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Making the Past:
The Concepts of Literary History and Literary Tradition in the Works of
Thomas Gray

By

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Abstract

This study explores Thomas Gray’s concepts of literary history, tradition, and the past. It proffers critical examinations of Gray’s literary and historical thoughts, illustrating the extent of the complexity of the mid-century cultural and intellectual climate in which Gray and his contemporaries were writing. It shows the aesthetic, cultural, and political dimensions of canonicity in the course of examining the ideological motivation behind Gray’s literary history. Though much of Gray’s poetry is private and written for a narrow literary circle, his literary history seems engaged with issues of public concerns. Gray’s literary history must not be understood as a mere objective scholarly study, but as an ideological narrative invented to promote specific national and cultural agendas.

Though Gray’s plan for his History of English Poetry was inspired directly by Pope’s scheme of writing a history of English poetry, Gray’s historiography represents a challenge to Pope’s most fundamental “neo-classical” premises of canonicity in that it aligns English literary poetry back to the literary tradition of ancient Britain and resituates the English literary canon in an entirely different theoretical framework. Gray reworked Pope’s historical scheme to suits the need of the political and intellectual agendas of his own time: the national need for a distinctive cultural identity, which was promoted by and led to the emergence of a more national and less partisan atmosphere. Gray’s comprehensive project of literary history charts the birth and development of what he views as an English “high-cultural” tradition, whose origins he attributes to the classical and Celtic antiquity. In Gray’s view, this tradition reaches its peak with the rise of Elizabethan literary culture; a culture which was later challenged by the “French” model which dominated British literary culture from the Restoration to Gray’s time.

Gray’s literary history is to be examined in this study in relation to the concept of canon-formation. Gray’s historiographical study of literary culture of ancient Britain, his historicization of Chaucerian and medieval texts, his celebration of Elizabethan literary culture, and his polemical attack on “neo-classical” literary ideals intend to relocate the process of canon-formation within a “pure” source of national literary heritage, something which provides cultural momentum for the emergence of a historiography and an aesthetics promoting Gray’s idea of the continuity of tradition. As is the case in his poetry, the concept of cultural continuity is also central to Gray’s literary history, and permeates through his periodization, historicism, criticism, and his concept of the transformation of tradition.
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Dedication

To my late parents who supported me since the first stage of the journey of my learning and to my late brother Ali who was and will be an endless great source of motivation and inspiration. I also dedicate this dissertation to my family for their support and encouragement.
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Author’s Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the Plymouth University has not formed part of any other degree either at Plymouth University or at another establishment.

Relevant English and creative writing research seminars were regularly attended at which literary works were often presented.

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Signed: .........................................................

Date: .............................................................
Introduction

[M]y only employment & amusement in Town... has been the Musæum: but I have been rather historically than poetically given. with a little of your encouragement perhaps I may return to my old Lydgate and Occleve, whose works are there in abundance.  

(Gray’s letter to William Mason, 6 October 1759)\(^1\)

In this study, I will concentrate on Gray’s literary history in prose and in verse. I will take the outline of Gray’s *History of English Poetry* as a framework around which to construct and develop a discussion of Gray’s notions of literary history and literary tradition in relation to a central idea of the continuity and connectedness of tradition. This study comes as a reaction to what I feel to be a neglect of modern studies of Gray’s literary history. Criticism of Gray’s works can be primarily and briefly grouped into three main orientations: the criticism which in one way or another situates Gray’s poetics within the wide-ranging “Romantic” shift of poetic taste which occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century; the criticism which tends to view Gray’s poetry in relation to the public and political milieu of the mid-eighteenth century; and, finally, the criticism which shows Gray’s poetry swinging between the poles of a dichotomy between his private and public tendencies. A typical example for the first orientation is John Sitter’s *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (1982) in which Sitter describes Gray and mid-century poets as “solitary writers” whose private poetry marks a “flight from history”. The most influential studies which represent the second orientation are Howard D. Weinbrot’s *Britannia’s Issue* (1993); Dustin Griffin’s *Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2002); and Suvir Kaul’s *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: A Study in Ideology and Poetics* (1992). William Levin’s essay, “‘Beyond the Limits of a Vulgar Fate’: The Renegotiation of Public and Private Concerns in the Career of Gray and other Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poets”, is an example of the third approach to Gray’s poetry.\(^2\) Though these studies shed


light on Gray’s poetry, in common with other modern studies, they do not study Gray’s *History of English Poetry* nor scrutinize in detail his concepts of literary history and literary tradition. Gray’s literary history not only throws light on him as a literary historian and a critic, but offers a key to understanding his poetry.³ This dissertation examines the cruxes of Thomas Gray’s theory and practice of literary history and considers a range of topics concerning the writing of literary history, such as the ideology and canonicity of literary history, the role of literary history, the problem of periodization, and the question of objectivity in literary history.

Gray’s interest in writing a history of English poetry had its original in a project Alexander Pope intended to achieve.⁴ In his *Commonplace Book*, Gray makes this clear when he declares that Pope’s sketch of literary history came to his hands through his friend William Mason: “The following is an exact Transcript from a Paper in Mr Pope’s own Hand-writing, wch was given by Mr Warburton to Mr W. Mason, in 1752. It is a slight sketch for a History of English Poetry”.⁵ Like Pope, Gray also periodizes his *History of English Poetry* according to schools of influence. However, unlike Pope who stresses the cultural influence of Italian and French literary traditions, and disregards the impact of ancient British poetry on the medieval and following ages in the history of English poetry,⁶ Gray’s narrative tells a different story not only in terms of the origins of English literary culture, but in terms of his concept and evaluation of literary tradition. It is true that Pope’s outline, with its idea of cultural progress, had a noticeable effect upon Gray and left its echo both in his literary history in prose and in verse. However, in this study, I argue that Gray does not use the term “progress” in the

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³ William Powell Jones, *Thomas Gray, Scholar: The Tragedy of an Eighteenth-Century Gentleman* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1937), casts some light on Gray as a scholar and assigned a chapter to Gray’s projected *History of English Poetry*. However, Jones did not discuss Gray’s *History* in details and from various dimensions as this study does. See pp. 84-105.

⁴ Robert L. Mack suggests that Gray’s interest in writing a history of English poetry was also sustained, in addition to Pope’s influence, by his reading some “volumes relating to oriental history and travel”, which “began slowly to cultivate a deeper interest in English history (Robert L. Mack, *Thomas Gray: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 436.


context of enlightenment and Whig historical narratives as an advance towards improvement or perfection, but as “movement”, or “touring” which alludes to Gray’s concept of the “continuity” and the “connectedness” of tradition. Gray’s revival of poetry of the vernacular past and his elevation of its model above the contemporary poetry illustrates the fluctuating and the cyclical nature of Gray’s idea of “progress”.

Through an examination of Gray’s writing, I demonstrate that Gray’s literary history, both in prose and in verse, cannot be fully understood and appreciated without recognition of the ideas of continuity which occupy a central position in his studies of literary historiography and in his poetry. In doing so, my argument challenges David Fairer’s suggestion that in his “poems, as in his scheme for a history for English poetry, Gray was unable to make a connection between past and present which would link up his own voice with those of his sources”.7

Gray initially began the research for his history of English poetry by studying British poetry from “the Poetry of the Gallic or Celtic nations, as far as it can be traced. On that of the Goths, its introduction into these islands by the Saxons and Danes, and its duration” to the “School of France, introduced after the Restoration. Waller, DRYDEN, Addison, Prior, & Pope, w^th has continued down to our own times”.8 However, Gray did not accomplish his project. He abandoned the idea of writing his literary history when he knew that Thomas Warton was undertaking a similar project and was near publishing the first volume of his History of English Poetry. Gray’s letter of 15 April, 1770 to Warton reveals that Warton has asked Gray, through Hurd, to send him the outline of his abandoned project of the History of English Poetry: “Our friend Dr. Hurd having long ago desired me in your name to communicate and fragments, or sketches of a design, I once had to give a history of English poetry”.9 Gray confesses to Warton that the outline of his project of literary history was inspired by Pope’s plan for a history of English poetry, which Gray had and to which he thought that Warton also had access: “You will observe, that my idea was in some measure taken from a scribbled paper of Pope,

8 Gray, Correspondence, 3:1124.
9 Ibid., 3:1122.
of wth (I believe) you have a copy.” Though Gray did not achieve his History, he left in his Commonplace Book a collection of essays and notes towards it about the history of Welsh poetry, the poetry of Chaucer and Lydgate, metre and the origins of rhyme, and some pieces of writing about Elizabethan poetry. By examining these few essays and the body of scattered criticisms that appeared in Gray’s correspondence with his friends as well as his annotations and notes to his works and other writers’ works, this dissertation will reconstruct Gray’s concepts and attitudes about history, past, tradition, and poetry.

Writing in what he understood to be a new historiographical genre Gray was under particular impulse to account for his text, and its relationship to other literary genres. In doing so, Gray found himself involved in discussing important ideas concerning the concepts of history, tradition, past, and culture and their relation to poetry and to the history of poetry. Moreover, Gray’s studies in the field of literary history raise significant issues concerning the production and reception of the literary texts of the past. In essence, Gray declines to consider the literary texts of the past only in relation to their historical significance, as was the habit of many historians and antiquarians of his age. Gray finds in the poetry of the past a cultural structure which not only reciprocally connects the past with present and the present with past, but also provides a spatial and temporal map of the transformation of human thoughts needed to understand the past and the present in the light of each other. Literary history in this account exposes literature as cultural knowledge, and not merely as a history of literary tastes located beyond man’s cultural and social activities. It contains within it a relation between the past and the present. It accounts for the past as well as for the present, since it views the past from the standpoint of the present. Accordingly, and to support my contention, I suggest that to adequately understand the crux of Gray’s literary history, it must be contextualized not only against the background of Gray’s scholarship and literary poetics, but against the cultural and political climate of his time as well. While discussing various aspects of

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10 Ibid., 3:1124-25.
Gray’s literary history, the study touches on the intersection of Gray’s literary history with history, philosophy, politics, philology, aesthetics, print culture, and the state of the reading public.

In focusing on Gray’s use of literary history to fulfil his search for the origin of poetic tradition and its continuity, I argue in opposition to the critics who read Gray’s pre-occupation with the poetry of the past in terms of “romantic” escapism or nostalgic yearning for a lost primitive world. In so doing, the study avoids a teleological discussion of mid-century literature, which views mid-century poetry as a last or first episode (or a literary annex) of either to what came before or was to come after it.\(^{11}\) Gray’s study of the literary past, I argue, is a search for a cultural identity immanent in the literary tradition of the past, and not a mere search for a sanctuary or refuge from eighteenth-century commercial present.

The study is divided into five chapters. In Chapter One, I illustrate how the rise of national consciousness in eighteenth-century Britain, which consequently led to a growing sense of cultural nationalism, left its effect on Gray’s literary history. Writing in a time in which the British periphery came to express its culturally independent identity in response to a growing sense of the cultural colonization of the English central culture, which led to the division of the canon and to increasing consciousness of the British cultural plurality, Gray finds in the ancient Celtic tradition a unifying episode for the national agenda of his *History of English Poetry*. Gray’s narrative proffers an alternative account based on the idea of influence and interaction rather than colonization. He suggests that the English literary identity is originally, though partly, derived from a Celtic identity, since the bardic tradition of ancient Britain played a significant role in constructing its main distinctive characters. Examining the overlaps between Gray’s national and cultural discourses, the chapter brings out how Gray, through scholarly efforts and an imaginative approach, tries to

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\(^{11}\) See Marshal Brown, *Preromanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) and Robert J. Griffin, *Wordsworth’s Pope: A Study in Literary Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Though Brown’s and Griffin’s studies tried to depart from the progressive narrative of the teleological studies of mid-century literary tradition, his views often shaped in relation to the following “Romantic” movement. He still views mid-century poetry as a precedent or a prelude for the “Romantic” period rather than approaching it as a stand-alone movement. In his account of the origin of “Romanticism,” Griffin attributes the beginning of Romantic literary history to mid-century writers such as Young, the Wartons, and Gray since they preceded Wordsworth in their attacking of Pope’s literary ideals.
construct a historical narrative of the Celtic literary past and canonize it to create out of it a cultural antiquity parallel to the classical model, locating the origin of English culture in the vernacular national past. Gray’s historiography of the bardic tradition represents the genesis of his narrative of literary history in that it places the archetypal source of English literary culture in the amalgamation of classical and native antiquities. The Celtic and classical traditions provide Gray’s literary history with a plausible origin, and an authority which bestows on English poetry some traces of antiquity and a character of durability.

Chapter Two explains how Gray stakes out a new position on assessing English medieval poetry. Throughout his examination of Chaucer’s and Lydgate’s poetry, Gray adopts a “historicist” approach which situates earlier texts in the historical and environmental conditions of their creation, rejecting the Restoration editorial and historical methods adopted by such writers as John Urry, who attempted to regularize the Chaucerian poetry by inserting certain linguistic additions in it. Gray’s hermeneutic approach to the medieval cultural root includes wide-ranging studies in the fields of antiquarianism, philology, historicism, and literature. It deviates from other standard accounts current in his day concerning the fountainhead of medieval linguistic and literary practices in that he maps the source of influence back to Saxon and British cultures, as well the classical culture. Gray’s historiography bestows on the old medieval texts a new status in that they came to be seen not merely from an antiquarian perspective, interesting for their faint patina of the past, but as cultural heirlooms that conserve national values and relate the cultural history of the nation. Languishing in obscurity and associated for many years by the “Augustan” humanists with barbarity, vulgarity, and irregularity, these medieval texts were elevated in Gray’s narrative to assume a canonical status in the national literary tradition.

Chapter Three discusses Gray’s use of literary history to define his age in relation to the literary culture of the past, not to derive a sense of modernity and superiority as many early eighteenth-century writers did, but, on the contrary, to emphasize a sense of loss and a need to reconstruct a continuity and connectedness with the national literary tradition of the past. Gray’s
historiography represents the Elizabethan period as a cultural apogee in British history in which the combination of the most powerful and successful of the British and classical cultural achievements finds a sublime expression characteristic of the national literary character. To construct a cultural link with earlier literary cultures, Gray suggests that the understanding of bardic and medieval traditions can be better made by understanding succeeding poets such as Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton who act as intermediate agents between the past and the present of British poetic culture. What is selectively glorified from the literary past by Gray is presented as a literary paradigm for the present time. Throughout its discussions, the chapter also casts some light on the ways in which Gray’s literary history is informed by his political and patriotic standpoint. Yet, though Gray’s historical narrative adopts many Whiggish principles, especially the principle of liberty, he rejects the Whiggish idea of progress which emphasizes the superiority of the present. Gray was apparently unwilling to tailor his narrative to appease the Court Whigs at the expense of his patriotic principles.

To enhance the main thesis of the study, the chapter emphasizes how Gray’s sister Pindaric odes, “The Progress of Poesy” and “The Bard”, enlist two different versions of historical narratives—the *translatio studii* narrative and the native narrative—which link English literary culture to classical tradition and to Celtic tradition to conceptualize his ideas of the continuity and interaction of poetic traditions. Gray’s search for historical links by which he attaches himself and his nation to an ancient past explicitly finds its expression in his adoption of the idea of the cultural progress from domestic and European sources of antiquity. These two versions of antiquity repeatedly offer Gray narrative structures which enable him to establish or fictionalize continuity with the cultural tradition of the remote past.

Chapter Four shows Gray’s views on the “School of France”, which, in his view, dominates the literary sphere from the beginning of the Restoration period to his own time. Gray sees the French literary model (which arrived on the British cultural scene relatively recently) as a relentless threat to the established native tradition. This, the chapter suggests, stems less from Gray’s rejection of the aesthetic principles of neo-classicism than from an anxiety caused by the encroachment of
modernity on the organic growth of native tradition. Gray’s literary history and aesthetic principles are informed by his championship and defence of what he considers a national “high-cultural”\textsuperscript{12} tradition from being eroded by the French model of poetry into an outmoded status irrelevant to the present literary culture. Like the bard, who is delineated by Gray as a guardian of tradition and with whose figure Gray associates himself, Gray appears in his poetry and in his literary history as a champion of a native sublime tradition. Glorifying the paradigm of earlier lyrical culture, Gray and his school began to revaluate and re-canonize vernacular literary texts according to new aesthetic norms which viewed “pure” and “true” poetry as an artistic, imaginative, and inspired creation, relying more on the power of sublimity than on its quotidian concerns and the general representation of here and now.

Chapter Five concentrates on Gray’s literary history in verse represented by his Pindaric odes “The Bard” and “The Progress of Poesy”. It shows how Gray’s poetic practice attempts to emphasize the idea of continuity of tradition through his poetic style. It suggests that Gray’s poetic language and allusive style to earlier poets and texts are not arbitrary acts. They are specific and meaningful. They raise an atmosphere that alludes to the high-cultural canonical tradition and to its significance in poetic creativity. Throughout examining Gray’s views on poetry and poetic diction, the chapter shows how Gray’s literary history in verse is fostered by his reaction to the commercialization of literature and the condition of the reading public in his own time. The chapter illustrates briefly the way in which Gray, by adopting principles of Platonic and Lockean philosophical theories, uses the personal history of literary memory to account for the natural visionary genius of canonical poets of the past. For Gray, genius creates a problem in literary history, since historians’ historicist methods cannot explain it. He, therefore, attempts explain it through Platonic and Lockean philosophical

\textsuperscript{12} Jonathan Brody Kramnick suggests that the literary works of the past came to be seen by many mid-century writers as “a pantheon of high-cultural works” (Kramnick, \textit{Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1). Similarly, John Brewer affirms that the “modern idea of ‘high culture’ is an eighteenth-century invention”. It refers to the literary culture of the past where “court was the centre of high culture” (Brewer, \textit{The Pleasure of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century} (London: Harper Collins Publisher, 1997), xvi, 3)
thoughts. In doing so, the chapter shows how the autobiographical memory informs the present of the poet as an individual and an artist and how paradoxically the flashback of literary anamnesis informs the forward-moving historical narrative of Gray’s literary history.
Chapter One

Cultural Nationalism: Welsh Mythology and the Construction of Britishness

INTRODUCTION On the poetry of the Galic (or Celtic) nations, as far back as it can be traced. On that of the Goths: its introduction into these islands by the Saxons & Danes, & its duration. on the origin of rhyme among the Franks, the Saxons, & Provençaux. some account of the Latin rhyming poetry from its early origin down to the 15th Century.

(Gray’s letter to Thomas Warton, 15 April 1770)13

This chapter focuses on the ways in which Gray’s studies of the Celtic literary tradition were informed by cultural nationalism, illustrating how a sense of Britishness came to be enhanced in his writings in response and in reaction to the new political situation which arose with the emergence of Great Britain as a united nation-state. The chapter suggests that to understand Gray’s historiography of the Celtic literary tradition, it must be seen from cultural and national perspectives as well as historical and aesthetic perspectives.14

When Gray, Mason, Evans, and other English and Welsh revivalists of Welsh tradition in the eighteenth century started their campaigns to invigorate the Welsh cultural revival, Welsh national tradition had been already politically promoted and manipulated by English monarchs since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Henry Tudor, who was enthroned as Henry VII in 1485, used Welsh mythical and legendary traditions for political gains. In the Battle of Bosworth he adopted the Red Dragon as a symbol for his claimed descent from the last Welsh prince, Cadwaladr the Blessed, to legitimate his claim to be king over the British Isles, in a sense acting to mobilize his Welsh supporters to restore their ancient glory by setting a Welshman once again on a British throne. The Welsh supported Henry’s propaganda, with a particular enthusiasm, for their bards had frequently

13 Gray, Correspondence, 3:1123.
14 On subjects related to this chapter, such as cultural and national identity, Celtic fringe or Celticism, cultural patriotism and nationalism, see Murray G. H. Pittock, Celtic identity and British Image (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), and Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); Christine Gerrard, The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and national Myth 1725-1742 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) Howard Weinbrot’s Britannia’s Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian; and Dustin Griffin, Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Britain.
heralded the coming of the second Owain.\textsuperscript{15} The loyalty of the Welsh was arguably secured by the manipulation of their own myths.

The Tudors also used the Welsh myth which asserts that the Welsh Christian Church was the most ancient independent Church in the British Isles. According to this myth, the Welsh were supposed to be the heirs of the early British church which had been established by Joseph of Arimathea in a very early stage of the history of Christianity. This myth was used after the Reformation to enhance the Tudors’ attempts to legitimise the newly-established Church of England, which stands independent from papal hegemony. Welsh myth helped the Tudors to provide an independent origin for the Anglican Church and to construct the imperial nature of their crowns.\textsuperscript{16} In fact, in the Tudor period, Welsh legends were revived primarily not for their cultural values but for their political implications which suited the new political circumstances which emerged during and after the War of Roses. For example, in Queen Elizabeth’s reign, the Welsh legend of Madoc was popularized to serve the English colonial agenda. The legend suggests that Madoc, son of the Welsh king Owain Gwynedd, had discovered America in about 1170 A. D. and had settled there with his companions who had progeny there. The legend was used in that time to justify the English claim to America and to confute the Spanish claim to the continent.\textsuperscript{17}

In the Interregnum, Welsh myths of origin began to subside. Hugh A. MacDougall attributes the wane of the interest in Welsh myths of origin in the seventeenth century to the shift of power from monarchs to parliament:

> The seventeenth century had seen England moving from a monarchically based society with a Crown claiming an absolute authority derived from ancient prerogatives to a self-conscious nation dominated by landed and rising commercial interests with parliament seen as the principal center of political power. Old myths


\textsuperscript{16} Morgan, “Keeping the Legends Alive”, 25.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
of origin stressing achievements of king no longer served the interests of dominant
groups and were pushed more and more into the realm of poetic fancy.\textsuperscript{18}

The use of mythical stories returned in the Restoration period. King Charles II was celebrated by
British people as the rightful kings to the British throne, since the Stuart line was supposed to reach
back to King Arthur.\textsuperscript{19} However, like other native traditions of the British nations in general, Welsh
cultural tradition was exposed to significant challenge in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth
centuries due to the changing cultural and social circumstances generated by new political system in
which the past was increasingly examined in the light of intellectual and empirical norms.\textsuperscript{20} In
addition, the rise of historical consciousness led to the rejection of the mythical past and promoted
more historical approaches to earlier periods.

The revival of Welsh mythological tradition for political purposes did not contribute actively
to the popularity and to the appreciation of the Welsh cultural tradition on a large scale since it was
mainly confined to oral propaganda and since the surviving manuscripts remained in private hands
for limited scholarly uses.\textsuperscript{21} It was not until the eighteenth century that Welsh cultural tradition
gradually appeared on a grand scale to the public. As the Welsh myths and legends were absorbed
into English tradition for political purposes to invigorate the expanding English state in the sixteenth
century before and after the Act of Union 1536-42, mythical tradition once again finds its way into
the English history and literature in the eighteenth century to serve, this time, the unitary agenda of
cultural nationalism and national identity.

The economic achievements and imperial expansion which Great Britain reached in the
eighteenth century created an unprecedented sense of national pride in the present. however, the
historical inferiority that the British still felt in that time, and which might have arisen from the

\textsuperscript{18} MacDougall, \textit{Racial Myth in English History}, 26.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 21-25.
\textsuperscript{20} See Chapter Four, and Chapter Five which discuss the effects of late seventeenth and early eighteenth-
century literary culture on British native traditions, and Gray’s and mid-century writers’ reaction toward it.
\textsuperscript{21} In fact, only few English literary writers who showed a strong interest in Welsh mythologies in that period.
Michael Drayton’s \textit{Poly-Olbion} is one of the most important poems that dealt with Welsh Druidic and bardic
tradition. Geoffrey G. Hiller referred to the similarities between Drayton’s treatment of history of Druids and
the bards and those of the late eighteenth-century writers. See Geoffrey G. Hiller, “‘Sacred Bards’ and Wise
historical accounts which stress that the early inhabitants of the British Isles were in the past barbarous nations, compared with more civilized nations like ancient Greece and Rome, and even France (Britain’s rival), produced a desire to reframe the past in such a way as to conform with the new position that Great Britain assumed. This helped British historians to bridge the cultural gap between the past and the present. Rather than repudiating the ancient past of the nation, history is now wanted not to be a true representation of the undesirable past, but to be a reinterpretation, an invention, and an imaginative reframing of a romanticized past. In fact, the eighteenth-century historiographical need for the reconstruction of the cultural past in relation to present multi-faceted achievements was one of the important factors which stood behind the emergence of new interest in reviving, reevaluating and inventing the literary heritage of the past.

Gray played a crucial part in the Celtic revival movement. It was Gray who first remarkably inaugurated the cultural revival of Welsh bardic tradition and created not only an atmosphere of plausibility and receptivity of Welsh cultural tradition throughout the whole of Britain, but an interest in Wales as a historical realm. Motivated by his national and cultural patriotism, Gray attempts to alter the pejorative image which often shows the ancient Welsh past as a phase of religious as well as cultural darkness and seeks to establish a new image which emphasizes its wisdom and heroism as well as the value and beauty of its cultural materials. In this respect, Paul Evans suggests that “The most influential and distinguished work of literature quoted is Thomas Gray’s ‘The Bard’...which is in many ways symbolic of a new interest in things Welsh detectable among the English reading public in the second half of the eighteenth century”. Though “purely imaginary”, Evans adds, “Gray’s ‘Bard’ became a popular figure in the 1770s and 1780s, particularly

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22 In 1764, Evans published Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards, which was a survey of Welsh poetry from the sixth to the sixteenth century. In 1773, the squire Rice Jones of Blaenau published his Gorchestion Beirdd Cymru (Exploits of the Welsh Bards or Triumphs of the Welsh Bards), which included a selection of the poetic works of Aneirin, Taliesin and Llywarch Hen.

among English tourists who flocked to the hills above Conwy to view the spot where the supposed incident had taken place”.

Eighteenth-century Britain was characterized by various changes which resulted from the agricultural and industrial revolutions, commercial advances, the emergence of the middle class, the evolution of the gentry, the development of education system and the increase of literacy. Subsequently, the social structure was remarkably transformed and cultural life flourished, something which required a new agent of cultural unitary forces to sustain the solidarity of the political union of the newly established nation-state. Consequently, scholars embarked on a wide-scale movement of political and cultural nationalism which involved constructing new images of the national traditions of Great Britain. This movement helped to create a new species of historiography in which the focus shifted from military and political subjects to more social and cultural concerns. The history of Wales, for instance, was studied by some mid-century scholars like Gray not for its political significance but for its literary and cultural dimensions and therefore it often underwent a process of apparent depoliticization by applying historical approaches which highlight the cultural aspects of historical events. This was made clear in “The Bard”, where Gray voices lament for the massacre of the Welsh bards and the death of the last bard, and overlooks the massacre of the last Welsh Prince at the hand of Edward I. Christine Gerrard relates this shift from political to cultural interest to the an “anxiety of influence” on one hand and to changes of the political scene in mid-century on the other. She claims that

It is...indisputable that many mid-century poets were suffering the kind of identity crisis that Lucas, echoing John Sitter, explores. The ‘anxiety of influence’ was as much political as it was literary, expressing itself most painfully in doubt about the poet’s social function and the identity of his audience. When Gray and Collins tried to imagine themselves in the role of inspired bards and spokesmen for the people, they were writing in a period where ‘opposition’ could not be so clearly or comfortably defined as it had been for the Patriot poets of the Walpole period. Pope and Thomson may have complained about Walpole’s contempt for the place of poets in society; but both of them played a far more central role in shaping public opinion than any poets in the two subsequent decades. The political context in which Gray and Collins were living and writing had changed, had become less clear-
‘Public service’ might demand the endorsement of values over which they felt profound ambivalence.25

Generally speaking, political and military histories that might evoke antagonism among the component nations of Great Britain, which were under the threat of war with Spain and France, were to be avoided or marginalized by mid-century cultural patriots such as Gray, in favour of social and cultural histories. The union of the British nations into a single polity required a vindication of the nation’s political, cultural, and historical dimensions. Moreover, Gray’s approach to Welsh tradition comes as an attempt to ride on a wave of the political and cultural agenda of Welsh nationalists and diverts it for a broader national purpose.

However, Gray’s poetic and historiographical treatments of Welsh literary tradition are, of course, not void of political implications. Though Gray’s plan of the History of English Poetry was, to some extent, influenced by Pope’s outline of his history of English poetry, Gray’s research takes a different direction concerning the cultural origin of Britain. He rejects Pope’s investigation of the progress of poetry solely from the external cultural sources of classical and French traditions. To vindicate British antiquity and the contribution and the influence of Celtic poetry on the progress of poetry, Gray assigns a great deal of the introduction of his History to the poetry of Celtic nations. As in his poetry, Gray’s invention in his History is evident in his historiography of ancient British literary culture. No history is ever written in an ideological vacuum, and to understand historians’ agendas that determine the direction and the meaning they intend to construct in their historical narratives, the ideological and intellectual milieus need to be examined thoroughly. Historical narratives are directly related to the present. The historian’s perception of the past is always influenced by the present, and therefore it changes with the changes of demands of the present. The eighteenth-century reworking of the past illustrates this approach. Gray’s essays for his projected History of English Poetry and the Welsh translations which he intended to include in his History as samples of the antiquity and vigour of Welsh poetry, illustrate the way in which he uses Welsh literary and

cultural traditions to highlight his agenda of cultural nationalism by emphasizing the formative cultural and literary interactions between the nations of British Isles.

Political ideologies play a crucial role in directing the course of historiography. This is clearly reflected in almost all historical disciplines. Gray’s literary history, like his poetry, reveals this tendency. In addition to its historical, critical, and aesthetic functions, Gray’s literary history seems to be designed to interpolate certain implications which enable him to construct and to foster a sense of a national past and a national identity. Gray’s introduction to the History of English Poetry emphasizes the antiquity and the importance of the Celtic tradition in the construction and development of English literary culture. However, Gray’s incorporation of Celtic poetry within a large domain of “English” history should not be viewed from a perspective of cultural assimilation; it should be understood in the context of Gray’s idea of the process of the birth, growth, and continuity of cultural tradition.

Gray’s historical narrative of Welsh tradition illustrates the extent to which his historiography has been informed by his British patriotism. Gray’s examination of the origins of rhyme is a typical example of that influence. Keenly attempting to attribute an important role to Celtic tradition in constructing English literary identity, Gray resorted to ancient Welsh literary practices to demonstrate to which sphere of influence English poetry belongs. In Gray’s scenario, English poetry did not begin with Chaucer and a medieval vernacular; it has its origins in the ancient poetic Celtic tradition and, though it derived much of its forces from classical cultures, was primarily formed through cultural interactions with old Celtic nations. This point is clearly revealed in Gray’s essay, “Observation on the Pseudo Rhythmus”, in which he claims that:

The most ancient instance of rhyming verse, as Sir W. Temple has observed, is that of the Emperor Adrian, about the 137th year of Christ. It was undoubtedly borrowed from the barbarous nations, among whom, particularly in the east, it is said to have been in the use from the remotest antiquity. The Welsh still preserve the works of the ancient British bards, Taliessin, Benbeirdh, and Lomarkk, who lived towards the end of the sixth century, and wrote in rhyme. It is possible that our ancestors, the
Anglo-Saxons, might borrow it from the Britons, but it is much more probable that they brought it from Germany with them.26

Gray’s claims that When British Druids were persecuted by the Romans, they migrated to Germany and introduced British cultural mode to Germany: “about Tiberius and Claudius times the Druids, persecuted & dispersed by the Romans, probably retired into Germany & propagated their doctrines there”.27 Here, Gray emphasizes that even if the Anglo-Saxons used the rhyme before they came to Britain, they might have taken the model from the Druids who settled in Germany. Gray’s historiographical approach aims to reconstruct the history of Welsh poetry and demonstrate its antiquity and its influence on English poetry by bringing the myth of the origin of rhyme to light. Welsh poetic tradition is presented by Gray as a centrifugal force whose influence is not restricted to the development of English poetry but also spreads to European poetic composition in general: “The Germans have therefore preserved in their tongue the most ancient monument of rhyming poetry, perhaps in Europe... The Welsh poetry only (if the remains of Taliessin and Lowarkk be not fictitious) can pretend to a superior antiquity”.28 Gray’s account aims to displace the view that deems Welsh tradition as a subordinate tradition of a minor nation or ethnic group; it offers a new reading of Welsh history which asserts the centrality of its cultural role and participation in constructing British cultural and national identity. The new political and cultural situations, which appeared after the Act of Union and which were understood by some nationalists of the Celtic periphery as a political and cultural hegemony by the English centre, find its echo in Gray’s treatment of the Celtic cultural past. Gray finds in Welsh tradition a rich repository of legends and myths, and a flexibility that enables him to mould this tradition, in both a scholarly and an imaginative sense, to enhance the cultural and national ideals of the present. Prys Morgan, in his discussion of the role of myths, legends, and imagination in constructing a sense of self-consciousness and national identity, indicates that what seems to be an organic growth of states is in fact an artificial human creation:

27 Gray Correspondence, 2:567.
...historians have become more and more concerned with role of imagination, myths, generalisations, images, clichés, in the cohesion of modern nations, states, or groups, emphasizing human activity in constructing these units or the deliberation and self-consciousness of such a process. This concern among historians contrasts with the older wisdom that states are organic growths, or unself-conscious occurrences over centuries. The new concern arises to some extent because all over the world one observes states large and small (e.g. the U. S. A. or modern African republics) which are human constructs, artificial agglomerations put together in short time.29

Gray’s research on the origin of rhyme reveals the concept of cultural community. In Gray’s hypothesis, the Welsh, the Saxons, and also the Franks make their contributions to the use of rhyme. To create a sort of cultural interaction between ancient Britons and the Saxons, Gray uses the Frank as a cultural link between two nations: “...as the Saxons and Franks were near neighbours in Germany, and spoke a language only differing in dialect, and alike derived from the old Gothic mother-tongue, it is likely that the same kinds of poetry were common to them both”.30 Gray’s account of cultural interactions within the ancient nations of the British Isles (Celtic and Anglo-Saxon) and with neighbouring Western European nations emphasizes his hypothesis which places Welsh tradition at the centre of a cultural diaspora. What Gray wants to assert is the idea of British cultural nationalism which transcends the boundaries of ethnic loyalties and pertains. To do this, Gray highlights the significance of the historical and geographical coexistence of the inhabitants of British Isles in the process of the crystallization of the totality of British cultural identity, which gradually created common cultural heritage and bonds.31 Gray’s highlighting of the spatial and temporal dimensions in constructing cultural similarities and cultural interactions is an endeavour to display what seems to be an organic crystallization of Britain as a nation-state. Writing in the formative period of an emerging nation-state, Gray attempted to situate the Welsh past within the larger context which emphasizes its formative influence and contribution to the development of British cultural and national identity rather than examining it as an isolated phenomenon.

