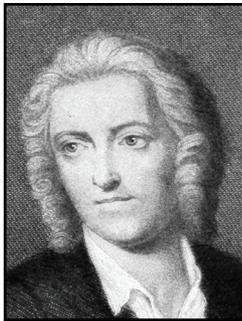


## NOT QUITE A RECLUSE THOMAS GRAY (1716-1771)



There could hardly be a greater contrast to the gregarious, philosophical, bawdy, tender-hearted and usually happy novelist Laurence Sterne than the austere, solitary, brooding, forlorn poet Thomas Gray. Yet despite his melancholy temperament, there are two joyous high points in Gray's correspondence as well as a final low point of emotional desolation.

As a youth, Gray is a member of a "Quadruple Alliance" of intimate friends at Eton; the other three are Thomas Ashton, Richard West, and the Prime Minister's son, Horace Walpole. Gray and West go up to Cambridge in 1734, a year before the younger Walpole. In letters to the latter touched with the humour of bantering schoolfellows yet shot through with melancholy, Gray castigates a university where "The Masters of Colleges are twelve grey-haired gentlefolks, who are all mad with pride; the Fellows are sleepy, drunken, dull, illiterate things; the Fellow-Commoners are imitators of the Fellows, or else beaux, or else nothing."

To his dismay, the instruction is not in the Greek and Roman poetry Gray has learnt at Eton to love, but in philosophy and mathematics. "I have made such a wonderful progress in philosophy," he announces, "that I begin to be quite persuaded that black is white, & that fire will not burn ... they tell me too, that I am nothing in the world, & that I only fancy, I exist." Proceeding to Oxford, West finds himself in no better plight, his university being "a country flowing with syllogisms and ale, where Horace and Virgil are equally unknown." Gray's social discomfort is acute: "do but imagine me," he adjures Walpole, "pent up in a room hired for the purpose, & none of the largest, from 7 o'clock at night, till 4 in the morning! 'midst hogsheads of liquor & quantities of tobacco, surrounded by 30 of these creatures infinitely below the meanest people you could even form an idea of." He yearns for Walpole to join him and enviously reads the account of plays, operas and masquerades his friend enjoys during a visit to London.

In the summer of 1736, holidaying with his horse- and dog-loving Uncle Rogers, who despises his nephew's taste for walking and books, Gray delights to think of himself as "Il Penseroso" – "the Melancholy Man" – of Milton's poem of that name, while he wanders alone down "a green lane" and through "a little chaos of mountains & precipices," and reads Virgil under a tree.

After two years at Cambridge, Gray decides to abandon the degree programme but remain at the University. He informs Walpole, "I swing from chapel or hall home, and from home to chapel or hall." When he has passed three and a half years in the place, he finds that he suffers from inertia: "'tis true," he confesses to Walpole, "Cambridge is very ugly, she is very dirty, & very dull; but I'm like a cabbage, where I'm stuck, I love to grow." Nevertheless, six months later, in September 1738, he leaves for London intending to study law. Luckily, the wealthy Horace Walpole is about to embark on a tour of the Continent, and Gray happily accepts an invitation to accompany him. Dyspeptic letters describing life at University are about to give way to passionate ones recording the writer's encounter with alien landscapes and the people who inhabit them.

Many people travel with preconceptions about the superiority – or less often the inferiority – of their own country. Gray, however, starts on his two-year tour at the end of March 1739 with an open and discriminating mind and a healthy supply of curiosity. Writing of Calais, he tells his mother, "we hardly saw anything there that was not so new and so different from England, that it surprized us agreeably." He notices the good roads and the bad inns, and at Amiens the Cathedral seems to him to be what Canterbury's must have been before the Reformation. In Paris, he finds the streets themselves and the people in them an entertainment, and besides theatrical pleasures, the city possesses "perhaps as handsome buildings, as any in the world." The palace at Versailles he dismisses as "a huge heap of littleness" disfigured by hues of "black, dirty red, and yellow," but in the vast gardens – enriched with "copies of all the famous antique statues in white marble" – "the case is indeed altered," despite an excess of such artificialities as "sugar-loaves and minced-pies of yew, scrawl-work of box, and little squirting jets-d'eau." In Rheims, he finds society is more formal than in Paris and less pleasant than in Dijon. Lyons disappoints him with its high houses over-shadowing narrow streets, but in its environs is a beautiful mountain landscape. Unfortunately the priests have little regard for the Roman remains.

