

THE POETRY OF THOMAS GRAY:
VERSIONS OF THE SELF

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Read 21 February 1973

THERE is no more familiar comment on Gray's poetry than Johnson's praise of the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* as a poem which 'abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo'.¹ In one form or another Johnson's tribute to Gray's eloquent generalities about rich and poor, life and death, has been reiterated down to the present day. There are signs, however, that the *Elegy* produces fewer or more complicated echoes in the bosoms of modern readers than in those of earlier generations. We are less confident about the basic truths of common human experience, or less grateful to the poet for attending to them. In his recent book *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Professor Lionel Trilling shows how the 'commonplace' has become for some contemporary writers precisely the treacherous illusion which frustrates the search for 'the authenticity of particular being', attainable only through 'intransigent subjectivity'.² Gray's own commonplaces have seemed sinister in another respect. In the opening pages of *Some Versions of Pastoral* Professor William Empson takes for granted the irritation many modern readers feel with 'the complacency in the massive calm' of the *Elegy*, and goes on to analyse with characteristic subtlety one of its most familiar stanzas to lay bare the latent political implications. Gray is meditating on the potential talents of the dead villagers which had never enjoyed any opportunity of fulfilment:

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

By means of these images, Professor Empson argues, such a waste of talents 'is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put

¹ *Lives of the Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill (3 vols., Oxford, 1905), iii. 441.

² *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), pp. 104-5.

into a mood in which one would not try to alter it'. Their effect is to make an unfair social arrangement seem both natural and dignified, to trick the reader into feeling that the deprived villager 'is better off without opportunities'. In general, the 'universality and impersonality' of Gray's truisms in the *Elegy* claim that 'we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death'.¹

Even if he does not agree with these conclusions about them, the careful reader of the *Elegy* will still do well to ponder the function of these images. What is surely most obvious about the hidden gem and unseen flower is that they have each fulfilled all their natural potential. The sense of 'pathetic' waste springs entirely from the isolation and therefore neglect of such perfected beauty and sweetness, and this seems oddly inappropriate to what has been said of the plight of the villagers, whose talents had been repressed and frozen by 'Chill Penury'. Their potential had been stunted and therefore unfulfilled; what the 'mute inglorious Milton' might have achieved was accessible only to the sympathetic imagination of the poet. (In his unfinished didactic poem, *Education and Government*, Gray had used appropriate images of 'sickly plants' and blossoms nipped in the bud to describe how natural potential could be stunted by lack of education and a tyrannical government.)

Some explanation of the role of the gem and the flower can be found in the earliest surviving draft of the *Elegy*, preserved in the Eton MS., which contains the first eighteen stanzas as we know them and four concluding stanzas which were later to be dropped. This original conclusion to the poem has particular interest since it returns us, as the final text does not, to the poet himself meditating in the darkness of the churchyard as at the beginning of the poem. In this version, the poet's reflections on the contrast between the humble lives and graves of the dead villagers and the splendid futility of the memorials to the arrogant great, his balancing of the wasted talents of the poor against the possibility that opportunity might only have corrupted that potential virtue and genius, have all been considerations in an essentially personal debate. Having weighed the deprivations of a life of obscurity against the opportunities and evils of the great world, the poet has reached the conclusion that his own preference should lie with the 'innocence' and 'safety' represented by the village:

¹ *Some Versions of Pastoral* (2nd imp., 1950), pp. 4-5.

The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow
 Exalt the brave, & idolise 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.

This renunciation draws on both the classical tradition of praise of retirement from the corrupt city and the Christian consolation of eternal peace hereafter. Yet the attempted calm of this conclusion to the poem seems precarious. What threatens it is the very acknowledgement of the 'fierce tumultuous' passions, the 'strife' with reason and the self, the 'anxious Cares & endless Wishes', which have apparently been the occasion of the poet's meditations. The belated admission of such inner turmoil has the effect of leaving us with it rather than of purging it.