29 Morgan, “Keeping the Legends Alive”, 19.
31 See Chapter Two which discusses Gray’s idea of the impact of the natural environment on shaping the cultural characters of people.
In Gray’s narrative, Welsh ancient tradition had exercised a permanent and far-reaching influence. Gray seeks to demonstrate that Welsh poetic tradition was generated as a result of the indigenous experience of ancient Welsh Druids who took Anglesey as the centre of their culture by which other nations were enlightened. Dismissing the account which ascribes the introduction of rhyme to England from France by the Norman King Henry II, Gray chooses to affirm the transfer of rhyme through the cultural channel that links the Welsh past with the Saxon past. The Franks, according to Gray, might have borrowed the use of rhyme from the natives of Gaul who, in their turn, had borrowed the use of rhyme from Britons through the Druidic religious instructions they received in rhymed verse:

As we have no reason to imagine that the Gothic nations of the north made any use of rhyme in their versification, and as the Franks appear to be the first who practised it (three hundred and fifty years after they conquered Gaul), it seems highly probable that they borrowed it from the natives of this country, to whom it must have been familiar at least three hundred years before. For, as we know that the Britons had it so early, who spoke the same tongue with the Gauls, and delivered to them the precepts of their religion and philosophy in verse, these latter could not possibly be ignorant of their poetry, which they imitated in their own country.32

Gray contests the views of P. Huet who claims that the Provençals are the first European people who used rhyme after borrowing it from the Arabs. Though he admits the antiquity of the use of the rhyme in Arabic poetry, Gray affirms that the cultural discrepancies represented by the differences of languages, religions and manners make it quite unlikely that rhyme was introduced to Europe from Arabic poetry. This makes the way clear for Gray to develop his hypothesis which attributes the earlier use of rhyme to the native antiquity of the Welsh:

Any one who considers these several dates, and sees that the fathers and priests of the Roman church wrote Latin rhyme early in the fifth century, and that the Franks did the same in their own tongue in the ninth, will scarcely give credit to P. Huet, who affirms, that the Provençal borrowed the art of rhyme from the Arabs. For though it is true that the Arabs had practised it before Mahomet’s time, and perhaps from the remotest antiquity, and that they were in possession of part of Aquitaine from 732 to 738; which is the most probable of the two, that the Provençals should imitate the taste of a nation wholly different from themselves in language, religion, and manners, who were but for a small time conversant among them?33

While Gray asserts the particularities and the antiquity of ancient British culture, he often alludes to the *translatio* narrative which stresses the derivation of modern Western culture from the antiquity of classical culture of ancient Greece and Rome.\(^{34}\) In doing so, he highlights implicitly the binary source of cultural influence on British culture. What Gray intends to assert through the concept of cultural synchronization is that modern British culture is a consequence of a process of simultaneous historical interactions between what is derived from classical or continental heritage and what is domestically constructed within the regional territory of British Isles. The idea of cultural interaction is also apparent in “The Bard” and the Welsh translations. In “The Bard”, Gray, through the use of the cultural juncture of the Northern tradition of the Saxons and ancient British tradition, has the revengeful murdered Welsh bards playing the role of Scandinavian Valkyries. Gray’s mingling of traditions illustrates his conviction of the poetic creativity which demands enrichment, assimilation, and transformation of previous traditions. Broadly speaking, Gray’s approach brings to the fore the importance of the cultural factor in the process of nation building which brings people into civil union on the grounds of shared history and culture, irrespective of their ethnic identities. In his *Commonplace Book*, Gray incorporates an entry from the comments of classical historians, which explains the main aspects of Druids’ political and cultural life:

> These religious Men had according to Caesar (Sig: Belli Gallici) Their Origin in Britain & such of the Gauls as aimed at a superiour Knowledge of their Literature...would commonly travel thither. Their young Disciples were kept close for twenty Years together; all they learn’d was by Memory; for it was not lawful to commit it to writing. it consisted of a prodigious great Respect, no Sacrifice or other Divine Rite, publick or private, was perform’d but in their presence. All Controversies were refer’d to their final Decision, and they were supreme Judge in criminal matters, Distributing Rewards & Punishments at pleasure. once in the year they assembled in the Country of the Cornutes, wch was recokon’d the middle of Gaul, to sit upon all Causes, that should be brought before them... one Great Druid presided over all the rest,...Strabo (Sig:) mentions two other Orders of Men in great reverence (beside the Druids) the Bardi, & the Vates. the first were their Poets, who sung the deeds of their Heroes to the Lyre,...and the others...studied and taught Metaphyicks, Natural philosophy, & the sublime Sciences. Caesar seems to have included them all under the name of Druids.”\(^{35}\)

\(^{34}\) For more detail of Gray’s use the concept of *translatio*, see Chapter Three which examines Gray’s poem “The Progress of Poesy”.

Gray’s invention is obvious here, “since the history”, as Eric Hobsbawm suggests, “which became part of the fund of knowledge or ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been presented in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so”.\(^{36}\) The historians might extract events out of their contexts, and put others in bogus contexts, and though in doing so they present the historical facts as they are, yet the acts of their inventions are undeniable. They can overlook some of what they deem minor incidents which surround certain events and highlight others that conform to their agenda, and in doing so what they retell does not reflect the entire truth. The above passage depicts a happy vision in which the Druids as priests, judges, and poets acting in harmony for the welfare of the entire society. Gray is keen not to mention Druids’ human sacrifice or any other aspect of their rituals that might mar this romanticized cultural vision of ancient world of Druids. However, Gray’s examination of Druidic life reflects something of his Whiggish principles of liberty which assumes that political liberty is a key factor of the flourish of cultural, social, economic, and political life of societies.\(^{37}\) Welsh poetry, according to Gray, flourished because there was a harmonious relationship between political power and art. Gray’s idealization of Druidic and bardic traditions should be viewed in the context of the invented tradition. In this respect, Marilyn Butler suggests that:

> **Inventing of a tradition maintains your legitimacy, and someone else’s lack of it; your mythical past is your defensive strategy in a real present. So traditions stand in a dialectical relationship to other practices they don’t describe at all, a literary or intellectual actuality which the traditionmonger seeks to block or bypass, and which the alert tradition reader needs to restore. Though the invented tradition loudly insists on its own authority, it must be taken, not as authoritative, but as polemic with particularly strong motives for hiding the circumstances which brought it to the being.**\(^{38}\)

Gray’s account of Welsh tradition illustrates how the eighteenth-century British revivalists of native tradition tend to merge scholarly and speculative narratives of the past to construct the evolution of social structure and cultural activities of the remote ancestors of ancient Britain. With the lack of


\(^{37}\) For more details of this subject, see Chapter Three which discusses Gray’s poem “The Progress of Poesy”.

relevant historical documentation and effective archaeological techniques, entirely accurate scholarly accounts of the remote period of the British past have been an unattainable aim. As a result, the eighteenth-century Celtic Renaissance marks a new orientation in the imaginative reinvention of the past. The Welsh past, as R. Paul Evans put it, was used by eighteenth-century Welsh and English historians and antiquarians not as “a past carefully reconstructed from documentary and archaeological evidence”, but as “one based on a curious vision peopled by druids and bards”. Gray’s treatment of Druidic and bardic traditions presents the ancient Welsh as a culturally advanced community; it stresses an opposite view to the traditional image which shows ancient Britons as savage and primitive. Welsh history and myths, “genuine tradition” and “invented tradition”, are so entangled that they became susceptible to a wide ranging process of concoction, fabrication or forgery in the hands of the revivalists whose scholarly research often amalgamate with speculative methods of investigation which accord with their political and ideological propensity.

The rise of national spirit and the new view of ancient Britons as people of knowledge and civilized culture, as British national revivalists claimed, shook the roots of dignified admiration for the Roman heritage, since the Romans were seen in this narrative not as reformers who brought enlightenment to old British nations, but as brutal invaders and persecutors of the native Britons. In his Welsh translations, Gray celebrated an early British defiance of invasions and the heroic spirit the British warriors showed in their confrontations with their enemies. Owen, Conan, Hoel, and Caradoc are British warriors who defended British liberty and freedom with valour. The heroes of classical Greek and Roman history were replaced by British heroes, fighting in defence of the British motherland. In his Welsh translation “Caradoc”, Gray celebrates the semi-legendary figure, Caradoc, who frequently appears in the Arthurian tradition as a member of the Round Table, as an example of the prowess of ancient Britons in the battle field:

Have ye seen the tusky boar,
Or the bull, with sullen roar,
On surrounding foes advance?

So Caradoc bore his lance. (ll. 1-4)\(^{40}\)

This shift from the classic to native was sustained by the recently increasing belief that the early inhabitants of ancient Britain were not descended from the Trojan people who escaped from the brutality of the Trojan War to settle finally in Britain, but from Noah’s progeny. Henry Rowlands, among many antiquaries and historians including free-mason antiquaries who emphasize the similarity between their rituals and the Druid’s rituals, claims that the Druids were descendants of Japhet, Noah’s son. He suggests that the Welsh language could be traced back to Babel, being closely related to Hebrew.\(^{41}\) William Stukeley points out that the Druids had come to Britain with “an oriental colony...in the very earliest times, during the life of Abraham, or...soon after Noah’s flood”. He asserts that the Druids had a religion “so extremely like Christianity”, and that “they believe in a Messiah who was to come into this world, as we believe in him that is come”.\(^{42}\) The new eighteenth-century antiquarian reading of ancient British history stresses that the ancient Britons are not a savage people whose religion includes superstitious human sacrifice, as the Roman invaders accounted, but as a civilized people who practiced an organized religion before the Greek and the Romans. This discovery was encouraged by the “Anglican churchmen, who sought to defend the established church by reference to historical precedent”.\(^{43}\)

The interest in Druidic history and the attempt to identify within it other primitive religions evident of the patriarchal religion was part of the conservative reaction against a scepticism which appeared to threaten atheism. This was the concern which lay behind a number of influential antiquarian works such as William Cooke's *An Enquiry into the Patriarchal and Druid Religion* (1754)

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\(^{40}\) Roger Lonsdale, ed., *Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith* (London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 1969), 235. All the following references to Gray’s poetry will be to this edition.

\(^{41}\) In the *Mona Antiqua Restaurata* (1723), Henry Rowlands, who was an Anglesey vicar, affirms the Welsh to be really Hebrew, brought in by “the first Planters of this Island”: “Being so near in descent, to the Fountains of true Religion and Worship, to have one of Noah’s son for Grandsire or Great-Grandsire, may be well imagin’d, to have carried and convey’d some of the Rites and Usages of that true Religion here, pure and untainted” (Cited by Stuart Piggott, *Ancient Britons and the Antiquarian Imagination: Idea from the Renaissance to the Regency* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 142).

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 145.

and Jacob Bryant’s *A New System or Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774), both of which sought to find physical evidence of scriptural narratives in the ancient British mythologies.44 William Stukeley asserts that his antiquarian research focuses on “Patriarchal Christianity or Chronological History of the Origin and Progress of True Religion, and the Idolatry”. “My intent is”, he affirms, “to revive in the minds of the learned the spirit of Christianity...to warm our heart into that true sense of Religion, which keeps the medium between ignorant superstition and learned free-thinking, between enthusiasm and the rational worship of God, which is no where upon earth done, in my judgement better than in the Church of England”.45

Glorifying Druids’ cultural life and depicting the figure of the bard, in his poem “The Bard”, in the image of ancient Hebrew prophets, Gray joins this polemic gallery which displays exalted portraits of the ancient wisdom and heroism of British Druids and bards. Druidic and bardic tradition occupies a position of remarkable importance in Gray’s research on Celtic tradition, inasmuch as he views it as a projection of a positive paradigm of creating and promoting the cultural heritage of ancient Britons. The cultural role of the British Druids was not seen by Gray only from religious, social and political perspectives, but also from a poetic perspective. For Gray, the special values of the Druidic society lay in the fact that poetry was at the centre of cultural life of the Druids. Religious instructions were delivered in verse, which, Gray noted, became models for the verse of Taliessin and the other Welsh poets. Thus, Gray links the bardic tradition with the ancient priesthood of the Druids:

...if we consider also how well adapted the division and rhyme of their poetry is to assist the memory, and that the British Druids (once the priesthood of the nation) delivered all the precepts of their doctrine in verse, which never was to be committed to writing, we may easily enough be induced to believe that these bards of the sixth century practised an art which they had received by tradition from the times of the Druids.46

Gray’s claim that the rhyme was first used in Druids’ instructions links the bard’s poetic authority with religious authority. Gray’s connection of English poetry to the earlier bards and Druid-priests

44 Ibid., 130.
bestows upon the history of English poetry not only literary rivalry but literary priority to the classical poetry, since the source of its authority is originally religious authority. In his Commonplace Book, Gray used classical historians’ accounts of Druids to construct a cultural paradigm in which various nations unite by British Drudism. Gray’s intent is to build upon this prototypical paradigm to connect the Northern cultures of the Saxons and the Danes to the British cultures of the Britons and the Welsh. He found that the fullest union of Goths and Britons, in poetic and social terms, occurred in Britain. Gray’s discourse, which emphasizes the interculturalism of ancient nations of the British Isles, exhibits Britain as a melting pot of disparate cultures:

That the Saxons (who had no rhyme among them) might borrow both that, & some of the measures still in use, from their Neighbors, the Britons, seems probable to me, tho’ at what time they did it, is very uncertain. for above 150 Years after the Saxon Invasion, the two Nations...seem’d to breathe nothing but unextinguishable hatred & mutual defiance. but Christianity (it is likely) something soften’d their spirits, & brought the Britons to regard their bitter enemies...as their Brethren.47

It is important to note here that Gray does not refer to Christianity as a spiritual force, but as a cultural force that unified and integrated Britons and Saxons by embracing common beliefs and practices.48 It is the same integrating religious force which Gray depicts in “The Bard” when he refers to the united Protestant Britain under the leadership of Queen Elizabeth.49 Gray claims that cultural and political tensions between ancient Britons and the Saxons abated with the coming of Christianity, and the old narrow ethnic belonging and loyalty were gradually abandoned in favour of new more culturally homogenized characters. By creating an element of reconciliation between the Welsh and English traditions, Gray invents a cross-fertilization of the cultural literary traditions which institutes the cultural hegemony of modern Great Britain.

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48 Gray’s understanding of the historical process which based on the idea of cause and effect rejects ecclesiastic belief which view historical process as something controlled and directed by a transcendent power acting from outside the universe.
49 See Chapter Three which discusses Gray’s literary history of Elizabethan poetry.
To promote his cultural enterprise, Gray enlists the Welsh bardic tradition to reinforce his contentions. He finds in the cultural voice of the bard a force that unites the nation together.\footnote{Katie Trumpener claims that the English writers’ “refunctioning” of the bard explains “the nominalism of imperialism in a new, aesthetic register” (Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 33).} In a long passage in his essay “Cambri”, Gray delineates, in detail, the hierarchy of ancient bards and the duties they performed and the privileges they received from the political leaders of their nation:

As long as the Welch continued under their own Princes, these solemn assemblies to choose the Chief Bard were held once in three years, in w\textsuperscript{th} the Pencerd (or Chief Musician) otherwise call’d bardd cadeirjawg, or the inthroned Bard, was elected for that time. the Prince of the Country always presented him with a harp, w\textsuperscript{th} he kept during life...his residence in Court was assign’d him in the houshold of the hereditary Prince, & he had the privilege of sitting at the King (or reigning Prince's) Table next to the Chief Justice...when he performed in publick before the king, he has the precedence of the Bardd-Teulu (or Domestic Bard) & sung first an Ode in honour of God, & then the Praises of the King...
The Bardd-Teulu was one of the Great-Officers of the Court constantly attending the King’s Person,& reckon’d the eighth in rank among them. on the three great Festivals his place was next to the Penteula (or Great Master of the Household) who deliver’d the harp into his hands. on entering into his Office, he received his Harp from the King; & and from the Queen a ring of gold. He was supplied by them with Clothes, & Linnen, & a House, & held lands, free of Taxes annex’d to his Post...if he accompanied the other Domesticks of the King in any warlike expedition, during the Battle he was to sing the Unbennjaeth Prydain (the Monarch of Britain) & his due was the fattest Ox taken among the Spoil. he was to sing to the Queen (when she desired it) in her own apartment,...and also to the Great-Master.\footnote{Gray, *Commonplace Book*, 2:809, 811.}

Gray’s fascination with the Welsh bardic and Druidic traditions arises largely from his admiration of a system which maintains a congruous relation between the cultural and political spheres. The high rank that the bard enjoyed in the Welsh national pantheon made him a central figure in Gray’s history of Welsh poetry. The bard was honoured by the court and by the people of his nation. Gray’s image of the ancient bard and his harmonious relationship with his society represents an opposite image for the poet-speakers of his English poems where the poet is typically presented as isolated figure. In his comment on Gray’s concept of the poet shown in the poems written before and after Gray’s studies of bardic tradition and his publication of “The Bard” (1757) and Norse and Welsh poems, Arthur Johnston claims that Gray’s concept “grows naturally if surprisingly...from the poet as hidden and remembered only by a kindred spirit, to the poet as the sole surviving voice of liberty
and virtue,” from "the poet of memento mori” to a poet as a prophet and warrior. John Lucas also suggests that Gray’s concept of the role of the poet is informed by his studies of the figure of the bard. He claims that Gray’s “Elegy”, as his other poems which were written earlier than his odes “The Progress of Poesy” and “The Bard”, “underwrites an almost entirely complacent account of a ‘settled’ society. It refuses to censure tyranny and oppression”. He suggests that Gray “progressively moves away from such complacency as he comes to identify poets as bards, that is as oppositional voices”. However, Gray views the role and position of the ancient bard in relation to the poet’s situation in the present. Modern “audience are most unlikely to credit their favorite contemporary poet” with sacral or cultural power; they neither “view themselves as patrons legally bound to him by a social contract, nor does he consider himself bound as a client to them as patrons. His unknown readers are not only faceless but also independent”.

This new concept of the warrior-prophet-poet is clearly reflected in Gray’s attempt at translating and interpreting early Welsh poetry. Gray’s Welsh translations differ remarkably from the original Latin texts in such a way as to enhance the national role that the poet plays in society. In “The Death of Hoel”, Gray chose from the Welsh bardic and heroic tradition a similar story to his previous poem, “The Bard”: the story of the bard who loses his friends in battle and seeks revenge on the enemy. Aneurin, the bard of Hoel, is presented as a warrior whose valour and fighting skill

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55 Roger Lonsdale relates that by September 1758 the Welsh Scholar, Evan Evans, had given Gray’s friend, Daines Barrington, literal Latin translations of three Welsh poems upon which Gray was to base his Welsh translations. Roger thinks that Barrington passed them to Gray “at some time after July 1759, when he was living in London” (Lonsdale, The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith, 228-29). Robert L. Mack suggests that by May 1761, “Gray was…at work on four lays adapted from Welsh, eventually titled, The Triumphs of Owen. A Fragment, The Death of Hoel, Caradoc, and Canon…. The first such fragment was drawn from Gwalchmai ap Meilyr’s twelfth-century Welsh poem Ode to Owen Gwynedd; the ultimate source for the three shorter pieces was the Gododin of Aneurin. The more immediate sources for these short pieces, however, were the prose, manuscript translations of Evan Evans” (Mack, Thomas Gray: A Life, 516).
enabled him to fight his way out to survive and relate, through his poem, the story of the heroic and honourable death of the Welsh Warriors:

   To Gattraeth’s vale in glitt’ring row
   Twice two hundred Warriors goe; (ll. 11-12)

But by the end of the battle, the bard declares:

   But none from Gattraeth’s vale return,
   Save Aeron brave, & Canon strong,
   (Bursting thro’ the bloody throng)
   And I, the meanest of them all,
   That live to weep, & sing their fall. (ll. 20-24)

Unlike the English writers who, earlier, viewed the ancient British bard as an entertainer,56 Gray ascribes to the bard cultural and national functions. He depicts him as a historian of the ideals of his nation and as a hero who fights side by side with great warriors like Hoel, Conan, and Caradoc. The relationship between the hero and the poet in the classical epic is carried by Gray into Welsh literary tradition. The hero as well as the bard is the protagonists of Gray’s Welsh translations. Morton Wilfred Bloomfield and Charles William Dunn claim that “Gray and Macpherson and their followers had succeeded in inventing a new vision of the role of ‘the ancient poet’... which early and pre-modern poets and their audiences would not entirely understand”.57

In his poem “Conan”, Gray emphasizes the cultural function that Welsh bards perform to propagate the national and cultural principles and inculcate them in their societies. Conan’s heroic deeds will be immortalized by the bard’s high cultural poetic medium to set exemplary ideals which highlight the spirit of courage in defence of the homeland. The poet’s gift to the hero and to his society, as Gray implies, is to preserve heroic tradition from oblivion:

   Conan’s name, my lay, rehearse,
   Build to him the lofty verse,
   Sacred tribute of the Bard,
   Verse, the Hero’s sole reward. (ll. 1-4)

56 See Prys Morgan, “From a Death to a View: The Hunt for Welsh Past in the Romantic Period”, The Invention of Tradition, 83.
57 Bloomfield and Dunn, The Role of the Poet in Early Societies, 87.
Gray implies that ancient bards had fulfilled a serious and responsible role in that they served to preserve the repertoire of the culture and tradition of their ancestors. They represent the voice of the nation and the memory which retains that voice. They are the eye-witness historians of the past and the prophets of the future. Similarly, the bard’s song in the Gray’s poem “The Triumph of Owen” refers to the significance of his panegyric song as a commemoration of the heroic ideals of his nation:

Owen’s praise demands my song,
Owen swift, and Owen strong;
Fairest flower of Roderic’s stem,
Gwyneth’s shield and Britain’s gem. (ll. 1-4)

In addition to the national identity of the Welsh hero, Gray ascribes to him cultural significance by emphasizing his contribution to the flourishing of arts in his nation. Owen has the virtue of generosity represented by his patronage of art. Thus, Gray places the hero and the bard in a reciprocity in which the hero as an art patron supports and encourages the bard for the national and cultural role he performs and the bard, in his turn, as creative agent of cultural production and as preserver of national heritage, commemorates the heroic principles and inculcate them in his community:

Lord of every regal art,
Liberal hand and open heart. (ll. 7-8)

Owen, the prince of North Wales, was fiercely attacked by three powerful fleets as part of the expedition of the Norman King Henry II in 1157. Historically, Gray knew that Owen was obliged to surrender Rhuddlan and other conquests in the east and accepted having to pay homage to Henry II. Yet, Gray insisted on presenting Owen as triumphant, since Owen could bravely defend his homeland and the cultural life of his nation against a massive triple invasion. To heighten Owen’s triumph by exalting the might of his enemy, Gray transformed and expanded the description of the fleets in the original text from six lines to ten.58

Big with host of mighty name,
Squadrons three against him came;

This is the force of Eirin hiding;
Side by side as proudly riding,
On her shadow long and gay
Lochlin ploughs the watery way;
There the Norman sails afar
Catch the winds and join the war:
Black and huge along they sweep,
Burthens of angry deep. (ll. 9-18)

Gray places Welsh Bardic tradition in a military context to remind the Welsh of the past encroachments of the external threat of France, and inciting the British to keep vigilant and rally together against any oncoming attack in the present. James Steele indicates that Gray’s choice of Welsh history as a topic of his poem cannot be considered inadvertent, given Gray’s political consciousness: “At a time when Britain was seriously threatened by a French invasion, it is understandable that Gray, who greatly feared such an event, should revive ‘The Triumphs of Owen’...about an heroic and successful defence of the homeland”.59 In her seminal work, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837, Linda Colley illustrates how such issues as war, religion, trade and empire plays a crucial role in inventing British unity. She claims that British Protestantism which creates a sense of difference from European Catholicism and the threat of war and the imperialistic competition with France and Spain develop an artificial construction of Brutishness. Colley mainly views the genesis of British national identity in terms of the response or reaction to the external agent represented by the “Other”. Colley’s study shows how a sense of common national identity was consciously created and how it was superimposed on cultural differences and ethnic loyalties: “Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other”.60

To promote his national agenda which locates England in politically central position as the ruling nation in Great Britain as a polity, Gray made slight but important alterations to the original text of the story of Owain Gwynnedd, Prince of North Wales. In line 20 of the poem, for instance, he altered Evans’s translation “The Dragon of Mona’s Sons,” which refers to the bravery of Owen’s

60 Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation, 6.
Welsh army (the dragon was their banner) in order to enhance the extraordinary character of Owen as a hero. By implication, Gray’s reference alludes to the victory of the second Owain, Henry Tudor who represents the rightful monarch of Britain who put an end to the Norman usurpation of the British throne and achieved vengeance for their persecuted ancestors:

Dauntless on his native sands  
The dragon-Son of Mona stands; (ll. 19-20)

The victory, in Gray’s poem, is not primarily Welsh victory, but Owen’s victory. Without Owen’s leadership this victory would never have been achieved. It is Owen’s heroic example that inspires and infuses valour in the spirit of his warriors:

Where his glowing eye-balls turn,  
Thousand banners round him burn. (ll. 27-28)

While Gray emphasizes in “The Triumph of Owen” the supernatural qualities of the protagonist, he did not attribute his triumphs to supernatural agents. There are no prophesies of curses as is the case in “The Bard” and “The Fatal Sisters”, where the destiny of the enemy is weaved by a supernatural prophetic power. It is the command of Owen and his super-human charisma that fill his troops with feelings of fear and shame that prevent them of fleeing from the battle ground:

Where he pointed his purple spear,  
Hasty, hasty Rout is there,  
Making with indignant eye  
Fear to stop & shame to fly. (ll. 29-30)

Gray did not publish a complete translation of the original Latin text of the poem. He gives his translation the form of a fragment rather than a finished poem. In the 1768 version, the poem concludes with description of the “horror”, “Conflict fierce”, “Ruin”, “Agony”, “Despair”, and “honourable Death” of the battle without giving a decisive conclusion that asserts the “Triumphs” the title of the poem refers to:

There Confusion, Terror’s child,  
Conflict fierce, & Ruin wild,  
Agony, that pants for breath,  
Despair, & honourable Death. (ll. 33-36)
Gray’s act should not be aligned within the general vogue of publication of ancient fragments as Macpherson does in what he claims to be genuine fragments of the ancient poet, Ossian. Instead, it can be understood in terms of the invention of tradition through which a historian may include and exclude certain elements of the past tradition to construct his ideological scenario. History, like tradition, may be subject to a deliberate act of reinterpretations or modifications. Henry Classie suggests that “histories are accounts of the past. Their authors, according to the demands of narration, customarily seek change, the transformations by which they can get their story told.”

Subsequently, “culture and tradition”, Classie proceeds, “are created by individuals out of experience. They have reasons for their actions, and their actions entail change”. Thus, invented tradition, like genuine tradition, exercises an influence on the cultural life of a certain society and this, in its turn, might entail a new understanding and interpretations of the events of the past. In other words, invented and genuine traditions, whether they are deliberate or non-deliberate creations of society, exercise certain impacts on the cultural structure of that society. This argument comes in opposition to the Arthur Johnston’s view which emphasizes Gray’s failure of understanding the original Latin text or his failure to achieve his usual desire to provide his poem with memorable end. What Gray emphasizes in the poem is the importance of leadership at decisive and critical moments in the history of nations. He refers implicitly to the necessity that demands that British nations rally under the leadership of England in the face of an external French threat. Thus, in the heart of Gray’s sense of Britishness, the sense of the Englishness was lying.

Gray finds in the obscure past of Welsh history, literature, myth, and legends a rich repository for invention which promotes his national and cultural programmes. This obscurity, Gray

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62 Ibid., 398.
63 Arthur Johnston suggests that “the fact that Gray offered an unfinished poem to Dodsley-and one that required so few lines to complete the sense of the original. Gray had too great a respect for his craft, and found composing too difficult, for him to add the sort of conclusion that Mason was adept at supplying. It is difficult to believe that Gray deliberately published it unfinished, relying on its appeal as ‘A Fragment’ of ancient poetry. He may, like Rice William’s learned friend, have found the last two lines in the Latin “too imperfect for him fully to understand.” More probably the appropriate ending eluded him. All Gray’s completed poems end memorably” (Johnston, “The Triumphs of Owen”, 195).
suggests in a letter to Mason, provides historians and poets with “an unbounded liberty to pure imagination & fiction”, the favourite realm for Gray. Gray urges Mason to rely on the inventive powers of imagination in constructing his historical story, when accurate historical materials for the subject of his work are not available. He advises him to take certain liberties with the apocryphal or mythological tradition:

When we treat a subject, where the manners are almost lost in antiquity, our stock of ideas must need be small, & nothing betrays our poverty more, than the returning to, & harping frequently on one image... But the subjects I speak off to compensate (& more than compensate) that unavoidable poverty, have one great advantage when they fall into good hands. they leave an unbounded liberty to pure imagination, & fiction (our favourite provinces) where no Critick can molest, or Antiquary gainsay us. & yet (to please me) these fictions must have some affinity, some seeming connection with that little we really know of the character & customs of the People.64

However, though he emphasizes the role of imagination in filling in the gaps of the historical or mythological materials, Gray still urges Mason to find “some affinity” and “some seeming connection” between the historical elements and the invented elements of his work. Gray proposes to Mason a sort of compromise between mythology, history and fiction through the free creation of imagination. He asserts to Mason that in the absence of accurate materials of the past in the hands of poets, poets should show more clarity in tackling their subjects, since readers might not be well versed in the cultures and traditions of remote periods of the past. Here, poets, according to Gray, take historical and cultural responsibilities on his shoulders to clarify to their readers the hazy episodes of the past:

I told you before (that in a time of dearth) I would venture to borrow from the Edda without entering too minutely on particulars: but if I did so, I would make each image so clear, that it might be fully understood by itself, for in this obscure mythology we must not hint at things, as we do with the Greek Fables, that everybody is supposed to know at school. however on second thoughts I think it would be still better to graft any wild picturesque fable absolutely of one's own invention upon the Druid-Stock; I mean upon those half-dozen of old fancies, that are known to have made their system. this will give you more freedom & latitude, & will leave no hold for the Criticks to fasten on.65

Gray makes clear to Mason that classical fables, though they offer a great source of imitation, leave

64 Gray, Correspondence, 2:528-29.
65 Ibid., 2:568.
little freedom of invention to writers, since readers are familiar with classical tradition which was
used intensively by writers for long time. Unlike classical tradition, Celtic tradition, Gray suggests,
provides writers with fresh materials which not only leave a wide scope for aesthetic invention, but
flexibility which enables writers to redirect their implications in accordance with their agendas.
Throughout “The Bard” and Welsh translations, Gray uses Welsh national symbols—the figure of the
Druid and the bard, the heroic warrior, dragon, and the harp—which represent national significance
not only for the Welsh, but for all the British since, according to Gray’s narrative, Welsh tradition
represents the cultural antiquity on which British cultural identity rests. Gray’s portrayal of the bard
with his harp (his cultural companion) on the high rock (a symbol of fortified nature against the
invasion of enemy)66 reflects the commitment of the bard to his art. The harp, besides being a
national symbol of Wales, is the cultural weapon by which, together with poetry, he intends to
confront and defeat Edward’s troops, and when he jumped into the endless darkness, one can
imagine, he jumped with his harp like a hero who never abandons his sword until the moment of
death. Prys Morgan suggests that the “ceremonial and the symbols and insignia all served to help
Welshmen visualize their own country, and they had an exceptional importance in a national
community that was not a political state.”67 Gray finds in these symbols implications which connect
the present with the old cultural past of Britain. “‘Invented tradition’”, Eric Hobsbawm suggests, “is
taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of ritual
or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition,
which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt
to establish continuity with a suitable historical past”.68

When Gray, in “The Bard”, refers to the collapse or temporary disruption of continuity of the

66 Prys Morgan argues that “The shift of imagination towards appreciating wild mountain scenery of course
took place all over Europe, but it particularly affected small mountain people such as the Welsh or Swiss. The
Welsh very gradually came to see their hills not as a punishment from the Almighty who had driven them from
the lush lowlands of England, but as a fastness or fortress of the nation” “Prys Morgan, “From a Death to a
67 Ibid., 92.
68 Hobsbawm and Ranger, The Invention of Tradition, 1.
bardic tradition with the death of the last bard in confrontation with the tyranny of Edward I, he does not attribute this collapse or disruption to an internal cause, such as a lack of patronage or liberty in Welsh society; instead, he ascribes that to the brutal political and cultural colonization of Norman forces which represent an external agent of anti-tradition and demolition of cultural life.  

It is the bard as a national and cultural hero who defies Norman encroachments, asserting “with prophetic spirit” and “with a voice more than human” that Welsh cultural tradition would never die with the bards’ death:

The army of Edward I. as they march through a deep valley, are suddenly stopped by the appearance of a venerable figure seated on the summit of inaccessible rock, who, with a voice more than human, reproaches the King with all the misery and desolation which he had brought on his country; foretells the misfortunes of the Norman race, and with prophetic spirit declares, that all his cruelty shall never extinguish the noble ardour of poetic genius in this island; and that men shall never be wanting to celebrate true virtue and valour in immortal strains, to expose vice and infamous pleasure, and boldly censure tyranny and oppression. His song ended, he precipitates himself from the mountain, and is swallowed up by the river that rolls at its foot.  

Through this bardic prophesy, which asserts the continuity of bardic tradition, Gray managed to alter the pessimistic implications of his source of the story. Gray’s source of the story of the massacre of the bards is Thomas Carte’s General History of England (1750). Carte relates that after Edward’s massacre of “the bards, who use to put those remains of the ancient Britains in the mind of the valiant deeds of their ancestors”, the bardic poetry became “dangerous, gradually declined, and in a little time, that sort of men utterly destroyed”. The Welsh, Gray suggests, managed to maintain, though relatively, a cultural independence through nurturing their language, customs and art: “their works (we see), still remain, the Language (tho’ decaying) still lives, & the art of their versification is known, and practised to this day among them”. Gray himself used a particular measure of Welsh prosody in “The Bard” to assert the continuity of Welsh bardic tradition. William Powell Jones asserts that “Gray derived a very genuine feeling for the rhythm and devices of Welsh poetry, which

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69 See Chapter Three for more discussions of Gray’s “The Bard”.
72 Ibid., 181.
he uses to great advantage in The Bard, particularly in the passages containing the speeches of the bard himself or of the ghostly chorus of his slain brother”. Thus, Gray does not only assert the continuity of bardic tradition in his poetic practice, but associates himself with the national figures of the Welsh ancient bards. In reference to the continuity of bardic tradition, Gray’s Advertisement in 1757 indicates that “The Bard” was “found on Tradition current in Wales”. Gray observes that the Welsh managed to keep the link of continuity of the British tradition, and though they had been militarily conquered and lost their political independence, they remained culturally independent. Gray’s glorification of Welsh cultural independence draws the attention away from the loss of the political independence of the Welsh, and displays it as a compensation for this loss.

Gray’s interest in the history and literature of ancient Britain is not entirely an aesthetic interest or an antiquarian nostalgic yearning for a lost primitive pre-commercial past. It is rather a defence of the commercial interests of Great Britain threatened by the interests of the other imperialistic nations. To reinforce a bound of unity and solidarity between component nations of united Britain in order to stand firmly together in the face of external threats, Gray invokes the heroic past of ancient Briton and uses the idea of cultural origin to enhance a sense of cultural nationalism. He attributes to the ancient poetic paradigm of bardic tradition the origin of English literary culture. For Gray, the history of English poetry is the also the history of ancient British poetry, since bardic poetry, according to Gray’s polemic narrative, plays a significant role in constructing the main characters of the English poetry.

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75 Though Gray defended the commercial interests of Great Britain, he, as Chapter Three will show, recognized and warned against the danger of the commercial and imperialistic expansions.
Chapter Two

Historicism and the Canonization of the Vernacular Poets

P: 2 On Chaucer, who first introduced the manner of the Provençaux, improved by the Italians into our country. his character & merits at large; the different kinds in w[7] he excell’d. Gower, Occleve, Lydgate, Hawes, G: Douglas, Lindesay, Bellenden, Dunbar, etc: (Gray’s letter to Thomas Warton, 15 April 1770)[76]

The previous chapter shows how Gray tried to construct poetic authority by adopting ancient British bardic tradition as an archetypal paradigm for English poetry and by placing it at the centre of the canonical poetic tradition by which the earlier Saxon literary culture was inspired. The historical investigation of the literary culture of ancient Britain, which Gray makes in the introduction to his History of English Poetry, initiates his idea of the continuity and connectedness of tradition. The second part of his History, which deals with medieval poetry, reveals Gray’s intent to construct a cultural link which connects medieval poetic tradition with bardic tradition through accommodating “the father of English poetry”, Chaucer, and his school within the Saxon culture whose cultural indebtedness to the bardic and Druidic traditions Gray has already stressed. The past of ancient Britain offers to Gray and many mid-eighteenth-century writers a sense of antiquity which enhances their image of their culture as having an ancient provenance with which they are keen to associate themselves. Gray’s elevation of the literary tradition of ancient Britain and his endeavour to draw the attention of eighteenth-century readers to its significance and its influence on the English canonical poets should be understood within the concept of canon-formation.[77] Gray’s historiography of a native literary past reveals his endeavour to set the aesthetic canon of the native tradition as parallel to the classical canon.

