

Style of Elegy written in a Country Churchyard

The style of Gray has both been praised and decried. It has merits and demerits. In The Elegy he comes off partly as a stylist and partly a poet at his ease. He is within the century and also escaping from it. He is half-embellished and half plain. George Saintsbury has praised his poems for their careful 'mosaics', but considers his personifications feeble, 'which is really worse not better' when compared with the 'older imagery of Keats'. Then his style is said to have 'mental without mass'. The defence of his style comes from a discerning literary critic who holds that Gray in his least personal moments is never 'banal'. It is always saved from pure passivity by a concern for propriety and accuracy, it has always a surface of polish. It is this polish in his style which looked on with scepticism by some of the literary critics. At least in a subject contained in The Elegy the polish seems to be a little extraneous. The gloomy theme calls for a little baldness, a little ruggedness, but it is not there. Wordsworth was not much happy with his style which he considered, at least, in matters of 'dignity, unnatural pomposity'.

Personification :

The personification in the poem is an extra-embellishment which he could have avoided. The expressions like: 'Ambition' (for ambitious people), 'Grandeur' (for the stately eminence), memory (the memorials commemorating his name), Death (the dark angel of death) Hands (the hands of the ruling monarch), etc show the bold anxiety of the poet to make the meaning clear in a word. It has the virtue of brevity, but in style a blemish to a certain extent. Later on this has been eschewed

on a large scale. The Eighteenth Century constraints of style stick to Gray in this Elegy.

The personification comes as a clear contrast against the ease of style with which he begins his poem. It has 'dignity and richness' indeed in the abstract qualities of persons and things. "Gray's personifications are generally of the pretentiously statuesque type." They are compressed and concise. The style seems to be evolving slowly and gradually in The Elegy.

• Extra Strain ! —

In style Gray seems to have a tension of extra strain. What a pure romanticist would have said in an easy idiom, he says it with a strenuous pull. Spontaneity of a much freer type is missing in his style. The strain is seen in avoiding the common place by him. He has on his mind the style of those who took decorous pains to say a thing. Had he written The Elegy after Keats and Shelley he would be different in wielding the style. He carries the burden of his predecessors on it. Thus he comes to use stilted language. It has been rightly observed by a critic that his expressions read like a catalogue. The extra strain taken by him is for the reason that he wants the pointed beauty in his poem. It is responsible for the artificiality which is seldom liked in a style.

• Quality of embellishment :

The nourishment of the poem lies in the quality of embellishment in The Elegy. It is not unadorned. Even where he turns a romantic the quality of embellishment clings to him. For this he has to put an extra strain on his sense of imagery. For instance 'storied urn or animated bust' and 'mansion' have been used. His style is like a posh woman with complete jewellery on the wrists and the neck. However it can be

reasonably said about him that Gray has power over 'compactness and a force of energy' which he makes his language ornate. He is not an idler like some stylists. He has a large classical turn of mind, and the style gets inspired by this fact. The abstract qualities, semi allegorical figures, pomposity, richness, personification are all due to the extra care he lavishes on the quality of embellishment. The conventionality of his style is, 'of course, half way house in the poem'. It is a part of his sense of humanity as well for which he is extra eager to create an impression.

High-flown language :-

There is an upwardness in his language. The flight taken by him in his style tends to make the poem carved than expressed. He hews closer to reality in thought but not in expression. The conventional Eighteenth Century expressions are abounding in it. Sometimes the high-flown language overrides his thoughts. It makes the style look 'artificial and cumbrous' indeed. "His language is never distinguished by the romantic surcharge, that elusive and mysterious quality, which gives to single lines and phrases of Keats and Wordsworth and Coleridge". The language looks self exhibiting rather than plainly simple. Occasionally his poetry reads like translation of prosaic thoughts. The high-flown language was the mode of time in which he lived.