Travelling further, Gray enlarges on the contrast between the prosperous republic of Geneva and the fertile yet poverty-stricken Savoy, which is misgoverned by the King of Sardinia. He happily records that Sir Robert Walpole has asked Horace to proceed to Italy. Gray, in love with the

Roman classics, reassures his father, "You may imagine I am not sorry to have the opportunity of seeing the place in the world that best deserves it."

To pass from France to Italy over land requires the party to traverse the Alps. Gray writes to his mother of their "eight days tiresome journey" and of their chaise's running along a road "not two yards broad at most" and bordering a precipice fifty fathoms deep. To West, he reveals the ecstasy that overtakes him on the ascent to the famous monastery La Grande Chartreuse:

I do not remember to have gone ten paces without an exclamation, that there was no restraining: Not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry. There are certain scenes that would awe an atheist into belief, without the help of other argument. One need not have a very fantastic imagination to see spirits there at noon-day: You have Death perpetually before your eyes, only so far removed, as to compose the mind without frightening it.

This encounter with dangerous magnificence marks Gray's initiation into the Sublime, that awe-inspiring aesthetic category that the eighteenth century loves to contrast with the harmonious Beautiful. The impact is to lead years later to his attempt at poetic sublimity in his two Pindaric odes. Less welcome in his account of the mountains is the assertion that "The creatures that inhabit there are, in all respects, below humanity."

Arriving at Genoa, Gray is enchanted by the beauty of the palaces and churches rising against the background of the Mediterranean and is dazzled by the sacred ceremonies on a festival day. "I believe I forgot to tell you," he teases West, "that we have been sometime converts to the holy Catholic church." In a similar vein he confesses to "cursing French music and architecture" while "singing the praises of Italy." For twelve days in Bologna, the party finds private houses inaccessible and sees "therefore, churches, palaces, and pictures from morning to night." Crossing the well cultivated Appenines, they luxuriate in the Uffizi Gallery and the architecture of Florence, but the climax of the Italian tour comes when Gray is wonderstruck by Rome. He exclaims, "As high as my expectation was raised, I confess, the magnificence of this city infinitely surpasses it." On the Good Friday of 1740, he is overwhelmed by the spectacle at St. Peter's, where he watches thirty processions and at night beholds "thousands of little crystal lamps, disposed in the figure of a huge cross at the high altar, and seeming to hang alone in the air." There is disdain, however, in his description in the same letter of alleged sacred relics of the Crucifixion displayed to worshippers and horror in his account of the blood-bespattered

flagellants in a side-chapel. At Tivoli, he and Walpole are fascinated by Roman remains, and back at Rome, Gray delightfully treats West to an account of an imaginary ancient dinner party he has enjoyed at Pompey's villa. The discordant element in the city is the squabbling Conclave unable to complete the election of a new pope, something that "gives great scandal to all good catholics."

Traversing "the most beautiful part of the finest country in the world," the friends reach Naples, which Gray finds full of hard working, music-loving people as well as classical remains, including the recent excavations at Herculaneum. Back in Florence, he begins to grow weary of its splendours but finds a new friend and future correspondent in the English expatriate John Chute. Thinking of his return, he writes to West, whom he has been encouraging to continue in his law studies, "This I feel, that you are the principal pleasure I have to hope for in my own country." Tragically, West is to die eight months after his friend's return.

