"A GRACE BEYOND THE REACH OF ART:" A STUDY OF THE LITERARY AND BIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES UPON THOMAS GRAY AND HIS ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

THESIS

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This study focuses on the poetic temperament of Thomas Gray and considers his Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard as representative of a change in sensibility which took place roughly in the last half of the eighteenth century.

The first chapter considers the literary and biographical influences on the author's changing aesthetic sensibility. The second chapter concerns the early life and education of Gray and his friendship with Walpole and West. The third chapter is a study of the Elegy itself and how it represents the poetic and aesthetic ideas of the author and the age in which he lived. In the concluding chapter Gray is considered as a transitional figure whose work embodies unresolved tensions between the Neoclassic and the Romantic.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: GRAY AS A TRANSITIONAL FIGURE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* first appeared in print on February 15, 1751; its reception by critics and public alike was so enthusiastic that within the year it was published in five quarto editions and four popular magazines.\(^1\) This initial swell of popularity, moreover, did not reach a peak and then decline; the distinctive gem-like beauty of the verses and their rich evocation of universal experiences—"with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo"—combined to give the poem that elusive air of permanence which marks a classic.\(^2\) Today, two centuries after Gray's death, the brilliance of those qualities which originally distinguished the poem remains undimmed, and the *Elegy* is one of the most widely known poems in the English language.

This study proposes first, to treat the poem within a broad historical context and then to focus upon the shift in aesthetics which took place during the eighteenth century and

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which is mirrored in Gray's *Elegy*. The biographical and literary influences upon the life of the author offer an insight into the poet's personal and sensitive approach to his subject. The characteristics of Gray—the poet and the man—which mark him as a transitional figure are reflected in his *Elegy*, which exemplifies an aesthetic shift from Neoclassicism to Romanticism.

The convergence of many historical phenomena in the latter half of the eighteenth century tended to produce an artistic sensibility preoccupied with the magnitude of melancholy and human suffering. The exuberance of the American and French Revolutions resulted in a new look at the plight of the common man. The growing popularity of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was evident from works like *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'Inégalité parmi les Hommes* (1755) and *Le Contrat social* (1762). Such works created a voice calling for the complete re-evaluation of social institutions in the light of human experience. Gradually, the dawn of the Industrial Age (1750-1830) led to a heightened awareness of the complex relationship between the individual and the society surrounding him. It is in this milieu that the development of Gray's poetic taste and aesthetic sense may be considered.

The literature of the age seemed pointed toward a rejuvenation of the idea that man is noble in all stations of life. The beggar and leech-gatherer of Wordsworth, the
chimney sweeper of Blake, and the English workingman of Shelley seem to share an ethical and aesthetic sensibility with Gray's "Hoary-headed Swain."\(^3\) These characters reflect a prevalent concern for the suffering individual—often presented as the unwitting dupe of a social or moral order he fails to comprehend. Gray's serious artistic vision has much in common with that of his "romantic" successors, especially since a central leitmotif in English literature of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century is an obsessive concern for the plight of the individual in an often oppressive society. Gray seems to share this concern, depicting "A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" as a common man whose station in life denies him the opportunity to fame. In this respect, the philosophy which informs his writing closely parallels that of Rousseau, who shows in his writings how the common man is exploited by the rich and powerful class. It is in Gray's apparent sensitivity to the political and social climate of his age that his poetic taste may best be understood.

The study of Gray's poetic taste, furthermore, necessarily includes an examination of the prevalent ideas of his age and the influence of these ideas on him. Such eighteenth-

\(^3\) The Beggar and leech-gatherer appear in the poems "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and "Resolution and Independence" respectively. The chimney sweeper is portrayed in the poem "The Chimney Sweeper." The English workingman is represented in the poem "Song to the Men of England."
century writers as Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, and Henry Home as well as such traditional writers as Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden of the preceding centuries offer an insight into some of the poetic theories from which Gray might have borrowed in the creation of his Elegy.

For a long time the fifty years or so between the death of Pope and the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* was somewhat of a critical no man's land. Some critics insisted on viewing the literature of Gray's period as a moribund Neoclassicism, the death-rattle of a movement inaugurated by Dryden and Milton nearly a century before. Others considered this period as a sort of chrysolitic romanticism, an inchoate sensibility whose mature expression had to await the talents of later "romantic" writers like Shelley, Keats, and Byron. A major breakthrough in the attempt to view the development of eighteenth-century literature from an objective perspective has been the recognition of the fifty years following the

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death of Pope (1744) as the Age of Sensibility. Recognition of this distinct phase allows the literature of this period to be discussed not as vestigial Neoclassicism or embryonic Romanticism, but as a distinct artistic expression of a transitional age.

A balanced study of Gray's *Elegy* is complicated by several factors. Internal analysis of the poem is difficult because of a crucial interdependence of structure and meaning within the work. In his efforts to achieve conciseness of expression and yet to express himself freely, Gray utilizes a descriptive-reflective method of narration (this method will be discussed later). The elegiac form itself, which is common to both Latin and Greek literature, transmutes the poet's individual feelings into universal human experience. Efforts to view the *Elegy* in relation to its historical context and to determine its date of composition have been impeded by the opinions of Gray's friend and editor, William Mason. Mason claims that he persuaded Gray "to call his poem an ELEGY because the subject authorized him to do so," and that the poem was begun, if not concluded, shortly after Richard West's death in 1742. A conflicting theory concerning the date of composition was asserted by Morris Golden. He held that Mason did not know Gray in 1742 and that Walpole, who was intimately involved in the publication of the *Elegy*, wrote in his

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"Memoirs of Gray" that the Elegy was finished in 1750.\(^8\)

Notwithstanding Mason's unsubstantiated assertions,

\[\ldots\] anyone who wishes to come to terms with the Elegy today is obliged first of all to make his own assessment of the evidence about the date of composition and the original intention of the poem.\(^9\)

A comparison of Samuel Johnson's strictures of Gray's other poetry (particularly The Progress of Poesy and The Bard) with his comments on the Elegy suggests a more subtle complication. Dr. Johnson denounced both the "cumbrous splendour" and "affectation" of Gray's small body of verse.\(^10\)

The mind of the writer seems to work with unnatural violence\ldots{} He has a kind of strutting dignity, and is tall by walking on tiptoe. His art and his struggle are too visible, and there is too little appearance of ease and nature.\(^11\)

In evaluating the Elegy, however, Johnson rejoiced "to concur with the common reader," and joined in the acclamation:

The four stanzas beginning Yet even these bones, are to me original: I have never seen the notions in another place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them. Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him.\(^12\)

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\(^8\)Golden, p. 67.


