

The origins of the Elegy

PETER WATSON-SMYTH

‘**H**AVING put an end to a thing, whose beginning you have seen long ago, I immediately send it to you.’ So wrote Thomas Gray to Horace Walpole from Stoke Poges on 12 June 1750, and thereby provided the first of the few axioms in a classic literary mystery which has defeated scholars to this day: where, when and why did Gray first write the best-known poem in the English language, his ‘Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard’?

The guessing game which started after his death between his friends Horace Walpole and William Mason has since been joined by so many others that it is not possible to refute individual theories in a short article, but only to attempt to show directly where the truth lies; to prove the right answers rather than disprove the wrong.

First of all, the time of year when the poem was first written can be established and the years themselves when it was not. In the opening stanzas, Gray carefully describes that short period of time when dusk turns to darkness on a clear night and places this, through the curfew, at 8.0 p.m. This time occurs at the end of what is scientifically known as Nautical Twilight, which ended in South Bucks under the Julian Calendar at 7.50 p.m. around 21 March and 28 August. The March period, however, is ruled out not only on grounds of inclement weather for outdoor composition, but also by the flying stag beetle — almost unknown in March, but common enough around August–September.

As to the years in which the poem was not first written, we know that Gray and Walpole embarked on a Grand Tour of Europe together in March 1739, quarrelled bitterly abroad in 1741, and were not again on speaking terms until a reconciliation was arranged through a mutual friend in November 1745. Walpole, therefore, must have been shown the beginning not later than late summer 1738 or not earlier than late summer 1746. A question to be asked at once is whether Gray’s ‘long ago’

was more likely to refer to less than four years or more than eleven. Is it not more probable that he was referring to the earlier and closer relationship of their youth?

Many attempts have been made to solve the puzzle through the identification of the Churchyard, but, apart from exposing the claims of Stoke Poges as patently false, these have proved sterile partly because most of the sleuths have been misled into looking for an ivy-mantled church tower, when no such tower could have been 'yonder' in the tiny country churchyards of those days, but mainly because the *Elegy's* description of the Churchyard could have fitted a number of places. It is useful for corroboration, but insufficient for positive identification.

Yet it is to the *Elegy* itself that we must first turn in solving the puzzle; not to the beginning, however, but to the end where, thanks to the luck which has preserved a small part of the English countryside virtually untouched for over two centuries, to a letter of Gray's and to the training he received at Eton from his uncle and tutor, Robert Antrobus, positive identification can be made not only of the exact location but also of the Youth of the poem.

Walpole attests that Antrobus 'took prodigious pains' with his young nephew, particularly in Nature study, and we know that as a result Gray became a keen and accurate observer of Nature throughout his life, to such an extent, for example, that he noted in his diary each year the precise date on which he first heard each new birdsong. This remarkable accuracy we can see for ourselves when we take the descriptive passages in the latter part of the *Elegy* and compare them closely with those contained in his letter to Walpole of August 1736, and the topography of the area to which he alludes.

The letter to Walpole was written from Cant's Hill, Burnham (now the Burnham Beeches Hotel), then the home of Gray's aunt, Ann Rogers and her husband Jonathan, a retired solicitor. After telling Walpole that he is obliged to write standing up as his uncle's dogs take up every chair in the house and that his uncle despises him for 'walking when I should ride and reading when I should hunt', Gray goes on to say that his 'comfort amidst all this' is Burnham Beeches, half a mile distant:

A forest all my own . . . covered with most venerable beeches . . .
that . . . are always dreaming out their old stories to the wind

And as they bow their hoary tops relate,
In murm'ring sounds, the dark decrees of fate;
While visions, as poetic eyes avow,
Cling to each leaf and swarm on every bough.

At the foot of one of these squats Me, I (il penseroso) and there grow
to a trunk for the whole morning . . . In this situation I often converse
with my Horace, aloud too, that is talk to you . . .

