolation of his mind.

'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.

—*Elegy*, 11. 101-104

He watches, filled with melancholy thoughts, the daily life of the people of the secluded village: the busy women in their 'straw-built shed,' and the men working in the field.

Or busy housewife ply her evening care :

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 !

—*ibid.*, 11. 22; 25-28

And, standing among the humble tombs in the country churchyard at twilight, he mused upon the 'neglected dead' with sympathy and affinity for them.

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

—ibid., 11. 29-32

The raw materials adopted in the *Elegy* account for his keen observation of his own surroundings. All the raw materials for the *Elegy* are roughly tabulated as follows :

N A T U R E adopted in the <i>ELEGY</i>		
Living things	Artificial Features of Nature	Natural Features of Nature
lowing herd	curfew	parting day
cattle	knell	lea
beetle	(ivy-mantled) tow'r	glimmering landscape
mopeing owl	tinklings	darkness
swallow	narrow cell	stillness
cock('s clarion)	straw-built shed	moon
plowman	echoing horn	yew-tree's shade
me (such)	hearth	turf in many a mould'ring heap
rude forefathers	sickle	cock's clarion
the dead	dirge	harvest
sire	(stone)	sun
housewife	memorial	dew
children	tomb	upland lawn
swain		brook
(village-) Hampden		rill
(little) Tyrant		wood
(mute) Milton		hill
(some) Cromwell		gem
rustic moralist		dark unfathom'd caves
young poet		ocean
yew-tree('s shade)		air
ivy		
rugged elms		
beech		
thorn		
flower		

Of these raw materials the *Elegy* is composed with a twilight churchyard as a setting. The table illustrates Gray's keen eye for nature; it also shows that the poetic materials for the *Elegy* are found near the poet, and that, not in the human society but in nature. Gray opens his eyes to nature. It is noteworthy, in this way, that his *Elegy* is far different from the poems of so-called Augustan Age, which recited the town life, the urbane society, politics, or impersonal and abstract matters.

The poem, as I have pointed out, is based on a scene of nature —the grave in the churchyard of Stoke Poges at twilight—which is very familiar to Gray. Deeply personal as the scene is, Gray universalizes it, in the poem, into an impersonal scene which is likely to be seen anywhere else.

Finally, it is to be remarked that in the background of the *Elegy* there is a sense of loss. Gray lost his father in 1741, and in 1742 had his most intimate friend Richard West die. Judging from the fact that the *Elegy* with his other English poems was started in the year of 1742, the bereavement of them, in particular of his friend, must have greatly contributed to the surge of creative impulse. Moreover, Mary Antrobus, his aunt, died in the autumn of 1749, and in June next year the *Elegy* was completed. His early poems, including the *Elegy*, are all affected by the same thought and mood—the inevitability of death, the indefinable darkening of the spirit. It can not be neglected that in the background of the *Elegy* lurks a sense of bereavement.

2

The *Elegy* has its scene set in nature of a humble village. The story of the poem develops throughout within the village. The poet stands 'in the neglected spot,' a country churchyard, viewing the rural life and scenery, which strengthen our romantic impression of the poem :

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 mopeing owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

—*Elegy*, 11. 1-12

The mood of the poem, which is melancholy and gloom, is presented in this exquisite

twilight scene. In these lines you will notice Gray's eye for the beauties of nature. As to his eye for nature, it can be noticed in his earlier life. The letters which he sent to his parents and friends from the continent abound with his keen observations of nature. He writes in the letter to his mother from Lyons on Oct. 13, 1739 :

"...; on one hand is the rock, with woods of pine trees hanging over head; on the other, a monstrous precipice, almost perpendicular, at the bottom of which rolls a torrent that sometimes tumbling among the fragments of stone that have fallen from on high, and sometimes precipitating itself down vast descents with a noise like thunder, which is still made greater by the echo from the mountains on each side, concurs to form one of the most solemn, the most romantic, and the most astonishing scenes I ever beheld : ..."¹⁾

And in the *Eton Ode* he shows his interest in nature, which he had in his Eton school day already :

And ye, that from the stately brow
Of Windsor's heights th' expanse below
Of grove, of lawn, of mead survey,
Whose turf, whose shade, whose flowers among
Wanders the hoary Thames along
His silver-winding way.