\(^10\)Johnson, p. 599.

\(^11\)Ibid.

\(^12\)Ibid.
Of course, Johnson echoes the Neoclassical dictum that true poetry should express universal truths in a novel and appealing manner. Pope had succinctly expressed this idea several decades before: "True wit is Nature to Advantage drest,/ What oft was Thought, but n'er so well Exprest."\(^{13}\) Because of Dr. Johnson's outspoken aversion to writing which departed from the proper norms (as evidenced by his vigorous reaction to Gray's experiments in the "Wonderful Wonder of Wonders"),\(^{14}\) such unreserved praise from the bulwark of Neoclassical decorum completely overshadows the novel aspects of the poem by highlighting only its traditional dress.

The following chapters deal with the related problems touched on above, namely, to determine what motivated the composition of the Elegy, to distinguish its antecedents, and to trace its development. The primary purpose of this study, however, is to explore a possible context for further explication of the historical and literary significance of Gray's poetic taste rather than to make a detailed internal analysis of the poem.


\(^{14}\)Johnson, p. 596.
CHAPTER II

GRAY: THE MAN AND THE POET

The dichotomy between the Elegy's apparently strict conformity to the ideals of neoclassical decorum and its less obvious departure from that tradition might be reconciled by approaching the poem through a study of the personality of Thomas Gray himself. Such an approach is particularly appropriate because Gray was personally divided by the same conflicting ideals that are reflected in the Elegy, and it seems likely that the poem is the product of his efforts to fuse these contradictory strains into a unified expression of his inner self.

The "Letter written to my friend Mr. Boswell, by the Rev. Mr. Temple, rector of St. Gluvias in Cornwall" provides a useful point of departure for the study of Gray.¹ The characterization of Gray contained in this letter is endorsed by Dr. Johnson's note that he is "as willing as his [Gray's] warmest well-wisher to believe it true," and includes the observation of Gray that "the world and mankind were shown to him without a mask."² This is, perhaps, ironic because

²Ibid.
Gray struggled throughout his life to project an image that would mask his true feelings and personality from "the world and mankind;" as Eliot would later say in a different context, Gray constantly tried "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet."³

The fifth child of Philip and Dorothy Gray, Thomas Gray was the only one of twelve children to survive infancy. He was born into a divided family, and his childhood was fragmented by the unhappy relationship between his parents.

The married life of Philip and Dorothy Gray was a miserable affair, ruined almost from the outset by the husband's peculiarities of temper. 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.⁴

Within this divisive environment, Gray is said to have developed 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 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."⁵ Before his ninth birthday, two of Gray's uncles, who were masters at Eton, were distressed by the child's bookish and solitary life at home and arranged for his admission to

⁵Ibid.
the school as a non-resident pupil. The unforeseen result of this warm-hearted gesture was that during his years at Eton, "unquestionably the happiest that he was ever to know," Gray's early scholarly interests were reinforced and his tendency toward seclusion was confirmed.⁶

Three of Gray's lifelong interests may be traced back to his days at Eton. His curiosity about botany and the life sciences was fostered by his uncle, William Antrobus, who tried to lead him into the study of medicine. His fascination with English history may have been stimulated by Windsor Castle, which "with its wealth of associations and legends, dominated the smiling landscape."⁷ His delight in the classics and in poetic composition probably grew from his exercises in Latin verse composition. Of much greater significance during his sojourn at Eton was the founding of several friendships whose divergent appeals to Gray's personality were to play a major role in his individual and poetic development. This was the formation of the "Quadruple Alliance"--the friendship of Gray, Horace Walpole, Richard West, and Thomas Ashton, a group of boys drawn together by their common interests and personalities, "delicate in health, disinclined to take part in games or adventure, poetical and romantic in temperament, a trifle conceited, rather old for their years," they banded together for mutual support in the chaotic school environment.⁸

⁶Ibid., p. 3. ⁷Ibid., pp. 3-4. ⁸Ibid., p. 5.
In 1734 the physical bonds of the Quadruple Alliance were severed when all except Walpole (whose circumstances did not require mundane considerations) were "faced with struggles, with duties, with the distasteful necessity of adopting a profession." West went to Oxford and Gray and Ashton enrolled at Cambridge, where in a few months they were joined by Walpole.  

This period affords the first evidence of the antipodal influence which Walpole and West were to exert on Gray's life. The urbane and sophisticated tone of Gray's letters to Walpole did not appear in those he wrote to West; it was replaced by a forthright expression of sentiment and emotional honesty. Indeed, these letters to West had "all the features of a sentimental correspondence." In a letter to Walpole on November 17, 1734, Gray wrote of a party at Cambridge:

Do but imagine me pent up in a room hired for the purpose, and none of the largest, from seven o'clock at night, till four in the morning! 'midst hogsheads of Liquor and quantities of Tobacco, surrounded by thirty of these creatures, infinitely below the meanest People you could even form an Idea of; Toasting bawdy healths and deafened by their unmeaning roar.

By contrast, a letter Gray wrote to West demonstrates no such world-weariness, and its emotional honesty reminds one of Milton's letters to Charles Diodati:

9Ibid., p. 9.
10Jack, p. 149.
I do not wonder in the least at your frequent blaming my indolence, it ought rather to be called ingratitude, and I am obliged to your goodness for softening so harsh an appellation. . . . Almost all the employment of my hours may be best explained by negations: take my word and experience upon it, doing nothing is a most amusing business; and yet neither something nor nothing gives me any pleasure. When you have seen one of my days, you have seen a whole year of my life. You need not doubt, therefore, of having a first row in the front box of my little heart, and I believe you are not in danger of being crowded there; it is asking you to an old play, indeed, but you will be candid enough to excuse the whole piece for a few tolerable lines.  

Concerning Walpole's strong appeal for the young Gray, it has been observed that Gray was attracted to the advantages which accompanied Walpole's wealth and influence.  

His affection for West, however, rested upon the firmer ground of a mutual love of classical literature. Gray sent translations of Statius and Propertius to West, who answered with his own translations of Horace and Tibullus. Gray even developed a reputation for his ability to write Latin verse that went beyond his immediate circle; in 1736 he was asked to contribute to the Gratulatio in honor of the marriage of the Prince of Wales, and in 1737 he was selected to contribute one of the "Tripos Verses" in the theme Luna est Habitabilis.  

