

Choice 6

Bentley's Original Designs for Gray's Poems

"Short Notes" records, "This year [1753] published a fine edition of poems by Mr T. Gray with prints from designs by Mr R. Bentley." He might have added that the fine edition had an "Explanation of the Prints" by himself. A sample is:

Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat.

Frontispiece.

The cat standing on the brim of the tub, and endeavouring to catch a gold fish. Two cariatides of a river god stopping his ears to her cries, and Destiny cutting the nine threads of life, are on each side. Above, is a cat's head between two expiring lamps, and over that, two mouse-traps, between a mandarin-cat sitting before a Chinese pagoda, and angling for gold fish into a china jar; and another cat drawing up a net. At the bottom are mice enjoying themselves on the prospect of the cat's death; a lyre and pallet.

Walpole published the book through Robert Dodsley in London to help his two friends. In the absence of his correspondence with Dodsley about the book we don't know the terms of its publication apart from Dodsley's payment of £42 to Gray for the copyright of his poems. *Designs of Mr R. Bentley for Six Poems by Mr T. Gray* finally appeared in 1753, a royal quarto of thirty-six pages so cut that it looks like a small folio. The price was high, half a guinea, the equivalent today of what—fifty dollars? Dr Johnson in his chapter on Gray in *Lives of the Poets* annoyed the poet and his friends by saying that the poems were printed on one side of each leaf "that they might in some form or other make out a book," but *Bentley's Designs* went through three editions in 1753 and four more from 1765 to 1789. In our own day it has been hailed as a landmark of English book illustration by Osbert Sitwell and Kenneth Clark who called it "the most graceful monument to the Gothic Rococo."

Both Bentley's original drawings and Walpole's copy of the printed book are at Farmington. I am saving the book of drawings. Walpole noted in it, "These are the original drawings by Mr Bentley from which



Bentley's Frontispiece to his designs for Gray's Poems, 1753. From the original drawing.

Grignion and Müller engraved the plates. Hor. Walpole." He pasted the drawings where the prints were to be. His usual binding was plain calf, but he had this book bound in red morocco with elaborate gilt tooling, a beautiful book. William Beckford paid eight guineas for it in the Strawberry Hill sale through his bookseller, Bohn, as we know from their correspondence about the sale at Farmington. Bohn reported that the drawings are so like engravings he had to look pretty carefully to satisfy himself that they are not engravings, an uncertainty shared by all then and since. After the Beckford Sale in 1882 they went to the ardent Walpolean Laurence Currie and came to me from Maggs in 1933.

The publication of the *Designs* did not proceed smoothly. Gray objected to numbering the stanzas and the numbers were removed; he insisted that "Mr" be put before his and Bentley's names for fear that their omission would make him appear as "a classic." Walpole saw no "affectation in leaving out the *Mr* before your names; it is a barbarous addition. . . . Without ranging myself among classics, I assure you, were I to print anything with my name, it should be plain Horace Walpole: *Mr* is one of the Gothicisms I abominate," but Gray insisted on having it. Although he disliked Walpole's "Explanation of the Prints," he conceded, "If you think it necessary to print these explanations for the use of people that have no eyes, I could be glad they were a little altered." Gray, always the candid friend with Walpole, wrote that he, Gray, would "revise the press, for you know you can't." He became seriously alarmed when Dodsley, to make the book look more for its money, had Eccardt's portrait of Gray at Strawberry Hill engraved for the frontispiece. On hearing this the poet wrote Walpole, "Sure you are not out of your wits! This I know, if you suffer my head to be printed, you infallibly will put me out of mine. I conjure you immediately to put a stop to any such design. Who is at the expense of engraving it I know not, but if it be Dodsley, I will make up the loss to him. The thing as it was, I know, will make me ridiculous enough, but to appear in proper person at the head of my works, consisting of half a dozen ballads in thirty pages, would be worse than the pillory. I do assure you, if I had received such a frontispiece without any warning, I believe it would have given me a palsy." The print appears in only a few copies, including Walpole's own. He lettered "Thomas Gray" neatly on it and below the print, "Eccardt pinx, Müller Inv. In the collection of Mr H. Walpole."