We can now see in retrospect how unusually emphatic for its period is the fourth line of the familiar opening stanza of the poem in which the ploughman 'leaves the world to darkness and to me'. The heavy final rhyme on 'me' seems to invite us to concentrate on the poet himself: as for Adam and Eve at the end of *Paradise Lost*, the world, even if shrouded in darkness, is all before the poet where to choose. The particularity of time and place, the poet's isolation (enhanced by the gradual withdrawal of human and animal life from the landscape), the sense that we are overhearing a direct utterance in the present, the sense of an individual consciousness delicately perceiving the fading away of sound and light, all seem to be preparing us in these opening stanzas to focus on the poet as a unique self. Yet the choice the poet is going to make can not after all be expounded in subjective terms. It has instead to be objectified into the contrasts of the rich and poor, and so convincing is the 'massive calm' of those familiar balanced quatrains,

so assured and harmonious the rendering of truths which generations of earlier poets seem only to have been fumbling towards, that the personal predicament is virtually eliminated. It is as if there are two selves in the poem: a judicious, normative self, resting confidently on traditional wisdom and values, and a deeper unofficial self of confused and subversive passions which can only be acknowledged as the debate is closed in the concluding lines.

Yet the elimination of the self is not total even in the impersonal body of the poem: the potent images of the gem and the flower, irrelevant to the plight of the deprived villagers, define exactly in their fulfilled but neglected perfection the poet's sense of his own isolation, to which he teaches himself to be resigned. There is no question in this version of the poem of the poet trying to trick the reader into feeling that the humble villager is 'better off without opportunities', as Professor Empson suggests: he is trying to persuade himself that he prefers to remain in obscurity. The poet's imaginative recreation of the lives of the dead villagers combines a sympathy for their lot, unusual for its age, with a degree of envy of their vitality and usefulness, but his feelings about them are essentially subservient to his concern about the meaning of his own life.

The fact that Gray provided the *Elegy* with a quite different conclusion in 1750 suggests that he may himself have been aware of a split in the poem between an aspiration to express timeless truths about human experience and an impulse to render a particular subjective predicament existing and uttered in a troubled present. The original conclusion, the poet's apparent identification with the humble and innocent lives of the villagers, may also have come to seem facile and self-deceiving. Two hundred years later another, and equally self-conscious, Etonian faced that problem literally in declaring that 'it is no use clapping a proletarian on the back and telling him that he is as good a man as I am: if I want real contact with him . . . I have got to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person'.¹ The solution attempted in the revised conclusion to the poem takes the opposite direction to George Orwell's: not to alter the self beyond recognition, even poetically, but to find a way of expressing and claiming some value for a self which rejected the corruption of the great world only to find itself cut off by education and self-consciousness—by the very ability to con-

¹ *The Road to Wigan Pier*, ch. 10.

template a choice—from the innocence, vitality, and purposeful energy of the lives it attributes to the humble villagers.

The new ending which Gray supplied for the *Elegy* has disappointed and puzzled most readers and critics. The clear and balanced structure contrasting the rich and poor survives in the first part of the poem but no longer to provide the poet with the grounds for making a personal choice. Apparently impersonal reflections now pursue the contrast between the grandiose monuments to the great and the 'frail memorials' to the poor in the churchyard, and then dwell on the general human desire for sympathy at the hour of death and for remembrance after death. If there is uncertainty in both the syntax and the broader movement of thought in this section of the poem it perhaps betrays the poet's uneasiness as he tries to bridge the gap between the impersonal assurance of the earlier stanzas and what he is now intent on describing: the memorial and the sympathy he can imagine himself receiving after his own death. As in the concluding stanzas of the first version, one of which he at first planned to transfer to this transition, the poet eventually addresses himself (as 'Thee'—the use of the second person perhaps betraying the split between the judicious and problematic selves), and then imagines what may happen in his own special case: some sympathetic 'kindred spirit' coming to the churchyard to inquire about his fate. The inquirer will receive from a 'hoary-headed swain' an account of the poet which will indicate just how far he had been from comfortable identification with the lives of the villagers, and how far, on the other hand, from the Augustan ideal of urbane, rural retirement dedicated to moderation and wisdom.

A solitary, distant, puzzling figure, the poet had wandered aimlessly round the village, hastening to meet the dawn, listlessly poring on the stream under the trees at noon and then, even more ominously,

Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.

The mysterious young man had suddenly disappeared and two days later had been buried in the churchyard. It is not simply the later fate of Thomas Chatterton, the poet in whose memory this annual lecture is given, which leads one to ponder the circumstances of the death that the meditating poet envisages for himself. Although modern critics have ignored

the matter, at least one eighteenth-century reader suspected that the poet had committed suicide.¹ It would seem that such a deduction is at least left open to us, by his youth, his misery, the abruptness of his death and the warning in the 'Epitaph' not to inquire too closely into his frailties.