The complementary efforts of Gray and West to master their art could not help drawing them closer together as kindred spirits; while this relationship grew more intimate, 

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13 Ketton-Cremer, p. 15.
14 Ibid., p. 22.
Gray maintained his friendship with Walpole on the same detached level as before. The contrasting nature of these two relationships is suggested by two letters of 1737 in which Gray touches on the subject of his pervasive melancholy. To West, he confessed that

Low spirits are my true and faithful companions; they get up with me, go to bed with me, make journeys and returns as I do; nay, and pay visits, and will even affect to be jocose, and force a feeble laugh with me; but most commonly we sit alone together, and are the prettiest insipid company in the world.\textsuperscript{15}

In a subsequent letter to Walpole, Gray treated his melancholy strain in a series of lighthearted allusions:

Both vale and hill are covered with most venerable beeches, and other very reverend vegetables, that, like most ancient people, are always dreaming out their old stories to the winds. . . . At the foot of one of these squats me I (il penseroso), and there grow to the trunk for a whole morning. The timorous hare and sportive squirrel gambol around me like Adam in Paradise, before he had an Eve; but I think he did not use to read Virgil, as I commonly do there.\textsuperscript{16}

In his friendship with Walpole, Gray observed the rules of decorum quite proper to an eighteenth-century gentleman. With West he was able to express the feelings he knew they shared. The nature of these passions was encapsulated in the Alcaic Fragment with which Gray closed a letter to West in 1738: "O fountain of tears which have their sacred sources in the

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 10.
sensitive soul! Four times blessed he who has felt thee, holy Nymph, bubbling up from the depths of his heart."  

During this same period Gray began to discover the extent of his affinity to West, which was not only temperamental but also poetic and scholarly, and which was enhanced through the continuing scholarly pursuits of Gray. His interest in the theories of contemporary philosophy and science enhanced his celebration of the beauty of the natural world. The philosophy of Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), which will be discussed later, probably appealed to both Gray and West because it upheld morality as part of that beauty which animates the whole universe.  

Gray's decision in 1736 to study law afforded him more intellectual freedom to study ancient and modern literature and allowed him to indulge his wide-ranging curiosity. He soon added a command of Italian to his knowledge of Latin and French: his notebooks record some sixty-two works of French and Italian literature, including such masters as Tasso, Ariosto, Dante, Petrarch, Racine, Boileau, La Rochefoucauld, and Montesquieu as well as works of history, criticism, memoir, and travel.  

In tracing both the development of Gray's personality and the genesis of his aesthetic beliefs, the two years which


19 Jones, p. 35.
he spent on the continent with Walpole are very important. During this period the belief in the powers of the feelings suggested by the Alcaic Fragment were reinforced by Gray's personal encounters with the strength of the sublime. In a letter written to West from Turin in November, 1735, Gray described his visit to the Grande Chartreuse:

> In our little journey up to the Grande Chartreuse, I do not remember to have gone ten paces without an exclamation, that there was no restraining. Not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry. There are certain scenes that would awe an atheist into belief, without the help of other argument. One need not have a very fantastic imagination to see spirits there at noonday; you have Death perpetually before your eyes, only so far removed, as to compose the mind without frightening it.20

Gray's enthusiasm for the power and delicate beauty of nature is evident as he writes of "spirits" and "death" personified.21 He realized, however, that the element of terror inherent in the sublime could be carried too far for successful aesthetic effect:

> Mont Cenis, I confess, carries the permission mountains have of being frightful rather too far; and its horrors were accompanied with too much danger to give one time to reflect upon their beauties.22

Similarly, Gray's antiquarian interest drew him toward what


21 Gray's awe-inspiring description of his visit to the Grande Chartreuse bears a rather close resemblance to Wordsworth's stanza, although Wordsworth's emphasis is ethical rather than religious; "One impulse from a vernal wood/May teach you more of man,/Of moral evil and of good,/ Than all the sages can." William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, with Introduction and Notes, edited by Thomas Hutchinson (New York, 1965), p. 377.

would later be called the Gothic, another essentially "non-rational mode that was closely allied with the sublime." His letters from Italy, especially those from Rome, abound with enthusiastic descriptions of ruins and ruin-dotted prospects.

Gray was, nevertheless, a firm believer in the traditional side of the eighteenth-century aesthetic argument—that represented by the classical canon of beauty which called for symmetry, balance, and decorum in art. The literary taste of eighteenth-century England generally encouraged plain expression of altruistic ideals. Both the harmonies of man's handiwork and the picturesque side of nature appealed to Gray. "Among the aspects of Turin he labeled 'beauties' were 'streets all out by the line, regular uniform buildings, fine walks that surround the whole, and in general a good lively clean appearance. . . .'" It may also be pointed out in this connection that Gray rejoiced in the "peaceful, fruitful plain," as is suggested by his response to the symmetry he found in the roads, farms, and trees of Lombardy. He was also delighted everywhere by the evidences of the classical tradition of form, simplicity, and proportion that man had so

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23Golden, p. 36.

24The word "Classical" as used here refers to art or literature which was patterned after the Greek and Roman.

25Mathew Arnold, quoted in Thomas Gray's Essays And Criticisms, by Clark Sutherland Northup (Boston, 1911), p. xii-xiii.

26Golden, p. 37.
long been creating. He was affected, nevertheless, by the opposing influences of the "Gothic" in art which expressed a wish to escape regularity, symmetry, and restraint. At Sienna's cathedral, for example, Gray described the "huge pile of marble, black and white laid alternately, and laboured with a gothic niceness and delicacy in the old fashioned way."27

While on the continent, Gray studied painting and classical sculpture; in Florence and later in Rome he studied every available collection and recorded his impressions of each painting and each statue in his notebooks.28 He admired works of such masters of the High Renaissance as Titian, Raphael and Veronese, but he was most taken by the artists of the seventeenth century; Annibale Caracci, Dominichino, Guerchino, Pietro da Cortona, Salvator Rosa, and Carlo Maratti all received his praise, although is particular favorite was Guido Reni.29 It has been noted that Gray was not only a most discerning critic, but that his artistic standards were, in fact, those of the best contemporary critics.30 His enthusiasm for Guido above all others reflects the typical fascination which that painter held for the eighteenth-century English poets.31 Gray's great admiration for Guido is reflected


28 Ketton-Cremer, p. 38.


30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.
by the glorious work that Gray projected as appropriate to his style and genius:

... Christ, the principal figure, with an air of calm and serene majesty, his hand extended, as commanding the elements to their several places: near him an angel of superior rank bearing the golden compasses (that Milton describes); beneath, the chaos, like a dark and turbulent ocean, only illuminated by the spirit who is brooding over it.32