With the removal of Gray's portrait the frontispiece became Bentley's illustration for the "Elegy" that shows the poet musing by the babbling

brook. There has been some speculation about the poet's identity, whether he was Gray, Richard West, or just anybody. Comparison of Bentley's original drawing with Müller's print of it shows that the musing figure was originally Gray, adenoids and all, and that Müller's figure, in compliance with Gray's wishes, is nobody in particular. Walpole's annotations in his printed copy of the book point out Gray's indebtedness in the poems to *Richard III*, *As You Like It*, *La Bruyère*, and the *Spectator*. Walpole also noted that the Favourite Cat Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes belonged to himself and that the authority for Chancellor Hatton's dancing in "A Long Story" is found in Anthony Bacon's papers, vol. I, p. 56. Walpole bound in an excellent sketch by Gray of Stoke House in A Long Story opposite Bentley's drawing of it and when we put these two drawings beside Grignion's engraving of Bentley's drawing we have Stoke House from start to finish.

So far as we know, Gray did not thank Walpole for publishing the book, but he did write "Stanzas to Mr Bentley":

See, in their course, each transitory thought
 Fix'd by his touch a lasting essence take;
 Each dream, in fancy's airy coloring wrought,
 To local symmetry and life awake!
 The tardy rhymes that us'd to linger on,
 To censure cold, and negligent of fame,
 In swifter measures animated run,
 And catch a lustre from his genuine flame.
 Ah! could they catch his strength, his easy grace,
 His quick creation, his unerring line;
 The energy of Pope they might efface,
 And Dryden's harmony submit to mine.

The story of Gray's and Walpole's friendship begins at Eton in 1727 when Walpole was ten and Gray eleven. Their intimacy was shared with Richard West and Thomas Ashton of the Quadruple Alliance. Bookish school-boys are not usually well thought of by their contemporaries, but the son of the Prime Minister protected the Quadruple Alliance. Gray's "Eton Ode" expressed their love for the school and became in time the "leaving book" given to each departing Etonian. Walpole wrote Montagu from Cambridge, "I can't say I am sorry I was never quite a schoolboy; an expedition against bargemen, or a match at cricket may be very pretty things to recollect," but he had preferred exploring the shelves of Pote's bookshop. He and Gray saw less of each other at Cambridge where Wal-

pole was at King's and Gray at Peterhouse and because Walpole who was a Fellow-Commoner could come and go as he pleased and was much in London with his dying mother. Both left Cambridge without taking a degree, a lack that did not prevent Gray being called later "the most learned man in Europe" and becoming Professor of History and Modern Languages at the University.

In 1739 Walpole took him on the Grand Tour to France and Italy where they spent a year at Florence with Walpole's distant cousin Horace Mann, the British Minister there who was to become his chief correspondent and the central figure in Choice 15. On starting home Walpole and Gray went to Reggio with John Chute for the fair. There they quarrelled and Gray left Walpole for Venice with Chute. Walpole records in "Short Notes" that he fell ill "of a kind of quinsy, and was given over for fifteen hours, escaping with great difficulty." Fortunately, Lord Lincoln and his travelling tutor, Joseph Spence, went to Reggio for the opera. Spence wrote his mother how

After we had been there a day or two, we heard that Mr Walpole (who we thought was gone) was still there, but that he was ill abed. We went, you may be sure, immediately to see him; and found him very ill, with a quinsy; and swelled to such a degree as I never saw any one in my life.

