THE ROMANTIC POETS

by

GRAHAM HOUGH
FELLOW OF CHRIST'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE,
AND UNIVERSITY LECTURER IN ENGLISH

HUTCHINSON'S UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
Hutchinson House, London, W.1.
New York Toronto Melbourne Sydney Cape Town

THE ROMANTIC POETS

HUTCHINSON'S UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
ENGLISH LITERATURE

EDITOR:
PROFESSOR BASIL WILLEY
M.A., F.B.A., HON.LITT.D.
King Edward VII Professor of English Literature in the University of Cambridge

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Last Romantics (1949)

THE ROMANTIC POETS

by

GRAHAM HOUGH
FELLOW OF CHRIST'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE,
AND UNIVERSITY LECTURER IN ENGLISH

HUTCHINSON'S UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
Hutchinson House, London, W.1.
New York Toronto Melbourne Sydney Cape Town

First Published - 1953

Printed in Great Britain by
William Brendon and Son, Ltd.
The Mayflower Press (late of Plymouth)
at Bushey Mill Lane
Watford, Herts.

CONTENTS

		Page
	PREFACE	vii
Chapter I	GRAY	9
II	WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE	
	i The Young Wordsworth	27
	ii The great decade	43
	iii Poetic diction and imagination	68
	iv Later years	85
III	BYRON	97
IV	SHELLEY	
	i Shelley and Godwin	122
	ii Prometheus Unbound	133
	iii Shelley as a lyrist	140
	iv The Defence of Poetry	150
V	KEATS	
	i The realm of Flora	156
	ii Negative capability	169
	iii The two Hyperions	180
	SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING	195
	INDEX OF WORKS DISCUSSED	199

PREFACE

THE object of this small book is to give a critical survey of the work of the major Romantic poets. By way of introduction, I have added a chapter on Gray. The main difficulty has been one of compression; so I have kept strictly to the poetry itself, and a few major critical documents. Much of what is to be said has often been said before; but most of the short general treatments of the field were written some time ago. There has been much detailed work and many shifts of taste in recent years. I have tried to take account of these, and, without any particular search for novelty, to write from the point of view of contemporary critical opinion.

Part of this book was written while I was Visiting Lecturer at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore: I should like to thank my colleagues there for a year's work in a delightful environment. I am also grateful to Professor Basil Willey for his helpful criticism.

CHAPTER I

GRAY

THE word 'romantic' has so many meanings, and they are so ill distinguished from each other that one is sometimes tempted to feel that it is hardly worth using it at all.[1] However, in practice it is difficult to get along without it, and we may begin by using it in its least ambiguous sense, as it is used in the title of this book, as a mere chronological label, to describe the imaginative literature of the early part of the last century. It is not hard to see where the label ought to be tied: in fact a new conception of poetry does come into being towards the end of the eighteenth century, and the poets who were to work it out were all either dead or past their creative period by 1825. In fact, too, the label is more than chronological; it does more than point to a certain group of writers; it can also legitimately connote something about their work, some things that they really had in common in spite of very different life-histories and personal characters. In the first place, the major poetry of this period is all written under the influence of the new secular, liberal conception of man and his destiny that had sprung from the French Revolution and the French eighteenth-century thought that had preceded it. I avoid saying inspired by the French Revolution, for that would suggest that the poetry is predominantly political and social, which it is not: and it would fail to suggest what is certainly true, that a reaction against the revolutionary ideal is almost as important as the revolutionary ideal itself. Secondly, the scepticism about existing society engendered by the revolutionary ferment impels the more imaginative minds into a new communion with nature. When the world of man is harsh and repugnant, in need of violent reform, yet so often, it appears, irreformable, the poet is apt to seek consolation in the world of nature which does not need reforming: at first *natura naturata*, the lovely texture of the

visible world; then *natura naturans*, the informing principle within it:

> A motion and a spirit that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things—

whose dwelling is as much in the mind of man as in "all that we behold of this green earth". The proper study of mankind is still indeed man, as it was in the eighteenth century, but man seen less often in relation to his fellows or to a fixed religious scheme, and more often in relation to the natural universe of which he is a part.

Often it seemed that this communion with nature had been more fully achieved in ages past than in modern society. "The world is too much with us", Wordsworth complains in 1806. "Little we see in Nature that is ours": he would rather be a "Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" than live the commonplace modern life, cut off by cares of the world from the deeper sources of joy. More often it is not to classical paganism that the poets now turned; from that, after all, the standard cultural tradition was derived. They found greater freshness and naturalness in little-known or barbarous ages which post-Renaissance culture had neglected. They turned to the medieval past, often indeed with ignorance of its real nature, but finding in it various kinds of liberation which we shall later have to discuss; especially perhaps liberation from the conscious ego that education, convention and society had built up. For the motive behind all these excursions into nature and the middle ages is a new subjectivism. When Pope, in the heart of the Augustan age, sets out to write a great philosophical poem he writes an *Essay on Man*, on man in general. When Wordsworth, at the beginning of the next age, wishes to do so he starts by writing *The Growth of a Poet's Mind*—meaning the growth of his own mind, his own personal development. The emphasis shifts from social man to the individual man, when he is alone with his own heart or alone with nature. Those who feel that man is most himself in society will probably get their greatest

poetical satisfaction from the poetry of other ages. Those who feel that man is most himself in solitude (or at most, perhaps, in a solitude made for two) will naturally turn to the poetry of the romantic age.

