

CHAPTER III

SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR AND THE POEM

A. Thomas Gray's Biography and His Works

Thomas Gray was born in London on December 26, 1716 and the only sole survivor of 12 children of a harsh and violent father and a long-suffering mother, who operated a millinery business to educate him. About 1725 or in the age of around nine, the delicate, pensive, studious boy was sent to Eton College. There he made a close friendship and formed a "Quadruple Alliance" with three other boys who liked poetry and classic and disliked rowdy sports and the Hogarthian manners of the period. They were Horace Walpole, the son of the prime minister; the talented poet Richard West, who was closest to Gray and whose early death was to be a severe blow to Gray; and Thomas Ashton. The style of life Gray developed at Eton, devoted to quiet study, the pleasures of the imagination, and a few understanding friends, was to persist for the rest of his years.

In 1734 he entered Peterhouse College, Cambridge, where he began to write Latin verse of considerable merit. He left in 1738 without a degree and set out in 1739 with Walpole on a grand tour of France, Switzerland, and Italy at Sir Robert Walpole's expense. At first all went well, but in 1741 they quarreled, for reasons never made explicit, Gray concluded his tour alone and

then returned to England. They were reconciled in 1745 on Walpole's initiative and remained somewhat cooler friends for the rest of their lives.

Gray returned to Cambridge in 1742 and settled into a quiet life of study, reading, and writing, financially supported by a small legacy left him by his father. That same year Richard West died, an event that affected him profoundly. Gray had begun to write English poems and published infrequently, among which some of the best were *Ode on the Spring*, *Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West*, *Hymn to Adversity*, and *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*. They revealed his maturity, ease and felicity of expression, wistful melancholy, and the ability to phrase truisms in striking, quotable lines. The Eton ode was published in 1747 and again in 1748 along with *Ode on the Spring*. Yet they not much attracted attention.

It was not until *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*, that Gray began to write it in August 1742 (but it can be said for certain that Gray wrote the main portion of the poem between 1746 and 1750) and it was finished by June 12, 1750, was published in 1751 that Gray was recognized. A note of direct simplicity dominates the "Elegy" and its success was instantaneous and overwhelming. Gray's newfound celebrity did not make the slightest difference in his habits. He remained at Peterhouse until 1756, when, outraged by a prank played on him by students that he had a trauma of fire from the time Gray's house in Cornhill burnt down (1748); he moved to Pembroke College at March 5, 1756. He wrote two Pindaric odes, *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard*, published in 1757 by Walpole's Strawberry Hill Press. These

poems created a furor because of their obscurity, but they solidified Gray's reputation. Gray was offered then the Poet Laureateship, but he refused.

During the 1760's, Gray traveled widely in England and Scotland, recording his impressions in extensive letters. Appointed as a professor of modern history at Cambridge in 1768, he gave no lectures -- a phenomenon not unprecedented, but felt by him as a personal failure. In his last years his peace was disrupted by his friendship with a young Swiss nobleman, Charles Victor de Bonstetten, for whom he conceived a romantic devotion, the most profound emotional experience of his life.

While he had dinner at Pembroke, Gray suddenly was taken ill and died a week later, July 30, 1771. He was buried beside his mother in the country churchyard at Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, which Gray visited often before; the putative-scene of the Country Churchyard celebrated in his "Elegy".

B. The Poem

Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard is a poem composed with two parts of verses, the first 29 stanzas is filled with monologue of the speaker and the last three stanzas in a form of an epitaph. The epitaph in the "Elegy" has a significance part especially in closing the poem that the existence of the epitaph more as to strengthen the theme the "Elegy" wants to imply.

B.1. Elegy

The first elegies were poems of mourning, but Greek and Roman writers came to use the word “elegy” more loosely. It described a poem on any subject written in elegiac meter – lines of a certain pattern and rhythm. Thus the term “elegy” is applied to some Greek poems about love or war or politics. And the Latin elegy reached its high spot with the love poems of Tibullus (54? – 18? BC).

In 16th century England an elegy was once again a poem honoring the dead. The meter, however, was not necessarily elegiac. Some elegy writers gave their poems pastoral settings – that is, a background of shepherds and country scenes. This they borrowed from the Greek poet Theocritus, who lived in the 3rd century BC. Theocritus had invented bucolic, or country, poetry, and many of his poems mourned the death of shepherds. In 1586, when Edmund Spenser wrote “Astrophel” in memory of Sir Philip Sidney, he called it pastoral elegy.

Several English poets after Spenser composed other fine elegies to honor friends who had died, like John Milton’s *Lycidas* (1638) in honor of Edward King, a college friend; Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Adonais* (1821) a tribute to John Keats; Matthew Arnold’s *Thyrsis* (1867) expresses his grief over the death of Arthur Clough. One of the most moving of American elegies, Walt Whitman’s *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d* (1865), mourns the death of Abraham Lincoln.

B.2. Epitaph

Epitaphs are lines about a dead person that may or may not be inscribed on a tomb. Some epitaphs, poetry or prose, are literary in style. Others state facts in plain language, perhaps giving only a person's name and dates of birth and death.

During the Renaissance, in the 15th and 16th centuries, the literary epitaphs became especially popular. In time some poets composed epitaphs never intended for a tomb. The epitaphs were simply memorial verses.

B.3. *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea The ploughman homeward plods his weary way, And leaves the world to darkness and to me.	1
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 tinkling lull the distant folds:	5
Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower The moping owl does to the moon complain Of such as, wandering near her secret bower, Molest her ancient solitary reign.	10
Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap, Each in his narrow cell for ever laid, The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.	15
The breezy call of incense-breathing morn, The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed, The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn, No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.	20

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

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield, 25
 Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
 How jocund did they drive their team afield!
 How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

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

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
 Awaits alike th' inevitable hour: - 35
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to these the fault
 If memory o'er the tomb no trophies raise,
 Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
 The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. 40

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

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid 45
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
 Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
 Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre:

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

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
 The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air. 55

- Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
 The little tyrant of his fields withstood,
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
 Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood. 60
- Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
 The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
 To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
 And read their history in a nation's eyes
- Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone 65
 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
 Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
 And shut the gate of mercy on mankind;
- The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
 To quench the blushes of ingenious shame, 70
 Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
 With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.
- Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
 Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
 Along the cool sequester'd vale of life 75
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.
- Yet e'en these bones from insult to protect
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
 With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,
 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh. 80
- Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse,
 The place of fame and elegy supply:
 And many a holy text around she strews
 That teach the rustic moralist to die.
- For who, to dumb forgetfulness a prey, 85
 This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
 Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?
- On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires; 90
 E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
 E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires,

- For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd dead,
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely Contemplation led, 95
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate, –
- Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away,
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn; 100
- There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noon-tide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.
- Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn, 105
Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove;
Now drooping, woful-wan, like one forlorn,
Or crazed with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.
- One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
Along the heath, and near his favourite tree; 110
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;
- The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne, –
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay 115
Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.
- THE EPIITAPH
*Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A Youth, to Fortune and to Fame unknown;
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.* 120
- Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere;
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
He gain'd from Heaven, 'twas all he wish'd, a friend.*
- No farther seek his merits to disclosure,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose,)
the bosom of his Father and his God.* 125

CHAPTER IV

THE ANALYSIS