The very possibility of a 'dramatic' interpretation of the *Elegy*—that, for example, the meditating poet in the churchyard is contemplating suicide—serves at least to remind us of what is logically the case, that this curious, melancholy figure described by the swain is the poet himself: his evening meditations in the darkness which we are overhearing, when sensible villagers are indoors, are part of the same eccentric pattern of behaviour observed by the swain. And yet the poet's whole strategy is now to reduce our memory of the particularity of the opening of the poem, of the whole poetic utterance as existing in the present. (It was perhaps for this reason that Gray finally omitted a stanza in the Eton MS. at this point in which the swain describes the poet watching the setting sun 'With whistful Eyes', and which has the effect of identifying the poet's present utterance with the behaviour of the doomed youth.) The psychological turmoil, kept at bay in the first version by classical and Christian resources, remains, but its existence in the present consciousness of the poet is doubly screened: by externalization into a version of the poet himself as observed by the innocent and uncomprehending villager, and by the deliberate escape from the present into an imaginary swain's narrative in an imaginary future, which will speak of an imaginary past. The suffering present is ingeniously vacated. The embarrassment of direct personal utterance is avoided.

The result is the swain's depiction of the lonely, distraught, and doomed, perhaps self-doomed, poet. Its poetic weakness, the self-consciousness of the swain's pastoral diction, culled from Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, is revealing, for it is a significant version of the self which emerges here: an anticipation of the sorrows and alienation which a generation later would drive Young Werther in similar circumstances to suicide, and a prefigurement, however tentative, of the isolation, mysterious suffering and special sensibility, which were later to become familiar attributes of the image of the artist in an unsympathetic or hostile society. Gray's portrait of the artist remains, of course, a far from defiant one: seen through the swain's eyes the poet's behaviour is more baffling than anything else and even, in

¹ John Young, *A Criticism on the Elegy* (1783), p. 78.

the context of village life, faintly ludicrous. Yet the swain will also guide the inquiring 'kindred spirit' to the 'Epitaph' on the poet's gravestone. In a poem unified if at all in its final form by a concern with monuments and memorials, the 'Epitaph' must be intended to offer a definitive version of the self. Wordsworth later said that the essence of an epitaph was 'Truth hallowed by Love',¹ and this is precisely what the poet provides himself with here. The 'voice of nature', which had earlier been described as crying even from the tomb for sympathetic remembrance, cries from the 'Epitaph'. Of course, the poet is only imagining himself to be dead, but the strangeness and vulnerability of his present needs are once more doubly disguised: by the attribution of the 'Epitaph' to the truth and love of an unknown sympathizer, and by the relative permanence of its inscription on stone, which seems to take the fantasy not merely out of the present or the imaginary future but into apparent timelessness:

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own.*

Critics have rarely approved of the 'Epitaph'; and from the eighteenth century onwards they have wanted that 'And' to be a 'But' in the last line of the stanza. Why should the 'Epitaph' imply that the blessings of Science or Knowledge—of which the villagers were explicitly deprived—might *naturally* lead to melancholy? The answer seems to be that the sensitive poet was educated but deprived of opportunity: knowledge merely replaced innocence with a burden of painful self-consciousness. He was neglected like the gem and the flower but, unlike them, knew that he was neglected. And yet the 'Epitaph' goes on to claim tentatively for the poet a value lacked by both the arrogant great and, as the fact that the swain cannot read these lines suggests, the humble villagers. Melancholy leads to sensibility and true sensibility to pity and compassion for others: away finally from the self towards sympathy with, for example, the lot of the humble villagers, as the poem itself has shown:

*Large was his bounty and his soul sincere . . .
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear . . .*

The self-consuming passions are at last refined into the benevolent

¹ *Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth*, ed. P. M. Zall (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1966), p. 102.

sensibility which renders the poet superior to the inhabitants of the 'thoughtless World', yet also grants him a compensatory value in the natural rustic world. To put it another way, the poet has found an acceptable escape route from the self in the growing contemporary doctrine of the ethical centrality of sympathy.