These, then, are the themes we shall be discussing in the following pages, and their origins all go far back into the eighteenth century. But one must begin somewhere, and since, in a book of this size, it is more profitable to talk about poets and poems than about movements and trends, we will try to illustrate the relation between the poetry of the new age and that of the eighteenth century by the case of the poet Gray, whose difficulties and triumphs throw much light, by contrast or anticipation, on what the later romantic poets were trying to do.

Gray's production is so scanty and so much of it is in a very minor mode, that one may well wonder why he seems to occupy such a key position in the history of English poetry. True, he happened to write one of the greatest poems in the language; but he only did it once, and it is hard to believe, if it were not for the *Elegy*, that we should be very interested in the rest of his poetry, except in a spirit of historical curiosity. His letters are of far greater volume, and are delightful as examples of that kind of friendly yet elegant and well-mannered correspondence which seems now to have passed from our culture. They are not strenuous writing; the historian of ideas will not find much of his material in them; but the historian of sentiment, of ways of feeling, will find a great deal. However, if we really want to discover what Gray's work amounts to, we should read the poems and the letters together, for they do much to illuminate each other. The picture of Gray that emerges from his letters is not a very vigorous or happy one. He was charming, generous of his time and trouble, devoted to his friends as they were to him, but he suffered from a constitutional melancholy.

> Mine, you are to know, is a white Melancholy, or rather Leucocholy for the most part; which, though it seldom laughs or dances, nor ever amounts to what one calls Joy or

> Pleasure, yet is a good easy sort of a state, and *ça ne laisse que de s'amuser*. The only fault of it is insipidity; which is apt now and then to give a sort of Ennui, which makes one form certain little wishes, that signify nothing. But there is another sort, black indeed, which I have now and then felt . . . it believes, nay, is sure of everything that is unlikely, so it be but frightful; and on the other hand, excludes and shuts its eyes to the most possible hopes and everything that is pleasurable; from this the Lord deliver us! for none but he and sunshiny weather can do it.[2]

Many of his literary projects were abortive, and were undertaken in a spirit almost of resigned hopelessness.

> I am a sort of spider; and have little else to do but spin my web over again, or creep to some other place and spin there. Alas! for one who has nothing to do but amuse himself, I believe my amusements are as little amusing as most folks. But no matter; it makes the hours pass, and is better than [to pass one's life in ignorance and grossness].[3]

Indeed, if we desert literary history and look at Gray in terms of common life, how could he have been happy? He lived the life of a timid and reclusive don, the major peripeteia of his existence being to cross the road from Peterhouse to Pembroke in 1756: and he achieved few of the successes that make such a course worth while. One of the most learned men of his day, he left behind hardly any result of his scholarship; when ultimately elected to the Regius Professorship of Modern History, he could never bring himself to lecture; interested in society, he could see the great world only by proxy, through his friendship with the brilliant Horace Walpole; and when he engaged in literary discussion, his most serious interest, it was commonly with his inferiors, with Mason, for instance, a worthy and devoted, but after all somewhat asinine person. Poor Gray, a sensitive poetical misfit in the hearty and idle grossness of eighteenth-century Cambridge, with little emotional

experience to express in verse except the sense of being a misfit, of being a failure as a specimen of social man.

This sense of maladjustment is not uncommon among the poets of the later eighteenth century. Gray's melancholia, the madness of Collins, Smart and Cowper—it is possible that they had a more than personal cause. All these men were trying to be poets in a climate of feeling that did not suit what ought to have been their kind of poetry.[4] They were acutely aware of conflict and unrest within themselves; yet the poetic dialect of their time offered no means of expressing it—the language for doing so was not yet invented. A generation or so later all was to be changed. When Shelley feels as Gray must often have felt, the result is *Stanzas Written in Dejection.* But the strong social sense of eighteenth-century poetry, its very good manners made this kind of self-expression quite impossible. There was as yet no convention for communicating one's private griefs to the world. In some ways this was for the best; perhaps the romantic age was to produce too many stanzas written in dejection, and too easily. No doubt the experience of doing it was highly therapeutic to the poet. To Gray no such direct relief was possible, and we turn to his early poems somewhat puzzled to find what he was really writing about. The *Ode on the Spring* is on the face of it a conventional piece of poetizing; we can see very little of the spring because the Hours, the Zephyrs, Contemplation and the Muse insist on standing in the light. Where we meet a particularly felicitous phrase we find it duly acknowledged in the footnotes as an adaptation from Shakespeare, Virgil, Milton or Matthew Green. (This kind of quotation is a legitimate and acknowledged source of eighteenth-century poetic imagery, unknown to the romantic age, but revived in our own day by Mr. Eliot.) We are invited to sit with the Muse and think

> How vain the ardour of the Crowd,
> How low, how little are the Proud,
> How indigent the Great!