At Reggio, Gray and Walpole quarrel, and Gray is left to make his way with one attendant to Venice and then home via France. Though he sends letters to reassure his parents he is safe and well, this part of his adventure is not described in his correspondence.

Home in England, Gray feels like a foreigner. He writes to Chute:

The boys laugh at the depth of my ruffles, the immensity of my bag[-wig], and the length of my sword. I am as an alien in my native land.... If my pockets had anything in them, I should be afraid of every body I met. Look in their face, they knock you down; speak to them, they bite off your nose. I am no longer ashamed in public, but extremely afraid ... as to politics, every body is extreme angry with all that has been, or shall be done ... now I have been at home, & seen how things go there, would I were with you again.

In his discomfort, Gray makes a desultory effort to study the law, but soon abandons it and takes rooms at Peterhouse, a Cambridge College. His letters give the impression that he sinks into a life of private study, melancholy, and dull ordinariness, relieved only by a few such incidents as his attendance at the trial of the Scottish peers who joined the Young Pretender's army in 1745, and his purchase of a rope ladder to escape from his chamber should drunken students cause a fire. In March 1756, when disturbances at Peterhouse become too alarming, he moves to Pembroke College, where one of the Fellows, James Brown, is his good friend.

Gray's correspondents, who soon include the reconciled Horace Walpole, learn a good deal about College and University politics, but they know the personalities involved, while we, his posthumous readers, do

not. Only gradually, as we read on, does it become clear that this quiet little man (he once alludes to himself as small and waddling) combats his habitual melancholy and occasional deep depression by maintaining wide ranging interests and amassing knowledge in several fields and by indulging his vein of humour. Harking back, not quite accurately, to the time of his quarrel with Walpole, he refers to himself at the end of 1746 as “a solitary of six years standing,” and he calls himself “an anchorite.” Four years later he is of the same mind and reports, “I have been this month in town ... and return to my cell with so much the more pleasure.” Although he has a handful of dear friends, this anchorite is a shy man who is terrified when the publisher Dodsley wants to use his engraved portrait as a frontispiece to his “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard.” There is probably, however, a touch of humorous exaggeration in his confession to his physician friend Thomas Wharton, “as to humanity you know my aversion to it; which is barbarous & inhuman, but I can not help it” – even though he adds, “God forgive me.”

Gray’s mischievous sense of fun adds a spice of playfulness to his correspondence. Writing to Wharton from Cambridge, he admits, “The Spirit of Laziness (the Spirit of the Place), begins to possess even me, that have so long declaimed against it,” and he foretells, “brandy will finish what port begun; & a month after the time you will see in some corner of a London Evening Post, Yesterday, died the Reverend Mr. John Grey ... his death is supposed to have been occasion’d by a fit of an apoplexy, being found fall’n out of bed with his head in the chamber-pot.” When his friend William Mason is appointed Precentor (director of the choir) at York Minster, Gray jocularly upbraids him for withholding the news and also passes on Wharton’s congratulations: “Here, take them, you miserable Precentor! I wish all your choir may mutiny, & sing you to death.” But Gray’s principal relief from depression, as he well knows, lies in finding occupations to fill his time. He is glad to hear that Bishop Hurd is preparing work for the press because, as he tells him, “to be employed is to be happy.”

Gray’s best known employment is the composition of poetry, and his greatest interest is literature. In his student days, he once seeks relief from mental vacancy by translating a passage from the Roman epic poet Statius into heroic couplets, which he then sends to West. Poems of his own and passages from his poems in progress occasionally appear in his letters. Sometimes he discusses arrangements for their publication. He keeps up to date with current books, devouring poetry, history, memoirs and letters. When James Macpherson brings out what he falsely alleges are translations of ancient Gaelic poems orally preserved, Gray is enchanted by them and passionately seeks assurance of their authenticity. He eagerly awaits

new volumes from France, especially instalments of the *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné, des sciences, des arts et des métiers* and of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière*. Natural history is as much an object of his study as human history. He greatly admires his contemporary Linnaeus, the great pioneer of biological classification, and seems to become expert in the identification of plant and animal species.

