THOMAS GRAY
Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (1751)

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Thomas Gray (1716–1771) spent his life at Eton and at Cambridge where he became Regius Professor of Modern History three years before his death (he never lectured, though).

He was a close friend to Horace Walpole and Richard West. He made the Grand Tour with Walpole. He was a very learned man: on addition to classical novels he turned to Welsh and Norse poetry (he was also interested in Ossian’s works which were exposed as forgery by Dr Johnson).

In his travel letters he expressed his enthusiasm for the Alps, the Lake Country and Scotland. He opposed the language of poetry to the language of the age. He used a “poetic diction” allusive and evocative from reminiscences of classical and earlier English poetry.

It is believed that Gray wrote his masterpiece, the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, in the graveyard of the church in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire in 1750. The poem was a literary sensation when published by Robert Dodsley in February 1751 and has made a lasting contribution to English literature. Its reflective, calm and stoic tone was greatly admired, and it was pirated, imitated, quoted and translated into Latin and Greek. It is still one of the most popular and most frequently quoted poems in the English language. Before the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, British General James Wolfe is said to have recited it to his officers, adding: “Gentlemen, I would rather have written that poem than take Quebec tomorrow.” The poem’s famous depiction of an “ivy-mantled tow’r” could be a reference to the early-medieval St. Laurence’s Church in Upton, Slough.

The Elegy was recognised immediately for its beauty and skill. It contains many outstanding phrases which have entered the common English lexicon, either on their own or as referenced in other works.

**Notes taken from Simon Schama, Landscape & Memory, 1996**

At Eton Horace Walpole and Thomas Gray made friends with Richard West and Thomas Ashton, forming what they liked to call, “The Quadruple Alliance.”

In the Italian Alps, (ca. 1740) Horace Walpole (the son of the former Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole) with his lapdog, mockingly called Tory (eaten by wolves in full daylight), and Thomas Gray completed
their tour of the continent. They found the Italian Alps uncouth and terrifying (vs the agreeable French Savoy). But their journey would provide the first unequivocally Romantic account of mountain sublimity nearly two decades before Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Inquiry*. The journey was designed to take them close to the edge and toy with disaster revelling in a “delightful Horrour” [*sic*] and a “terrible Joy” (words coined by John Dennis in 1688). They were not the religious types but the experience they sought was pseudo-religious.

In opposition to the sham and complacent century of “lumières”, Edmund Burke sought the obscurity and darkness of profundity. The sublime was to be discovered in the depths of caves, chasms, precipices, fissures, and clouds.

Mountain scenery had already become associated with ruin, chaos and catastrophe on which Romanticism thrived. One of the first to make this kind of association was the theologian Thomas Burnet whose *Telluris Theoria Sacra* of 1681 would have an ironic twist. Burnet actually wished to oppose the conformist Platonic view at Cambridge that mountains must have been included in the Creation for some benign reason (i.e. as a sign of “the wisdom of God”). But Burnet, having really been into the mountains, was appalled by what he had experienced. He stressed Earth’s rugged irregularities, not wishing to avert his gaze from the inscrutable ways of the Almighty. Burnet offered an authentic primordial drama in the place of a neatly well-ordered cosmology. The original egg-world Earth of Genesis had been smooth and full of underground water with no mention of mountains but the Great Deluge had shattered this unblemished sphere (“the ruins of a broken world”).

Addison (“agreeable kind of horror”) and Steele popularized these ideas. Even Shaftesbury opposed the “horrid graces of wilderness” to the “formal mocking of princely gardens.”

Salvator Rosa, the Neapolitan artist, had become an object of cult among the Whig aristocracy (there were at least a hundred of his paintings in England by the beginning of the eighteenth century; Rosa was praised for his “management of Horror and Distress”). Rosa’s fame did not rest on his more conventional baroque work but rather on his desolate mountainscapes (“orrida bellezza” of the Appenine scenery) or so-called “banditti.” Besides he liked to portray himself as a wild man genius, a hermit or misanthrope disdaining the conventions
of polite society. His fame was such that it inspired a thriving industry of Salvator engravers catering for a growing taste for fearsomeness. When Walpole tried to convey the Savoy mountain scenery to his friend Richard West, he heavily drew from Salvator imagery.

The same year Walpole and Gray left for their tour Longinus’s treatise of rhetoric (with its famous chapter on the sublime) was translated into English.

_Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard_

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimm’ring landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow’r
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wand’ring near her secret bow’r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould’ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twitt’ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing 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!

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

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,
Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem’ry o’er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where thro’ the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

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 soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

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 ecstasy the living lyre.

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.

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

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.
Th’ applause of list’ning senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o’er a smiling land,
And read their hist’ry in a nation’s eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib’d alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin’d;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the Muse’s flame.

Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn’d to stray;
Along the cool sequester’d vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet ev’n these bones from insult to protect,
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck’d,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by th’ unletter’d muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e’er resign’d,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one 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.

For thee, who mindful of th’ unhonour’d Dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
“Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

“There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

“Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt’ring his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz’d with care, or cross’d in hopeless love.

“One morn I miss’d him on the custom’d hill,
Along the heath and near his fav’rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

“The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow thro’ the church-way path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Grav’d on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.”

THE EPITAPH

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frown’d not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark’d him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav’n did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Mis’ry all he had, a tear,
He gain’d from Heav’n (‘twas all he wish’d) a friend.

1There scatter’d oft, the earliest of the year,
By hands unseen, are show’rs of violets found;
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,
And little footsteps lightly print the ground.
No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God.