It is central to this chapter to explore Gray’s historicist method, which aimed at understanding earlier poetic texts from the context of the age of their authors. Gray’s historicist

[77] Trevor Ross suggests that “Works from the distant past could be deemed canonical only if they could be clearly shown to contribute in some way to the productivity and stature of the present age, or to the circulation of contemporary values” (Trevor Ross, “The Emergence of ‘Literature’: Making and Reading the English Canon in the Eighteenth Century” ELH 63 (1996): 401).
study of Chaucer’s language and metre throws light on the problem of Chaucer’s linguistic anachronisms which obscure a full understanding of Chaucer’s poetry by eighteenth-century readers. Gray’s method hinges upon the evidence of medieval linguistic and poetic practice. It approaches the historicity of literary works of the past as a problem of literary, linguistic and cultural changes. Examined in context, Chaucer’s poetry, for Gray, assumes the status of an important stage in the development of English poetry since it proffers paradigms of cultural influence and interaction and the continuity of ancient tradition.

Mid-eighteenth-century historicist approaches to earlier literary texts considered in this chapter came as a reaction against the literary hierarchy which was established in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when the newly-established standards of canon-formation ignored many national vernacular poets in favour of classical ideals. The heightened appeal for uniformity, decorum, and regularity, as Trevor Ross asserts, “meant that the canon had almost to be purged of authors who failed to evince an adequate regard for the rules”.78 According to these standards, Chaucer and his disciples have been excluded from the canon since their poetic language was considered as obsolete and obscure, while Waller and Denham, whose writings represent a refined model of English language, have been placed at the peak of the English canon. Waller’s “Of English Verse”, for example, emphasizes the irregularity and archaism of Chaucerian tradition: “The glory of his numbers lost!/ Years have defeated his matchless strain”.79 Similarly, Joseph Addison’s “Account of the Greatest English Poets” indicates that “age has rusted what the poet [Chaucer] writ/ Worn out his language, and obscur’d his wit”.80 Dryden, on the other hand, views the distance, and accordingly, the distinction between Chaucer’s poetry language and the refined language of his own time in relation to idea of the linear evolution and improvement. Chaucer, according to Dryden, “lived in the

78 Trevor Ross, The Making of the English Literary Canon from the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 139.
infancy of our poetry” and “the dawning of our language”. Chaucer’s poetry represents, for Dryden, a primitive stage in the English literary history which is in continuous process of refinement and improvement: “nothing is brought into perfection at the first ... we must be children before we grow into men”. William L. Alderson and Arnold C. Henderson observe that “Dryden’s remarks on Chaucer’s ‘unequal numbers’ sum up the common seventeenth-century attitude and, sad to say, impede the progress of Middle English scholarship by ranging his great critical authority on the side of those who found Chaucer’s verse rough and homely”.

Gray’s aim of studying Chaucer’s poetry, on the other hand, is to tackle the problem concerning the obscurity and irregularity of Chaucer’s poetry and give it a canonical character by elevating it and giving it a cultural iconic status. Gray was writing a literary history and not an editorial work or literary translations or modernizations. Gray’s task, as a literary historian, is to explain and account for Chaucer’s texts in context of the medieval literary practices. Gray realized that medieval poets were alienated from the literary canon because their language was difficult for the modern reading public of eighteenth-century polite society. This urged him to embark on philological and historicist studies of medieval poetry to remove the obstacles that hindered the medieval poets from assuming a place in the English canon. In his essay “Observations on English Metre”, Gray tries to solve the problem that faced the eighteenth-century editors and critics of Chaucerian texts. He argues against the prerogative attitudes of Chaucer’s editors and critics who often criticize Chaucerian poetic language and metre as something vulgar and irregular. Gray’s thorough examination of variant readings in early texts aims to restore the original vigour of Chaucerian texts and, by extension, the medieval texts which were largely marred by clumsy eighteenth-century literary editing. Gray’s approach to Chaucer’s poetry shows a rejection of the refinement and correction of the modernizations of the editors of Chaucer, such as John Urry’s 1721

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82 Ibid., 281.  
edition of Chaucer, which endeavoured to alter what was deemed by eighteenth-century politeness as medieval vulgarity by thrusting modern vocabulary in the original text or by changing the syntactic structure of the text. Gray sees such acts as encroachments, since they not only ruin the relics of texts of the past but damage what poets intend to convey to their contemporary audience: “I would not with Mr. Urry, the Editor of Chaucer, insert words and syllables, unauthorized by the oldest manuscripts, to help out what seems lame and defective in the measure of our ancient writers”.84

What distinguishes Urry’s editorial procedures from Gray’s method is that Urry tries to make Chaucer’s metre appear regular by making arbitrary emendations to the original text, while Gray’s approach is grounded on a historicist understanding of the linguistic and literary practices of the medieval period. Urry’s textual changes can be summarized by his using editorial devices to distinguish the number of syllables in a line. For example, to “distinguish those instances of –ed, -es, -est, and -eth ending which were to be given full syllabic value, Urry arbitrarily respells them –id, -is, -ist, and –ith when they are to be pronounced, leaving them unaltered otherwise”.85 In additional to that, Urry uses devices to augment Chaucer’s language to regularize the metre. For example, in “filling out lines which might otherwise appear to be metrically deficient, Urry resorts to the addition of entire prefixes and suffixes which he seems to have regarded as free counters in his metrical game... Urry adds or omits whole words when none of his other devices will serve his metrical purpose. Of the omissions the Preface takes no account”.86 Basing their editorial methods on taste rather than on contextual explanations, seventeenth and early eighteenth editors and critics are less

84 Gray, “Observation on English Metre”, The Works of Thomas Gray, 1:325. Gray’s historicist and philologist treatment of medieval language and culture helped to set guiding parameters for the following editors and critics of medieval poetry. Thomas Tyrwhitt, in the preface to the edition of The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer (1775), showed similar method used by Gray and a similar reaction against Urry’s edition of Chaucer. Tyrwhitt based his study on historicist reading of Chaucer’s Language and Versification. He provides "illustrations of particular passages; and explanations of the most uncommon words and phrases", such as those which were omitted, or ill explained, in the Glossary to Urry’s Edition". He asserted that to understand Chaucer’s poetry, “it was necessary to enquire into the state of our language and versification at the time when Chaucer wrote, and also, as much as was possible, into the peculiarities of his style and manner of composition. Nor was it less necessary...to trace his allusions to a variety of forgotten books and obsolete customs” (Thomas Tyrwhitt, ed., The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer, vol. 1 (London: Payne, 1775), 1:i-iii).
85 Alderson and Henderson, Chaucer and Augustan Scholarship, 121-22.
86 Ibid.
concerned in the recovering the author’s words than in making their own emendations in such a way that brings to the light their editorial creativity, rather than editorial scholarship, in adapting the production of the past effectively to the demand of the present. The widespread circulation of the printed texts made possible by the new print technology led many late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century poets and critics to claim cultural superiority not only to the earlier vernacular authors, but also to the classical ancients since the didactic and moral role the modern authors now play became more possible with the emergence of print culture and the public sphere. In this respect, Addison claims that:

Had the philosophers and great men of antiquity, who took so much pains in order to instruct mankind, and leave the world wiser and better than they found it; had they, I say, been possessed of the art of printing, there is no question but they would have made such an advantage of it, in dealing out their lectures to the publick. Our common prints would be of great use were they thus calculated to diffuse good sense through the bulk of a people, to clear up their understandings, animate their minds with virtue, dissipate the sorrows of a heavy heart, or unbend the mind from its more severe employments with innocent amusements.  

Addison’s argument, which is informed by the modern world in which he lives, illustrates how the image of the past began to change as the present significantly changed. Subsequently, the cultural productions of the vernacular past, which have been often deemed as barbarous or unpolished, have been exposed to a process of modernization and refinement to suit the contemporary taste of sophisticated polite society. In doing so, “the pastness of the author, the text, or the period at large was an issue insofar as it had to be overcome”.  

Chaucer’s language and metre represent a problem for late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century critics in their violation of the classical principles they adopt. For them, “keeping Chaucer in the canon entails rethinking the nature of literary value” and creates a plurality in the literary canon, “because it involved a difficult compromise between classicist principles and nationalist sentiment, and more important, because it impelled them to consider, if only tentatively, the definition of canonicity that had been for centuries based on the social, political, and cultural

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idealization of verbal power” \(^8\) Late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century critics, such as Dryden and Pope, tried to accommodate Chaucer within the classical canon by modifying and refining his text on the model of the classical standards of composition. However, Gray views the accommodation of the Chaucerian texts to the dominant classical model as a process of acculturation which breaches native cultural continuity. He thinks that what earlier poetry needs is not a process of refinement and reproduction in accordance with standards of the present, but instead, it needs a historicist reading. The understanding of the cultural environment of a text and its historical peculiarities would enable earlier poetry not only to meet the appreciation of the readers of the modern literary culture but also of future taste. Without this understanding, old poetry would remain irrelevant to the present and future and out of the process of the natural transformation of literary tradition. In fact, Gray and other mid eighteenth-century scholar-critics such as Lewis Theobald, John Upton, and Thomas Warton made significant departures from the historical approaches of their predecessors. The early eighteenth-century editing and criticism of the literary works of the past which relied heavily on the editor’s and the critic’s taste and judgement were gradually replaced by historicist methods which contextualize the historical texts.

The threshold of this change was set as a reaction against earlier editions of Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton which were deemed by a new generation of literary historians and critics as degradation of canonical works of the native past. As a cultural and national patriot, Gray finds that it is his cultural and national responsibility to protect English literary heritage from the editorial and critical encroachments. As he, in his *History*, defends Chaucer’s poetry against the distortion caused by the editors and transcribers of his poetry, Gray, in poetic lines in a letter to Mason on July 8, 1765, defends Shakespeare against deformation made to his texts by “canker’d” critics and commentators who “patch’d” Shakespearean texts in an endeavour to accommodate them to the taste of their own time:

William Shakespeare To
M\(^1\) Anne, Regular Servant

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89 Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon*, 143.
to the Rev’d M’ Precentor of York.

A moment’s patience, gentle Mistris Anne!
(But stint your clack for sweet S’t Charitie)
‘Tis Willy begs, once a right proper Man,
Tho’ now a Book, and interleav’d, you see.
Much have I born from canker’d Critick’s spite,
From fumbling Baronets, and Poets small,
Pert Barristers, & Parsons nothing bright:
But, what awaits me now, is worst of all!
‘Tis true, our Master’s temper natural
Was fashion’d fair in meek & dovelike guise:
But may not honey’s self be turn’d to gall
By residence, by marriage, & sore eyes?
If then he wreak on me his wicked will:
Steal to his closet at the hour of prayer,
And (when thou hear’st the organ piping shrill)
Grease his best pen, & and all he scribbles, tear.

So York shall taste, what Clouët never knew;
So from our words sublime fumes shall rise:
While Nancy earns the praise to Shakespeare due.90

Gray thinks that the clumsy editorial works of some eighteenth-century critics and poetasters degrade the sublimity of Shakespearean texts. Shakespeare, the speaker of Gray’s lines, tells Mason’s servant, Anne, to urge Mason to save his texts from any encroachments to restore its sublimity and stop any further acts of ingenuity and alterations might be made by his critics and editors.

In fact, the revival of the Gothic past contributes significantly to the rise of historicism, and the studies of Spenser and Shakespeare were often key triggers for the study of Gothic literary tradition. In his Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser (1762), Thomas Warton suggests a contextual reading of the texts of the past. Warton affirms that Spenser’s poetry belongs to the tradition of the medieval romance; therefore it is inappropriate to judge it by the standards of the classical tradition:

It is absurd to think of judging either Ariosto or Spenser by precepts which they did not attend to. We who live in the days of writing by rules, are apt to try every composition by those laws which we have been taught to think the sole criterion of excellence. Critical taste is universally diffused, and we require the same order and

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90 Gray, Correspondence, 2:879-80. For more details about the rise of the scholarly editorial interpretation of the texts of Shakespeare and Milton in eighteenth century, see Marcus Walsh, Shakespeare, Milton, and Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing: The Beginning of interpretative Scholarship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
design which every modern performance is expected to have, in poems where they
never were regarded or intended. Spenser...did not live in an age of planning.91

Like the classical poetry which cannot be well understood without sufficient knowledge of ancient
culture of Greece and Rome, as Richard Hurd puts it in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762),
medieval poetry can only be understood in the context of Gothic culture: “When an architect
examines a Gothic structure by Grecian rules, he finds nothing but deformity. But the Gothic
architecture had its own rules, by which when it comes to be examined, it is seen to have its merits
as well as the Grecian”.92 In his study of Shakespeare’s writing, Johnson suggests that “Every man’s
performance, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived,
and with his own particular opportunities”.93 Similarly, Gray’s recognition of the influence of the
external conditions on the human mind in general and on the creation of literary works in particular
is a main reason beyond his belief in the necessity for the application of the historicist criticism which
entails studying earlier poetry in relation to the temporal and spatial conditions in which it was
produced. In his essay “Some Remarks on the Poems of John Lydgate”, Gray suggests that the
evaluation of literary works of the past should not be based on the present standards of judgement
by imposing contemporary norms on literary culture of the past, since the criteria according which
the writers of different ages write are distinctively different. He declines to examine Lydgate’s and
other medieval works in accordance with the contemporary principles:

The “long processes” indeed suited wonderfully with the attention and simple
curiosity of the age in which Lydgate lived. Many a stroke have he and the best of his
contemporaries spent upon a study old story, till they had blunted their own edge
and that of their readers; at least a modern reader will find it so: but it is a folly to
judge of the understanding and of the patience of those times by our own.94

Gray rejects the linear narrative of history and its methodological principles which examine the past
in relation to the idea of progress. Viewing earlier literary works in relation to their historical

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1807), I:21.
93 D. Nichol Smith, *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare* (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1903),
132.
contexts, Gray’s examinations refute the belief (mainly a Whiggish belief) that change in literature takes place developmentally.\(^{95}\) Historicism enabled Gray to justify the poetic tendencies of earlier writers and helped him to achieve fairer interpretations and evaluations of their texts to bring them into play.

Historicizing perspectives and the process of canonization are closely related. They emerged largely from the need for the revision of the literary culture of the past which was, in its turn, heightened by the rise of nationalism. National literary historians assert that the period or the group of writers of the national past which they study has a valuable literary tradition. They confer cultural importance on national literary achievements and create a sense of continuity between the present and the past of their ancestors. In their focusing on the shared past and shared values, national literary historians reinforce a sense of nationalism in the present. Cultural nationalism is rooted in the collective history of literary system and the history of groups or individuals who represent that system. Gray’s historicist study of medieval literary culture is an endeavour to bring the medieval literary text back to its national source by restoring the cultural significance of the original text and by linking its cultural origin back with ancient British and Anglo-Saxon traditions. Unlike the conjectural and aesthetic modernations of Chaucer’s poetry, such as those of Dryden, Urry and Pope, Gray offers historical and authorial approaches grounded on contextualization of Chaucerian texts via examining them in the light of the linguistic and literary practices of their own time. In the mid-eighteenth century, as David Fairer asserts, “Scholar-critics... began to immense themselves in the linguistic and cultural context that was to become *de rigueur* when interpreting a native ‘classic’ for an expanding modern readership”, and as “a mark of its canonization the great literary survivor was subjected to source-hunting, textual research, and explanatory annotation: it was put before the public as a work ‘for all time’ at the very moment of being returned to its origins in history”.\(^{96}\) Gray suggests that the understating of medieval poetry is contingent on the understanding of linguistic

\(^{95}\) See Chapter Three for more details on Gray’s views on the Whiggish idea of progress.
and literary habits of its historical period. Locating Chaucer’s text in its own linguistic world, Gray claims that the inconsistencies of Chaucer’s language which arises from the defectiveness of the orthographical manner of Middle English caused damage to the metrical regularity of Chaucer’s poetry:

...as I see those manuscripts, and the first printed editions, so extremely innocent in their manner of spelling one and the same word as to very continually, and often in the compass of two lines, and seem to have no fixed orthography, I cannot help thinking it probable, that many great inequalities in the metre are owing to the neglect of transcribers, or that the manner of reading made up for the defects which appear in the writing.97

Gray’s examination, which proffers an early paradigm of contextual criticism, asserts that poetry of the medieval writers is regular in its own terms and has no defects as some of critics and editors claimed. He states that the deformity of their measure does not result from their lack of skill, but is caused by the transcribers’ misunderstanding of their poetry: “these poets had an ear not insensible to defects in meter; and where the verse seems to halt, it is very probably occasioned by the transcriber’s neglect, who, seeing a word spelt differently from the manner then customary, changed or omitted a few letters without reflecting on the injury done to the measure”.98 Gray’s contextual reading of Chaucer’s poetry is grounded on the understanding of the disparity in orthography, syllabication, and pronunciation of the Middle English used by Chaucer and eighteenth-century modern English.

Gray attempts to diagnose the poetic taste of Chaucer’s age which reveals a great admiration for innovation. He claims that Chaucer enriched his style with many new and foreign words which suited his poetic demands. He tries to understand the potency of Chaucer’s verbal innovations and explain to the reader the nature of the linguistic transformation made in the medieval time by poets in particular and by society in general. He claims that the medieval poets had followed a flexible process of pronouncing syllables or letters according to their metrical purpose: “This syllable, though

98 Ibid., 1:328.
(I suppose) then of use in common speech, our poets inserted, where it suited them in verse”.\textsuperscript{99} Gray suggests that if the earlier critics and editors of the medieval poetry took into consideration the way of the medieval poets’ pronunciation, then, the medieval poetry, according to Gray’s view which obviously does not correspond with Dryden’s view on Chaucer’s metre, would be regular:

I am inclined to think, (whatever Mr. Dryden says in the preface to his Tales) that their metre, at least in serious measures and in heroic stanzas, was uniform; not indeed to the eye, but to the ear, \textit{when rightly pronounced}. We undoubtedly destroy a great part of the music of their versification by laying the accent of words, where nobody then laid it; if we pronounce enténcion, presúmpcion, compéndious, vértuous, prócresse, &c. in the manner in which we do in our own age, its neither verse nor rhyme; but Lydgate and his contemporaries undoubtedly said, entención, compendíuous, procéss, &c. as the French (from whom those words were borrowed) do at this day, intención, compendieúx, procés. We may every day see instances of this: the better sort of people affect to introduce many words from that language, some of which retain their original accent for many years...others, by coming more into vulgar use, lose it and assume the English accent.... Another peculiarity in the old pronunciation was that of liquefying two syllables into one, especially where was a liquid consonant in either of them.\textsuperscript{100}

Gray stresses that the ambiguity of the medieval poetry arises from the difference between the written and spoken English, claiming that though the habit of the poets of that period is to insert certain affixes in the vocabulary of the poems for artistic reasons, they do not pronounce them in the reciting of these poems. For the same reasons, concerning the measure of their poetry, they may omit some letters in their poetic composition: “As then our writers inserted these initial and final letters, or omitted them; and, where we see them written, we do not doubt that they were meant to fill up the measure”.\textsuperscript{101} Gray’s meticulous explanations do not locate the cause of literary changes solely in external forces to literature (sociolinguist effects or the social effects on the way language is used), but also in forces working within the literary work itself and in doing so he extends a better understanding of the world of the past texts grounded on various contexts to his argument. For Gray these linguistic changes in the lexical constructions and in the sound system of the English language over a period of time are diachronic and synchronic in the same time: diachronic in that they represent an across-time system, and synchronic in that they illustrate the difference of language

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 1:326.
\textsuperscript{100} Gray, “Some Remarks on the Poems of John Lydgate”, 1:393-94n
\textsuperscript{101} Gray, “Observation on English Metre”, 1:327.
usage within particular temporal moment as the difference between the innovative language of the poet and that of the public. H. R. Jauss asserts that “The historicity of literature comes to light at the intersections of diachrony and synchrony.” Jauss believes that it is “possible to make the literary horizon of a specific historical moment comprehensible as that synchronic system in relation to which literature that appears contemporaneously could be received diachronically in relations of noncontemporaneity, and the work could be received as current or not, as modish, outdated, or perennial, as premature or belated”. Gray’s synchronic study in a given point of medieval time led him to embark on diachronic analysis which focuses on language change over periods of time. Gray tries to position readers close to the condition of the past poetic composition, which was undoubtedly informed by the linguistic shift and transformation, to enhance their comprehension of the earlier literary texts. Gray proclaims that the poetic habit of medieval writers was either to follow the old Anglo-Saxon way of pronunciation or not according to poetic demands, since English was exposed to great changes in pronunciation after the Danes settled in England:

This was commonly done too, I imagine, in Chaucer’s and Lydgate’s times; but, in verse, they took the liberty either to follow the old language in pronouncing the final syllable, or to sink the vowel and bridge it, as was usual, according to the necessity of their versification.... I have mentioned in some remarks on the verses of Lydgate the mute, and their use of it in words derived from French, and I imagine that they did the same in many words of true English origin, which the Danes had before robbed of their final consonant.

To understand a literary work, Gray suggests, is to study the culture from which it emanates.

Gray aligns English literature with cultural genealogy of Anglo-Saxon. In order to explain the cultural forms of the medieval era, Gray goes back to scrutinize its tap-roots of Anglo-Saxon culture.

Chaucerian tradition is depicted as a link to the earlier Anglo-Saxon world. In his endeavour to accommodate medieval literary culture within the province of Anglo-Saxon tradition, Gray identifies Chaucer essentially with Gothic literary tradition. Gray’s discourse directly challenges the hypothesis that attributes the descent of medieval poetry to the Provençal or Norman origins. Gray suggests

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that English literary culture derives its main character of the transformation of the received tradition of the Anglo-Saxon past.

Richard Terry aligns Gray’s theory of the cultural origin with the theory adopted by Thomas Rymer, Dryden, and Pope which ascribes the origin of Chaucerian tradition and, by extension, English literary culture in general to the Provençal polished culture “to clinch the case for English literature’s being essentially ‘polite’”. 104 Terry’s claim crucially rests on evidence from Gray’s plan of History of English Poetry when Gray declares that Chaucer is the first to have “introduced the manner of the Provençaux improved by the Italians into our country”. It is evident in Gray’s plan, I would argue, that Gray agrees with his predecessors about the influence of Provençal literary tradition on Chaucer.

However, he suggests that that influence is placed on the manner (the style rather than the species) of poetic composition, in that it results from cultural interaction rather than representing cultural origins as the theory of Gray’s predecessors asserts. Secondly, Gray indicates that the Provençal influence on Chaucer is indirect, since Chaucer indirectly took from Provençal tradition through the Italian poets who made certain modifications and improvements on that tradition before it came to Chaucer’s hand. Gray’s hypothesis celebrates the Saxons as the ancestors of the English and the Anglo-Saxon tongue and culture as the origins of the English language and culture; it contrasts with the myth of Provençal origins of English polite culture rather than concurs with it. Indeed, one of the central concerns of Gray’s essays on Chaucer and Lydgate is the effects of the linguistic expansion on poetry. Medieval poetry, for Gray, reflects the capacity and productivity of the English language. In his essay “Some Remarks on the Poem of Lydgate”, Gray makes it clear that English language was improved by the cultural interconnection with neighbouring nations:

...at that time, the orthography unsettled, the syntax very deficient and confused, the metre and number of syllables left to the ear alone; and yet, with all its rudeness, our tongue had then acquired an energy and a plenty by the adoption of a variety of words borrowed from the French, the Provençal, and the Italian, about the middle of the fourteenth century, which at this day our best writers seem to miss

and to regret; for many of them have gradually dropped into disuse, and are only now to be found in the remotest counties of England.105

In fact, Gray’s approach to the language of the medieval poets shows different views not only from his predecessors but also from many of his contemporary literary historians notably those of Thomas Warton, for instance. While Gray suggests that Chaucer’s act of borrowing vocabularies from foreign languages is a deliberate activity, springing from Chaucer’s awareness of the importance of cultural interaction as a crucial element of richness, Warton sees Chaucer’s language as a satiric and sarcastic imitation of the court life of his age.106 In a letter to West in 8 April, 1742, Gray asserts:

As to matter of stile, I have this to say: The language of the age is never the language of poetry; except among the French, whose verse, where the thought or image does not support it, differs in nothing from prose. Our poetry, on the contrary, has a language peculiar to itself; to which almost every one, that has written, has added something by enriching it with foreign idioms and derivatives: Nay sometimes words of their own composition or invention.107

The disparity between Gray’s and Warton’s opinions springs largely from the difference in their views of the nature of the poetic language. Gray thinks that the language of poetry is never the language of the age, since the poet has unique power of poetic expression and creativity. For him, the poetic language is a language of high culture. Warton, on the other hand, sees the language of poetry as an imitation and transcript of the age. While Gray emphasizes equally the historical and artistic aspects of the poetic language of the past, Warton’s main concern lies in its historical dimension. While Warton views the linguistic aspect of earlier literary works primarily as a representation of its time and place which can be the subject of a historical generalization of literary

105 Gray, “Some Remarks on the Poems of John Lydgate”, 1:394-95. Gray claims that the newly borrowed words provided great capacity to the rhyme of the medieval poetry, something which makes the medieval poets “so voluminous”: “Another thing, which perhaps contributed in a degree to the making our ancient poets so voluminous, was the great facility of rhyming, which is now grown so difficult; words of two or three syllables, being then newly taken from foreign languages, did still retain their original accent, and that accent (as they were mostly derived from French) fell, according to the genius of that language, upon the last syllable; which, if it had still continued among us, had been a great advantage to our poetry” (Gray, “Some Remarks on the Poems of John Lydgate”, 1:395).

106 In the second volume of his History, Warton suggests that Chaucer’s Gower’s and Occleve’s uses of foreign vocabularies in their poetry was not acts of borrowing, but acts of copying foreign language of courtly life (Thomas Warton, History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century (London: J. Dodsley, 1778), 2:50-52).

107 Gray, Correspondence, 1: 192.
history, Gray views these time-and-place aspects mainly in relation to their immanent explanation of literary attributes.¹⁰⁸

Gray’s emphasis on the imaginative qualities of the poetic composition of the past stands in opposition to the viewpoints of many of his contemporary critics, literary historians, and antiquarians who view the literary works of the past as sheer realistic representations of earlier times, without paying much attention to the imaginative and the individual aspects of their creation. Eighteenth-century critics believe that a truthful representation of nature is an essential requirement which enables the earlier poets to supply their contemporary readers with imitative pictures which portray the reality of their lives, and provide the readers of the following times with informative examples of the past life. Thomas Warton, for instance, sees that some poetic forms such as lyric and allegory are not historically suitable for a history of poetry. They do not adequately serve the needs of the historians of poetry, since they do not supply them with historical data concerning manners, customs, and institutions of the ages in which they were written. Warton views ancient poetry in accordance with the Augustan concept which deems poetry as an imitation of its age, and ascribes minor historical significance to the some species of poetic composition, such as lyric and allegory, which, according to him, do not serve to convey real a transcript of life: “Although much fine invention and sublime fabling are displayed in the allegorical visions of our old poets, yet this mode of composition, by dealing only in imaginary personages, and by excluding real characters and human actions, necessarily fails in that chief source of entertainment which we seek in antient poetry, the representation of antient manners”.¹⁰⁹ Warton ascribes a special value to satire, only because it provides the historian of poetry with perspicuous representations of society. “All antient satirical writings”, says Warton, “even those of an inferior cast, have their merit, and deserve attention, as they transmit pictures of familiar manners, and preserve popular customs”.¹¹⁰ Warton’s approach throws light on the antiquarian character of his study of the cultural tradition of

¹⁰⁸ For more detail on Gray’s views on the language of poetry, see Chapter Four.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., 2:246-47.
the past, and one might agree with Wellek and Warren in their criticism of his antiquarian approach: “to him and many of his antiquarian successors, literature was primarily a treasury of costumes and customs, a source book for the history of civilization, especially of chivalry and its decline.” 111 “But such studies” they later added “seem of little value so long as they take it for granted that literature is simply a mirror of life, a reproduction, and thus, obviously, a social document”. They observe that such historiographical “studies make sense, only if we know the artistic method of the novelist studies, can say—not merely in general terms, but concretely—in what relation the picture stands to the social reality. Is it realistic by intention? Or is it, at certain points, satire, caricature, or romantic idealization?” 112

Gray’s approach, on the other hand, locates earlier literary texts in a transcendent aesthetic value to allow the reader to appreciate this value. However, Gray defends the use of circumstances by medieval poets since they suit the age in which they wrote, claiming that “Whether these...are well or ill grounded, it is sufficient for me that Homer, the father of circumstance, has occasion for the same apology which I am making for Lydgate and for his predecessors”. He speaks of circumstances as the essence of poetry. He suggests that in spite of “the different languages in which they wrote”, 113 medieval poetry shows similar tendency to the classical poetry concerning the use of circumstances since they rely on imagination which transcends cultural and linguistic differences: They loved...length and train of circumstances in a narration. [I]t gives an air of reality.... Circumstance ever was, and ever will be, the life and essence both of oratory and of poetry. It has in some sort the same effect upon every mind that it has upon that of the populace; and I fear the quickness and delicate impatience of these polished times, in which we live, are but the forerunners of the decline of all those beautiful arts which depend upon the imagination. 114

Gray’s above statement does not only justify the use of circumstances in the medieval poetry on the ground of the medieval taste, but it emphasizes the continuity of the medieval imaginative poetic

114 Ibid. 1:392-93.
tradition. It is evident from this passage that Gray’s admiration of circumstances arises from their aesthetic qualities which have timeless effects upon different readers in different times and places. Gray’s notion of imagination as a creative faculty is not restricted to the creation of elements of style, but it also includes the creation of “circumstance”, that is, the creation of the plot and the conceptual content of the poem. According to Gray, circumstances should not be viewed entirely as true representations of real life, since they depend largely on the creative power of the poet’s imagination. Gray advocates them in poetic composition for their imaginative and universal effect: “It has in some sort the same effect upon every mind that it has upon that of the populace”. Gray’s canonization of vernacular poetry rests on the notion which assumes that the merits of canonical works transcend the temporal and spatial forces which shape their creation. This notion enables him to give the medieval poets such as Chaucer and Lydgate a timeless status. Gray’s discourse illustrates his views on the nature of poetry. Gray’s concept of the poetic representation involves the poet’s creative activity. It is not a mere reflection of what the poet observes in the external world, but rather a process of interaction of the external world and the inner world of the poet. In other words, Gray does not consider poetry as a pure product of social representations, but as a creation of genius which at times transforms aspects of the external world to produce a creation of a certain degree of novelty. He does not view poets as mere imitators of their ages but also as creators of works of art. poets, writing under the influence of their ages, exercises mutual influence on their ages by introducing conceptual and artistic elements of novelty to their societies. The historical dimension of poetry that Gray emphasizes in his research on poetic history arises from his belief in the capacity of the literary history for displaying both the effect of society on shaping the poetry in which it was written and the influence that poetry exercises on the cultural elements of society. For Gray, poetry is best understood in its relation to historical change which exercises great influence on the literary tastes and literary movements of any historical period. Gray’s anxiety about “the quickness and delicate impatience of these polished times” of the eighteenth century, which he considers as “the forerunners of the decline of all those beautiful arts which depend upon the imagination”, reveals
the external effect of society on the orientation of poetry, suggesting that the imaginative qualities of earlier poetry began to lose their appeal under the new influence of the commerciality of polished society which has a deleterious effect on the reception and continuity of the literary cultures of the past. In this respect David Perkins suggests that:

A major theory of decline in the eighteenth century attributed literature’s dwindling imagination and passion to increasingly refined manners, civilized rationality, the growth of literary criticism, and the greater abstraction of language as it matures, that is to causes external to literature itself; hence, this explanation might be considered contextual rather than immanent. But literature, according to this theory, has an essential role in creating the social conditions that cause its decline. Thus the relation of external and immanent causes may be dialectical. An external factor becomes internal if it enters literature and changes it. If an immanent transformation of literature has an effect in social world, this effect becomes a factor external to literature and may have an impact on it, thus becoming internal again.\(^\text{115}\)

Gray’s immanent explanations of his literary history do not act to separate the development of poetry from the specific external socio-political conditions of the time of its production. What Gray planned to write was a history of poetry, not a criticism of earlier poetic compositions which might be examined separately from each other. As a synthesis of history and criticism, the approach of literary history differs from that of history and criticism in that it attempts to reconstruct and understand the literary cultures of the past and to illustrate literary and historical causes which make certain literary works acquire their characteristics or share features with other literary works by examining literary and non-literary materials. However, Gray’s intent is not to examine the social activities and their development as they were reflected in poetry, but to study poetry in its interrelation with the society in which and for which it was composed. He seems aware that literary historians’ tasks are different from those of social historians in that the social historians’ interests in the poetic texts stem from their desires to discover social experiences and activities which earlier poetry might contain to formulate historical pictures of the periods they study. Literary historians’ methods of explanation are largely based on exploiting the historical aspects of poetry to explain the poetic ambiguities that the modern readers might encounter. Gray uses the historical materials to

\(^{115}\text{David Perkins, Is Literary History Possible? (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 159.}\)
account for the poetic tendencies of earlier poetry and to illustrate the uses and development of poetic genres, techniques, forms, and language by examining the local and foreign influences on the tastes and the habit of poetic composition prevailed in their age. Gray’s approach is to examine the poetic and historical dimensions in light of each other; one reciprocally explains the other. Poetry is not an independent force; it must not therefore be judged by literary historians on its own terms, alone; it must be viewed in relation to other pertinent social and cultural dimensions.

Placing his primary emphasis on the literary rather than the historical dimension of literary works, Gray’s evaluations of the poetic compositions of earlier poets are formulated in relation to the poetic creativity which reveals poets’ power of observing minute human activities of their ages. They throw light on poets’ abilities to formulate social experiences and individual experiences in coherent poetic creations. They reflect poets’ artistic skills of selectivity and creativity. This view is evident in Gray's treatment of the historical and literary materials he prepared for his History of English Poetry and his prose writing and correspondence. In a letter to Walpole in January 1747, Gray reveals his notion of history and poetry as arts that cannot be performed in isolation from society and its influence, since the creative imagination of the artist responses or reacts in accordance with social forces. Gray depicts poets and historians as observers of life, and society as the object and target of their studies:

The first man that ever bore the name [of philosopher], if you remember, used to say, that life was like the Olympic games (the greatest public assembly of his age and country), where some came to show their strength and agility of body, as the champions; others, as the musicians, orators, poets, and historians, to show their excellence in those arts... to enjoy the spectacle, and judge of all these. They did not then run away from society for fear of its temptations: they passed their days in midst of it: conversation was their business: they cultivated the arts of persuasion, on purpose to show men it was their interest, as well as their duty, not to be foolish, and false, and unjust; and that too in many instances with success: which is not very strange; for they showed by their life that their lessons were not impracticable; and that pleasures were no temptations, but to such as wanted a clear perception of the pains annexed to them.\textsuperscript{116}

Undoubtedly, Gray’s evaluation of the historical side of the earlier poetry was also informed by a new Eighteenth-century interest in the history of manners. “The only certain means, by which

\textsuperscript{116} Gray, Correspondence, 1:262-63.
nations can indulge their curiosity in researches concerning their remote origin”, Hume writes, “is to consider the language, manner, and customs of their ancestors, and to compare them with those of the neighboring nations. The fables which are commonly employed to supply the place of true history, ought entirely to be disregarded”. ¹¹⁷ Eighteenth century historiography shows a new interest in the history of manners. There was an increasing sociologic or anthropologic interest to look beyond the literary aspects of earlier literary works to the social aspects they might reveal. Viewing poetry as social documents of distant ages, eighteenth-century historians, antiquarians and critics were primarily interested in the way of social life, in the significance of manners and customs, and mode of thought which convey a historical understanding of the early societies. This new tendency of studying literature as social documents of the manners and activities of past societies became a distinctive feature in the eighteenth-century historiography. ¹¹⁸ Gray’s remark on Jehan Froissart (1337-1410), in his letter to Wharton in January, 23, 1760, shows that a great deal of the delight that Gray finds in the medieval romance rests on its capacity of conveying “gallery” of the activities of the medieval life:

_Froissart is my favourite book of mine ... & it is strange to me that People who would give thousands for a dozen Portraits (originals of that time) to furnish a Gallery, should never cast an eye on so many moving Pictures of lives, actions, manners, & thoughts of their Ancestors done on the spot, & in strong tho’ simple colours._ ¹¹⁹

This shift of interest toward the social milieu of the poet can also be understood in relation to the rise of nationalism which, in its turn, gave rise to the national literary history: the interest of eighteenth-century writers and reading public in the social and cultural conditions of the earlier life of the past of Britain. This growing interest motivated many historians and antiquarians to scrutinize earlier poetry in quest of true pictures of the manners and customs of the earlier times. Wellek and Warren refers to this new approach in historiography in the eighteenth century which emphasizes the significance of literature in the examination of social life of the past: “Much the most common

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¹¹⁸ For a detailed account of the emergence of history of manner in eighteenth century, see Mark Phillips, _Society and Sentiment_.
¹¹⁹ Gray, _correspondence_, 2:655-56.
approach to the relations of literature and society is the study of works of literature as social
documents, as assumed pictures of social reality...some kind of social picture can be abstracted from
literature”.120 While once it had been sufficient to convey a narrowly defined narrative of public
action, eighteenth-century historians now began to present a wide-range of experiences of social
life. This “enlarged context”, as Mark Philips puts it, led to “an inevitable displacement of the older
narrative within the broadly drawn horizons of a new history that took society, not politics, as its
definitions. As a result, political and military events, once the whole frame of humanist
historiography, now figured as simply one theme in a multiplicity of plots”.121

In his essay on Lydgate’s poetry, Gray asserts the significance of historical aspects in earlier
poetry. His treatment of Lydgate’s poetry suggests that the task of a literary historian is not merely
copying circumstances without applying the principle of selectivity. Minute circumstances, if they are
carefully selected by the historian of poetry, provide “an air of reality” of the times in which they
were written. Gray’s treatment of Lydgate’s poetry shows recognition of both Lydgate’s merit as a
poet and Lydgate’s merit as a historian, and though Gray considers the historical aspects of Lydgate’s
poetry non-poetic, he finds them valuable for their historical account of the manners of poet’s age:
“There are a few other things in this work of Lydgate’s which have no connection with his merit as a
poet, but are curious as they relate to the history and manners of the times in which he lived”.122

Thus, the historical dimension of poetry is important for Gray. However, Gray is not primarily
interested in including the historical elements of earlier poetry in his literary history for their
historical significance alone, nor does he intend to extend his study into the domain of social history.
He believes that with the absence of social history in the earlier times, poets played the role of social
historians and to achieve this task they undertook to record mass of circumstances in their poetry.
For this reason earlier poets were not selective, and for this reason their poetry was of interest to
historians. Lydgate’s poetry, for instance, gives certain historical images about the mode of thinking

120 Wellek and Warren, Theory of Literature, 99-100.
121 Philips, Society and Sentiment, 4.
and “the notion then current in Britain”. Gray relates through his analysis of passages from Lydgate’s poetry how people in that time believe “that King Arthur was not dead, but translated to Fairy-Land, and should come again to restore the Round Table”. Then, Gray observes that “we may remark also the opinion, then prevailing, that a decisive victory was a certain proof of the justice of the conqueror’s cause, which was but natural among a people which for ages had been taught to refer even civil causes to a decision by combat”. As a literary historian, Gray finds these selected examples of the “prevailing” medieval beliefs useful in that they illustrate the medieval poets’ literary tendency of incorporating images of social life of their age rather than stressing their significance for their own sake. In doing so, Gray manages to determine the nature of medieval poetry and to study it as a related product of a distinctive poetic school rather than of unrelated individual poets.