Gray's love of painting and sculpture as well as his intense interest in ancient and modern literature was perhaps not always fully shared by Walpole. It was doubtful that two young men of such different backgrounds and varied interests as Gray and Walpole could have weathered two years of an eighteenth-century Grand Tour in a state of unruffled amiability.33 The clash between Gray's scholarly preoccupations and Walpole's desire to enhance his personal social success led to an increasing estrangement between the two.34 This conflict seems to have augmented Gray's predisposition toward self-analysis, and in April, 1741, shortly before they were to leave Florence for Venice (where their final separation was to occur), Gray sent West a letter summarizing the changes he had perceived in his own character:

Try at least to make me imagine myself not indifferent to you; for I must own I have the vanity of desiring to

33 Ketton-Cremer, p. 44.
34 In addition to numerous catalogs Gray copied at least nine volumes of manuscript music.
be esteemed by somebody, and would choose that somebody should be one whom I esteem as much as you. On the good side you may add a sensibility for what others feel, and indulgence for their faults or weaknesses, a love of truth, and detestation of everything else. Then you are to deduct a little impertinence, a laughter, a great deal of pride, and some spirits.35

In an agitated frame of mind, Gray left Venice in July, 1741, to return to England. Shortly after the middle of August he revisited the Grande Chartreuse and passed some time there among the monks. During his brief stay with them, the contemplative life of the monks and his own disturbed feelings were combined in his well-known Alcaic Ode (1741), which he inscribed in the guest-book at the monastery. As he addresses the "Holy Spirit" at the monastery, he offers an insight into his own enthusiasm for the spiritual:

. . . we behold God nearer to us, a living presence, amid pathless steeps, wild mountain ridges and precipitous cliffs, and among roaring torrents and the nocturnal gloom of sacred groves than if He were confined under beams of citron and gleaming with gold wrought by the hand of Phidias)--hail to Thee!36

There is one other document from this period of Gray's life that is helpful in tracing the sources of his poetry and poetics. In a letter written to West in April, 1742, some eight months after his return from Europe, Gray elaborated one of the fundamental bases for his poetic style in his comments on the proper language of poetry:

As to the matter of stile, I have this to say: the language of the age is never the language of poetry; except among the French, whose verse, where the thought or image does not support it, differs in nothing from prose.  

In the same letter to West, Gray describes himself as a "sort of spider":

I ... have little else to do but spin it over again, or creep to some other place and spin there. Alas! for one who has nothing to do but amuse himself, I believe my amusements are as little amusing as most folks. But no matter; it makes the hours pass.

Gray realized that while he could speak directly from his heart in his correspondence with West and in his private Latin poems, any verse intended for the reading public would require the observance of the rules of decorum and the traditional aesthetic canon. At the same time, his belief in the power of the passions and his awareness of the aesthetic effect of the sublime caused him to desire "significant emotional communication" in his poetry. Gray's early efforts to write didactic poetry seem to have been consistent with the accepted poetic practice of following either a classical model or a derivative of the classical tradition. Consequently, his decision to explore his melancholia in an elegy afforded him a proper literary form.

38 Ibid., p. 110.
39 Golden, p. 41.
Gray's description of his chosen poetic medium, lyric poetry, indicates that its capacities for the sublime had enticed him to it: 'the true lyric style with all its flights of fancy, ornaments, and heightening of expression and harmony of sound, is in its nature superior to every other style. . . .' The ornaments, the heightening, and the harmony in general fit with the theorizing and, for that matter, with the underlying wishes of his contemporaries. 40

To his belief in the fusion of passion and imagination Gray joined a high regard for poetic craftsmanship and the union of sound and sense:

There is . . . a tout ensemble of sound as well as sense, in poetical composition always necessary to its perfection. What has gone before still dwells upon the ear, and insensibly harmonizes with the present line, as in that succession of fleeting notes which is called Melody. 41

To achieve this unity, Gray not only avoided the colloquial in his language, but he also made great use of allusion and borrowed ideas to evoke a wider range of response to his poetry. 42 Such composition of a unique work from fragments of other pre-existing works is described in another context as the process of bricolage, and a consideration of Gray's poetry in the light of this contemporary anthropological

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., p. 39.
42 Among Gray's allusions to British historical figures he mentions Hampden, Milton, and Cromwell. The ideas which Gray borrows include the melancholy of the yew tree's shade and the pastoral theme of living close to the earth.
theory might be illuminating. For the purpose of the present chapter, however, it is enough to say that Gray himself was aware of the range of his literary borrowings and freely acknowledged them; in the 1768 edition of his poems he added several referential notes. "To imitate and not plagiarize, and thereby to sum up what many had thought but none had so well and so universally expressed--that was the poetical gift of Gray..." A close examination of the Elegy shows the degree of the author's imitation of the ideas of other writers. Such an examination also shows the extent to which Gray contributed his own ideas to eighteenth-century literature.

43 Bricolage (derived from the French word bricoleur, which signifies a "jack of all trades"), represents the quality of the poet's art which gives an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes among the limited possibilities afforded by the world around him; the bricoleur builds a new world (or poem) from the same shattered pieces of an old world (or poem). Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago, 1966), pp. 20-21.

44 Jones, p. 144.
CHAPTER III

GRAY'S INDEBTEDNESS AND CONTRIBUTION TO
THE AESTHETIC IDEAS OF HIS AGE

In order to distinguish in the Elegy certain striking similarities between the poetic ideas of Thomas Gray and those of his contemporaries, it is necessary to review some prominent aesthetic characteristics of his age. It would perhaps be futile to attempt a complete enumeration of Gray's literary debts. He doubtless absorbed and followed certain of the theories that were in use or appearing during his lifetime, but his almost instinctive aversion to abstruse philosophy perhaps prevented him from consciously taking over any elaborate system or ideology propounded by others. Insofar as Gray evolves his own poetic theories in the Elegy, he contributes stylistically and philosophically to the expansion of the aesthetic ideas of his century. His extensive reading in many fields of literature and his excellent taste naturally led him to many of his ideas without any discernible debt to one or two specific writers. It is therefore

1Herbert W. Starr, "Gray as a Literary Critic," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of English, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa., 1941, p. 120.
with some degree of caution that I shall attempt to show some of the most apparent influences on Gray's poetic theory, especially as represented in the Elegy.