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

—*Eton Ode*, 11. 5-14

Moreover, in his 'journal' to Wharton (1768) he does praise and admire the loveliness of the English lake district, where he travelled not long before his death. As to an eye for the beauties of nature, Gray, as Tovey remarks, was 'one of the first English men to appreciate the beauty of lake and mountain scenery.'²⁾ With such an keen eye, Gray would often watch the 'homely joys' of the 'plowmen' in their happy though humble family life :

1) Corr. [71] Oct. 13, 1739

2) *Gray's English poems*, by. Tovey p.xii

... the blazing hearth shall burn,
 Or busy housewife ply her evening care :
 ... children run to lisp their sire's return,
 Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

—*Elegy*, 11. 21-24

and 'their useful toil' from dawn to dusk on the farm or in the woods :

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 !

—*Elegy*, 11. 25-28

He never fails to notice the fresh air of the morning in the tranquil countryside :

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,

—*ibid.*, 11. 17-19

The poet in his *Elegy* is keenly observant of every aspect of the face of nature; his eyes are turned to all the little and trifling phenomena in nature, all the lives of the humble villagers and all the animals and plants that he could see near himself. He found beauty in these scenes familiar to all people. 'Gray had never regarded the beauties of nature with the vague appreciation of a townsman. From his youth he had looked at trees and flowers and growing crops with something of an expert's eye.'³⁾

The following stanzas explain his customary meditative walks through the field—his true appreciation of nature.

'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.

'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.

3) cf. W. K-C. p.118

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

—ibid., 11. 98-108

In these lines we can find the relation of his inward eye towards external nature. He enjoys a most close intimacy with nature.

In the eighteenth century the central interest was in the human society, not in the passions and strings of the individual soul; and the lovers of solitude, who would seek inspiration from the wilder aspects of nature, were exiles from the urbane society. Far from the noisy world of men and affairs, Gray seeks for his spiritual consolation in the tranquil wild nature, and therein finds his joy. He sees himself in the mirror of the secluded scenery of nature. The following words of his own afford a silent proof of his mental attitude towards nature :

'P. B. 1754 :

Contrast between the Winter Past and coming Spring. Joy owing to that Vicissitude. Many that never feel that delight. Sloth envy Ambition. How much happier the rustic that feels it tho' he knows not how.⁴⁾

He is deeply moved by such a natural affinity between himself and what he views in the English countryside, that he can not help imagining himself lying dead.

'The next with dirges due in sad array
 'Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him born.
 :

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
 A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
 :

—*Elegy*, 11. 113, 114; 117, 118

He feels an irresistible impulse to bury his own bones in 'the neglected spot' where he finds a peaceful refuge from the noisy urbane life. He watches nature directly and feels an intimacy with her. He is friends with her.

4) a note by Gray to *Ode on the Pleasure Arising from Vicissitude*, which Mason found in Gray's Pocket Book after his death

He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend,

—ibid., 1. 124

His mind 'rests its head upon the lap of Earth.' There amid nature exists the limitless liberty and freedom of his mind. The rural scenes of nature arouse a lofty sympathetic sentiment, provoke a reflective meditation, and inflame a fertile imagination :

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.

:

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

:

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.

—ibid., 11. 17-20; 29-32; 45-48

The imagination conjures up images and thoughts which have some concern with humanity, and the poet allows them to create his spiritual communion with nature. Such a sense of the beauties of nature in his period, the eighteenth century, is, no doubt, a prelude and prophecy of what is to come.

This attitude that Gray shows towards nature in his poetry is cast in the same mould as the one Richard Wilson⁵⁾ (1714-82) does in his landscape pictures. Richard Wilson was a portrait painter at first, but later he took much more interest in the scenery. Think of his *Boys Bathing*, for example. Most of the great masters in this period painted the Italian landscapes and nearly always introduced in their landscape pictures figures from the classic story. But Mr. Wilson, after his return from Italy, painted the sceneries of his own country; and the figures in his *Boys Bathing* are, it is found,

5) cf. *Landscape in English Art & Poetry*, by L. Binyon pp.64-67

6) see ibid., pp.47-62

from his actual life in England. Gray, the poet, introduces figures from the English countryside and from English history, and describes the landscape of his own country.

This viewed vertically, I should think Gray's attitude towards nature could be made a little clearer. Laurence Binyon refers⁶⁾, in his *Landscape in English Art and Poetry*, to the difference in the presences of figures in the landscape poems of the three great poets, Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope. As his opinion seems to me to contain most instructive and suggestive hints as to Gray's attitude to nature and his description of it, I should like to apply Binyon's suggestions to my reasoning here.

In the description of landscape, prior to the Romantic Revival, the figures from the Greek and Roman mythology often come between the poet and the landscape, as in landscape paintings. As an example in the sixteenth century, Shakespeare is quoted from his *Venus and Adonis* :

'Touch but my lips with those fair lips of thine, ——
 Though mine be not so fair, yet are they red, ——
 The kiss shall be thine own as well as mine :
 What seest thou in the ground? hold up thy head :
 Look in mine eyeballs, there thy beauty lies ;
 Then why not lips on lips, since eyes in eyes?