If one leaves the Burnham Beeches Hotel at dawn in early
September (since 28 August then is 8 September now), to walk
to that spot in Burnham Beeches beside the Swilly stream which
is still marked on some maps as 'Gray's Tree', one comes out of a
shady hollow below the house and proceeds north-east up a
fairly steep grazing hill on to flat meadows where one first sees
the rising sun. The meadows stretch up to the Beeches; on their
left lies Burnham Beeches Golf Course (the 'heath' of the poem)
and on their right is Hunt's Wood. 'Gray's Tree' is about two
hundred yards inside the Beeches and about three-quarters of a
mile from the hotel. The poetic description is absolute and is
further confirmed by two stanzas from the Eton MS. version
which Gray subsequently omitted:

If chance that e'er some pensive Spirit more,
By sympathetic Musings here delayed,
With vain, tho' kind, Enquiry shall explore
Thy once-loved Haunt, this long-deserted Shade.

Him have we seen the Green-wood Side along
While o'er the Heath we hied, our Labours done,
Oft as the Woodlark piped her farewell song
With whistful Eyes pursue the setting Sun.

The first of these stanzas is obviously a direct reference to
'Gray's Tree', while the second clearly describes him setting
home south-westwards along the side of Hunt's Wood, being
observed by the woodcutters who would have walked across the
present golf course on their way back to Burnham village.

Together, then, the letter and the topography show beyond
doubt that the latter part of the Elegy is an exact self-portrait of
Gray himself and this, of course, is confirmed by the Epitaph:

Thomas Gray, a youth of nineteen or twenty; the son of a money-scrivener and a milliner and the only one of their twelve children to survive infancy; his two best friends the sons of the Prime Minister of England and the Lord Chancellor of Ireland. We have enough to be sure of the identity of the 'Youth', but what of the 'Friend'? (Is it fanciful to deduce from all the evidence that Gray's 'hopeless love' was a homosexual infatuation with Horace Walpole? From the 'Quadruple Alliance' at Eton — of Gray, Walpole, West, and Ashton — through all his life, there are indications of homosexuality in Gray's character.) However this may be, the establishment of the location of the latter part of the Elegy helps us greatly in identifying the Churchyard for it is obvious that it must have been nearby and somewhere where he might reasonably have been at nightfall. These requirements point unerringly to St Peter's, Burnham, and, as soon as its long-neglected claims are examined, there is little difficulty in confirming them beyond all reasonable doubt.

Now steepled, St Peter's then had a wooden tower capped with a small bell-cote (a photograph of 1850 still exists). Unlike Stoke Poges, its churchyard has always had its elms as well as yews. Standing at the church porch and looking west today one sees a housing estate where then lay rolling farmland. Looking south along the path through the old graveyard one can see the tower of Burnham Priory three hundred yards away. The Priory has no ecclesiastical connection and was only built (as a private house) in 1824, but is believed to have been so named because of a ruined thirteenth-century tower (built by Richard, Duke of Cornwall, who founded Burnham Abbey), which previously stood on the site. It is probable that St Peter's has been discarded in the past because a census of 1740 showed the parish to consist of '540 souls and no Papist' — much too large for a 'hamlet'. This, however, is to ignore two important points: first, that Gray's first choice of word, as the Eton MS. shows, was 'village' and, second, that most of the parishioners had decamped a mile or more south of the village after the Bath Road had been diverted some two centuries before Gray's time. Indeed, contemporary maps show only about twenty houses in the village proper — the size of a traditional hamlet.

Apart from propinquity (St Peter's lies only half-a-mile from Cant's Hill), and meeting the descriptive requirements of the Elegy, we have the all-important evidence of Gray's connection with the Church and the probability of him being there at night-fall in late August. Jonathan Rogers, we know, was a loyal parishioner. Although he had moved to Stoke Poges some two years before he died in 1742, it is at St Peter's that he is buried and his memorial plaque testifies that he 'devoted the last years of his life to himself, his friends and God'. (One wonders, *en passant*, whether Gray, noted for his wry humour, was responsible for the priorities.)

We can be reasonably sure that whenever young Gray went to stay at Cant's Hill he would have been obliged to accompany his uncle and aunt to Evensong on Sundays at St Peter's. That he found their company unsympathetic is attested to not only by his letter to Walpole, but also by the fact that he always refers to his aunt as 'Mrs Rogers' whereas his mother's other sister was always his 'dear Aunt Mary'. What more likely than that, on a fine late summer evening, he would have excused himself from riding back with them in their carriage on the grounds that he would prefer to walk?