Moreover, to specify the forces which determine the nature of poetry, Gray’s study of the literary culture of the past shows an insistence on studying earlier poetic works not only in relation to the poets’ social conditions, but also in relation to their natural environments as well, which have influence over the poetic trend of composition. This tendency stems from Gray’s wide-ranging notion of literary history. Gray’s sketch of his proposed inaugural lecture as a scholar of modern history at Cambridge, found among his papers, casts light on the depth of his concept of history:

Preparations and accompaniments.

1 Knowledge of ancient History.
3 Geography
4 Chronology } Mem. Technica
2 Languages
8 Moneys
9 Antiquities
5 Laws. Government
7 Manner
6 Education
Dates to commence from (Mod: His) different in diff’ nations. arbitrary, yet distinguished by some favourable & convenient point of Time.

Sources of Hist:

123 Ibid., 1:389.
124 Ibid.
From this sketch one notices Gray’s recognition of the forces which shape and control history. Gray’s emphasis on the significance of geography, government, manners, language, and education in studying history illustrates the wide scheme for his project of literary history. Social and cultural dimensions are not to be considered as the only sources of the historical explanations. A further investigation is to be done in relation to the literary work to the environment in which it was created. In his poem on “The Alliance of Education and Government” (1748), Gray stresses how different effects of natural conditions produce different character of human life:

Not but the human fabric from the birth
Imbibes a flavour of its parent earth:
As various tracts enforce a various toil,
The manners speak the idiom of their soil. (ll. 84-87)

Gray’s comment on these lines emphasizes the idea of the formative influence of the climate in determining the cultural character and mode of thought in general: “men receive an early tincture from the situation they are placed in, and the climate which produces them”. 126 Later in a letter to James Brown in February 17, 1763, Gray emphasizes this belief, claiming, in his comment on Ossian poems, that the poetic qualities of the poems reveal vividness of “imagination dwelt many hundred years agoe in all her pomp on the cold and barren mountains of Scotland. The truth (I believe) is that without any respect of climates she reigns in all nascent societies of Men, where the necessities of life force every one to think and act much for himself”. 127 The poetic qualities of Ossian poems

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127 Gray, Correspondence, 2:797-98. In his note on this passage, Mason suggests that “One is led to think from this paragraph that the scepticism which Mr, Gray had expressed before concerning these works of Ossian was
reflect the character of the culture in which Gray believes, though not firmly, they were created. Gray’s emphasis on the effect of climate justifies for the poetic tendency of English earlier poets in that he identifies their poetic taste and the poetic orientation in relation to exclusive external determinants which give distinctive characters to their poetry. Goldsmith shares Gray these views on the effects of climate on the literary taste and, therefore, he calls for, in his essay on The Polite Learning of England and France Incapable of Comparison, a national model of criticism for every country: “Criticism...can only improve our taste in the useful. But this...is different in every climate and country-what is useful in one climate being often noxious in another; therefore, criticism must understand the nature of climate and country etc., before it gives rules to direct taste. In other words every country should have a national system of criticism”.

However, Gray’s hermeneutic explanations are not restricted to external or contextual considerations, since he attributes much importance to poets’ individualities in characterizing the uniqueness of their quasi-autonomous creations. Like his poetry, Gray’s historiography was greatly influence by the psychological studies of seventeenth-century philosophers, notably Locke’s An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689), which place great emphasis on the individual aspects of human being in formulating social and cultural activities. “The rise of literary history,” as Wellek put it, “was dependent on a general growth of the ‘historical sense’ which can be described as a recognition of individuality in its historical setting and an appreciation of the historical process into which individualities fit.” Wellek asserts that the philosophical schools of Locke and Descartes inaugurated new interest in the psychology of the individual which marked a shift from the cosmological to the psychological and epistemological concerns, something which left its influence on various disciplines and institutions such as religion and politics:

Under the influence of Cartesianism, philosophic interest had begun to shift from the cosmological problem to the problem of consciousness and its growth. The

now entirely removed”, though “he had certainly received no evidence of their authenticity” (Gray, The Works of Thomas Gray in Prose and Verse, 3:148.


problem of knowledge was to become the central concern of English philosophy from Locke onwards. As the approach of Locke and his followers was psychological rather than strictly epistemological, psychology became a new and fundamental science.\textsuperscript{130}

Gray attempts to enlist the cult of individuality to heighten the national character through emphasizing the peculiarity of the vernacular canon. Trevor Ross claims that the “ideology of individuality” allowed the mid-eighteenth-century scholars to justify for the rise of vernacular canon on the ground that vernacular poetry has its own peculiarities that distinguish it from classical poetry: “The ideology of individualism that informed the cults of originality and personal style could find expression in the claim that English authors could be severally differentiated in both kind and degree of skill, disposition, learning, taste, and moral sensitivity”.\textsuperscript{131} Gray’s essay on Lydgate’s poetry diagnoses the importance of individual tendencies in shaping the peculiarities of Lydgate’s poetry which distinguish his poetry not only from the classical poetry but also from the poetry of the writers of the same generation (namely Chaucer whose influence on Lydgate was stressed by Gray) who encounter similar determinant external conditions. Commenting on the individual temperament and the psychological character of Lydgate, Gray affirms that much of Lydgate’s poetry is a result of the “serious and melancholy turn of [his] mind”.\textsuperscript{132} Gray suggests that a literary text expresses its author’s mind and feelings and that these are formed and shaped by individual endowments and individual experiences. He talks about the role of poets’ individualities in determining the trends of their poetry. While Chaucer conveys to his readers comic images from his age, Lydgate’s poetry reveals the emotional side of the human heart. Throughout his analysis, Gray makes a distinction between the private feelings of poets which inevitably appears in their poetry and the general social dimension of their times:

\begin{quote}
Lydgate seems to have been by nature of a more serious and melancholy turn of mind than Chaucer; yet one here and there meets with a stroke of satire and irony
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 89. Wellek identifies various aspects that led to the emphasis on individualism. He claims that “Religious individualism led to increased emphasis on personal experience. In political life, the growing respect for the rights of the individual, points, at least theoretically, to liberalism. In ethics, concepts like the ’moral sense’ ...show the same trend towards subjective standards” (Wellek, \textit{The Rise of English Literary History}, 89).
\textsuperscript{131} Ross, \textit{The Making of the English Literary Canon}, 254.
which does not want humour, and it usually falls (as was the custom of those times) either upon the women or on the clergy...This kind of satire will, I know, appear to modern men of taste a little stale and unfashionable; but our reflections should go deeper, and lead us to consider the fading and transitory nature of wit in general.  

Gray’s reference to Lydgate’s psychology is meant to put Lydgate’s text in a supposedly determining context of Chaucerian texts; in doing so, he creates an unhistorical context to his argument which limits the area of historical context, and proffers the reader a varied, but nevertheless, interrelated narrative. Gray’s emphasis on Lydgate’s “turn of mind” illustrates the significance Gray attributes to the individual principles and forces which operate differently in writers. Gray’s comparison of Lydgate and “his master, Chaucer” implies that following a particular tradition or model set by previous writers does not hinder creativity, since the signatures of writers will inevitably find their shapes and their expressions through the writers’ motives, interests, and individual tendencies which produce new versions with new characters which differ from the examples set by previous writers or groups of writers. R. S. Crane points out that “The historian of literary arts must... find ways of dealing with the individual works...that will do justice at once to their multiple historical relations and to their qualities as unique artistic wholes”. David Perkins maintains that “Theorists of literary history must allow for the effects of individuality in order to be plausible”. However, “for the sake of a general explanation”, Perkins suggests, theorist of literary history “must downplay the role of individuality as much as possible. They must assume that, as Keats put it, even ‘the mightiest Minds’ are subdued ‘to the service of time being’. To extent that writers are not thus subdued, literary histories can be no more than suites of biographies, which is what they often have been”.

Gray does not design his literary history to be “suites of biographies.” However, Gray’s recognition of the importance of the individual private feeling and the everyday experiences of writers reverberates through his examination of biographical materials of the poets. The biographical

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133 Ibid., 1:402-3.
134 It is noteworthy to indicate that though Gray places Lydgate “among the greatest poets,” he does not “pretend set him on a level with his master, Chaucer, but he certainly comes the nearest to him of any contemporary writer that I am acquainted with. His choice of expression, and the smoothness of his verse, far surpass both Gower and Oclevé” (Gray, “Some Remarks on the Poems of John Lydgate”, 1:397, 390).
materials are important for Gray since they help to account for poets’ poetic tendencies. They have
great significance in explaining the influence and the impulses under which the poet writes. The
literary historian’s “method”, as Edwin Greenlaw puts it, does not only involve the study of the times
in which the writer lived, but it involves also the study of his experiences, and of “the book which he
read, the minor authors as well as the masterpieces, the contacts which he formed with past in order
to interpret the present.” It involves the study of “those more subtle currents of thought and feeling
of which he may have been only partially aware, which he could not interpret clearly, being part of
them and creator of them, but from which he could not escape”. Biographical elements enable
literary historians to penetrate to the details of poets’ lives and the working of their minds. However,
Gray’s History was not concerned with giving survey of the lives and the works of earlier writers as
isolated phenomena; but rather, he wanted it to be a coherent history expounding the
multidimensional influences which helped to determine the transition of poetry and shaped it into
various schools. Biographical criticism offers literary historians the flexibility needed in their studies
of earlier literary works. It helps literary historians to shed some light on the relationship between
poets and their poetry. It can explain the ambiguities of the historical account through the detailed
particulars it provides; whereas history, on the other hand, can account for the totality of manners of
the individuals of the past societies. Historians’ tasks are to find this inevitable public reflection
through the private details of biographical materials, distinguishing, through their historical insights,
the individual particularities from the public qualities. Historical-biographical criticism helps Gray to
proffer a reading of poetry as a reflection of the poet’s “turn of mind” and as a representation of a
historical moment. Beside the advantage of understanding the literary practices of the poetry of the
past, historical-biographical explanations offer an additional advantage, for it provides readers with
historical implications from individual prospective.

In addition to its informative dimension, biographical approaches to the past arouse a critical
sympathy towards earlier writers. “Our sympathy”, as Robert Bisset puts it in 1793, “is most

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powerfully excited by the view of those situations and passions, which, by a small effect of the imagination, we can approximate to ourselves. Hence Biography often engages our attention and affections more deeply than History”.138 In this respect, biography has overlapping qualities with historicism. Like biography, the historicist method, with its emphasis on the cultural peculiarities of the author’s age, engenders a critical sympathy towards cultural conditions of earlier times. Gray’s approach to the medieval poetry shows that sympathy, a requirement need by a historian in treating the cultural conditions of the earlier times. Unlike their immediate predecessors who endeavour to establish their classical canon through attacking the literary culture of the vernacular past, mid-century critics grounded their vernacular canon in a polemic against their predecessors’ approaches to earlier literary works. In this respect, Kramnick asserts that “The midcentury’s new valuation of historical distance and older writers established itself against an earlier hostility to the crude works of English antiquity. Canonical works were now honoured on the terms of their former rejection”. Kramnick claims that “The idea of the past was turned on its head. In this sense, canon formation is tied to developments in midcentury culture with which readers will already be familiar: the rise of Gothic historicism, for example, or the growing interest in the sublime”.139 Gray’s historicist study of medieval literary culture was developed and motivated by his interest in history of vernacular sublimity140 and Gothic culture. This new interest in Gothicism and sublimity, to which Kramnick refers, generate a desire of reordering the English canon by adopting new historicist and aesthetic principles of evaluation which enabled mid-eighteenth-century scholars and critics to bridge the inherited cultural and intellectual discontinuities with the vernacular past through the historicist justifications and aesthetic polemics of its cultural achievements. G. M. Miller proclaims that “the historical point of view in literary criticism rests upon the general principles of the organic unity of

138 Cited by Phillips, Society and Sentiment, 134.
139 Kramnick, Making the English Canon, 3. Kramnick suggests that “many early eighteenth-century critics retroactively barbarized antique English writers, whose versification was rough and diction impolite, whose puerile language troubled the mature flowering of the public. In addition to celebrating contemporary style, many critics revised or rewrote older works so that their rough language or their indecorous bawdiness and violence would better fit modern reading habits” (Ibid., 24).
140 See the following chapter which throws some light on Gray’s cult of sublimity.
national or community life and its historical continuity... As factors in this organic unity, we must consider, then, not merely inherited racial characteristics, but also the total national environment—physical surroundings, government, social institutions and relations, religion, philosophy, science and art and their causal relations one with the other”.

Gray’s historicist study of Chaucer’s and Lydgate’s language and metre is a key approach to national canonization and cultural continuity in that it approaches English as the language of the national culture and studies the origin of the English nation through the study of history of the English language. Gray’s canonical literary history suggests that the national literary heritage belongs just as much to ancient Celtic and Anglo-Saxon tradition as it does to early modern and modern English tradition from Chaucer to Gray himself. In his search for linguistic and literary identity Gray identifies the cultural origin of the English in the Anglo-Celtic cultures to enhance the historical and literary continuum of English literary history. Gray’s project of literary history entails celebrating the antiquity of English poetry by linking it to Celtic literary tradition and emphasizing its influence on Saxon literary tradition on which medieval poets such as Chaucer and Lydgate modelled their poetry, which, in its turn, exercised great influence on the poetry of Elizabethan canonical poets. This approach helps Gray to highlight the cultural link that connects the literary tradition of ancient Britain with Elizabethan canonical poets and with Gray’s own poetry.

141 G. M. Miller, The Historical Point of View in English Literary Criticism from 1570-1770 (New York: Burt York, 1968), 16.

142 Ardis Butterfield claims that “Chaucer and Shakespeare frame a discussion of nation in their rival claims to English vernacular pre-eminence: since each is the archetype of his period’s assertive self-identification” (Ardis Butterfield, “National histories” in Cultural reformation: medieval and renaissance in literary history, eds. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: oxford university press, 2010), 41).
Chapter Three

The Canonization of Elizabethan literary Past

P: 3 [is on] Spenser, his character. Subject of his poem allegoric & romantic, of Provençal invention: but his manner of [treating] it borrow’d from the Second Italian School. Drayton, Fairfax, Phin: Fletcher, Golding, Phaer, &c: this school ends in Milton.

(Gray’s letter to Thomas Warton, 15 April 1770)\textsuperscript{143}

By examining the revival of Elizabethan poetry in the eighteenth century, this chapter illustrates the influence of the political culture on eighteenth-century literary orientations. To understand the politics of eighteenth-century literary culture, it is necessary to examine the dialectical relationship between Whig and Tory on the one hand, and Court Whig and the patriot opposition to the Whig governments on the other. This chapter offers dual perspectives on Gray’s writing through examining it in the context of Whiggish literary politics and mid-eighteenth-century aesthetic literary culture. In doing so the chapter demonstrates the influence of political and partisan forces on the formation of the literary canon. The chapter will examine conventional critical takes on these issues, following in particular the understandings of these things developed by Christine Gerrard and Abigail Williams; then the chapter moves on to examine Gray’s specific engagement with these matters.

The chapter argues that to canonize the Elizabethan poets and Milton in the same time, Gray resorts to main two strategies: first, he adopts a cyclical concept of history as opposed to a concept of history as a steady evolutionary progress. Gray’s version of the idea of progress diverts from the traditional version adopted by eighteenth-century progressivists. While Whig and Tory progressivists see Elizabethan tradition as a pedigree from which modern poetry developed and out of which it improved, Gray sees it as a literary peak at which poetry began to decline. Unlike eighteenth-century writers of progress poems such as Thomson who uses the \textit{translatio imperii} narrative to celebrate the progress of imperial power from Rome to England and generalizes it to cultural progress, Gray follows \textit{translatio studii} narrative which focuses on the transfer of the literary culture of the classical nations to Elizabethan England. Secondly, Gray distances Milton from modern

\textsuperscript{143} Gray, \textit{Correspondence}, 3:1124.
literary culture and groups him into the Elizabethan school of poetry by viewing his poetry in terms of its poetic species and values. Gray’s periodization presents Milton’s poetry as the last poetic example of the national school of poetry which, as Gray thought, was effaced by the modern “School of France”. Gray’s approach to Milton’s poetry supports his cause of standardizing vernacular poetry as sublime poetry, as the next chapter will show in more detail.

The partisan policies and ideologies which influenced and controlled a substantial amount of cultural production in the years following the Revolution of 1688 were clearly manifested in the ideological divisions between the Whig and Tory factions. Such divisions reached beyond political and Parliamentary issues and extended to a variety of cultural activities which captured public opinion. The years between 1715 and 1760 saw Parliament controlled by a Whig party led by a series of statesmen including Charles Stanhope, Robert Walpole, John Carteret, and William Pitt. The warring ideologies of political factions created a strong opposition to the Whig governments which was at its height during Walpole’s term of office which spanned from 1721-1742. As a result the cultural field, including literature, was largely used as a political propaganda to promote the political causes of the partisan factions.144

To propagate their political and cultural agendas, eighteenth-century political factions made wide use of the literary tradition of the past in their political disputes. Both Whigs and Tories showed great esteem for the classical tradition, finding in it a repository of imitable literary materials useful for commenting on contemporary public issues. From the Restoration in 1660 to about the mid-eighteenth century the classics served, among their other uses, one distinct and unique function which marked out that phase of English cultural politics.145 Critics assert that both Whigs and Tories sought to appropriate the classical tradition for partisan ends but Tories were more successful than their rivals.146 This may be true, since the Tory writers were taking the role of opposition in that

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145 Ibid., 34.
146 Abigail Williams asserts that early eighteenth century saw “an inverse relationship between political and cultural authority” in that the works of “Tory and Jacobite authors...constitute the literary canon”, while the
period and they were ready to manipulate any political weapon available to them, whether classical
or native. The political hegemony of the Whig faction created a cultural reaction represented by
Tories’ large-scale exploitation of cultural possibilities in their political strife with Whiggish
governments. Court Whigs were more preoccupied with celebrating the triumphs of post-Revolution
England than with the previous achievements accomplished under the arbitrary political system of
the past. In addition to this, the shift of literary patronage from the court to aristocratic patrons,
which reverberated clearly in the lack of patronage of arts offered by the Walpolian government and
the Hanoverian court, led the opposition, Frederick, Prince of Wales, and Bolingbroke, to capitalize
on this matter and to actively patronize many of the leading thinkers and men of letters. In 1739 Paul
Whitehead’s anonymous The State of Rome, Nero and Domitian used Juvenal and Persius to
comment on the problem of the contemporary poets under the lack of patronage in the reign of
George II and Walpole, revealing nostalgia for the culture of the Stuart courts, and the patronage
they provided:

When black Corruption spreads her Wings around
And Brib’ry, bare-fac'd, stalks the Senate Ground;
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When was each Vice so dignify’d before?
None, none can e’er out-do us--future Times
Can’t add one Scruple to our present Crimes;
Our Sons but the same Things can wish and do,
Each Vice is at the highest it can go,
Spread Satire, spread thy Wings, and fearless fly
To seize thy Prey, tho’ lurking ne’er so high. (ll. 18-22, 42-48)\(^\text{148}\)

\(^{\text{147}}\) See Abigail Williams, “Patronage and Whig Culture in the Early Eighteenth Century”, Cultures of Whiggism:
New Essays on English Literature and Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century, ed. David Womersley (Newark:
University of Delaware Press, 2005), 149-172; Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary Culture 1681-1714,
204-240. Williams claims that the Whig patronage was active and the examination of the nature of
eighteenth-century “patronage reveals the economic and political networks behind Whig verse, and it also
demonstrates the important ideological commitment to the systematic promotion of a Whig literary culture”.
Williams stresses that the reason “behind the extensive support of Whig poetry in this period was not just to
secure the services of political propagandists but to support a distinctive Whiggish cultural arena. The new
Whig elite would become the guardians of a revitalized artistic culture whose grandeur would reflect their
authority and largesse, and the modern writer would play a vital part in the remodelling of cultural, political,
and social sphere in the early eighteenth century” (Williams, Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary
Culture, 21).

The restrictive tenets of neo-classicism as practised by many writers in this period showed a noticeable comparability to the political conservatism advocated by the Tory faction after the following years of the Revolution of 1688. Subsequently, English literature and art in general came under the influence of a programme of moral reformation. This programme, which was sponsored by High Church and Tory nobility and intelligentsia, aimed to reform manners, raise moral principles and improve taste, and therefore increase order in English society. The programme reverberated with the neo-classical belief in the moral utility of art with its emphasis on order, reason, restraint, and common sense.

Like the classical tradition, the native tradition was actively manipulated for political purposes to serve the political and cultural programmes of both the Hanoverian monarchs and court Whigs and the patriot opposition. The Elizabethan revival, for instance, which notably found expression in a wide variety of propagandist media, including pamphlets, journals, drama, painting, and poetry, was largely generated by pressure for war with Spain and France. Elizabethan history and literature were increasingly recovered and republished to service the demands of present political situations. The opposition writers depicted Queen Elizabeth as a patriotic monarch who managed to unite the nation and put an end to the Spanish imperialistic ambition. Subsequently, the Elizabethan political culture was glorified as a cultural generator of native canonical literary achievements, especially Spenser’s poetry. Christine Gerrard claims that “Spenser's double-sided political profile—both Elizabeth’s royal panegyrist and yet a critic of court corruption and advocate of a more extreme form of Protestant mission than Elizabeth herself—made him malleable to manipulation in the century to follow”. Accordingly, Spenser’s poetry enjoyed a powerful political revival and allegorical manipulation in the Walpolian period, motivated by partisan conflicts.

In fact, the opposition writers' interest in Spenserian poetry arises mainly from Spenser’s moralistic model which was manifested in his severe condemnation of courtly vices and the corruption of the life of luxury. They find in Spenser’s poetry such as The Faerie Queene (1590-1596)

149 See Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation; Gerrard, The Patriot Opposition to Walpole.
and Ruines of Time (1591) a source of political satire on contemporary political issues and a nostalgic account of the pre-Revolution political and social system. Spenserian poetry was exploited in such a way as to enhance the moralist agenda of the opposition writers which was politicized to satirize the corrupt administration of Whig governments and the Hanoverian court. Pope’s Dunciad (1728, 1743) and Thomson’s Spenserian allegory, The Castle of Indolence (1748), are good examples of the way in which opposition writers draw on Spenserian tradition. The idea of the self-indulgence of the Hanoverian court was allegorically depicted in these poems by employing the Spenserian symbol of the “WIZARD” who offers an epicurean way of life to all those who come to his Court of Dullness. Both Pope’s court of dullness and Thomson’s castle allegorically refer to Britain under the corrupt period of the Hanoverian reign and Walpolian regime.

This wide-scale manipulation of the Elizabethan tradition, Spenserian poetry in particular, by the opposition propagandists on the one hand, and the Court Whigs’ preoccupation with the present commercial achievements on the other, led many historians, as Gerrard observes, to assume that “the Court Whigs were emphatic modernists, repudiating and ridiculing the Patriots’ revival of past English golden ages”.151 “Walpole’s regime”, Gerrard proceeds, “acted on current necessity, the patriot opposition on bygone identity”. Court Whigs resisted the past, and the patriots espoused it.152

The Court Whigs were active advocators of the Lockean theory of contractual kingship. This theory, first publicly outlined in John Locke’s An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government (1690), was based on the assumption that civilized society is the result of a voluntary contract that establishes a representative authority to enforce rights and ensure security and prosperity. Proud of the cultural politics of the present which secured the principles of liberty and civil society in contrast to the previous absolute political authority, the Court Whigs were less enthusiastic for a revival of vernacular tradition and showed less nostalgia for the cultural past of

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151 Ibid., 153.
pre-Revolution Britain. Perhaps this was because they deemed all the political systems established before the revolution of 1688 tyrannical in comparison to the liberty that the British subject had under the reign of the Hanoverian dynasty in particular, where much of the royal power had been transferred to the parliament. In this respect, Christine Gerrard claims that the Court Whigs’ attitude towards the Elizabethan past “was not so much a repudiation of Elizabeth as an endorsement of modern constitutional principles which had enabled ‘lawful’ government to replace ‘arbitrary’ government”.153 Thus, the alienation of the Court Whig poets from the vernacular literary tradition of the past was largely informed by what they thought to be the unfittingness of that old tradition to the newly acquired political and cultural gains. As a result, what they advocated and emphasized diverged rather widely from what was previously accepted. This is clearly depicted in Whig poet Joseph Addison’s "Account of the Greatest English Poets" (1694):

Old Spenser next, warm’d with poetic rage,
In ancient tales amus’d a barb’rous age;
An Age that yet uncultivate and Rude,
Where’re the poet’s fancy led, pursu’d
Thro’ pathless fields, and unfrequented floods,
To dens of dragons, and Enchanted Woods.
But now the mystic tale, that pleas’d of yore
Can charm an understanding age no more. (ll. 17-24)

Spenserian poetic barbarity and archaisms troubled Whig cultural progressivists. Spenserianism and its implications of the superiority of Elizabethan literary culture raised doubts about the Whig belief in the inevitability of progression toward decorum and refinement and, by extension, about the progress of the political constitution. Whig authors such Thomas Tickell, Richard Blackmore, Joseph Addison, Thomas Shadwell, John Dennis, and Ambrose Philips wrote poetry and essays to laud the political and cultural achievements of post-Revolution Britain. The new political era of liberty was largely projected onto the literary culture of the period and a new kind of poetry was demanded to conform to political and economic achievements of the present. Abigail Williams asserts that:

Whig authors responded to the imaginative challenges of post-Revolution England with enthusiasm and confidence, convinced that the political liberties established at

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153 Gerrard, The Patriot Opposition to Walpole, 162.
the Revolution offered the opportunity to create a new native literary culture that was distinctively Whiggish. The funding and distribution of their poetry was secured through substantial patronage from the Whig aristocracy, who collaborated with Whig publishers...to produce prestigious editions of poems that were promoted as a new English literature.  

This new tendency was clearly reflected in the field of literary criticism and exercised great influence on the formation of an English literary canon. Addison’s tribute to Charles Montagu’s poem, Epistle to Dorset (1690), makes it clear that his admiration of Montagu’s poetry does not rest primarily on his skill in versification, but on the poet’s choice of the “highest theme”, with its political polemics, which celebrates William III as a Protestant king who achieved a heroic victory over the French and Jacobite troops led by the recently exiled James II. The poem shows how Addison’s literary judgement was influenced by the political and partisan affiliations. Montague, the minor contemporary poet, became in Addison’s appraisal an example for a new Whig literary culture:

The noble Montague remains unnam’d,  
For wit, for humour, and for judgment fam’d;  
To Dorset he directs his artful Muse,  
In numbers such as Dorset’s self might use.  
How negligently graceful he unreins  
His verse, and writes in loose familiar strains;  
How Nassau’s godlike acts adorn his line,  
And all the heroe in full glory shines.  
We see his army set in just array,  
And Boyne’s dy’d waves run purple to the sea.  
Nor Sinois choak’d with men, and arms, and blood:  
Nor rapid Xanthus’ celebrated flood,  
Shall longer be the poet’s highest theme,  
Tho’ gods and heroes fought promiscuous in their streams.  
But now, to Nassau’s secret councils rais’d  
He aids the Hero, whom before he prais’d. (Il. 134-49)

Addison’s praise of Montague’s poetry is political polemics in that it aims primarily to commend William’s military achievement than to concentrate on Montague’s poetic achievement. Addison’s literary history exemplifies how eighteenth-century literary historians at this juncture were engaged

154 Williams, Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary Culture, 2-3. Jack Lynch claims that “Foremost in the minds of such critics was the notion of a progression from barbarity to enlightenment, from darkness to light-one of many metaphors used to distinguish the new age from the old. ‘Refinement’, a metaphor from metallurgy and alchemy, implies that modern purity came from burning away the imperfections of the past. ‘Cultivation’, another common term, suggests that modern arable land lay fallow in a benighted age. These metaphors pit the utility of modernity against the inadequacy and incompleteness of what came before” (Jack Lynch, The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6).
in partisan struggles.

However, mid-eighteenth-century poetry marked a shift from partisan polemics towards more aesthetic concerns. The revival of Spenserian poetry, with its roots in the native medieval tradition, also contributed to the rise of a new aestheticism. The shift in the literary vogue of the mid-eighteenth century shows how Spenser, the moralist, was used in the early eighteenth century to highlight the conservative agenda of moral reformation, and how the vogue of the sublime urged mid-century writers to appropriate Spenser, the “romantic,” for national and cultural functions.\textsuperscript{155} J. H. Plumb and Linda Colley attribute this shift to the political consensus achieved in the period which transcends party-political divisions.\textsuperscript{156} In fact, the expansion of the reading public and print culture which promoted the professionalization of literature led increasingly to the popularity of topics of national concerns rather than partisan ideologies. They freed authors from the shackles of political patronage and offered them independence, enabling them to choose the subject matter which meets the general public demands rather than the needs of individual patrons. In other words, political culture began to exercise less direct influences on the literary culture, since the writers now were writing to more politically and nationally unified readers which represent a profitable alternative for partisan patronage of the early eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{157}

Mid-eighteenth-century poets, as recipients of that immediate politicized poetic tradition which was originated and developed in accordance with the agendas of the political and religious institutions, were less interested in the political and religious connotations of that immediately inherited tradition than its national literary values which determine the identity of English literary culture. Tradition is usually created, developed, and transmitted under certain political, economic, and social impulses, gaining new features that distinguish it from its immediate past yet maintaining


\textsuperscript{157} See Chapter Five for more discussion about Gray’s reaction against the rise of literary professionalism.
many of the elements of the past, though some of them remain irrelevant to the present, which enforce themselves according to the process of continuity of tradition: “Traditions”, Henry Glassie argues, “exclude as well as include, they can be pressed toward progress…. In progress, we bring certain aspects of life into sharp focus, dismissing others—though they continue--into the irrelevance of a dead past”. 158

Thus, the allegorical imitations of Spenser’s *Faery Queene*, for instance, for oppositional and partisan commentaries on the current political issues, which occupied the political scene in the beginning of the eighteenth century, lost much of their admiration in the following decades, since they had been admired for their skilful allegorical parallel between the world of Spenser’s poem and the political situations on which they were composed. Unlike the early-eighteenth-century poets, who found in Spenser’s poetry an allegorical source for political criticism, for later-eighteenth-century poets, Spenser’s poetry helped to open a gate to the old native past of Britain, allowing them to gaze at the primitive, remote romantic world of chivalric values and the virtuous life of earlier societies. For “in history the romantic impulse is not to look for what is present; it is to reach out everything distant, [and] absent...; it is the sensation of some lost harmony with the world’s totality!”159

However, mid-century interests in the aesthetic aspects of English literary tradition do not mean that the political culture generated by early eighteenth-century partisan battles ceased to exercise any ideological influence on the literary culture of late-eighteenth-century sensibility. Many of the features of Whig historiography were encapsulated in Gray’s Pindaric odes “The Progress of Poesy” and “The Bard”. However, that is not to say that the whole body of Gray’s writing conforms to the norms of Whig literary culture. Gray’s elevation and idealization of vernacular literary culture in fact contrast with the Whiggish idea of progress, and with the Whiggish tendency to dim the pre-Revolution past to enhance the glory of the present. The Whig version of progress suggests that improvement had already occurred or eventually would take place across virtually all forms of

human life, including arts. This idea of progress flourished vigorously in the early eighteenth century and reached its peak in the mid and late eighteenth century. Stability, liberty, scientific advances, prosperity, and power achieved in this period are the main factors which promoted confidence and led to the emphasis on the idea of progress. These achievements created a sense of pride in the present and a sense of optimism about the future. The Whiggish historians’ concept of the past is usually encapsulated in a view of the past as a temporal precedent of the present. Accordingly, the inevitability of improvement and progress is a central principle in Whiggish reading and interpretation of history. In fact, many eighteenth-century Whiggish historians echo a Whig notion of history, which evaluates the past in terms of the present and constructs a history conforming to the ideological principles they embrace. In his book *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Herbert Butterfield says that:

The fervour of the Whig historian very often comes from what is really the transference into the past of an enthusiasm for something in the present, and enthusiasm for democracy or freedom of thought or the liberal tradition. But the true historical fervour is the love of the past for the sake of the past.\(^{161}\)

Gray does not share that optimism. Gray’s notion of “progress” seems to differ dramatically from that of Whig progressivists who treat history as a record of ceaseless linear improvement. This was made clear in Gray’s ode “The Progress of Poesy”. Gray’s original title of his ode, “The Power of Poetry” explains Gray’s intent to explicate how poetry gets its power from the flourishing of liberty, and when he changed it to “The Progress of Poesy” he seems to mean as a temporal and spatial “journey” or “motion forward”.\(^{162}\)

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161 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 282. Butterfield affirms that “The whig method of approach is closely connected with the question of the abridgement of history; for both the method and the kind of history that results from it would be impossible if all the facts were told in all their fullness. The theory that is behind the whig interpretation - the theory that we study the past for the sake of the present - is one that is really introduced for the purpose of facilitating the abridgement of history; and its effect is to provide us with a handy rule of thumb by which we can easily discover what was important in the past, for the simple reason that, by definition, we mean what is important `from our point of view’” (Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, 24).

