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THE LIVING LYRE: A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF THOMAS GRAY

by

Stephen Wagman

A dissertation submitted to The Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Baltimore, Maryland
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ABSTRACT

Underlying the usual division of Gray's poetry into classical and Celtic modes is a quality of profound ambivalence. On the one hand, he is disposed to believe that the circumstances in which man is nurtured, including but not limited to the classical and Celtic pasts, can both cause and correct what ails his spirit. But on the other hand, with equal conviction he tends to feel that man's spirit, while a prey to the influence of circumstances, beneficial and harmful, need not and should not be determined by this influence.

The former inclination leads him to survey a wide variety of conditions in life, from the classical and Celtic civilizations to mountains and plains and youth and age. In everything he considers he invariably finds qualities that both foster man's spirit and paralyze or dissipate it. The fertility of the Mediterranean soil and the warmth of its climate, for example, are seen as responsible at the same time for the flowering of Roman civilization and for the luxury and indolence that made it vulnerable to the barbarian hordes from the north. The harsh life, in turn, of these invaders is seen as the major factor in molding both their brutality and their indomitable spirit. Because of the paradoxical nature of these gentle and fierce spirits, which govern every condition of life he investigates, Gray cannot ultimately decide whether circum-

stances that foster the one or the other are more favorable to fulfillment and happiness.

When Gray's inclination leads him to feel that man need not depend on any circumstances for his spirit to thrive, he writes his most defiant and sublime poetry. Instead of surveying the world with philosophical detachment or feverish anxiety, he looks down on it with lofty and dignified contempt. In this mood he expresses faith in the power of man's spirit to forge a noble destiny for itself, whether it must sustain the adversity of a barren soil and cold climate or the forces of political tyranny. But this attitude of Gray's is only occasional. Although he approves of it almost without reservation, he cannot depend on it as he would like to. He himself is too much a prey to what he considers to be the benighted circumstances of his own age to have unwavering faith in the self-reliant vigor of the soul. Instead he remains locked in an unresolved conflict between the tendency to believe in the power of circumstances and the inclination to spurn them in favor of the spirit's capacity to determine itself.

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PREFACE

This study is a deliberate reaction against the prevailing historical view of Gray as a poet wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other, to revise Arnold's phrase, only in the process of being born. According to this view, Gray inherits a bankrupt poetic idiom, bound by rigid generic imperatives and stocked with worn-out epithets and the commonplace vocabulary of an exploded mythology. Far from providing a vital means of expression, these devices of the classical poetic tradition are seen as a cumbersome restraint on Gray's imagination. An example of this style which I believe most proponents of this view concur in condemning is the opening stanza of the "Ode on the Spring," where Gray writes of the "purple year" (4), the "Attic warbler" (5), and "Cool Zephyrs" (9). Whether this kind of ornamental language is dismissed in the name of literary pictorialism, as it is by Jean Hagstrum, or under the banner of intimacy and authenticity, key terms for Patricia Spacks, the feeling is that Gray is working a used-up vein of ore that can yield him very little profit.

At the same time, this group of critics heralds Gray's scholarly research into ancient Britain, which led to his striking Norse poems, as a fresh departure for English poetry. His inquiry into the native and northern, they feel, uncovers a vital source of inspiration that contrasts sharply with the pallid

Augustan or classical muse he appeals to elsewhere. In this new mode of poetry, for example, the commonplace image of the retired, musing poet gives way to the sublime figure of the inspired bard and classical allusions are replaced by references to Scandinavian mythology, such as the web of fate spun by the Valkyries.

What I take objection to in this view is not the sense of upheaval and change that it emphasizes, but the unquestioned assumption that the poems written under a classical influence are poor and uninspired. Without exception, for example, these critics attack Agrippina, Gray's uncompleted play on decadent Rome, as appallingly stilted. But they never make any attempt to interpret it to see if it is meaningful or if the language they so vehemently object to comes to life as an essential and integral feature of the part of the play that Gray finished. These critics never justify their response by demonstrating that the fault they find in this poetry is an intrinsic feature of it rather than the result of misapplied standards of excellence.

In my own study of Gray I have found that virtually none of his poetry needs to be dismissed as inferior, inauthentic, or uninspired. By examining the totality of Gray's work with a view to its inherent patterns rather than to its place in a preconceived historical context, I have come to feel that its essential and vital characteristic is neither classical nor Celtic, but something common to them both. In a word, the informing principle of Gray's

writing, I feel, is the ambivalence that disposes him to both Greco-Roman and British culture, despite their many differences. Instead of preferring one of these civilizations to the other, in each of them he sees both engaging and objectionable qualities. Moreover, I find that he is preoccupied with the same qualities in his consideration of other contrasting entities, from mountains and plains to innocence and experience.

To bring out these conflicting qualities I organize the following chapters in increasingly abstract patterns. Although the first chapter is primarily an introduction to the rest of the dissertation, in it I focus on the various circumstances of place and time that Gray considers and on the different styles he employs for this purpose. Then in chapters two and three I move on to a discussion of the spirits that govern these conditions and finally in chapter four to an examination of the appeal of the genius loci itself and of genius not confined to any locus. Because I believe that the underlying nature of Gray's interest even in nations and topography is in qualities that his mind abstracts from them, I sometimes refer to his conflicting representations of social and geographical as well as psychological entities as evidence of an inner conflict.

This view of Gray, I feel, has the advantage of redeeming many of his poems written in the classical tradition and dismissed by prevailing critical opinion. His ambivalence organizes and gives meaning to the classical commonplaces he employs, just as Pope's be-

lief in concordia discors inspires the traditional diction and phrasing of Windsor Forest. In the opening stanza of the "Ode on the Spring," for example, the florid style of the speaker is not ornamental excess, but an integral part of the poem. It calls into question the sober restraint that he claims to exercise and criticizes the swarm of mankind for lacking.

At the same time, this approach to Gray suggests that his Celtic poetry is not so distinct from his work in the classical tradition as at first appears. Underlying the striking originality of the images, rhythms, and myths in his British poetry is the same ambivalence that structures his Augustan poems. In "The Descent of Odin," for example, he demonstrates the same uncertainty about the value of quiet repose as he does in the "Ode on the Spring." To me this identity of concern seems more remarkable and central than the admittedly great differences in style distinguishing the two poems.

If in my single-minded pursuit of this thesis I largely ignore the prevailing critical view of Gray, it is not out of contempt for its emphasis, but out of a conviction that what we now most need is to balance the typical historical approach to Gray with a more exclusive attention to his poetry itself. At the end of the dissertation I do suggest the place of Gray as I see him in his historical context. But I am deliberately brief and sketchy. I merely wish to indicate that what I have found to be relevant to Gray

is worth considering in his contemporaries. The proper place to do this, however, is not the conclusion to a study of Gray, but separate studies of his contemporaries themselves.

CHAPTER ONE

THIS BENIGHTED AGE

In an examination of Gray's writing it soon becomes clear that much of his work is a response to his enduring frustration with his contemporary situation. This frustration results from an inability to resolve his conflicting attitudes towards various conditions of the immediate world around him. There is no one poem or passage that that gives us a full statement of everything about eighteenth-century England that preyed on Gray's spirit. But when we group together individual poems, casual references from his correspondence, and various passages from prose articles, a fairly comprehensive picture of his dilemma emerges.

In Gray's thoughts about private or domestic life his conflict arises from the problem of whether a life of retirement in the country is a pleasant relief from the frantic bustle of London society or whether it condemns one to deadening isolation from vital companions. This dilemma is a variation of the old cultural tradition recommending a balance between an active social life and contemplative retirement. Prior to Gray's time, the question of the authenticity or value of these modes of life does not ordinarily arise. In "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," for example, Milton's twin poems on social merriment and melancholy seclusion, the emphasis falls equally on the advantage of each life style; the speakers

are never in doubt about the wisdom of their choice. It is only a question of whether they can exorcise their respective evil spirit and successfully petition the goddess each worships.[1]

Gray, however, is much less certain which choice to make. In his letters he often complains that at Cambridge, for example, one tends to languish from tedium rather than enjoy the pleasures of peaceful seclusion. On one occasion he wrote his friend Horace Walpole: "in Cambridge there is nothing so troublesome, as that one has nothing to trouble one. every thing is so tedious, regular, so samish, that I expire for want of a little variety."[2] When he takes this view, he sometimes regards the dullness of retirement from the detached perspective of the satirist. He even produced two brief poems in this vein, one a light-hearted nonsense piece and the other a much more ambitious, but incomplete satire in the manner of Pope. In the first of these, the "Satire on the Heads of Houses," Gray ridicules the far-from-stimulating company he met with in his secluded life at Cambridge. The heads of the colleges in the poem are all duplicates of one another, each trying meekly like sheep to follow the other's lead.

> Know the Master of Jesus
> Does hugely displease us;
> The Master of Maudlin
> In the same dirt is dawdling;
> The Master of Sidney
> Is of the same Kidney;
> The Master of Trinity
> To him bears affinity ... (5-12)[3]

The other poem is an invocation to the spirit of Cambridge, which Gray envisions as a goddess like Queen Dulness in the Dunciad and calls Ignorance. Because this spirit fails to respond to the entreaty of the speaker, who devotes himself to Ignorance much as Cibber worships Dulness, he fears for its vitality and laments the passing of olden times when Ignorance ruled triumphant over the entire world. Nevertheless, from an unmistakable suggestion in the language of the invocation, it is clear that the goddess is far more difficult to eradicate than the speaker fears. How can she possibly be budged out of those "ever gloomy bowers" (1)? The likelihood of Ignorance's decamping from Cambridge seems as great as a speeding up of the river Cam, which we are told oozes along perpetually in a heap of mud. In view of this conviction, it is not surprising that Gray never extended the poem to the revival of learning during the Renaissance, as he apparently intended to do.[4] It would be difficult to sustain enthusiasm for the vanquishing of Ignorance some two hundred years before when he felt that her soporific fumes had stolen over the land once again.

Satires like the "Hymn to Ignorance," however, are extremely rare in Gray, because he is usually too acutely aware of his own laziness to ridicule others for it. Again and again in his letters he admits that the spirit of dullness and letharagy that grips Cambridge incapacitates him for work as much as anyone. "The Spirit of Lazyness (the Spirit of the Place)," he writes his

medical friend Thomas Wharton, "begins to possess even me, that have so long declaimed against it."[5] As a result of this realization, Gray occasionally turns his mockery from others to himself. "You must know," he writes Wharton concerning the power of laziness.

> she had been pleased to appoint me (in Preference to so many old Servants of hers, who had spent their whole Lives in qualifying themselves for the Office) Grand Picker of Straws, and Push-Pin-Player in ordinary to her Supinity (for that is her Title).[6]

But his most typical attitude to the dullness of retirement is melancholy displeasure. According to a letter he sent his friend Richard West after more than a year at Cambridge:

> When you have seen one of my days, you have seen a whole year of my life; they go round and round like the blind horse in the mill, only he has the satisfaction of fancying he makes a progress, and gets some ground; my eyes are open enough to see the same dull prospect and to know that having made four-and-twenty steps more, I shall be just where I was.[7]

Yet despite all this evidence of his dissatisfaction with retirement, Gray never condemns it once and for all. Whenever he ventures up to London, he is so disappointed with its noise and glare[8] and his little forays into society, which he finds frivolous and distracting, that he typically turns to the seclusion of Cambridge as a welcome retreat. From a letter he wrote at Pembroke Hall after one of these expeditions into London society one would never know that he ever considered the retired situation of Cambridge

as a disadvantage:

> For me, I am come to my resting place, and find it very necessary, after living for a month in a house with three women that laughed from morning to night, and would allow nothing to the sulkiness of my disposition. Company and cards at home, parties by land and water abroad, and (what they call) doing something, that is racketting about from morning to night, are occupations, I find, that wear out my spirits, especially in a situation where one might sit still, and be alone with pleasure.[9]

The domestic dilemma facing Gray is even more complicated, for there is evidence in his correspondence that retired situations cannot be counted on to be merely either dull or peaceful. Even in seclusion at Cambridge Gray was exposed to the circumstances that he both sought out and fled from in the world. His well-publicized removal from Peterhouse to Pembroke is a case in point.[10] According to a legend, a party of revellers tried to take advantage of Gray's well-known fear of fire by sounding the alarm and scaring him down the rope-ladder which he kept attached to a special railing outside his window. It is not clear whether he paid any attention at all to the hollering, but whatever his immediate reaction, he was outraged when the college authorities subsequently made light of the whole affair, and he promptly removed himself across the street to Pembroke Hall.

In spite of the fact that Gray felt himself abused by the fellows, he could not help regarding the incident as an exciting de-

parture from the humdrum routine of his daily life at Cambridge. "This may be look'd upon," he wrote Thomas Wharton," as a sort of Aera in a life so barren of events as mine."[11] Yet a few sentences later he casually let slip a reference that reveals at the same time how disturbing the whole thing was to him and how glad he felt to find refuge at Pembroke Hall. "I am for the present extremely well lodged here," he wrote, "and as quiet as in the Grande Chartreuse." This monastery had a special meaning for Gray, which he recorded in his Latin poem "Alcaic Ode," a celebration of the sheltering quiet of that mountain retreat from the storm of human life. To have compared Pembroke Hall to the Grande Chartreuse, even as unobtrusively as Gray does, suggests that the experience of changing residence was at least as upsetting as it was exciting. The entire incident, moreover, shows how deeply his ambivalence penetrated into the bloodstream of his daily life.

When Gray considered the situation of the whole nation, he concluded that, instead of flourishing, the country was either withering on the stem or proliferating in luxurious riot. In the arts particularly his naturally gloomy disposition found much to brood on, for the burden of the past rested heavily on his frail shoulders:

> But not to one in this benighted age
> Is that diviner inspiration giv'n,
> That burns in Shakespeare's or in Milton's page,
> The pomp and prodigality of heav'n.
> (Stanzas to Mr. Bentley, 17-20)

Instead of genius, everywnere he looked he found dullness. On

reading Colley Cibber's book on the character of Cicero, based on Conyers Middleton's biography, he was so depressed by its stupidity that he was led to speculate gloomily on where it all might lead: "Literature (to take it in its most comprehensive Sense, & include every Thing, that requires Invention, or Judgment, or barely Application & Industry) seems indeed drawing space to its Dissolution."[12] Gray's own part in this decline was in the meagerness of his output, which led him to call himself, "but a shrimp of an author."[13]

But shrinkage and timidity were not, for Gray, the only maladies afflicting the writers of this period. Some tended towards the opposite extreme and failed in attempting too much or in capturing only the show of greatness without the spirit. Gray has less to say about this propensity than the other, but nevertheless he was aware of overextension as well as under-achievement in the plight of his nation's literature. In an especially illuminating, though indirect remark from a letter about the 1758 edition of Dodsley's Miscellany he clearly addresses himself to both evils at once. The entire collection is dismal in Gray's opinion. But "particularly Dr. Akenside," he writes, "is in a deplorable way."

> What signifies Learning and the Antients, (Mason will say triumphantly) why should people read Greek to lose their imagination, their ear, and their mother tongue? But then there is Mr. Shenstone, who trusts to nature and simple sentiment, why does he do no better? he goes hopping along his own gravel-walks, and never deviates from the beaten paths for fear of being lost.[14]

The implication here is that, by displaying his familiarity with classical learning and literature, Akenside is striking out from the common path to which Shenstone confines himself in keeping the milieu of his poetry recognizably English. Yet, Gray makes clear, to his mind there is as little vitality in Akenside's Grecian adventures as in Shenstone's native hopping about. In the one learning merely inflates his poetry without heightening it, and in the other there is nothing to give even the appearance of greatness.

Literature was not the only domain in which Gray thought the nation missed greatness. In military expeditions and economic speculation during this time he believed the country suffered for overextending itself as much as in its pompous literary endeavors. His thoughts on this theme are less extensively documented than those on the plight of the nation's literature, but one poem in particular stands out: the tripos verses he wrote at Cambridge, entitled "Luna Habitabilis."

The poem closes with a brief prophecy of the fame of his native land, in which he envisions a time when England, which long ago harnessed the sea and now rules in undisputed majesty over wind and wave, will raise her standards over the air as well and reign as queen of the skies. On the surface it is difficult to know whether to interpret this course marked out for England as a testimony to her vitality or a subtle mockery of her expansionist policies. There is nothing in the language of the prophecy that cannot be

interpreted as genuine national pride, and the allusions to the Aeneid, from which it borrows heavily, merely seem to bolster this interpretation. For example, the last line of "Luna Habitabilis," which represents England as queen or master of the air, sounds suspiciously like a verse in the first book of the Aeneid referring to Rome's eventual triumph over the Grecian state as revenge for the Trojan defeat.[15] The prophet here is Jupiter himself, reassuring Venus in her fears for Aeneas shortly after his shipwreck on the Carthaginian coast.

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that Gray's prophecy is not to be taken as evidence of nationalistic fervor, but as a mockery of England's immoderate ambitions. A previous passage in "Luna Habitabilis" cancels out any subtle allusion to Virgil that may be hovering above the words Gray borrows. Shortly before the prophecy the goddess of the moon initiates Gray into the mysteries of her realm (51-72) and reveals that there are people inhabiting her pale orb who are just like mortal creatures on earth. Fear and love affect them, and ardent excitement, particularly at the sight of our planet and the prospect of further territory to conquer. When tiny England swims into view, princes themselves throng together to admire the lovely radiance. It may well be, we are told, though whether in a revelation by Phoebe or in a speculation by the poet is not clear, that some distant tyrant calls himself master and imagines himself swaggering in an English palace. Whoever says

this, the implication is clear: territorial conquest is tyrannical, not heroic. As a course of action for a nation to pursue, it indicates more a swollen head than a daring spirit. Surely, then, when the poet turns around and himself imagines England conquering the realms of air, we are to construe him and the policy he advocates for England as tyrannical, like the strutting lunar prince and his desire for conquest.

For the most part Gray's response to all the problems affecting domestic life, particularly in retirement, and the literary and political situation of the nation depended on a theory of education borrowed in part from two philosophers. One was Locke, for whom Gray in his incomplete "De Principiis Cogitandi" was trying to do what Lucretius in ancient times had done for Epicurus. And the other was Plato, particularly in the sixth book of The Republic, where he discusses the importance of education and government in the growth of the soul.[16]

According to Gray's educational theory, what determines the cast a mind takes, whether it tends to good or to mischief, depends on the circumstances in which a man grows up. As Gray warned his young Swiss friend, Charles Victor de Bonstetten, if a well-endowed soul, naturally vivacious, gentle, and magnanimous, should light on a bad soil and receive a poor education, then its growth would be stunted or crooked.[17] Similarly, if the government of a man's country is ill-regulated, then he will suffer according to the ir-

regularity. As a rule, the more tyrannical the government, the more impoverished the lives of the people. But if a government eases up too much and grows lax in its discipline, then luxury and corruption will set in to deprave the nation. This theory was not so much a self-conscious attitude in Gray as an integral part of his outlook and penetrated even into his most casual remarks. On leaving the Pope's dominions on the road to Naples, for example, he was struck by the beauty and fertility of the region and wondered in a notebook, "What must such a country be in the times of liberty when even under the execrable government it has now long been subject to, it can flourish in this manner?"[18]

More significantly, this attitude spawned the greatest portion of Gray's poetry. One notable way in which it appears is in his philosophical verse, which coolly and rationally considers how circumstances affect men, whether they necessarily determine what he is, and whether they can be manipulated to shape man according to an ideal image. Gray's most outstanding expressions of this conception are only fragments, "The Alliance of Education and Government" and "De Principiis Cogitandi," but their importance in Gray's canon is greater than their bulk, because they provide an insight into a significant mode of his thinking. In his own day, which witnessed the efflorescence of environmental determinism, culminating perhaps in Montesquieu's L'Esprit des Loix, Gray's contribution to the subject, small as it is, received some notable attention. The

greatest praise came from Gibbon, who quoted some verses from the fragment on "Education and Government" in a footnote to his history of Rome and lamented the fact that Gray never completed this "exquisite" poem.[19]

In the excerpt quoted by Gibbon, Gray treats a problem that motivated Gibbon himself as well as Montesquieu in France on a much more elaborate scale: the collapse of the Roman empire. To explain this phenomenon, Gray speculates on a connection between the decadence and luxury of Rome and the fertility of her soil and warmth of her climate. The belief is that these factors tended to foster indolence and vulnerability to invasion. Another theme which Gray touches on in this poem and which interested other writers of his period, such as Goldsmith in "The Traveller," is the hardiness of mountain people. The speculation turns on the relation of the freedom and hardship of mountain life to strength of spirit.

Gray's preoccupation with mountains and the spirit they foster was widespread. From his first journey over the Alps with Horace Walpole his letters depict the glorious inspiration of mountain peaks and precipices. In his most famous remark, sent to Richard West after crossing the Alps, he enthused: "I do not remember to have gone ten paces without an exclamation, that there was no restraining: Not a precipice, not 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 argu-

ment."[20]

But his very next letter, postmarked at Genoa, demonstrates his ambivalence even to mountains. The letter begins with a Sapphic verse:

> Horridos tractus, Boreaeque linquens
> Regna Taurini fera, molliorem
> Advehor brumam, Genuaeque amantes
> Litora soles.[21]
>
> Leaving behind rugged country and the
> savage realms of the Taurine Boreas,
> I pass on to a milder winter and suns
> which caress the shores of Genoa.
> (My translation)

Abruptly at sight of the gentle coastal plain of Genoa, Gray changes his mind about the mountains he has just crossed. Far from inspiring, the mountains are here described as disturbingly harsh and even, the implication is, inimical to life. They are only something to glance at briefly in awe perhaps, but no place to nestle down and thrive in. They do not foster life like the gentle plains of Genoa.

In addition to topography, climate is a significant factor in this poem and elsewhere in Gray's geographical outlook. In "The Alliance of Education and Government" the two factors are personified as mother and father, the soil figuring as the mother's bosom, either fertile and life-giving or flinty and dried up, and the climate representing the father's temperament, either benign and encouraging or violent and tyrannical. Unless they cooperate with each other, no offspring of theirs can possibly thrive. In the

Taurine Alps they are both gruff and ill-tempered, the ruggedness of the country being matched by the savagery of the north wind. But at Genoa the two clearly get along famously together: the sun is even so unabashed as to make love openly to the gentle plain.

Gray's native country, he feels, is topographically in a particularly deplorable situation. Level plains are not always a welcome sight. Against the background of savage mountains, they may be pleasant and comforting, but when those same mountains strike Gray as splendid and glorious, the plains pale in comparison and seem tame and insipid. With its large stretches of level land, England suffers from lying next to an uncommonly grand spectacle of rocks and precipices in neighboring Scotland.[22] To add to its plight, the country is plagued not only with the dullness of a flat situation, but with the rigors of a cold climate, at least in comparison with the sun-kissed shores of Genoa. Fixed in a northern latitude, England may simply be too cold to nourish a fertile imagination and rival the achievements of Italy and Greece, both warm, Mediterranean countries. At least the belief is that England's coldness is an obstacle to poetic glory. Count Algarotti's characterization of Gray's poetry is apposite here in that he considers it to be as rapturous as it would have been, had Gray been born nearer to the sun, that is, in a country to the southeast of England.[23] Gray himself in "The Progress of Poesy" makes a similar assessment of Shakespeare.

Though the philosophical detachment of "Education and Government" is important in Gray, it is not the only or even the typical way in which his concern with the influence of circumstances on a man's spirit emerges in his poetry. His consideration of this question tends to be more feverish or disturbed than cool and rational. When his dissatisfaction with contemporary civilization arises out of the sense that it is too sophisticated and overwhelming, his inclination is often to escape to paradisiacal conditions of ease. When he senses that this civilization, because of its excessive refinement, has become too weak and decadent, he then frequently yearns for something both simpler and hardier. This desire for better conditions is often projected as a wish to return to the past, either to an earlier historical period or to his own youth.[24]

Gray is as ambivalent about these past conditions as he is about his present national and domestic situation. Although in his exploration of the heroic age of Celtic and Saxon Britain there is no single statement of his perplexity, his poetry on this period clearly suggests a divided attitude. On the one hand, we have his translations celebrating the dauntless bravery of Celtic warriors like Hoël, who defies fate and hurls himself against an overwhelming foe and certain death to defend his country from the Saxon invaders.[25] If we compare this behavior with the unscrupulousness of a contemporary leader like the Earl of Sandwich, whom Gray

satirizes in "The Candidate," the belligerency of the ancient warriors is unquestionably heroic. Their open defiance of their enemies contrasts sharply with the treachery and hypocrisy of Sandwich, who, even though he himself was notorious for whoring and debauchery, had the impudence to denounce his former friend John Wilkes for writing an obscene essay on women.[26] But the warring spirit of Hoël and the others in Gray's Welsh translations may also be considered barbaric. They are not only victims of bloody carnage; they do enough slaughtering themselves, which Gray describes in epithets and imagery similar to what we find, for example, in "The Bard," where the shedding of blood is denounced with prophetic wrath as tyrannical. The "crimson harvest" (10) of enemy blood for which Conan is praised in a little poem devoted to him sounds very much like the "crimson wing" (3) of conquest for which the Bard thunders a curse against Edward I. And the thunder, lightning, and wind to which Conan is compared to exalt him are similar to the atmospheric disturbances during the devastating volcanic eruption which Gray personifies in "The Gaurus" as a menacing tyrant. A number of questions arise out of the juxtaposition of these poems: when does an act of bravery become an act of tyranny? And is it possible to have the courageous spirit of the warrior without inflicting harm or death on others? In the ancient Britons the two come together, and Gray must look elsewhere for what he wants.

There is another reason for his dissatisfaction with the British

past. The problem concerns the theme of letters and arms.[27] Gray broaches this topic explicitly in a translation he made of Propertius. Following his model, he chooses to give himself over to the sweets of love in youth and the fruits of knowledge in old age. The rigors of war are not for him, unless they be the milder rigors of amorous warfare. In Propertius love, which he calls the god of peace, and knowledge are considered only as honorable pursuits. Gray's translation, following Propertius closely, also treats peaceful activities as a desirable alternative to war, but in his closing two couplets, which amplify the last two verses of Propertius, there is a different perspective on this opposition, for which I find no authority in the Renaissance and later editions that Gray may have used. Propertius merely says that love and knowledge are for him: let those to whom arms are dearer reclaim the standards of Crassus.

> exitus hic vitae superest mihi: vos quibus arma
> grata magis, Crassi signa referte domum.
> (Book III, Elegy V, 47-48)[28]

In Gray's translation, however, instead of maintaining this dignified attitude towards his choice, the speaker becomes almost self-abasing. Love and learning he calls "These soft, inglorious joys" (55) and he refers to the young men who are eager to redeem the defeat of Crassus as inspired by "a nobler flame" (57). This modification of the text, though admittedly slight, reveals clearly enough Gray's ambivalence towards arms and letters. When the

raising of arms strikes him as glorious, learning degenerates into something base. But when war appears savage, peaceful learning takes on the aspect of an honorable and civilized pursuit.

In his consideration of ancient Britain war wavers between glory and savagery, but when it inclines toward the savage, there is no learning to compensate for it. Gray nowhere links these two ideas directly, as he does in his translation of Propertius, but it is clear from his "Hymn to Ignorance" that he considers the Middle Ages to have been as impoverished in learning as they were ravaged by war. Although the poem breaks off at the beginning of his history of Ignorance, enough is written to demonstrate his conviction that Ignorance never possessed so firm a stronghold in Britain as during the dark ages before the revival of learning in the Renaissance.[29]

In Gray's recollection of his own youth ignorance plays as significant a role as in this consideration of the youth of his country. But it is not so much ignorance of books as ignorance of the world, of experience. Gray's only important treatment of this theme is in his "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College." Usually he is criticized in this poem for idealizing youth and casting a rosy glow over Eton College that no Etonian could have experienced. Gray, however, is anything but silly and romantic in the sense of dreamy. No poet was ever more sensitive to the hardships of life. As much as he yearned for a paradise of ease, he believed that, ex-

cept for fleeting moments in life, utopia exists only before birth in the nourishing warmth of the mother's womb and perhaps after death, if (but that is a big if) man is then folded in the bosom of God.[30] In between, the only certainty is that sooner or later adversity will strike. What permits Gray to treat a childhood spent at Eton as paradisiacal is its seclusion and shelter in comparison with an adult life exposed to much greater rigors, like the pains of a ruined career and the suffering of "slow-consuming Age" (90). But that childhood is idyllic or free from care is not in question. What perplexes Gray is whether it is in the best interests of children to remain ignorant of the grisly fate that awaits them until it is upon them. Is ignorance bliss or folly?

At times Gray decided that he could not find satisfaction in any of the circumstances he considered, regardless of the place or time, not because the particular circumstances under scrutiny were deficient in some respect, but because no set of circumstances whatever can be unblemished. Even if the human factors can be successfully manipulated, he believed, there remain the uncontrollable forces of nature to contend with. Education and government perhaps can be organized and mastered, but who can change soil and climate or control the accidental and unpredictable inclemencies of nature? The fact is that some circumstances affecting man are bound to be unfavorable at times.[31] From the moment the infant leaves the womb, as Gray tells us in his "De Principiis Cogitandi"

(I.75-80), and feels the chilling touch of the air, pain folds him in an iron embrace and remains an unwelcome companion throughout life. Suffering is not constant, as pleasure mixes with pain, but we can never trust that conditions will remain favorable for long.