At this stage, a good case emerges in favour of late August 1736, as the birthdate of the Elegy, but, in the writer's opinion, not quite good enough. To carry conviction beyond all reasonable doubt, our solution must be able to answer all the questions, not just most of them, and this dating would leave some loose ends. It would not, for example, explain the Abbey references which have puzzled many scholars nor would it explain the long gap between original composition and eventual publication.

As Gray never again stayed at Cant's Hill after his journey abroad in early 1739, we are left with only late August 1737 or 1738 as possibilities, and 1738 can be virtually ruled out in that there is no reason or evidence whatsoever to suggest it as likely.

But what of late August 1737? On Monday, 22 August 1737, we find Gray in London writing to Richard West in response to a most touching elegy in English, called 'Ad Amicos' which West had sent him:

Low spirits are my true and faithful companions . . . most commonly we sit alone together. Would I could turn them to the same use that you have done . . . If they could write such verses with me, not hartshorn, nor spirits of amber, nor all that furnishes the closet of an apothecary's widow, should persuade me to part with them. But, while I write to you, I hear the bad news of Lady Walpole's death on Saturday night last. Forgive me if the thought of what my poor Horace must feel on that account obliges me to have done in reminding you that I am, Yours, etc.

Lady Walpole was buried at Houghton, Norfolk, on Saturday, 27 August, but her funeral service was held at Westminster Abbey a day or two before. Is it possible to imagine that Gray, in London, would not have attended to lend support to his 'poor Horace' who, we know, was most deeply attached to his mother? And, when Walpole departed to Norfolk for the burial, what more likely than that Gray would have betaken himself down to Cant's Hill, where he had spent the previous August and September; before returning to Cambridge for the Michaelmas term? We have no evidence of his movements or whereabouts at this particular time, but, if we accept this as a reasonable probability on the basis of his previous pattern, we can then reconstruct the scene at the end of Evensong at St Peter's, Burnham, on Sunday, 28 August 1737, in such a way as to convince us beyond reasonable doubt that this point of time saw the birth of the *Elegy*.

Excusing himself from the Rogers' company as we have already suggested, he waits at the church while they make their departure. He is aware, of course, of one particular memorial tablet already there. It is to the man who had had the greatest influence on his young life and reads:

Near this place lie the Ashes of
ROBERT ANTROBUS

No man was ever more affectionate to his friends nor more worthy of their love. He was so able of intellect and learning that he was an honour to his family and a help to others. If you consider his character, he was upright and kindhearted; if his disposition, he was always consistent; if his fortune, he deserved more than he gained.

Standing at the church porch, he cannot fail to be moved by the contrast between the humble village church with its pathetic

jumbled graveyard and all the pomp and ceremony of the Abbey funeral service of a few days previous. West's elegy in English no doubt also comes into his mind: 'Would I could turn them to the same use that you have done . . . If they could write such verses with me . . .' He observes the fading scene as night falls, hears the owl hoot from the ruined tower across the graveyard, hears also the curfew toll, perhaps from the little bell-cote above him, and starts to pen his poetic description by the light of the lantern still swinging in the porch.

He heads these '12 or more first lines' (which Walpole remembered first seeing) 'Stanzas Written in a Country Churchyard' and expands them over the following weeks at Cant's Hill up to the present eighteenth stanza where, Mason declares, he originally intended to end. Fearing Walpole's reactions to the 'Abbey references', however, he returns to Cambridge with only the original Churchyard stanzas, leaving the full poem at Cant's Hill. As far as we know, he never returned there and the most likely explanation of the Elegy's 12 years in limbo is that it and the Epitaph (a separate piece of the same period) fell into the hands of his devoted Aunt Mary when the family moved house to Stoke Poges while he was abroad, only coming to light again among her papers after her funeral at Stoke Poges in November 1749, which Gray attended.

Nostalgia for his adolescence runs through all Gray's early poems and we can imagine the effect of this discovery upon him. What more likely than that he would revisit his old haunts nearby and there resolve to knit them together as an epitaph on both his youth and his first love? Mason's statement, the poem's structure, the retrospective tone of 'Thy once-loved haunt, this long-deserted Shade' and the fact that all the eventually omitted stanzas come from this part of the poem all tend to bear this out.