162 David Spadafora brings out that “In English dictionaries published between 1720 and 1791, the primary meaning of the term “progress” and its derivations was stated to be “a going forward or proceeding in any undertaking” or a “course, procession, passage”. From the 1750s, however, a secondary meaning with a clearly
Till the Sad Night in Greece’s evil hour
Left their Parnassus for the Latin plains.
Alike they scorn the pomp of tyrant power,
And coward Vice that revels in her chains.
When Latium had her lofty spirit lost,
They sought, oh Albion! Next thy sea-encircled coast. (ll. 77-83)

Gray used the Whig principle of liberty to serve his belief in a cyclical idea of history. He made a
historiographical shift from a linear to a cyclical narrative of history grounded on the idea of rise and
decline. The poem reveals Gray’s anxiety that what happened to Greece and Rome in the past, the
rise and collapse of their civilizations under the effect of luxury and corruption, is very likely to occur
in England according to the cyclical pattern of rise and fall. What Gray tries to enunciate in his ode,
together with the dichotomy of liberty and tyranny, is the history of rise and decay of political and
literary cultures. He proffers evidence from the classical histories of Greece and Rome, suggesting
that the modern materialistic urges and excessive luxury might be signs of the moral laxity which
foreshadows the decline of the nation. This idea is made explicit when Gray affirms that luxury may
lead not only to social decline but national decline: “The doctrine of Epicurus ruinous to society: it
had its rise when Greece was declining, and perhaps hastened its dissolution, as also that of Rome; it
is now propagated in France and England, and seems likely to produce the same effect in both”.163

Gray’s mock-elegiac poem, ”Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes”,
allegorically refers to the danger of luxury brought by commercial and imperial expansion. The poem
is in part a warning against greed and imperialistic ambition. It starts with Selima, Horace Walpole’s

163 Gray, The Poems of Mø Gray to which are Prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings by W. Mason, M. A., 2nd
cat\textsuperscript{164}, gazing with lust into the goldfish bowl:

\begin{verbatim}
'Twas on a lofty vase's side.
Where China's gayest art had dyed
The azure flower, that below;
Demurest of the tabby kind,
The pensive Selima reclined'
Gazed on the lake below. (ll. 1-6)
\end{verbatim}

Gray thinks that “Commerce” softens and breaks “the spirit of nations”. “Commerce”, as Gray puts it, “changes entirely the fate and genius of nations, by communicating arts and opinions, circulating money, and introducing the materials of luxury; she first opens and polishes the mind, then corrupts and enervates both that and the body”.\textsuperscript{165} Gray’s mock elegy implies this view. The temptation of imperial ambition, with its inevitable expansion of commerce, is reinforced when Selima, in this reading a metaphor for a Walpolean Britain, noticed the “golden gleam” of fish which symbolizes the overseas richness:

\begin{verbatim}
Still had she gazed; but 'midst the tide
Two angel forms were seen to glide,
The genii of the stream:
Their scaly armour's Tyrian hue
Through richest purple to the view
Betrayed a golden gleam. (ll. 13-18)
\end{verbatim}

Suvir Kaul suggests that “The fish, with their ‘golden gleam’, are not simply signifiers of wealth or riches. Their ‘Tyrian hue’ aligns them with mercantile commodities; they are, at this historical juncture, living reminders of the potential of a trading empire”.\textsuperscript{166} In the fourth stanza of the poem, the mercantile desire implicitly compared with a woman’s possessive desire:

\begin{verbatim}
The hapless nymph with wonder saw:
A whisker first, and then a claw,
With many an ardent Wish,
She stretched in vain to reach the prize.
What female heart can gold despise?
What cat's averse to fish? (ll. 19-24)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{164} The ode was written as an Epitaph on the death of Horace Walpole’s cat which was drowned in a goldfish bowl in response to Walpole request in February 1747.

\textsuperscript{165} Gray, The Poems of Mr Gray to which are Prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings by W. Mason, 202.

\textsuperscript{166} Suvir Kaul, Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: A Study in Ideology and Politics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 175.
The drowning of Selima is not accidental; it is a result of lust. According to Kaul's reading of the poem, Gray uses the style and conventions of epic poetry to stress the serious consequences generated by the unquenchable desire for excessive mercantile expansion. Gray makes an allegorical comparison between Selima's downfall, which results from the ferocious pursuit of glistening prey, with the decline of Britain as a world power. He sees this decline as an inevitable consequence, if the imperialistic and mercantile ambitions were left uncontrolled. Selima's ambition takes a lethal turn when it goes too far:

Presumptuous maid! With looks intent
Again she stretched, again she bent,
Nor knew the gulf between.
(Malignant fate sat by and smile)
The slippery verge her feet beguiled,
She humbled headlong in.

Eight time emerging from the flood
She mewed to every watery god,
Some speedy aid to send.
No dolphin came, no Nereid stirred:
Nor cruel Tom nor Susan heard.
A favourite has no friend! (ll. 25-36)

Similarly, the voice of “The Progress of Poesy” draws the attention to the consequences of “Vice” and luxury which exercise a great influence on the cultural destiny of nations. Gray’s historical account of the journey of the poetic muse and liberty to England is not meant to celebrate the contemporary flourishing of art; instead he emphasizes the temporary residence of the muse and liberty in Elizabethan England. Elizabethan literary culture is hailed as the golden age of the native poetry of sublimity: Shakespeare is portrayed as a “dauntless child” of nature to whom mother nature reveals the sublime world “of joy;/Of horror that and thrilling fears” (ll. 9-93). Similarly, Milton is depicted as a poet-prophet gifted with superb poetic vision. Gray sees in Milton's poetry a paradigm of sublimity that connects the literary culture of classic antiquity with national poetry.

Milton, as Gray put it in “The Progress of Poesy”, soars aloft above human flight:

...he, that rode sublime
Upon the seraph-wings of Ecstasy,
The secrets of the abyss to spy.
He passed the flaming bounds of place and time:
The living throne, the sapphire blaze, 
Where angels tremble while they gaze, 
He saw; but blasted with excess of light, 
Closed his eyes in endless night. (ll. 95-102)

Gray’s attempt to give the English poetry a character of sublimity is not without political implications. 

The Whig principle of liberty finds its expression in the cult of the sublime. Leonard Welsted’s 1712 translation of Longinus’ *Peri Hupsous* offered an accessible version of Longinus’s theory on the nature of poetic effect. Early eighteenth-century Whig writers such as Addison, Dennis, and Blackmore all wrote about the sublime, but the theory was at first largely applied to promote the biblical sublime. However, the religious concept of the sublime advocated by early Whig writers at the start of eighteenth century began to give way to a more secular concept of the sublime in the second half of the century. The Whiggish political connotation associated with the cult of the sublime continued in the writing of mid-century writers though it was adopted for its national and cultural significance.167 The concept of the sublime, with its focus on the individual freedom of the poetic flight and emotional effects, offers many Whig writers a solid ground for rejecting the decisive formality in the poetry of judgment and order preached by Tory writers like Pope. Abigail Williams asserts that:

> For many writers the freeing of modern verse was more likely to manifest in attempts to attain a poetic sublime. With its emphasis on effect, its rejection of formal harmonies in favour of transcendent expression, and its privileging of poetic genius, the sublime seemed to represent ‘break’ with the formal traditions of earlier verse. One of the virtues of the sublime was that it offered a paradigm for a paradoxical combination of classical authority and aesthetic freedom: it was, in effect, an established and authoritative poetic tradition defined by the rejection of set forms.168

In fact, Gray and many late-eighteenth-century poets were greatly indebted to the writing of the early eighteenth-century poets, critics, aestheticians, and philosophers, especially Whig writers, whose writings marked a seminal shift towards placing new emphasis on the individual role in the

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167 See Chapter Four for detailed discussion of Gray’s and other mid-century writers’ use of the cult of sublimity for establishing an aesthetic theory derived from the poetic culture of national vernacular past and for emphasizing the distinction of the English national literary culture from the French model of neo-classicism.  
168 Williams, *Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary Culture*, 178.
process of the perception of the external world and poetic creativity. In contrast to the neo-classical
tenets of generality, a number of more liberal-minded writers, mostly Whig writers, began to
advocate new viewpoints regarding the capacity of the individual potentiality and the importance of
subjective artistic creation, evaluation, and experience. With their adoption of Lockean notions of
civic liberty, the empirical study of the psychological processes involved in art and artistic experience
began to challenge traditional absolutist neoclassical theories of artistic experience. The political
belief in individual liberty and self-determination was carried into the literary criticism and aesthetic
philosophy throughout the works of the many of the eighteenth-century writers.

Sublimity became a useful tool in the hands of the cultural patriot writers who capitalized on it to celebrate the unfettered genius of the national literary culture.\(^{169}\) To mark the boundaries between the English poetry of sublimity and the satiric poetry of the “School of France,” Gray needs first to set an alternative scheme of taxonomy for the history of English poetry to align Milton, the most celebrated sublime “native classic” poet, with the Elizabethan age. Court Whig writers enlisted Milton as a modern proto-Whig poet, to celebrate the superiority of the present to the past.\(^{170}\) For early Whig writers, defining modernity meant first defining a pre-neoclassical vulgar period against which to measure the brightness of the modern refined age of classical enlightenment. Both Tonson, in his edition of Paradise Lost (1688), and Addison, in a series of 1712 Spectator papers on the poem, attempted to define Milton as a neo-classical poet by examining his work in relation to classical literary culture. In Mary Wortley Montagu’s progressive account, it is Milton, not Shakespeare or Spenser, who marks the shift to modernity by refining poetry and freeing it from the “Monkish Chain” and “Reform the taste of a degenerate Age”:

When Harry’s Brow the Diadem adorn
From Restoration, Learning shall be born,
Slowly in Strength the infant shall improve
The parents glory and its Country’s love,

\(^{169}\) See Chapter Four.

\(^{170}\) Thomas Vogler observes that “The perennial goal of historical thought can be seen to be a mode of self-definition in the form of a narrative in which a ‘modernity’ defines itself over against a past perceived as essentially different” (Thomas Vogler, “Romanticism and Literary Periods”, New German Critique 38 (1986): 135).
Milton, for Mary Wortley Montagu, best exemplifies cultural progress from the remains of medieval rudeness to modern refinement. In contrast, Gray presents a narrative of English history that links Milton’s poetry to the Elizabethan literary culture. Shakespearean and Spenserian poetic achievements seem not enough for Gray to promote the sense of Elizabethan literary cultures, and therefore, he sets the boundaries of the periodization of his literary history in a way which allows him to align Milton to that lost tradition rather than presenting him as a modern poet. To resituate Miltonic texts by relating them to another tradition of poetry, the vernacular sublime tradition, Gray emphasizes the qualities that the poetry of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton has in common and overlooks, to some degree, those that show dissimilarities in their poetry. Gray’s classification, which calls attention to certain features of Milton’s poetry characteristic of Elizabethan literary tradition, demarcates the literary boundaries between what he considers to be national poetry and the French model of neo-classicism. It reveals Gray’s point of views not only on Elizabethan literary tradition but also on the modern literary culture established in the Restoration period. David Perkins suggests that “periods of the past are constructed from a present perspective and change as the present moves on”. He maintains that “classifications serve ideological interests”, and, therefore, they are liable to change with the change of ideologies. He distinguishes various determinants engaged in the literary historian’s periodization. He points out that “Literary classifications have been determined mainly by six factors: tradition, ideological interests, the aesthetic requirements of writing a literary history, the assertions of authors and their contemporaries about their affinities and antipathies, the similarities that the literary historian observes between authors and/or texts”. Gray’s periodization aims to derive a literary identity which distinguishes the character of modernity from that of earlier literary

culture. However, Gray does not intend to emphasize the superiority of the present and the inadequacy of the immediate past as early Whig writers do, but to draw attention to what he considers being a turning away from national tradition and to the need for constructing channels of connectedness with a native cultural source. Jack Lynch suggests that “Epochs are imposed in retrospect, and periodization is therefore never entirely disinterested or objective. The past is defined in terms of its relation to other ages, including the present, in an attempt to extract the most useful or satisfying narrative out of the past. It is therefore inevitable that historical periods should serve the needs of the present”.173 In the standard neo-classical view, Waller and Denham were considered as the leading intermediary figures between the unrefined poetry of the Elizabethan age and the refined poetry of the Restoration age. By contrast, Milton seemed to Gray a late example of Elizabethan literary culture, where the poetry of imagination and sublimity began to give way to correctness and decorum. In his outline of his project of the History of English Poetry, Gray refers to two major schools in the Elizabethan period: the school of Spenser, which includes “Drayton, Fairfax, Phin: Fletcher, Golding, Phaer, &c: this school ends in Milton.” The other school” which is “full of conceit”, had “begun in Q: Elizabeths reign, continued under James, & Charles the first by Donne, Crashaw, Cleveland; carried to its height by Cowley, & ending perhaps in Sprat”. Then, basing his taxonomy on the moment of cultural transmission, he refers to the following school of poetry as the “School of France, introduced after the Restoration. Waller, DRYDEN, Addison, Prior, & Pope, wch has continued down to our own times”.174 Similarly, Gray’s note to his ode “The Progress of Poesy” explains the movement of poetry from Greece to Italy and then from Italy to Elizabethan England where Spenser imitates the Italian poetry and Milton improves it:

173 Jack Lynch, The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson, 2. Lynch affirms that “Whether or not historical objectivity can ever be attained, period boundaries are obviously subjective and arbitrary, and the imposition of names on decades, centuries, or millennia is always and self-evidently reductive. They are provisional aids to comprehension, not objective truths, and should always be regarded with circumspection. Far from being a problem, though, this reduction is the whole point of periodization: it reduces the undifferentiated flux of centuries, years, and days down to a manageable body of knowledge. Much is lost, but much, too, is gained; and that balance of gains and losses provides insights into the cultures that draw the lines” (Lynch, The Age of Elizabeth, 2).
174 Gray, Correspondence, 3:1124.
The Progress of Poesy from Greece to Italy, and from Italy to England. Chaucer was not unacquainted with the writings of Dante and of Petrarch. The Earl of Surrey and Sir Tho. Wyatt had travelled in Italy, and formed their taste there; Spenser imitated the Italian writers; Milton improved on them: but this School expired soon after the Restoration, and a new one arose on the French model, which has subsisted ever since.\textsuperscript{175}

The progress of poetry is crucially linked with the idea of \textit{translatio}. Gray’s narrative comes, partly, as a reaction against the French thinkers who adopted the idea of \textit{translatio} to celebrate the superiority of French culture and power; they claim that the classical cultural tradition, knowledge, and imperial power had transferred from Greece and Rome to settle finally and for good in France. Unwilling to celebrate the French model of the contemporary “school of France”, Gray turned to the Elizabethan poets who draw directly their poetry from the classical models to emphasize the journey of muse toward England, and since the muse exists where liberty exists, thus, Gray glorifies the Elizabethan age as an age of liberty.

However, Gray’s narrative does not indicate that the English poets, before they borrow the vigour of classical literary culture, were culturally empty-handed. They had an equal rival tradition: the British bardic tradition. Gray insisted on publishing his sister odes, “The Progress of Poesy” and “The Bard” together in order to enunciate the significance of both the classical and native traditions in constructing the character of Elizabethan literary culture, as Chapter One illustrated this idea through a discussion of Gray’s introduction to his \textit{History of English Poetry} \textsuperscript{176}. While “The Progress of Poesy” relates the residence of the classical muse in Elizabethan England, “The Bard” shows the revival of the British bardic tradition in the canonical poetry of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. In both odes, Gray rejects the Whig narrative of progress. As the case in “The Progress of Poesy, “The Bard” shows how poetry was flourishing with the prevalence of British liberty, and how it collapsed with the coming of Norman tyranny, and how it flourished again in the Elizabethan period. The poem

\textsuperscript{175} Gray’s note to line 66 of “The Progress of Poesy”, \textit{Gray, The Works of Thomas Gray}, 1: 33n.

\textsuperscript{176} In a letter to Wharton in 9 March 1755, Gray declared that he was unwilling to publish “The Progress of Poesy” until he complete “The Bard” and publish both odes together: “in truth I am not so much against publishing, as against publishing this alone” (\textit{Gray, Correspondence}, 420).
celebrates ancient British institutions as well as the Elizabethan institutions. In Gray’s account, the sixteenth century appears not only as the Renaissance of classical tradition, but as the renaissance of the ancient constitutionalism of Britain as well.

Gray shows a patriotic view of the Elizabethan tradition. He enlists the Elizabethan poets, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, as models of reviving and of reproducing the past tradition with its political and cultural connotations. Gray looks back to the literary tradition of the great English poets and uses it as a standard to assert the vigour of the poetic source from which they drew: Chaucer drew from Gothic and ancient British tradition, Spenser and Shakespeare drew from Chaucer, and Milton from Spenser and Shakespeare. Gray claims that Spenser and Milton managed to maintain the native literary tradition and kept its purity. They, for instance, freed the medieval national tradition from “the greatest confinement which Puttenham would lay on our verse” by “making the Caesura constantly fall on the fourth syllable of our decasyllabic measure”. Puttenham, as Gray puts it, “was misled by the change which had undergone in [the old writers’] accents since the days of Chaucer”. Spenser and Milton, as Gray suggests, restored the Chaucerian tradition by avoiding what Puttenham wrongly regarded as a rule of perfect poetic composition: “But our poets have long since got loose from these fetters. Spenser judiciously shook them off; Milton, in his Paradise Lost, is ever changing and mingling his pauses” and avoiding “what Puttenham regarded as a rule of perfect versification”.

For Gray, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton represent the chain of connectedness and continuity with the antiquity of British national tradition. He looks at them as inheritors of the medieval tradition as well as of the ancient Celtic bardic tradition. Therefore, their poetry, which serves as a bridge of connectedness and an example of the persistence of tradition, will be the

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177 Gray here, as in “The Progress of Poesy”, shows cyclical rather than linear reading of history.
178 Gray, “Observations on English Metre”, 1: 333, 335-36, 35. Gray observes that Spenser has adapted the “Riding Rhyme” used Chaucer “which is confined to one measure, whatever that measure be, but not on rhythm; having sometimes more, sometimes fewer syllable, and the pause hardly distinguishable”. This metre has “an air of rusticity has very well adapted it to pastoral poetry, and in his hands it has an admirable effect, as in the Eclogue called March, which is in the same metre as Chaucer’s Tale of Sir Thopas” (Gray, “Observations on English Metre”, 339).
poetry of future ages. This idea is revealed in the conclusion of “The Bard”, where the bard hears the voices of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton in the distance as he “plunges to endless night” of death. The bardic tradition which was inherited and transmitted by these English poets will continue in the future:

The verse adorn again
Fierce war and faithful love,
And truth severe, by fairy fiction dressed.
In buskined measures move
Pale Grief and pleasing pain,
With Horror, tyrant of the throbbing breast.
A voice as of the cherub-choir
Gales from blooming Eden bear;
And distant warblings lesson on my ear,
That lost in long futurity expire. (ll. 125-134)

The Tudor age, especially that of Queen Elizabeth is, for Gray, the age of the restoration of bardic literary culture. Like his Whig predecessors, Gray also resorts to Spenserian Merlin’s prophecy, not to prove the Arthurian dynasty of the House of Hanover as Queen Caroline tried to do, but to prove the validity of his bard’s prophecy about Edward I’s decline and the restoration of the liberty of the British with the coming of the Welsh Tudors to the throne of England. Gray’s note to the poem makes his intention clear: “Both Merlin and Taliessin had prophesies, that the Welch should regain their sovereignty over this island; which seemed to be accomplished in the House of Tudor” and the noblest and most popular of Tudors was Elizabeth, who established a powerful state as well as freedom, and restored the glory of the arts. “Gray’s antiquarian, historical, poetical, and patriotic interests”, as Howard D. Weinbrot declares, “all blend in the Druid-Bard as voice of his Celtic nation that would permanently enrich and invigorate England with a Tudor Celtic queen” whose ancestry may be traced back “to an ancient imaginative...Hebraic people whose settling in Britain helped

179 In her endeavour to associate her own royal pedigree with the British Arthurian myth, Queen Caroline relied on Merlin’s account of the Arthurian dynasty. Merlin, in Spenser’s Faerie Queene, sees the Arthurian line culminating in the Tudors, and in Orlando Furioso, Ariosto’s Merlin, on the other hand, predicts the rise of House of Este. Leibniz, German advisor of the Queen, among others, had recently claimed that it was from the House of Este that the House of Hanover was descended. For more detail see Judith Colton, “Merlin’s Cave and Queen Caroline: Garden of Art as Political propaganda”, Eighteenth Century Studies 10 (1976-7): 1-20; and Gerrard, The Patriot Opposition to Walpole.

produce Druid-Bardic wisdom”. Unlike Edward, the Norman king, who muffled the voice of art and persecuted the artists, Gray depicts Queen Elizabeth as a patron of art surrounded by artists, responding to the melody of their bardic songs. The dead bards and seers, in their graves, are rapturous with the restoration of the glory of art and liberty:

What strings symphonious tremble in the air,
What strains of vocal transport round her play!
Hear from the grave, great Taliesian, hear;
They breathe a soul to animate thy clay.
Bright rapture calls, and soaring, as she sings,
Weaves in the eye of Heav’n her many-coloured wings. (ll. 119-24)

Thus, the poem celebrates the restoration of liberty and the British bardic tradition, which were fulfilled under the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The voice of the poem is patriotic. Gray places his audience in British scenery, where liberty and poetry temporarily are destroyed, but restored after the collapse of the Plantagenets and the triumph of the Tudors, descendent from Welsh Arthur. In Gray’s narrative the Elizabethan age is not only emphasized as a period of British history where England inherited the power and the literary culture of the ancient classical world, and British literary tradition, but an era of stability and order which arises from a balance of political power. Tory and patriot Whig writers invoked the Elizabethan age as a period of balance of power. Reflecting the Tory point of view on this balance, Swift suggests that “Since the Norman Conquest, the Balance of Power in England has often varied and sometimes been wholly overturned...about the middle of Queen Elizabeth’s Reign, I take the Power between the Nobles and the Commons to have been in more equal Balance, than it was ever before or since”. To highlight this idea, Gray stresses the horror of wars, tyranny and strife for power before the ascension of Tudor dynasty to the throne of England:

Give ample room, and verge enough

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182 Jonathan Swift, *The Discourse of the Contest and Dissentions between the Nobles and Commons in Athens and Rome*, ed. Frank H. Ellis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 119. Jack Lynch claims that debate over the ancient constitution and the history of royal prerogative, which came to its peak in in the Stuart period, “gave shape to many discussions of Tudor and even earlier history, as Whig and Tory historians fought their ideological and political battles in the pages of their histories. Most modern historians are more sceptical and less adulatory toward Elizabeth’s administration, but for eighteenth-century historians, the Tudor dynasty generally and Elizabeth’s reign in particular was the period in which the English government most closely approximated its natural character and balance of power” (Lynch, *The Age of Elizabeth*, 69).
The characters of hell to trace.  
Mark the year and mark the night,  
When Severn shall re-echo with affright  
The shrieks of death, thro’ Berkley’s roofs that ring,  
Shrieks of an agonizing King!  
She-Wolf of France, with unrelenting fangs,  
That tear’st the bowels of thy mangled Mate,  
From thee be born, who o’er thy country hangs  
The courage of Heaven. What terrors round him wait! (ll. 51-62)

Gray’s historical narrative of royal prerogative is presented in terms of political progress-movement from the darkness of the Norman Plantagenet dynasty to the national lustre of the Tudor period. However, for Gray, this progress, as in “The Progress of Poesy”, is cyclical: poetry flourished with the liberty of ancient Britons, declined with coming of the Normans and then arises with the rise of liberty and prosperity with the accession of the Tudor dynasty.

However, the native patriotic poetry which was rooted in the bardic tradition and “adorn[ed] again” in the Elizabethan period and which seems no more possible in the present produced a sense of the loss of a literary tradition which had flourished before the restoration period. Roger Lonsdale argues that “what was happening to English poetry in the 1740s, as one sees the younger poets moving, for example, away from the inevitable influence of Pope to persistent echoing of the diction and phrasing of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton... [is] reorientation of poetry...to the pre-Restoration native tradition”.

Arthur Johnson, on the other hand, suggests in his essay on “Poetry and Criticism after 1740” that the poetry of “the period 1740-1780 is engaged on a quest for a lost literary culture, which was found in the Elizabethan age, when national credulity, chastened by reason, had produced a sort of civilized superstition, and left a set of traditions fanciful enough for poetic decoration, and yet not too violent and chimerical for common sense”. In “Stanzas to Mr. Bentley”, Shakespeare’s and Milton’s poetry is seen by Gray as a paradigm of divine inspiration that modern poets, who are fettered by mechanical poetic rules, cannot attain:

Not to one in this benighted age

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Is that diviner inspiration given,
That burns in Shakespeare’s or in Milton’s page,
The pomp and prodigality of heaven. (ll. 17-20)

For Gray, Milton’s poetry is a reflection of the highest creative power that a poet can have. Dustin Griffin claims that the eighteenth-century fascination with Miltonic tradition created what he called an “idolatrous tradition” which enhanced the tendency to examine the modern literary culture against that of the past, something which revealed a huge poetic gap between what Milton and (one can add) other Elizabethan canonical poets had achieved and what was being produced in their own time: “In his capacity as the age’s ideal poet, Milton served to focus eighteenth-century England’s literary self-consciousness,... its relation to the literary past, its own achievement, and its ambitions...

For many Milton simply paralyzed the critical faculty and gave rise to what one might call the idolatrous tradition: ‘the divine...the immortal...the incomparable Milton’”.

To ally himself with the glorious age of liberty of imagination and sublimity rather than with modern literary culture, Gray declared himself, though with less sublime and visionary flight, as an inheritor of sublime traditions: Elizabethan native tradition and Greek Pindaric tradition. Gray portrays himself in “The Progress of Poesy” as the “daring spirit” whose Pindaric odes enable him to wake the “lyre divine”:

Though he inherit
Nor the pride nor ample pinion,
That the Theban eagle bear
Sailing with supreme domination
Through the azure deep of air:
Yet oft before his infant eyes would run
Such forms that glitter in the Muse’s ray
With orient hues, unborrowed of the sun. (ll. 113-20)

To celebrate the Elizabethan age and to give his poetry the manner and the qualities of the poetic sublimity, Gray resorted to Greek lyric tradition, and he chose Pindar, who was used by Longinus as

185 Dustin Griffin, Regaining Paradise: Milton and the eighteenth century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 33. Griffin suggests that “The task for post-Miltonic poet was to recognize both that Milton, like his own unfallen Adam, belonging to a world one could no longer inhabit, and at the same time that he spoke to perennial concerns” (Griffin, Regaining Paradise, 42).
an example of a sublime poet, as a model for his poems. Longinus’s theory and Pindar’s poetic example offered classical paradigms through which Gray would conceptualize and evaluate the Elizabethan poetry and articulate the scenario of the canon-formation of the English poetry in accordance with Longinian critical norms and the Pindaric poetic model. Pindar (“the Theban eagle”), both as a patriot poet and as a sublime poet, provided Gray with a useful poetic pattern to celebrate the patriotic period of the Elizabethan age with its patriotic monarch and its national poets. The muse of sublime poetry which left Greece to settle in liberal Elizabethan England seems, in Gray’s account, to find its place in the liberal patriotic Pittite England and its manifestation, though with less vigour as Gray admits, in Gray’s neo-Elizabethan poetry.

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186 Mid-eighteenth-century saw new interest in Greek poetry in general and Pindaric odes in particular. Basil Kennett’s *Lives and Characters of the Ancient Grecian Poets* (1697), which was reprinted in 1735, provided a good source for eighteenth-century poets who were interested in Greek lyric poetry of Pindar, Tyrtaeus, Alcaeus, and others. See Kennett’s *Lives and Characters of the Ancient Grecian Poets* (London: B. Motte and C. Bathurst, 1735). For Gray’s use of Pindaric tradition, see Dustin Griffin, *Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 170-75.

187 For a detailed discussion of Gray’s admiration for Pitt, see James Steele, “Thomas Gray and the Season for Triumph”, in *Fearful Joy: Papers from Thomas Gray Bicentenary Conference at Carleton University*, eds. James Downey and Ben Jones (Montreal, London: McGill-Queen’s University, 1974). In his essay which concentrates on Gyay’s political principle and affiliation, Steele suggest that “The whig principles to which Gray so closely adhered involved not only a commitment to a particular kind of ‘liberty’ but an equally strong enthusiasm for that ‘glory’ which, since the time of Elizabeth, had been accruing to the English nation...” (Steele, “Thomas Gray and the Season for Triumph”, 206).
Chapter Four

Making the Aesthetics of the National Poetry

P: 4 [is on] School of France, introduced after the Restoration. Waller, Dryden, Addison, Prior, & Pope, w\textsuperscript{th} has continued down to our own times.

(Gray’s letter to Thomas Warton in 15 April 1770)\textsuperscript{188}

The previous chapters showed how Gray and other mid-century writers used various historiographical approaches to justify the literary practices of vernacular poetry, something which allowed them to reorder the English literary canon. This chapter illustrates how they try to contrive an aesthetic theory based on and deriving its authority from the vernacular literary culture of the past, and how their theory is informed by their reaction to the French influence on the English literary culture establish after the Restoration—or what Gray calls in the periodization of his literary history the “School of France”. According to them, this imported modern school caused a disruption to the continuity of the national literary tradition.

Gray, as the chapter will show, uses poetic language not only in order to establish one of the norms within his canon-formation and as standard for rewriting the history of vernacular literary culture, but as a foundation on which he establishes his aesthetic theory. Gray’s approach is not dissimilar to those of neo-classical critics, such as Dryden, Pope, and, later, Johnson who base their norms of canonicity on the standards of a poetic language by which poets such as Waller and, Denham are raised to a hierarchical peak in literary history. Gray links what he calls “the true language” of poetry with “pure...lyric poetry”, a form which came to represent for Gray and many mid-century writers the defining features of the national poetic tradition. Gray and other mid-century revivalists of tradition suggest that national lyric poetry is different from that of the “school of France”: it is imaginative; it is emotional; it is original; it is sublime; it is the offspring of natural genius and freedom. Gray’s critique emphasizes the power of the sublimity of the lyric style, which requires different language and different genius from that of “School of France”. In other words,

\textsuperscript{188} Gray, Correspondence, 3:1124.
Gray uses the concept of sublime pure poetry to define and differentiate a different kind of beauty characteristic of vernacular poetry: the poetry which enkindles passion and lets imagination run wild; the poetry which was tarnished with domination of rational species of poetry such as essays, epistles, satiric, and mock forms of poetry; the poetry which must, in Gray’s view, be revaluated and revived to restore the national character of English literary culture.

What Gray means by “School of France” is of course a version of what would today be broadly termed “English neo-classicism”, including such writers as Waller, Dryden, Addison, Prior, and Pope. Gray sees the period as stretching from Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 to his own time. Gray’s taxonomy of his literary history does not refer to the rise of a new school of poetry in the mid-eighteenth century. However, Gray’s reference to the continuity of neo-classicism does not mean that he considers himself as a typical neo-classicist. He only indicates that neo-classicism still a dominant literary vogue in that it is still championed by many writers of his time. Accordingly, the chapter, though it stresses the remarkable departure Gray and many mid-century writers made from what we might now see as the neo-classical creed, also suggests that Gray’s narrative is not so much a repudiation of neo-classicism as a literary theory as he finds in such subjects as poetic diction, originality, lyric sublimity, natural genius, imagination, and passion, which stand in a dialectical opposition to many neo-classical principles, vehicles for constructing his aesthetic theory—a theory which helps him to produce a plausible version of the national literary tradition of the past, and to emphasize the importance of its continuity, as chapter Five will show. In doing so, the chapter, thus, avoids presenting a teleological reading of mid-century aestheticism.

Historically speaking, the term “Restoration” refers, of course, to the restoration of the political culture accomplished with the restoration of the traditional political system and the exiled monarch to the throne of England in 1660. However, the term does not refer to the restoration of English literary culture prior to the Interregnum, but on contrary, at least for Gray and many mid-century writers, refers to the hegemony of French culture on all walks of English cultural life. 

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See Chapter Five which is closely related to this chapter. Chapter Five will show how the literary departure from neo-classicism made by Gray and his school led to split mid-century literary culture.
century writers’ denunciation of the excessiveness of French influence on English literature was undoubtedly enhanced by the political conflict between Britain and France over colonial and commercial issues whose impacts were quickly reflected in the literary history of the period which began to look at the literary culture spanning from Denham and Waller through Dryden to Pope and his school as cultural periphery to the central pivot of French culture. John Upton’s view on this point is a typical example:

'T were to be wished that with our restored king [Charles II], some of that taste of literature had been restored which we enjoyed in the days of Queen Elizabeth. But when we brought home ourrenchified king, we did then, and have to this day, continued to bring from France our models, not only of letters, but (O shame to free born Englishmen!) of morals and manners. Hence every thing, unless of French extraction, appears awkward and antiquated.190

But this was a judgement made with comfort of retrospection. The early neo-classicists present a different account of the importance of French cultural impact. The Earl of Roscommon’s Essay on Translated Verse (1684), illustrates the prevailing admiration for the French neo-classical poetic model that helped to shape, according to Roscommon, not only the main features of the English poetry, but also those of European poetry in general. He claims that the French writers have set a great example of poetic composition. They reflect in their writing the best poetic features of Greek and Roman writers:

When France had breath’d, intestine Broils,
And Peace, and Conquest crown’d her foreign Toils,
There, cultivated by a Royal Hand,
Learning grew fast, and spread, and blest the Land;
The choicest Books, that Rome, or Greece have known,
Her excellent Translators made her own:
And Europe still considerably gains,
Both by their good Example and their Pains.
From hence our gen’rous Emulation came,
We undertook, and we perform’d the same.191

In his poem, “To the Earl of Roscommon, on His Excellent Essay on Translated Verse” (1684), Dryden follows Roscommon’s glorification of Restoration literary culture as established by the French model and promoted “In Charles' reign, and by Roscommon’s pen,” and by other early neo-classical poets:

The French pursu’d their steps; and Britain, last,
In Manly sweetness all the rest surpass’d.
The wit of Greece, the gravity of Rome,
Appear exalted in the British loome;
The Muses empire is restor’d again,
In Charles' reign, and by Roscommon's Pen.
Yet modestly he does his Work survey,
And calls a finish’d Poem an ESSAY;
For all the needful rules are scatter’d here;
Truth smoothly told, and pleasantly severe;
(So well is art disguised, for nature to appeare.) (ll. 24-34)\(^{192}\)

Though in these lines Dryden expresses a confident assertion of British ability to surpass the excellence of the French model, yet, he admits the French cultural priority and influence. Unlike Gray who, as Chapter Three made clear, describes the journey of the muse (the literary culture) from classic nations directly to Elizabethan Britain, Dryden, thought celebrating the poetic improvement made by the British poets’ “Manly sweetness”, suggests that the French poets came first in that they set a poetic paradigm followed by the British neo-classical poets.

Early neo-classicists, mostly courtiers, established a new canon by which they intended to efface the former literary culture and inaugurate a modern one modelled on the French secular example. This was strongly sponsored by Charles II who encouraged secular and rational fields of studies such as natural science and empiricist approach of philosophy. Aided by the progress of print and the increase of literate audience caused by expansion of education, the neo-classicists managed to adapt the literary field to the political and social changes which occurred in their time.\(^ {193}\) They found in the classical literary culture the elegance and the simplicity they needed to communicate


\(^{193}\) John Brewer gives a statistic of the number of literate people from sixteenth century to mid-eighteenth century: “The long-term trend in Britain between the sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries was of growing literacy. The most reliable figures (and they are not very reliable) shows a gradual, though not unbroken improvement in male literacy from 10 per cent in 1500 to 45 per cent in 1714 and 60 per cent in the mid-eighteenth century. Female literacy rates were lower- 1per cent in 1500, 25 per cent in 1714 and 40 per cent in 1750” (Brewer, *The Pleasure of the Imagination*, 167).
with the growing reading public and the rhetoric to perform their didactic messages.\textsuperscript{194} In his poem, *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope celebrates the literary culture of “True ease” accomplished by Denham and Waller:

And praise the easy Vigour of a line,  
Where Denham’s strength, and Waller’s Sweetness join.  
True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,  
As those move easiest who have learn’d to dance (ll. 360-3)\textsuperscript{195}

Neo-classicism allowed many late-seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries poets to play a public role through emphasizing the importance of the poet’s engagement in the public life of his age and, subsequently, in the cultural sphere which exercises an active influence on their society. Unlike mid-century aesthetic theory, with its emphasis on the private concerns of poetry, which views poetry as a product of disinterested and autonomous personae, the didactic social nature of much neo-classical poetry, with its emphasis on moral teaching, was meant to promote social mobility by taking the responsibility to instruct the readers. The shift towards poetic forms such as panegyrical and satire, which are suitable for the concern of the public issues, illustrates the changes that were beginning to affect the literary culture of the time.