What man needs to do in this case, Gray thought, is to look with contempt on the conditions that threaten his happiness and forge a noble destiny for himself, regardless of adversity. On occasion he felt certain of man's ability to achieve this feat. As he says to Wharton in a letter, "It is sure, we have great power over our own minds, when we chuse to exert it; & tho it be difficult to resist the mechanic impulse & bias of our own temper, it is yet possible."[32] And in another letter:

> That we are indeed mechanical and dependent beings, I need no other proof than my own feelings; and from the same feelings I learn, with equal conviction, that we are not merely such: that there is a power within that struggles against the force and bias of that mechanism, commands its motion, and by frequent practice, reduces it to that ready obedience which we call Habit; and all this in conformity to a preconceived opinion (no matter whether right or wrong) to that least material of all agents, a Thought.[33]

In this lofty mood Gray vigorously opposed many of the materialists and mechanists who challenged the freedom of the soul to determine itself. Voltaire, for example, he detested as a vile atheist who denied the independent existence of the soul.[34] On home ground he dismissed David Hume, whom he called a pernicious writer and a professed sceptic for being guided by nothing but immediate impulses

and interests. "To be masters of his philosophy," Gray wrote, "we need not his books or advice, for every child is capable of the same thing, without any study at all."[35] But Gray reserved his greatest censure for the philosophy of Bolingbroke, which he repudiated in a brief essay first published by William Mason after Gray's death.[36] What irked him about Bolingbroke was the placid, even complacent resignation he advocated in the face of misfortune and death. If unhappiness were inevitable, as Bolingbroke claimed, then we would be justified, not impious in crying out against our miserable lot and even blaspheming God. But, Gray asserted, God has made us capable of knowing and doing what may conduct us to happiness.

However, his faith in this ability of man wavered. It is not something that he suddenly felt at a certain date in his life and then lived happily ever after with. It is a climactic experience only in the logical development of his thought, not in the chronology of his life. In point of fact, his faith was kindled, extinguished, and rekindled again and again throughout his writing days. He was not able to maintain a lofty attitude with ease, but always had to struggle for it against the forces of lethargy, which threatened to undermine his spirit.

This struggle produced perhaps the two most distinctive strains in his poetry: his sublimity, found most prominently in the two Pindaric odes, and his pathos, which achieves its most poignant

expression perhaps in the "Elegy." The first of these tones emerges in those intensely lyrical moments when his spirit succeeds in defying the "thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" and he feels himself not free from pain and care, but superior to them, capable of withstanding their most furious onslaught. One of the most notable and concentrated ways in which we can see this spirit rear its lofty head is in the contrasting treatment that Gray gives to the misfortunes of life in the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" and "The Progress of Poesy." In the former Gray personifies the forces of adversity as furious vultures that prey mercilessly on their helpless victim mankind. But in the Pindaric ode these same forces are merely pale, nightmarish figures that flee in panic at the break of day before the strong armies of the sun, which represent what Gray calls the "poetic Genius."[37] His sensibility emerges when he fails in his struggle to maintain a lofty spirit and sinks into an Eton College mood, overwhelmed by the gloomy sense of an implacable fate. The suffering he endures in this frame of mind breeds a sympathy within him for the suffering of others. In the "Elegy," for example, his own fear of death, of vanishing from the earth without leaving a trace behind stirs a spirit within him that reaches out to try and rescue from oblivion, in the memorial of his verse, the "unhonour'd Dead" (93).

It is possible to trace the vagaries of Gray's reputation and with it the history of the critical judgment of his verse in the

varying responses to these two outstanding strains in his poetry. The sublime passages in the Pindaric odes are successes not only in his own terms, but in the opinion of an outspoken coterie which flourished for a few decades after his death. These critics considered Gray to be the finest lyrical poet in English and the most serious rival to Pindar among all lyrical poets.[38] As vociferous as they were, however, they represented only a minority. Even in his own day the reception of the Pindaric odes was largely lukewarm, if not disapproving. The common reader charged them with obscurity, to which he much preferred the tender, easily understood pathos of the "Elegy." Gray responded to the charge by publishing a sarcastic series of notes that taxed the reader with even more obscure allusions than abound in the odes themselves. But he was waging a losing battle. With the advent of Wordsworth's attack on him and the new canon of taste that Wordsworth helped to introduce, the majestic Pindarics were eclipsed and only the poetry that seemed to represent natural feeling was acceptable. Since Wordsworth's time the specific poems of Gray attacked for being too impersonal and inexpressive have varied, but the principle itself, regardless of Gray's theory and practice, continues to flourish.[39]

I have divided the rest of my study according to Gray's tendency, on the one hand, to believe in the power of circumstances to cause and correct what troubles him in the world and, on the other hand, to feel that man's spirit, while a prey to the influence

of circumstances, beneficial and harmful, can and should be responsible for its own strength. In his consideration of the power of circumstances Gray finds that the problems it causes tend to be the same in the past and present, in England and elsewhere. On the one hand, wherever he looks he finds circumstances that nourish a spirit of meanness, caution, or lethargy. In his hymn to the spirit of Cambridge, for example, this spirit flourishes as the goddess Ignorance. On the other hand, wherever he turns he also finds situations that produce a spirit given to excess. In ancient Britain, for example, according to one of Gray's Welsh translations, this excess is a frenzied passion that prompts Conan to hideous deeds of slaughter. In Gray's own day, moreover, according to his "Long Story," the excess is the spirit of frivolity that marks the preoccupations of sophisticated society. At the end of this poem he offers an ironic apology to Lady Cobham for detaining her from her dignified games of whist, cribbage, and backgammon with so trivial a diversion as his poem.

In the next two chapters I focus on the various situations that Gray's belief in the power of circumstances leads him to consider as antidotes to laziness and frenzy. His inclination to believe in the power of man's spirit to thrive independently of circumstances reappears in the fourth and final chapter, where I discuss not only the expression he gives to this inclination, but its relation to his contradictory tendency to believe in circumstances as a source of vitality.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]See also Pope's Windsor Forest, especially as it is interpreted by Earl R. Wasserman, The Subtler Language (Baltimore, 1968), pp. 101-168.

[2]Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, ed., Correspondence of Thomas Gray (Oxford, 1935), I, 16; see also I, 34, 82. Hereafter I will refer to this book as Gray's Correspondence.

[3]H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson, ed., The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray (Oxford, 1972), p. 76. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations from Gray's poetry will be from this edition, which I shall refer to as Gray's Poems. The parenthetical reference in the body of the quotation here is to the specific lines quoted. This notation will be used throughout.

[4]My authority here is Horace Walpole, who twice makes reference to a poem that Gray began on the revival of learning, but left off, so he says, because it resembled the Dunciad too closely. This is almost certainly the poem that Mason published as a "Hymn to Ignorance," even though the only line that Walpole quotes Mason found among Gray's papers for the continuation of his fragment on education and government. This poem, so far as it goes, has nothing to do with the theme of learning, whereas the "Hymn to Ignorance" breaks off at the beginning of an account of medieval scholasticism. See Horace Walpole's Correspondence, ed., W. S. Lewis (New Haven, 1951), XV, 53; also Walpole's "Memoir of Gray" in Gray's Correspondence, III, 1286-1288; and for an account of the problem see Roger Lonsdale, ed., The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, and Oliver Goldsmith (London, 1969), p. 87.

[5]Gray's Correspondence, I, 317-318; see also, for example, I, 254-255.

[6]Ibid., I, 223.

[7]Ibid., I, 34; see also, for example, I, 170.

[8]For a mildly satiric account of the sights of London see ibid., I, 252-253.

[9]Ibid., II, 692-693.

[10]Ibid., III, 1216-1220.

[11]Ibid., II, 458.

[12]Ibid., I, 265.

[13]Ibid., III, 1018.

[14]Ibid., II, 566.

[15]Aeneid, I, 285: "servitio premet ac victis dominabitur Argis."

[16]See Gray's "Notes on Plato" in the fourth volume of The Works of Thomas Gray, ed., Edmund Gosse (New York, 1885). For an account of this theme in the eighteenth century see J. A. Passmore, "The Malleability of Man," in Aspects of the Eighteenth Century, ed., E. R. Wasserman (Baltimore, 1965).

[17]Gray's Correspondence, III, 1118.

[18]D. C. Tovey, ed., "Notes of Travel," Gray and His Friends (Cambridge, 1890), p. 231.

[19]See Edward Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed., J. B. Bury (London, 1896-1900), III, 332n.

[20]Gray's Correspondence, I, 128.

[21]Ibid., I, 129.

[22]Ibid., II, 588.

[23]Ibid., II, 797n.

[24]For a standard account of primitivism see the preface to A. O. Lovejoy and George Boas, A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas, Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity, Vol. I (Baltimore, 1935). For an ccount of primitivism in the eighteenth century see Lois Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress (Baltimore, 1934).

[25]In addition to "The Death of Hoël" see "Caradoc," "Conan," and "The Triumphs of Owen."

[26]For accounts of Sandwich see Gray's Correspondence, III, 1236-1241 and Lonsdale's edition of Gray, referred to above, pp. 243-248.

[27]See Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1963), pp. 178-179.

[28]This line reference is to the Loeb Classical Library edition of Propertius, trans. H. E. Butler (London, 1912). In Joseph Scaliger's 1577 edition of Propertius, Catullus, and Tibullus, which Gray owned, there is a significant textual difference. Scaliger unites what appears in the Loeb edition as the fourth and fifth elegies of the third book and prints them combined as the fourth. The closing two lines, then, are 69-70. See also, for example, Broukhusius' edition from Amsterdam.

[29]Although Gray does not make explicit his attitude towards his own enormous scholarship, the scope of which is well documented by W. P. Jones in Thomas Gray, Scholar (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), he does not seem to regard his learning primarily as something superior to the barbarity and ignorance of the British past. At least, his enthusiasm for the rude power that flourished at that time, particularly in its poetry, suggests that he felt his learning might be a disadvantage to him, except insofar as it imbued him with a sense of the ancient qualities that he admired.

[30]See Gray's "De Principiis Cogitandi," I, 64-80 and the "Elegy," 128.

[31]See Gray's "Ode to Adversity," especially the first stanza.

[32]Gray's Correspondence, II, 571.

[33]Ibid., II, 582.

[34]Ibid., III, 1175.

[35]Ibid., III, 1141.

[36]C. S. Northrup, ed., "Essay on the Philosophy of Lord Bolingbroke," Essays and Criticisms (Boston, 1909).

[37]Gray's Poems, p. 206.

[38]See, for example, John Pinkerton, Letters of Literature by Robert Heron, Esq. (London, 1785), pp. 33, 131; Nathan Drake, Literary Hours or Sketches Critical and Narrative (London, 1800), II, 74-75; Anna Seward, Letters (Edinburgh, 1811), II, 42; IV, 159-160, 364; V, 189.

[39]Wordsworth's attack occurs in the preface to the 1800 edition

of Lyrical Ballads. Two modern attacks are by F. Doherty, "The Two Voices of Gray," EIC, XIII (1963), 222-230 and Patricia Meyer Spacks, "'Artful Strife': Conflict in Gray's Poetry," PLMA, LXXXI (1967), 63-69.

CHAPTER TWO

I. THE SPIRIT-STIRRING VOICE

Though in some of his most important poems, like the "Elegy," Gray responds to the opposite evils of laziness and frenzy together, he often devotes his energy to only one of these vices at a time. There are, in fact, two fairly large groups of poems, composed to a considerable extent of fragments, translations, and Latin poems that critics usually disregard, in which Gray treats these evils separately and with unusual resolve. In the group of poems concerned with lethargy by itself he never doubts his belief in the need for a situation to arouse man's spirit, though he is unsure whether he prefers certain active or leisurely circumstances for this purpose. In his work devoted exclusively to the problem of frenzy he is similarly single-minded, though more pessimistic about the possibility of carrying out his resolution. Only in poems like the "Elegy," which I discuss in the following chapter, do the conditions he considers to correct a sluggish soul come into conflict with those he proposes to remedy a spirit given to excess.

In the poetry responding exclusively to the vice of laziness Gray imagines an ideal situation in which a whole nation might blossom out in full flower. Since he believes that the impoverishment of a nation, spiritual as well as economical, is due to an

irregularity of government, the key to the thriving world he wishes to see prevail lies in its leadership. The proper activity of the governing class, as he makes clear in the "Ode for Music," which extols the Duke of Grafton, is to display the Aristotelian virtue of magnificence and foster prosperity among the people rather than disdain their simple ways, as the ambitious and proud are criticized for doing in the "Elegy."

To achieve this ideal the ruler must exercise what Gray in "The Triumphs of Owen" calls a "Liberal hand" (8). Owen himself, the dauntless hero of the poem, exhibits this princely quality while governing his nation in times of peace.

> He nor heaps his brooded stores,
> Nor on all profusely pours. (5-6)

This poem is not Gray's own invention, but is based on a Latin translation of the Welsh original. However, since his praise significantly varies from the text he relied upon, we may take it to express his own attitude. In the version he worked from we are told that Owen was eminent as a prince who was neither avaricious nor covetous, both these qualities signifying a hoarding instinct. Gray adds the contrary vice according to the traditional Aristotelian conception and praises Owen as much for avoiding prodigality as for shunning miserliness.[1]

A slightly different formulation of this ideal for the ruler occurs in "The Alliance of Education and Government," where liber-

ality under the name of "equal Justice (15), like the sun, scatters "with a free, tho' frugal Hand/Light golden Showers of Plenty o'er the Land (17-18). This distribution of wealth is more liberal than under tyranny, which blights the "blooming Promise" (21) of the spring instead of bringing it to fruition, and yet it is frugal enough, as Gray's qualification suggests, not to deluge the land with luxury. Government in its noblest form fulfills a similar function in the "Elegy," where one of the ideal political virtues listed is "To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land" (63).

There is an exact correspondence between the liberality of the aristocrat or prince and the prosperity of the nation which he governs. The nation flourishes in direct proportion to his generosity. This relation is nowhere more concisely expressed than in Gray's images of the flower and gem, scattered throughout his poetry. To depict Owen's princely virtues Gray amplifies the text on which his translation is based and sings the hero's praises as the

> Fairest flower of Roderic's stem,
> Gwyneth's shield, & Britain's gem (3-4)

The same images depict the flourishing nation. When a prince is the genuine flower of his race, the nation achieves distinction with him. Thus Gray in his praise for the Duke of Grafton predicts:

> Thy liberal heart, thy judging eye
> The flower unheeded shall descry,
> And bid it round heaven's altars shed
> The fragrance of it's blushing head:

Shall raise from earth the latent gem
To glitter on the diadem. (71-76)

Despite the intensity of Gray's desire for a liberal leader and thriving nation, he tends to regard this combination as more the elusive vision of a dream than palpable reality. Only in "The Triumphs of Owen" does he praise a leader for actually dispensing wealth with generosity and justice, but even this poem, as a translation of ancient Celtic verse, indicates more a yearning in Gray for past conditions than his sober conception of the way things are, and even the flourishing peace of that past time is disturbed by the threat of invasion. In his fragment on "Education and Government" the ideal of justice for all is only an hypothesis considered with philosophical detachment as the condition necessary to ensure a land of peace and plenty. Even in this hypothetical land, he affirms, "Tyranny has fixed her Empire" (19). For all of Gray's majestic praise the Duke of Grafton remains untried as a leader, at least in the "Ode for Music," and, of course, Gray's confident prediction of his achievement, according to the nature of a panegyric, is as much an encouragement or even exhortation to virtue as a prophecy of accomplished nobility. The sorry state of affairs mulled over in the "Elegy," with all its injustice and inequality, is as faithful to Gray's conception of reality as it is remote from the conditions of life that he would like to see flourish. Because the ruling class has neglected its duty in this poem, the nation

is suffering. According to what are perhaps Gray's most famous lines in the "Elegy" the gem that he hopes the Duke of Grafton will raise from the earth remains hidden in the "dark unfathom'd caves of ocean" (54), and the flower that he wants to see wafting its perfume to heaven wastes "its sweetness on the desert air" (56).

Gray was not too hopeful about the possibility of righting these prevalent wrongs. There is only one notable instance in which he treats the prospect of improving political conditions and thus realizing his dream of prosperity for nations: Agrippina, his uncompleted play on decadent Rome. The ideal conditions strived for in this play are projected as a virtue of the past to be restored. Instead of flourishing as it once did in Republican times, when everyone was free, the Rome in which the play is set is corrupt, divided into two classes: the oppressor and the oppressed, the tyrant Nero, who enjoys the fruits of "arbitrary sway" (79), and the servile masses, contemptuously called the "idle herd" (130), which bear his yoke. Opposed to this situation is a small band, led by Agrippina, the mother of the emperor, and distinguished by its "antique cast" (127) of mind, which Agrippina would like to see regain the predominance it has lost.

Her opposition is directed not only against Nero, but against the people as well, for in spite of the distinction between master and slave, they are united by a common spirit, contrary to the

vigorous spirit of old. Except for an occasional outburst of fury, such as impelled him to poison Britannicus, his chief rival to the throne, Nero is inclined towards a sluggish self-indulgence, which is curiously similar to the terrified servility of the people. In this mood, which is so typical of Nero that Agrippina calls him "The silken son of dalliance, nurs'd in Ease/And Pleasure's flowery lap" (98-99), she claims that he is impotent against the violent tempest she will soon unleash. The masses are similarly paralyzed, "Slaves from the womb," Agrippina says, "created but to stare,/And bellow in the Circus" (131-132). Because of his customary indolence Nero is incapacitated and cannot act. Because of their habitual fear and a slavish mentality the people shrink from danger and have no desire to act; they are not even aware that action may be desirable.

The spirit of ancient times that Agrippina wants to restore throughout the land is both more fiery than lax self-indulgence or fearful servility and more disciplined. Perhaps the best expression of this spirit occurs when Agrippina waxes enthusiastic over liberty and claims that it is indeed a cause to "rebrace the slacken'd sinews of time-wearied age" (139-140). The image of the taut muscle economically captures both the energy and the discipline of the heroic behavior that Agrippina advocates. This spirit is opposed to Nero's indolence in Agrippina's claim that he is accustomed to ease and pleasure and not to the iron discipline of war. A similar contrast between this hardy spirit and the idleness of the masses occurs in

Agrippina's reference to the "Minds of the antique cast, rough, stubborn souls,/That struggle with the yoke" (127-128), unlike the herd, which submits to tyranny in docile fashion.

Agrippina's intended revolution does not take place in the play as it stands. It is questionable whether she would have been successful even if Gray had written more, not only because of the historical evidence, but because in no other poem does he show any sign that an effective revolution in the political situation is possible. As a rule he takes mismanagement in government for granted and turns instead to what an individual can do in these deplorable conditions. Without proper government Gray still believes that it is possible for individuals to flourish, but only temporarily. One way in which they can thrive for a few brief moments is by engaging in some heroic activity that stirs the slumbering spirit or by turning a more ordinary endeavor into something heroic.

In Gray's play on Agrippina, for example, her chief heroics stem from a minor clash with Nero when he has the impudence to send a messenger to secure her obedience. She sarcastically advises the man to tell Nero what he wants to hear, namely, that she turned pale and quaked before her son's command, that womanly tears struggled with pride, which barely restrained the flow, and that finally she went off in retirement to Antium, "there to tend/Her household cares, a woman's best employment" (7-8). Actually she does nothing of the sort. The real Agrippina, as she makes clear, is no timid,

trembling old woman. She is not only unaccustomed "to shake/When a boy frowns" (17-18), but she is capable of firing the hearts of others who are similarly unresponsive to her son's displeasure. Instead of fleeing as Nero commands, she resolutely remains where she is in Baiae and threatens to incite a rebellion.

She is so vociferous, in fact, that her confidant, Aceronia, fears for her safety. Throughout the scene Aceronia functions as a determined foil, continually interpreting Agrippina's behavior according to her own fearfulness. Thus she regards Agrippina's audacity in opposing her arrogant and powerful son as the indulgence of a dangerous and imprudent passion, which for her own sake she ought to curb. In spite of the fact that Aceronia never alters her attitude, it is clear that what she considers wise caution is only timid hesitation. In the first place, she makes no criticism of Agrippina's spirited opposition in itself, but objects to it only on practical grounds. Her audacity is mad, according to Aceronia, because it endangers her life, not because there is anything frenzied or hysterical in her defiance itself. But even this practical consideration seems uncalled for. As the scene unfolds, we discover that Agrippina is not foolishly goading Nero without any support at all. In all corners of the empire, we are told, there are sturdy legions loyal to her as well as to her son.

The courage she shows in sending a sarcastic message back to her proud son is evidently the same that inspired her earlier in

her career in her more daring venture to secure the throne for Nero. He was then, in her words, merely "a puny boy" (36), ambitious only of attaining an edileship, a minor bureaucratic position as a superintendent of trade in charge of ensuring that the weights and measures of goods meet a certain standard. When she urged him to aim his sights higher, she tells us, he only trembled, stupefied by the prospect, whereas she refused to shrink from danger or mask her fear with the name of prudence. Instead, undaunted, she taught him to scale the rugged heights and grasp ambition's prize.

This characterization of Agrippina differs markedly from Gray's two models in Racine's Britannicus and The Annals of Tacitus, in both of which she is far more of a cunning villain than a heroine. In Racine her first impulse in seeking revenge against the ingratitude of her son is to resort to treachery. She plans to foment trouble by secretly arranging to marry Britannicus to Junia, who is descended from Augustus, and thus to enhance his claims to the empire.[2] In Gray's version Agrippina's only scheme is open rebellion with her in the lead instead of secretly conniving behind the scenes. Tacitus, who provides the ultimate source for Racine as well as Gray, underscores Agrippina's treachery by recording the full extent of her scheming career: from her incestuous intrigue to marry her uncle Claudius when he is emperor to her persuasion of Claudius to engage his daughter by a former marriage to her son by a former marriage and finally to her securing of the throne for

Nero upon Claudius's death.[3] In Gray whatever intrigue Agrippina is involved in is portrayed as heroic daring.[4]

In Gray's translation of Statius' account of the discus throw in the Thebaid there is a flexing of the spirit that corresponds to Agrippina's heroic enterprise in striving for the crown. The competitors who accept the challenge issued by Adrastus are of heroic stature. Hippomedon, for example, who picks up the quoit and flings it aside as too puny except for youngsters, stands out as a dignified and fearless champion. Most of the others tremble like cowards at the sight of his prestigious feat and fear to risk shame as well as defeat in contesting the palm against him. Only Phlegyas in the passage Gray translates rises to the occasion and bears himself with manly courage. When he heaves the discuss, the act, in accordance with his heroic stature, is enhanced by means of an epic simile. By likening the trajectory of his throw to the path of the moon when it is drawn by magic out of its sphere and disappears into the blackness of the night, the comparison endows Phlegyas' feat of strength with an appropriate aura of supernatural power.

This translation of Gray's has notably perplexed his most energetic critic, Roger Martin. Because Gray was known to be a sensitive youth, more occupied with books than athletics, Martin wonders why of all the passages in the Thebaid Gray should choose to devote his energy to translating the account of a discus throw.

The choice does not make sense, he thinks, for someone so fastidious in matters of sport that he joined with three other youths at Eton to form the "Quadruple Alliance" in a precocious intellectual revolt against the athletically inclined majority of Etonians.[5] But Martin failed to take into account that the games celebrated by Statius differ significantly from the hoop-rolling that Gray depicts as a typical sport in his Eton College ode. The games in the Thebaid are the solemn and religiously sanctioned funeral games of ancient Greece, in which competition encouraged noble pride as well as strength, since not only victory was at stake, but also glory and honor.[6]

A different heroic action is commemorated in an epitaph that Gray composed for Sir William Williams at the urging of a friend. Williams died at the siege of Bellisle, and Gray celebrated his bravery in this effort by recording that he was "foremost in the dangerous paths of fame" (1). Here the quest for fame, as it denotes an unflinching and courageous spirit, is depicted as an honorable ambition. It has the same meaning in Agrippina when Nero is scorned for being content to live "unknown/To fame, or fortune" (38-39) in timid and unambitious obscurity. But fame is desirable, as Gray makes clear in a note found among his papers, only insofar as it perpetuates the memory of a lofty spirit.[7] In the "Elegy," because fame is associated with the inflated boasts of the arrogant and wealthy, which do not deserve remembrance, the

youth commemorated in the epitaph is clearly admirable for remaining "to Fortune and to Fame unknown" (118).

Another way in which an individual can briefly flourish, besides responding ardently to an ordinary situation or engaging in activity calculated to inspire fervor, is through a stirring of emotions in a moment of leisure or inactivity. These feelings can be as ardent as the spirit roused in heroic action or they can be of a more tender variety. For the most part Agrippina's fiery spirit is stirred not by action, but by her passionate desire to act, which is expressed most vividly in the rhetoric she uses in threatening to instigate a revolution. This rhetoric thrives mainly on images of light and sound. The heroic spirit in Soranus, Cassius, and the other men of "antique cast" (127) is not visible, Agrippina tells Aceronia, but lies buried as a "spark/Unquenchable, that glows within their breasts" (128-129) and will "blaze into freedom" (130) when she fans their ardor. In a corresponding image she claims that their spirit is languishing in a drowsy sleep from which she will awake them when she sounds the "spirit-stirring voice" (125) of the "trump of liberty" (123), which like the "Trumpet's thrilling voice" (95) calls men to arms.

These visual and auditory images coalesce in a comparison that Agrippina makes between herself and the cause of liberty on the one hand and Seneca and Burrhus, Nero's mentors, on the other. The context is an argument that she imagines between herself and

Nero's spokesmen before a high tribunal to judge who shall rule Rome. In this trial the language of freedom is opposed both to the "gorgeous phrase" (150) that Seneca employs to dress up his plea and to the "plain soldier's oath" (152) that issues from Burrhus's mouth. The implication is that the language of freedom is less gaudy than Seneca's eloquence, though more intense, since it radiates from the heart of Agrippina instead of merely dressing up her plea as an ornament, and yet it is not so dull as Burrhus's plain oath.

Agrippina's rhetoric expresses more than just her fiery spirit; it captures the energy and color of the Elizabethan age of poetry, or at least it was intended to do so. In his criticism of Agrippina West recognized that Gray was trying to imitate Shakespeare, but claimed that this was a mistake, because Shakespeare's style, being too antiquated, was not fit for the contemporary English stage. Gray admitted that he may have failed in his attempted imitation and listed a number of possible faulty expressions, including the "silken son of dalliance" (98), which he borrowed from Henry V, and "wrinkled beldams" (135), which derives from King John.[8] But he staunchly defended his intention by pointing out that the language of their day had greatly degenerated since Shakespeare's time, so that he could do nothing better than try to revive the power and excellence of Shakespeare's verse.[9]

In some of Gray's poetry a vital spirit emerges not in the intensity of an ardent passion, but in the stirring of a more tender

emotion. In his epitaph on Mrs. Clerke, for example, he portrays her husband's pangs of grief as something precious, tantamount to life itself. When time blots out his grief, Gray writes, it will erase life, memory, and love as well. A letter to Norton Nicholls on the death of his uncle illuminates this curious equation.[10] Ordinarily, Gray explains, we are so absorbed in what we do that we live in a trance, oblivious not only of our cruelty and inconsequence, but also of our happiness. The death of a kind and sustaining friend, whether it is sudden or not, acts like a thunderbolt jolting us out of our lethargy and recalling us to serious reflection on life. Gray's exquisite "Alcaic Fragment" is a testimony to the sensitivity of the soul as it gushes forth in a fountain of tears and stirs within the sacred precincts of the heart in the form of a holy nymph. Agrippina also makes reference to this gentler motion of the heart. Her opposition to Nero stems, at least in part, from his ingratitude for the crimes she committed to advance him to the throne. In excusing these crimes to the ghosts of her victims, she speakes of pity as a spring of water in her heart which has been dried up by her ambitious desire for her son's success.

In Gray's judgment sensitive souls are unfortunately as rare or prone to hardening as liberal leaders are scarce. In his grief over the death of his wife Mr. Clerke is waging a losing battle with time, which Gray declares will eventually blunt every feeling

of his heart. According to the "Alcaic Fragment," sensitivity is so rare that the man who has felt the fountain of tears bubbling up inside his heart has reason to count himself specially blessed. Anyone inclined to regard this little poem as sentimental drivel or a mawkish tribute to tears should take note. The entire implication behind the fragment is that tears do not flow easily. Gray does not so much lavish praise on tears as invoke the holy nymph who controls them from within the sacred depths of the heart. We have here, in fact, the beginning of a traditional hymn, and even though the poem does not continue and no formal petition ensues, imploring the nymph to make her divine presence felt, the very fact of the invocation suggests the distance separating the poet from the goddess and the sources of sensitivity within him.[11] By implication, he is as insensible as Agrippina, whose source of pity has dried up, though he desires nothing more than to revive the "gen'rous spark extinct" (45), to borrow a phrase from the "Ode to Adversity," whereas she, in her eagerness to overthrow Nero, is content to let the spark remain extinguished.

The spirit of vitality expressed in action, such as a glorious discus throw or combat with the sword, and vitality of feeling, whether it is a revolutionary ardor or a gentler impulse of sorrow or kindness, are alike in their opposition to a slumbering or deadened soul, but they are also curiously incompatible. Fiery as her passionate rhetoric is, Agrippina makes clear that to her

the mere talk of revolt, however inspiring, is both preliminary and inferior to action. In a moment of disgust with herself she dismisses all her words as mere "threats unexecuted" (156), which "waste the fruitless hours" (155).