One such influence stems from the political-economic struggle of the century. The old aristocratic indifference to the common man begins to give way as a new ethical theory is established, and literature begins to display a broader human interest and a pronounced human sympathy.\(^2\) The basic contrast in the Elegy seems to be a distinction between the rich and the poor. The narrator-persona, who apparently belongs to neither class, describes the life of the rustics in a disinterested manner. Through the character of the narrator-persona Gray reveals his understanding of the human condition and projects at the same time a melancholic mood. Although Gray's identity is concealed throughout the poem, there is no apparent distinction between himself and his narrator-persona. They seem to share the same pensive and melancholic disposition.

Around the beginning of the eighteenth century there developed a growing fondness for melancholy poetry. Coming from such classical writers as Lucretius, Virgil, Horace, and Seneca, and reinforced by Milton's Il Penseroso, this poetry

\(^2\)Cecil A. Moore, Backgrounds of English Literature, 1700-1760 (Minneapolis, 1953), p. 3.
revolved around three general themes which may be termed "Complaint of Life, Retirement, and Death."\(^3\) Probably because of Milton's influence, melancholy at this time was no longer regarded as solely negative. "The influence of Milton gave to literature a dreamy, melancholy cast, that harmonized with the sentimentalism in England and the continent."\(^4\) The melancholy associated with the theme of retirement was thought to bring certain joys and mild pleasures without the accompanying fear that they are abnormal and dangerous, or that they are inevitably followed by pain and death.\(^5\) This belief in the unique pleasure of melancholy was generated by Shaftesbury's optimistic philosophy with its endorsement of benevolent or virtuous expression of emotion.\(^6\)

In Shaftesbury's doctrine of man as well as in his humanitarian ethics sympathy plays an important role.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Reed, p. 127.

\(^6\) Shaftesbury's philosophy was, in part, an attempt to give due satisfaction to man's emotional needs while acknowledging the sovereignty of reason. R. L. Brett, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, A Study in Eighteenth-Century Literary Theory* (New York, 1951), p. 722.

\(^7\) Grean, p. 159.
Similarly, the trait in the narrator-persona's character which appears most sensitive in the *Elegy* is his sympathy for the sufferings of others, his "sensibility" to feel another's sorrows. In this respect Gray seems to share an aesthetic sensibility with Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's "generous affection, an exercise of friendship uninterrupted, a constant kindness and benignity of disposition, a constant complacency, constant security, tranquility, equanimity" anticipates Gray's tone in the *Elegy*. In Shaftesbury's essay on "The Philosophical Regimen, Natural Affection" he proposes a method for man's harmonious relationship with his fellow man:

"... by the natural and good affection of creatures towards their own species the species should be preserved and be prosperous." It is precisely with this kind of affection that Gray strengthens his sympathy for mankind. That Gray read Shaftesbury's writing there is no doubt, since he described Shaftesbury as a "fine writer" who "seems always to mean more than he said."

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significantly in his century to the development of ethics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of religion.  

The awakened interest in the plight of the common man evolved in England partly through the imitation of Shaftesbury’s benevolent school of philosophy. Like other writers of his day, Gray participated in the vigorous literary interest in philanthropy that characterized middle eighteenth-century English literature.  

It must be remembered, however, that in the literature before Shaftesbury, as well as in the philosophy, there were already indications that public taste was moving toward a more sentimental interpretation of life.  

For Gray, furthermore, a requisite for sympathy was to see life in its true proportions. His sympathy shows respect for another man’s point of view and allows at the same time a deserved place for the inherited tendencies and prejudices which determined the view.  

As evidenced in the Elegy, even the "hoary-headed Swain" is entitled to his views on life, however simply these views may be stated. The swain seems

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12 Grean, p. xi.
13 Moore, p. 4.
14 Ibid., p. 51.
to understand in his own limited manner that life is fleeting, even though he perhaps does not perceive that his own life quickly passes like the "brook that babbles by" (1. 104).

This sympathetic quality of human understanding seems to permeate the melancholic mood of the *Elegy*. "The prevailing impression one has on considering Gray's *Elegy* is of its distinctive 'atmosphere,' contemplative and Horatian. There is a stoic reflection on the transience of earthly glory that we associate with this tradition. It is the same apparent preference for a Sabine Farm, 'far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife;' the poet's melancholic mood seems to express a wish which he has for his whole future: to be 'marked out' by melancholy for her own, to live and die in peaceful rustic security."16 The proper setting in the *Elegy* for his melancholic reflections is "Beneath those rugged elms" (1. 13) in the English countryside. The narrator-persona is perhaps more an observer of nature than a participant in its infinite vicissitudes, and seems to invite the reader to share in his spiritual and humanitarian interpretation of rustic life. The profound sense of isolation in

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the Elegy might derive at least partly from the unhappy events of Gray's early home life.

As the century progressed, the expression of the themes of poetic melancholy became intimately connected with descriptions of nature and the countryside; as is evidenced by Thomson's Seasons, there was by 1730 a well established association between the author's description of nature and his pensive or gloomy reflection. Indeed, it has been noted that by this time

Certain details of the descriptions too, had become so fixed by repetition as to be in themselves considered either pensive or horrible, so that the mere use of them in a poem was sufficient to stamp it as melancholy, regardless of whether or not the poet's feelings really penetrated his description. Thus autumn and evening are pensive, winter and night gloomy. . . . A ruin covered by ivy and haunted by owls, bats, ravens, . . . or adders, toads, foxes, . . . is almost an inevitable feature. A deeper shade of melancholy is attained through description of a graveyard or charnel house.  

During the years 1740-1750 melancholy poetry moved toward the simplicity of expression, organic structure, and personal expression of emotion that characterize the true lyric. One major step in this direction was the publication of Hammond's Love Elegies in 1742. Based on the elegies of

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17 Reed, p. 176.
18 Ibid., p. 177.
19 Reed, p. 177.
Tibullus, the chief contribution of these poems was Hammond's effort to imitate the classical elegaic meter by retaining the pentameter line throughout, linking the alternate lines by rhyme. Intrigued by Hammond's *Elegies*, William Shenstone discussed the elegaic form in his "Prefatory Essay on the Elegy," and in this work standardized the use of elegy in melancholy poetry. His summary of morally advantageous subjects for the elegy includes

the innocence and simplicity of rural life, the sweets of liberty and independence, the honest delights of love and friendship, the glory of a good name after death, the futility of pride in noble birth, the innocent amusements of letters, and in general the humane temper.