Neo-classicists wrote their poetry with full intent to teach and make pragmatic effects on their society. They adopted a literary style comprehended by common readers. Late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century readers were well fitted to understand and enjoy familiar clear literary style. Swift’s habit was to read his poems to his servants, and “if they did not comprehend, he would alter and amend, until they understood it perfectly well, and then would say, *This will do; for I write to the Vulgar, more than to the Learned*”.\textsuperscript{196} Ann Cline Kelly claims that although Swift’s publications often contain “an odd mélange of witty erudition and coarse vulgarity, with irony always lurking as a

\textsuperscript{194} Rachel Trickett suggests that the subject-matter of neo-classical poetry is pragmatic “in which the subject-matter is peculiarly important and to which a lucid, pointed style is especially appropriate. Some of its strength derives from the narrative manner of the epic, and the epic, which set out to instruct as well as to please, depended inevitably, to some extent, on the art of persuasion. Narrative allows the poet to relate dispassionately, but it can encourage him to command various tones of voice, too, if his intention is to teach” (Rachel Trickett, *The Honest Muse: A Study in Augustan Verse* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), 7).

\textsuperscript{195} Alexander Pope, *Pope: Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 74. All subsequent references of Pope’s poetry will be to this version.

possibility, Swift’s contemporaries condemned his publications as ‘low’” because his works were “signalled by their Grubstreet genres, their appeal to a broad audience,... and their reflection of the life and language of ‘the vulgar’, or the underclass”. The refinement of the poetic language made by neo-classicists increased the prosaic quality of poetry.

Mid-century writers, such as Gray, the Wartons, Collins, and Hurd, felt that vernacular sublime poetry no longer assumes a central position in modern literary culture; they perceived that its popularity was challenged and overshadowed by newly rising neo-classical poetic forms, on one hand, and by the culture of novelism on the other. Matthew Arnold, in his study of Gray’s poetry, claims that “Gray, a born poet, fell upon an age of prose. He fell upon an age whose task was such as to call forth in general men’s powers of understanding, wit and cleverness, rather than their deepest power of mind and soul”. Arnold asserts that Gray, who has “high qualities of mind and soul”, was isolated by the eighteenth-century modern culture of “prose”:

As regards literary production, the task of the eighteenth century in England was not the poetic interpretation of the world, its task was to create a plain, clear straightforward, efficient prose. Poetry obeyed the bent of mind requisite for the due fulfilment of this task of the century. It was intellectual, argumentative, ingenious; not seeing things in their truth and beauty, not interpretive. Gray, with the qualities of mind and soul of a genuine poet, was isolated in his century.

Gray’s views on neo-classicism were primarily generated by his reaction to changes in the cultural field. Gray thought that the widespread change which came over literary culture from the Restoration period to his own time begot the wane of what he considered as high-cultural tradition. Like many mid-century writers, Gray saw the neo-classicalists’ emphasis on rationality, which distinguishes their modern age from the fantasy and superstition of the past, as a menace which was

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197 Ann Cline Kelly, *Jonathan Swift and Popular Culture: Myth, Media, and the Man* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 2. Kelly claims that “In the early eighteenth century, popular literature spanned the gamut from parlor fare, like The Spectator-whose implied reader is ‘polite’, that is affluent, educated, and refined- to cheaply printed street literature (ballads, almanacs, libels, prognostications, hues and cries) sold by hawkers, whose implied reader has less genteel tastes” (Ibid., 1-2).

198 Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1913), 75, 91-2. Arnold claims that “The difference between genuine poetry [such as that of Gray] and the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and all their school, is briefly this: their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul. They differ profoundly in their modes of language, they differ profoundly in their modes of evolution” (Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, 95).
increasingly leading to the disappearance of literary tradition of imagination and sublimity. In “The Bard,” Gray seized on the past as analogous with the contemporary situation; the challenge of modernity to British tradition in the past is made to prefigure the challenge in the present. Gray’s account of the survival of the bardic culture in the face of the modernity brought by the Norman Conquest disrupts the historical hierarchy of the Enlightenment narrative which suggests that modern cultural forms should be paradigms for the present, and more traditional forms should be phased out, as outmoded symbols, and blotted out of cultural memory. Gray enlists the figure of the bard as a cultural spokesman not only for his nation but for all the tradition-bound, articulating in his visionary literary history of futurity an optimistic vision which foretells, through visionary prophesy, the durability and continuity of tradition. Gray’s historical narrative presents cultural identity as a cultural manifestation which has its origin and its roots in the past and spreads into present.

For Gray, the advent of French neo-classical culture seems to represent a second cultural invasion which subsequently generates a second challenge to British literary tradition. The poetry of visions and imagination which Gray’s bard ushers in and which is manifested in the Elizabethan high culture has been forsaken in favour of poetic model which derives its authority from the consumers of commercial culture. Gray’s protest against excessive adulation of the French model rests on a conviction that the emulation of this model reduced English sublime tradition to the level of prose writing. In his letter to Richard West on 8 April, 1742, quoted earlier in this study, Gray shows a clear rejection of the neo-classicists’ imitation of French neo-classical poetic style, emphasizing the disparity between English and French literary cultures, and claiming that the language of English poetry is never the language of the prose. Unlike English poetic language, “the French, whose verse, where the thought or image does not support it, differs in nothing from prose”. Later towards the end of century, Wordsworth, who ignored or did not notice the national connotation of Gray’s remark about the language of English poetry and who took it as purely aesthetic, rejected entirely Gray’s view of poetic language. In fact, a consideration of Wordsworth’s comments on Gray provides

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199 See Chapter Five which discusses Gray’s reaction to the commercialization of literature.
200 Gray, Correspondence, 1:192.
a useful way of illustrating the former’s misunderstanding of the latter’s cultural moment. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth attacks Gray, “who was,” as he puts it, “at the head of those who by their reasoning have attempted to widen the space of separation betwixt Prose and Metrical composition, and was more than any other man curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction”. Wordsworth quotes in his Preface Gray’s “Sonnet on the Death of Richard West” and prints some lines in italics to show, as he asserts, “that the language of Prose may yet be well adapted to Poetry”. Wordsworth singles out these lines as the only valuable lines in Gray’s sonnet, since other lines are steeped in what he considers to be mechanical metaphors and personifications of abstract ideas. In his explanation of the style of his poems, Wordsworth asserts:

Having dwelt thus on the subjects and the aims of these Poems, I shall request the Reader’s permission to apprise him of a few circumstances relating to their style, in order, among other reasons, that I may not be censured for not having performed what I never attempted. The Reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and, I hope, are utterly rejected as an ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose. I have proposed to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of the language. They are, indeed, a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such; but I have endeavoured utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style, or as a family language which Writers in metre seem to lay claim to by prescription.

Wordsworth believes “that a large portion of the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good Prose”. He asserts “that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition”. The difference between Gray’s and Wordsworth’s views on the poetic language can be explained in relation to the difference of the poetic genres they adopted. P. W. K. Stone suggests that Wordsworth’s preference for the plainness of the poetic style arises from his interest in the ballad-style which prompts him to refuse the distinction between the languages of poetry and prose. Wordsworth’s view and originality, as Stone asserts, “may at best be...related to his concern with the ballad. What seems again almost certain,

202 Ibid., 1:xxii-xviii.
203 Ibid., 1:xxiii.
however, is that it was the ‘plain style’ of the ballad which, as it led him to deny any difference between the language of poetry and prose, interested him in a poetry employing only the ‘real language of men’.” 204 Gray’s attempt to separate poetic language from the language of the age, on the other hand, reveals a desire to relocate English poetry in the sphere of what he sees high culture, as it was in the past, and to ascribe the “prosaic”205 neo-classical style of poetry to a lower class of poetry. 206 Gray suggests that neo-classical poetic diction became increasingly mundane and prosaic, and it lost, under the influence of the French poetic model, the poetic beauty characterized by the poetic tradition of Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton. Gray does not view English poetic language as something static. “Our poetry”, Gray asserts, “on the contrary [to the French poetic model], has a language peculiar to itself; to which almost every one, that has written, has added something by enriching it with foreign idioms or derivatives: nay sometimes words of their own composition or invention.” 207 So poetic language, for Gray has a flexible expanding nature; yet it should be controlled and should not lose its distinctive poetic features.

The mid-century departure from the French neo-classical creed towards the earlier model of English literary culture manifested itself in the rise of a new definition of poetry based on an aesthetics which takes beauty as the principal end of art. To emphasize the cultural identity, which, as they thought, was disrupted by the encroachment of the modern model of neo-classicism, mid-century critics embarked on celebrating lyric poetry (its sublimity which arises from its language and


205 Throughout this study, the term “prosaic” is used to mean “having the characteristics of prose”; “lacking imaginativeness or originality”; it is not used to mean “dull or not interesting.”

206 Trevor Ross claims that “Far from returning poetic forms and conventions to their purity of origin, critical gestures such as these were drastically altering the terms of disavowal by which the value of the poetic creativity could be defined. In place of the classicist emphasis on the moral independence of the poet as civic-minded laureate, these gestures were valorizing the autonomization of an entire field of cultural production. The function and distinctiveness of this field had now to be set against the “crowd” in the marketplace, whose multiple sensual delight and subjective relations threatened to render poetry merely one among many possible diversions that could serve the subject in forming his moral being” (Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon*, 204-5).

its imaginative flight and emotional effects) as a distinctive form of the national literary tradition with which they were eager to establish historical continuum. In a letter to Mason, Gray compares the difference between the native lyric style and the neo-classical epic style with the difference between verse and prose, suggesting the decline of English poetry to the level of prose by the constant endeavours of the neo-classicists to fit poetry to the understanding of common readers. The “true lyric style”, Gray wrote to Mason, “with all its flights of fancy, ornaments & heightening of expression, & harmony of sound, is in its nature superior to every other style. wth is just the cause,” Gray goes on, “why it could not be born in a work of great length, no more than the eye could bear to see all this scene, that we constantly gaze upon, the verdure of the field & woods, the azure of the sea & skies, turned into one dazzling expanse of gems”. Thus when we pass from the “lyric glare” to “epic solemnity...we seem to drop from verse into mere prose, from light into darkness”.208 Gray and his friends, such as West, thought that Milton managed to anglicize the classical epic style by adding to it the English character of the pure poetic language which he inspired from Shakespeare and Spenser. They focused their celebration on the vernacularity and Englishness of Milton’s Paradise Lost. In his letter to Gray in 1742, West claims that: “One need only to read Milton to acknowledge the dignity [vernacular old words] give the Epic”.209 Gray attributes to the language of lyric poetry a character of grandeur and beauty removed from the common idioms which is, according to Gray, unsuitable for the poetry of sublimity:

Extreme conciseness of expression, yet pure, perspicuous, & musical, is one of the grand beauties of lyric poetry. this I have always aim’d at, & never could attain. the necessity of rhyming is one great obstacle to it: another & perhaps a stronger is that way you have chosen of casting down your first ideas carelessly & at large, and then clipping them here & there and forming them at leisure. this method after all possible pains will leave behind it in some places a laxity, a diffuseness. the frame of a thought (otherwise well invented, well-turned, & well-placed) is often weaken’d by

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208 Gray, Correspondence, 2:608.
209 Ibid., 1:195.
it. do I talk nonsense? or do you understand me? I am persuaded, what I say, is true in my head, whatever it may be in prose, for I do not pretend to write prose.\textsuperscript{210}

Coleridge, like Wordsworth, used Gray’s sonnet on the West and his view of poetry in his correspondence, such as the passage above, to form his judgment not only about Gray’s poetry but about eighteenth-century poetry in general which, for him, consists merely of “translations of prose thoughts into poetic language”.\textsuperscript{211} Gray, though he believes that poetry is inspired, does not claim the spontaneity of the process of poetic creativity as Wordsworth and Coleridge do. For Gray, learning polishes the talent of the poet. Gray’s poetic practice, as Chapter Five will illustrate, shows how Gray’s wide knowledge manifests itself clearly through his allusive style which consciously echoes a great number of the literary works of the past. Gray implies that the vocabulary that the poet uses has the ability to stimulate the reader’s imagination and to provide variety of interpretations, implications and impressions. Non-poets or ordinary people might comprehend and enjoy what poets compose, but definitely they are not adequately gifted to show the power of poetic expression, since they do not have the poets’ faculties of creative imagination. In other words, to use Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s terms, the poet differs from ordinary man in degree and in his active primary imagination, and this forms the difference between the poetic language (the artist’s creation) and the language of the age (of ordinary people) which Gray refers to in his letter to West.

Gray’s views of the poetic language and concept of pure lyric poetry were adopted by many mid-century writers. Joseph Warton called lyric poetry “PURE POETRY”. He claims that the British native tradition offers a truer and purer model of poetry than the modern poetry of the refined taste. Warton’s \textit{An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Alexander Pope} (1756), which juxtaposes Pope’s didactic and satiric poetry based on the French school of poetry and native literary works of the past, came as an attempt to remake the canonical narrative of English literary history. Following the French satiric example, Pope was located in the second class of the English poets, together with

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid., I:551-52.

Waller, Dryden, Prior, Addison, etc., who, though they “had noble talents for moral, ethical, and panegyrical poesy”, could not achieve the sublimity of the first rank poetry. It is the vernacular literary paradigm which was positioned on the peak of the cultural hierarchy: “Our English Poets may, I think, be disposed in four different classes and degrees. In the first class I would place our only three sublime and pathetic poets: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton”. In Warton’s view the neoclassicists were unable to produce poetic sublimity as the first class poets did since their poetic practices led to reduce their poetry to operate as a didactic and moral medium of social representation. Warton claims that:

…the largest portion of [Pope’s works] is of the didactic, moral, and satiric kind; and consequently, not of the most poetic species of poetry; whence it is manifest, that good sense and judgment were his characteristic excellencies, rather than fancy and invention: not that the author of the Rape of the Lock, and Eloisa, can be thought to want imagination; but because his imagination was not his predominant talent, because he indulged it not, and because he gave not so many proofs of this talent as of the other. This turn of mind led him to admire French models; he studied Boileau attentively; formed himself upon him …. He stuck to describing modern manners; but those manners, because they are familiar, uniform, artificial, and polished, are, in their very nature, unfit for any lofty effort of the Muse.

Warton believes that though Pope “became one of the most correct, even, and exact poets that ever wrote”, his preoccupation with depicting the familiar manners and his polished style do not produce sublime pure poetry which “frequently ravish and transport his reader”. In the Dedication of his Essay, Warton declares the superiority of “PURE POETRY” through a comparison he makes between the poetry of wit and common sense characteristic of modern sophisticated culture and the “TRUE” poetry of native sublimity: “We do not, it should seem, sufficiently attend to the difference there is betwixt a MAN OF WIT, a MAN OF SENSE, and a TRUE POET. Donne and Swift were undoubtedly men of wit, and men of sense: but what traces have they left of PURE POETRY?” Warton’s aligning of Donne and Swift in the same category of wit makes it clear that his protest is not directed exclusively against French cultural influence, but against any encroachment that mars the national

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213 Ibid., 2:401-2.
214 Ibid., 2:402.
215 Ibid., 1:ii.
tradition of pure poetry. Donne’s and Swift’s poetry, as Warton suggests, is a representation of “Familiar life” which, according to Warton’s poetic hierarchy, assumes a lower status since the delineation of familiar manners is inadequate for producing sublime poetry: “In the third class may be placed men of wit, of elegant taste, and lively fancy in describing familiar life, though not the higher scenes of poetry. Here may be numbered, BUTLER, SWIFT, ROCHESTER, DONNE, DORSET, OLDHAM”. Moreover, Donne, who tried to make a radical departure from the vernacular literary tradition by incorporating a metaphysical inventive style with far-fetched and metaphorical conceits unusual in English poetry, was rejected on grounds similar to those used in relation to his neo-classical successors. Like Warton, Gray disapproves of metaphysical poetry, since it deflects away from the conventions of lyric tradition. Gray claims, in a letter to West, that “Poems and Metaphysics (say you, with your spectacles on) are inconsistent things. A metaphysical poem is a contradiction in terms”. Accordingly, Gray’s account of the history of the canonical poetic tradition in his ode “The Progress of Poesy,” does not offer to Donne and his school a place in the canon, and when Gray comes to conclude his celebration of the native poetry of sublimity, he praises the lyric poetry of Dryden, before it was rationalized under the influence of the rise of “School of France”. However, though Gray gives Dryden less poetic rank than Shakespeare, and Milton, Dryden’s lyric poetry assumes an iconic status in Gray’s history of sublimity. Dryden’s “less presumptuous car” is pulled “Wide o’er the field of glory” by two “ethereal” horses:

Two courses of ethereal race,
With necks in thunder clothed, and long-resounding pace
Hark, his hands the lyre explore!
Bright-eyed Fancy hovering o’er

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216 Ibid., 1:vii.
217 Johnson, in “Life of Cowley,” also objects to metaphysical poets on the grounds that they, in their endeavours at originality, continually sought for the “unexpected and the surprising”, and paid too little attention to that “uniformity of sentiment” which allows the poet to express universal thoughts. “Great thoughts,” Johnson claims “are always general, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness. It is with great propriety that subtlety, which in its original import means exility of particles, is taken in its metaphorical meaning for nicety of distinction, those writers who lay on the watch for novelty, could have little hope of greatness; for great things cannot have escaped former observation” (Samuel Johnson, The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets with Critical Observations on Their Works, Vols. 4 (London: C. Bathurst, Buckland et al, 1781), 1:30-31).
218 Gray, Correspondence, 1:183.
Scatters from her pictured urn  
Thoughts that breathe and words that burn. (ll. 103-110)

In his note to line 110, Gray stressed that “We have had in our language no other odes of the sublime kind, than that of Dryden on St, Cecilia’s Day; for Cowley (who had his merit) yet wanted judgment, style, and harmony, for such a task. That of Pope is not worthy of so great a man”. 219 “But ah!”, these sublime songs of Dryden’s lyrical poetry are “heard no more” after the domination of satirical and panegyrical state poetry which Gray detests, as he shows that in his comment on Tickell’s poem “On the Prospect of Peace”, which was written in 1712, at the end of the War of Spanish Succession:

So to begin with Mr Tickell. This is not only a state-poem (my ancient aversion) but a state-poem on the Peace of Utrecht. If Mr. Pope had wrote a panegyrical on it, one could hardly have read him with patience: but this is only a poor short-winding imitator of Addison, who had himself not above three or four notes in poetry; sweet enough indeed, like those of a German flute, but such as soon tire the ear with their Frequent return.... 220

Gray seems to agree with Dryden and Pope about the “sweetness” of the neo-classical poetry, however, he thinks that this sweetness, unlike that of the native sublime poetry, falls flat with “frequent return” even when it is produced by a poet of great talent like Pope. Thus, Gray does not direct his protest against Pope’s poetic skill, but to the choice of his poetic mode which, for Gray, lacks the power of sublime poetry capable of achieving emotional effects and evoking emotional response. Gray affirms that poetic language reached a glorious status in the hands of Dryden and Pope through their invention, borrowing, and enriching the native diction. Gray attributes the decline in poetic language to the practices of hack poets who, after Pope’s death, aligned themselves to Pope’s school:

If any future Englishman can attain that height of glory to which these two poets [Dryden and Pope] have risen, let him be less scrupulous, upon reflecting, that to poetry languages owe their first formation, elegance, and purity; that our own, which was naturally rough and barren, borrowed from thence its copiousness and its

220 Gray, Correspondence, 1:295. Gray seems to be aware of the narrow interests of the occasional poetry which depicts certain incidents or occasions happening in certain times and places. Such poetry, Gray may realize, cannot be great sublime poetry since it does not express issues of universal interests which evoke wide appeal to human emotions.
ornaments; and that the authority of such a poet may perhaps redress many of the abuses which time and ill custom have introduced, the poverty of rhyme, the crowd of monosyllables, the collision of harsh consonants, and the want of picturesque expression, which, I will be bold to say, our language labours under now more than it did a hundred years ago.221

Gray admits the elegance and correctness of Pope’s poetry; however, he thinks that these qualities do not create sublime poetry. Thomas Warton, in his poem “The pleasure of Melancholy” (1747), shows similar views of Pope’s poetry. In a comparison he makes between Pope’s Belinda and Spenser’s Una, Warton suggests that though Pope’s “song” has been graciously composed, it is Spenser’s “wildly-warbl’d song” that evokes deep “rapture” and captures his imagination and appeals to his heart:

| Thro’ POPE’S soft song tho’ all the Graces breathe, |
| And happiest Art adorns his Attic page; |
| Yet does my mind with sweeter rapture glow, |
| As at the root of mossy trunk recline’d, |
| In magic SPENSER’S wildly-warbled song, |
| I see deserted Una wander wild… (ll. 153-58)222 |

Gray’s literary history in “The Progress of Poesy” is the history of poetry of imagination and sublimity. He was unable to fit Pope’s poetry within that history. When Gray comes Pope and his school, he laments the loss of the sublime poetry: “Oh! Lyre divine, what daring spirit/ Wakes thee now? (ll. 112-13)223. Gray’s comparison of the neo-classical school with what came before it illustrates the way in which mid-eighteenth-century writers often define the contemporary literary culture in relation to what they think to be the high literary culture of the past; this definition often led them to a sense of nostalgia for lost tradition. They attribute the cause of what they consider to be a literary deterioration to the external cultural forces that occurred with the domination of French models after the Restoration and not to the lack of native geniuses or individual endowments in the present. In the new cultural conditions, the literary achievements of the past seem somehow beyond the reach of mid-century writers. Like Gray and Warton, Richard Hurd looks at the rise of

223 According to Gray, it is only with his Pindaric odes that sublime tradition was restored. See page 88.
Restoration literary culture in relation to cultural change rather than cultural interaction or cultural transformation, deeming the impact of French literary culture on the English literature as cultural “revolution” which “drove” the wonders of tradition “off the scene”. In his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), Hurd claims:

But reason, in the end, (assisted however by party, and religious prejudices) drove them off the scene, and would endure these *lying wonders*, neither in their own proper shape, nor as masked in figures.

Henceforth, the taste of wit and poetry took a new turn: And *fancy*, that had wantoned it so long in the world of fiction, was now constrained, against her will, to ally herself with strict truth, if she would gain an entrance into reasonable company.

What we have gotten by this revolution, you will say, is a great deal of good sense. What we have lost, is a world of fine fabling; the illusion of which is so grateful to the *charmed Spirit*; that, in spite of philosophy and fashion, *Faery* Spenser still ranks highest among the Poets; I mean with all who either come of that house, or have any kindness for it.224

The disapproval of neo-classicism in favour of the paradigm of “pure poetry” was strongly proclaimed by Thomas Warton whose historicist and critical approaches made a significant move towards a new aesthetic theory. In his *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser*, Warton describes the satirical poetry imported from France as a “bane” which affects the English tradition of sublimity:

... a poetry succeeded, in which imagination gave way to correctness, sublimity of description to delicacy of sentiment, and majestic imagery to conceit and epigram... The nicer beauties of happy expression were preferred to the daring strokes of great conception. Satire, that bane of the sublime, was imported from France. The muses were debauched at court, and polite life and familiar manners became their only themes.225

Mid-century writers’ meditations on what was lost and what was gained with the coming of the modern school of poetry created a nostalgic desire to bridge the gap between the past and present. Fancy, imagination, genius, enthusiasm, emotion, passion, and other poetic elements associated with vernacular poetry were elevated as counter structures of poetic beauty to the “strict truth” of modern poetry. As a result, the lyric literary tradition was hailed as a form of sublimity and a domain of the natural native genius.

An important aspect of this move toward lyricism and imaginative poetry is the idea of the natural genius, best exemplified in the shift of mid-century critics’ emphasis from neo-classical ideals of regularity and rationality to the idea of originality in poetic composition. Edward Young, in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), claims that “In the fairyland of fancy, genius may wander wild; there it has a creative power, and may reign arbitrarily over its own empire of chimeras”. He attributes great capacity to the human mind in perceiving unknown beauty:

“Moreover, so boundless are the bold excursions of the human mind, that, in the vast void beyond real existence, it can call forth shadowy beings, and unknown worlds, as numerous, as bright, and, perhaps, as lasting, as the stars; such quite-original beauties we may call paradisaical”. Young affirms that “There is something in poetry beyond prose-reason; there are mysteries in it not to be explained, but admired; which render mere prose-men infidels to their divinity”. William Duff’s *Essay on Original Genius* (1767) shows similar views. Duff suggests that imagination, which is the faculty of inventive genius, can open routes to unknown realms of truths: “By the vigorous efforts of the creative Imagination”, the poet “calls shadowy substances and unreal objects into existence. They are present to his view, and glide, like spectres, in silent, sullen majesty, before his astonished and intranced sight”. Mid-century critics and aestheticians find in the idea of natural genius an aesthetic capacity to modify the norms of canonicity by undermining the neo-classical principle of imitation which entails the poet’s severe commitment to the classical rules. By making a distinction between natural genius and genius acquired by learning, Young celebrates original poetry as an organic creation which grows out of natural process rather than mechanical labour as the case with imitative poetry:

An *Imitator* shares his crown, if he has one, with the chosen object of his imitation; an *Original* enjoys an undivided applause. An *Original* may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is

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227 Ibid., 31.
228 Ibid., 14.
not made: *imitations* are often a sort of *manufacture* wrought up by those *mechanics, art, and labour*, out of pre-existent materials not their own.\textsuperscript{230}

Originality in thoughts, images, and poetic language came to be seen as the main distinctive feature of the vernacular cultural past on which Gray and many other mid-century poets attempt to rest their aesthetic theories. Art and rules of poetic representation assumed less value in mid-century aesthetic theories. They began to be associated with less poetic genius. Admitting the regularity of the French model of drama, in a letter to Mason, Gray stresses that the merit of the literary work does not depend on its sincere representation of truth or its regularity alone. There are certain beauties which transcend Art, since their domain is a poet’s natural genius which manages poetic subjects and produces aesthetic pleasure without much need of Art. While neo-classical poets try to derive a sense of beauty from the regularity, Gray seeks beauty in the sense of wildness to which true poetry gives rise:

> I do not admit the excellences of the French writers are measured by verisimilitude, or the regularities of their dramas only. Nothing in them, or in our own, even, Shakespeare himself, ever touches us, unless rendered verisimile, which by good management may be accomplished even in such absurd stories as the Tempest, the Witches in Macbeth, of the Fairies in the Midsummer Night’s Dream: and I know not of any writer that has pleased chiefly in proportion to his regularity. Other beauties may indeed be heightened and set off by its means, but of itself it hardly pleases at all.\textsuperscript{231}

Gray suggests that Shakespeare’s poetry is a creation and an expression of a pure afflatus of genius. It is a pure poetry which stands closer to nature rather than abiding by precepts of any literary creed: “Shakespeare . . . is moreover particularly admirable in his introduction of pure poetry, so as to join it with pure passion, and yet keep close to nature. This he could accomplish with passions the most violent, and transporting”.\textsuperscript{232} In his epigraph to “The Progress of Poesy,” Gray maintains that “The true poet is he who knoweth much by gift of nature, but they that have only learnt the lore of song, and are turbulent and intemperate of tongue, like a pair of crows chatter in vain against the

\textsuperscript{230} Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 7.
\textsuperscript{231} Gray, *Correspondence*, 1:359.
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 1:359.
godlike bird of Zeus”. Gray defended the lyric tradition as an imaginative artistic creation unfettered by the rules of neo-classical poetry. He regards rules largely as “chains” which often act as an obstacle to the poet’s imagination. In a remark on the Minstrel in a letter to Beattie, Gray gives an important judgement on the value of the rules:

St. 7. *Rise, sons of harmony*, & c. This is charming; the thought and the expression. I will not be so hypercritical as to add, but it is *lyrical*, and therefore belongs to a different species of poetry. Rules are but chains, good for little, except when one can break through them; and what is fine gives me so much pleasure, that I never regard what place it is in.

Gray’s admiration of lyrical tradition arises from the nature of lyric composition which derives its authority independently of the panegyric and didactic instruments of contemporary neo-classicism. In his *Reminiscences of Gray*, Norton Nicholls reports that Gray considers Dante fortunate in that he wrote in a period where rules of refinement were not the standards of evaluation and where genius was not curbed by rational criticism:

He had a perfect knowledge of the Italian language & of the Poets of Italy of the first class, to whom he certainly looked up as his great progenitors; & to Dante as the father of all; to whose Genius. If I remember right, he thought it an advantage to have been produced in a rude age of strong, & uncontrouled passions, when the muse was not checked by refinement, & the fear of criticism.

The implication of this remark is that poetry was genuine and sublime, but now with the constraints of the neo-classical culture of criticism, this kind of poetry of “strong” and uncontrolled “passion” was unfortunately no longer possible in the modern literary culture of “refinement & the fear of criticism”. Gray disapproves of rules as guiding principles both in poetic composition and critical judgment. He lays the greatest emphasis upon imagination and emotion and attributes a minor function to judgment. In a letter to Mason, Gray declares that “an unbounded liberty to pure imagination, & fiction” is the “favourite province” of the poet which establishes its sphere beyond the “molest” of criticism. In a letter to Bedingfield, Gray reveals a great admiration for John Home’s *Tragedy of Douglas* because its beauty “greatly struck” him, though he found in it “infinite

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234 Gray, *Correspondence*, 3:1169.
236 Gray, *Correspondence*, 2:529.
faults”, since its writer shows no strict commitment to classical rules: “I am greatly struck with the Tragedy of Douglas, tho’ it has infinite faults. the Author seems to me to have retrieve the true language of the Stage, w’th had been lost for these hundred years; & there is one Scene (between Matilda & the old Peasant) so masterly, that it strikes me blind to all the defects in the world”. Gray’s discourse implies a correlation between “the true language” of poetry and sublimity. According to Gray, “the true language” is one of the remarkable hallmarks of true sublimity; it is the offspring of untrammelled imagination and emotion rather than a tutored genius.

Mid-century writers’ emphasis on the beauty of the literary work and the imaginative capacity of the poet which create it led to a shift toward a more subjective and relativist critical mode, which challenged the neo-classical ideal of absolute and objective judgment. Subsequently, mid-century aestheticism showed a fundamental change in the way in which literary value was defined, in that critics began to measure literary and artistic works less by the social functions they perform than by the “impression” they make “on the imagination and the feeling...which is to produce a pleasing effect upon the mind.” Douglas Lane Patey asserts that a literary work came to be conceived, like a painting in a museum, as a product “characterized precisely by its ‘disinterestedness’”, and by “its disconnection” from the public concerns. Wallace Jackson makes a similar point suggesting that mid-century writers were influenced by contemporary fashions as “the tradition of ut pictura poesis developed in English poetry from the demand for an immediately effective art, and fundamentally the lyric was the literary form most able to meet this requirement”. This allows mid-century writers to promote their concept of true sublime poetry by establishing a conceptual compatibility between it and lyric poetry which, as Jackson affirms “served somewhat similar purposes; its effect was taken to be an immediate exaltation of spirit, an enlargement of the

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237 Ibid., 2:515.
imagination, in its more extreme form an aesthetic of transcendence.”.\textsuperscript{240} The idea of “\textit{ut pictura poesis}” (as is painting so is poetry) marked a shift in emphasis from a concept of poetry as a statement of strict truth to the importance of poetic language, imagery and metaphor which brings poetry closer to its sister genres of fine arts. Lord Monboddo in his \textit{Origin and Progress of Language} (1773) reveals the way in which mid-century critics and poets began to view poetry as an imaginative creation of “truly poets or makers” just like the artistic work:

\begin{quote}
The imagination has a \textit{creative} power, which is peculiar to it, and distinguishes it effectively both from sense and memory: for sense is only conversant with the present, memory with the past; whereas imagination, by the means of this faculty, is conversant with future as well as the past, and paints to itself scenes that never did exist, and it is likely never will; for it may be said to create even the materials of those scenes…formed upon the model of objects that have been presented by the sense[s] and are, as it were, imitations of them…this is that great work of imagination, which is the foundation of all \textit{fine arts}, and stamps men truly \textit{poets}, or \textit{makers}.\textsuperscript{241}
\end{quote}

This emphasis on the role of imagination as a common creative faculty of art and poetry is also earlier laid by Gray. Imagination, Gray suggests, creates emotional effects by bestowing on the objects of life new appearances, new shapes, and new hues of the poet’s own creation: “The Province of Eloquence is to reign over minds of slow perception & imagination to set things in lights they never saw them in- to engage their attention by details or circumstances gradually unfolded, to adorn & heighten them with images & colours unknown to them, to raise & engage their rude passions &c”.\textsuperscript{242} James Engell claims that in the mid-century, critics and poets bestowed a “new literary premium on the imagination.” They were “rapidly becoming confident that it alone permits the greatest poetry, of a kind found by skipping the high neo-classic mode and returning to Milton and the Elizabethans, to Chaucer, and Homer”. The power of invention, he proceeds, was “incorporated into the new and rangy view of imagination” which became “more of a trusted power and, harkening back to Renaissance and classical inferences, a human reflex of God’s creative

\textsuperscript{241} James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, \textit{Of the Origin & Progress of Language}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. 6 vols. (Edinburgh: J. Balfour, 1774), 1:179n.
\textsuperscript{242} Duncan C. Tovey, \textit{Gray and his Friends, Letters and Relics in Great Part Hitherto Unpublished} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890), 270.
energy”.\textsuperscript{243} In his “Ode on the Poetical Character”, Collins depicts “Fancy” as the highest creative power exclusive given to few “godlike” individuals.

Young Fancy thus, to me divinest name,
To whom, prepared and bathed in heaven,
The cest of ampest power is given,
To few the godlike gift assigns,
To gird their blest prophetic loins,
And gaze her visions wild, and feel unmixed her flame. (ll. 17-22)\textsuperscript{244}

Burke’s On the Sublime and the Beautiful (1756) illustrates the psychology of aesthetic experience by explaining the nature and powers of the imagination. Burke ascribes to the creative imagination of the individual a capacity of inventing a “new manner” out of the familiar objects of the external world: “the mind of man possesses a sort of creative power of its own”, he asserts, “either in representing at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the senses, or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order. This power is called imagination; and to this belongs whatever is called wit, fancy, invention, and the like”.\textsuperscript{245} Imagination, as it was glorified as a distinctive feature of English lyric tradition, helped mid-century poets not only to channel their poetry within that tradition, but also offered them a vehicle to construct the concept of the poetic process of creativity which marked a shift away from the neoclassical idea of imitation, which takes poetry as an art imitative of the external world, towards emphasis on the internal expressive process of creativity. Joshua Reynolds claims that “The art which we profess has beauty for its object; this it is our business to discover and to express”. He observes that art “is an idea that subsists only in the mind; the sight never behold it: it is an idea residing in the breast of the artist, which he is always labouring to impart, and which he dies at last without imparting; but which he is yet so far able to communicate, as to raise the thoughts, and extend the views of spectator”.\textsuperscript{246}


\textsuperscript{244} Lonsdale, The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith, 429.