The tender emotions also are opposed to heroic action as a source of vitality, though it is not clear to which side superiority belongs. Agrippina unwittingly reveals this conflict when she refers to her opposition to Nero as "vengeance" (183). Like Conan's valor in war in Gray's fragment devoted to the Celtic hero, Agrippina's response to Nero when he sends his messenger and the revolution she wants to incite include a measure of cruelty as well as heroism. So long as we think of her as the courageous rebel against tyranny, who stands out from the submissive populace, then her spirit appears admirably heroic. But when we consider her opposition to Nero as less disinterested, as motivated by the desire to punish him as retribution for his ingratitude to her personally, then her spirit seems withered and cruel, dead to all the finer impulses of generosity and kindness. This ambiguity, which the play in its unfinished state does not resolve, may extend even further. It is reasonable to assume that if Agrippina's heart were soft, she would be ineffective as a rebel. She could not feel compassion for her son and plot to overthrow him at the same time, though these conflicting impulses might struggle within her. In "The Bard" this conflict is avoided by removing vengeance from the realm of

action to the realm of words. The Bard's entire opposition to Edward I consists of a thundering curse, which, though perhaps less effective than Agrippina's more practical measures, speaks more highly of him than her willingness to resort to murder does of her. Even the Bard's curse, moreover, is innocent of cruelty, because it is impersonal. He is furious with Edward I because of the king's tyranny in ordering that all the bards of Wales be put to death. His wrath against the tyrant stems from his compassion for his murdered compatriots. Unlike Agrippina, he combines savage indignation with a refined sensibility.

The ambiguity of Agrippina's character is that at the same time her behavior might be considered heroic and her heart cruel. In other words, she may be said to possess a spirit that is alive to the promise of glory and greatness, but dead to feelings of kindness and pity. In the striking fragments that Mason published as the "Ode on the Pleasure Arising from Vicissitude" the choice between ways of being vital is not so uncompromising. According to this poem, one may experience exhilaration emanating from within without being unresponsive to conditions in the world, like the clamor of battle or the return of the skylark in spring. However, the poem does suppose a superiority to the former experience; it contends that the stimulations of the mind are greater than the mindless raptures of beasts, which depend solely on responding to circumstances in the world. The reason is that con-

scious man adds to the pleasure derived from these experiences through the joyful recollection of the past and a glowing hope for the future. Even past misfortunes can soften, Gray writes, when we smile over them during a moment of reflection, and hope can illuminate even the blackest clouds that lour upon the day.

Elsewhere Gray holds the opposite opinion about which mode of vitality is superior and prefers the exhilaration of just living to that of leisurely thinking. This difference in attitude is owing to the fact that the great joys of the mind are often accompanied by an equally great anguish, which may significantly reduce or even nullify the former. In the "Epitaph on Mrs. Clerke," for example, it is difficult to decide whether the stirring of emotions is more pleasurable or sorrowful. The pang her husband feels on her death may be dear to him insofar as it keeps her memory alive within him and sustains him above the dull insensibility characteristic of routine life, but it is also, more obviously, painful, testifying to his wretchedness over her loss. Faced with such a case as this, Gray is inclined to favor the situation of someone like the simple rustic, who, like the beasts in the field, responds ardently to the signs of life in spring without being conscious of his feelings.[12] In this way, though his mind is not alive and supple, he is not subject to the morbidity of anguish, which is the twin brother of sensitivity.

II. FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

Gray's typical response to frenzy is more pessimistic than his attitude towards torpor. He projects no vision of society as a whole turning away from its riotous ways, and when he focuses on individuals, he does not characteristically celebrate moments of triumph over the grasping tentacles of a frenzied spirit, but primarily explores the failure to escape this spirit and achieve an authentic mode of vitality. Most often he portrays society as the seat of inexorable frenzy. The moralist in the "Ode on the Spring," for example, condemns ardor as it flourishes in the crowd. In the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" the thoughtful speaker presents an allegorical picture of man's furious passions, including jealousy, ambition, and madness, as characteristic of the world. And the "Elegy" fixes this image of society in our mind with the speaker's eloquent praise of a sober life "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife" (73). In all of these poems, however, this attitude towards society is mixed with conflicting views. Gray's purest treatment of a frantic society is the Latin ode that he inscribed in an album at the Grande Chartreuse.

The speaker in this poem utters a formal prayer, calling on the spirit of the place to grant him vitality of feeling. At first sight the speaker seems to be asking for something else entirely, for calm repose. His literal request is for gentle peace ("placidam

... quietem"), and a secluded monastery in the mountains seems like an ideally quiet place to retreat to from the tumult of the mob ("vulgari tumultu") and the anxieties of men ("hominumque curis"). Yet the speaker's own account of the region and its presiding spirit does not exactly square with his desire for a quiet place. Far from being gentle and peaceful, the region, we are told, is a stern, rugged, wild mountainous tract, noisy with roaring cataracts. It clearly has more in common with the savage Taurine Alps depicted in the Sapphic verse Gray sent to West than with the gentle coastal plain of Genoa in the same verse, where he seeks out rest. The local spirit, moreover, is invoked as "severi relligio loci" (the holy spirit of this stern place). It surely is not trivial or easy-going ("non leve ... certé ... Numen"), Gray adds in parentheses, after appending the old liturgical formula offering the deity its choice of epithets ("Quocunque gaudes nomine"). In other words, whatever the spirit may be called, stern and serious it assuredly is. Someone merely interested in discharging the burdensome cares of the world and relaxing would be making a mistake in taking his case to this divinity. It is emphatically not one to encourage setting aside weighty concerns and taking life easy.

There is a suggestion, however, that in asking for peace Gray is not requesting a life of ease in an idyllic haven, but merely something more peaceful than the frantic bustle of the world. When he expresses his fear that circumstances may force him, despite

his wish, back into the turbulent world of men, he speaks of this pressure as a sucking whirlpool that will draw him violently into its midst. In asking that he be allowed to escape this influence later in life, if not at the moment, he prays that he may spend the hours of his old age at liberty. According to his description of the region, its principal virtue is precisely that it frees man in a significant way from the confinements of civilization. It enables him to behold God more closely than he can if he is restricted to worshipping a gold image in a temple, even though the image may be wrought by the hand of Phidias. What Gray wants, then, at the mountain retreat is not to shrink away from experience, but to be sufficiently free from the distracting anxieties of the world to let his spirit blossom out.

The spirit of the place never openly responds to Gray, nor officially grants his request, but in the act of praying Gray temporarily achieves the very vitality he is praying for. As he invokes the spirit of the place, his own spirit shakes off the influence of the world and blossoms out in full flower. Despite the fact that he calls himself a weary youth, who is worn out presumably by the cares of the world, his underlying mood is one of fervent entreaty. Perhaps emotional exhaustion characterized him before his excursion to the Grande Chartreuse, but in the domain of the holy spirit, in which the poem is set, he takes on the characteristic of the place. The first sign of this transference is the exclamation with which

the ode begins. However muted it may seem to us through familiarity, the conventional "O" still points to an ardent spirit, outstretched in the act of prayer. The chief indication of his enthusiasm, however, is the parenthetical praise following the invocation. The fact that this glorification is parenthetical is at least as revealing as the glorification itself, which sings of untamed streams and ancient forests. As an amplification of the initial description of the region as stern or harsh, the parenthesis represents a verbal energy that belies the confession of weariness. Within the parenthesis, moreover, the progress from the reference to the local spirit to the perception of a universal deity marks the expansive direction Gray's spirit is taking. This growth is further underscored by the fact that he does not simply record his perception in as few words as possible, but takes the trouble to emphasize and embellish his point. After he remarks that no insignificant spirit rules over these streams and forests, instead of just adding that we also behold God nearer to us here and letting the previous local reference explain where he means, he repeats the reference to the streams and forests in different terms and enlarges its scope. Not only does a significant local spirit reign here, he says, but we behold God himself among these pathless steeps, wild mountain ridges, and precipitous cliffs, among the roaring torrents and the darkness of the woods.

Despite the expansion of spirit implied by this verbal exuber-

ance, Gray is decidedly not optimistic in this poem. He has no quarrel with the virtues of the place he has selected to thrive in, but he doubts that fortune will permit him to remain in the vicinity for any length of time, and to leave the place is to forfeit its influence. At least his dread of returning to the troublesome, populous world strongly implies that he is convinced he will not be able to bear the blessing of the local spirit with him on his return.

The teeming, social world, however, is not always the ogre in Gray's poetry. Sometimes he sees frenzy rooted in the self, independent of society. In these cases the keynote is also a failure to escape the pernicious influence of a frantic spirit, but the attempt is directed towards achieving intimacy with others, not fleeing from them, and thus soothing the vexations which sometimes accompany isolation. Though this view of frenzy is somewhat less typical than the attitude expressed in the "Alcaic Ode," the poem that best illustrates it, Gray's sonnet on the death of Richard West, stands out as one of his most prestigious efforts.

What is mainly responsible for the fact that Gray is tormented rather than overjoyed by his solitude in the sonnet is that West during his brief life was instrumental in helping to make Gray's life flourish. We can judge the importance of West's influence by the way Gray expresses his complaint in the sonnet. Not even Phoebus and the spring morning, he says, the primary source of his

flourishing in "Ad C: Favonium Aristium," an Horatian epistle addressed to West, can compensate for the loss of his friend:

> These Ears, alas! for other Notes repine,
> A different Object do these Eyes require. (5-6)

To thrive he depends more on the influence of West than on that of the chirping birds, the spring sunshine, and green fields.

Gray does not elaborate on how West excelled Phoebus as a source of inspiration, but we can gather this information from their correspondence. First of all, he provided Gray with unsurpassed encouragement in his poetic endeavors. The most fruitful instance of this occurred in the month of West's death, when he sent Gray a set of verses, asking what had retarded the spring and invoking the month of May to hasten its arrival. Gray responded with his "Ode on the Spring," which begins, as though in fulfillment of West's prayer, by revealing the presence of spring in the world. In addition to inspiring Gray's poetry, which sunny conditions could do, though not so well, West gave him a blessing not in Phoebus's power to give: the understanding and sensitive attention of what Gray in the "Elegy" calls a "kindred Spirit" (96). This is much harder to document than poetic influence, but it emerges, I think, in the openness with which Gray writes to West about himself. Gray was not a trusting soul, as Bonstetten's Souvenirs make clear,[13] But to West he revealed some of his most intimate feelings. In a letter he sent from Florence, for example, shortly before his quarrel with Walpole

erupted into the open, he confessed to West an inability to love people in general, in spite of a sensitivity to what they feel, and a sadness or loss of spirited good humor that was obvious to everyone, but admitted only to his friend.[14] As no sun god could do, West touched the springs of Gray's heart and released a flow of emotion that no other man or woman in Gray's life witnessed.

The torment of Gray's isolation from West in the sonnet is augmented by the fact that there is no one with whom he can share the sorrow of his situation: "My lonely Anguish melts no Heart, but mine" (7). The poignant irony of this line is that among Gray's friends only West himself was sensitive enough to be touched by Gray's suffering and to help sustain him in his loss, and yet West, of course, was the only one he could not turn to.

All Gray has to turn to ultimately is nature, but nature also fails to cheer him. This failure, however, is not due to nature's being dead and inert matter. The scene Gray looks upon is not autumnal or wintry, when nature is barren. The season is spring, when nature renews itself, and the time morning, when the day is fresh. In addition, Gray endows this bursting life with a human vitality by personifying most of its features. The song of the birds is an "amorous Descant" (3), a complicated counterpoint for a trained voice, not an undisciplined chirp. As a spring ritual, the fields don their "green Attire" (4) in imitation of ladies and gentlemen at their daily toilette. And the sunrise is a "golden

Fire" (2) being lifted up by "redning Phoebus" (2).

It may be argued that this last personification is more hackneyed than vital, a mere threadbare poetic ornament. But Coleridge, in his defense of the sonnet against Wordsworth's charges, shows us that pagan gods perform a meaningful function not only in Gray's poem, but in poetry in general since the Renaissance.[15] Through the use of these divinities, according to Coleridge, Christian poets have been able to represent the vital presence of God in nature by more than a mere abstraction and thus have combated the tendency of the mechanistic philosophy to turn nature into a lifeless machine. According to this line of reasoning, the nature that fails to cheer Gray up in the sonnet, as it is dominated by a pagan god, is vital with a vengeance. The trouble, in fact, is not so much that nature fails to gladden Gray's vexed spirit as that he fails to respond to its vitality.

Evidently, however, Gray is not so deeply locked up inside himself that he is not aware of his surroundings, even though they are so out of keeping with his mood. This awareness suggests that he has a promising, if ever so slight, hold on the flourishing world beyond his anguished self. In the sestet this grasp of the world beyond himself is extended from a nature merely joyful in itself to one that adds the happiness of a race of men, who, unlike Gray, are able to enjoy the pleasures of the spring morning. He not only recognizes that these men exist, moreover, but seems to have some

insight into their situation, into why they are more fortunate than he is, though he only betrays this knowledge obliquely. All he openly asserts is that the men to whom the morning brings pleasure are already "happier" (10) than he is, but the implication is that it is actually necessary to be happy already if one is to be receptive to the cheerful influence of nature. As for what the happiness of these men depends on, again he does not openly tell us anything, but he does call them a "busy Race" (8), and there are several instances in his correspondence when he equates happiness with being busy. When Walpole was setting up his press at Strawberry Hill, for example, Gray wrote him, "Seriously, though, I congratulate you on your happiness, and seem to understand it. The receipt is obvious: it is only, Have something to do; but how few can apply it!" In another letter he sent Bishop Hurd similar congratulations: "I rejoice to hear you are so ripe for the press, and so voluminous,--not for my own sake only, whom you flatter with the hopes of seeing your labours both public and private,--but for yours, too, for to be employed is to be happy." On still another occasion he wrote to Wharton concerning his recent acquaintance with the botanist Benjamin Stillingfleet: "he is always employ'd, & always chearful."[16]

Not only does the morning, which smiles in vain on Gray in his idleness, cheer busier people, but the green fields as well, which have no effect on him, benefit others. He says this benefit ex-

tends to "all" (11), apparently without discrimination, but the benefit they receive suggests that they must be different from Gray in the same way that the men who enjoy the spring morning are different. Gray stands in relation to the fields as a detached spectator regarding an object of interst. He is concerned only with the beauty of their appearance, and even this does not entirely absorb his attention. The people on whom the fields have a salutary effect are concerned with the usefulness of the fields, not their beauty. The fields are said to bear them "their wonted Tribute" (11); that is, the fields yield up the fruits of the soil. Whether these people are farmers or not, they must be more busily involved with the fields than a detached spectator like Gray. The metaphor of bearing tribute suggests, however, that they have not gone to the opposite extreme and become enthralled by their work. They are not slaves to the fields, but masters. The fields bear tribute to them.

Even the amorous birds, which sing so sweetly to each other, yet have no effect on Gray, fare better in the sestet. Their success is gauged not by their influence on listening people, but on each other. "To warm their little Loves," Gray writes, "the Birds complain" (12). This shift in emphasis to the birds suggests still another way in which Gray ventures outside himself. In this line he is not morbidly brooding over his own anguish, but penetrating into a situation other than his own. This mental excursion may be a mere speculation about the intention of the birds: they complain

in order to warm their loves. But in view of the context of the line, which emphasizes effectiveness in the morning's cheerful influence and the fields' fertile yield, it seems more likely that Gray is recording his impression of the effect of the birds' song rather than merely its intention: they complain with the result that they warm their loves. The effectiveness of their singing contrasts with the futility and frustration of Gray's idle, half-hearted listening to their song in the octet.

In imagining the situation of busy people doing their chores and of amorous birds chirping to their lady-loves, to a certain extent Gray becomes absorbed in doing something other than brood self-consciously about his own mournful situation. In other words, Gray in the sestet is in counterpoint to Gray in the octet. This relation is unobtrusively reflected in the rhyme scheme. The first eight lines are interwoven with two rhymes: "shine-joyn" and "repine-mine;" "Fire-Attire" and "require-expire." The two rhymes of the sestet half-rhyme with these. "Chear-bear-hear" partially echoes "Fire-Attire" and "require-expire," and "Men-complain-vain" partially responds to "shine-joyn" and "repine-mine." Similarly, the content of the sestet focuses on the same spring morning as the octet, but on a different recipient of this vernal influence. The first eight lines record Gray's anguished response to the spring. The last six deal mainly with the attitude of happier men and of Gray in a different mood.

The sestet, however, does not entirely respond to the preceding quatrains. The last two lines, though they fit into the rhyme scheme of the sestet, form a self-contained couplet in thought. The form of the Shakespearian sonnet thus clashes with that of the Petrarchan.

> Yet Morning smiles the busy Race to chear,
> And new-born Pleasure brings to happier Men:
> The Fields to all their wonted Tribute bear:
> To warm their little Loves the Birds complain:
> I fruitless mourn to him, that cannot hear,
> And weep the more, because I weep in vain. (9-14)

Instead of successfully projecting himself into the situation of "happier Men," he abruptly returns to himself at the beginning of line 13: "I." The personal pronoun has been conspicuously absent from the previous four lines, as Gray has entered into the situation of other people. After beguiling him for awhile, however, the happiness of these situations suddenly loses its spell-binding power. It dawns on Gray with jolting force, though how or why at this moment we are not told, that his own situation is different from those he is considering and, in fact, excludes him from the happiness of more fortunate people. He awakes as from a dream and tastes the full bitterness of the realization that circumstances which are only too real prevent the fulfillment of his wishes.

Perhaps the specific stimulus to this bitter awakening is the complaint of the birds. At least the reference to it immediately precedes his disillusionment. If we focus exclusively on this tran-

sition, we can see more clearly how the thought of the birds' complaint seems to reawaken in Gray a sense of his own grievance.

> To warm their little Loves the Birds complain:
> I fruitless mourn to him, that cannot hear. (12-13)

In the first line Gray is thinking of the effectiveness of the birds in redressing their grievance, presumably directed against the reluctance of their lady-loves to comply with their amorous wishes. Or at least, if the line implies only intention, he is thinking of the birds' hopefulness of success. In the second line he seems to be consciously contrasting the futility of his own situation with the happier outlook of the birds, perhaps because thinking of them suddenly reminds him of how sadly different from them he is. Unlike the birds, he is fruitlessly mourning, and the object of his complaint, unlike the recipients of the birds' song, neither is nor can be stirred, because he "cannot hear."

The effect of Gray's return to his own situation in this line is disastrous. Contrary to the sequence of the fortunate fall, Gray rises in the third quatrain only to plunge in the final two lines deeper into the abyss of his own anguish than the level he is at in the opening octet. Not only does he weep for West's death at the end, but he weeps for the futility of his own weeping. The despair at this thought is effectively underscored by the twin phrases that open and close the poem. Both the first and the last words of the sonnet are "in vain;" together they testify to the

overwhelming melancholy of the situation depicted in between.

In Gray's Latin lament over the death of West he also strikes a gloomy note. When West was alive, he joyously recalls, life was full of sunshine. For Gray this means in particular that life was full of inspiration for his poetry. He also mentions West's attributes that help to foster personal or emotional development, such as his sensitivity to the suffering of others, but he mentions these only as general characteristics, not as they specifically affect himself. West's influence on his poetry is specially important in this poem. The lament forms the prologue to the uncompleted second book of his ambitious poem "De Principiis Cogitandi." In this great task, he says, West was his hope and inspiration ("spes tanti et causa laboris"). But now he is dead. Gray does not openly announce that as a result of this death he will not or cannot continue writing, but the fact is that he never wrote another word of the poem. In addition, he does say that with West dead his sunny days are filled only with grief, and he must pass them in longing and vain complaints ("questus ... inanes").

But there is a happy note in the poem, a certain exhilaration. For a moment Gray is able to imagine West in heaven as a blessed spirit, who may be looking down on him with concern. He is able to achieve this mental feat by a shift in perspective. Instead of seeing West's death as leaving an abyss in his own life, he thinks of the advantage for West. According to his speculation, death

frees West from care, from the human storm ("Humanam ... procellam"), including the sorrow that Gray is suffering from at that moment. The thought of West in heaven looking back with compassion on the anxieties that convulse Gray and the rest of mankind offers him some genuine comfort and consolation. It temporarily restores a fostering relationship in which Gray can flourish.

Yet this spurt of Gray's imagination is only a flicker of enthusiasm in a pessimistic man, a vain effort which he cannot sustain. It indicates more a fleeting hope, which doubt kills, than a hearty, glowing belief. We can witness the disintegration of the fostering relationship he creates in his mind through a series of increasingly severe retractions from his initial bold assertion that West is a blessed spirit in heaven with no need of his laments. Following this confident statement comes a number of uncertain hypotheses that pile up as Gray's desperation mounts: if you are free from care, yet not unconcerned with mortal affairs, if you have compassion, if perhaps you do contemplate the storm of human life, then look back at me. At the end he is fixed once again in paralyzed despair, capable only of uttering a lonely cry in the dark. The verse paragraph begins with "thou" as the subject, as Gray loses himself in imagining West as a blessed spirit; but the paragraph ends with the glaring emergence of the personal pronoun, as West reverts to silent ashes and Gray scurries back inside himself, where he broods in anguished isolation from his

deceased friend.

In addition to these central poems on West there are a few amorous verses scattered throughout Gray's work that also depict the frenzied self and its futile efforts to achieve fulfillment. The majority of these poems are translations, and though we cannot attribute the original conception to Gray, the fact that he chose to translate them suggests the importance of their theme to him. In one of these translations, based on an epigram in the Greek Anthology (Book V, 215 in the Loeb Library edition), a frustrated follower of Venus is wrought up to a feverish pitch, and neither a humble prayer to his mistress to grant him a reprieve from his madness nor a threat to have his complaint engraved on his tombstone, to her lasting shame, succeeds in moving the obdurate lady to even a sign of concern. In Gray's translation of Petrarch's Sonnet 170, another sorrowing lover also complains of the fire in his blood and the cruelty of his fair mistress. But he is less threatening than the anthologist and willing to ascribe his lady's perversity to a decree of fate. In addition, he takes genuine consolation from the thought that his verse will outlast his lady's stubbornness, even if his patience will not. The anthologist, on the other hand, derives no satisfaction from the contemplation of his inscription, unless it is the bittersweet taste of a Pyrrhic victory. Gray's own contributions to the genre of love poetry are few, but they, too, sound the shrill note of anguish. In one, to

which Mason gave the simple title "Song," a lady tries to hide her anxiety over the failure of her lover to return with the spring, according to his promise, but her fears show through, even before she lets them surface, in the quarrel she picks with the spring for arriving so hastily. For her, as for most of the other lovers in Gray's poetry, there is no sign of an end to her misery, no hope that her love will flourish.

Some poems stand out as exceptions to the typically pessimistic treatment of frenzy found in the "Alcaic Ode," the sonnet on West, and the love poems. Under certain circumstances Gray is hopeful of escaping the clutches of a frantic spirit and achieving an authentic mode of vitality. In the "Hymeneal," for example, which Gray wrote in celebration of the Prince of Wales' marriage, he holds out the promise for an end to frenzy and the beginning of a period of fulfillment and happiness. Like Gray's other love poems, this one focuses on the inner tumult of a lover separated from his beloved. For the Prince this separation means withdrawal from reality into a delusive mental world, where his imagination runs riot. Dwelling on an empty picture ("picturâ ... inani"), he substitutes for flesh-and-blood encounters mere imaginary dalliances, which serve only to fan his passion into an uncontrollable, self-consuming fire, bordering on madness.

But his is no ordinary case of eternally unrequited love. His beloved is no cruel mistress, but his fiancée, and his separation

from her is merely the brief period he has to wait for her to arrive from her native Germany, so that they may be married. Then, of course, the edge will be taken off his frenzy, and he will be restored to greater sanity. Wedded life will not quench his flame; it will merely reduce the raging sensation to a warm glow, transform the "violentae ... flammae" (9) into a "flammâ/Dulci" (3-4).

Gray, of course, did not invent the marriage for the purpose of his poem. The marriage is the occasion for which the poem was written as part of a collection of congratulatory verses assembled by Cambridge University. However, the actual arrangement of the Prince's marriage is the special circumstance which enabled Gray to write a hopeful poem about escaping frenzy. The whole point of the poem is the contrast between the royal prerogative in love and the desperate fate of the ordinary lover. Because in matters of love everything is usually arranged for royalty, Gray argues that kings and princes lead a charmed life, escaping the turmoil that is the exasperation of ordinary lovers. Proverbial wisdom pities kings for being chained to so fixed an arrangement, because it is supposed to deprive them of genuine love. But freedom of choice, according to Gray's unusual argument, only condemns one to the painful devices of Venus and Cupid, that is, to the anguish of courting and the cruelty of a coy and unyielding lady. All that kings miss of love, says Gray, is the suffering, anger, and deceptions; the pleasure they enjoy in full measure.

This royal prerogative, we learn, is tantamount to divine favor. In the comparison of the Prince's lot to that of Pygmalion's at the end of the poem, what corresponds to the amatory privileges of royalty is the responsiveness of Venus to her suppliant's prayer, her willingness to metamorphose Galatea from sculptured ivory into breathing woman. The Prince's royal status assures him of ease in love as only Venus's benevolence can do for Pygmalion. What happens to the Prince happens only to the privileged few, to the gods and those whom the gods favor.

Despite the optimism of this poem, the consummation of the Prince's marriage is only projected as a future event. Gray merely urges the wedding day to approach in typical epithalamic style and then imagines the festive ceremony finally taking place.[17] In the Latin epistle that he addressed to West as Gaius Favonius Aristius shortly before they were to enter law school together in London, we have something even rarer in his treatment of frenzy than the promise of an escape from it. The greater part of the poem, the long middle section, which is central in importance as well as position, celebrates the flourishing life actually led by Gray at his leisure in the country. This cherished time is devoted to exercising his imagination and treating his senses to the immediate pleasures of the countryside. Gray characterizes this activity through the same paradox that is central to the "Alcaic Ode." Just as the youth at the Grande Chartreuse wants to find both peace and

quiet from the bustle of the world and a vitality of feeling that one would hardly think of as peaceful, so the youth in the Latin epistle is at ease, free from care ("curis ... expeditâ/Mente"), and yet at the same time busy with simple cares ("Simplices curae"). The paradox is more obvious in the epistle than in the ode because of the repetition of the word for "cares" with a favorable connotation after it has been used to mean something undesirable. It is easy to overlook the fact that the youth's prayer for peace at the Grande Chartreuse is a request to be free of anxiety, not to let his spirit slumber. In the epistle to Favonius, however, the paradox is inescapable, but not difficult to solve. Gray's leisure is not wasted in idly lolling about, though part of it is spent supine; his time is fruitfully, though ever so simply, employed in exercising his mind with poetic thoughts and in worshipping at the shrines of nature: the passing breeze, a running brook, the glorious sun.

While Gray pursues his poetic thoughts, his spirit thrives in spite of the lateness of the night ("serae ... nocti") and all its sickly dew ("malo rori"). He succeeds in overcoming these disadvantages, in fact, by his strong mental effort. His mind is not where his feet take him, but with the soft Italian Muse ("blandam ... Camoenam"). In every hill he seems to see the rich forest of Parnassus and in every spring a cool Aganippe. This mental thriving is distinct from the inner stirring of the "Alcaic Ode," for that

depends on external conditions, on being in the right place, the high Alps, and on winning the favor of the spirit which governs the place, whereas Gray's mind in the epistle is vital in spite of adverse conditions. In this respect he resembles the defiant speaker of "The Progress of Poesy," who also opposes the Muse to the ills of life and basks in his confidence in man's ability to flourish in spite of adversity. Significantly, the ills put to flight by the Muse in "The Progress" are, like those which Gray faces in the epistle, the evils of night-time, including "sickly dews" (49). For the Gray of the epistle this condition is an actual feature of the landscape he is wandering through. In "The Progress of Poesy" the sickly dew is a symbol of misfortune rather than an actual adverse condition; it is as much a part of the mental landscape as the Muse herself.

For the most part in the epistle to Favonius, however, Gray flourishes not in spite of his surroundings, but entirely because of them. The circumstances of his life in the country are usually ideal, not adverse. Instead of the dangers of the night, Gray focuses on the virtues of day-time in the spring, which he portrays as a benevolent protector, shining or smiling down on him ("Risit et Ver me"). According to the poem, the sun and the attributes of spring actually cause him to thrive, as though he were a flower, growing involuntarily. His dependence on these fostering conditions is aptly expressed by a comparison with

Clytie, the daughter of Oceanus, who pined away for love of Phoebus. According to Ovid, she was ultimately transformed into a heliotrope, which shows its fidelity by turning its head to face the sun as it makes its way across the sky. Gray turns not only his head to the sun, but his nostrils to the violet-scented breeze and his ears to the sweet clashings ("dulci strepitu") of the nearby brook. According to the poem, there is no distinction between the flourishing of his spirit in these simple day-time occupations and in his imaginative defiance of the forbidding night. These modes of vitality seem to be equally desirable here.