Such emphasis on the self-absorption of the *Elegy* has both advantages and disadvantages. It may be felt that to lay emphasis on the poem's conclusion merely draws attention away from the poem's undoubted strengths, the assured and eloquent utterance of timeless truths about man, society, and history, to its most diffident and uncertain areas. And yet it is too easy to read as static and marmoreal what is in one aspect a sustained struggle to find decorous ways of talking about the self and about the meaning of one's own life. The poet's circuitous technique of self-dramatization has misled some modern critics into arguing that the poet must be visualizing not his own death but that of someone else: Gray's friend, the young poet Richard West, who had died in 1742, for example; or, more desperately, the 'stonecutter', a village poet who must have been responsible for the stark inscriptions on the 'frail memorials', and who accordingly joins the *dramatis personae* of the *Elegy* in some modern interpretations. I have no doubt that the poet is talking about himself at the end of the *Elegy*, yet the problem that interests me is not in the first instance a biographical one. I have tried so far to keep Gray the man out of my discussion and to deal rather with the 'self' created by the poem. The complexity of the relationship between the man and the poetic 'self' may be suggested by a letter Gray wrote in April 1749 (about a year before the final version of the *Elegy*), in which he also anticipates his death, but in a somewhat different tone. The letter describes the laziness, the ennui, and the trivial pleasures of his life in Cambridge, and contemplates with wry amusement the numerous errors which will appear in his eventual obituary notice:

Brandy will finish what Port begun; & a Month after the Time you will see in some Corner of a London Even:^{ng} Post, Yesterday, died the Revnd M^r John Grey, Senior-Fellow of Clare-Hall, a facetious Companion, & well-respected by all that knew him. his death is supposed to have been occasion'd by a Fit of an Apoplexy, being found fall'n out of Bed with his Head in the Chamber-Pot.¹

¹ *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. P. Toynbee and L. Whibley (3 vols., Oxford, 1935), i. 318.

That is only one more, and in its own way complex, version of the self. My particular concern so far has been with the way in which a mid-eighteenth-century poet felt that he could approach and express private experience, the unique self, that point 'Where all stand single', as Wordsworth later phrased it,¹ even if we accept that self as a poetic creation only. Why did Gray have to be so devious in the *Elegy*? A simple explanation would be that there was little or no respectable precedent for genuinely introspective poetry and that Gray was himself a conventional enough poet to obey contemporary injunctions that the business of the poet was to utter basic truths about shared human experience rather than to describe private spiritual turmoil. The cautious progress of autobiography in the eighteenth century in itself indicates the suspicion of introspection as morbid or egocentric. (Introspective or confessional autobiography in England before 1740 was almost entirely religious in character, a purposeful scrutiny of private experience for spiritual ends.) English poetry, as Gray knew it, portrayed the self only in conventional religious or amatory postures and predicaments. The dominant recent influence, Alexander Pope, had dramatized himself in his poetry often enough, but as an idealized, public self, usually fortified and biographically confused by a skilful merger with Horace. In 1738 Henry Pemberton had quoted as definitive a dictum of Fénelon: 'To make a work truly excellent it is necessary, that the author should so forget himself, that the reader may forget him likewise, and have his attention engaged only on the subject.'²

The time had not yet come for the profound exploration of the self which would seem more or less compulsory to the Romantics. Even so, there were signs of growing interest in personal experience in literature and Gray himself was perhaps caught at a crucial transitional moment. In accounts of this development importance is usually granted to John Locke, whose philosophy made the problem of consciousness central and established a new concern with what we would now call psychology. The most ambitious of Gray's many early Latin poems, the unfinished *De Principiis Cogitandi* (1740-2), is in fact a versification of parts of Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*. After dealing at length with the various senses, Gray comes to the crucial moment when the maturing human mind can recognize and contemplate its own activities. He chooses

¹ *The Prelude*, iii. 187.

² *Observations on Poetry* (1738), p. 102.

to describe it in a long simile, which attempts to render Locke's concept of 'reflection' as literally as possible. A hamadryad who has wandered alone through a deserted landscape lies down on the bank of a stream, silent, chilly, and darkly shadowed, discovers her own reflection in the water, and eventually recognizes herself.¹ Gray has not merely given a decidedly melancholy atmosphere to this moment of self-discovery. He has also admitted ominous literary overtones, for the passage as a whole irresistibly recalls not merely Narcissus falling in love with himself in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but Milton's newly created Eve admiring herself in the lake in Eden, an act foreboding the eventual Fall.² Self-knowledge apparently involves for Gray the danger of self-absorption and the loss of innocence.