\textsuperscript{246} Reynolds, Sir Joshua Reynolds’s Discourses, 240.
This emphasis on the process of the human mind and its individual response to the external objects led many mid-century critics and aestheticians to reject the neo-classical reading of literature which depersonalizes individual tastes into the general representation. As a result the general was replaced by the particular and individual, the exemplary by the singular, judgement by emotional effects, and the correct and the refined by the wild. The attention of mid-century critics turned for the first time from the concept which viewed the poetic composition as an impersonal product to the concept which conceived the process of creativity “as something individual, something intimately bound up with the personality of the author”. Accordingly, “‘originality’ became the slogan against imitation, against observance of the rules and exact conformance with established types”. Gray, in a letter to Wharton, talks about poetic creativity as an involuntary process of inspiration: “I by no means pretend to inspiration, but yet I affirm, that the faculty in question is by no means voluntary. It is the result (I suppose) of a certain disposition of mind, w^th does not depend on oneself, & w^th I have not felt this long time. you that are a witness, how seldom this spirit has moved me in my life, may easily give credit to what I say”. Gray condemns Akenside’s didactic poem, Pleasures of the Imagination (1744), for its excessive act of emulation: “It seems to me above the middleing, & then (but for a little while) rises even to the best, particularly in description. it is often obscure, & even unintelligible, & too much infected with the Hutchison-Jargon”. Gray claims that Akenside’s imitation of “Hutchison-Jargon” obscures his poem. For Gray, Akenside’s borrowing from Hutchison is not appropriate in that it does not provide his poem with highly poetic idioms. For Gray, the language and style of poetry should be intimately connected with the poetic subjects. Poets should express a feeling of language congruous with the nature of poetry as art; their language

247 Wellek, The Rise of English Literary History, 49. Wellek claims that mid-century criticism made its “movement away from the abstract and towards the individual, subjective and concrete- to the unique which has been once and will never be again. The poet becomes an “original,” “creative” genius, a “second maker; a just Prometheus under Jove” in Shaftesbury’s widely quoted terms (Ibid., 49).
248 Gray, Correspondence, 2:571. Gray’s claim aroused Johnson’s reaction against Gray’s notion of inspiration, claiming that Gray “had a notion of not very peculiar, that he could not write but at certain times, or at happy moments; a fantastic foppery, to which my kindness for a man of learning and of virtue wishes him to have been superior” (Johnson, Lives of the Poets, 2:480).
249 Ibid., 1:224.
must express emotion in order to move readers. In his comment on Mason’s *Caractacus*, Gray disapproves Mason’s use of scientific diction since it mars the poetic effect of the literary work: “intellect is a word of science, & therefore inferior” not only to the poetic words, but even “to any more common word”. Similarly, in his note on Mason’s “Elegy on the Death of a Lady”, Gray suggests that “Zenith-height is harsh to the ear, & too scientific”. Gray urges Mason to maintain the mellifluousness of his diction and avoid harsh combinations of words. Pure poetry, according to Gray, is to be dressed with pure poetic diction—highly poetic language that arouses the effect of sublimity. Gray calls for the consistency of imagination which enables the poet to produce a poetic language which evokes the sublime effect of poetry rather than acting as a mere ornament or accessory. He stresses the importance of figurative language and imagery in poetic composition in constructing meanings and in evoking passions. Thomas Gibbons emphasizes the vivacity of figurative language which loses a great deal of its poetic effects when it is reduced to plain simple status: “If we would have a distinct and full idea of the beauty of a trope, let us substitute the natural expressions in the room of the tropical, and divest a bright phrase of its ornaments, by reducing it to plain and simple language, and then observe how much we abate the value of the discourse”. Similarly, Gray, in a letter to Mason in 1758, draws attention to the difference between the poetry of imaginative “magical enthusiasm” and that of cold common sense:

I must not have my fancy raised to that agreeable pitch of heathenism, & wild magical enthusiasm, & then have you let me drop into moral philosophy, & cold good sense. I remember you insulted me, when I saw you last, & affected to call, that w[ch] delighted my imagination, *Nonsense*: now I insist, that Sense is nothing in poetry, but according to the dress she wears, & the scene she appears in.

Gray’s statement of language as the “dress” of thought elaborates a rhetorical argument adopted by classical and Elizabethan writers. Pope, in his *An Essay on Criticism*, attacks the critics who focus their attentions on poets’ language rather than the moral messages of poetry: “Others for *Language* all

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250 Ibid., 2:606.
251 Ibid., 2:714.
252 Ibid., 2:593.
their Care express,/ And value Books, as women men, for Dress:/ Their praise is still,—the Style is excellent:/ The Sense, they humbly take upon Content” (ll. 305-8) P. W. K. Stone suggests that the “conception of ‘dress’ derives from a presumption that one and the same thought may be expressed in a variety of different ways: language is said to ‘dress’ thought in that it may present it under different guises”. According to this conception, as Stone puts it, “Tropes and figures are regarded as especially appropriate to this purpose. The chief consideration here is not accuracy, but effectiveness: the choice of such language as will serve best to present a given thought in certain light”.

Gray does not mean by the word “dress” as mere ornaments or accessories, but as the body or manifestation of thoughts through which implications and impressions radiate and the process of the poet’s mind is revealed: “I do not mean by expression the mere choice of words, but the whole dress, fashion, & arrangement of a thought. here in particular, it is the brokenness, the ungrammatical position, the total subversion of the period that charms me”. For Gray, a poem is similar to a painting which needs meditation on the part of receivers in order to extract a meaning out of it. According to Gray, poetic language has an artistic significance, and for this reason, he differentiates poetry from prose which displays more literal dimensions. In a letter to Mason, Gray proclaims:

Pray, when did I pretend to finish, or even insert, passages into other people’s works? As if it were equally easy to pick holes, & to mend them. all I can say is, that your elegy must not end with the worst line in it. it is flat, it is prose, whereas that above all ought to sparkle; or at least to shine. if the sentiment must stand, twirl it a little into apophthegm, stick a flower in it, gild it a little with a costly expression, let it strike the fancy, the ear, or the heart, & I am satisfied.

Prose is “flat”, for Gray. It is the imagery and the “costly expression” of poetic language that “strike the fancy, the ear, or the heart”. In accordance with this conviction, Gray’s literary history is constructed and on this foundation Gray bases his evaluation. Gray’s opinions on Joseph Warton’s

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254 Stone, The Art of Poetry, 49.
255 Gray, Correspondence, 2:528.
256 Ibid., 2:568.
and Collins’ poetry indicate how Gray shows admiration for invention, for fancy modelled upon poetic tradition, and for a variety of expressions and images:

Have you seen the Works of two Young Authors, a Mr Warton & a Mr Collins, both Writers of Odes? it is odd enough, but each is the half of a considerable Man, & one the Counter-part of the other. the first has but little invention, very poetical choice of Expression, & a good Ear. the second a fine Fancy, model’d upon the Antique, a bad ear, great Variety of Words, & Images with no Choice at all.  

On the other pole of the literary history of Gray and his school of “neo-Elizabethans” stands the contemporary neo-classical poets, the followers of the culture of “True ease”, with their “flat” prosaic style and didactic poetry ingrained by the “School of France”. Though Gray does not align himself with a particular literary school, the narrative of his literary history indicates an affinity with the Wartons, Collins, and Hurd who strived to restore English poetry to its original poetic source.

To a certain extent neo-classicism as Gray conceived it represented a revolt against the optimistic, exuberant, and enthusiastic vernacular tradition which replaced its literary ideals of imagination, invention, experimentation, and mysticism with an emphasis on order, reason, and restraint. Though Gray recognized Dryden’s and Pope’s contribution to enriching and keeping the vigour of poetic language, he saw that their adaptation of the French neo-classicism alienated modern poetry from the sublimity of native literary culture. He and many of his contemporaries joined together in their plea for restoring English poetry to its original poetic channel.

Mid-century critics’ rejection of those ideals that they framed as French neo-classical ideals, particularly, those which hinder the continuity of vernacular literary tradition, and their endeavour of rewriting English literary history in light of new aestheticism are an ideological reaction, both national and cultural. The French political challenge was acting as a trigger which generated a

257 Ibid., 1:261.
258 See Chapter Five.
259 Joseph Warton, in his “Advertisement” introducing his Odes on Various Subjects (1746) declares that “the public has been so much accustom’d of late to didactic Poetry alone, and Essays on moral Subjects, that any work where the imagination is much indulged, will perhaps not be relished or regarded. The author therefore of these pieces is in some pain least certain austere critics should think them to fanciful and descriptive. But as he is convinced that the fashion of moralizing in verse has been carried too far, and as he looks upon Invention and Imagination to be the chief faculties of a Poet, so he will be happy if the following Odes may be look’d upon as an attempt to bring back Poetry into its right channel” (Joseph Warton, Odes on Various Subjects, ed. Joan Pittock (Delmar, NY: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), 3).
reaction against the hegemony of French literary culture, and this helped to construct a new aestheticism as an essential requirement for constructing a distinctive cultural character. Unlike the neo-classicists who constructed their own vision of an earlier literary past in light of the standards of polite society to define their modern culture, mid-century critics presented a version of the past, in which what was considered to be as barbarous and irregular came to be seen as the creation of originality and the production of natural genius. This new version helped them in constructing literary theories deriving its authority and its cultural features from what they viewed as high cultural forms of the past. In other words, mid-century critics’ reaction does not result from a desire to distinguish themselves aesthetically by repudiating the classical tradition, the pantheon of neo-classicism, in favour of vernacular tradition. Much of the debate of mid-century critics takes its authority from the classical tradition, especially Greek tradition of Longinus and Pindar, to refute neo-classical ideals. The native lyric tradition and the Greek Pindaric odes were revived together as paradigms of “pure poetry” and as counter genres to French neo-classical models. In order to heighten a sense of cultural identity, mid-century writers found in tradition a vehicle of cultural restoration, as next chapter will illustrate, which helps purifying poetry from modern infringements.

Lyric sublimity, for Gray, is a result of combination of beauty of thought and the beauty of expressions. Poetry loses much of its power and its effect when it loses the poetic character of its idioms. The poetic language of neo-classical poetry generates a different style of poetry, which, though Gray admires it, he does not find it a characteristic mode for “pure poetry”, since it departs significantly from the poetic mode of native tradition. For Gray the poetic language is not a mere means of presenting thoughts but a means of generating the sublime effects by producing a mode of style which appeals to the imagination and emotion of the recipients.

Mid-century writers turn the neo-classical notion of purity which assumes that a pure style must be free from the barbarisms of earlier poetic composition, and established a new notion of pure poetry whose paradigmatic source is related to the pure poetic native tradition. Gray’s terms of “pure poetry”, “pure imagination”, “pure passion”, and “the true language” of the “true poet”
reflect his desire to channel the contemporary English poetry to the pure poetic source of native tradition which, according to Gray, was muddled with domination of “School of France”. Gray uses the concept of sublime or “pure poetry” to emphasize the genius of English language and English poetry to buttress his idea of significance of tradition, as the next chapter will illustrate.
Chapter Five

Gray’s Odes: The Poetics of Literary Tradition

…the still small voice of Poetry was not made to be heard in crowd; yet Satire will be heard, for all the audience are by nature her friends; especially when she appears in the spirit of Dryden, with his strength, and often with his versification.

(Gray’s letter to Walpole, Jan. or Feb., 1748)260

This chapter addresses one of the more overlooked results of the emergence of professionalism within poetry and literary criticism in the mid-eighteenth century, namely the development of a split between what had by this time become a mainstream of literary culture established by neo-classicists and what came to be seen by Gray and many mid-century critics as a pure high literary culture which pre-dated the domination of the neoclassical literary culture. The chapter suggests that both camps of the mid-century that divided the literary field viewed literature in relation to the reading public. Each attempted to appropriate the literary field by constructing aesthetic theories derived from the poetic culture of the past. In some cases, this was the immediate past, as in the case of late neo-classicists such as Johnson and Goldsmith, who built on the literary culture established by earlier neo-classical predecessors. In others it was the distant past, as Gray, the Wartons, and Hurd, by advocating a literary paradigm characteristic of pre-Restoration poetry. In both cases, literary tradition was used to serve and validate the debate about canon-formation and the writing of literary history. In tracing this, the chapter shows how mid-century interest in vernacular literary tradition was informed by the pressures of modernity which was viewed by Gray and many mid-century writers as a direct threat to the national literary culture established before the rise of the “modern” culture represented by the Restoration period and continued through to their own time. Gray’s literary history in verse represented by his odes “The Bard” and “The Progress of Poesy”, with their antiquated language and sets of references to a pre-commercial literary

260 Gray, Correspondence, 1:296.
culture, construct a narrative of literary history removed from the language of commercial culture of his age.

Gray’s resistance to what he saw as the pressures of modern literary culture can be seen on various levels. Within his poems, prior literary tradition is markedly identified by the revival of long-established poetic forms, topoi, and diction. In terms of their production, Gray resisted modern literary culture. Working in ways more familiar to the earlier literary tradition that prevailed prior to the print revolution, Gray consistently confirmed a reluctance to subject his poetry to the commercial market place aimed to satisfy the needs of common readers, preferring to circulate his poetry within a literary circle of intellectual readers. Through discussing these issues, the chapter also shows how Gray’s literary history was informed by his attitudes to the commercial print market and its reading public. In doing so, the chapter illustrates how the literary history which Gray tried to present in his odes was an object of controversial argument between Johnson’s school and that of Gray. Johnson’s view reflects a poetic culture established by panegyric and satiric modes of poetry which constrains the poetic subject from the personal and the individual and locates it rather in a more rational and rhetorical sphere: a poetic culture which emphasizes the poet’s task to cultivate and persuade rather than emphasizing the effects of sublimity arising from passion and images of fancy and fiction. Johnson considers the approach Gray follows in his odes, especially “The Bard”, as a kind of private flight of fancy which lies outside the range of customary human experience. For Johnson, if the poet has “painted scenes which he never saw, and manners he never knew, his performance, though it might have been a pleasing amusement of fancy, would have exhibited no representation of nature or of life”.261

Johnson’s criticism shows a continued insistence on the Aristotelian idea of the universality of literature. Gray’s “Elegy” was admired by Johnson because it “abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo”.262 Gray was

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261 *Literary Magazine*, 1 (April-May, 1756), 36.
262 Johnson, *Lives*, 4:485. Johnson approved Dyer’s “Grongar Hill” since “the reflections of the writer [are] so consonant to the general sense or experience of mankind.” Johnson similarly criticized Collins because of his
praised primarily because his elegy conforms to the neoclassical cult of generality and pastoral tradition. However, when Gray resorted to another sort of inspiration for his odes, “The Bard” and “The Progress of Poesy”, he was severely criticized by Johnson:

To select a singular event, and swell it to a giant’s bulk by fabulous appendages of spectres and predictions, has little difficulty, for he that forsakes the probable may always find the marvellous. And it has little use; we are affected only as we believe; we are improved only as we find something to be imitated or declined. I do not see that The Bard promotes any truth, moral or political.263

Johnson’s criticism casts some light on the difference in the concept of poetry that he and Gray adopt. Johnson disapproved Gray’s choice and imaginative treatment of remote subject-matter in “The Bard” which violated neo-classical ideals of rationality and probability which show deep concern with the present, with contemporary attitudes, manners and standard of language. Gray’s and many mid-century poets’ concern, on the other hand, was to focus on “unsubstantial realities existent within the imagination” and on “a newly marvellous subject not divorced from probability but founded on the probabilities of human nature and justified by the evidence of past literatures”.264

In essence Johnson was rehearsing a key tenet of Restoration literary culture, whose aesthetics emphasized the importance of the poetic representation of the probability of human conditions and at the same time degraded such imaginative flight in poetic creation which was seen to offer access to what it considered to be an outmoded literary culture of “inherent improbability”, which, in Johnson’s words, “always forces dissatisfaction on the mind”.265 Such a reading was generally dominant in English literary criticism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

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263 Ibid., 4:881-82.
264 Wallace Jackson, The Probable and the Marvelous: Blake, Wordsworth, and the Eighteenth-Century Critical Tradition (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1978), 4. Jackson suggests that mid-century writers’ reaction came as an attempt to resume “what they believed to be the true impulses of the native tradition in poetry, a tradition largely distorted by their Restoration and Augustan predecessors. By so doing, they offered both a more comprehensive appeal to, and representation of, the diversities of human sensibility than had been practiced by the poets, with the exception of Milton, of the preceding hundred years… In this endeavour they were aided and abetted by such contemporary fashions as the traditions ut picture poesis, by the sublime, and by the growing interest in cultural and aesthetic primitivism” (Jackson, The Probable and the Marvelous, 4).
centuries and it remained without substantial challenge until the rise of national consciousness which entails emphasis on cultural distinction which the mid-century writers found its roots in the vernacular past. In defence of the literary culture of the past, Gray and a number of mid-century critics contrived an aesthetic theory which conforms to what they framed as the poetic tradition of the past. Hurd, for instance, offers an alternative concept of poetry which emphasizes the fictional nature of poetry: “fiction”, says Hurd, is the “soul” of poetry. According to Hurd, the purpose of poetry is

not to delineate truth simply, but to present it in the most taking forms; not to reflect the real face of things, but to illustrate and adorn it; not to represent the fairest objects only, but to represent them in the fairest lights, and to heighten all their beauties up to the possibility of their natures; nay, to outstrip nature, and to address itself to our wildest fancy, rather than to our judgment and cooler sense.266

In a similar fashion, Gray sought inspirations of what he thought to be the central tradition of English literary culture. For Gray, tradition, whether it is historical or mythical, offers the poet a province of imagination which is the essence of “invention” and originality. For Johnson, such an imaginative approach, however skilful, is a violation of historical truth. Gray’s vision of the bard “With haggard eyes the poet stood;/ Loose his beard and hoary hair” (ll. 18-19), the “bloody” prophecy, and the bard’s plunge to “endless night” are regarded by Johnson as a factitious invention or “falsehood.” Johnson believes that the poet’s indulgence in fancy carries the poet’s thoughts away from what he observes and experiences in real and familiar life:

To indulge the power of fiction, and send imagination out upon the wing, is often the sport of those who delight too much in silent speculation.... By degrees the reign of fancy is confirmed; she grows first imperious and in time despotic. Then fictions begin to operate as realities, false opinions fasten upon the mind, and life passes in dreams of rapture or of anguish.267

Mid-century literary theories, such as those of Gray and Johnson, can also be read in the context of changes in the nature of the audience of literature. Johnson’s emphasis on the poetic representation of familiar life and his rejection of the antiquated literary modes of his contemporaries reveal the

extent to which Johnson’s views were formed in relation to the reading public and his standpoint as a professional writer. Professional writers compose their literary products with full intention to be read and bought by large number of readers. In one sense, Johnson champions a poetic model intelligible and accessible by as broad a reading public as possible. “In the character of his Elegy”, Johnson asserts, “I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinement of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decide all claim to poetical honours”.

He advocates a species of poetry which emphasizes the concept of poetry as a representation of the general and the familiar: the poetry which instructs and pleases the largest number of the reading public. The disparity of the views adopted by such poets as Johnson and Gray illustrates how the split that characterized mid-century literary culture was informed by the changes in the reception and commercial commodification of literature. This situation generated a conflicting position between the traditional systems of manuscript circulation and oral tradition and print culture, with its contrasting wide-range circulation of printed materials, which, for Gray, represented a direct threat to the high-cultural tradition of the native past.

Johnson focuses most of his denunciation of the odes on Gray’s diction which he regards as a hindrance to the communication between the poet and his readers. He claims that Gray’s language “laboured with harshness. The mind of the writer seems to work with unnatural violence. Double, double, toil and trouble. He has a kind of strutting dignity, and is tall by walking on tiptoe. His art and his struggle are too visible, and there is too little appearance of ease and nature”. Gray’s attempts to recapture a poetic fire and sublimity achieved in the past, and which were effaced with the domination of the prosaic style of modern poetry, led him to rely heavily on antiquated diction.

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268 Johnson, Lives, 4:484.
269 Ibid.
270 This view was common among mid-century advocates of primitivism. Hugh Blair claims that the language of the poetry of the past is more poetic in that it is more metaphorical: “Men never have used so many figures of style as in these rude ages”, Hugh Blair wrote, “when, besides the power of a warm imagination to suggest lively images, the want of proper and precise terms for the ideas they could express, obliged them to have recourse to circumlocution, metaphor, comparison, and all those substituted forms of expression, which give a
Gray attributes to the antiquated poetic language characters of sublimity and pictorial beauty removed from the common idioms of modern literary culture. However, Gray believes that the use of old language, as he asserts in his letter to West in April 1742, should not be an imitative affectation: “the affectation of imitating Shakespeare may doubtless be carried too far; and there is no sort of excuse for sentiments ill-suited, or speeches ill-timed, which I believe is a little the case with me.” West’s letter to Gray in April 1742 shows that West concurs with Gray about many issues concerning the use poetic language. West affirms that if the antiquated words are carefully chosen and moderately used by modern poets, they give “certain grace” and “energy” to their poetry:

For you say the affectation of imitating Shakespeare may doubtless be carried too far; I say as much and no more. For old words we know are old gold, provided they are well chosen... Shakespeare is a mine of antient ore, where all our great modern poets have found their advantage. I do not know how it is, but his old expressions have more energy in them than ours, and are even more adapted to poetry; certainly, where they are judiciously and sparingly inserted, they add a certain grace to the composition; in the same manner as Poussin gave a beauty to his pictures by his knowledge in the antient proportions: but should he, or any other painter, carry the imitation too far, and neglect that best of models Nature, I am afraid it would prove a very flat performance.

Gray’s and West’s views were entirely rejected by Johnson. Johnson, in his comment on Gray’s language, asserted that “Gray thought his language more poetical as it was more remote from common use”. Gray’s choice of antiquated obscure diction is deliberate. In a letter to Horace Walpole in 1752, he says that he will send Dodsley “a high Pindaric upon stilts, which one must be a better scholar than he is to understand a line of, and the very best scholars will understand but a little matter here and there”. In a letter to Mason in 1757, Gray declares: “nobody understands

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271 Gray, Correspondence, 1:193.
272 Ibid., 1:194-95.
273 Johnson, Live, 4:477.
274 Gray, Correspondence, 1:364. Gray’s description of his odes as “high Pindaric” illustrates that Gray’s concept of high culture is not peculiar to pure native tradition. His periodization of his literary history into schools according to the influence exercised on them shows his awareness of the interaction of classical and native traditions. Thus, according to Gray, high culture which was represented by Elizabethan tradition is the paradigmatic result of this cultural interaction.
me, & I am perfectly satisfied. [...] Lyttelton & M'. Shenstone admire me, but wish I had been a little clearer. [...] its very well: the next thing I print shall be in Welch. that’s all”.275 Even Gray’s closest friends found Gray’s odes obscure. In 1757, Horace Walpole wrote of Gray’s odes to Lord Lyttelton that Gray’s “great lustre has not dazzled me, as his obscurity seems to have blinded his contemporaries. Indeed, I do not think that they ever admired him except in his Churchyard, though the Eton Ode...is perfect: these [Gray’s sister odes], of more masterly execution, have defects. Yet not to admire them is total want of taste”.276 Gray felt that readers admired his “Elegy” because of its plain language and its familiar references, as well as Gray’s drawing on the classical tradition of pastoral poetry, which was increasingly familiar to wide readership due to the domination of neo-classical tropes within mid-century literary culture: it “owed its popularity entirely to the subject [for] the public would have received it as well if it had been written in prose”.277 Gray wanted his poetry to be elevated to the level of high-cultural tradition of the past and not to be reduced to the level of commercialized popular culture. In a letter to Walpole in 1751, Gray urged Walpole to rescue him from the problem Walpole had put him in by circulating the MS copies of the “Elegy” for long time so that the editor of the Magazine of Magazines wrote to Gray about the publication of the “Elegy”. The letter shows how Gray associates the commercial magazines and periodicals with the literature of mass culture and how he was careful about the printing his own works:

As you have brought me into a little Sort of Distress, you must assist me, I believe, to get out of it, as well as I can. Yesterday I had the misfortune of receiving a Letter from certain Gentleman (as their Bookseller expresses it) who have taken the Magazine of Magazines into their Hands. they tell me, that ingenious Poem, call’d, Reflections in a Country-Churchyard, has been communicated to them, wth they are printing forthwith: that they are inform’d, that the excellent Author of it is I by name & that they beg not only his Indulgence, but the Honor of his Correspondence, &c: as I am not at all disposed to be either indulgent, or so correspondent, as they desire; I have but one Way left to escape the Honour they would inflict upon me. & therefore am obliged to desire you would make Dodsley print it immediately (wloth may be done in less than a Week’s time) from your Copy, but without my Name, in what Form is

275 Gray, Correspondence, 2:522-24. Shenstone saw that “Mr. Gray, of manners very delicate, yet possessed of a poetical vien fraught with the noblest and sublimest images, and a mind fraught with the more masculine parts of learning” (Gray, The Works of Thomas Gray in Prose and Verse, 2:327-28n).
most convenient for him, but in his best Paper & Character. he must correct the
Press himself. & print it without any interval between the Stanza’s, because the
Sense is in some Places continued beyond them; & the Title must be, Elegy, wrote in
Country Church-yard. if he would add a Line or two to say it came into his Hands by
Accident, I should like it better.278

After the commercial success of the Elegy, Gray embarked on Pindaric odes, “vocal for the intelligent
alone”. Though Gray complied with his friends’ advice to add some explanatory prose notes to his
odes to remove the obscurity which faced the reading public, he was reluctant to add more notes,
thinking that they might degrade his poetry. Walpole, as he wrote to Horace Mann of these odes in
1757, was hesitant to ask Gray to add more notes: “They are Greek, they are Pindaric, they are
sublime--consequently I fear a little obscure...I could not persuade him to add more notes; he says
whatever wants to be explained, don’t deserve to be”.279 In an “Advertisement” to his odes Gray
asserts that he had previously refused to add them, for he “had then too much respect for the
understanding of his readers to take that liberty”.280 Gray felt disappointed when he realized that
many educated readers did not in fact understand them: “very few understand them; the multitude
of all rank call’d them unintelligible.”281 Linda Zionkowski suggests that “It is uncertain whether the
quality of audiences actually had declined, but the perception at mid-century was that things were
getting worse, as poets more bitterly and more frequently acknowledged the social and intellectual
differences between themselves and their readers”. She asserts that “To many writers of the period,
consumers of commercial print proved an inadequate audience for poetry, in part because they
viewed verse as one commodity for entertainment among others”.282 Beattie, in a letter to Gray in

278 Gray, Correspondence, 1:341-2. As Gray wished, Walpole wrote a short “Advertisement” which was prefixed
to the Elegy by Dodsley: “the following POEM came into my hands by Accident, if the general Approbation with
which this little Piece has been spread, may be called by so slight a term as Accident. It is this Approbation
which makes it unnecessary for me to make any Apology but to the Author: As he cannot but feel some
Satisfaction in having pleas’d so many Readers already, I flatter myself he will forgive me communicating that
Pleasure to many more” (Cited by Lonsdale’s The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith, 111).
279 Walpole, Correspondence, 21:120.
280 See Jones, Thomas Gray: Scholar, 15-16. In 1768, Gray added some notes his odes. In a letter to James
Beattie in 24 December 1767, Gray affirms, “I do it out of spite, because the Publick did not understand the
two odes” (Gray, Correspondence, 2:608).
281 Jones, Thomas Gray: Scholar, 16.
282 Linda Zionkowski, Men’s Work: Gender, Class, and the Professionalization of Poetry, 1660-1784 (New York:
Palgrave, 2001), 146. Linda Zionkowski’s book discusses the Professionalization of Poetry in relation to the
emergence of “new constructions of masculine authorship” (Zionkowski, Men’s Work, 26).
1768, refers to a decline in the quality of the audience of poetry in the mid-eighteenth century. He asserts that “If there be any obscurity in the Bard, it is only in the allusions; for the style and imagery are clear distinct and strong. But readers now-a-days have nothing in view but amusement; and have little relish for a book that requires any degree of attention”.Gray’s reaction was primarily generated by these “social and intellectual differences” which affected the traditional cultural hierarchy and led to a perception on his part that a heterogeneous reading public dominated the production of literature as a cultural commodity: “Mr. Bedingfield in a golden shower of panegrick writes me word, that at York-races he overheard three People, whom by their dress & manner he takes for Lords, say, that I was impenetrable & inexplicable, and they wish’d, I had told them in prose, what I meant in verse, & then they bought me (which was what most displeased him) & put me in their pocket”. Gray suggests that the deterioration of literary taste included even the educated elite audience who were increasingly influenced by and accustomed to prose mode of writing. Under this influence of contemporary literary culture, readers no longer have the aesthetic sensibility which enables them to comprehend and judge what Gray thought of as high-cultural poetry. Gray recognized this shift in cultural power and reacted against it. He was unwilling to work within the commercial system of commodification of literature dominated and directed by a diverse mass audience. The educated audience of barons, dames, and statesmen of the British golden age, as Gray points out in his description of the Elizabethan literary culture in “The Bard”, whose patronage of arts helped to establish the national culture of Britain, had been replaced by a thoughtless audience:

Girt with many a baron bold
Sublime their starry fronts they rear;
And gorgeous dames, and statesmen old
In bearded majesty, appear.
In the midst a form divine!
Her eye proclaims her of the Briton-line;
Her lion-port, her awe-commanding face,

283 Gray, Correspondence, 3:1011.
284 Ibid. 2:532.
Attempered sweet to virgin-grace. ("The Bard", ll. 111-18)\textsuperscript{285}

The competition of writers for the favour of educated august patrons in the past had become commercial competition for the favour of common readers, who began to create, through their impact on the market of books, a mass culture which, for Gray, affected the continuity of national literary culture. The rising diverse audience of common readers helped to cause a decline from sublimity towards a more prosaic and mundane fashion in poetry. Gray thinks that the commodification of literature has altered the poet to a mechanical versifier who increasingly focuses on the satisfaction of the readers’ desire. In 1768, Gray suggests, in a letter to Walpole, that “When you first commenced an author, you exposed yourself to pit, box and gallery. Any coxcomb in the world may come in and hiss, if he pleases; aye, and (what is almost as bad) clap too, and you cannot hinder him”.\textsuperscript{286}

The “still small voice of Poetry” which, as Gray believes, “was not made to be heard in a crowed”\textsuperscript{287}, exposed, with the commodification of literature generated by print culture, to a “gallery” which represents pressure on the writer and, subsequently, an influence on the direction of literary culture. Gray also believes that addressing a few elite audience will not only pay tribute to literary culture constructed by native canonical poetry of the past, but will enable him to communicate his views to the most influential sphere capable of exercising direct and active influence on the present and future of the national culture. In a letter to Walpole, Gray, after welcoming Walpole’s intention to write a social history of England and after giving him some advice about it, suggests that the book should be sponsored by the king and circulated among the elites: “As to the expence, that must be the king’s own entirely, and he must give the book to foreign ministers and people of note; for it is obvious no private man can undertake such a thing without a subscription, and no gentleman will care for such an expedient; and a gentleman it should be, 

\textsuperscript{285} Gray suggests that national culture flourish only with patronage of the state. He give examples of the ancient British bardic culture where the bards honoured by kings and from Elizabethan culture where the national literary culture was flourish under the reign of patriotic queen Elizabeth.

\textsuperscript{286} Gray, Correspondence, 3:1009.

\textsuperscript{287} Ibid., 1:296.
because he must have easy access to archives, cabinets, and collections of all sorts.” This statement explains the nature of the audience Gray expects for his unfinished project of *History of English Poetry* and shows the status he attributes to the historian and to himself as a literary historian—an educated gentleman speaking to educated gentlemen.

However, Gray’s reaction against mass culture and its reading public does not arise from sexism or social snobbery, as some critics, such as Linda Zionkowski, have thought. Gray sees the problem caused by the rise of mass culture in terms of education. He holds that an economic improvement alone cannot produce a cultural improvement unless it is accompanied by a proper education. He claims that the educational system of his time is unjust, especially towards women, and he attributes the difficulty that women readers face in understanding intellectual works due to their lack of education:

> [O]ne thing I must say, (but this is sacred & under the seal of confession) there is no Woman, that can take pleasure in this kind of composition. If Parts only & Imagination & Sensibility were required, one might (I doubt not) find them in that Sex full as easily as in our own: but there is a certain measure of learning necessary, & a long acquaintance with the good Writers ancient & modern, which by our injustice is denied to them. and without this they can only catch here & there a florid expression, or a musical rhyme, while the Whole appears to them a wild obscure unedifying jumble.

Similarly, in his “Elegy”, Gray famously maintains that many a “mute inglorious Milton,” “Hampden,” and “Cromwell” among the poor who lived and died without opportunities to develop and polish their potentialities by getting a proper education. He compares them with flowers in the desert and with gems at the bottoms of the sea, with nobody to enjoy their beauty.

> 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.  
> ……………………………………………………………  
> Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid  
> Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;  
> Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,  
> Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

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290 Gray, *Correspondence*, 2:477-78.
But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page  
Rich with the spoils of time did ne’er unroll;  
Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower 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 field withstood;  
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,  
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country’s blood. (ll. 29-32, 45-60)

Gray asks the rich, those with grandeur, power, nobility, and pride, not to mock and disdain the poor  
because they could not accomplish remarkable status in in the “annals” of life. In the original version  
of the “Elegy”, Gray selected three Romans as representative figures of great achievement: Cato,  
Tully and Caesar. In the second version of the poem, Gray substituted these figures with figures from  
English modern history: Hampden, Milton and Cromwell.  
291 Gray chose English figures to localize the  
problem of the poor and the question of education. He indicates that the same soil and climate  
which produced such great leaders and poets could make some poor villagers, if they had good  
educational opportunities, great figures “pregnant with celestial fire”—a political figures that might  
rule great empires and poetic figures that might awake “to ecstasy the living lyre” of Miltonic  
sublimity once again. But unfortunately, all those potentialities were hindered because of the lack of  
Knowledge.

Gray’s later poetry with its antiquated language and obscure style was not meant to exclude  
the common reader on social and sexist grounds, but he found in the subject-matter he chose and in  
the style he used a necessity for aligning his poetry with the tradition of sublime poetry. In his A

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291 Lonsdale suggests that Gray “instances of greatness were originally classical in the Eton MS. The alteration  
to Hampden, Milton and Cromwell corresponds to the fact the continuation of the poem after the original ending  
is markedly less classical and more English in character” (Lonsdale, The poems of Gray, Collins,  
Goldsmith, 128). The alteration Gray made in the second version of the “Elegy” marked an alteration in the  
character of the poem. While the first version relied on Virgilian and Horatian techniques the second version,  
in which Gray followed the poetic model set by Milton’s Lycidas, is Miltonic in its language and technique.
Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), Burke refers to “obscurity” as a source of the sublime. Unlike his neo-classical contemporaries, Burke views “obscurity” not as an incidental or undesirale sign of poetic enthusiasm, but as an attribute of sublime transport which has favourable effects on the passion and imagination of the recipient. The vagueness of the images which arises from the obscure or undefined atmosphere contributes to an effect of sublimity. Burke finds in Milton’s Paradise Lost a typical example for his argument: “No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things...in their strongest light by the force of judicious obscurity, than Milton. [There follows a quotation from Paradise Lost, ii, 666-73]. In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree.” In “The Bard,” for instance, Gray managed to escape through history and myth the more quotidian subject matter of Augustan poetry and found in the remote obscure and mystic past a voice of historical grandeur and sublimity he felt was missing in contemporary literary culture. Gray found a new kind of complexity and obscurity to which he was driven by the need to align his poetry with the canonical tradition of the past by confining it to a coterie of writers, cognoscenti, and readers well-versed in literature and the history of literature. Like the high-cultural poetry of the past, Gray wanted his poetry to be also inaccessible for the uneducated readers of the mid-century commercial literary culture. The literary works of the past are obscure and inaccessible for contemporary common readers in that they require a wide knowledge on the part of the reader to understand its allusions and its historical, cultural, and social background. For this reason, the literary works of canonical poets, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton were not fully understood and appreciated in Gray’s time by uneducated audience, since these works became remote in time and place to eighteenth-century readers. Gray’s odes were an attempt to create verse intellectually remote from the mass literary culture generated by modernity to associate his poetry with the remote high-cultural tradition. This idea was challenged by Johnson and his school. Oliver Goldsmith claims that Pindar, whom Gray endeavoured to imitate, was very true to the demands of his

audience, in that his poetry was derived from real experience and was a response to his own society. In reviewing Gray’s odes, Goldsmith thought that Gray had too little sense of his readers. Pindar, for all his obscurity, “adapted his works exactly to the dispositions of his countrymen. Irregular, enthusiastic, and quick in transition, he wrote for a people inconstant, of warm imaginations and exquisite sensibility. He chose the most popular subjects, and all his allusions are to customs well known, in his days, to the meanest person”.293 In his Life of Thomas Parnell (1770) Oliver Goldsmith regretted that, with poetry having once been “brought to its highest pitch of refinement”, the new poets

should have taken so much pains to involve it in pristine barbarity. There misguided innovators have not been content with restoring antiquated words and phrases, but have indulged themselves in the most licentious transpositions, and the harshest constructions, vainly imagining, that the more their writings unlike prose, the more they resemble poetry. They have adopted a language of their own, and call upon mankind for admiration. All those who do not understand them are silent, and those who make out their meaning, are willing to praise, to shew they understand.294

Goldsmith’s judgment of Gray’s poetry was made in terms of the reception of poetry. However, he admitted that “the circumstances of grief and horror” and “the mystic obscurity” in “The Bard” “will give as much pleasure to those who relish this species of composition, as anything that hitherto appeared in our language”.295 The group of writers and readers to whom Goldsmith referred found in Gray’s poetry the imaginative, the pathetic, and the sublime that represent, according to Joseph Warton, the characteristics of “true poetry”. Warton was keen to defend these characteristics against Johnson and his circle. Warton instead aligns Gray’s poetry with the school of Milton. He rejects Johnson’s criticism of Milton’s and Gray’s poetry:

As much as I revere and respect the memory of my old acquaintance Dr. Johnson, and as highly as I think of his abilities, integrity, and virtue, yet must I be pardoned for saying, that I cannot possibly subscribe to many of his critical decisions: particularly to what he has said of the Lycidas, II Penseroso, and Latin poems of Milton; of the Sixth Book of Paradise Lost... and of the Odes of Gray.296

296 Warton’s Essay on Pope, 1:xvi- xvii.
Warton’s protest came as a reaction against Johnson’s criticism in his Lives of the Poets, where he launched a severe attack on Milton’s and Gray’s diction in relation to its difficulty for unlearned readers. Johnson claims that though “there prevails an uniform peculiarity of diction” in some of Milton’s works, his “mode and cast of expression” are “so far removed from common use, that an unlearned reader, when he first opens his book, finds himself surprised by a new language”. By contrast, for Warton, Milton’s and Gray’s diction is the diction of true poetry: an exalted style of verse, which, according to Warton, surpasses the prose-like style demanded by the mainstream (and as far as he was concerned commercially motivated) literary culture of the day. Gray’s odes represented to many mid-century writers a contemporary paradigm of the sublime poetry, a poetry that bridges the past with the present. John Pinkerton wrote that, “Gray is the first and greatest of modern lyric writers; nay, I will venture to say, of all lyric writers, his works tho few… uniting the perfections of every lyric poet, both of present and former times”. In his the second volume of his Essay on Pope, Warton claims Gray’s “The Bard” offers an example of sublime poetry unattainable even by Pope, the leading poet of modern literary culture:

The preference given to Pope, above other modern English poets, it must be remembered, is founded on the excellencies of his works in general, and taken all together; for there are parts and passages in other modern authors, in Young and in Thomson, for instance, equal to any of Pope; and he has written nothing in a strain so truly sublime, as the Bard of Gray.