But even this rare celebration of a flourishing life in Gray's poetry is not unblemished. The thought of the frenzy of the law courts he soon must enter and of inevitable changes for the worse in the weather has him wishing for better conditions, just like those who are actually suffering instead of flourishing, as he is. The poem, in fact, begins with a wish to forget the inns of court, the so-called Temple, which Gray, punning, renames "Barbara aedes" (1), or barbaric temple, and also its presiding deity, Eris, the goddess of discord, who foments the strife of legal battles among the swarming armies of lawyers. Instead of this disagreeable frenzy he tells us he wants to do what we soon discover he is doing: taking life easy in the country and whiling away the hours with the Muse. This version of his activities, by alluding to Horace, locates the poem in a certain classical context. His urge to spend time in the

country is not indicative of any return to nature in anticipation of Wordsworth, but refers to the traditional theme of retirement from society as it is expressed in Horace. In Gray's image of stretching at ease beneath the spreading branches of a sheltering elm there are direct verbal echoes of Horace. Gray's lines read:

> Dulcis quanto, patulis sub ulmi
> Hospitae ramis, temeré jacentem
> (5-6; my underlining)

In one of his odes (Odes, II.11) Horace asks:

> cur non sub alta vel platano vel hac
> pinu iacentes sic temere et rosa
> (13-14; my underlining)

Another direct allusion that sets Gray's epistle in an Horatian ambience is the description of his Muse as humble. The adjective he uses for "humble" is "tenuis," the word that Horace employs to categorize his type of poetry. In one ode on his art (I.vi), for example, where he declines to celebrate the military exploits of Agrippa, he protests that grand themes are beyond the reach of poets of his calibre, whom he modestly calls "tenues," the slight or fragile ones. For these poets lesser themes are in order, including wine and women, Horace's favorite topics, and the modest pleasures of a country life, which Gray celebrates in his epistle. Hence both the kind of flourishing that Gray celebrates and the mode in which he celebrates it belong to the modest Horatian tradition of poetry.

Despite the prominence accorded Gray's dread of the law courts, the social pressures to engage in a profession are not the only

threat to his sunny life in the country and not even the most dangerous threat. The social pressures can conceivably be sidestepped. Gray himself, by a stroke of good fortune, was rescued from a legal fate when Walpole invited him on a timely tour of France and Italy. But the occasional onset of imperfect weather is inexorable. Even while he is enjoying the spring, Gray notes that the softer summer ("Mollior aestas"), that is, the spring, is fading; in other words, that the blazing months of summer are approaching. In addition, during the cloudless spring itself he realizes that Phoebus undergoes daily changes. The sun does not always shed splendor ("Prodigum splendoris"), but sometimes blazes too fiercely and at others gives way to the forbidding, sunless night. The thought of the ceaseless movement of the sun's flaming chariot ("ardentes ... quadrigas") is so disconcerting to Gray that he forgets the pleasures of a rural spring and ends the poem by blurting out a wish to die. He wants to sinks to death, he says, as the sun sets in the evening, even though he might not rise again the next day.

Another poem besides the "Hymeneal" and the epistle to Favonius that stands out in Gray's treatment of frenzy is the "Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat." This poem is exceptional, not for a predominantly optimistic or joyous mood, but for its playful or humorous approach to the frantic spirit. Even though frenzy predominates in this poem, Gray's manner is light-hearted and carefree.

The primary reason, of course, is that the only frenzied proceedings dealt with are a cat's frantic bid to snatch a couple of unsuspecting gold-fish out of a bowl. The humorous treatment is so salient, in fact, that it completely overshadows the trivial incident being ridiculed.

The chief device that Gray employs to make light of the episode is the broad irony of the mock-heroic style. Even the most minute details are exaggerated to the point of absurdity. The cat's name, Selima, which is borrowed from Rowe's heroic drama Tamerlane, lifts her ridiculously enough out of the realm of cats and into the exotic milieu of Turkish veils and tyrannical sultans. The bowl of gold-fish is called a mere tub in the title, but in the first line it swells to the stature of a "lofty vase." Instead of a puny craftsman having painted the flowers on the side of the bowl, China's art itself, we are told, with majestic impersonality performed the dyeing. And the water in the bowl, circumscribed though it is, assumes the dimensions of a "lake" (6), as Selima gazes into it.

More important than these deft touches, however, is the main action itself, which is also inflated out of all proportion to its significance. Even though Selima has no adversary except the slippery rim of the bowl, which precipitates her tumble, in the account of her fall Fate itself is said to be a malignant onlooker, who sits idly by and smiles at the proceedings. When she is in the water, she does not simply mew for help to her owner, but directs

her caterwaul to "ev'ry watry God" (32), that is, to whoever may be listening among the likes of Oceanus, Neptune, Nereus, Proteus, and Triton. And finally the heartlessness of Selima's fellow cats, Tom and Susan, as they fail to lift even a paw in assistance, is expressed as the deafness of Dolphin and Nereid, famous in mythology for miraculous water rescues.[18]

This note of absurdity carries over even into the versification, which achieves a bathetic effect that is easier to recognize in reading than to define in writing. Each verse is a sestet divided into two units of three lines apiece. Within each of these smaller units there is a falling off or anti-climax. The first two lines form a couplet in tetrameter rhythm; this, however, trails off into a tag line with one beat less and ending on a word conspicuous for not rhyming with the preceding couplet. This prosodic anti-climax is most notable when the third line does not so much complete the sense of the unit as reiterate with a slight variation what is said or implied in the couplet. In the unit depicting Selima's fatal slip, for example, the tag line audibly drags out the couplet for three additional, anti-climactic beats and then undercuts the couplet's strong rhyme by ending with an accent on a feminine foot.

> (Malignant Fate sat by, and smil'd)
> The slipp'ry verge her feet beguil'd,
> She tumbled headlong in. (28-30)

Even in units where the third line is important for completing the sense of a passage, the prosody makes it slightly ridiculous. And

the incongruity between the emphasis on the meaning of the line and the triviality accorded it by the rhythm makes it even more laughable. Take, for example, the unit that reveals to us that Selima is gazing at herself in the water:

> Her coat, that with the tortoise vies,
> Her ears of jet, and emerald eyes,
> She saw; and purr'd applause. (10-12)

In the thrust of its meaning this passage clearly culminates in the last line, which alone makes sense of the details suspended above it. But in rhythmical development this unit undergoes a diminuendo from the tetrameter of the rhymed couplet to the trimeter of the tag line, which rhymes with a word too many lines away for its accent to be as strongly marked as the couplet's.

Another instance of humorously ironic discrepancy is the initial description of Selima. Contrary to the typical manner of the poem, the irony here operates by understatement rather than by exaggeration. We are not told that she is a ferocious Amazon, but that she is the demurest of tabby cats, a pensive soul who reclines at ease on the rim of the fish bowl and does nothing more strenuous than gaze into it. This description is as far below the mark as the sublime accounts of her action are above it. And the understatement is betrayed, even before her furious outburst, in the description itself. According to Dr. Johnson's dictionary, the word "demure," when applied to cats, usually is ironic, indicating an affectation of modesty. This sense is clarified by an example he

quotes from Dryden:

> So cat, transform'd sat gravely and demure,
> Till mouse appear'd, and thought himself secure.

The other epithet describing Selima, pensive, is belied by the nature of her contemplations. All she does is dwell self-indulgently on her own image in the water of the fish bowl.

> The fair round face, the snowy beard,
> The velvet of her paws,
> Her coat, that with the tortoise vies,
> Her ears of jet, and emerald eyes,
> She saw, and purr'd applause. (8-12)

This rapt attention and complete self-absorption point to a character that is hardly thoughtful or disinclined to brusque action. In fact, the purr of delight suggests that she is on the verge of committing the rash act of suicide, like Narcissus, out of pure love for herself.

Despite all this playfulness in the treatment of the cat's frenzied death, the incident itself is not just a trifle that exists for the poet's virtuoso display of technical proficiency. There is an underlying note of seriousness in the poem, based on the fact that Gray has more than a cat in mind in writing about Selima. The clue to just what he is thinking of in addition to a cat is the inflated description of the gold-fish, which treats them as heroic warriors.

> Their scaly armour's Tyrian hue
> Thro' richest purple to the view
> Betray'd a golden gleam. (16-18)

According to this humorous bombast, the fish's golden scales form shining armor, and their purple coloring is the traditional shade of a royal robe. As the adjective "Tyrian" suggests, these warriors that Gray has in mind are from the Roman period and may, in fact, be narrowed down to one particular figure in Virgil's Aeneid, Chloreus. Gray's description of his fish-warriors bears a remarkable similarity to Virgil's account of Chloreus' glittering apparel.

> Forte sacer Cybele Chloreus olimque sacerdos
> insignis longe Phrygiis fulgebat in armis
> spumantemque agitabat equum, quem pellis aenis
> in plumam squamis auro conserta tegebat.
> ipse peregrina ferrugine clarus et ostro
> spicula torquebat Lycio Gortynia cornu.
> (Aeneid, XI.768-773)

Gray's only significant divergence from the Latin text is his introduction of the adjective "Tyrian." Virgil himself speaks only of "purple" ("ostro"). But even in this detail Gray is following Virgil as he was translated by Dryden.

> Chloreus, the priest of Cybelé, from far,
> Glittering in Phrygian arms amidst the war,
> Was by the virgin view'd: the steed he press'd
> Was proud with trappings, and his brawny chest
> With scales of gilded brass was cover'd o'er,
> A robe of Tyrian dye the rider wore,
> With deadly wounds he gaul'd the distant foe;
> Gnossian his shafts, and Lycian was his bow.
> (In Dryden's translation, Aeneid, XI.1131-1138)

Now these glittering arms affect the Amazon Camilla (the "virgin" of Dryden's translation) just as the gleam of the goldfish strikes

poor Selima. They entrance her, and she pursues them incautiously to her death.

In addition to this classical allusion, there is a somewhat more tenuous reference to the archetypal Christian female. In Selima's admiring contemplation of her image in the water of the fish bowl, she recalls not only Narcissus, as I have already suggested, but Eve in Milton's account of her first waking (Paradise Lost, IV.449-475). Eve, too, sees herself in the water and is pleased with the image, though unlike Selima she is not aware that the image she admires is her own. In addition and more significantly, Eve resembles Selima in having been fatefully lured by something glittering. What first attracts her to Satan, at least in Milton's account (Paradise Lost, IX.494-531), is the sparkling gold of his snake-like appearance.

To press these allusions, especially the latter one, in so light-hearted a poem would be a mistake in emphasis, but nevertheless they do lurk beneath the surface to lend the poem some weight and save it from being a mere trifle. The seriousness they give the poem, however, is unlike that associated with Gray's main poems on frenzy. When we consider Selima as more than a cat, the serious figure she represents is not a victim of frenzy like Gray at the Grande Chartreuse or mourning the death of West. At times the narrator does regard Selima as an unfortunate victim, a "hapless Nymph" (19), who suffers first at the hand of "Malignant Fate"

(23), smiling on from a distance while she loses her balance on the bowl's slippery rim, and then from the cruelty of her fellow cats, who refuse to lift a helping hand after she has taken the plunge. But for the most part the narrator considers Selima to be not only responsible for her own actions, but guilty, in fact, of a frenzied action, as she strains to snatch the fish. In this frame of mind he sees her as a "Presumptuous Maid" (25), who yields all too easily to her "ardent wish" (21) to grasp what stirs her fancy. From this point of view, of course, Selima is not so much feline as typical of the incautious female. And Dr. Johnson's objections to the illogicality of calling Selima a nymph and of the two lines

> What female heart can gold despise?
> What Cat's averse to fish? (23-24)

are unfounded.[19] He either cannot or, perhaps out of animosity to Gray, will not see the point. These references, of course, merely bring closer to the surface the previous allusions to Camilla and Eve.

At the end of the poem Gray openly addresses the type of female whom Selima represents:

> From hence, ye Beauties, undeceiv'd,
> Know, one false step is ne'er retriev'd,
> And be with caution bold. (37-39)

In drawing this moral from Selima's fate, Gray gives us additional evidence that he has something serious to say about frenzied action, for though his manner remains light-hearted, the moral itself

echoes the tradition of serious commentary on the fate of Virgil's Camilla. Addison, for example, in Spectator no. 15, picks up the typical gloss of the Renaissance commentators and amplifies it in such a way that it might serve as a paraphrase of Gray's moral as well as a commentary on Camilla. In traditional fashion he points out the Amazon's "Female Passion for Dress and Show" and her weakness for "pretty Trappings" and then concludes: "This heedless Pursuit after these glittering trifles, the Poet (by a nice Concealed Moral) represents to have been the Destruction of his Female Hero."[20]

It is important to note that like Camilla's "heedless Pursuit" Selima's frenzied action fails to achieve its purpose. This failure seems to be almost as vital a prerequisite for Gray's lighthearted attitude as the fact that on the surface he is dealing only with a cat. In a Latin poem he composed early in his career on Guy Fawkes he takes the same playful attitude towards Fawkes's frantic attempt to blow up the Parliament buildings as he does towards Selima's frenzied bid to snatch the gold-fish. He mockingly nominates Fawkes for the noble honor of being foremost among evil-doers, greater even than the most notorious of Roman tyrants. Here, of course, the playfulness cannot be attributed to the triviality of the venture. Fawkes's plot was serious enough. Gray's attitude must instead be attributed to the failure of the plot to amount to anything. Had Selima succeeded in her cruel

endeavor, she would not, of course, have been tantamount to a tyrant, as Gray implies Fawkes would have been, had his plot worked. But in general Gray does regard furious acts, if they succeed and cause injury to others, to be tyrannical. The greatest instance of this tyranny in Gray's poetry is Edward's murdering of the Welsh bards in "The Bard." Gray's response to this cruelty is the noble indignation of the prophet.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]For a discussion of magnificence and liberality, see Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics, trans. H. Rackham (London, 1926), II.vii.4-6 and I.v.8, IV.k.6.

[2]Racine, Britannicus, ed., G. Jacquinet (Paris, n.d.), pp. 99, 103 (I.ii.239-240, I.iii.299-304).

[3]Tacitus, The Annals, trans. John Jackson (London, 1937), III, 317-320, 327-328, 411-417.

[4]Though we can only speculate, it may well be that Gray's divergence from the historical record is responsible for his abandoning of the play. He himself attributes this decision to West's sage advice, but it is difficult to imagine how he could have completed the play on the foundation of Tacitus' chronicle and remained consistent with the spirit of Agrippina revealed in the first scene.

[5]Roger Martin, Essai sur Thomas Gray (Toulouse, 1934), pp. 70-89, 317-318. See also R. W. Ketton-Cremer, Thomas Gray: A Biography (Cambridge, Eng., 1955), pp. 5-7.

[6]Statius, of course, followed the example of Homer in the twenty-third book of the Iliad and of Virgil in the fifth book of the Aeneid.

[7]See Gray's Poems, p. 246.

[8]See the Prologue to Act II of Henry V: "And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies" (2); also, King John, IV.ii.185-186: "Old men and beldams in the streets/Do prophesy upon it dangerously."

[9]See Gray's Correspondence, I, 189-190, 193.

[10]Ibid., III, 935-936.

[11]See Kurt Schlüter, Die Englische Ode (Bonn, 1964), pp. 9-30.

[12]See Gray's note on the joy of vicissitude, which appears in Gray's Poems, p. 247.

[13]See the excerpt from Bonstetten's Souvenirs in Gray's Correspondence, III, 110n: "Je racontais à Gray ma vie et mon pays, mais toute sa vie à lui était fermée pour moi; jamais il ne me

parlait de lui. Il y avait chez Gray entre le présent et le passé un abîme infranchissable. Quand je voulais en approcher, de sombres nuées venaient le couvrir."

[14]Gray's Correspondence, I, 181-182.

[15]S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed., J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1907), II, 58-59.

[16]See Gray's Correspondence, II, 508, 520, 725.

[17]See, for example, Cortlandt Van Winkle's preface to his own edition of Spenser's Epithalamion (New York, 1926).

[18]According to Greek legend, the minstrel Arion was rescued from the sea by a dolphin when a mutinous crew forced him overboard, and in Milton's Comus, 824-842, we are told that Sabrina was saved from drowning by water nymphs, who carried her to the hall of Nereus, where she was made goddess of the river that had nearly taken her life.

[19]Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets (London: Frederick Warne and Co., n.d.), p. 499; this is from the "Chandos Classics" series.

[20]The Spectator, ed., Donald F. Bond (Oxford, 1965), p. 69. For the Renaissance commentary on Camilla see the 1529 edition of Opera Virgiliana with notes by Servius, Ascensius, and Pierius and P. Virgili Maronis Opera, ed., Robert Stephanus, (Paris, 1532).

CHAPTER THREE

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

From the poems dealt with in the previous chapter we learn that Gray's plan for flourishing in life instead of lethargically watching it pass by or dissipating it in a state of frenzy encompasses two contrary strategies. One is to subject oneself or be exposed to situations that encourage the hardy virtues of a disciplined life. We can understand most clearly what Gray has in mind here when Agrippina chastizes Nero for his lack of military sternness, but the same bracing mode of life that she praises appears in the sonnet on West in the brief reference to an outdoors life devoted to simple, hardy chores. The other strategy is to seek out circumstances that foster ease and playful exuberance. Perhaps the purest example of this occurs in the epistle to Favonius, where the youthful Gray, roaming about the countryside, carries on a dalliance with Phoebus, who is usually associated in his poetry with a mild life. We may recall here the sun-kissed shores of Genoa in the Sapphic verse Gray sent to West after crossing the Alps. In all of these poems there is never any doubt about the value of the desired way of life, although Gray may be uncertain about the best way to achieve it. Whether, for example, he prefers to look for relaxation in isolation or through intimacy, he is as certain in some poems about the virtue of an easy life as elsewhere he is convinced of

the benefit to be gained by stirring a sluggish spirit. There is a group of poems, however, in which these two modes of flourishing come into conflict and Gray is uncertain, for example, whether circumstances of ease, such as the leisure to loll about beneath a shady elm in the country, lead to vitality or vacancy. The doubt in these poems is provided by a variety of sources, ranging from someone who merely considers himself to be flourishing in a contrary situation to the example of people who actually are thriving under different circumstances. As a group these poems are concerned with deciding which conditions in life do, in fact, most encourage fulfillment and happiness.

In the "Ode on the Spring" Gray rules in favor of playful conditions, those pleasant days of sunshine in spring that encourage the carefree enjoyment of life. But even though this decision is unmistakable, it is by no means explicit. The poem merely focuses on two speakers: a moralist, who contemplates a swarm of insects, which he takes to be the emblem of frivolous mankind, and the insects themselves, which turn on the moralist and let him know what they think of his observations. Neither side acknowledges defeat, and no third party intervenes to judge the contest. Gray, however, makes his attitude known implicitly in the way the poem is written.

First of all, he carefully and thoroughly undermines the moralist's position. The moralist treats mankind scornfully as a swarm of irresponsible pleasure-seekers. Yet his account of them

makes them seem as much like the poor victims of misfortune in the Eton College ode as the selfish, thoughtless, "idle brood" (18) that deserts a friend at the first sign of misfortune in the "Ode to Adversity." The swarm of mankind, he says, dances its way gaily through life as though it were a pageant, yet falls like so many insignificant flies at the slightest brush by the hand of fate. As a consequence of this introduction of helplessness, the moralist's contempt seems, to a certain extent at least, guilty of callous insensitivity.

In addition, though the moralist scolds mankind for self-indulgence, that is, for not taking life seriously enough, he, too, may be charged with the same failing. This is evident even in his manner of criticizing mankind. Instead of substantiating his charges and giving them the weight or conviction of honest indignation, he elaborates a clever conceit, not of his own invention, comparing mankind to the insect population. Though his tone remains unmistakably critical, the business of condemning is subordinate to the mere elaboration of the analogy for its own sake.

> To Contemplation's sober eye
> Such is the race of Man:
> And they that creep, and they that fly,
> Shall end where they began.
> Alike the Busy and the Gay
> But flutter through life's little day,
> In fortune's varying colours drest:
> Brush'd by the hand of rough Mischance,
> Or chill'd by age, their airy dance
> They leave, in dust to rest. (31-40)

None of the statements uttered here is directly scornful of the masses. Though the moralist claims to be the very incarnation of sober thought, there is something frivolous about his concentration on spinning out the analogy and moralizing well. Concern with the issue of blamable folly gives way to a pompous pride in declaring his position.

The moralist's failure to be truly serious, however, emerges most clearly in his description of himself and of the spring. Though he hardly flutters about like an insect, neither is he chastened by harsh experience. There is nothing brisk or edifying about his way of life. In his own words, he is "At ease reclin'd in rustic state" (17). His circumstances are those of a man who enjoys leisure rather than of one devoted to discipline. As he stretches out beneath a shady oak or "moss-grown beech" (13) on the edge of some water, he resembles more the insects who take life easy than the sober, business-like individual he claims to be.

In his description of spring we see that this similarity to the insects is more than just superficial or slight. Far from slighting the spring or demonstrating an autumnal gloom, he, in fact, celebrates the coming of spring and the freedom and exhilaration it implies. In praising the blooming of the variegated flowers, the melodious warbling of the birds, and the cool breezes, laden with fragrant perfumes, he is as much a spokesman for the good life and the philosophy of carpe diem as the upstart insects

None of the statements uttered here is directly scornful of the masses. Though the moralist claims to be the very incarnation of sober thought, there is something frivolous about his concentration on spinning out the analogy and moralizing well. Concern with the issue of blamable folly gives way to a pompous pride in declaring his position.

The moralist's failure to be truly serious, however, emerges most clearly in his description of himself and of the spring. Though he hardly flutters about like an insect, neither is he chastened by harsh experience. There is nothing brisk or edifying about his way of life. In his own words, he is "At ease reclin'd in rustic state" (17). His circumstances are those of a man who enjoys leisure rather than of one devoted to discipline. As he stretches out beneath a shady oak or "moss-grown beech" (13) on the edge of some water, he resembles more the insects who take life easy than the sober, business-like individual he claims to be.

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at the end of the poem. His style of praise, moreover, in keeping with its object, is florid and profuse. His description is strewn with elaborate poetic diction and references to classical mythology, ranging from the "rosy-bosom'd Hours" (1) and Venus to the throaty "Attic warbler" (5) and "Cool Zephyrs" (9) spreading flowery perfume through the air. Contrary to his claim, the moralist is anything but sober and restrained here.

Perhaps because this description is so thoroughly poetic or derivative rather than realistic or true to nature, it has opened the poem to attack by several twentieth-century critics. A. R. Humphreys, for example, who finds the poem florid and pretentious and lacking in personal conviction, rejects it out of hand. It is impossible to take it seriously, he says. Patricia Spacks, although she agrees with Humphreys' observations, refuses to dismiss the poem, because she believes that Gray is fully conscious of the poem's unconvincing artifice and triumphantly rejects it himself in favor of an intimate, personal, and authentic voice.[1] But she is deaf to the tone of the poem and unwilling, like Humphreys, to accept Gray's admiration for the artificial and playful as worthy of poetic expression. Contrary to her argument, he does not undermine the ornate style of the speaker, particularly in his description of spring, to establish a more serious and reliable tone, but uses the speaker's unavowed penchant for easy, florid expression to undermine his claim to sober seriousness. Gray has nothing

against the speaker's ease and exuberance; he scorns only his pretense of being sober and pensive. The problem with the speaker, in fact, is two-fold: on the one hand, he is not genuinely serious or deeply committed to the morality he professes, but on the other hand, neither is he willing or perhaps able to accept the view that something is worth doing, not for any serious moral purpose, but for the pure pleasure of doing it.

In addition to undermining the moralist's position, Gray portrays the advocates of a carefree life in a way that suggests his favor and their triumph. The point of view of the sportive insects emerges twice, first as the moralist sees it and then as the insects themselves announce it. Perhaps the most important thing to note in accounting for the forcefulness of this attitude is that there is no divergence between the two presentations of it. The moralist does not distort it in the way that his view is subtly manipulated. According to his description, the insects may be either frivolous or exuberant. The choice is left open. All he says, for instance, is that they are "Eager to taste the honied spring" (26). There is nothing in this statement which the insects would not agree. The ambiguity lies in the word "eager." From his previous explicit denunciation of ardor (18), we know that the moralist deplores this attitude, but at the same time we are at liberty to interpret the insects' eagerness in their favor. The fact that this introduction to the insects' light-heartedness is

not colored in the way that the introduction to the moralist's seriousness is helps to explain its predominance in the poem.

The telling blow, however, is struck when the insects speak for themselves. There are a number of reasons for the decisiveness of this passage. First of all, the idea of having the insects speak at all is itself playfully exuberant and suggests that the mode of the poem is in keeping with the life-style of the insects. To understand this, we must remember the situation of the moralist. He is alone in the country, observing the insects buzzing about, and comparing their behavior with that of mankind. For the insects suddenly to burst into speech and rebuke him for his reflections on them is startling and funny. If there was any doubt before, their speech decisively places the poem on the level of comic verse, where natural laws are subject to human will and it is not uncommon for sub-human creatures to behave like people, as Selima does in the poem on the cat.

In addition, the insects cleverly demolish the moralist on his own grounds. They out-moralize him. He complains that they frivolously dissipate their life without ever considering anything of importance. But they show him that they can defend their way of life soberly and philosophically by appealing to the argument of carpe diem: youth flies by so quickly that if they spend their time thinking about it, as he advises, it will pass away before they can live it. At the same time they point out that while they

can defend their life-style philosophically, he fails to ground his philosophy in experience. Unlike the speaker in the "Ode to Adversity," he demonstrates no benefits to thinking as he does, only disadvantages. In a life of sober contemplation he misses out on the joys of love, work, and play:

> Thy joys no glittering female meets,
> No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
> No painted plumage to display. (45-47)

The final reason for saying that this passage indicates the triumph of the insects' mode of vitality is a slight, but significant change in the moralist himself. In his introduction to the retort of the insects he is far more humble than in his previous reflections on mankind. Instead of claiming to pronounce judgment for all thinking people ("To Contemplation's sober eye/Such is the race of Man"), at the end of the poem he merely ventures a personal opinion ("Methinks I hear in accents low/The sportive kind reply"). Slight as this change is, I would suggest that it is an indirect acknowledgement on the part of the moralist of the superior forcefulness of the insects' argument. But even without this detail the poem stands as the foremost example of Gray's support of the playful in life.

The major drawback to depending on the carefree circumstances of spring as a source of vitality is that they are not immune from "the hand of rough Mischance." In the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" Gray tests the validity of his findings in the

spring ode in light of this realization. The world of the Eton poem is governed by sober and serious concerns. But the speaker here is not pretentious, like the moralist in the "Ode on the Spring;" he is saddened by the experience of misfortune, which the moralist only talks about but does not suffer from, and he is weighed down by a "weary soul" (18), like the visitor to the Grande Chartreuse. The playful and carefree have their place in the poem, too, but not as an exuberant force that punctures pomposity as though it were a balloon. These qualities inform the shadowy vision of the speaker's departed and fragile childhood. It is as much this lost world of the past that forms the distant prospect of the title as the college itself. The title, in fact, suggests the place of the child's lot in life in the poem. Youthful exuberance depends here on being at Eton College, just as it depends on the conditions of spring in the previous poem. But that poem, as the title suggests, celebrates the presence of spring and youthful joy; this one is concerned with the absence of this feeling and the conditions that engender it and takes two contradictory attitudes towards this departed world.

At first the speaker is weary and looks upon the seat of his childhood as a paradise lost that he would dearly love to recapture. His nostalgia and veneration for the place are evident in his portrayal of it. He does not so much describe a prospect as invoke a community of sacred spirits. In his respectful form of

address ("Ye distant spires, ye antique towers") and elevated diction ("the stately brow/Of Windsor's heights" and "the hoary Thames") there is an aura of religious piety and solemnity. This homage may seem inappropriate for a place associated with mirth and fun, but Eton is sacred to Gray for protecting him from the ravages of adversity. It gave him above all, Gray sees from his vantage point in time, the blessing of a sheltered life.

Despite the fact that this holy attitude has inspired several parodies, notably Thomas Hood's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Clapham Academy," there is no irony in it and Gray's sincerity is unquestionable. The first ambiguity creeps into his attitude when as a result of his invocation he seems briefly to recapture the spirit of "joy and youth" (19) and to feel the breeze of a "second spring" (20). The crux of the matter lies in his sophisticated diction and poetic devices. Instead of merely recalling the simple pleasures of youth, like swimming in the Thames, in an appropriately simple manner, Gray adopts a lofty style suitable to a religious hymn. As though he were about to catalogue the armies in the Trojan war, he invokes "Father Thames" (21) to aid his memory and then embarks on a sketch of childhood games and activities in exalted terms. Swimming, for example, becomes cleaving "With pliant arm thy (i.e, the Thames's) glassy wave" (26), and playing with a hoop turns into a chase after "the rolling circle's speed" (29). Studying lessons is described as an "earnest

business" (31), and exploring the surrounding countryside becomes a bold adventure into "unknown regions" (37), as the little children assume an heroic stature. This elevated treatment undoubtedly suits the dignified sentiments of the speaker as he recalls his childhood, but whether it is appropriate to the actual pastimes of his youth is less certain. This doubt allows us to interpret the passage both as a genuinely idealized view of childhood and as a gentle satire on what it considers important. We might also express this ambiguity in relation to the speaker's sophistication, evinced by his poetic skill. This quality may indicate either that he is sadly out of touch with childhood simplicity or that children have a lot to overcome in their naive delusions of grandeur.