The English poetry which Gray began to write in a uniquely creative period in 1742 so repeatedly finds itself at such a moment of self-discovery as to explain the emphasis I have placed on this element in the *Elegy*, written several years later. From a purely biographical point of view such a preoccupation with the self as an isolated, unique identity need not be surprising. In the previous year Gray, aged twenty-four, had returned to England alone after quarrelling in Italy with the companion who had taken him abroad, Horace Walpole, probably the closest of the few friends he had made at Eton and Cambridge. However affectionate it had once been, the friendship had always seemed likely to lead to tension once it moved into the real world. Walpole was the son of a powerful Prime Minister, Gray of relatively humble origins. To the effects of the serious breach with his friend was added uncertainty about his future: his father had died recently, he was uprooted, and, since he had quarrelled with the one man whose influence could have helped him to rapid preferment, without any obvious role in society.

Gray spent those early months of 1742 reading, corresponding about literature with another Etonian friend, Richard West, and, for the first time with any seriousness, writing English poetry. In May 1742 he sent West his *Ode on the Spring*. His capacity for distilling the essence of a whole tradition of earlier poetry on the subject into his own condensed, suggestive, lyrical creation is already astonishingly clear, but the basic

¹ A translation of the passage can be found in my edition of *The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith* (1969), p. 331.

² *Paradise Lost*, iv. 456-69.

situation of the poem, and its development to the end of the penultimate stanza, are all too familiar. Surrounded by the beauty and fertility of the spring, the poet—a mere representative self—meditates complacently on the absurd ardour of the crowd, the folly and meanness of the proud and great. The sportive insects of the spring become emblematic of the futile activities of busy, frivolous, and ephemeral humanity. But in the final stanza the façade of this comfortable traditional moralist suddenly collapses to reveal the lonely and frustrated private self which lies behind:

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

Relying on the humorous sympathy of Richard West, the poet can present ironically this discovery of the sterility of the self, measured against the fertility and 'untaught harmony' of the spring, and even against the activities of other men. In retrospect the moral commonplaces offered earlier in the poem turn out to have been equally sterile compensatory rationalizing.

The letter containing this poem was returned unopened, for Richard West, the only audience of Gray's poetry, was already dead at the age of twenty-five. In this state of isolation Gray wrote three other poems at Stoke Poges in August 1742. He was never himself to publish his *Sonnet* in memory of West, perhaps because, for all its restraint, it is so totally self-enclosed in a grief for which no resolution can be discovered. The poet is trapped syntactically by the self: 'My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine.' The poem begins and ends with the words 'In vain'. Grieving for the loss of the only one who would have sympathized with such grief, the poet, as in the *Ode on the Spring*, is again surrounded by the instinctive activities of nature, fertile, amorous, harmonious, indifferent to his deprivation. As Philip Larkin has said in his own poem on *Spring*, 'those she has least use for know her best'.

In the same month Gray wrote his *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, which explores the same situation: or rather,

it may be felt, fails to explore it. The details of the observed landscape and the historical associations of Eton, appropriate to a topographical poem, are followed by a stanza of apparently spontaneous and particularized personal statement. The distant prospect of Eton is not merely spatial but temporal: the poet is contemplating his own past and the observing self threatens momentarily to become as important a subject as what it observes:

Ah, happy hills, ah, pleasing shade,
 Ah, fields beloved in vain,
 Where once my careless childhood strayed,
 A stranger yet to pain!
 I feel the gales, that from ye blow,
 A momentary bliss bestow,
 As waving fresh their gladsome wing,
 My weary soul they seem to soothe,
 And, redolent of joy and youth,
 To breathe a second spring.

The freshening winds blowing across the valley travel also across the years from his own childhood. But this is not the 'correspondent breeze', the reanimating, liberating, creative power, fusing the imagination with nature, which blows through the pages of Romantic poetry; nor is this that characteristic kind of Romantic poem in which, through the interplay of memory, imagination and nature, the individual contemplating a significant landscape can work through a private predicament towards self-discovery and reaffirmation. The poet of the *Eton Ode* has come as close as he can to confronting his own weariness and pain: there is a gulf between past and present selves which cannot be explored or given meaning. The soothing winds bring no 'second spring' after all, but leave the poet only a more painful sense of an unresolved and unspecific deprivation. There is a rhetorical appeal to Father Thames to describe the present generation of schoolboys, an evocation of what has been lost, not of what might be regained: hope, joy, resilience, the possibility of breaking through restraints:

Some bold adventurers disdain
 The limits of their little reign
 And unknown regions dare descry:
 Still as they run they look behind,
 They hear a voice in every wind,
 And snatch a fearful joy.