—though why we should think so in the spring more than at any other season is not apparent. The most vividly realized

aspect of the spring is, somewhat oddly, its insect life. And then we discover that this is because

> To Contemplation's sober eye
> Such is the race of Man:

—as ephemeral as the insects and as busy about nothing. However, Contemplation is not allowed to have the last word: the insects answer back:

> Methinks I hear in accents low
> The sportive kind reply:
> Poor moralist! and what art thou?
> A solitary fly!
> Thy joys no glittering female meets,
> No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
> No painted plumage to display:
> On hasty wings thy youth is flown;
> Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone—
> We frolick, while 'tis May.

And here, surely, is what the poem is really about, what Gray really wants to do—to contrast the free and fluent energy of spring with his own solitary and constricted life, so deficient in the sources of joy. And this is the only way he can do it: only after four stanzas of conventional description and conventional moralizing can he even begin to say what he wants, and then only under the guise of a rather rococo joke. We find the same side-step into facetiousness in the letters whenever the approach of a real emotional intimacy seems imminent. The *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* is a much more considerable performance. Gray had been happy at Eton; all the high spirits and most of the tenderness he was ever to know were encountered there: but even in this poem the sense felt so acutely by Gray of a happiness enjoyed in childhood, inevitably to be lost in later life, appears less as an experience than as a piece of traditional Stoical-Christian moralizing. And the same could be said of the fine *Hymn to Adversity*.

The greatness of the *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* no one has ever doubted, but many have been hard put to it to explain in what its greatness consists. It is easy to point out that its thought is commonplace, that its diction and imagery are correct, noble but unoriginal, and to wonder where the immediately recognizable greatness has slipped in. "That triumph of an exquisitely adjusted tone", I. A. Richards has called it; and that is certainly part of the truth. The poem is written with the most perfect of good manners. The reader is not hectored or dazzled, the commonplaces are presented to him as what they are, and he is made to feel that on such a theme they are far more in place than any attempt at novelty. But surely this is not all. Rare and agreeable as perfect manners are, they do not make a great poem any more than a great man. If we read the *Elegy* in the light of the letters and the Odes cited above, we may see more clearly what Gray was about. In the earlier poems he had been struggling with the difficulty of expressing personal conflicts and despondencies within the limits of eighteenth-century poetic convention. He had not succeeded very far. In the *Elegy* he finds the answer to his problem, finds the complete expression of his private despairs and frustrations, yet the whole perfectly and unobtrusively placed in a wider field of reference. The *Elegy* was most probably begun soon after the death of Gray's school friend West, some reminiscences of whom remain in the conclusion of the poem. West had been Gray's dearest friend and confidant, and like himself a melancholy and hypochondriac young man. The "youth to fortune and to fame unknown" of the closing epitaph might be either West or Gray himself, and is, indeed, by a process familiar to dream-analysts, a sort of fusion of the two. Dr. Tillyard has cogently argued that *Lycidas* derives its emotional force from Milton's identification of Henry King with himself.[5] Something of the same kind seems to be going on in the *Elegy*: and the Gray-West persona, the obscure young man who dies with his ambitions unfulfilled, is further assimilated to the rude forefathers of the hamlet, the village Hampdens and Miltons who have suffered the same fate. So Gray is enabled to sum up the experience of all his years of adult life—the melancholy, the

obscurity, the lack of vigour and achievement, and yet see it in a way that makes it tolerable—as part of the inevitable human situation.

The poem begins with what looks like a drawing from nature: it is actually full of literary echoes. The bell tolling for the dying day comes from Dante; that unelegiac creature the beetle had already been consecrated to poetic purposes by Shakespeare and Collins, and the owl seems to be behaving in an extremely self-conscious manner. Gray is here far less concerned with nature as an object of contemplation than with his readers—the readers whom he wishes to lull into a resigned, acquiescent, summer-evening frame of mind. The opening picture is followed by some extremely obvious reflections about the sights which the rude forefathers of the hamlet will see no more. They are designedly obvious—again intended to establish the mood of calm acquiescence in which the poem must be read. We then come to what Gray really wants to say.

> 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 isle and fretted vault
> The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

The proud (Horace Walpole *et hoc genus omne*?) come out as badly as in the *Ode to the Spring*, and their arrogance is pointless, since their end will be the same as everybody else's. The lines that follow, on the rustic Hampdens and Miltons