In any case, when the speaker begins to recall youth with a less vivid immediacy, he does not seem to regret the dimming of his vision. It is as if childhood loses something of its charm for him. He still dwells on its advantages, such as hope, health, and liveliness, but he cites these in so offhand a manner that we cannot help questioning his enthusiasm, especially since his opening address to Eton and youth is so devout by contrast. In addition, there is something double-edged and ominous about some of the advantages cited, which suggests that the speaker is again aware of the fragility of childhood and the vulnerability of innocence. He takes the trouble, for example, to point out that youthful hope, so delightful in itself, is inevitably disappointed. Even when what

is hoped for comes true, the reality, he says, is "less pleasing" (42) than the dream. Children, moreover, may have the blessed ability to forget tears as soon as they are shed, but the fact that there are tears at all suggests a flaw in their paradise.

The change in attitude, subtly suggested in this passage, the fifth stanza of the poem, comes to the surface in the following stanza. In contrast to his initial sadness at being excluded from the realm of childhood, Gray not only ceases to yearn for a return, but is anxious to evacuate children themselves, as though they were inhabiting a disaster area. To understand this reversal, we must remember that the entire charm of Eton and youth for him consists in their representing a refuge from pain and anxiety. The spatial image implied by this attitude, like that of an island in the ocean or an oasis in the desert, can be seen from two sides. On the one hand, we may consider the place of refuge as set off from misery and therefore desirable. But we may also, on the other hand, think of the refuge as surrounded by hostile forces and therefore threatened and in danger. This latter point of view is especially forced upon us by Gray's particular spatial image for the safety of childhood and the dangers of maturity, which, unlike the image of the island and ocean or oasis and desert, has a way of suggesting the inevitable exposure of childhood to the misfortunes of maturity. In addition to being surrounded by the agents of misfortune ("Yet see how all around 'em wait/The Ministers of

human fate"), the children are marching in ignorance as they play towards an ambush ("Ah, shew them where in ambush stand/To seize their prey the murth'rous band"). Faced with this prospect, childhood is an unenviable lot.

Even though the poem is clearly written from the point of view of the serious adult, up to this point at least it is by no means entirely weighted in favor of circumstances that encourage seriousness. It is true that there is something overwhelmingly solemn about the initial hymn to childhood, that the speaker's fear for the security of the children is typical of serious, adult concerns, and that the only time he flirts with the feelings of childhood is in his half-serious, half-humorous catalogue of games and activities at Eton. But despite the fact that the speaker himself represents the serious attitude to life, the poem seems to be a stalemate between his view and the more playful attitude of the child, which the speaker half wants to be his own. We are presented with both a good and a bad side to being a child and devoting one's life to gaiety, playfulness, and ease. But so far at least we have only the bad side of adulthood: grown-ups suffer from all sorts of things, including a longing for the security of childhood and anxiety over the precariousness of that security. If this suffering corresponds to the doomed nature of childhood, then what in maturity corresponds to the joys of youth?

According to the poem, there does not seem to be any pleasure

in entering the world of experience and suffering to compensate for the loss of youthful bliss. Gray ultimately takes the view that informing children of their fate as adults is only hastening a bad thing. His initial inclination to warn them of the dangers that await them can be explained, then, as a sympathetic impulse, as Gray himself puts it, of the "tender for another's pain" (93). It is like a movie audience's wish to shout out a warning to the pale, helpless, and unknowing heroine as the hideous villain creeps up on her stealthily from behind. When Gray realizes that he cannot help children avoid suffering, that his gesture to warn them, however noble, is futile, his tender inclination naturally turns to prolonging their blissful ignorance in whatever way he can.

According to this view, however, the vision of the hellish fate awaiting youth that Gray does, in fact, present to us is little more than a slip of the tongue, resulting from impetuosity and serving only to remind Gray of the real hideousness of what he, with the best of intentions, wants to do. Plausible as this interpretation is, it simply puts too little emphasis on the vision for the space it takes up in the poem. It has, in fact, a greater role than is immediately apparent. Though it does not indicate a way of avoiding adversity, nor any benefit to actual suffering, it does reveal to us the value of a knowledge or awareness of suffering. As the speaker demonstrates, though he is obviously unaware of it, the importance of this knowledge is not what it enables you to do,

but the state of mind it puts you in.

If we examine the speaker closely as he discloses his vision of the "fury Passions" (61) and the "painful family of Death" (83), we notice that he is unlike himself earlier in the poem. Not only is there none of the child's light-heartedness about him, but he is no longer the anguished adult who casts a weary glance back at the paradise of childhood or worries about the gloomy prospects for youth. Though he reveals a vision of pain and suffering, he himself is not anguished during the revelation. Just prior to his outburst, he is full of sorrowful exclamations:

> Alas, regardless of their doom,
> The little victims play! (51-52)
>
> Yet see how all around 'em wait
> The Ministers of human fate,
> And black Misfortune's baleful train! (55-57)
>
> Ah, shew them where in ambush stand
> To seize their prey the murth'rous band! (58-59)
>
> Ah, tell them, they are men! (60)

In these remarks he is as overcome by a sense of fate as the children, chasing the hoop, are free from it. Once he begins, however, to make out the Ministers of fate distinctly with his inner eye, instead of fearfully succumbing to the vague sense of an overpowering force, his attitude changes. As with a child having a nightmare, the anxiety vanishes when the light is switched on. For Gray the light is a visionary power, what he calls "poetic Genius" in "The Progress of Poesy" and "Sapientia dia" (I.23), or divine Wisdom, in "De

Principiis Cogitandi."[2] Under this light the terrifying, ghostly misfortunes of life take on a visible shape. For example, the "fury Passions" (61) become

> The vultures of the mind,
> Disdainful Anger, pallid Fear,
> And Shame that sculks behind. (62-64)

Insanity, or the involuntary regression to childish antics in the face of intolerable suffering, is personified as

> ... moody Madness laughing wild
> Amid severest woe. (79-80)

Finally, the "painful family of Death" (83) executes its victims like a team of human torturers:

> This racks the joints, this fires the veins,
> That every labouring sinew strains. (85-86)

The whole hideous crew pass before us in their dance of death as a single, unified tableau. The "griesly troop" (82) that inflicts physical pain and death performs its ghastly work "in the vale of years" (81), and evidently the furious passions, which cause mental anguish, ambush man on his way towards this valley of death.

Personified in the speaker's vision, these murderous abstractions do not prey on his mind as inescapable vultures. If he is not safe from adversity, as the children are at Eton, he is at least able to hold misfortune at arm's length, unlike the anguished adult, who is completely engulfed by suffering. Yet the visionary is obviously not unconcerned with evil or ignorant of it, as the innocent children are. There is something elevated and highly

charged about his mood, as we can see especially in comparing him with the moralist in the "Ode on the Spring." When the moralist depicts fate, it is through a casual and clever analogy to the perils of being an insect. The treatment belittles the subject and emphasizes the urbanity and aloofness of the moralist. In contrast, the vision in the Eton ode is copious and intense and reveals the impassioned soul of a seer, whom Gray in the "Elegy" characterizes as inspired by "noble rage" (51).

We can trace this enthusiasm to a number of sources. First, there is the vividness of the language. Though the pictorial quality given to the abstractions suggests a distance between the seer and his vision, the pictures themselves have an intense visual impact. Particularly impressive are the "rankling tooth" of Jealousy (66), that "inly gnaws the secret heart" (67), Infamy, "grinning" at the rapid fall of a poor, ambitious wretch (74), and the "icy hand" of Poverty (89), that "numbs the soul" (89). Though these images are by no means original with Gray, as Roger Lonsdale amply demonstrates in his edition of the poems,[3] they are still startling and effective.

Secondly, we can point to the obliteration of the logical development of the argument that underlies this section of the poem. Gray is trying to decide whether children should be informed of their fate as adults, but instead of carefully considering both sides of the issue, as he does in the "Elegy," he makes no effort

to mull things over at all. The vision does not contribute explicitly to the argument either for or against warning the children. Clearly the mind that conceives this vision is not governed by logic, but has lost sight of the reasons for the revelation or is simply not concerned with reasons. A greater power than judgment compels the speaker: the traditional rapture of the prophet.

Lying behind this passage, in fact, is a rich tradition of similar visions in the grand style of epic and heroic poetry. When we become aware of this context, Gray's vision gains immeasurably in stature. We see, then, that for him the entrance into the world of experience is no ordinary event, but tantamount to man's fall from paradise, his embroilment in war, or his descent into hell. Woven into the texture of the vision is material found, for example, in Pope's description of man's fall from "Nature's State" (III.147) in the Essay on Man. Just as Gray associates the child's initiation into adulthood with an attack of the "vultures of the mind" (62), so Pope ascribes the onset of evil in the history of mankind to the same "Fury-Passions" (III.167). Thomson, too, in Spring (278-308) attributes the blemishing of the golden age to the riot of the passions, which he depicts at length like Gray in the form of personified abstractions. Another thread in Gray's vision refers back to descriptions like Statius's portrayal of the Temple of Mars, which Chaucer imitated in his Knight's Tale and Dryden, following Chaucer, modernized in Palamon and Arcite. If

the echoes of texts such as Pope's and Thomson's add a philosophical grandeur to Gray's vision of the passions, the reference to visions such as Statius's gallery of horrors accentuates their murderous aspect.

> primis salit Impetus amens
> e foribus caecumque Nefas Iraeque rubentes
> exsanguesque Metus, occultisque ensibus adstant
> Insidiae geminumque tenens Discordia ferrum.
> (Thebaid, VII.47-50)

> From the outer gate wild Passion leaps, and
> Mischief and Angers flushing red and pallid
> Fear, and Treachery lurks with hidden sword,
> and Discord holding a two-edged blade.
> (Lonsdale's translation)

The traditional vision, however, which most contributes to a loftiness of mood in Gray's poem is the vision of hell, such as Virgil depicts in the Aeneid. This lends to Gray's portrayal of experience a quality quite literally hellish.

> vestibulum ante ipsum primisque in faucibus Orci
> Luctus et ultrices posuere Curae,
> pallentesque habitant Morbi tristique Senectus
> et Metus et malesuada Fames ac turpis Egestas,
> terribiles visu formae, Letumque Labosque;
> tum consanguineus Leti Sopor et mala mentis
> Gaudia, mortiferumque adverso in limine Bellum
> ferreique Eumenidum thalami et Discordia clemens,
> viperum crinem vittis innexa cruentis. (VI. 273-281)

> Just before the entrance, even within the very
> jaws of
> Hell, Grief and avenging Cares have made their
> bed;
> there pale Diseases dwell, and sad Age, and Fear,
> and
> ill-counselling Famine, and loathly Want, shapes
> terrible to view; and Death and Distress; next,
> opposite, the death-bearer War, and the Furies'
> iron

cells, and savage Strife, her snaky locks
entwined with bloody fillets.
(Lonsdale's translation)

Gray's sublime vision of experience, to sum up, exhibits similarities both to the anxious adult's relation to the harsh side of life and to the child's blissful ignorance of this world. Like the adult, Gray's visionary clashes with adversity, but he is not reluctant to face up to this inevitable collision or sorrowful at its consequences. He is not determined by adverse circumstances, but defiant of them. Invincible in spirit, he rages at shame, envy, despair, and pain with all of the boldness of adventurous youth. According to the implications of this attitude, there is a good reason, after all, for informing children of their fate: it is to focus the energy of the child on withstanding inevitable misfortune before that energy is completely dissipated by the direct experience of misfortune. In this way the virtues of childhood are incorporated into maturity to produce not a good side to adulthood, compensating for its misery and corresponding to the joy of youth, but a different mode of vitality altogether, one that does not depend on circumstances at all, whether they are those of the adult or of the child. Like Blake's higher or organized innocence, this mode of life is a synthesis of qualities found in the antithetical states of childhood and maturity. It blends the playfulness of youth with the sobriety of adulthood to form the enthusiasm of the visionary or prophet.

In the poem, however, this enthusiasm is short-lived, and even for the brief time it lasts, the enthusiast is not conscious of his powers. We are never, in fact, explicitly told that there is a visionary in the poem, that the person who presents the "fury Passions" (61) to us is in any way different from the person who laments the doomed nature of childhood. As a result, the stanzas that are demonstrably central appear to be muted or perhaps of secondary importance. So far as I can discover, only Kurt Schlüter of those who have written on the poem emphasizes or even acknowledges the role of the enthusiast.[4] The fact that the visionary is submerged or implicit, however, does not mean that he is not essential to the poem or that Gray is unaware of his importance, but only that he is not triumphant. Even though the visionary stance is an effective attitude for combating misfortune, it cannot easily be sustained, and Gray reverts in the last stanza of the poem to the gloomy outlook of the adult.

The curious feature about this transformation is that it is like passing through the Lethe in Hades. Nothing is remembered about the previous attitude. Instead of yearning to recover his visionary power, Gray turns his attention entirely to the blissful paradise of childhood, and the poem ends on the grim, ironic note with which it begins. The speaker, though hopelessly barred from the youth's paradise, looks back on it with approval. His values are thus sorrowfully inappropriate to his situation in life. He

favors ignorant bliss and childish playfulness, but is too old to be a child and too weighed down by suffering to act like one. However, contrary to the opening of the poem, his manner of speaking at the end shows him to be resigned to his fate. Instead of sighing wistfully over lost horizons, he announces his resolution not to warn children of their doom in a style that is stoically restrained or terse. By themselves the lines may not imply resignation, but alongside the earlier nostalgic utterances they suggest someone who is at least not seeking to change his lot.

> Yet ah! why should they know their fate?
> Since sorrow never comes too late,
> And happiness too swiftly flies.
> Thought would destroy their paradise.
> No more; where ignorance is bliss,
> 'Tis folly to be wise. (95-100)

Despite the fact that carefree circumstances, such as those of childhood, are not always available or immune from adversity, Gray still favors them in the Eton College ode as the best means of thriving in life. But he makes this decision without considering the vitality possible under adverse conditions, the stirring of the spirit that can result from a stern mode of life or from shocking events. It is only when adversity is overwhelming, as it is for the anxious adult in the Eton ode, that Gray definitely prefers carefree conditions. When adversity is inspiring, however, his attitude changes.

We can see this clearly in the "Ode to Adversity." Far from

regretting misfortune or nostalgically looking back to the carefree lot of the child, in this poem he worships adversity as a goddess who can impart a benign influence and rouse him to life by softening an insensible heart or reviving the "gen'rous spark extinct" (45) within him. These beneficial effects he represents as the train of attendants who follow in the steps of the goddess:

> Wisdom in sable garb array'd
> Immers'd in rapt'rous thought profound,
> And Melancholy, silent maid
> With leaden eye, that loves the ground,
> Still on thy solemn steps attend:
> Warm Charity, the gen'ral Friend,
> With Justice to herself severe,
> And Pity, dropping soft the sadly-pleasing
> tear. (25-32)

That Wisdom signifies vitality, even though it wears the garb of woe, is evident in the term "rapt'rous." To understand how adversity can stir profound thought we need only think of the "Epitaph on Mrs. Clerke" and Gray's letter to Norton Nicholls on the occasion of his uncle's death.[5] In both of these Gray represents the ultimate pain in life, the death of someone dear, as a curiously beneficial event that jolts us out of the daily trance in which we take life for granted. As for melancholy, which is personified as a maid who might be regarded as sluggish, since her eye is "leaden," it will be helpful to consider Gray's defense of Mr. Wollaston's melancholy imagination against Lord Bolingbroke's attempt to ridicule him. That Wollaston's mind is melancholy does not mean that it is not warm with life. In fact, Gray takes his

melancholy complaint about the possiblity of serving after death only as dust to be mingled with the dirt under his feet as a sign of a feeling heart. In comparison with the complacent resignation which Bolingbroke urges in the face of pain and affliction Gray considers Wollaston's attitude as positively inspired.[6]

Gray's belief that adversity rouses such vital inclinations as "Warm Charity" and other manifestations of sympathy is most fully expressed in an entry in his Commonplace Book. "Grief," he wrote,

> inclines, & softens us to commiserate, & redress, if we be able, the Misfortunes of others in the like unhappy Circumstances; indeed we should be insensible to their Woes, (here he quotes the Aeneid, I.630: non ignara mali miseris succuere disco; according to Lonsdale's translation: not ignorant of ill, do I learn to befriend the unhappy), had we not felt, what it was to be wretched; nor could we form any Idea of them, but by comparison of them with our own .... Compassion, then, the mother of so many generous actions, arises from this.[7]

Prosperous conditions in this poem, instead of fostering vitality, encourage only the vapid luxuries of idleness. These Gray personifies as

> Self-pleasing Folly's idle brood,
> Wild laughter, Noise, and thoughtless Joy. (18-19)

These creatures are fickle idolators, who vow their allegiance to the goddess Prosperity, but break their word and flee at the first sign of Adversity's "frown terrific" (17). In other words, joy that depends on prosperity is not only devoid of vital energy, but also unreliable. It lasts only as long as the ephemeral conditions

of prosperity itself. We should note here that this major shortcoming of carefree prosperity, its impermanence, appears also in the Eton College ode, but there it is not considered a serious drawback, because there is no alternative mode of vitality recognized. In the "Ode to Adversity," however, since there is an alternative, the attitude towards prosperity with all its fluctuations is considerably less admiring.

The attitude that adversity rouses the slumbering spirit is reflected in the way the poem is written. The speaker here does not embrace a specific set of circumstances, as the speaker in the Eton ode favors the lot of the child, but invokes a goddess. Adversity, in other words, is represented not so much as a condition, but as a divinity. Critics have proposed a number of classical deities as possible sources. Mitford, for example, suggested that adversity be identified as Até, or blind Folly, but the consensus seems to favor Athene. She, of course, is a "Daughter of Jove" (1), and since her shield bears the head of Medusa, she may be said to be in "Gorgon terrors clad" (53). In addition, Athene, like Gray's Adversity, has a benign and malignant form. Like her father, she has a vengeful side, associated with tempests and hurtling thunderbolts, but she also showers down light and warmth and fruitful dew and thus is responsible for the thriving of fields and plants. In this connection she is known as the helper and protector of agriculture, the divinity who favored Attica

with the olive tree.

This mythologizing or personifying vitalizes the concept of adversity just as adversity itself brings renewed energy to the sluggish soul. It turns "adversity" from a vague, lifeless abstraction into a vivid picture. That Gray thought the language was in need of revitalizing is evident from some statements in his correspondence. Writing to West about his imitation of Shakespeare in Agrippina, he ventured the opinion that since the Renaissance "our language is greatly degenerated." West agreed that Shakespeare's "old expressions have more energy in them than ours, and are even more adapted to poetry." Turning to classical authors like Tacitus, Gray repeated his complaint in different words. "The English tongue," he said, "is too diffuse, & daily grows more & more enervate." At the same time Gray felt that the best way to regenerate the language was to make it more strikingly visual or pictorial. In imitating Shakespeare, he wanted, above all, to achieve this excellence. His chief praise of Shakespeare's language was that "every word in him is a picture."[8] He demonstrated a similar ideal for poetry in "Stanzas to Mr. Bentley," where his thesis is quite simply that pictures vitalize poetry. Here he means pictures literally, but there is no reason why his lines cannot be taken metaphorically as well: anything pictorial improves poetry, from accompanying designs to visually striking language.

> See, in their course, each transitory thought
> Fix'd by his (Bentley's) touch a lasting es-
> sence take;
> Each dream, in fancy's airy colouring wrought,
> To local Symmetry and life awake!
> The tardy rhymes that us'd to linger on,
> To censure cold, and negligent of fame,
> In swifter measures animated run,
> And catch a lustre from his genuine flame. (5-12)

Hence Gray's lone attempt to create a mythological creature out of an abstract quality, like similar efforts of Collins in such poems as the "Ode to Pity," where he, too, draws on the features of a classical goddess, may be interpreted as a desperate device for reviving the dying genius of English poetry.

Despite the powerful reinforcement in the style of the poem of the attitude towards adversity expressed in it, this attitude still has limitations. On the basis of this poem alone we cannot consider that adverse conditions are Gray's final choice as the best circumstances in which to flourish. The poem, we must remember, is a prayer following the antique structure of the classical hymn.[9] It begins with an invocation, then substitutes a tableau of allegorical personifications for the typical epic incident, and closes with a supplication.

> Oh, gently on thy Suppliant's head,
> Dread Goddess, lay thy chast'ning hand! (33-34)

There is no divine response. Gray only wants Adversity to impart her "milder influence" (42); he has no assurance that she will not strike in her "Gorgon terrors clad" (35) and crush rather than awaken

him. It is one thing to suggest, as Gray does earlier in the poem, that since adversity is inevitable, only the foolish try to avoid it, that it is better to be acquainted with suffering as a child is her nurse, for the happiest person is the one who is best prepared for pain and suffers least in adversity. But it is quite another thing to put this austerity program into action. As the supplication indicates, the effect of adversity on a person is not entirely in his control. Therefore the poem cannot guarantee that to flourish it will not be necessary to escape adversity as a plague and seek out a nurturing home in more congenial circumstances.

On the basis of the three poems so far considered here, all central to his achievement, Gray's inquiry seems to be getting nowhere. Evidently there is a profound ambiguity at the heart of his poetry, and he faces a grave dilemma in his search for the best way to flourish in life. Wherever he turns, eventually he runs up against unreliable and disappointing circumstances. This problem emerges most clearly in the "Elegy," not only his most famous poem, but the only one where the full extent of his dilemma confronts him at once.

Gray begins the "Elegy" like the "Ode to Adversity" in favor of a stern mode of life. Contrary to what we might expect, however, the representative he chooses for this life is the social or cultural counterpart to the child, the country peasant, who is as inexperienced in the ways of the world as the callow youth. But far

from exemplifying a carefree, pastoral life, the swain here stands for sober, earthy realities, for the simple home and hard work. His life revolves around the hearth and the plough, and his pleasures are the rude ones of a devoted family and work well done: on the one hand, children who "run to lisp their sire's return,/Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share" (23-24), and on the other, the harvest yielding to his sickle (25) and the woods bowing beneath his "sturdy stroke" (28).

In opposition to this stalwart worthy stand the idle, pleasure-seeking gentry, who see the poor as dull and vacuous. But Gray points out that what they consider to be the mark of vitality,

> The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
> And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er
> gave, (33-34)

is only extravagance, show, not substance. What good, he asks, is a luxurious tomb with its "storied urn or animated bust" (41), since these things are in themselves lifeless and cannot recall the dead from the grave? Gray's contemptuous attitude towards this grandeur resembles that of the moralist toward the frivolous swarm of mankind, except that Gray's scorn bears all the conviction of the suppliant to Adversity and disdainer of "Self-pleasing Folly's idle brood" (18).

In the next section of the poem, however, there is a noticeable change in attitude, and Gray demonstrates his typical ambivalence towards various circumstances in life. He is still wholly in favor

of the rural peasants and shows no sympathy for the proud, but he does acknowledge the merit of qualities usually associated with the wealthy and great. The shift in his argument is subtle. Just previously he denied any value to the trappings of honor, but now he claims that under more favorable conditions the poor could have achieved everything that has been the lot of the wealthy. They, too, might have swayed "the rod of empire" (47) or "wak'd to extasy the living lyre" (48). The obvious implication of this new claim is that these achievements are worthwhile. In other words, what he previously denied he now admits. Instead of extravagant, the enterprises of the fortunate are seen as great. A "storied urn or animated bust" (41) may be luxurious excesses, but those who raised these trophies in pompous pride are also capable of glorious accomplishments.

Along with this shift in outlook there is a corresponding change in Gray's attitude to the poor. They are no longer viewed as admirably simple, but as lamentably thwarted. Their unadorned life is now a liability, though through no fault of their own.

> But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
> Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
> Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
> And froze the genial current of the soul. (49-52)

Now having in some sense considered both sides of the issue at hand, Gray, swayed by his ambivalent feelings, wavers once again. He returns to his initial position with regards to the poor and the

rich. Abundant circumstances, he decides, foster great crimes as well as great achievements. They may permit someone "To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land" (63), but they also provide the opportunity to "wade through slaughter to a throne" (67). The confined lot of the poor may keep them from doing any great good, but at least they cannot contract the refined vices of those with an ampler education. They cannot learn to be disingenuous and conceal shameful blushes over a misdeed. Nor can they prostitute the Muse to serve the interests of the wealthy and proud.

Once again Gray applauds the poor for their "sober wishes" (74). In a metaphor that recalls the refuge in the Eton College poem he contrasts the circumscribed life of the poor with the more spacious lot of the "madding crowd" (73). In this poem, however, the enclosure, the "sequester'd vale of life" (75) does not protect the inhabitants from the invasion of hostile forces and allow them to be carefree. It keeps their life quiet and prevents them from straying too carelessly beyond the bounds of sobriety, which in a different context entirely is Selima's fatal shortcoming. Indulging in anything beyond useful work and simple domestic pleasures, Gray again feels, leads to something frivolous or frantic, "ignoble strife" (73).

According to this reversal in Gray's thinking, the simple, sober lot of the poor should be preferable to that of their sophisticated overlords. And the original ending of the poem does, in fact, take

this attitude:

> The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow
> Exalt the brave, & idolize Success
> But more to Innocence their Safety owe
> Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless
> (73-76, first version)

Gray offers no sound reason, however, for making this choice, and elsewhere, particularly in his lofty tribute to the Duke of Grafton in the "Ode to Music," sincerely exalts majestic power himself.[10] His decision in favor of a simple, rural life is, in fact, as arbitrary as his decision to devote himself to the rugged virtues that Adversity can bestow. In neither choice does he effectively refute the argument opposing his inclination. He merely gives in to his immediate impulse. In the adversity ode he never directly confronts the value of flourishing in carefree circumstances, and in the first version of the "Elegy" his final preference for "the sacred Calm" (81) of the country ignores his previous arguments in favor of something more exciting and glorious.

The final version of the "Elegy," however, corrects this imbalance. Instead of concluding in favor of the sober swain's lot, it proceeds to consider a situation in which all men, rich and poor, flourish alike, in which the best of both their worlds are combined. This situation is life itself, when considered as a whole and opposed to the grisly fate of death, where one is condemned to a state of "dumb Forgetfulness" (85). The need to make one's mark in life and ward off oblivion, Gray realizes, is shared

by both those who lead a simple life and those who are given to extravagance. Even the rude graves of the poor are decked with a "frail memorial" (78), which, even though it is composed only of "uncouth rhimes and shapeless sculpture" (79), testifies to the vital instinct that once burned within the dead and to the intense desire they shared with the wealthy to hold on to life, even if only vicariously by leaving some trace behind or by being remembered.

> For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
> This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
> Left the warm precincts of the chearful day,
> Nor cast a longing ling'ring look behind?
>
> 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 wonted Fires. (85-92)

Conscious of their common doom, all people act the same way: "the voice of Nature" (91) cries out within them. This futile plea is anything but sober and restrained, and yet there is nothing frivolous about it. It combines the fiery vitality of "noble rage" (51), of those born to sway "the rod of empire" (47) or wake "to extasy the living lyre" (48), with the high seriousness of someone conscious of impending death.

The importance of this insight is difficult to determine. On the one hand, it seems to be a genuine reconciliation of the warring sympathies in Gray's mind. At the very least it has a remarkable effect on him, evident in the way he expresses himself. Gone are the sarcastic scorn of pompous display and the uneasy defense of

simple rectitude. In their place is the calm certitude of someone who has discovered a source of unity in a bitterly divided world. He has no doubt about the validity of his sentiments on death.

Yet there is a significant limitation to the value of Gray's discovery. As he himself implies, most people act as human beings united in a common struggle against the emptiness of oblivion only when they are actually in the face of death. Ordinarily they live according to their specific circumstances in life as rich or poor, simple or sophisticated, each with his own virtues and shortcomings, but staunchly opposed to one another and irreconcilable. To be sure of flourishing in life, the implication is, one cannot depend on a specific set of circumstances, but needs to make a conscious effort of will to rise above the petty divisions dictated by circumstances and think of life itself as the common lot of mankind with death and oblivion our common enemy.

This reconciliation, such as it is, between the conflicting modes of vitality considered in the poem is reflected in the way the poem is written. Although I have emphasized Gray's inner debate over the relative merits of the lot of poor, rural folk and that of wealthy gentry and ignored the context of these social reflections, they do form only part of the larger structure of an elegy. Gray begins the poem by mourning the "rude Forefathers of the hamlet" (16), all those who lack a fine tomb to perpetuate

their memory, and throughout he is as much engaged in raising a trophy to the dead as are the wealthy. His memorial, however, is neither so luxurious as the ornamented tomb raised to the memory of the proud, nor so frail as the uncouth monument erected to the "rude Forefathers" (16) by "th' unletter'd muse" (81). Gray's memorial in verse combines something of the simplicity of the one and elegance of the other.

In this achievement Gray is only following the elegiac theory of the eighteenth century, although his poem acquired such authority that it became the model for the type of elegy it embodied. Writers as varied as Joseph Trapp and William Shenstone, echoing the classical tradition, agreed that the primary requirement of the elegy is simplicity and naturalness.[11] Since the motivating force behind such a poem is supposed to be grief, the feeling must be or at least appear to be natural. This critical tenet lies behind Dr. Johnson's strictures against "Lycidas."[12] According to him, Milton's elegy is too ingenious and obviously learned to be the expression of genuine sorrow. At the same time the critics felt that the elegy should not be too plain. Trapp said that it must be humble, but not abject. Recalling the artful touches of the Roman elegists like Ovid, he declared that the elegy requires a measure of elegance as well as naturalness. Shenstone made the same point by distinguishing the elegy from the pastoral. The latter, he claimed, is unpolished rusticity; the former, polished.