His research into literature leads him into serious contemplation of language. As a Latinist, he regrets that English "is too diffuse, & daily grows more and more enervate"; he looks back nostalgically to the more concrete language of the Elizabethan age, quoting eight lines from the opening speech of *Richard III* with the comment "To me they appear untranslatable," for "Every word in him [Shakespeare] is a picture." He counsels against an English translation of the Italian writings of Count Algarotti (the object of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's passion): "the justness of thought & good sense might remain; but the graces of elocution (which make a great part of Algarotti's merit) would be entirely lost, & that merely from the very different genius and complexion of the two languages." When it comes to the translation of his masterpiece, "Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard," into Latin, he endorses the translator's omission of certain phrases, for "Every language has its idiom, not only of words and phrases, but of customs and manners, which cannot be represented in the tongue of another nation."

Although Gray can be impatient for books from France, he is no friend of the French nation. His letters, which constantly comment on changes in the ministry, show his interest in public affairs, and he trembles for the fate of Britain and her Prussian ally, Frederick the Great, in the Seven Years War against France, Austria, and Russia. He is horrified when William Pitt the Elder, the great British leader in the War, deserts the House of Commons to accept a peerage and a pension. Six years after peace is signed, he gloats: "The only good thing I hear is that France is on the brink of a general bankruptcy, & their fleet (the only thing they have laid out money on of late) in no condition of service." As a Whig, he supports the repeal of the Stamp Act to mollify the American colonists, observes that the Spitalfield weavers demonstrating for protection against imported silks "neither appear'd insolent, nor intimidated," and sympathizes with the over boisterous and libertine Wilkes in his brave campaign against the abuse of royal privilege and government power. As a patriot, he is able to convince Algarotti that though the English are laggards in painting and sculpture, they have invented one art: landscape gardening. As an Englishman and an anti-Gallican, he does not scruple to write of the French, "I rejoice at their dulness and their nastiness," but the main charge he levels against them is of irreligion and atheism. Conventionally pious,

Gray encourages Wharton to continue reading evening prayers in his household, and on a visit to Mason is happy to accompany him twice a day to church. He detests the anti-Christian Voltaire, and when he cannot help applauding the latter's success in having an unjust conviction for murder reversed, he writes of "that inexhaustible, eternal, entertaining scribbler Voltaire, who at last (I fear) will go to heaven." He is similarly hostile to the sceptical philosopher David Hume, foolishly dismissing his writings as "a turbid and shallow stream," himself as "all his days an infant," and his "vogue" to the influence of "That childish nation, the French." Unable to come to grips with philosophy outside the field of ethics, Gray is unlikely to have read *A Treatise of Human Nature* or any other major works of this great thinker.

Gray's piety sits easily with his romantic love of old churches and ruined abbeys. He builds up an impressive knowledge of architecture, tracing, for example, the history of various parts of York Minster and making a detailed critique of a manuscript section of James Bentham's study of Ely Cathedral. His indignation is very justly aroused by innovators and their "rage of repairing, beautifying, painting, and gilding, and (above all) the mixture of Greek (or Roman) ornaments in Gothic edifices."

The taste for Gothic design, rare at the beginning of the century, is now becoming widespread, and when Thomas Wharton wants to decorate the house on his newly inherited estate in the north of England in Gothic style, Gray advises him on the design of wallpaper and the production of painted glass and helps him to procure them. At the same time, he warns,

it is mere pedantry in Gothicism to stick to nothing but altars & tombs, & there is no end of it, if we are to sit upon nothing but coronation-chairs, nor drink out of nothing but chalices & flagons. The idea is sufficiently kept up, if we live in an ancient house, but with modern conveniences about us.

