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WORKS of Gray

Gray's letters, published in 1775, are excellent reading and his Journal is still a model of natural description but it is to a single small volume of poems that he owes his fame and his place in literature. These poems divide themselves naturally into three periods, in which we may trace the progress of Gray's emancipation from the classic rules which had so long governed English literature. In the first period he wrote several minor poems, of which the best are his "Hymn to Adversity" and the odes "To Spring" and "On a Distant Prospect of Eton College". These early poems reveal two suggestive things: first, the appearance of that melancholy which characterizes all the poetry of the period; and second, the study of nature, not for its

own beauty or truth, but rather as a suitable background for the play of human emotions.

The second period shows the same tendencies more strongly developed. The "Elegy written in a country churchyard" (1750), the most perfect poem of the age, belongs to this period. To read Milton's "Il Penseroso" and Gray's "Elegy" is to see the beginning and the perfection of that "literature of melancholy" which largely occupied English poets for more than a century. Two other well-known poems of this second period are the Pinderic odes, "The Progress of Poetry" and "The Bard". The first is strongly suggestive of Dryden's "Alexander's Feast", but shows Milton's influence in a greater melody and variety of expression. "The Bard" is, in

every way, more romantic and original. An old minstrel, the last of the Welsh singers, halts King Edward and his army in a wild mountain pass, and with fine poetic frenzy prophesies the terror and desolation which must ever follow the tyrant. From its first line, "Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!" to the end, when the old bard plunges from his lofty crag and disappears in the river's flood, the poem thrills with the fire of an ancient and noble race of men. It breaks absolutely with the classical school and proclaims a literary declaration of independence.

In the third period Gray turns momentarily from his Welsh material and reveals a new field of romantic interest in two Norse poems, "The Fatal Sisters" and "The Descent of Odin" (1761).

Gray translated his material from the Latin, and though these two poems lack much of the elemental strength and grandeur of the Norse Sagas, they are remarkable for calling attention to the unused wealth of literary material that was hidden in Northern mythology. To Gray and to Percy (who published his Northern Antiquities in 1770) is due in large measure the profound interest in the old Norse Sagas which has continued to our own day.

Taken together, Gray's work forms a most interesting commentary on the varied life of the eighteenth century. He was a scholar, familiar with all the intellectual interests of his age, and his work has much of the precision and polish of the classical school, but he has also the reawakened interest

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in nature, in common man and in mediæval culture and his work is generally romantic both in style and in spirit. The same conflict between the classic and romantic schools and the triumph of Romanticism is shown clearly in the most versatile of Gray's contemporaries, Oliver Goldsmith

The end.

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