Similarly, Horace Walpole rates Gray’s odes, in a letter to Lord Lyttelton in 1757, in the first rank of cultural production. He holds “them in the first rank of genius and poetry.” The first three stanzas of “The Bard” and the last three of the Progress Ode “are in my opinion equal to anything in any language I understand”. To achieve this rank of poetry, Gray used the Pindaric ode as a model for high-cultural poetry, since this form shows difficulty and challenge to the mass culture of his time.

Gray relied heavily on an allusive style comprehensible only by readers who have a wide background

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297 Johnson, Live, 1:263.
298 Robert Heron [a pseudonym of John Pinkerton], Letters of Literature (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1785), 131.
300 Walpole, Correspondence, 40:102,101.
in native and classical history, mythology, as well as a knowledge of literary history. Gray finds in allusion an alternative to imitation. It enables him to find a kind of reconciliation between modernity and tradition. Martin Price views Gray’s style as an “avant-garde” style in which Gray fashioned his poetry not through direct experience but from poetic tradition. He suggests that Gray’s new style of poetry is “virtually a cento, or pastiche, where overlapping phrases” from earlier poets of different periods and different tastes such as Shakespeare and Pope; it generates a poetry out of poetry.\textsuperscript{301}

The allusive style offers Gray a means of juxtaposing the poets from the past and poets from the present, which highlights his belief in the continuity of tradition. It allows Gray to construct a sense of continuity. It emphasizes the inevitability of the persistence of tradition by highlighting poets’ acts of drawing on all the available resources of tradition in their own poetry. In West’s letter of 1742 to Gray, West suggests that the language of Gray’s unfinished tragic drama \textit{Agrippina} shows a tendency towards Shakespearean English rather than employing modern diction such as that used in Addison’s \textit{Cato} which West considered as a linguistic paradigm for modern writers. Gray’s answer is that even the most celebrated poets of the time draw on the poetic diction of the past; a process which Gray finds inevitable:

Shakespeare and Milton have been great creators...and no one more licentious than Pope or Dryden, who perpetually borrow expressions from the former. Let me give you some instances from Dryden whom every body reckons a great master of our poetical tongue. [After giving many examples, Gray proceeds] But they are infinite: and our language not being a settled thing (like the French) has an undoubted right to words of an hundred years old, provided antiquity have not rendered them unintelligible.\textsuperscript{302}

Gray was aware of the traditions within which he tried to locate himself, using idioms which were fashioned by his predecessors and shared by him. He wrote with the intention of reconfiguring the literary sphere. While the Augustans adopted the elegance and simplicity of the classic tradition, Gray tried to restore to the modern poetry of his time the qualities of the vernacular poetic tradition and simultaneously cast it in the sublime poetic form of Pindaric tradition. Gray’s intertextual


\textsuperscript{302} Gray, \textit{Correspondence}, 1:192-93.
allusive style, like his diction, produces its own circle of readers. They entail the engagement of the recipient in a very active form of reading, making him participant in the construction of meaning of the poetic text. Paul Hammond suggests that “Poems work intertextually as they weave the threads which go to make up their texture. Sometimes this may be by direct allusion, an unmistakable reference through naming; in such cases the reader must understand the allusion to grasp the full force of the poet’s idea.”303 After making a difference between allusion and borrowing, Hammond claims that “whatever the authorial intention may be, intertextual poetry implies an intertextual readership, a readership which is itself situated between texts, knows its ancient and modern classics, is au courant with contemporary debates, and is sufficiently agile and alert to recognize and weigh the connotations of a poem’s language. Intertextuality places considerable responsibilities upon the reader.”304 Earl R. Wasserman, on the other hand, claims that the mode of experience of much of eighteenth-century allusive poetry “ought to be defined broadly enough to include a creative act by the reader. For it suggests that the reader is not only to appreciate the poet’s invention in finding appropriate allusions but is actively invited by them to exercise, within poetic reason, his own invention by contemplating the relevances of the entire allusive context and its received interpretation”. Wasserman suggests that such a literary work “is constituted not only by its own verbal texture but also by the rich interplay between the author’s text and the full context it allusively arouses, for these allusive resonances are not peripheral but functional to the meaning of the artistic production.”305 Gray traces the tradition of the past by alluding to particular terms used by earlier writers, emphasizing the cultural richness which has been swept out of current literary culture and which must be recovered now and brought into cultural play. Gray’s antiquated language and allusive style aim to offers certain elements to the reader which constitute that poetic culture which Gray intended to bring to life and with which he intended to link his poetry. Burke claims that there are certain “words” which “produce in the mind, whenever they are afterwards

304 Ibid., 75.
mentioned, effects similar to those of their occasions”. Certain classes of words may raise images in
the mind, and convey and echo the archetypal idea, myth, system, character, or event or “by having
from use the same effect on being mentioned, that their original has when it is seen”. In so doing,
the original notion “continues to operate as before”.

Gray’s language and allusions endeavour to jog his readers’ memories about the richness of
tradition. By frequent allusions to the earlier works, Gray tried to inculcate a particular version of
British tradition in the minds of his readers, especially young poets and critics, and to find
constitutive elements to connect between what is received from the past and what is accepted in
the present. Barrett Kalter indicates that Gray’s meditation on the past imposes on him individual
implications that find their own expression in the present: “a viewer of the cathedrals, especially one
like Gray who could ignore the religious function of the buildings, collaborated with the structure to
create his own experience of it”. Tradition “offered a space from the past that could be inhabited
freely in the present”.

To emphasize certain norms and beliefs from the past and ingrain them in the present, Gray
thinks that they need certain substantive reference to the past; they need to express appreciation of
the past in order to be recommended and accepted for their connection with what was viewed as
the lost canonical and paradigmatic past. In his endeavour to do this, Gray followed two methods of
transmitting tradition: transmission through exemplary models and transmission through exposition.
He relied more on the latter since it provides capacious layers of interpretations and offers a wide
level of modification. The exemplary models can be individual persons such as Spenser,
Shakespeare, and Milton, or members of minor creativities whose individual distinction was
assimilated in the course of time to form anonymous totality of tradition as represented by the
traditional heritage of folk tales, bardic songs and old ballads. “The large residual category of
persistence” of tradition, as Edward Shils puts it, “arising from attachments to past things, to past
persons, past societies, past practices, the performance of actions practised in the past, the

adherence to modes of perception, belief and appreciation received from those observed them previously”  

Gray enlisted the great poetic figures as sources and models of reviving and of reproducing the past tradition. He seems to believe that the creative features of the poetry of those figures are able to infuse new exuberance and enthusiasm in the present poets to find ties of connection with sequential chain of their national tradition. Those great poets left a literary tradition which seems more readily accepted not only because of its connectedness to the past, but because the genuineness of its creative genius, and therefore it gives authority to certain beliefs or ideas which were employed and implicitly recommended by them. “Beliefs can be also accepted on the grounds of the charismatic qualities of their recommenders”. This longing for continuity with certain strands or figures in the past may arise from:

The need for transcendence of the boundaries of the empirical self, to share beliefs in a community of those who have similar “state of mind” extends not only laterally towards contemporaries but also backwards towards those who live in past times. There is also a need to be in contact with them- not with all who have ever lived but selectively. The need for continuity with those past, like the need for community with those present, is a variant of the need to be part of an order which is infused with meaning.  

Gray finds a similar “state of mind” that links him with the poets of the earlier literary culture. When he was asked about what he felt when writing “The Bard”, Gray declared “I felt myself the Bard”. Similarly, Gray’s fascination with the canonical English poets of the past was not restricted to his interest in their poetry, but also encompassed a study of their creative mentalities. In his comment on Gray’s interest in Milton’s poetry, Robert F. Gleckner asserts that Gray was an acute reader of Milton’s poetry especially those passages in Paradise Lost in which Milton speaks about himself and his own epic enterprise, passages to which Gray returns repeatedly in his poetry and, distinctly in

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309 Ibid., 128.
310 Ibid., 130.
“his most intensely self-scrutinizing moments”. Gray, Gleckner proceeds, “increasingly saw in 
*Paradise Lost* a specular image of himself, of his own agon that was being played out in his poetry 
but rarely illuminated there by the sort of spotlight Milton shines upon himself and his own mind”.

Gray’s echoing of the poets of the past through his diction, allusions, and his borrowing from 
their poetry led many mid-century critics to accuse him of plagiarism. However, Gray did not 
consider this as a detraction from his poetry, since his act of borrowing was intentionally made clear 
to readers. Gray’s borrowing was not from individual poets, but from the tradition available to him 
and that, as he thought, was what the poet should do. Writing about “The Bard” in a letter to 
Edward Bedingfield, Gray overtly refers to his “borrowing”, telling his friend not to “wonder 
therefore, if some Magazine or Review call me Plagiary: I could shew them a hundred more 
instances, wch they never will discover themselves”.

With Gray’s approach, time became a preserver of tradition rather than a consumer of its 
components though these components may take new shapes and forms in the course of temporal 
progress. However, Gray is not a conservative writer whose viewpoints about the past stand in 
opposition to new-coming modes of ideas and innovations. He believes that the tradition of the past 
provides enrichment to the present through a process of assimilation and interaction. Tradition 
offers elements from the past which could establish continuity with the present. New poets, as 
recipients of the past, can fit in or reproduce the past incidents, beliefs, situations, or poetic 
conventions in conformity with present and future reproduction, and in this way, they become an 
ongoing vehicle that connects the past with present, and prospectively the future. For Gray, tradition 
is that which embodies and preserves the ideals that mankind needs. It, as he puts it in one of his 
notes for the poem on “Education and Government”, “extends our existence and example into 

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313 Ibid., 28. 
314 Gray, *Correspondence*, 2:477.
future ages; continues and propagates” its elements, “which otherwise would be as short-lived as our frame”.315

Gray’s strong sense of the past and his imaginative perception of its implications are evident in his examination and meditation on the objects of the past. The aesthetic appreciation of present originality, for Gray, is no less valuable than the aesthetic appreciation of output of the past, since he is aware of the direct or indirect indebtedness of the present to the past. In other words, Gray does not show blind appreciation of past art only because it was produced in the past, but because it possesses an aesthetic value that recalls the implications of the past and awakens the imagination to the aesthetic elements of that past. Gray’s criticism of the Elizabethan poet Samuel Daniel illustrates how he bases his critical judgment on the aesthetic standards he advocates rather than on mere nostalgic yearning for lost literary culture. He claims that Daniel’s “genius and style rarely if ever rise to that elevation, that the stranger and the more terrific emotions of the mind require. His figures and allusions are neither many nor bold; he had little invention in the design, or art in the arrangement of ideas. His ear was good, his versification like his style flowing and unaffected”. For Gray, Daniel’s poetry neither shows a strong connection with tradition through constructing sets of allusions nor displays a power of invention by maintaining the interaction between his “talents” and tradition: “his natural talents, and the expectations Spenser had raised of him were blasted after the death of Elizabeth”.316

Gray does not consider tradition as something prescriptive, or not conducive to development. On the contrary, he finds in tradition a flexibility which supplies the poet with a wide range of modification or recreation of past materials. In other words, Gray believes that originality does not hinder or contradict the continuity of tradition by breaking or deflecting its course from the archetypal channel. It is a process of integration in which the interaction of the individuality which

operates within the poet and the external impulse of tradition results in a creation of novelty. Thus, tradition is actually the fountainhead of originality and the wellspring of poetic creativity. In this connection, Edward Shils claims that

All novelty is a modification of what has existed previously; it occurs and reproduces itself as novelty in a more persistent context. Every novel characteristic is determined in past by what existed previously; its previous character is one determinant of what it became when it became something new. The mechanisms of persistence are not utterly distinct from the mechanisms of change. There is persistence in change and around change and the mechanisms of change also call forth the operation of mechanism of persistence; without these, the innovation would fade and the previous condition would be restored.  

Unlike the Neo-classicists’ empirical view of tradition “as collectible things or observable performances that can be and should recorded verbatim”, Gray shows a humanist view of tradition, seeing it “as symbols demanding imaginative expression”. Like his historical studies and his treatment of the poetry of the past, Gray’s antiquarian studies illustrate his view of tradition. Gray’s interest in the material culture of the British past provided him with a great sense of the past which enables him to focus on the spirit of the historical sense of pastness and its relation to the present rather than the factualism of certain historical objects or incidents. In a letter to Wharton, Gray affirms that “for want of spirits... hat my studies lie among the Cathedrals, and the Tombs, and the Ruins. To think, though to little purpose, has been the chief amusement of my days; and when I would not or cannot think, I dream”. Gray’s letter to Wharton explains how Gray views history and material culture as sources of knowledge about the tradition of the past:

the drift of my present studies is to know, wherever I am, what lies within reach, that may be worth seeing. whether it be Building, ruin, park, garden, prospect, picture, or monument; to whom it does, or has belong'd, & what has been the characteristick, & taste of different ages. you will say, this is the object of all Antiquaries, but pray, what Antiquary ever saw these objects in the same light, or desired to know them for a like reason?

\[317\text{Shils, “Tradition”, 122.}\]
\[319\text{Gray, Correspondence, 2:565.}\]
\[320\text{Ibid. 2:564.}\]
This impressionistic view of the past shaped Gray’s view as a literary historian and as a poet. Gray seems to differentiate between the static facts of history and the flexibility of literary tradition. In this respect, J. V. Cunningham observes that literary tradition is not the same as history. He suggests that “though a tradition is historical in that it issues from an historical process, it is not in itself its history”. According to Cunningham, a “tradition can be located in a body of texts and interpretations current among given group of writers and readers. Such a description applies equally to the traditions in which Chaucer and Shakespeare wrote and to those which are now current”. Cunningham believes that “the notions which constitute a tradition are not ideas merely, but principles of order. They are schemes which direct the production of works”.321

Gray looks at tradition as a repository of inspiration and novelty and not repetition or slavish imitation of what is previously produced. “In opposition to the classical narrative mode so commercially successful at the time, Gray recommended a more casual, expository approach. Ignoring utility, the conventional rationale for studying history, encouraged...‘curiosity’, therefore linking the ‘hoards’, ‘ruin’ and ‘monuments’ to imagination, passion, and entertainment”.322 Thus, Gray does not call for reinventing or changing the tradition, but for representing of its elements in such a way that the general features of these elements remain intact and true. Tradition is a dynamic and in continuous process of development. Aware of the original source of the materials of tradition, the poet consciously or unconsciously can give these materials individual aspects through a dynamic process of assimilation and interaction. The archetypal materials become a trigger that inflames the individual perception and a channel of continuity to the general spirit of its identity.

Accordingly, Gray looks at poetry as a process of successive interaction and assimilation that gives birth to an individual literary work. For him, poetry is not a product of a static mechanism that passes materials from tradition of one generation to another. Poets cannot slough off all the elements of tradition to create entirely original works. In their pursuit of originality, the latent

elements of tradition, which work within poets’ minds, produce modifications and transformations which give new forms and shapes to their relatively creative works.

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), T. S. Eliot famously asserts the debt of the individual creativity of the writer to tradition. He suggests that originality works within the framework of tradition. The writer might add and modify, while accepting many of its materials. In any case, even though he rejects or disregards a lot of its components, he accepts a great deal of what is inherited in the context of the creation. He starts his point of departure from the received tradition and goes on from there, introducing novelty to the original elements of tradition throughout a process of correcting, improving and transforming. Eliot points out that “if we approach a poet ... we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestor, assert their immortality most vigorous”.

He goes on to claim that:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism.

Gray’s relation to “the dead poets,” to borrow Eliot’s words, exceeds the range of influence. He finds in them a “kindred spirit” with whom he is in continuous communion, and with whom he yearns to join. Writing to West, he confesses, “I converse, as usual, with none but the dead: they are my old friends, and almost make me long to be with them.” In the “Elegy,” Gray expresses an appeal to an unidentified poet-friend “gain[ed] from Heaven” (l. 124), to fulfil this role of a literary kin and transferor of tradition. The poem shows the poet-narrator’s dependence on another’s sympathetic future poet who would take on his shoulders the responsibility of preserving tradition. In short, the projection of the unknown imagined poet becomes the imaginative vehicle that allows the poet to construct his own self-representation in the future literary culture:

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,

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324 Ibid., 15.
This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing lingering 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. (ll. 85-92)

The “voice of Nature” cries from the tomb to the surviving poets who may preserve the “wonted Fire” of their departed friend not only by their individual memory, but by the immortal “Fire” of poetic tradition.

But, unlike Eliot, who claims “that the poet has not a ‘personality’ to express”, Gray seems to believe that a poet is not without individual personality to reveal and through which, when it is imposed on the traditional materials from the past and on the implications he drives from them, innovation and novelty are distinctively produced. In his poem “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”, Gray voices the record of his own personal feelings through his meditation on the individual history of his childhood. Locke’s thoughts about the past experiences of the individual and their influence on the individual perception and response to the present left a noticeable impact on Gray’s thoughts and found a clear expression in this poem. In this respect, Locke, as Kenneth Maclean asserts, was so suggestive to Gray for his study of the mind and for his own distant prospects of childhood. Gray glorifies the heavenly mind of the child as a blank slate of worldly experience which brings suffering to the world of adulthood:

To each his sufferings: all are men,
Condemned alike to groan;
The tender for another’s pain,
The unfeeling for his own.
Yet ah! Why should they know their fate?
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more; where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise. (ll. 91-100)

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The child’s ignorance, Gray suggests, is the ignorance or unawareness of the world of the contraries of life, which William Blake later reveals in his *Innocence and Experience* (1794). The ignorance of the child, according to Gray, is a bliss which protects him from unpleasant awareness of the evil side of the fallen world and provides him with a realm of unity and order, and in this way the child is wiser than the adult whose awareness of life’s contraries brings curses on him by disrupting the serene world of order and unity, as Wordsworth later emphasizes in his poem “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” (1807). In his view of the capacity of a child’s world, Gray suggests that the perception of the child is divine, and not an inspiration of the external world or accumulative experiences in the past. Gray’s studies of Plato’s works enhanced his ideas on the capacity and potentiality of the world of the child. In his note on Socrates’s dialogue, Gray explains that the study and practice of the

true philosophy is ... to wean and separate the body from the soul, whose pursuit of truth is perpetually stopped and imposed by numerous avocations, the little pleasures, pains, and necessities of its companion. That, as death is but a transition from its opposite, life (in the same manner as heat is from cold, weakness from strength, and all things, both in the natural and in the moral world, from their contraries) so life is only a transition from death; whence he would infer the probability of a metempsychosis. That, such proposition, as every one assents to at first, being self-evident, and no one giving any account how such parts of knowledge, on which the rest are founded, were originally conveyed to our mind, there must have been a pre-existent state, in which the soul was acquainted with these truths, which she recollects and assents to on their recurring to her in this life. That, as truth is eternal and immutable, and not visible to our senses but to the soul alone; and as the empire, which she exercises over the body, bears a resemblance to the power of the divinity, it is probable that she, like her object, is everlasting and unchangeable, and, like the office she bears, something divine.  

Gray suggests that the child’s vision is a prelapsarian vision. The child maintains a pre-existent vision of unity, but he or she starts to lose it gradually until finally it is lost completely with the stage of adulthood. “Ah, tell them they are men!” is Gray’s sigh as he sees the little children playing on the field of Eton. He calls them “the little victims” “regardless of their doom”:

Alas, regardless of their doom,
The little victims play!
No sense have they of ills to come,
Nor care beyond today:

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Yet see how all around 'em wait
The ministers of human fate,
And black Misfortune's baleful train!
To seize their prey the murthersous band!
Ah, tell them they are men! (ll. 51-60)

Gray’s personal past enabled him to meditate on the plight of human being and to philosophize on the world of childhood through echoing philosophic traditions. Kenneth Maclean claims that Gray’s adoption of the Lockean ideas enabled him to “entered the scene of innocence-the place of a child’s seeing. Gray keeps the spirit of poetry very close to childhood”. Gray believes that a great poet such as Shakespeare has the ability to access the celestial world of child’s vision which reveals to them divine visions. In his “The Progress of Poesy”, he describes Shakespeare as a “dauntless child”, and “immortal boy” to whom the mother nature reveals the sublime world “of joy;/ Of horror that and thrilling fears”:

> Far from the sun and summer-gale,
> In thy green lap was Nature’s darling laid,
> With time, where lucid Avon strayed,
> To him the mighty Mother did unveil
> Her awful face: the dauntless child
> Stretched forth his little arms and smiled.
> 'This pencil take,' (she said) 'whose colours clear
> Richly paint the vernal year:
> Thine too these golden keys, immortal boy!
> This can unlock the gates of joy;
> Of horror that and thrilling fears.... (ll. 83-93)

Similarly, in “The Progress of Poesy”, Gray depicted himself as a poet-child to “his infant eyes” a poetic vision “unborrowed from the sun” is revealed. Gray implies that his odes are not mere reproductions of Pindaric and native traditions but also inspired creations of his own vision:

> Yet oft before his infant eyes would run
> Such forms as glitter in the Muse’s ray
> With orient hues, unborrowed from the sun:
> Yet shall he mount and keep his distant way
> Beyond the limits of a Vulgar fate,
> Beneath the Good how far-but far above the Great. (ll. 118-23)

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The comparison of these lines with Gray’s version in his Commonplace Book shows clearly how Gray relates the world of childhood to visionary power of the poet. The “infant eyes”, for him, is another term for “visionary eyes”:

Yet, when they first were open’d on the day
Before his visionary eyes would run
Such Forms, as glitter in the Muse’s ray
With orient hues unborrow’d of the sun:
Yet never can he fear a vulgar fate.329

The lines celebrate Gray’s poetry as a result of the incorporation of the tradition of the past with his own visionary talent of creativity which he locates beyond the limits of the understanding of the “vulgar”. Gray’s epitaph to the poem makes this very clear: “Full many a swift arrow have I beneath my mine arm, within my quiver, many an arrow that is vocal to the wise; but the crowd they need interpreters” 330

Gray’s emphasis on the individual identity of the poet stands in contrast to the concept of the authorial identity of the poet adopted by his Augustan contemporaries. Gray’s annotation of Plato’s works illustrates Gray’s interest in exploring the capacity of individual memory in shaping present human experiences, and this shapes Gray’s view of the significance of the autobiographical memory in the process of poetic composition and in the individual response of the reader of the poetic composition: “If we had no memory nor reflection”, Gray explains in his annotations of Plato’s Philebus, “we could have no enjoyment of past pleasure, nor hope of future, and scarcely any perception of the present, which would be much like the life of an oyster”.331 Memory cultivates the present perception: “Our opinions are founded on our sensations, and the memory of them”. Gray tries to clarify the significance of individual memory in constructing a true representation of human emotion: “The senses, the memory, and the passions, which attend on them, ... delineate, a variety of conceptions and representation of which, when justly drawn, we form true opinions and

330 Ibid., 176.
propositions; but when falsely, we form false ones". 332 Leslie Fiedler argues that the poet's life "is the focusing glass through which pass the determinants of the shape of his work", including "the tradition available to him". "Literature", he proceeds, "properly speaking, can be said to come to existence at the moment a Signature is imposed upon the Archetype". 333 Edward Shils, on the other hand, claims that a writer's genius consists in his capacity for finding a coherent whole out of the objectivity of tradition and the subjectivity of his own imaginative powers and personal feeling:

The artist or literary man accepts a prevailing form in so far as it is "fitting" to his ambitions. There is already a wide variety of forms, not all of them equally current or recommended at the moment, in which his "genius" can find some sort of accommodation. Within those categories of verse, narrative, lyrical or epic verse, within the novel or short story, or the portrait, the landscape or still life, he tries to view and see and express what he has seen and felt in himself. If his creative powers are weak, he will accept what is given and work within it. If they are strong, he will modify the received genre as well as express his own substantive viewpoint and sensibility. What he accomplishes depends on his capacity to form a coherent whole of what he accepts from what has come down to him as part of the corpus of traditional objectivation and what his own imaginative powers require. 334

According to Shils, the writer may depart slightly or significantly from what is given to him, but cannot depart entirely from tradition. For him, "'primitive' and 'uneducated poets' who are genuinely 'primitive' and 'uneducated' are practically non-existent-and however much geniuses diverge from the received as they reach the heights of their powers, they do have their point of departure in them". 335

By bringing into play the literary tradition of the past, Gray’s desire is not to animate past literary practices in order to present them as alternatives to the modern literary forms, but instead, to add a dimension from tradition to new original works by constructing allusive variation from the past and present. Gray’s literary history does not deny the importance of the immediate literary tradition of the neo-classical poets such as Dryden and Pope though he attributes to them a lower rank in the hierarchy of poetic canon of his literary history. The neo-classicists’ literary legacy continues in Gray’s poetry together with bardic, medieval, and Elizabethan literary heritage. In a

332 Ibid., 4:129.
333 Cited by Baker, "Tradition and the Individual Talent in Folklore and Literature", 111.
334 Shils, “Tradition”, 148
335 Ibid.
letter to West, Gray reveals his desire to weave a “web” of references out of tradition of the past “I am a sort of spider”, he writes, “and have little else to do but spin it over again, or creep to some other place and spin there”. 336 Tradition inheres within Gray’s style and the construction of the canon of his literary history. It takes in Gray’s odes a transcultural status which emphasizes its persistence.

336 Gray, Correspondence, 1:194.
Conclusion

This study has been the first sustained engagement with Thomas Gray’s putative *History of English Poetry*. It has argued that understanding the contours of Gray’s thoughts allows us to understand the relationships between Gray’s ideas of literary history, literary tradition, and poetry in relation to his central idea of continuity of tradition. It also allows us to reread Gray’s poetry in the light of this historical understanding.

Gray’s literary history focuses on different moments of the history of English poetry. It tracks the moments of origins of English poetry in both classical and ancient British traditions, emphasizing their formative impacts on shaping the main characters of English literary culture. In doing so, Gray creates a cultural genealogy for English poetry and proposes himself as an heir of ancient literary traditions. Gray’s literary history traces the moments of transition and change in the condition of literary cultures of the past and tries to show their impacts on the nature of poetry.

Gray’s literary history is greatly informed by his cultural and national agendas. Gray’s desire to produce a plausible version of the British past is largely fostered by these agendas. The structure of Gray’s historical narrative emphasizes the idea of the continuity of literary tradition which he tries to draw from and to impose on the British literary past.

Gray’s literary history is a monumental or canonical history in that Gray focuses his narrative on the tradition of English canonical writers of the past and seeks inspiration from it. He derives his critical and aesthetic views from that tradition and emphasizes the possibility of the recurring of its vigour and the need to construct links of connectedness between the past and the present. In contrast to the conventional literary annals which view literary history as a sequential record of earlier writers, Gray shifts the focus of literary historiography to poetry itself: the nature and the course of poetic cultures of the past. Subsequently, the number of poets (poets of Gray’s choice) that he studies and echoes in his poetry (as representatives of the English literary canon) is largely reduced to include only those poets who, as he thought, helped to shape the characters and the identity of English poetry.
The narrative of Gray’s literary history is determined by his commitments, interests and values whether they are informative, aesthetic, or political. Gray’s narrative grasps a selection of the literary past and appropriates it to fortify national solidarity in the present. Glossing over the strife of political factions, Gray’s literary history promotes feelings of cultural nationalism.

Gray rejects the critical literary history which approaches and evaluates earlier literature by the standards of the present. He sees that this kind of literary history, by not perceiving the literature of the past in relation to the time and place of its creation, degrades the national literary heritage. Gray disapproves of the modernizations of earlier poetic texts in accordance with the standards of present refined poetry. Gray’s historicist method does not only help him to understand the literary works of the past but to reconstruct the past for the benefit of the national agenda of the present. In his endeavour to trace the influences that shape the tastes of earlier poets—the influence of literary tradition, the influence of society, and the influence of environment—Gray explains earlier poetic texts by many areas of contexts, including the social and natural worlds of the poetry of the past. Gray’s literary history has been constructed in context of various intellectual sources, such as cultural anthropology and hermeneutic philosophy.

Though Gray tries to narrativize the Whig principle of liberty through his literary history, he rejects the Whig narrative of progress. Gray adopts a cyclical theory of history because it posits a regular or periodic recurrence of literary flowerings and wanings. He finds in the cyclical narrative a useful instrument for promoting his national and cultural purposes, since the historical idea of rise and decline, which depends on the personal perspective of what the historian considers to be a status of rise or decline, allows him to achieve these purposes.

Gray’s wax-and-wane narrative assumes that poetry flourished in ancient Britain and declined with the tyranny of Normans. It restores its glory again by canonical poets under the liberal atmosphere of the Elizabethan period. Gray correlates the flowering of Elizabethan poetry with its openness to British bardic influence. The reader of Gray’s literary history perceives poetry from ancient bardic poetry to Elizabethan poetry as a poetry belongs to the same school of sublimity, and
it is only after the Restoration that that poetic tradition was challenged and disrupted. Gray’s literary history traces the continuous transformation of the English poetic tradition within an organic whole in which every school of poetry causes the next to develop and come into existence. English national poetry, according to Gray, declined with the disruptive influence of the “School of France”, and therefore, it is time for English poetry to be revived and brought to play on the cultural scene once again. Gray’s plea not only clears the way for the revival of the literary tradition of the past but also secures a place for him within that tradition.

Gray’s literary history is conceptual in that it exhibits the interrelation between bardic tradition and medieval and Elizabethan poetry and presents them under the concept of pure imaginative sublime poetry. In other words, Gray’s conceptual reading of the periods of his history divides successive periods under different concepts: the concept of vernacular poetry as imaginative, natural, pure, and sublime; and the concept of the rational refined mode of poetry, which replaced the vernacular poetry in the Restoration period. This conceptual scheme offers Gray an option or an opportunity to display a plausible reading that emphasizes the individuality of the native literary canon.

Gray’s literary history is a history of a poetic genre which traces the fortunes or the conditions of pure poetry. It is a history of what he considers to be imaginative sublime poetry of the vernacular literary culture, which stretched from ancient Britain to the Elizabethan period. Gray realizes that his historicist explanations, which help him to interpret the works of earlier poets and to account for the tastes and poetic practices of their ages, remain insufficient for canonizing vernacular works of the past unless he approaches these works as aesthetic designs. Therefore, he embarks on constructing an aesthetic theory which enables him not only to reveal their poetic merits and beauty but to voice through this theory his idea of continuity of tradition and the significance of tradition in the poetic composition.

Gray recognizes that the authorial identity of the “School of France” is based on French literary culture whose literary ideals challenge those traditional literary assumptions established by
the canonical works of vernacular literary culture. He notices that the national literary tradition of the past came to be seen, with the hegemony of the French poetic model, as an expression of alien genius which belongs to an obsolete time in the past. The diversion of Gray and many mid-century critics from rhetorical and didactic poetry towards sublime poetry is fostered by this feeling which motivates them to solidify the native literary tradition and to protect it against what they deem as external cultural encroachments.

The political situation of the mid-century unified Gray and a group of mid-century English writers, who wrote under common cultural and national forces, to react against the excessiveness of the impact of French neo-classicism on nation literary culture. They think that the domination of French model of poetry hinders the continuity of national literary canon. The revision of the English canon requires a revision of the canon of classical authors. Gray’s schema places Greek writers such as Pindar at the peak of the canon of sublime poetry. The Augustan pantheon of the Latin classics such as Virgil, Horace and Ovid—the propagandists of Roman persecutors of ancient Britons—assume a lower rank in Gray’s canon.

Gray perceives that English literary tradition can be recovered only if points of intersection can be found between it and ancient literary cultures which provides it with an authority and enables it to assume a central position in modern literary culture. To achieve this, Gray writes his literary history in verse, “The Progress of Poesy” and “The Bard”, in the tradition of the Pindaric ode (the poetic source of lyric sublimity) to set a poetic antiquity parallel to the neo-classical model of Roman antiquity.

In “The Progress of Poesy” and “The Bard”, Gray tries to reflect English literary tradition within frames of references. Gray’s allusive style refers to a system of literature that the earlier poets left; it reflects the thoughts and feelings of the earlier poets which he shares and is keen to bring to life. Gray suggests that the tradition of canonical writers helped to establish the language and the identity of English literary culture. Through his language and allusions, Gray’s attempts to speak through earlier writers and maintain the English literary identity by making their tradition to
be seen and felt in the literary culture of the present. However, Gray’s odes are not designed for public or common entertainment, but for private circulation among few educated audience of a poetic community. Gray’s literary history in verse, which is “vocal for the intelligent alone”, is terra incognita for common audience. Gray’s aim is to spark a reformation within English poetic culture. He intends to draw the attention of his contemporary poets and critics to the richness of vernacular literary tradition.

Gray’s literary history reveals his yearning for a model of authorship established in the past and vanishing with the emergence and domination of modern commercial print culture. Gray felt that poetry which once had a central position in the national literary culture became a commercial commodity profitable to the seller and an object for the consumption of common readers.

Unlike his predecessors who tried to set a temporal and literary barriers between the vernacular poetry of the past and their own poetry to emphasize the differences between the past and present, Gray tried to lift these barriers and evince, through his aesthetic theory and sets of references to the literary tradition of the past, the richness and the importance of tradition not only in the process of the poetic creativity but in its significance to maintain the national literary identity. Gray’s literary history does not aim only to report what poetry was in the earlier times, but also to suggest what poetry can or should be in the present time. It arises from a desire to establish a poetic paradigm in which the poetry of the past lives in the poetry of present and occupies an exalted place on the pedestal of the present literary canon.
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