There is a degree of elegance and refinement, he felt, that is not inconsistent with the rural virtues of simplicity and innocence, and that degree is what sets the elegy apart from its cousin genre.

One way in which Gray fulfills these requirements and echoes the resolution of the central issue considered in the poem is by refining simple sentiments with elegant diction and phrasing. When, for example, he charges Ambition not to mock the "useful toil" (29) of the peasants, he expresses his admiration for a simple, hardy outdoors life through the sophisticated devices of the poet. He speaks out for simple manners in personified abstractions and urges his case with a balanced, stately rhetoric. Yet there is nothing so obviously discordant in Gray's praise of the busy housewife at her chores or of the manly labor involved in ploughing the ground as there is in his catalogue of children's games and activities in the Eton ode. On the contrary, the refined diction and elegant phrasing blend easily with the simple feelings. Part of the reason is the unobtrusiveness of the sophisticated language and structural devices referring to the peasants. Even though "glebe" (26), for example, may be considered a poetic rather than an ordinary word, it is still far simpler than the periphrasis "to cleave/ With pliant arm thy glassy wave" (25-26) for "to swim" in the Eton ode. The parallel constructions, moreover, which lend so dignified a rhetorical note to the praise, are fairly inconspicuous amidst

the wealth of details they organize. Consider, for example, the "no more" construction of stanzas 5 and 6 or the balancing "ofts" and "Hows" of stanza 7.

> The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
> The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built
> shed,
> The cock's shrill clarion, or the ecchoing
> horn,
> No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.
>
> 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,
> 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!
> (17-28)

This eloquence is all the more unobtrusive when compared with the blatant devices that Gray uses to attack the pomposity of the rich, the personified abstractions like "Honour's voice" (43) or the soothing tongue of "Flatt'ry" (44). Though certainly more prominent than the quiet praise of the poor, this style does not, however, predominate in the poem, because it is only occasional and, even when it is used, and rejected like the prideful ways it points to. For example, in criticizing "Grandeur" (31) for disdaining the poor, Gray is attacking the inflated language by which he depicted the puffed up aristocrats as much as the aristocrats themselves.

Another way in which Gray satisfies the demands of the elegiac form and thus reinforces the resolution of the argument in the poem

is in his versification. According to Shenstone, the problem facing the poet is to find a free and unconstrained verse form to convey the simplicity of the elegiac emotions. It cannot be too lax and prosaic, and yet neither can it be too artificial and ostentatious. The reader has to be able to attend to the sentiment without being distracted by the sound, but some rhythmical quality is necessary to raise the poem above the vulgarity of prose. Shenstone found that the heroic couplet, though well adapted by Pope to the elegy, especially in his poem "To the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady," nevertheless tends to terminate the flow of feeling too arbitrarily. At the other extreme he found that the irregular rhyme scheme which Milton employs so effectively in "Lycidas" is usually too loose for the elegy. What he recommended is the heroic meter in alternate rhyme. Not only is this form the closest approximation of the Latin elegiac meter with its alternating hexameters and pentameters, but with its regular, yet delayed rhyme scheme it is the least ostentatious verse that is not downright prosaic. In the "Elegy" Gray uses this version of the quatrain with such authority that as a standard for the elegiac form it became associated with him throughout the rest of the century. An anonymous contributor to the Annual Register for 1767, for example, points out in his routine discussion of the elegy that since Gray this type of poem has always been in alternate rhyme.[13]

The chief objection to this stanzaic form, according to Shenstone,

is that like the couplet it may seem to break the sense of the lines too regularly; in other words, if it errs in any way, it errs by seeming too artful. Shenstone himself did not consider this fault so great as to discard the quatrain altogether. Gray, however, seems to have worried more about this slight imperfection. In a letter to Walpole just prior to the first publication of the poem he insisted that it be printed "without any Interval between the Stanza's, because the Sense is in some Places continued beyond them."[14] Dodsley followed these instructions in the first printing, but Gray never repeated the admonition, and later printings both in his lifetime and afterwards have been broken up on the page into stanzas. Whether he approved of this alteration or not we do not know, but the intervals are not strictly in keeping with elegiac theory, and Gray's early concern to avoid them points to his familiarity with the problems of elegiac form and his meticulous desire to avoid an unnecessary display of artfulness.

Still another way in which Gray meets the requirements of the elegy and echoes the resolution of the conflict in the poem was pointed out by the contributor to the Annual Register for 1767. Typically, he remarked, the elegy is an expression of sorrow, but when the source of grief is a universal calamity rather than domestic distress, then the poem is often extended to include moral contemplations, as in Gray. Evidently the distance between the poet and the calamity he is mourning sanctions the use of the rational

faculty. If the loss is supposed to be personal, then moral reflections are out of order. As the contributor to the Register said, where the head is painfully laborious, the heart is at ease. In other words, evidence of an active mind belies any profession of grief. For further illustration of this point again we might turn to Johnson's attack on "Lycidas." "Where there is leisure for fiction," he said, "there is little grief." But Gray is not related to the "rude Forefathers of the hamlet" (16) except as any man is related to his fellow men. It is thus appropriate for him to reflect on "th' unhonour'd Dead" (93) as well as grieve for them. The entire portion of the poem devoted to these reflections, then, is not only set in the context of an elegy, but is an integral part of it. When Gray ponders the virtues of a country life and the achievements of greatness, he is not digressing from the purpose of his elegy, but fulfilling it.

The very thing, moreover, that sanctions the dignified reflections, the obscurity of the "rude Forefathers" (16), the fact that Gray did not know them, is also the source of his grief. What awakens his sympathy for these poor, unnamed people is the oblivion to which destiny has consigned them. His sorrow over the things that they will no longer experience, from the "incense-breathing Morn" (17) and "swallow twitt'ring" (18) to the "blazing hearth" (21) and "busy housewife" (22), is genuine enough. But he is far more concerned that the living shall forget these people than that

they shall forget life. The real tragedy of their death, he implies, is that it is not seen as a tragedy and their memory is allowed to lapse into obscurity. When he expresses his sympathy for man's irrepressible desire to leave some trace behind to be remembered by, his feelings carry a conviction that strikes even Dr. Johnson as sincere, and no critic has been more determined to abuse Gray than Dr. Johnson.[15]

The blending of the two elements in the structure of the elegy corresponds to the resolution of the conflict in the reflective element itself. In the reflective part of the elegy Gray discovers a way in which the simple, sober peasants and the sophisticated and gay aristocrats are alike and in which they each display the characteristics of the other as well as their own. In the face of death the proud dispense with frivolity and acquire some of the sobriety of the hardy swains. And the swains show some of the rage to live that is usually more evident in the thrilling style of the wealthy and powerful, as they command "Th' applause of list'ning senates" (61) or "wade through slaughter to a throne" (67). In the scheme of the elegy, however, the entire reflective element corresponds to the frenzied or stirring life of those who have won fame and fortune.

It is in the turns of his thought that Gray is at strife with himself. The sudden shift in his thinking when he reverts from praise of a glorious lot to applause for a more sober and circum-

scribed life indicates a profound uneasiness of mind. In fact, in his effort to decide between the advantages of a "destiny obscure" (30) and "the pomp of pow'r" (33) or perhaps I should say in his curious need to defend the poor from imaginary insults and accusations, he shows himself to be embroiled in the kind of "ignoble strife" (73) that he associates with the frantic world. That such a struggle exists is confirmed by the first version of the poem, which ends at this point in the argument. Instead of merely repudiating the way of the madding crowd, as he does in the final version, Gray explicitly identifies himself with their strife and rejects it as his own vice.

> 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. (85-88)

In excising this passage Gray did not eliminate the personal struggle. He only removed the explicit reference to it. But the sobering emotional element of the elegy, it is true, his heartfelt grief over the fate of the obscure, does significantly tone down the tumultuousness of his reflections.

At the same time, however, it may be said that his many vigorous thoughts enliven his otherwise glumly serious disposition at the sight of all the mouldering graves in the churchyard. When he is moved to scorn by the pretentious disdain of "Grandeur" (31) for the poor, his pointed, ironic questions spark the poem with the

incisive wit of ridicule.

> Can storied urn or animated bust
> Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
> Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
> Or Flatt'ry sooth the dull cold ear of Death?
> (41-44)

In another vein Gray's copious thoughts on the theme of adorning an otherwise barren life with the fruits of political and poetic talent enrich the poem just as the talents he speaks of enrich life. Instead of making his point in a plain manner with as few words as possible, he elaborates on it lavishly, stating and re-stating his theme several times. He begins with a general remark about the undeveloped or neglected talent now forever laid to rest with those buried in the country churchyard.

> Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
> Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire,
> Hands, that the rod of empire might have
> sway'd,
> Or wak'd to estasy the living lyre. (45-48)

A few stanzas later he repeats himself with a flourish, the only variation being in the specificity of the references.

> 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.
> (57-60)

But the most purely ornamental repetition is the stanza with the famous lines on the gem and the flower.

> 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. (53-56)

There are, of course, minor modifications of the main theme from stanza to stanza, but these are of far less importance than the exuberant repetition of the theme that enriches the poem.

However, whether we consider the reflective element of the elegy to be frantic or exuberant and the elegiac emotions to be sobering or glum, the fusion of the two elements raises the simplicity of the feelings above the level of plainness and brings a measure of conviction to the sophistication of the thinking.

The resolution of the conflict in the poem between opposing modes of vitality is reflected not only in the form of the elegy, but in the character of the elegist himself. Unlike the majority of people, who act, according to Gray's depiction, as though life itself were their lot, instead of poverty or wealth, only when actually in the face of death, Gray rises to this perception during the course of his meditations on the death of others. He is especially able to perceive the common lot of the simple and the sophisticated, because, as the formal features of his elegy suggest, he shares the characteristics of both parties. In itself this combination of qualities is admirable, not only for enabling him to perceive the unity underlying the class divisions, but for helping him to avoid the shortcomings of either class, the stolidity of the peasants and the frivolity of the aristocrats. Nevertheless,

accompanying this unique achievement are some serious difficulties, which are explored in the framing stanzas of the poem.

These stanzas, which form the larger structure in which the elegy itself is set, have been the focal point for a critical controversy over the poem. The debate centers on whether the closing stanzas refer to the speaker in the first part of the poem, who enters in line 4 as "me" and is usually taken to be Gray, or whether they refer to the so-called stonecutter, the unnamed craftsman responsible for the "uncouth rhimes and shapeless sculpture" (79) that deck the graves of the poor. Though the controversy has raged for many years, the speciousness of the stonecutter argument has been definitively documented by John H. Sutherland.[16] As he points out, no advocate of the stonecutter interpretation has adequately explained the contradiction between the reference to the stonecutter as "th' unletter'd muse" (81) and the line in his supposed epitaph that tells us, "Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth" (119). Obviously he cannot be both "unletter'd" (81) and educated. On the other hand, the interpretation of these stanzas as referring to the original speaker contains no comparable absurdity and fits in with the rest of the poem at least as well as an extended reference to the stonecutter.

What we learn from the framing stanzas, if they are taken to refer to the elegist himself, is that his unique combination of qualities, though helping him to perceive the common nature uniting

the simple and the sophisticated, ironically is the source of his own isolation from them. In a word, his mixture of qualities makes him a misfit. By virtue of "his humble birth" (119), his heartfelt sympathy for rural folk, and his disdain for fame and fortune, he belongs with the simple swains of the country. But his learning disqualifies him for the lower class, just as his origins and inclinations disqualify him for the upper. As the opening scene discloses, he is all alone.

> The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
> And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (3-4)

His isolation in the churchyard, moreover, is symbolic. He is not only physically apart; the failure of the peasants to understand him isolates him also. However obscure he himself may be, he is a stranger in the land of the poor. According to his portrait of the "hoary-headed Swain" (97), the rude fathers of the hamlet see him with puzzlement and perhaps paternal concern, but not with the deep and gratifying understanding of a "kindred Spirit" (96). The old man evidently is concerned about him, for otherwise he would not take such careful note of his wandering about the meadows or stretching out beneath "yonder nodding beech" (101) and still less would he pay the notice he does to the absence of the youth and take the trouble to point out his grave to an inquiring friend. Yet the swain's inability to understand the speaker is also apparent. The evidence is not so much in his failure to interpret the young

man's behavior with certainty, but in the misconception underlying all his guesses. In the words of the swain,

> "Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
> "Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he wou'd rove,
> "Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
> "Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless
> love. (105-108)

According to this view, the young man is either glad to go his own way and scornful of others or miserable at being solitary. The swain has no conception of the youth's understanding of simple folk or of his sympathetic attachment to all of suffering mankind, which his epitaph pays tribute to: "He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear" (123). The swain, in other words, would never suspect that the young man might write an elegy on all the unhonored swains lying buried in the country churchyard.

Even in death the young man is set apart. Though his head rests "upon the lap of Earth" (117) instead of in a trophied tomb like those who have achieved fame and fortune, his grave is not so common as those around him in the churchyard. No "uncouth rhimes" (79) commemorate his life, but a fine epitaph or "lay" (115), which the "hoary-headed Swain" (97) specially points out for the consideration of the inquiring friend, presumably at least in part because it is so unusual in those surroundings.

In view of the speaker's ironic isolation, which he is no doubt keenly aware of, since he himself portrays the old swain as misunderstanding, it is not surprising that he loses the enthusiasm

necessary to maintain his defiant attitude to death. Ultimately, instead of feeling that to flourish one must struggle against the "dumb Forgetfulness" (85) of death, he turns toward God and a life after death for salvation. Only in the "bosom of his Father and his God" (128), as his epitaph suggests, does he finally hope for the fulfillment so difficult to achieve on earth. This change of heart weakens the sense of resolution projected by the speaker's insight into life and reflected in the formal features of the elegy and re-establishes the ambivalence of the opening stanzas as the dominant mode of the poem.

Throughout the poetry discussed in this chapter we see that whether or not easy or hard conditions are vital depends on the point of view of the speaker. For the moralist in the "Ode on the Spring," who considers himself serious and highly values sobriety, the easy life led by the swarm of mankind is mere frivolous diversion, devoid of genuine vitality and joy. For the anxious adult of the Eton College ode, the easy ways of childhood, like the spring, bring life and happiness. To the worshipper of Adversity, the harsh goddess alone can ensure a vital spirit. Finally, to the elegist, who is both sober like the visitor at Eton and enthusiastic like the insects in spring, neither ease nor rigor is by itself sufficient to guarantee genuine fulfillment.

In the past this variation in the nature of the speaker has raised the question of the authenticity of his voice. One set of

critics takes the variation as evidence that the speaker cannot be Gray "the person."[17] Committed to the assumption that Gray is ruled by a sense of decorum forbidding any personal revelation, these critics are suspicious of any efforts to trace the sentiments in his poetry to his biography. Out of this school arises the view that Gray must be referring to the so-called stonecutter in the closing stanzas of the "Elegy," for it would be an unthinkable indiscretion if the epitaph were his own. According to the ad hoc argument these people use, this would indicate a self-pity of which Gray was incapable in a poem he allowed to be published. To support their assumption about Gray, however, despite their admonition against the use of biographical data, they marshal evidence from his personal letters calculated to establish him beyond doubt as an exceptionally modest man.

Another group of critics, strongly committed to the view that straightforward honesty is the criterion of authenticity, dismiss Gray's obvious personae as the regrettable vestige of the Augustan mode of poetry.[18] Far from being an authentic sign of Gray's presence, the mask for these critics conceals the real Gray and points only to his insincerity or shyness. Like Wordsworth, who is the father of this school, they believe that the more prose-like a poetic style, the more natural and genuine it is. Hence, wherever they find a contrast in Gray's poetry between a florid and plainer style, they point to the latter as evidence of his real

self. From this school comes the misleading distinction between the strident and false declamation of the Pindaric odes and the quiet and genuine voice of the "Elegy" and the other more meditative and personal poems.

I would like to suggest, however, that Gray is not so much interested in concealing or revealing himself in his poems with different speakers, but in establishing the proper stance to take in considering the various circumstances of the world around him. The variation in the identity of his speaking voice may raise the question of "the real Gray," but more fruitfully it also suggests his concern in deciding on the best way, both poetically and psychologically, to achieve any authentic insight in an inquiry such as he undertakes. Should he be detached and deliberate or should he be enthusiastic and throw himself whole-heartedly into the situation he is considering? In other words, his changing persona raises the question of the extent to which he approves and makes use of a sympathetic imagination, or the ability to identify oneself with the object of one's interest and contemplation.[19]

We have already seen in the "Affectus" entry in his Commonplace Book the importance of this concept to Gray for moral purposes.[20] If we could not feel for ourselves the intensity of another person's suffering, he believed, we would not be inclined to commiserate or help others in their misfortune and the entire moral order would collapse into chaos. There is evidence, moreover,

that the sympathetic imagination was significant to Gray on aesthetic grounds. He spells out his commitment to it in a rare statement of poetic theory tucked away in an essay on Samuel Daniel. Vital to the writing of an elegy, he says, is

> a feeling mind strongly possess'd by its subject, and surely he that is so in poetry has done more than half his work, but it is not every imagination that can throw itself into all the situations of a fictitious subject.[21]

In a casual remark recorded by Norton Nicholls in his "Reminiscences" Gray confirms that he not only admired this faculty, but employed it as well. When Nicholls asked him how he felt when he composed "The Bard," he said, "Why I felt myself the bard."[22]

Yet Gray does not give unqualified approval to the use of the sympathetic imagination. He is as ambivalent about entering wholeheartedly into an imagined situation as he is, in the final analysis, about abandoning oneself entirely to sporting in the sunshine, without a thought for serious matters. Even in the essay on Samuel Daniel he calls attention to the need for a mind cool enough to judge of propriety and not to be dazzled or carried away too far by the subject being contemplated.[23]

But Gray's most decisive reservations about the sympathetic imagination are implicit in his poetry. He wrote only one fragment of a play, Agrippina, in which he submerges his personality entirely in the characters he creates. And there are only a few poems like "The Bard," where he identifies himself so completely with the

object of his creation. In addition, sometimes he is a highly self-conscious speaker who deliberately detaches himself from the subject of his poem. In the "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat" his mockery of Selima's frantic effort to snatch the gold-fish and his advice to female beauties everywhere on the subject of "heedless hearts" (41) suggest that he is more indebted to his critical judgment than to any sympathetic use of imagination. The "Ode on the Spring," moreover, points to a great danger of the sympathetic imagination. In using this faculty rather than a critical power, one is not necessarily tolerant or understanding. The speaker of the spring ode, the moralist, identifies himself with the object of his sympathy, but he is sympathetic only to himself. He cannot see beyond his own most cherished thoughts. This single-mindedness is clearly a liability, since it results from not even considering the advantages of the life-style adopted by the swarm of mankind instead of conceding these and absorbing them into a more comprehensive outlook. The same inability to admit opposition may be charged against the self-important speaker of "Luna Habitabilis," who loses himself in a rapturous prophecy of the aggrandizement of his native land.

Gray's inability to decide whether he should adopt an attitude of cool detachment or enthusiastic involvement in conducting his inquiry into the world around him parallels his inability to decide finally on the most favorable circumstances to live in and points to

the fact that his ambivalence pervades everything he considers. We shall see still another instance of it in the next and last chapter.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]A. R. Humphreys, "A Classical Education and Eighteenth-Century Poetry," Scrutiny, VIII (1939-1940), 204; Patricia Meyer Spacks, The Poetry of Vision: Five Eighteenth-Century Poets (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 91-95.

[2]Both the terms are attributed to a force that puts to flight anxieties and fears. The Latin phrase is part of the text of the poem; the term "poetic Genius" appears in a note to "The Progress of Poesy." See Gray's Poems, p. 206.

[3]Roger Lonsdale, ed., The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, and Oliver Goldsmith (London, 1969), pp. 60-63.

[4]Schlüter comes to the enthusiast by way of the ancient structure of the classical hymn, which he traces in the English ode up to the time of the Romantics. According to his argument, the ode is an impassioned prayer to the gods or some supernatural power, and Gray's poem is merely a displaced version of this formula. See Kurt Schlüter, Die Englische Ode (Bonn, 1964), pp. 145-152.

[5]See Gray's Correspondence, III, 935-936.

[6]C. S. Northrup, ed., Gray's Essays and Criticisms (Boston and London, 1911), pp. 10-11.

[7]This passage from Gray's Commonplace Book has not been printed by itself, but is quoted in such sources as Roger Lonsdale, ed., The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith (London, 1969), p. 71.

[8]See Gray's Correspondence, I, 193, 195, 196.

[9]See Schlüter, pp. 31-47.

[10]Many sneering contemporaries of Gray considered the ode nothing but a deplorable exercise in venality. But the facts reveal that Gray's appointment at Cambridge, which the Duke made, occurred before the writing of the ode and without any prompting by Gray himself. If the poem served any social function besides celebrating the installation of the Duke as Chancellor of Cambridge, it was no more than a simple act of gratitude. See Gray's Correspondence, III, 1033-1040, 1070-1072.

[11]For these and subsequent references to Trapp and Shenstone

see Joseph Trapp, Lectures on Poetry (London, 1742), pp. 163-171 and William Shenstone, "A Prefatory Essay on Elegy," Works (London, 1773), pp. 15-26.

[12]For Dr. Johnson's attack on "Lycidas" see Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets (London: Frederick Warne & Co., n.d.), p. 65. The subsequent reference is to this edition and page.

[13]Annual Register for 1767, pt. ii, 220-222.

[14]Gray's Correspondence, I, 341.

[15]For Dr. Johnson's feelings about the "Elegy" see Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets (London: Frederick Warne & Co., n.d.), p. 502.

[16]John H. Sutherland, "The Stonecutter in Gray's 'Elegy,'" Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy, ed., Herbert W. Starr (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), pp. 79-81.

[17]See Herbert W. Starr, "'A Youth to Fortune and to Fame Unknown': A Re-estimation," pp. 41-50; Frank H. Ellis, "Gray's Elegy: The Biographical Problem in Literary Criticism," pp. 51-75; Morse Peckham, "Gray's 'Epitaph' Revisited," pp. 76-78; John H. Sutherland, "The Stonecutter in Gray's 'Elegy,'" pp. 79-81; collected in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's Elegy, ed., Herbert W. Starr (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968).

[18]See Wordsworth's attack on Gray in the preface to the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads; Patricia Meyer Spacks in the chapter cited above and in "'Artful Strife': Conflict in Gray's Poetry," PMLA, LXXXI (1967), 63-69; F. Doherty, "The Two Voices of Gray," EIC, XIII (1963), 222-230; and C. S. Northrup in his introduction to Gray's Essays and Criticisms (Boston and London, 1911), pp. xxvii-xxxv, xlii-xliv.

[19]For a comprehensive general account of the concept of the sympathetic imagination in the eighteenth century see W. J. Bate, From Classic to Romantic (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), pp. 129-159; for an application of this concept to theories of acting during the century see E. R. Wasserman, "The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-century Theories of Acting," JEGP, XLVI (1947), 264-272.

[20]See reference 7 above.

[21]See Gray's Essay and Criticisms, cited above, p. 121.

[22]See Gray's Correspondence, III, 1290.

[23]Gray's Essays and Criticisms, p. 120.

CHAPTER FOUR

HYPERION'S MARCH

When Gray feels that man cannot rely on circumstances for his spirit to thrive, he turns elsewhere, to a power defiantly independent of circumstances. This power sometimes seems to be located in the self as a vital inner resource. In Gray's angry letters on materialism and mechanism he proclaims his faith in the power of the human soul to determine itself regardless of the circumstances in which it is nurtured.[1] What this means vividly emerges in his fragment on "Education and Government," where he ponders the tyrannical forces encroaching on European freedom. Are northerners at a disadvantage, he wonders, in a clash with natives of a warmer climate, as lamps are inferior to the sun (64-67)? Do Europeans need the "Influence of the Northern Star" (68) to steel themselves for war? Though he admits that circumstances may and do influence the European character, he strongly denies the inevitability of this influence (72). There is a power, he feels, within men's souls on which they can rely to rise to the threat of tyranny and resist it fiercely, regardless of the climate and topography of their homeland, whether they live in "Libya's Deserts" or "Zembla's snows" (77).

Sometimes, however, this power seems not so much to reside in the human soul, but to encompass and permeate the world as a great

spirit. To this universal power he gives various names, ranging from "Sapientia dia" (23), or divine wisdom, in "De Principiis Cogitandi" to the "poetic Genius" in a footnote to "The Progress of Poesy."[2] Though the gulf between poetry and religion separates these names, they both refer to the same tremendous power. Gray depicts divine wisdom as a rosy torch that "with serene countenance enlarges the minds of men, shows the way to new joys, and scatters into flight monstrous cares and unsubstantial terrors" (Hendrickson's translation):

> ... vultuque sereno Humanas aperit mentes,
> nova gaudia monstrans,
> Deformesque fugat curas, vanosque timores.
> (24-26)

In "The Progress of Poesy" he portrays the "poetic Genius," or the "heav'nly Muse" (48), as the army of the sun god Hyperion, which puts to flight the

> Night, and all her sickly dews,
> Her Spectres wan, and Birds of boding cry.
> (49-50)

These monsters he himself glosses as "the real and imaginary ills of life."[3]

Despite the awesome attributes of this power independent of circumstances, Gray does not permanently dismiss circumstances themselves, the conditions of the world around him as a means of thriving. He is, in fact, as ambivalent about these two modes of flourishing as he is about the relative merit, for example, of

mountainous surroundings and gentle plains. Sometimes he prefers to rely on the spirit associated with a specific condition in life; sometimes he turns to a power independent of place and time.

These mixed feelings almost never find expression within the confines of a single poem. The fragment on "Education and Government" provides the most concentrated example of this ambivalence. After rejecting the influence of soil and climate in favor of the soul's uncircumscribed power to suspend "Th' inferior Laws that rule our Clay" (80), Gray again acknowledges the fostering power of local spirits.

> Not but the human Fabrick from the Birth
> Inbibes a Flavour of it's parent Earth
> As various Tracts enforce a various Toil;
> The manners speak the Idiom of their Soil.
> (84-87)

The examples he has in mind, moreover, confirm that his approval of depending on circumstances to flourish is as whole-hearted as his enthusiasm for the soul's self-reliant vigor. The challenge of a mountain life, he points out, reaps benefits in the hardy spirit it produces. The need to till "flinty Ground" (91), to control swiftly flooding torrents, and to brave savage geasts trains the spirit to "patient Valour" (94). At the same time, he maintains, in more "sultry Climes (100), the flooding conditions of the Nile are responsible for the adventurous spirit of the dusky Egyptians, who are inclined to take to oar and sail and "drive before the gale" (105)

Or on frail floats to distant cities ride,
That rise and glitter o'er the ambient tide.
(106-107)

For the most part, however, instead of witnessing this ambivalent attitude of Gray's within a single poem, we need to infer it from the total pattern of his work. Though there is a tendency to think of a chronological development in Gray's writing, since his major poems emphasizing the vitality of an independent spirit, his two Pindarics, were written after his most important poems exploring the possibility of flourishing under various circumstances, such as the Eton College Ode and the "Elegy," the notion of a simple chronological development is misleading.

On the one hand, examples of Gray's enthusiasm for a lofty, independent spirit occur quite early in his career. In the epistle to Favonius, for example, written in 1738, even before his Grand Tour of the continent with Walpole, he celebrates the poetic inspiration that enables him to enjoy roaming about the countryside without a care for the sickly dews of night surrounding him. Even in the Eton College ode the speaker comes under the influence of a visionary power that temporarily fires his soul and gives him immunity to the anguish fostered by his condition in life. And at the same time that Gray was working on the "Elegy" he wrote the lines in "Education and Government" asserting the power of man's soul to determine itself independently of time and place. In opposition to the soporific effect of both hot and cold climates,

he says, the soul is capable of awakening "each slumb'ring Energy" (78) and raising "the Mortal to a Height Divine" (83).

On the other hand, examples of his interest in determining the reliability of various circumstances for nurturing a vital spirit occur as late as several years after the Pindarics. In "The Descent of Odin," written in 1761, Gray alters the original Icelandic material and the Latin translation of Bartholinus to reveal his abiding ambivalence towards conditions of ease. Even though the style of the poem, with its supernatural setting in the Norse underworld, its use of Scandinavian mythology, and its urgent tetrameter rhythms, sets it dramatically apart from a contemplative poem like the "Elegy," it bears a remarkable similarity to Gray's famous lament in the essential ambivalence structuring its attitudes. The poem turns on the efforts of Odin, the "King of Men" (1), to awaken the prophetess of hell and consult her regarding the fate of his son. In both the original and the Latin translation that Gray used the "prophetic Maid" (20) is annoyed by Odin's attempts to interrupt her rest, but no special emphasis is placed on her attitude.[4] In Gray's version, however, her feelings are brought into relief by the introduction of an allusion that undercuts what she says. According to her explicit view, Odin is guilty of breaking "the quiet of the tomb" (28). She accuses him of disturbing her "bed of rest" (36) with a "voice unblest" (35). But at the same time, in lines which have no equivalent in Gray's sources, her request to be left

in peace directly echoes the Genius of Winter in the "Frost Scene," as Gray calls it in an early letter to Walpole,[5] of Dryden's King Arthur. Like the reluctant prophetess, the wintry spirit, addressing Cupid, asks:

> What power art thou, who from below,
> Hast made me rise, unwillingly and slow,
> From Beds of Everlasting Snow![6]

In addition, just as the prophetess implores Odin to "Let me, let me sleep again" (34), the Genius of Winter pleads with Cupid, who wishes to thaw the polar region as evidence of love's power, to "Let me, let me Freeze again to Death." Since Winter here obviously stands for a lethargic reluctance to live, it becomes clear that Gray faces the same dilemma that confronts him in the "Elegy" and elsewhere. He is uncertain whether to consider the abode of the prophetess as a place of sacred calm, as she herself claims, or merely as a lifeless burial ground, as her unwitting allusion to Dryden suggests.