In reading this list, "One might think that Shenstone was writing a prescription for duplicating Gray's poem." This striking similarity between Shenstone's catalogue and Gray's practice in the *Elegy* contributes to the dating of the composition of the poem mentioned in the first chapter of this paper. A knowledge of the date of composition of the *Elegy* is necessary in order to determine the extent to which Gray represented in his poem ideas which were not originally his own. Because Shenstone is known to have begun the

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20 Ibid., pp. 226-227.
21 Ibid., pp. 228-229.
22 Golden, p. 68.
composition of his *Elegies* and his "Prefatory Essay" around 1743 and because certain internal evidence suggests that Gray might have seen two of his poems (numbers IV and XV) at that time, it might be possible to strengthen the argument supporting a date of composition subsequent to 1743. Furthermore, stronger evidence suggests that the poem was begun sometime during 1746. In a letter to Walpole on June 12, 1750, Gray introduced the enclosed copy of the *Elegy* with the words

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

Since there is no evidence that the poem was begun before 1741 (when Gray and Walpole were on a Continental tour) and because Gray and Walpole remained estranged from then until the close of 1745, Gray's "long ago" could not be legitimately applied to any date prior to 1745. In arguing this case one may note that this would seem to confirm Walpole's comment to Mason that

> The Churchyard was . . . posterior to West's death (1742) at least three or four years. . . . At least I am sure that I had the twelve or more first lines from himself above three years after that period, and it was long before he finished it.

Finally, because Mason did not meet Gray until 1747, he could not have seen any of the poem as early as 1742 (a date of

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24Jack, p. 141.
composition suggested by Mason, but unsubstantiated): 

He cannot have had a letter proving that the poem was written in 1742, or he certainly would have printed it. He cannot have had Gray's word for such a date, or he would not have said merely that he was "inclined to believe it." 25

It is also necessary, as suggested at the outset of this discussion, to recognize the overall design of the poem and the techniques and ideas with which Gray developed the delicate interdependence of structure and meaning. Inherent to the melancholy genre at this point in its evolution was the alternation of descriptive and reflective passages, and three such units of the depiction of a scene followed by consideration of its implications have been recognized in the basic structure of the Elegy. 26 What distinguishes this structure in Gray's poem is not only the beauty of his descriptive passages resulting from his keen observation of the natural world, but his vast and sophisticated knowledge of the subjects and techniques of the graphic arts. Very possibly influenced by Alexander Pope's superb use of balanced phrases, Gray often employs parallel structure to heighten the emotional effects of such phrases as "The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r." 27 It might also be noted that in the structure of

25 Reed, p. 177.


the *Elegy* Gray's technique resembles the scientific method of the seventeenth century.

The development of scientific method in the seventeenth century in stressing the order and rationality of nature, had given the concept a new emphasis; an emphasis that made the most characteristic feature of nature its conformity to the laws which science had discovered. It followed that if poetry were to be an imitation of nature it, too, should demonstrate the same order and symmetry, should obey the same laws and possess the same coherence as were now seen to characterize nature.²⁸

Yet it was not alone the principle of the imitation of nature which guided Gray in the construction of the *Elegy*. Shaftesbury's insistence on the natural and innate goodness of man was an integral part of his rehabilitation of the whole natural order.²⁹ Gray thus perhaps evolved from the philosophy of Shaftesbury a concept of order and a personal theory of ethics which, while free from traditional restraints, recognized the utility of the visions and talents of the artist.

Gray seems also to share a respect for the fine arts which, according to eighteenth-century poetic theory, are contrived to give pleasure both to the eye and to the ear.³⁰ Indeed, a positive contribution by Gray to his age is his attitude that poetry is an end in itself and that the main

²⁸ Brett, pp. 123-124.
²⁹ Ibid., p. 187.
purpose of poetry is to produce pleasure, an idea that was to receive its consummate expression in the critical writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge.\textsuperscript{31} Gray's taste in the fine arts is almost synonymous with his moral sense, and it is this harmonious relationship between the tangible in art (beauty and form) and the aesthetic in sensibility (ethics and religion) which pre-eminently endures in the \textit{Elegy}. In the following lines, for example, Gray achieves a memorable blending of harmonious diction and humanitarian ethics:

\begin{quote}
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 (11. 29-32).
\end{quote}

Gray's ethical sense is consistent with the eighteenth-century theme of reform. His careful construction of the \textit{Elegy} and his serious treatment of human pathos in the poem render him both an artist and a moral philosopher. The humanitarian ethic ennunciated in the \textit{Elegy} is enhanced by the refinement and harmony of diction. Gray agreed with his contemporary Home that "... the fine arts, like morals become a rational science; and like morals, may be cultivated to a high degree of refinement."\textsuperscript{32}

Gray accepted the doctrine of \textit{ut pictura poesis} in criticism and recognized the tradition of iconic poetry.\textsuperscript{33} While touring the continent in 1741 he developed a great interest in and appreciation of painting and sculpture. Thus


\textsuperscript{32}Home, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{33}Hagstrum, p. 288.
it was with the eye of the painter as well as that of the poet that Gray structured his Elegy into a form which has been perceptively characterized as a triptych. By describing the work in this way and recognizing its relation to the pictorialist tradition, the critic adds a new dimension to an analysis of the structure and content of the poem. Like a painting, Gray's poem functions as a totality and produces a harmonious overall effect. The pictorial quality of such painters as Guido Reni, Annibale Caracci, and Carlo Moratti is achieved by the dramatic treatment of their central subjects, while Gray utilizes words and phrases to direct his reader to the Elegy's central theme of sympathy for the common man and his common lot. The "Curfew" tolls, the "glimmering landscape" fades, and the author (or the narrator-persona) directs the reader's attention to the "rude Forefathers of the hamlet." Words like "Ambition" and "Grandeur" paradoxically extol the "homely joys" and "destiny obscure" of the common man. This analysis of the relationship between the Elegy and the pictorialist tradition illustrates Gray's development of his theme through a series of interconnected contrasts. Such an analysis avoids the confusion of identifying the narrator-persona with the Youth in the Epitaph,

34 Brady, p. 172.
35 Grean, p. 77.
36 Brady, p. 184.
and it accentuates the author's methodic development of his central theme. The sophisticated narrator-persona and the naive Youth are thus used by the author to further develop his theme through contrast. When approached as a product of Gray's dual interest in humanitarianism and the pictorial arts, the Elegy is seen as a word-painting which, in Shaftesburyan terms, "sensitizes us to suffering and pain, and so helps to promote the security and happiness of mankind."37

The first of the poem's three sections (ll. 1-76) begins with a vivid description of a twilight landscape by a first-person narrator who seems to be looking down from some isolated vantage point upon the simple existence of those below. From this detached perspective he points out the various features of the microcosm spread in panorama before him--"yonder ivy-mantled tower," "those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade"--without ever becoming a part of it. This omniscient perspective allows him to call forth the forefathers of the village from their graves in the churchyard before him, and to consider their "homely joys and destiny obscure." The gravity of Gray's treatment of the simple village rustics is consistent with Shaftesbury's formula: ". . . true simplicity must ever be accompanied with gravity and a certain becoming reservedness, otherwise simplicity perishes.38


38Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, quoted in Cecil A. Moore's Backgrounds of English Literature (Minneapolis, 1953), p. 183.
Gray handles the English landscape with simplicity, fidelity, and spiritual feeling. The way in which its various details are blended with the emotion expressed is one of the most distinctive features of the poem.  