∴

By this the love-sick queen began to sweat,
 For where they lay the shadow had forsook them,
 And Titan, tired in the mid-day heat,
 With burning eye did hotly overlook them;
 Wishing Adonis had his team to guide,
 So he were like him and by Venus' side.

—*Venus and Adonis*, 11. 115-120; 175-180

Shakespeare, as is seen, introduces three mythological figures: Venus, Adonis and Titan. When we read these lines, they bring to our eye a bright and erotic picture of a passionate woman lying with a young man under the burning sun. It is true, Shakespeare describes in the poem the landscape very vividly and intimately, but it is not painted for its own sake. Nature forms nothing more than a background. His central interest is in the action of human beings. In the foreground stand out the passionate actions of these mythological figures in relief. They, who are given life and spirit, act lively, freely and openly there. The poet's eye follows every action of the

figures, is absorbed in bodily delight and is kept on the strivings of human soul. All our attention is attracted to the figures in the foreground by his description of them in vivid detail. Man is the main and dominant theme in the lines, Nature the secondary and subordinate theme. The classical figures are first essentials in the poem.

The following quotation, an example in the seventeenth century, is from Milton, his *L'Allegro*.

Streit mine eye hath caught new pleasures
 Whilst the Lantskip round it measures,
 Russet Lawns, and Fallows Gray,
 Where the nibling flocks do stray,
 Mountains on whose barren brest
 The labouring clouds do often rest :
 Meadows trim with Daisies pide,
 Shallow Brooks, and Rivers wide.
 Towers, and Battlements it sees
 Boosom'd high in tufted Trees,
 Wher perhaps som Beauty lies,
 The Cynosure of neighbouring eyes.
 Hard by, a Cottage chimney smokes,
 From betwixt two aged Okes,
 Where Corydon and Thyrsis met,
 Are at their savory dinner set
 Of Hearbs, and other Country Messes,
 Which the neat-handed Phillis dresses ;
 And then in haste her Bowre she leaves,
 With Thestylis to bind the Sheaves ;

—*L'Allegro*, 11. 69-88

From these lines we can know that Milton is also a true lover of nature. The picture he depicts there is a pastoral. His description is vivid and beautiful, but rough and not very intimate. Milton also sees classical figures between himself and what he sees; *Corydon* and *Thyrsis* are the conventional names of shepherds, *Phyllis* and *Thestylis* those of country girls.

It is not to be doubted that Milton took a keen interest in human beings, especially human souls; but it is also true that the figures are not of so great importance in his picture as in Shakespeare. The figures, in Milton's poems, are not there for their own sake, while Shakespeare's figures are there for their own. They are presented there as

mere part of nature. Evidently, however, they are animated with the poet's spirit and mood. They act alive as in Shakespeare. The animated mythological figures are indissolubly connected with nature, and stir up all the more pastoral and the more refined feeling for their presences. The main theme of the poem is neither human beings nor nature, but a pastoral feeling that runs through it.

This literary tradition is also followed by Alexander Pope, a representative poet of the eighteenth century. The quotation is from his *Windsor Forest*.

Not proud Olympus yields a nobler sight,
 Though gods assembled grace his towering height,
 Than what more humble mountains offer here,
 Where, in their blessings, all those gods appear.
 See Pan with flocks, with fruits Pomona crown'd,
 Here blushing Flora paints th' enamell'd ground,
 Here Ceres' gifts in waving prospect stand,
 And nodding tempt the joyful reaper's hand;
 Rich Industry sits smiling on the plains,
 And peace and plenty tell, a Stuart reigns.

—*Windsor Forest*, 11. 33-42

Pope, as Soseki Natsume remarks⁷⁾, does not always shut his eyes to the beauties of nature. It is true that he has a keen eye for the beauties of nature, but he seldom views a landscape without associating it with human society. The lines quoted above bring no vivid picture to our eyes. Pope only looks on landscapes that are rich with flocks of sheep, fruits, flowers and corn, and associates them with mythological figures. He never finds delight in a landscape itself, except for a reflection of human society. Nature makes only a background. What he has to say is that England is flourishing under the reign of 'a Stuart.' The figures are merely artificial ornaments arranged in a row. They are not animated with life. They are only furniture of worn-out tradition. The classical names in Shakespeare and Milton have been changed to mere imitations of poetic convention in Pope, a representative of Gray's contemporaries.