No doubt he worked on this during the winter of 1749-50 at Cambridge, but it was to Stoke Poges that he returned to finish his masterpiece before sending it at once, not to his publisher or any other friend, but, significantly, again to Walpole. 'You will, I hope,' he went on after the opening sentence of this article, 'look upon it in the light of a *thing with an end to it*', quickly covering this cryptic remark with a wry joke. If this also was a shy

clue to the origin and inner meanings of the poem, it escaped Walpole, who merely found the work somewhat obscure.

Gray must have been relieved, not wishing to hazard again a friendship which had been so carefully repaired. Indeed, by sending his poem first to Walpole, he was in a way insuring himself against this for, if Walpole had understood it or even remembered when he had first seen its beginning and been offended as a result, Gray retained the option of suppressing the work to retain the friendship. Fortunately for us, Walpole's faded memory meant to Gray that his secret was safe as long as he kept it to the grave. As the *Elegy* was an instant and wide-spread success, making Gray a celebrity almost overnight, he must often have been asked where, when and why he first wrote it. This theory alone seems to explain why he evidently never gave the answers, but honest men make poor deceivers and we can now see that Gray left 'fingerprints' all over the place. We can even see why he was so keen to tell us in the title where the poem was written rather than what it was about, as was the accepted fashion of the time: because it was both true and also unusual for him to write other than at his desk. If we recall his letter to Walpole, we can see that the *Elegy* might very well never have been written had it not been for Jonathan Rogers' dogs.

The possible objection that this reconstruction is rendered void by the fact that the ninth stanza is an obvious plagiarism from West's *Monody on the Death of Queen Caroline* (who did not die until November 1737) is, in fact, no objection. The important point is that Gray, far too scrupulous to be a conscious plagiarist, was a subconscious one. The *Elegy* owes obvious debts to Dante and Petrarch as well as West. Gray, therefore, must have forgotten West's lines when he revived them from his subconscious. They must, that is, have been one of the 1750 additions to the poem to give time enough for them to have left his conscious memory.

As to those who feel that the *Elegy* could not have been written by a youth of nineteen or twenty as his first original composition in English verse, let us remember West's 'Ad Amicos' and hear the evidence of Horace Walpole, one of the

greatest letter-writers of all time, writing of their youth to William Mason on 27 November 1773:

They not only possessed genius . . . but both had abilities marvellously premature. What wretched, boyish stuff would my letters to them appear if they existed.

If there are still those who find it hard to accept that Gray's masterpiece was, albeit with later alterations, essentially his first original composition in English verse, let them remember that, until now, it has been generally accepted that his first efforts were the 'Sonnet on the Death of Richard West', the 'Hymn to Adversity' and the 'Ode on a distant prospect of Eton College', all known to have been written within a few weeks of each other in the summer of 1742. Is that less remarkable? And let us hear Walpole again, this time writing to Lord Lyttleton on 25 August 1777:

I do not think that they (Gray's contemporaries) ever admired him except in his Churchyard, though the Eton Ode was far its superior, and is certainly not obscure. The Eton Ode is perfect.

Whatever current literary fashion may make of Gray's works, it is obvious that Walpole, judging them in the light of the critical standards of the time, was in no doubt that the Eton Ode represented a considerable advance on the Elegy in terms of poetic accomplishment.

Finally, there is the significance of that single stanza in Gray's letter to Walpole of August 1736, (a stanza, incidentally, much admired and often quoted by Hazlitt) with its similarities to the Elegy: quatrain, pentameters, location, poetic maturity, even its 'hoary tops' and the Elegy's 'hoary-headed'.

All assessments of Gray and his works to date have been based on the assumption that the masterpiece which Palgrave described as 'perhaps the noblest stanzas in our language' was first written by a man of at least twenty-five with considerable experience of English verse composition. If it is now beyond reasonable doubt that it was, in fact, first written by a mere youth of nineteen or twenty as his first poem in English, there is food for new thought on the strange character and prodigy that was Thomas Gray.