This helpfulness to Wharton is matched by equal kindness to others. Gray undertakes research to assist Walpole with his *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, his *Historic Doubts on Richard III*, and his edition (the first) of Lord Herbert of Cherbury's autobiography. When Mason submits manuscripts of his poems and plays, Gray compiles very detailed critiques. Similarly, he advises the Scottish James Beattie on a section of his long poem *The Minstrel*.

There is, too, a less serious component to Gray's letters. He is not averse to a little scandal and seems to take a particular interest in marriages. "This very night," he writes of a Fellow of St. John's College, "Billy Robinson consummates his good fortune; she has £10,000 in her pocket,

and a brother unmarried with at least as much more." After Lady Harriet Wentworth, "not a young or a beautiful maiden," marries her Irish footman, instead of becoming Mrs. Sturgeon, she retains her name and title. When "the world" says of his friend Henrietta Speed that she has done "a very foolish thing" in marrying the Sardinian Minister's son, the Baron de la Perrière, who is ten years her junior, Gray observes that her bridegroom is "a very sober man, good-natured & honest, & no conjurer [i.e., no fool]." Four years later, her husband is himself the Minister in Britain, and Gray reports:

I sat a morning with her before I left London. She is a prodigious fine lady, & a Catholic (tho' she did not expressly own it to me) not fatter than she was: she had a cage of foreign birds & a piping bullfinch at her elbow, two little dogs on a cushion in her lap, a cockatoo on her shoulder, & a slight suspicion of rouge on her cheeks.

Glimpses of many characters appear in Gray's letters. In his first months at Cambridge, he is much comforted by the mince pies of

an old gentlewoman ... in whose favour [he reports], I have made no small progress.... I make my addresses to her by calling her, Grandmother; in so much, that she sends her niece every day to know how I do: N.B.: the other day she was dying, as every one thought, but herself: and when the physician told her how dangerous her case was; she fell into a violent passion with him: marry come up! she die! no, indeed would'nt she; die quotha! she'd as soon be hang'd: in short she was so resolutely bent upon not dying, that she really did live.

At Florence, the Countess Suarez, a favourite of the late Grand Duke and a lady who "gives the first movement to every thing gay that is going forward," contrasts with the Electress Palatine Dowager, the same ruler's sister, to whom Walpole is presented. The Electress is

a stately old lady, that never goes out but to church, and then she has guards, and eight horses to her coach. She received him [Walpole] with much ceremony, standing under a huge black canopy, and, after a few minutes talking, she assured him of her good will, and dismissed him: she never sees any body but thus in form; and so she passes her life.

Very different is Jane Oliffe, the aunt with whom Gray is co-executor of another aunt's legacy. "I am agreeably employ'd here," he writes from Stoke Poges, the family's village, "in dividing *nothing* with an old *harridan*, who is the spawn of Cerberus & the Dragon of Wantley." More than a decade later, when he is pitying her in her dying agony, he finds, "she is just as sensible & as impatient of pain, & as intractable as she was 60 years ago." Harsh sentiment is not entirely uncharacteristic of this gentleman, who can write of the Reverend Henry Etough, "it is his constant practice twice in a year to import a cargo of lies, & scandalous truths mix'd" and advises, "There are three methods of taking him properly to task, the cudgel, the blanket, and the horse-pond."

The most memorable portraits that emerge from Gray's letters are of some of his correspondents. There is James Brown, a scholar fond of gardening, who leads the Fellows of Pembroke College in a revolt against the Master and long after becomes the Master himself. Another College Fellow is William Mason, who leaves academe to serve as a clergyman and is also an ambitious poet and dramatist, a proud amateur designer of gardens, a hero-worshipper of Gray, the forty-year-old bridegroom of a woman he calls "this gentle this innocent creature," and, after eighteen months of marriage, a grieving widower. The physician Thomas Wharton, who takes up the fashion for things Gothic, shares Gray's fascination with natural history – the latter's observations sometimes feature in his letters. Younger than the others is Norton Nicholls, a lover of poetry and Gray's junior by about a quarter of a century, who follows the latter's advice to take holy orders and settles down in his country parish but longs to experience the glory of the Alps.