The description of the boys repeatedly echoes earlier descriptions of prelapsarian man by Milton and James Thomson: what has been lost above all is innocence. The poet himself has gained only the superior but useless knowledge of what awaits the inhabitants of paradise: the onset of destructive human passions, misfortunes, disease, and death. Through the formal tableaux of menacing personifications private anguish is desperately generalized into the experience of all men. Yet at the end, as in the *Ode on the Spring* and the *Sonnet on West*, the poem has to admit its own futility, or to cancel whatever assertions it has made:

Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more; where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise.

The poet has gained from experience only a destructive capacity to warn the happy and innocent. For Wordsworth the poet was to be one 'who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him', a heart which is not 'scared at its own liberty', which can itself project life and passion into nature.¹ In these three poems of Gray, the poet's self-consciousness, cut off from the innocence and vitality of nature or childhood, illuminates only his own isolation and sterility.

The remaining poem Gray wrote in the summer of 1742 was the *Ode to Adversity*, a disciplined effort to move outward from this self-enclosed predicament. Although the poem accepts with the *Eton Ode* that all men are born to suffer, it also asserts that human suffering is not meaningless, for it can lead to wisdom and the melancholy sensibility which brings in its train compassion for the sufferings of others. The fact that Gray himself sometimes entitled the poem a *Hymn to Adversity* suggests that he has fallen back here on a more ritualized and therefore less directly subjective form for fervent personal utterance. Only at the end of the poem does the poet plead in his own person for the benign 'philosophic' fruits of his suffering.

To soften, not to wound, my heart.
The generous spark extinct revive,
Teach me to love and to forgive,
Exact my own defects to scan,
What others are to feel, and know myself a man.

The capacity for sympathy, love, and self-knowledge desired here were to be claimed for the poet in the 'Epitaph' of the

¹ *Literary Criticism*, ed. Zall, p. 48; *Prelude*, i. 16.

Elegy. In other ways also the two versions of the later poem represent renewed efforts to order and resolve the preoccupations of 1742. One recurrent theme had in fact appeared in the very first of Gray's surviving English poems, the *Lines* he had sent to Walpole at the age of eighteen in 1734, in which he speaks as a ghost rising at Walpole's command to describe how 'That little, naked, melancholy thing, My soul' had travelled after death to a twilight underworld of sexual frustration and humorous social chaos. The 1742 poems had all described or implied a kind of living death in the poet: his 'sun is set' in the *Ode on the Spring*; his exclusion from the processes of nature in the *Sonnet* left him essentially as dead as his friend; the useless wisdom of the *Eton Ode* was offered as if by one who had already experienced the entire cycle of life and was acquainted with 'The painful family of Death'. In the second version of the *Elegy* the poet is excluded from the innocent lives of the villagers, as earlier from nature or childhood. Yet he contrives, as we have seen, finally to escape the living death of the present by an imaginative enactment of his own death into a timeless state of unfulfilled but uncorrupted potential, which he can share with the dead villagers. And the self commemorated thus is no longer simply sterile nor its wisdom merely futile: the whole poem has been an act of that sympathetic sensibility which claims at the end a special value of its own and its own right to comparable sympathy.

On the purely biographical level, which it becomes increasingly hard to ignore, we might speculate that these claims at the end of the *Elegy* were directed unconsciously at Horace Walpole, with whom a cautious reconciliation had taken place in 1745, who probably remained for Gray a permanent focus for all his complicated feelings about his own relationship with the great world, and who had eventually replaced Richard West as the audience of his poetry. It was to Walpole that the *Elegy* was first sent in 1750, through Walpole that it was circulated in manuscript and eventually published. Ironically, the instantaneous success of the poem in itself provided Gray with a new identity which at once enters his poetry. *A Long Story* was a reply in verse to an invitation from a fashionable lady who had admired the *Elegy* in manuscript. The humorous self-representation in *A Long Story* makes clear Gray's uneasy fascination with this new role: the poet (and he is now specifically identified as such), pursued by emphatically militant women, appears as an awkward, nervous figure to whom dubious and possibly

malign powers are attributed by the local community, but who is eventually and to his own surprise absorbed into respectable society by an aristocratic invitation to dinner.