Despite the fact that throughout his life Gray is ambivalent about the fostering power of circumstances and of a spirit transcending circumstances, he does focus most of his attention on the world around him. He simply devotes more poems to an exploration of various places and times than to a consideration of a vigorous, independent spirit. Belonging to the former group are those poems in chapter one concerned with his own place and time and those dealing with distant lands and past ages and then, in addition, all

the poems in chapters two and three divided into categories which cut across spatial and temporal distinctions. These include the poems dealing with possible alternatives to circumstances that encourage lethargy, whether in the past or present, in England or elsewhere, and then the poems focusing on alternatives to situations fostering a frenzied spirit. Also included, of course, are the poems in which Gray tries to decide between these various alternatives suggested for flourishing, namely, poems such as the "Elegy."

On the other hand, instead of devoting entire poems to a consideration of a fostering spirit independent of circumstances, Gray often only broaches this theme as an occasional thought in a poem emphasizing other things. In these cases the power considered is typically portrayed in opposition either to adverse circumstances, such as an enfeebling old age, or to the binding influence of circumstances, both harmful and beneficial. In the Eton College ode, for example, Gray is moved to an enthusiastic pitch as he beholds in a vision the misfortunes that afflict man's body and soul. During these visionary moments he demonstrates the power to withstand the onslaught of adversity and triumph over rather than succumb to the anguish and despair it ordinarily leaves in its victims. In the "Elegy" Gray points to a similar power in his perception that man is not necessarily limited to the immediately available circumstances in life. He need not be determined by the strengths and shortcomings inherent in the lot of the poor peasant or that of

the wealthy aristocrat. Instead, Gray realizes, when man is actually in the face of death or when he is merely conscious of the inevitability of death, he has the power to rise above his specific lot in life and flourish independently of his circumstances, whether he happens to be rich or poor, simple or sophisticated.

There are two poems, however, Gray's Pindaric odes, "The Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard," in which his enthusiasm for an independently flourishing spirit is not an occasional theme, but the dominant one. We can see evidence of this spirit even in the implications of the lyrical genre to which these poems belong. According to most commentators throughout the eighteenth century, the distinguishing feature of lyrical poetry is not any emotional lilt, but elevation and dignity, something superior to what the poet is ordinarily capable of.[7] In the words of Joseph Trapp,

> As to the Nature of the Lyric Poem, it is, of all Kinds of Poetry, the most poetical; and is as distinct, both in Style and Thought, from the rest, as Poetry in general is from Prose .... Now this is the boldest of all other Kinds, full of Rapture, and elevated from common Language the most that is possible.[8]

Of the various kinds of lyrical poems, or odes, commonly written in the century, each of which corresponds to a classical master, the Pindaric was universally considered to be the most sublime, evincing the loftiest spirit. The Pindaric ode, according to Edward Young, for example, is governed by a spirit at once stately, imperious, and "so intoxicating that it was the highest com-

mendation that could be given an Antient, that he was not afraid to taste of her charms." On the other hand, he says, Horace, who feared to risk this intoxication, wrote under a muse who is "correct, solid, and moral." And the anacreontic ode "is like Amoret, most sweet, natural, and delicate .... inspiring complacency, not awe."[9] Even the epic, traditionally the loftiest of the genres, was thought by some critics to be less dazzling than the great ode. According to Gray himself, the epic alternates between the "lyric glare" and "graver colours," and in passing from one to the other, he says, "we seem to drop from verse into mere prose, from light into darkness."[10] In view of all these assumptions, for Gray even to attempt a Pindaric is a sign that, temporarily at least, he was under the influence of a far bolder and more independent power than the gloomy spirit of his age. In "Stanzas to Mr. Bentley" this latter spirit prompted him to write:

> But not to one in this benighted age
> Is that diviner inspiration giv'n
> That burns in Shakespeare's and in Milton's page,
> The pomp and prodigality of heav'n. (17-20)

In "The Progress of Poesy," however, Gray shakes off this pessimism and aspires to be another Milton "And justify the laws of Jove" (47).

There is another way in which Gray's use of the Pindaric form itself expresses a spirit flourishing independently of circumstances. Gray's two great odes are the culmination of a revolution in Pindaric

form or perhaps I should say of an attempt to restore the Pindaric as it was practiced in English to a dignified likeness of the original. According to Congreve, who instituted this restoration almost fifty years before Gray's odes,[11] the English Pindaric that flourished in the latter half of the seventeenth century is a monstrous and distorted image of the Greek model. As practiced by Cowley, who virtually introduced the form to England, and more especially by his many inferior imitators, the English version of the Pindaric, Congreve believed, is guilty of establishing Pindar as a wild genius, full of noble rapture, but erratic and unreliable, given to rambling, incoherent thoughts and irregular stanzas and rhythms. On the contrary, however, as Congreve asserted and as Gray himself discovered in his own study of Pindar,[12] the great poet's thoughts, though characterized by frequent digressions and sudden transitions, which suggest a wild imagination, are nevertheless subtly connected. In addition, his stanzaic form is notable for a dignified and majestic regularity, consisting typically of two strophes of equal length and the same meter and an epode uniformly of different length and meter. The only liberty in Pindar's versification, again according to Congreve's discourse and to Gray's private study, is in the variety of meters introduced within a single stanza and faithfully reproduced in corresponding stanzas throughout the poem and in the diversity of stanzas attempted in different odes. In imitating this model of Pindar,

Gray expresses a vigorous, enthusiastic genius, which unlike the spirit of Cowley and his followers is innocent of any charge of excess. In addition, of course, the only source of this spirit in Gray, the only power he depends on is the "heav'nly Muse" ("The Progress of Poesy," 48). The fact, moreover, that Gray defied established practice to join ranks with Congreve and a few others like Gilbert West[13] in their revolutionary venture expresses his bold and independent spirit as much as the formal features of the ode that he helped to restore.

Other formal characteristics expressing a lofty spirit, besides those of the Pindaric, are the Welsh poetic devices yoked in "The Bard" to the Pindaric form. Like the authentic features of the Greek ode, these primarily prosodic devices point to an ardent enthusiasm which is artful or controlled enough not to be guilty of frenzied excess. The enthusiasm bursts through, for example, in the urgent trochaic refrain, "Weave the warp, and weave the woof" (49), which Gray borrowed from an Icelandic ode he later translated as "The Fatal Sisters." Despite his limited knowledge of the Scandinavian tongue, he obviously captured the spirit of the original, which reads: "Vindum vindum/vef Darradar."[14] He was similarly successful in his introduction of internal rhymes in the three epodes.

'No more I weep. They do not sleep.
'On yonder cliffs, a griesly band,

'I see them sit, they linger yet,
'Avengers of their native land. (43-46)

"Above, below, the rose of snow,
"Twined with her blushing foe, we spread:
"The bristled Boar in infant gore
"Wallows beneath the thorny shade. (91-94)

'Enough for me: With joy I see
'The different doom our Fates assign.
'Be thine Despair, and scept'red Care,
'To triumph, and to die, are mine. (139-142)

As he himself modestly noted opposite the first of these examples in his own copy of the 1757 odes, "The double cadence is introduced here not only to give a wild spirit and variety to the Epode; but because it bears some affinity to a peculiar measure in the Welch Prosody called Gorchest--Beirdh, i.e.: the Excellent of the Bards."[15] At the same time that these prosodic devices testify to an ardent spirit, they are so artfully controlled by an elaborate set of rules that the spirit they express cannot be charged with excessive wildness. These rules, according to Gray, appear "for variety and accuracy to equal the invention of the most polish'd Nations." In particular he refers to the "conceal'd harmony, arising from the regular return of similar letters or syllables in the beginning or middle of a verse."[16] This alliterative technique organizes Gray's verse throughout "The Bard."

'Ruin seize thee, ruthless King! (1)

'Helm, nor Hauberk's twisted mail. (5)

Frowns o'er Conway's foaming Flood. (16)

'Cold is Cadwallo's tongue. (29)

"A baleful smile upon their baffled Guest. (82)

'But oh! what solemn scenes on Snowdon's height. (105)

'Gales from Blooming Eden bear (132)

It is difficult to determine the implications of this combined use of Welsh and Greek poetics. But it is consistent with the case Gray makes for the native sublimity of Celtic verse that his wedding of British and Greek modes suggests the essential parity of the two forms of imagination or rather that imagination can flourish regardless of the earth in which it takes root. As Gray says, pointing to the evidence of the Ossianic poems,

> Imagination dwelt many hundred years agoe in all her pomp on the cold and barren mountains of Scotland. The truth (I believe) is that without any respect of climates she reigns in all nascent societies of Men where the necessities of life force everyone to think and act much for himself.[17]

The fact that Gray is mistaken about the authenticity of the Ossianic poems, the fact that they are the product of a contemporary imagination, of course, only reinforces his argument for the universality of this power.

The muse inspires Gray to assert a vigorous spirit in his two great odes not only through their formal characteristics, but in their content as well. In "The Progress of Poesy" the form may be said to be the subject. Gray sings of the very powers that he

demonstrates in the form of the ode. These powers, he declares, contrary to the theory of geographical determinism, do not depend on a warm climate or sunny conditions to flourish. He points out, for example, that they animated Shakespeare's pen, even though he was born "Far from the sun and summer gale" (83). For himself he claims that the "Muse's ray" (119) illuminates forms "with orient hues, unborrowed of the Sun" (120). In other words, the poetic genius furnishes its own sun; it is the unquenchable Hyperion of the mind (53).

The poetic spirit is not only unaffected by circumstances, according to the poem, but possesses powers such as no specific set of circumstances, no spirit of any particular place can lay claim to. It has the capacity, to use Gray's words, both to give "life and lustre to all it touches" and "to calm the turbulent sallies of the soul."[18] By itself it can have the stirring influence of the lot of the wealthy and great depicted in the "Elegy" or the sobering effect of the poor swain's conditions as they appear in the same poem. These twin powers Gray portrays through a traditional water metaphor and incidents borrowed from Pindar's own first Pythian.

Far from influencing the poetic spirit, represented by a stream, the circumstances of the land are themselves affected by the poetic stream. Specifically, they are enriched by it.

> From Helicon's harmonious springs
> A thousand rills their mazy progress take:
> The laughing flowers, that round them blow,
> Drink life and fragrance as they flow. (3-6)

The stream accomplishes this enrichment through a power ranging in intensity from a quiet strength to an impetuous, irresistible force.

> Now the rich stream of music winds along
> Deep, majestic, smooth, and strong,
> Thro' verdant vales, and Ceres' golden reign:
> Now rowling down the steep amain,
> Headlong, impetuous, see it pour:
> The rocks, and nodding groves rebellow to the
> roar. (7-12)

Though this variation in intensity may seem to point to two contrasting powers, in fact, it refers only to two different degrees of the same power, according to the traditional metaphor of the stream as the same body of water throughout its course, despite its changing appearance.[19] The landscape, moreover, is not only enriched by the poetic stream; as a metaphor, it is the creation of the poetic spirit and depends entirely on it for its existence.

The incidents which illustrate the balancing or complementary power of the poetic genius concern the miraculous soothing of the "frantic Passions" (16). Reversing the order found in the first Pythian, perhaps to make the transition more violent and thus more Pindaric, Gray treats of the enchanting effect of the lyre first on Mars and then on the eagle.[20]

> On Thracia's hills the Lord of War,
> Has curb'd the fury of his car,
> And drop'd his thirsty lance at thy (the
> lyre's) command. (17-19)
>
> Perching on the scept'red hand
> Of Jove, thy magic lulls the feather'd king
> With ruffled plumes and flagging wing:
> Quench'd in dark clouds of slumber lie
> The terror of his beak, and light'nings of
> his eye. (20-24)

Another way in which the theme of poetic power in "The Progress of Poesy" expresses a spirit flourishing independently of circumstances is in the reference to the alliance of poetry with music and dance in the first triplet of the ode. Though superficially these three stanzas may not seem to be integrally related, since one elaborates a water metaphor, another concerns mythological incidents borrowed from Pindar, and the last pays homage to Venus, together they depict the three arts of poetry, music, and the dance or rather, according to John Brown at least, the three powers of art: articulate speech, voice, or vocal melody, and action.[21] As we have already seen, the first stanza indirectly depicts poetry, or versified speech, through the powerful stream originating from "Helicon's harmonious springs" (3). The power of melody is explicitly referred to in the second stanza in Gray's invocation of the lyre as "Parent of sweet and solemn--breathing airs" (14). And in the epode the tribute to Venus is performed as a dance of "antic Sports, and blue-eyed Pleasures" (30):

> Frisking light in frolic measures;
> Now pursuing, now retreating,
> Now in circling troops they meet:
> To brisk notes in cadence beating
> Glance their many-twinkling feet. (31-35)

The union of these three arts or of other related arts was widely studied in the England of Gray's time, as their combined power was thought to represent the Muse at the height of its glory.[22] Gray himself makes explicit reference to this "happy union," as he calls it, in a letter to Count Algarotti:

> I see with great satisfaction your efforts to reunite the congenial arts of Poetry, Musick, and the Dance, which with the assistance of Painting and Architecture, regulated by Taste and supported by magnificence and power, might form the noblest scene, and bestow the sublimest pleasure, that the imagination can conceive.[23]

According to the implication of this statement ("reunite") and to the explicit remarks of other writers, like John Brown, this union of arts is supposed to be characteristic of a flourishing past, but not of the benighted present. For Brown this alliance is natural and can be found "among the savage tribes of almost every Climate."[24] Division and corruption set in, he believes, only with the advancement and increasing specialization of civilization.[25] In "The Progress of Poesy," however, contrary to Brown's theory and to the sober attitude of his own letter to Algarotti, Gray asserts this union to be a living truth, not an historical fact. Even though the language of this assertion is full of references to classical

mythology, Gray here is depicting the powers of Poesy not as they flourish in a particular time and place, but in themselves, as they affect people wherever and whenever they live. In the first stanza, for example, Gray accounts for the origin and progress of poetry metaphorically, in universal and ideal, not in historical terms. Poetry arises not so much in Greece as in the mythical mountain springs of the muses and takes its course not westward to Rome and northward to England, but down the rocky precipices and through the fertile valleys of life. In these stanzas at least, Gray is not the gloomy person he usually shows himself to be in contemplating the fortunes of poetry. Instead of complaining that the Muse has deserted England, he tells us that the spirit of poetry is always alive and available, in every time and place.

Poetic power as a theme is carried over from "The Progress of Poesy" to "The Bard," where it is embodied in a Welsh poet of the thirteenth century. As the personification of this power, he is opposed to the most adverse circumstances imaginable in the form of Edward I's legendary tyranny against the Welsh bards.[26] The power of the poetic spirit emerges not in any miraculous defeat or elimination of these hostile forces, but in sustaining the Bard in his adversity, in preserving his spirit intact. The only way in which the poetic genius may be said to desert him and let him fall victim to the devastating effects of tyranny on the spirit is in his reaction to the death of his fellow bards. Their fate overwhelms

him with sorrow and temporarily leaves him, like Gray at the death of West, capable only of weeping and vain complaints. In this mood he even begins a formal lament; that is to say, this towering Pindaric ode harbors an embryonic elegy in its midst.[27]

> 'Hark, how each giant-oak, and desert cave,
> 'Sighs to the torrent's aweful voice beneath!
> (23-24)

> 'Cold is Cadwallo's tongue,
> 'That hush'd the stormy main:
> 'Brave Urien sleeps upon his craggy bed.
> (29-31)

> 'Dear lost companions of my tuneful art,
> 'Dear, as the light that visits these sad
> eyes,
> 'Dear, as the ruddy drops that warm my heart,
> 'Ye died amidst you dying country's cries.
> (39-42)

Even this evidence of anguish, however, may be interpreted as evidence of the poetic spirit. The Bard's elegiac strain may be a sign that the muse has inspired him with a vital, though futile compassion for his murdered companions.

For the most part, however, there is never any doubt that the Bard is inspired to defy Edward and adversity. Despite the fact that he is "Robed in the sable garb of woe" (17), he strikes a most unusual figure for a mourner, full of fiery vitality.

> With haggard eyes the Poet stood;
> (Loose his beard, and hoary hair
> Stream'd, like a meteor, to the troubled air).
> (18-20)

According to a letter Gray sent to his medical friend Thomas Wharton,

the Bard's eyes suggest that he is as wild as a hawk: "haggard, which conveys to you the Idea of a Witch, is indeed only a metaphor taken from an unreclaim'd Hawk, which is call'd a Haggard, and looks wild and farouche and jealous of its liberty."[28] At the same time, there is something supernatural about his fury. The sublime implications of the comparison with a meteor are confirmed in Gray's 1768 note to this description: "The image was taken from a well-known picture of Raphaël, representing the Supreme Being in the vision of Ezekiel."[29] To this note Mason, in his edition of the poems, added the information that "Moses breaking the tables of the law, by Parmegiano, was a figure which Mr. Gray used to say came still nearer to his meaning than the picture of Raphael."[30] In either case, the sublimity of the reference and the dignity and power it confers on the Bard are undeniable. In addition, the Bard's appearance gains a measure of grandeur from the location of his defiant stand,

> On a rock, whose haughty brow
> Frowns o'er old Conway's foaming flood. (15-16)

He does not depend on these surroundings for his vitality, which derives from his poetic inspiration, but the mountainous terrain, as part of the stock imagery of sublimity, does enhance the power visible in his features.

The Bard differs from the withdrawn, pensive mourner and demonstrates his vital spirit in another respect besides appearance. Un-

like Gray, for example, who has so much difficulty in his Latin lament over West in seeing him as anything but silent ashes, the Bard abruptly breaks off his elegy as a vision of his murdered compatriots, resurrected from the dead, involuntarily fills his mind.

> 'No more I weep. They do not sleep.
> 'One yonder cliffs, a griesly band,
> 'I see them sit, they linger yet,
> 'Avengers of their native land. (43-46)

Instead of falling prey to consuming anguish, the Bard comes to life under the influence of a visionary power.

An even more telling way in which the Bard reveals a spirit flourishing independently of circumstances, indeed, in defiance of them, is his vociferous response to the tyrant himself. This is the greatest tribute Gray pays to the muse of poetry and the power of articulate speech, to use John Brown's term. Except for his suicide, which is itself a form only of passive aggression or militant non-violence, the Bard expresses his rage entirely in words, not in deeds. In this way he avoids being a slave to the circumstances of war and joining in the fray like an eager combatant. He does not fall victim to the spirit of battle, which, as some of Gray's Welsh translations suggest,[31] is paradoxically both frenzied and heroic. At the same time, however, the Bard is not idle or torpid. Moved by the "nobe rage" ("Elegy," 51) of the poetic spirit to denounce Edward in no uncertain terms, he decisively avoids the spiritual paralysis which, for example, afflicts the servile masses

in Agrippina, who are accustomed to bear Nero's yoke. This rage, moreover, helps him to overcome his anguish at the death of his fellow bards.

His furious speaking out takes the form of direct wrathful curses and of an extended prophecy of doom, which he utters together with his temporarily resurrected companions. The very first words of the poem, in fact, are a thunderous denunciation of the tyrant.

> 'Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!
> 'Confusion on thy banners wait,
> 'Tho' fann'd by Conquest's crimson wing
> 'They mock the air with idle state.
> 'Helm nor Hauberk's twisted mail,
> 'Nor even thy virtues, Tyrant, shall avail
> 'To save thy secret soul from nightly fears,
> 'From Cambria's curse, from Cambria's tears!
> (1-8)

This curse is powerful not only in what it says, but in the way it says it. True to the requirements of an ode, Gray elevates his diction and thereby transforms what might otherwise be vulgar swearing into dignified invective. Instead of "Devil take ye," we have "Ruin seize thee."[32]

In the prophecy the vital influence of the poetic power reveals itself in a variety of ways. In the exuberant manner of Pindar the bards dart wildly about, making rapid transitions from subject to subject, as they project the future of "Edward's race" (50). Without any explicit warning they leap ahead in time from one descendant to the next. For example, as Richard II is about to starve to death, they abandon him and plunge into the War of the Roses with an abrupt

rhetorical question.

> "Close by the regal chair
> "Fell Thirst and Famine scowl
> "A baleful simile upon their baffled Guest.
> "Heard ye the din of battle bray,
> "Lance to lance, and horse to horse? (80-84)

Then with a sudden apostrophe to the oldest section of the Tower the bards shift their focus from a general survey of the civil war to the fate of Henry VI, one of the champions of the Lancastrian line.

> "Long Years of havock urge their destined
> course,
> "And Thro' the kindred squadrons mow their
> way.
> "Ye Towers of Julius, London's lasting shame,
> "With many a foul and midnight murther fed,
> "Revere his Consort's faith, his Father's
> fame,
> "And spare the meek Usurper's holy head.
> (85-90)

In the obscure references to the future found, for example, in the passages just quoted, the bards also reveal themselves to be under the influence of the sublime power of the poetic genius. According to the Longinian tradition, especially as it was interpreted by Edmund Burke,[33] obscurity paradoxically was supposed to manifest this power inasmuch as it enhances or raises to a sublime degree the dreadfulness of any danger, in literature as well as in life. When the bards, therefore, refer to Richard II obscurely as "the rising Morn" (70), then as a "gilded Vessel" (75) with "Youth on the prow, and Pleasure at the helm" (74), and finally as the "baffled Guest"

(82) of "Fell Thirst and Famine" (81), they not only show that they are dealing with dark futurity, which at best can be but dimly apprehended; in addition, in true sublime fashion they increase the horror of the fate they are prophesying for Edward's line.

At the same time, of course, the bards do illuminate the future by means of their visionary power. However obscure, for example, the meaning of the references to Richard may be, the references themselves, couched in vivid personifications, have a striking visual impact. Together they form a brilliant allegorical tableau.

> "Fair laughs the Morn, and soft the Zephyr
> blows,
> "While proudly riding o'er the azure realm
> "In gallant trim the gilded Vessel goes,
> "Youth on the prow, and Pleasure at the helm;
> "Regardless of the sweeping whirlwind's sway,
> "That, hush'd in grim repose, expects his
> evening-prey. (71-76)

We may not know that this doomed ship refers to the magnificence of Richard's reign, as Gray's own note informs us,[34] and to the misfortunes which brought it to an end, but nevertheless the image of unsuspecting opulence and merciless fate is particularly intense. The obscurity of the prophecy, then, is not so great or unrelieved as to suggest an impotent imagination, and yet the brilliance of the images is carefully enough obscured that we do not think of the mind that conceives them as illuminated by an excessively dazzling source. In other words, the poetic inspiration that guides the

chorus of bards through its prophecy of doom is neither too weak nor too overwhelming.

The perfect balance of this power is reflected especially in the image of the loom on which the bards are supposed to weave the fate of Edward's race. Borrowed from the Icelandic poem which Gray translated as "The Fatal Sisters," this image of the web of fate not only contributes a grisly Scandinavian grandeur to the poem, but suggests that the vision of doom produced by the bards' poetry and music is no mere airy nothing, but a distinct entity. In other words, the force of poetry and music manifested here is something to be reckoned with, not an effete power. And yet, of course, the web is only an image, not a tangible object. However great the power inspiring the prophecy is, it is not so dazzling even as the power of more glorious visions, such as the one of God which strikes Milton blind in "The Progress of Poesy" (95-102).

One of these "Visions of glory" (107 crowns the poem, and despite its intensity, which is somewhat overpowering, it also points, like the prophecy of doom, to a spirit flourishing under poetic inspiration. After the fate of Edward's last descendant, Richard III, is sealed and the chorus of bards melts into the air, a vision of something radiant descends Mt. Snowdon. The Bard is blessed with a glimpse of the resurrection of Celtic sovereignty, "our long-lost Arthur" (109), in the form of the Welshman Henry Tudor and his successors, "ye geniune Kings, Britannia's Issue"

(110). This vision suggests that the Bard's enthusiasm stems not only from wrath and a burning desire for vengeance, but from hope as well. The ascendancy of the Tudors turns the nightmare of Edward's reign into nothing worse than a fortunate fall. The vitality of inspiration suggested by this attitude seems even greater when we consider the adversity of the Bard's immediate circumstances. For him to be hopeful in the face of imminent death testifies in a special way to the indestructibility of the spirit burning inside him with such poetic or visionary zeal.

"The Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard," however, despite all the formal and thematic ways they express a vital spirit independent of circumstances, are not enough in themselves to balance the greater number of poems that Gray devoted to the vitality emanating from circumstances. But whether this fact can be interpreted as a preference for the latter is highly questionable. There is only slight evidence that Gray in any way disapproves of the former mode of thriving or questions its effectiveness as he questions the fostering power, for example, of mountainous terrain. His disapproval emerges chiefly in "The Progress of Poesy," where he tampers with Milton's biography specifically to explain his blindness as divine punishment for visionary power, for his daring to spy "The secrets of the Abyss" (97) and

> The living Throne, the saphire-blaze,
> Where Angels tremble, while they gaze. (99-100)

Dryden avoids this fate because he is "less presumptuous" (103). His "Two Coursers" (105) are "of ethereal race" (105), but they restrict their horizons to the earth and heroic endeavor, to "the fields of Glory" (104). Not for them, like Milton, to pass "the flaming bounds of Place and Time" (98). The disapproval of visionary boldness in this account of Milton and Dryden, the suggestion that it can be more reckless than brave, gains a degree of corroboration from the enigmatic ending of the poem. After declaring his determination to emulate Milton and Pindar in his own feeble way, Gray seems to suffer an attack of conscience and condemns himself for this very decision to a fate "Beneath the Good how far" (123). At least this is a possible interpretation of his curious introduction of the theme of virtue and his own sinfulness at the same time that he proudly proclaims his intention of soaring "Beyond the limits of a vulgar fate" (122), "far above the Great" (123). Further evidence that Gray espoused this view comes from an early Latin poem which is heavily indebted to Pope's Essay on Man[35] or at least to the traditional view expressed in that poem of man's proper place in the universe. Like Pope Gray claims that man is meant to be neither angel nor beast. In discrediting the human presumption to aspire to heavenly knowledge, the sin that Milton is guilty of in "The Progress of Poesy," Gray says:

> Non super aethereas errare licentiús auras
> Humanum est, at scire hominem; breve limite votum

> Exiguo claudat, nec se quaesiverit extrá
> Errat, qui cupit oppositos transcendere fines,
> Extenditque manus ripae ulterioris amore.
> (31-35)

> Man is not meant to roam too freely above
> the upper air, but to know Man; let him
> confine his limited desire within narrow
> bounds, and let him not seek to know
> what is outside himself. That man errs
> who wishes to transcend the limits placed
> in his way and who stretches out his
> hand with love of the farther shore.
> (Hendrickson's translation)

In "The Bard" Gray does not so much demonstrate disapproval of the visionary power as point to a limitation of it as a source of vitality. The "Visions of glory" (107) overwhelm the Welsh prophet to the extent they do, not because he has transgressed and needs to be punished, but simply because they are so supernaturally intense. When he begs the visions to spare his "aching sight" (107), he merely indicates that they are too bright for his ordinary human eyes. Gray likewise implies that the poetic spirit can be excessively powerful, a source of devastation rather than of strength, in his discussion of the "lyric glare," which

> could not be born in a work of great length,
> no more than the eye could bear to see all
> this scene, that we constantly gaze upon,
> the verdure of the fields and woods, the azure
> of the sea and skies, turn'd into one dazzling
> expanse of gems.[36]

For the most part, however, Gray approves of and trusts in the visionary power. The major reason that he focuses less attention on it than on the various circumstances of the world is the difficulty

in writing about it, in prevailing upon it to inspire his pen. At least circumstances are not intangible; the physical world is reliably present, always available for consideration. But the poetic spirit is elusive and indeterminate. Gray's difficulty in pinning it down and appropriating it for his own use, like his success in this endeavor, is most evident in his two Pindarics.