In 1765, at the age of forty-eight, Gray himself makes a second foray into mountains when he travels in Scotland and is astonished to rediscover in the Highlands the sublimity he encountered in the Alps twenty-six years before. These Highlands, he writes to Brown on his return, "would be Italy, if they had but a climate," and he treats Mason to an implicit contrast between "those monstrous creatures of God" that "join so much beauty with so much horror" and the mild prettiness of "bowling-greens, flowering shrubs, horse-ponds, Fleet-ditches, shell-grottoes, & Chinée-rails." In a journal-letter for Wharton, Gray describes the forests, rivers, lakes, churches, towers, and towns that feed his appetite for the exotic but do not prevent him from responding happily to the southern beauty of Kent the following year. Despite his hopes, he is never able to return to Scotland, but in 1769 he has the joy of exploring the mountains of the Lake District, which draw from him a second journal-letter for Wharton. Of Gowder-crag, with its rock-strewn road, he declares,

The place reminds one of those passes in the Alps, where the guides tell you to move on with speed, & say nothing, lest the agitation of the air should loosen the snows above, & bring down a mass that would overwhelm a caravan.

Well might Johnson say, "He that reads his epistolary narration wishes that to travel, and to tell his travels, had been more of his employment."

By this time, Gray has less than two years to live, but there is one more surprise waiting for him. In November 1769, Norton Nicholls recommends to his attention a young Swiss man who seems "vastly better than anything English (of the same age)." The young man, Charles Victor de Bonstetten, studies for a few weeks with Gray, who assures Nicholl, "I never saw such a boy: our breed is not made on this model. He is busy from morning to night, has no other amusement, than that of changing one study for another." But the happy situation is not to last, for by March Gray is informing Nicholls, "His cursed Father will have him home in the autumn, & he must pass thro' France to improve his talents & morals. . . . He gives me too much pleasure, & at least *an equal share* of inquietude." Gray soon asks Nicholls to burn the letter just quoted. Like Nicholls, Gray fears that Bonstetten's perfection may crumble under the stress of temptation; as he tells the young man, he sees in him the potential of Plato's Philosopher-King, a potential that, Plato admits in Book Six of *The Republic*, may be corrupted by society. In his infatuation, Gray discloses to the departed Bonstetten, "My life now is but a perpetual conversation with your shadow — The known sound of your voice still rings in my ears. — There, on the corner of the fender you are standing, or tinkling on the pianoforte, or stretch'd at length on the sofa." Tremblingly, he warns him against "the jargon of French sophists, the allurements of painted women *comme il faut*, or the vulgar caresses of prostitute beauty." Returning from a trip to Suffolk, he writes, "The thought, that you might have been with me there, has embittered all my hours." Two months after Bonstetten has sailed, Gray laments to Nicholls that "he seems at present to give in to all the French nonsense & to be employ'd much like an English boy broke loose from his governor." The mirage of human perfection has vanished.

One matter of conscience adds to the misery that burdens Gray in his last days. Since 1768, he has been Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge — to his delight the post was bestowed on him unsolicited. Two years, then almost three, have passed since, and he has performed no duties. Nicholls is probably right in reassuring him, "For God's sake how can you neglect a duty which never existed but in your own imagination . . . ? It never yet was performed, nor I believe expected." Nevertheless, it is hard

to believe that the audience would not have benefited greatly from lectures by a man of his learning and his command of the English language.

Gray's letters portray the lifestyle, emotions and friendships of a retired scholar and poet who emerged from his seclusion to experience first the Alps, secondly the Scottish Highlands, and thirdly the English Lake District. The posthumous publication of his epistolary descriptions of these regions did much to teach his compatriots to regard mountains as scenic splendours to be visited rather than inconvenient obstacles to travel.