Gray later tried to suppress this occasional poem, in which humour and self-consciousness mingle uneasily. Indeed, he was to continue writing serious poetry for only a few more years, as if the *Elegy* and its success had helped to render his problematic dealings with the poetic self unnecessary. In the *Stanzas* he addressed to Richard Bentley, the illustrator of an elaborate edition of his poems which Walpole insisted on supervising in 1753, Gray modestly expressed only the hope that his poetry, whatever its other limitations, might inspire a 'secret sympathy' in some other 'feeling breast'. The trouble was that there were suddenly too many 'feeling breasts' and 'kindred spirits', all eager to respond to the *Elegy*. He had exposed as much of himself or a self as he wished, perhaps too much, and had no desire to become, in Keats's phrase, 'A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce'. He never attempted another poem in the manner of the *Elegy*, although countless imitators for the rest of the century were only too delighted to do so for him.

Yet how was he to follow the *Elegy*, which had gained him that new identity as a poet? Perhaps inevitably, the subject of Gray's two remaining serious poems was poetry itself. In the two Pindaric *Odes* which he published in 1757, he set out quite consciously to baffle the popular audience he had so recently acquired. *The Progress of Poesy* now claims for poetry all the energy, fertility, passion, harmony, and life-enhancing powers which had formerly always contrasted with the poet's own sterility; and its visionary power, richness of texture and technical virtuosity are an attempt to embody everything that Gray could claim for his art. Poetry itself, the 'heavenly Muse', is now explicitly a providential compensation for the real and imaginary ills of life.

The last great embodiment of the popular Augustan 'progress' formula, the *Progress of Poesy* follows the movement of poetry westward from Ancient Greece to Britain, expounding the close connection of poetry and liberty and so asserting the importance of the poet to society. An Augustan 'progress' poem naturally ends in the glorious British present. The trouble with a 'progress of poesy' is that it naturally ends with the poet himself. Gray can celebrate the great poets of the English tradition, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, with whom he always allied himself, but this native tradition turns out to be itself

a burden on his shoulders. Even along this route the poet finally comes face to face with himself, although the closing lines of the poem are obscure enough to have prevented many readers from grasping that he is here talking about his own inadequacy and rashness in daring to imitate Pindar and to follow the achievements of the earlier English masters.

Gray was, of course, expressing here not merely a sense of personal inadequacy, but a more general uncertainty about the capacity of his own over-civilized society to maintain the tradition. The final attempt at a solution appeared in the second Pindaric, *The Bard*, in which the embarrassing self and the ever-burdensome present are at last eluded through an escape into history. Yet the escape from the self is achieved only by total self-projection into the poem's protagonist, the figure of the medieval Welsh bard. When a friend asked Gray how he felt when writing the poem, he replied, 'Why I felt myself the bard'.¹ This is the final version of Gray's isolated poet, surrounded by poetic ghosts in a veritable graveyard of the bards. Gray has not merely provided his poet with flowing locks and bardic robes, but has invested him with everything he and his contemporaries could identify as a lost source of poetic power, as if hoping to channel into his poem the authentic springs of all the great poetry of the past: the Pindaric sublime, biblical prophecy, the unselfconscious poetic passion of primitive societies, the medieval and the Celtic. Thus formidably equipped, the Bard, the sole survivor of the Welsh bards supposedly slaughtered by Edward I, can thunder denunciation and defiance at the tyrant and at all the forces hostile to poetry; the ghosts of the dead bards can foretell in prophetic vision the future revival and high destiny of poetry in a better society.

Yet at the end the Bard—and this time there is no ambiguity—has to commit suicide, and that spectacular plunge to death also marks the end of Gray's serious career as a poet at the age of forty. During the 1760s he was to write occasional epitaphs by request, two or three humorous poems, a few translations for their historical interest of fragments of Norse and Welsh poetry, whose primitive violence only points up the sobriety of the life he himself had been leading rather resentfully in Cambridge since 1742, devoted largely to antiquarian and, later, botanical pursuits. An affectionate and highly amusing friend to a small circle, as his superb letters show, Gray could other-

¹ *Correspondence*, iii. 1290.

wise seem an aloof, fastidious, and proud figure. His final poetic effort, the *Ode for Music* he dutifully provided in 1769 for the Installation of the Chancellor of the University, was not a production in which he took any pride. 'The musick is as good as the words: the former might be taken for mine, & the latter for Dr. Randal's', he confided to a friend.¹ Most striking is the fact that the once neglected gem and flower of the *Elegy* now make a disconcerting reappearance, as if to confirm that the problematic self had now been exorcised:

Thy liberal heart, thy judging eye,
The flower unheeded shall descry,
And bid it round heaven's altars shed
The fragrance of its blushing head:
Shall raise from earth the latent gem
To glitter on the diadem.