In the *Elegy*, however, Gray gives up this worn-out poetic tradition and introduces English characters:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
 Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,

7) cf. 「文学評論」(漱石全集19卷), 岩波書店, 1957, p.322

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

:

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.

—*Elegy*, 11. 13-16; 57-60

The poet puts his mind in nature itself, and looks it directly in the face. He is closely combined with what he sees. 'The neglected spot' which he looks on with intimate love suggests to him the English obscure people, to whom he feels akin. The figures come naturally and smoothly to Gray's mind in the scene; his mind follows the suggestion of nature obediently. The landscape conjures up these English characters, and his mind infuses life into them. They breathe lively in the scene of their own land. Nature is animated with the presences of English historical characters. The figures are there for their own sake. They are not mere ornaments as in Pope. They are of no less importance in the *Elegy* than in Shakespeare and Milton. And yet the figures of Gray are radically different in their origin from those of Shakespeare, Milton and Pope. Gray's figures are from England, while the other three poets' are from the Greek and Roman mythology. In spite of the fact that he was 'the most learned scholar in Europe' familiar with Greek and Roman classics, Gray, finally, adopted English historical characters instead of the Greek and Roman classical figures, though he had once been tempted by the worn-out poetic tradition to introduce the classical ones. This amply proves that Gray took a new attitude towards nature in revolt against his contemporary poetic convention, and, besides, suggests his new interest in England's past.

Gray does not view nature at a distance as Milton does, nor does he modify nature artificially as does Pope. He throws himself into nature, looks it directly in the face, and sees it just as it is. He obeys nature as it commands, and describes it, as it is, for its own sake. He finds an affinity between nature and himself. Between himself and what he sees Gray never tries to seek any reflection of human society or politics; nor does he furnish a landscape with any classical figures. He is nestled in the bosom of nature, whence he looks on every aspect of nature as it is. He finds the consolation of his soul in nature.

This attitude of Gray's towards nature, it may be said, affords a glimpse of the coming of the Romantic Movement.

3

Gray loves contrasts. Where he thinks of some one thing, he ties it with its direct opposite. In his mind co-exist two entirely different men, but never do they injure each other. These two men in the poet's mind are closely linked with a spirit, and each of them helps the other. The images, ideas and thoughts which come to one of the two make a striking contrast with those which come to the other, and a life or a vivid and lively vision is created on the contrast between them. Gray always finds in the present aspect the retrospective shadow or the fleeting one.

This fundamental inclination of his mind's eye manifests in almost every way and in almost every place :

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 : ...
:

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.

—*Elegy*, 11. 61-64, 65, 73-76

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,

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,

—*Ode on the Spring*, 11. 25-36

We can find this 'contrast pattern' of Gray's not only in his expression of thought, but also in his description of natural landscape. Gray's technique of representing landscapes is dramatic, and very effective.

New-born flocks in rustic dance
 Frisking ply their feeble feet,
 Forgetful of their wintry trance
 The Birds his presence greet.
 But chief the Sky-lark warbles high
 His trembling thrilling ecstasy
 And, less'ning from the dazzled sight,
 Melts into air and liquid light.

[Rise, my soul! on wings of fire,
 Rise the rapturous choir among;
 Hark! 'tis nature strikes the lyre,
 And leads the general song:]

Yesterday the sullen year
 Saw the snowy whirlwind fly;
 Mute was the musick of the air,
 The Herd stood drooping by:

—*Ode on the Pleasure arising from Vicissitude*, 11. 9-24

In the above lines is found a striking contrast between the delightful spring and the cold winter. He always presents two opposite descriptions of scenery, and yet their combination is by no means unnatural. The two utterly different feelings naturally concur to produce a pure, lofty, and strong emotion.

In the first four stanzas of the *Elegy*, 'the rude forefathers of the hamlet, each in his narrow cell for ever laid,' are introduced together with the 'still' background of a gloomy and pathetic scene of nightfall. There is a beautiful contrast in the description of the scene.

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.

Elegy, 11. 1-4

To strengthen and emphasize the 'stillness', 'gloominess' and pathos of the previous lines, he immediately introduces the 'scenes of noises' in the following lines.

Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The mopeing owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as...

—*ibid.*, 11. 7-11

Owing to the 'contrast pattern' he attains a success in the exquisite description. This dark, gloomy and pathetic mood is given a still more striking contrast by the next three stanzas :

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,
...

For them ... the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care :
... children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke ;

—*ibid.*, 11 .17-19, 21-26

These stanzas represent a pleasing and refreshing morning scene, the domestic happiness and daily activities of the dead in their lifetime, all of which belong to the by-gone days and are no more now. These bright and light scenes are, in mood and time, diagonally opposite to what are in the previous stanzas. The introduction of the scenes of 'lightness and brightness' not only contributes to an effective deepening of the mood of 'darkness and gloominess', but also puts the present time and the past in a pathetic contrast.