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. (ll. 13-16)

Again in the twenty-sixth stanza the landscape is described by the "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. (ll. 101-104)

A growing sensibility in the eighteenth century reasserted a belief in the world as a manifestation of some spiritual reality; Gray's spiritual interpretation of nature seems to reflect the romantic belief in nature as something organic and growing rather than mechanical and static.  

Gray's reference to "some heart once pregnant with celestial fire" implies that the heart of man has in it something of the divine. His attitude toward the rustics implies that society is an organism in which all members perform useful functions and that individual ability and virtue exist at all levels of society. 

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40 Brett, p. 187.

The isolation of the narrator from the society of the rustics is balanced by his considerations of the limits imposed on the members of that society as seen by the proud; he realizes that because

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\ldots \text{Knowledge to their eyes her ample page}
\]
\[
\text{Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;}
\]

and

\[
\text{Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage}
\]
\[
\text{And froze the genial current of the soul,}
\]

possibly some great artistic or political genius was never allowed to develop his potential. Implicit in these lines is an aesthetic view of intuitive awareness which Shaftesbury referred to as an innate function of reason and good sense.\(^\text{42}\)

This intuitive awareness of the truth is not attainable merely by constructing a system of logical concepts, nor by merely adding one fact to another.\(^\text{43}\) On the other hand, this innate power must be nurtured and encouraged by education and culture. The rustic who possesses native artistic or political genius cannot develop his potential if he is repressed and is denied an education in the common way of instruction. This leads the narrator to speculate that conversely, these limitations greatly reduce the potential for the rustics to attain the same magnitude of crime or sin that the greater advantages

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\(^{42}\)"Intuitive awareness" as used here refers to the inherent ability of man to know what is morally good and bad without the use of rational processes or formal instruction.

granted the proud make possible for them:

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 (11. 65-68).

At the heart of this apparent conflict between the inborn abilities of the rustics and the limitations which fetter their intellectual development, however, the narrator realizes that the same inevitable and obliterating fate awaits rich and poor alike, and that none of the attainments of the proud can in any way ameliorate it.

In the second section of the *Elegy* (11. 77-92), the narrator envisions the tombstones of the rustics "With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked," and in doing so he creates an ironic parallel between the rustics' "frail memorials" and the "storied urn" and "animated bust" which adorn the graves of the proud. These memorials suggest to the narrator the universality of the motive which inspires men of all classes to try to withstand the total obliteration of death. When the narrator generalizes about the common unwillingness to leave "warm precincts of the cheerful day," he notes that the "parting soul" of the dying may be comforted by the presence of a friend. This suggests that the consolation for man at the moment of death lies in the recognition of our shared humanity. Herein lies perhaps the closest rendering in the *Elegy* of Shaftesbury's theory of universal benevolence. "Sociability," says Shaftesbury, "... is the
great instinct, and benevolence the great law, of human nature, which no other law can repel or alter." The writer of "uncouth rhymes" is reminiscent of the "Swain" in Milton's Lycidas who mourns the death of a young shepherd. In Lycidas a dead shepherd is the object of a "melodious tear," while in the Elegy every man of low station who has died "Some pious drops . . . requires," or at least "Implores the passing tribute of a sigh."

There is perhaps another suggestion here by Gray, one which reflects a growing skepticism in the eighteenth century on the question of personal immortality. When the "Curfew tolls the knell of parting day" in the first section, the author sets the tone for his reference to the "dull cold ear of Death" in the second section. In the final lines of the Epitaph Gray seems to imply that personal immortality is an impenetrable mystery which abides in a spiritual domain, "The bosom . . . of God." Shaftesbury's agnosticism on the question of immortality reveals a change in the religious temper of the times; the suggestion of religious uncertainty in Gray might reflect Shaftesbury's influence. Gray suggests that man may rely on his fellow man for comfort in his dying moments:

44 Phelps, p. 159.

45 Gray possibly draws from Dante's "distant bells" in the Purgatory (Canto VIII, line 5).
On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires,
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n in our Ashes live their wanted Fires. (11. 88-92)

Gray's apparent appreciation for Petrarch is reflected both in the *Elegy* and in Gray's imitation of Petrarch's sonnet 170. The sonnet contains the idea that a tear ("pious" drop) may be a warm and emotional expression of love. Yet in the following two lines Gray suggests that hope is as eternal as the celestial fires in the ashes of man:

Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted Fires. (11. 91-92)

The third section of the *Elegy* (11. 93-128) begins with a reminder that the narrator, who began the poem in the first person, has disembodied himself, "diffusing his identity in generalized, impersonal statement."\(^4\)

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'. (11. 93-100)

Indeed, the speaker has become objectified and converted to the second person. After addressing himself in stanza 24, the narrator becomes the subject of speculation in the future tense by an entirely new and disinterested third party, the

"hoary-headed Swain." In this section the description of the narrator by the illiterate swain who can see no deeper into the Youth's character than his curious behavior, is modulated and amplified by the Epitaph, which presents the spiritual side of the Youth's personality:

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompence as largely send. (11. 121-122)

The Youth's burial in the country churchyard reaffirms the suggestion made at the end of the preceding section of the poem that in the final analysis it is through human beings that our memory endures. The poet's selection of the common burial ground shows that he recognized this universal bond between all men and that he conducted his life in accordance with this view of shared humanity. His generosity and sincere spirit were thus given the ultimate reward: "He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend." The last stanza of the Epitaph offers a resolution, however informal, concerning man's incessant desire to understand his destiny. The inscription, which is perhaps a summary of Gray's own beliefs, enjoins the reader to no longer seek to uncover the "merits" and "frailties" of the dead Youth's life:

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. (11. 125-128)

The "merits" and "frailties" repose with his ashes in a mysterious home which offers eternal hope for spiritual comfort in the bosom of his Creator.
The characteristics of Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* which mark it as a transitional work between Neoclassicism and Romanticism result from the literary influences on the author as well as from his personal temperament. Rousseau and Shaftesbury contributed to Gray's ethical and aesthetic sensibility while classical authors such as Statius and Propertius\(^1\) influenced his poetic diction and sense of structure. Gray's interest in classical literature naturally led him to read such works as Virgil's *Aeneid* and Aristotle's *Poetics*. The effects of these authors upon Gray, coupled with his ingrained melancholy and feeling of isolation, produced in the *Elegy* a literary style which cannot be categorized as purely Classic or Romantic.