In "The Progress of Poesy," for example, though Gray begins as the confident emulator of Milton, who is going to disprove the "fond complaint" (46) of "Man's feeble race" (42) and "justify the laws of Jove" (47), by the end he has lost his precious inspiration. After recounting the historical progress of poesy, he is overcome with timidity and unsure whether he should presume to touch the lyre. After all, who is he to follow in the footsteps of Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden? Similarly, even though he has boldly imitated Pindar in the design and grandeur of his ode, at the end of the poem he meekly confesses his inferiority to the "Theban Eagle" (115). He may declare his resolution to soar "Beyond the limits of a vulgar fate" (122), but he is careful to qualify his intention by pointing out that he inherits

> Nor the pride, nor ample pinion
> That the Theban Eagle bear
> Sailing with supreme dominion
> Thro' the azure deep of air. (114-117)

Corresponding to this loss of confidence and of inspiration is a change in his conception of the poetic power itself. Instead of

regarding it as alive and available in every place and every time, he ultimately suggests that its availability is determined by circumstances. This shift in attitude is marked by the emergence of an historical consciousness. After claiming that the Muse knows no geography and visits the shivering north and torrid south alike, he contradicts himself by embarking on a literary history or sketch of the progress of poesy, whose theme is the poetic spirit's abandonment of country after country. The genius of poetry may be capable of flourishing in any land, but the fact is, as Gray notes, that now the echoes of the woods, the islands, and the fields of Greece languish, "Mute but to the voice of Anguish" (72). Now desolation reigns

> Where each old poetic Mountain
> Inspiration breath'd around. (73-74)

This fate is also true, we are told, of "Latium" (81), where "the sad Nine" (77) fled when they left Parnassus in "Greece's evil hour (77). In both cases, moreover, the loss of the poetic spirit is linked with the political situation, with the triumph of "tyrant-Power" (79) and the prevalence of "coward Vice, that revels in her chains" (80). The hostile power does not exile the Muse, who leaves of her own volition, scornful of tyranny and cowardice, but nevertheless the point is clear that certain circumstances are unsuitable for the flourishing of the poetic spirit. Though Gray does not explicitly say so, moreover, it seems that England, which the Muse

sought out after abandoning Rome, is also now no longer to her liking. England, too, presumably has had her day, the golden age of Shakespeare and Milton. But with the death of Dryden, the last of the great lyrical poets, according to Gray's history, England's literary fame is in eclipse. The lyre, which responded ecstatically to Dryden's hands, is "heard no more" (111), and Gray's attempt to wake it is hampered by the absence of the poetic spirit from England.

This brief literary history is an ironic version of the conventional progress piece.[37] Instead of dwelling on the glory of the poetic spirit at the height of its power in its various locations, for the most part, like Pope in the third book of the Dunciad, Gray focuses on the vacuum left when the glorious spirit moves on. In his account of the progress of poesy to England, it is true, he does turn primarily to the golden age of the great poets. But as his description of Shakespeare and Milton is in the past tense, the sense of the poetic spirit's having passed from the land is already implicit in his praise of its fiery presence in them. Furthermore, his attempt to be enthusiastic in his reference to Dryden, by invoking his spirit as something vividly present and by addressing his lyre as though it were playing at that very moment, peters out into what amounts to a shrugging of the shoulders, a sigh at the vanity of the rapturous effort. "But ah!" he says of the lyre, "'tis heard no more" (14). Dryden is irrevocably dead. Gray's reaction to this progressive impoverishment of national literatures

contrasts sharply with Pope's attitude in the third book of the Dunciad, before he felt that it was too late to sound a warning for England. Dullness is just too much a proliferating condition of life in Gray's time for him to be satirical and repudiate it as only a threat to culture. Instead, as the sad exclamation at Dryden's passing suggests, he writes his literary history in an elegiac vein, as a lament. Beginning with the woods, islands and fields of Greece, which are bereft of poetic inspiration, and ending with the silencing of Dryden's lyre, he portrays the progress of poesy not as a magnificent pageant, but as a funeral procession, leading to the benighted cemetery which is his contemporary England.

It is difficult to say whether this situation is responsible for Gray's access of timidity at the end of the poem or whether this timidity brings him to see the poetic spirit as historically determined rather than free of any temporal and spatial constraints. In either case, however, his self-doubt and his reluctant admission of the determining power of circumstances point to his inability to retain the power of poetry for any length of time and flourish under its influence.

In "The Bard" Gray's difficulty in flourishing independently of circumstances is more subtle and implicit than in "The Progress of Poesy." He is inspired only by throwing himself into the situation of a medieval Welsh harpist. The empathetic achievement is magnificent, but points to his inability to strike rapturous chords with

his own hand and in his own time. Though the Bard himself rages nobly in spite of his doomed circumstances, Gray is obviously in need of the Bard's situation for his imagination to blossom. He cannot prophesy as an eighteenth-century English gentleman. Only wearing the mask of the Bard, whose gloomy fate it is, like Gray's, to live in an age when the spirit of poetry is becoming extinct, can he venture to predict a glorious resurrection of this dying power. Of course, the fact that this prophecy had to be true, as Gray himself dryly noted, because "it was wrote so many hundred years after the events,"[38] only diminishes all the more the intensity of his spirit revealed in the poem.

The prophecy points to Gray's timidity in yet another way. What he envisions as glorious is a time when the poetic spirit will not have to defy circumstances, but can depend on them to foster its vitality, a time, in other words, when it can be passively nurtured. Since this time, moreover, the Elizabethan age, is Gray's own past, we may interpret his esctatic vision of it in the role of the bard as a nostalgic desire on his own part for its ideal conditions. He himself describes these chiefly in enthusiastic personifications. Elizabethan England, for example, is a time when

> 'Bright Rapture calls, and soaring, as she
> sings,
> 'Waves in the eye of Heav'n her many-colour'd
> wings. (123-124)

But in his account of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton there is a more informative hint about his interpretation of the age. It was given, he implies, to both "Truth severe" and "fairy Fiction" (127). What this means, if I may read into these terms what some of Gray's contemporaries say about the Elizabethan age, is that it was enlightened enough not to perpetrate anything barbaric and yet it was not so tame as to be incapable of rapturous feelings. It was both reasonable ("Truth severe") and imaginative ("fairy Fiction").[39] Consequently, it was ideally suited to promote poetry that would be vital rather than vapid or frenzied. In yearning for the spirit of this time instead of demonstrating a vitality independent of any time, Gray shows himself to be the same timid soul who concludes "The Progress of Poesy."

Since Gray's difficulties, evident in the two Pindarics, in maintaining for and in himself a vigorous, independent spirit account for its scarcity in his work more than any disapproval of it, the conclusion is inevitable that, despite the extent of his attention to the world around him in the tradition of English empiricism, this is not the primary characteristic of his poetry. Nor, of course, is the essence of his work to be found in his rarer, though equally important disdain for this world in the name of a higher reality, unknown to the senses or to the mind that merely reflects on what it perceives. Instead, what most typifies Gray's writing is the profound uncertainty and restlessness of mind im-

plied by his lifelong wavering between these two positions.

This essential and unresolved ambivalence is rooted deep within Gray's psyche as something highly personal and peculiar to him. A psychoanalytical case might even be made, in the manner of Erikson's study of Luther, to establish the foundations of Gray's ambivalence in the conflicts of his childhood. Though such a study would, of course, take us beyond the realm of literature, it would demonstrate that what we find in his writing is not merely a response to the spirit of his age. According to a legal document prepared when Gray's mother was considering a separation, it becomes clear that the psychological origin of the adversity so often represented in Gray's poetry as a harsh tyrant, either directly or metaphorically, is his father, who used his mother

> in the most inhuman manner, by beating, kicking, punching, and with the most vile and abusive language; that she hath been in the utmost fear and danger of her life, and hath been obliged this last year to quit her bed, and lie with her sister.[40]

At the same time, since Gray's mother and aunt provided him with a comfortable refuge from his abusive father, they are the prototype of the paradisiacal conditions of ease that he yearns for in the Eton College ode and elsewhere. Curiously, however, they must also have inspired the young Gray with an admiration for a disciplined life and for a vigorous spirit of independence, as they stalwartly managed a millinery business by themselves for

nearly thirty years and took charge of the household, which Gray's father refused to be responsible for.

Despite the fact that the complex of thoughts and feelings expressed in his writing may be traced back to the peculiar circumstances of his childhood, it would be misleading to think of Gray as an island in the ocean of his time. There is evidence, which can only be briefly documented here, that many of his attitudes were shared by at least some of his contemporaries. Other writers display the same ambivalence to living conditions in eighteenth-century England. In "The Deserted Village,"[41] for example, Goldsmith utters a lengthy and moving lament on the debasement of rural life as a result of the enclosure acts, which depopulated the countryside. Gone, he complains, are the "health and plenty" that "cheered the labouring swain" (2), the "innocence and ease" (5) associated with lovely villages like "sweet Auburn" (1). No longer is it possible for him to look forward to a "blest retirement" (97) amid the calm and peaceful ways of the country. In the base interests of wealth and commerce, he charges, England has allowed itself to be lured away from the simple, rural virtues and to seek out the deceptive pleasures of dazzling splendor. Now "rank luxuriance" (351) proliferates, and England has grown "A bloated mass of rank unwieldy woe" (392). Even in this poem, however, there is a hint of a different atttitude, which plays a significant part in other of Goldsmith's works. At one point he refers to his "book-learned

skill" (90), which he hopes he some day might be able to share with the simple swains, who we know are in need of it from his portrayal of their amazement at the village schoolmaster's vocabulary (221-216). Here, of course, the praise of learning is only implicit, and rural ignorance merely the object of some gentle humor. However, in parts of The Vicar of Wakefield rural simplicity is associated with gullibility and definitely derided as a fault. As a result of their innocence, both the Vicar and his son Moses are greatly imposed upon. Moses is lured into selling the family horse for a gross of paltry green spectacles, and when the Vicar sets out to remedy this blunder, he ends up with nothing more than a worthless bank draft, foisted upon him by the same man who outwitted his son.[42]

Like Gray, moreover, many writers of the time responded to the dissatisfaction with their situation by fancying a favorable climate and fertile soil in which their imagination might take root and blossom. In his poetry Collins, for example, ranges from the exotic surroundings of ancient Arabia in the "Persian Eclogues" to the richly superstitious highlands of contemporary Scotland; England's Gaelic neighbors provide the locale for Macpherson, whose Ossian fragments he claimed to be the authentic utterance of a primitive Scottish bard; and fifteenth-century England entices Chatterton in his search for a vigorous poetic idiom.

But also as in Gray there is a tendency among these writers

to find as much fault with the situations sought out in their imaginative explorations as in those they flee from in the first place. From a most exhaustive survey of distant lands in "The Traveller," Goldsmith concludes:

> Hence every state, to one loved blessing prone,
> Conforms and models life to that alone.
> Each to the favourite happiness attends,
> And spurns the plan that aims at other ends;
> Till, carried to excess in each domain,
> This favourite good begets peculiar pain.
> (93-98)

Specifically he finds that fertile Italy, blessed with sunshine, abundant fruits, and colorful blossoms, devotes itself too exclusively to "sensual bliss" (124). As a result, instead of flourishing with what nature has provided, the country is given to luxury and opulence. What might be its strength is but "plethoric ill" (144). Spurning this vicious excess, Goldsmith turns to "rougher climes" (166) and the bleak Swiss mountains. But here again, though he finds that the "churlish soil" (168) and lingering winter have bred a hardy, simple race, free of the lavish taste that contaminates Italy, he is far from satisfied. Like the rude peasants of Gray's "Elegy," the Swiss may be blessed with the virtues arising from arduous labor and the simple pleasures of a cheerful hearth, but completely unknown to them is the "finer joy" (218) that "pleasing science" (215) has to offer.

> Unknown those powers that raise the soul to
> flame,

> Catch every nerve and vibrate through the
> frame.
> Their level life is but a smouldering fire,
> Unquenched by want, unfanned by strong desire.
> (219-222)

Though Goldsmith extends his search for a truly happy land to France, Holland, and back to England, in every place he discovers disadvantages to detract from the virtues he applauds.

Among the writers who examine the past in an effort to decide upon the most favorable circumstances to live in, we find evidence of the same ambivalence that stymies Goldsmith. Both Bishop Hurd and Thomas Warton, for example, reveal as much contempt for the Gothic age as they do a fascination with it. The troublesome question for them is whether the fantastic imagination which flourished at the time, peopling the universe with wild spirits and demons, is a desirable liberation from the tyranny of reason or the crude and regrettable product of a barbarous age.

In Hurd these mixed feelings emerge most clearly in the dialogue structure of his essays. Instead of discussing the age of Elizabeth in his own person, he assignes one view to Dr. Arbuthnot and the opposing outlook to Addison and imagines them arguing back and forth until weariness puts a halt to their conversation. While Dr. Arbuthnot sings the praises of the Elizabethan period, Addison plays the devil's advocate and raises repeated objections to his friend's rose-colored view. On the subject of manners, for example,

Dr. Arbuthnot waxes enthusiastic, fervently admiring the chivalric exercise of jousting as a noble contest, apt to kindle the spirit of spectator and participant alike.[43] Thinking of the vitality implicit in such activities as this, he says:

> I could almost fancy, the soil itself wore another face, and, as you poets imagine on some occasions, that our ancestors lived under a brighter sun and happier climate than we can boast of. (I, 156)

Addison, on the other hand, cynically dismisses tilting as "a very barbarous entertainment" (I, 165) and reminds his distinguished friend,

> now your hand is in for this sort of encomium, do not forget to celebrate the sublime taste of our forefathers for bear-baiting, as well as tilting; and tell us too, how gloriously the mob of those days, as well as their betters, used to belabour one another. (I, 166-167)

At the end of the debate, which rages politely through two formal dialogues, Hurd breaks in and dramatizes the irresolution of the conversation by reporting to us the "sceptical conclusion" (II, 83) of a third party, who throughout has interspersed his comments among those of Arthuthnot and Addison.

> Mr. Digby, who had been very attentive to the course of this debate, was a little disappointed with the conclusion of it. He thought to have settled his judgement of this reign by the information, his two friends should afford him. But he found himself rather perplexed by their altercations, than convinced by them. (II, 83)

Thomas Warton's similar ambivalence to the age of Elizabeth emerges in his assessment of the poetry written in her reign. At one point he is a proud spokesman for the enlightenment, who is a trifle impatient with the unpolished and childish exuberance of the Elizabethans and chides them for letting their imaginations run riot. He writes as though he were reviewing a slight blemish on the callow youth of the English Poet.

> And here we are led to observe, that at this restoration of the classics, we were first struck only with their fabulous inventions. We did not attend to their regularity of design and justness of sentiment. A rude age, beginning to read these writers, imitated their extravagancies, not their natural beauties. And these, like other novelties, were pursued to a blameable excess.[44]

Only a few paragraphs later, however, he assumes a strikingly different posture. With a fine irony he pays tribute to Reason for having had the kindness not to trample the imagination of the age entirely underfoot. Though he has just reprimanded the Elizabethan poets for not devoting themselves sufficiently to Reason, he now remarks on their good fortune in escaping Reason's yoke to the extent they did.

> But the reformation had not yet destroyed every delusion, nor disenchanted all the strong holds of superstition. A few dim characters were yet legible in the mouldering creed of tradition. Every goblin of ignorance did not vanish at the first glimmerings of the morning of science. Reason suffered a few demons still to linger, which she chose to retain in her service under the guidance of poetry. (327)

Like Gray, moreover, some of his contemporaries found that in whatever circumstances they considered, past or present, in Britain or elsewhere, they were faced with the same deficiencies and excesses, the same unresolved war between a gentle and a fierce spirit. We need only point, for example, to Collins's frequently anthologized odes to Pity and Fear,[45] written in the tradition of Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." In the former ode Collins addresses Pity as a beautiful goddess, symbolically adorned with the myrtles of Venus (19). In his distress he bids her to come and make her divine presence known, as she is

> ... the friend of man assigned,
> With balmy hands his wounds to bind,
> And calm his frantic woe. (1-3)

In the companion ode, however, after first meekly starting at the sight of Fear, whom he represents as a "mad nymph" (47) followed by a monstrous train of "phantoms" (16) and "fiends" (18), he suddenly reverses himself. Instead of wishing to flee Fear as a demon, he calls on her to grace him with her inspiring presence.

> Dark power, with shuddering, meek, submitted
> thought
> Be mine to read the visions old,
> Which thy awakening bards have told. (52-54)

He now seeks no gentle spirit, but the enthusiastic heat that fired "Shakespeare's breast" (65).

> Hither again thy fury deal,
> Teach me but once like him to feel:
> His cypress wreath my meed decree,
> And I, O Fear, will dwell with thee!

Along with this interest in spirits governing various circumstances of the world, there is also among Gray's contemporaries an interest similar to his in a power transcending place and time. At the end of the survey of nations in "The Traveller" Goldsmith, in collaboration with Dr. Johnson,[46] turns inward to find what he has been vainly searching for in the world around him.

> Vain, very vain, my weary search to find
> That bliss which only centres in the mind:
> Why have I strayed from pleasure and repose,
> To seek a good each government bestows?
> In every government, though terrors reign,
> Though tyrant kings or tyrant laws restrain,
> How small, of all the human hearts endure,
> That part which laws or kings can cause or
> cure.
> Still to ourselves in every place consigned,
> Our own felicity we make or find. (423-432)

Here, of course, the transcendent power referred to is only considered with philosophical detachment. For a more sublime rendering, similar in enthusiasm to Gray's Pindarics, we need to turn to a poem like Collins's "Ode on the Poetical Character." In a rapturous flight of fancy in the middle strophe of the ode Collins traces the poetic power back to its divine origins. So remote is it from mundane circumstances that it owes its birth and vitality to a divine conception beyond the "flaming bounds of Place and Time," (98), where Milton soars in "The Progress of Poesy." On the day of the creation, Collins writes,

> When he, who called with thought to birth
> Yon tented sky, this laughing earth,
> And drest with spring and forests tall,
> And poured the main engirting all, (25-28)

a creature literally possessed by God, pregnant with his thought, "the loved Enthusiast" (29), sang out from the "sapphire throne" (32) of heaven and gave birth to the "rich-haired Youth of Morn" (39), poetry in all its splendor.

But even though Collins, inspired by the divine power he praises, imagines it in all its magnificence, instead of merely reflecting on its virtues, he, too, like Gray is hampered by timidity and cannot sustain his own enthusiasm for long. In the third and final strophe of the poem his unmediated vision of poetic glory dims and goes out. Suddenly he recalls his historical situation, and the imposing figure of Milton intervenes as a guide to poetic greatness whose steps he cannot follow. How, he wonders, paralyzed by his consciousness of Milton's triumph, can he possibly grasp the "ancient trump" (67) and carry on the sublime tradition of English poetry? In despair he is forced to abandon his dream of glory. Vigorous, enthusiastic poetry, he concludes, despite his own earlier display of enthusiasm, is simply beyond his reach and that of his generation.

> And Heaven and Fancy, kindred powers,
> Have now o'erturned the inspiring bowers,
> Or curtained close such scene from every
> future view. (74-76)

Because of this despair Collins does not ultimately turn to rapturous inspiration for his salvation, but, like Gray, wavers between it and dependence on a more available power, like the gentle spirit of

twilight that he celebrates in the "Ode to Evening."

If this brief survey of Gray's contemporaries is at all valid and they are characterized in a significant way by the profound uncertainty and ambivalence essential to Gray, then it follows that this period of English literature, so long classified as partly neo-classical and partly pre-Romantic,[47] has an ambience of its own, distinct from that of both periods on which it borders. On the one hand, it stands apart from the cosmic certainty expressed by the Augustan conception of general nature. According to this notion, the particular circumstances of place and time that weigh so heavily on Gray's spirit are lightly dismissed, in the words of Sir Joshua Reynolds, as "the accidental discriminations of nature."[48] What matters for the Augustans is the general forms of nature, not the crookedness of a nose or the streaks on a tulip. They have no difficulty in regarding the differences among historical periods or the nations of Europe as deviations from the true nature of things, which is universal and timeless. At the same time, the writers of Gray's period are equally distinct from the Romantics, who may differ significantly from the Augustans in their attitudes, but resemble them in the profundity of their convictions. Wordsworth, for example, though not consistently confident, nevertheless has moments of assured insight such as Gray never achieves. In The Prelude, for example, he asserts:

> ... whether we be young or old,
> Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
> Is with infinitude, and only there;
> With hope it is, hope that can never die,
> Effort, and expectation, and desire,
> And something evermore about to be.
> Under such banners militant, the soul
> Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils
> That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts
> That are their own perfection and reward,
> Strong in herself and in beatitude
> That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile
> Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds
> To fertilise the whole Egyptian plain.
> (VI, 603-616)

Lacking this single-mindedness, Gray at least, if not many of his contemporaries, remained locked in an unresolved ambivalence from which he was released only with his death.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]See Gray's Correspondence, II, 571, 582; III, 1141, 1175.

[2]See Gray's Poems, p. 206.

[3]Ibid., p. 206.

[4]See Thomas Bartholinus, Antiquitatum Danicarum de causis contemptae ... mortis (Copenhagen, 1689), pp. 632-640.

[5]Gray's Correspondence, I, 37.

[6]John Dryden, The Dramatic Works, ed., Montague Summers (London, 1932), VI, 272. The lines unfortunately are not numbered, but both this and the subsequent quotation appear on the same page.

[7]For a helpful account of eighteenth-century views on the ode, see Norman Maclean, "From Action to Image: Theories of the Lyric in the Eighteenth Century," Critics and Criticism, ed., R. S. Crane (Chicago, 1952), pp. 408-460.

[8]Joseph Trapp, Lectures on Poetry (London, 1742), pp. 203-204.

[9]Edward Young, "On Lyric Poetry," Johnson's Works of the English Poets (London, 1790), LX, 181-182.

[10]Gray's Correspondence, II, 608.

[11]William Congreve, "A Discourse on the Pindaric Ode," Johnson's Works of the English Poets (London, 1790), XXXIV, 279-286.

[12]See W. P. Jones, Thomas Gray, Scholar (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), pp. 63-65.

[13]See Gilbert West's preface to a translation of Pindar's odes by himself and H. J. Pye in British Poets, ed., Thomas Park (London, 1828), XXVIII, pt. ii, 1-14.

[14]See Thomas Bartholinus, cited above, pp. 617-624. This edition, which Gray himself in a headnote to the poem acknowledges as one of his sources, prints the original with a Latin translation after each stanza.

[15]This note is not included in the 1768 edition of Gray's poems,

for which he provided a great many annotations. The copy in which it appears is now in the Morgan library. It is also quoted by W. P. Jones, cited above, p. 93.

[16]These statements are quoted from Gray's article on the Welsh, called "Cambri," which appears in his Commonplace Book, II, 799-800, 803-806, 809-816; the article is reproduced in its entirety by Roger Martin, Chronologie de la Vie et de l'Oeuvre de Thomas Gray (Toulouse, 1931), pp. 169-199. The passages I have quoted appear on p. 172.

[17]Ibid., II, 798.

[18]See Gray's notes to "The Progress of Poesy" in Gray's Poems, p. 205.

[19]Pope, for example, uses this metaphor for a similar purpose in defending the Odyssey against charges of being inferior to the Iliad. They are both equally vivacious and bold, he says. "The Odyssey is a perpetual source of Poetry: The stream is not the less full, for being gentle; tho' it is true (when we speak only with regard to the Sublime) that a river, foaming and thund'ring in cataracts from rocks and precipices, is what more strikes, amazes and fills the mind, than the same body of water, flowing afterwards thro' peaceful vales and agreeable scenes of pasturage." See Pope's postscript to his translation of the Odyssey, The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed., John Butt, et al. (New Haven, 1967), X, 385-386.

[20]In his correspondence Gray records an instance of this miraculous power of poetic music, which, as it takes place in the more mundane and familiar setting of a London theatre, clarifies the mythological references in the ode. The passage is too long to quote here, but concerns the ravishing voice of an Italian opera singer and the attention she commanded from a noisy, hostile audience, who did not understand a word of her language. See Gray's Correspondence, II, 811.

[21]John Brown, A Dissertation on Poetry and Music (London, 1763), p. 27.

[22]In addition to Brown see, for example, Anselm Bayly, The Alliance of Musick, Poetry, and Oratory (London, 1789); Daniel Webb, Observations on the Correspondence Between Poetry and Music (Dublin, 1769); Adam Smith, "Of the Affinity Between Music, Dancing, and Poetry," Essays (London, 1872).

[23]Gray's Correspondence, II, 810.

[24]John Brown, p. 28.

[25]Ibid., pp. 36-46.

[26]For the purpose of his poem Gray makes use of the tradition, as he himself acknowledges in his advertisement to the ode, that Edward I ordered all the Welsh bards to be put to death. His source for this view, as Edward D. Snyder has demonstrated in The Celtic Revival in English Literature (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), pp. 42-43, was Thomas Carte, History of England (London, 1750), II, 196. At the same time, however, there is ample evidence in Gray's article entitled "Cambri," printed in Roger Martin, Chronologie de la Vie et de l'Oeuvre de Thomas Gray (Toulouse, 1931), pp. 170-199, that he was fully aware that this act of tyranny was more lengendary than accurate. Gray writes, for example, that Edward I "is said to have hanged up all their Bards, because they encouraged the Nation to rebellion, but their works (we see), still remain, the Language (tho' decaying) still lives, and the art of their versification is known and practised to this day among them" (p. 176). Even more to the point, Gray says: "Whatever severity Edward the first might exercise at the time when he reduced that Country, on some of the Welsh Bards; yet it appears, he proceeded no farther against them in general than to order that they should not travel (as usual) about Wales, nor ask any rewards from the Inhabitants" (p. 188). That he ignored this historical information in the poem suggests his interest in emphasizing the power of the poetic spirit to withstand the fiercest possible onslaught of adversity.

[27]I quote excerpts only for the sake of brevity; in fact, the elegy is continuous from ll. 23-42.

[28]Gray's Correspondence, I, 434.

[29]Gray's Poems, p. 209.

[30]William Mason, ed., The Poems of Mr. Gray (York, 1775), pt. ii, 93.

[31]See, for example, "The Death of Hoël" and "Conan," where the text praises the warriors for the bravery of their fighting, but depicts it in terms that elsewhere, as I point out in Chapter I, Gray associates with execrable tyranny. There is no essential difference, for example, between the "crimson harvest" (10) of enemy blood for which Conan is glorified and the "crimson wing"

(3) of conquest for which the Bard denounces Edward I.

[32]A scurrilous pamphleteer named Archibald Campbell made perverse use of this exaltation to poke fun at Gray in The Sale of Authors (London, 1767). See Gray's Correspondence, III, 1216-1218.

[33]Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, ed., J. T. Boulton (London and New York, 1958), pp. 58-59.

[34]See Gray's Poems, p. 210.

[35]The first three books of the Essay on Man were published in 1733 while Gray was still at Eton, where he himself notes that his Latin poem was written. See Gray's Poems, pp. 117, 252.

[36]Gray's Correspondence, II, 608.

[37]Of the three major accounts of the progress convention the most important for Gray is Aubrey Williams, Pope's Dunciad (Archon Books, 1968), pp. 42-48. Nevertheless, see also R. H. Griffith, "The Progress Piece in the Eighteenth Century," The Texas Review, V (1919-1920), 218-233; Mattie Swayn, "The Progress in the Seventeenth Century," The University of Texas Bulletin, Studies in English, XVI (1936), 84-92.

[38]Gray's Correspondence, I, 433.

[39]See, for example, Thomas Warton, The History of English Poetry (London, 1824), IV, 328: "We were now arrived at that point, when the national credulity, chastened by reason, had produced a sort of civilised superstition, and left a set of traditions, fanciful enough for poetic decoration, and yet not too violent and chimerical for common sense." Also, Richard Hurd, "Dialogue 3: The Age of Elizabeth," Moral and Political Dialogues (London, 1771), I, 197-198: "There is, I think, in the revolutions of taste and language, a certain point, which is more favourable to the purposes of poetry, than any other. It may be difficult to fix this point with exactness. But we shall hardly mistake in supposing it lies somewhere between the rude essays of uncorrected fancy, on the one hand, and the refinements of reason, on the other. And such appears to have been the condition of our language in the age of Elizabeth."

[40]See the case submitted to Dr. Audley, printed as Appendix A of Gray's Correspondence, III, 1195-1197; also, R. W. Ketton-Cremer, Thomas Gray (Cambridge, Eng., 1955), pp. 1-3.

[41]All quotations from Goldsmith's poetry are from Roger Lonsdale, ed., The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith (London, 1969).

[42]Oliver Goldsmith, The Vicar of Wakefield (New York, n.d.), pp. 183-187 (chapter 12), 191-195 (chapter 14).

[43]Richard Hurd, cited abve, I, 164-165; the subsequent page references, inserted in the text of my argument, are to this edition.

[44]Thomas Warton, cited above, IV, 326; the subsequent reference is also to this edition.

[45]My line references for Collins's poetry are to Roger Lonsdale's edition, cited above.

[46]For a summary of Dr. Johnson's contributions to the poem, supposed and real, see Lonsdale, pp. 623-625.

[47]Despite Northrop Frye's eloquent plea for an impartial reexamination of the age, made over fifteen years ago in "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," ELH, XXIII (June, 1956), 144-152, little has been done to carry out his proposal, at least not in the spirit in which it was made. The most notable exception is the work of Geoffrey Hartman in such essays as "False Themes and Gentle Minds" and "Romantic Poetry and the Genius Loci," collected in his volume Beyond Formalism (New Haven, 1970).

[48]Sir Joshua Reynolds, "Discourse Three," Discourses on Art (New York, 1966), p. 52; the whole of the third and fourth discourses are especially relevant here. Even though Reynolds and other neoclassicists were contemporaries of Gray, it seems to me that the spirit of their work is more an echo of Pope's time than the dominant spirit of their own age.

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