And yet as late as 1768 Gray had produced one of the most impressive, if still neglected, of his poems, his contemptuous verses on the fashionable ruins with which Lord Holland had adorned his bleak estate on the Kent coast. Gray makes these ruins symbolic of the devastation this corrupt and unscrupulous politician would have visited on the nation as a whole if his colleagues had not abandoned him:

Far other scenes than these had blessed our view
And realised the ruins that we feign.
Purged by the sword and beautified by fire,
Then had we seen proud London's hated walls:
Owls might have hooted in St. Peter's choir,
And foxes stunk and littered in St. Paul's.

The sudden satiric intensity of this late poem seems to appear from nowhere. Or could it be that it sprang from some deep response in the poet to the sterile, destructive vision he attributes to Holland, as if some part of him were avenging a still latent barrenness and emptiness of his own, for which poetry itself had come to be no compensation?

Here, it may be as well to admit that an inquiry into the ways in which a private poetic self could be expressed or dramatized can go no further without resort to evidence of a purely biographical nature, a resort which may not be misleading if we are not confused about the limitations of what we are doing. The perpetual but inhibited preoccupation with the self in Gray's poetry may be explicable simply in terms of the

¹ Ibid. iii. 1065.

theoretical pressure on a poet of his generation to avoid morbid self-centredness and to express the truths of common human experience. The other possibility can be presented only in biographical terms. No one who has read through Gray's admirable correspondence will have failed to be struck, and moved, by the tone of the letters he wrote early in 1770 to a young Swiss friend, Charles de Bonstetten, who had studied in Cambridge for a few months under the poet's supervision. The bewilderment of painful self-discovery is clear in the letters he wrote to the young man after his departure:

Never did I feel, my dear Bonstetten, to what a tedious length the few short moments of our life may be extended by impatience and expectation, till you had left me: nor ever knew before with so strong a conviction how much this frail body sympathizes with the inquietude of the mind. I am grown old in the compass of less than three weeks. . . . I did not conceive till now (I own) what it was to lose you, nor felt the solitude and insipidity of my own condition, before I possess'd the happiness of your friendship.

And a week later:

My life now is but a perpetual conversation with your shadow.—The known sound of your voice still rings in my ears.—There, on the corner of the fender, you are standing, or tinkling on the Pianoforte, or stretch'd at length on the sofa.—Do you reflect, my dearest Friend, that it is a week or eight days, before I can receive a letter from you and as much more before you can have my answer, that all that time (with more than Herculean toil) I am employ'd in pushing the tedious hours along, and wishing to annihilate them; the more I strive, the heavier they move and the longer they grow.

The last letter was written in May 1770:

I know and have too often felt the disadvantages I lay myself under, how much I hurt the little interest I have in you, by this air of sadness so contrary to your nature and present enjoyments: but sure you will forgive, tho' you can not sympathize with me. It is impossible with me to dissemble with you. Such as I am, I expose my heart to your view, nor wish to conceal a single thought from your penetrating eyes.¹

Gray died in the following year. Bonstetten survived until 1832, to publish these letters and to express the opinion that the trouble with Gray was that he had never loved anyone.

This one, sad, unignorable exposure of the heart does not provide us with a key which unlocks the secret of Gray's poetry. Yet it may suggest why his poetic career as a whole had become

¹ *Correspondence*, iii. 1117–18, 1127, 1132.

a process of escape from a dimly understood sense of a private predicament, which was in itself the real spring of his creativity. If such a conclusion might help to explain why his output was so small and fragmentary, it does nothing to account for the undoubted distinction of much of his poetry. Although he was content at last to see himself as merely 'a shrimp of an author', Gray's handful of lyrical or resonant poems were to affect the sensibility of a whole generation and the best of them have not been forgotten. I have myself been concerned only to suggest that poetry which might seem 'complacent' in its 'massive calm' was in reality neither complacent nor calm; or, at least, that such calm as it ever achieved was the result of a personal and poetic struggle which can not but be moving, if viewed with the sympathetic imagination which was its own unifying theme.