As to Gray's technique of description, which contains the form of poetry, *i. e.*, poetic diction, versification, ... etc., I shall confine myself for the moment to the

subject concerned with his attitude towards nature. Gray's description of the scenery conjures up an exquisite picture vividly. Some of the reasons for it have already been given. Gray's vivid description is a manifestation of his keen eye for the beauties of nature, of his keen observation of nature. He perceives by the eye a beating pulse in what is seen as we do in our own body. This enables him to give life to his pictures. One of the most significant features of his picture is its 'realisticness, or its 'concreteness'. The following descriptions suggest his careful observation of an external phase of nature and his realistic and concrete expression :

the curfew, the knell, parting day (1.1); the lowing herd, o'er the lea (1.2); the plowman, his weary way (1.3); to darkness and to me (1.4); glimmering landscape (1.5); the beetle wheels his droning flight (1.7); from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r/
The mopeing owl does to the moon complain (11. 9-10)

Such graphic descriptions are found in the fourteenth beautiful stanza as well :

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.

—*Elegy*, 11. 53-56

and also in the dramatic speech of 'some hoary-headed swain' :

'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.

—*ibid.*, 11. 101-104

The above quotations are all from the lines depicting the landscape. In these concrete descriptions Gray produces a lofty mood abstracted from actual time, real space, and concrete things. This is Gray's way of describing nature. Not only to the external appearance of nature, but also to the inner world of nature, Gray gives a concrete expression :

The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

—ibid., 1. 36

Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

—ibid., 11. 91-92

Such lines are too many to cite here.

Gray, giving concrete images to abstract ideas, embodies and animates them. He creates an abstract emotion by giving an exact description to the concrete, and by giving a figurative and picturesque description to the abstract he produces a concrete effect.

A picturesque description, here, means a concrete and sensuous description which conjures up not only a visual but an acoustic image. In the *Elegy* he gives a realistic description to the scenes of nature, though in his later poems he depicts them fantastically; and he allures the readers into an abstract world of pathetic and symphonic beauty. "His descriptions show an unusually keen color sense for his day," maintains Roger P. McCutcheon in his *Eighteenth Century English Literature*. I think, however, the realistic description in the *Elegy* is musical rather than colourful. The poem contains no 'colour-words' except 'hoary' (1.97) and 'darkness' (1.4). On the contrary, it is rich in 'sound-words,' especially in the description of scenery :

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day (1. 1); the lowing herd (1. 2); solemn stillness (1. 6); droning flight (1. 7); drowsy tinklings lull (1. 8); the moeping owl does... complain (1. 10); the breezy call of ... Morn (1. 17); the swallow twitt'ring (1.18); The cock's shrill clarion or the echoing horn (1.19); lisp their sire's return (1. 23); hear with disdainful smile (1. 31); silent dust (1. 43); to extasy the living lyre (1. 48); Th' applause of list'ning senates (1. 61); madding crowd's ignoble strife (1. 73); the noiseless tenor of their way (1. 76); Impores the passing tribute of a sigh (1. 80); to dumb Forgetfulness a prey (1. 85); the voice of Nature cries (1. 91); babbles (1. 104); mutt'ring (1. 106); now smiling as in scorn/Mutt'ring his wayward fancies (1. 104-106); with dirges due in sad array (1. 113)

and in other descriptions :

The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

(1. 40)

These simple and concrete 'sound-words' produce sound images, which harmoniously

fuse into an exquisite symphony that conjures up an abstracted lofty mood—melancholy, pathos or calm happiness.

Gray shows himself having “the naturally exquisite ear of the poet having been trained to consummate skill in harmony.”¹⁾ He is a musician much more than a painter. Even though he is a painter, the picture he depicts is not a colourful painting, but a piece of ‘*Sumie*’, a black and white drawing, or a sketch which leaves ample room to our unbounded and vigorous imagination.

As for Personifications, which the lines of the *Elegy* are rich in, they are to be treated of on another occasion. Here I say this only, that they also do much to his concrete description of nature.

I have given considerations to the *Elegy* in the aspect of the material. It may be reasonably concluded from them that in poetic materials, in an attitude towards nature, and in the description of it, Gray has freshness and unconventionality as never seen before. With the words of John Drinkwater I shall close this paper.

‘he [Gray] arrests particular attention in the course of English poetry because he was the first man of importance to revolt against the formalism of the poets of the age into which he was born.’²⁾

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