Like Rousseau, Gray was apparently sustained in his dedication to a study of mankind and the institutions which men create by his philosophical reflections and his humanitarian sentiment.\(^2\) He recognized the worth of all human beings, and at the same time he perceived the differing magnitudes of their minds. Furthermore, like Shaftesbury,

\(^1\)Jones, p. 31.

\(^2\)In the critical theory of Henry Home the most original parts of his theory include the discussion of sympathy as aesthetic norm, Arthur E. McGuiness, *Henry Home, Lord Kames* (New York, 1970), p. 142.
he exalted all living men of his age when he presented English historical examples as though they were equal in dignity to such figures as Virgil and Augustus taken from Latin literature and history. This idea was evidenced in his effective use of such names as "Some mute inglorious Milton," and "Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood" (ll. 57-60). The Elegy thus represents a form of expression equally suited to classical precedent and to the growing romantic ethical sensibility.

Throughout the Elegy Gray's ideas are represented in a manner that is both imaginative and detached. By selecting the elegiac mode, Gray knew that he would be permitted the freedom to explore with decorum his own emotions in developing the Elegy's theme of "inescapable egocentricity." In writing the Elegy he brought his entire range of scholastic achievement and aesthetic sensibility into play. His efforts to achieve an ideal union of sound and sense as well as his years of spider-like patience and attention to such individual details as the euphony of vowels within a line are evident.


4 Bronson, p. 172.

5 A few examples of such euphony in the Elegy include the following:

The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way (ll. 2-3);
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap (1. 14); and
The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn. (1. 17)
in the technical perfection of the poem. Gray was aware of the supreme power of poetry as it was to be stated later in the century by Henry Home in his discussion of the sublime: "When the sublime is carried to its due height, and circumscribed within the proper bounds, it enchants the mind, and raises the most delightful of all emotions: the reader, engrossed by a sublime object, feels himself raised as it were to a higher rank." Yet more than just a wish for artistic perfection motivated Gray in his devotion to the composition; he recognized that by writing in the tradition of descriptive-reflective melancholy poetry (a tradition which bore the imprimatur of impeccable classical origins in such authors as Milton, Dryden and Pope), he would be able to deal directly with a subject which held for him great personal importance. Even his earlier poetry had reflected Gray's sensitivity to his isolation from the majority of mankind; reinforced by his ever-present "leuchocholy" (white melancholy), his feelings of personal separateness and insecurity led him to consider the general nature of human existence and the possibilities it contained for individual happiness and satisfaction.

Both as a man and as a poet Gray seems finally to have reconciled in the Elegy the opposing tendencies that he

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6Henry Home, Elements of Criticism (New York, 1858), p. 126. (Home was born several years before Gray, but his work was not published until 1762.)

7In a letter to West, May 27, 1742, Gray analyzes his own temperament as melancholy, "or rather Leuchocholy," Reed, p. 243.
expressed in his letter to West from Venice: his consciousness of his own need to be loved was opposed by his inability to love mankind at large. In Gray's struggle to find some new way to unite himself personally with the rest of humanity, he started with his belief in the universality of the emotions and developed his argument in such a way that he managed to mask all evidence of his own presence in the poem by the use of the narrator-persona and the disinterested third party, the "hoary-headed Swain." Yet those of us who read the poem find ourselves "projecting into his lines our own identity, so that it is our voice which seems to have been projecting our own train of thought all this while."8 Gray's Elegy is a cogent statement on the power of poetry to enjoin permanently the poet and the reader in a community of harmony and understanding through shared human experience. Again, he seems to have anticipated the view of Henry Home, who said that "Nature, which designed us for society, has connected us strongly together, by participation of the joys and miseries of our fellow creatures."9

In Gray's moralizing he reminds the reader that neither "Honour's voice" nor "Flatt'ry" can "sooth the dull cold ear of Death" (11. 43-44); this conventional moralizing in the

8 Bronson, p. 176.
Elegy pleased eighteenth-century readers. In another passage he depicts the theme of the inevitability of human fate:

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. (11. 33-36)

The Elegy thus provided the average reader of the age with something sufficiently original to be stimulating but not so completely unorthodox as to be distasteful; it provided for readers of all ages themes, viewpoints, and emotions that were both familiar and comprehensible.

For many readers, the most stimulating feature of Gray's style is his vivid and memorable representations of nature. His high regard for the imagination seems always to be tempered by his awareness of its proper limits, particularly in the depiction of natural scenes. In the opening stanzas of the Elegy, the rich, yet restrained language suggests his love of the quiet that is in nature:

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. (11. 5-8)

The imagery is full of sensuous appeal as he further describes the natural secluded setting:

10 Cooper, p. 160.
11 Starr, p. 12.
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.  
(11. 16-18)

The descriptive scene represented in the above passages is an example of the picturesque and enthusiastic style which Gray defends in his letter to the Reverend William Mason:

I remember you insulted me when I saw you last, and affected to call that which delighted my imagination nonsense. Now I insist that sense is nothing in poetry but according to the dress she wears and the scene she appears in.12

In Gray's apparent high regard for the imagination he anticipated a critical revolution which would later become evident in such works as Wordsworth's "Preface" to the Lyrical Ballads,13 Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, and Shelley's Defence of Poetry.

In the Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard Thomas Gray assumes the role of a student, not a critic, of mankind, and by his example persuades the reader to do the same. In his willingness to observe sympathetically the simple lives of others he offers insights to his own philosophical ideas on the common bond which connects all beings. The predominant quality of Gray's personality which renders his work emotionally and intellectually stimulating is his sensitivity to and appreciation of humanitarian sentiment.


This feeling, which is itself common to all men and women of good will, is expressed with a felicity and poignancy that have made Gray's Elegy the poetic touchstone of humanitarian feeling as well as a lasting example of artistic excellence.
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