Between three and four in the morning, Spence wrote, he

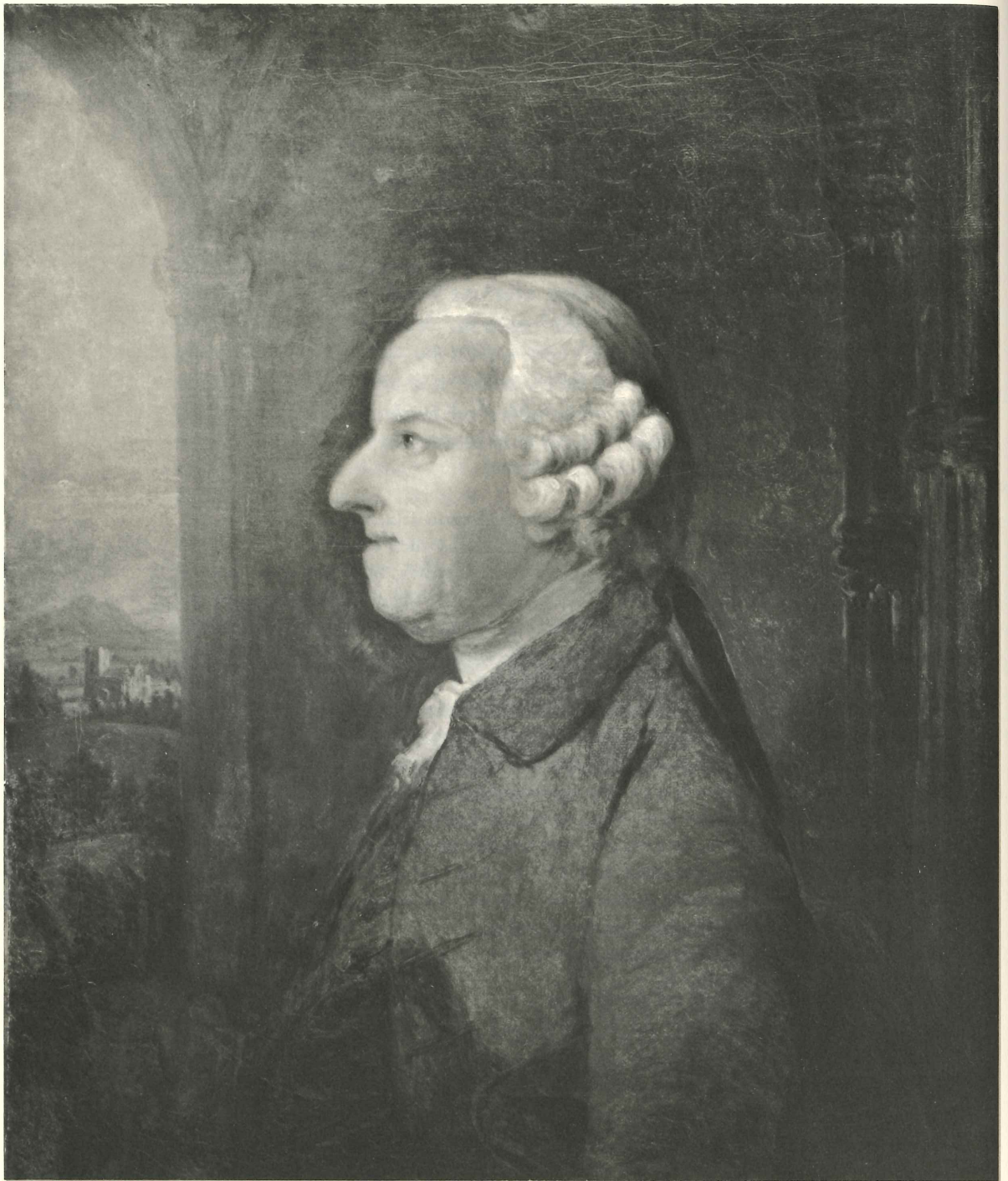
was surprised with a message that Mr Walpole was extremely worse, and desired to speak with me immediately. I dressed as soon as I heard it; stepped into his coach, which waited at the door, and found him scarce able to speak. I soon found there, upon talking with his servants, that he had been all this while without any physician; and had doctored himself. So I sent immediately for the best physician the place could afford and dispatched an express to Florence, to our minister there, with orders to bring a physician from thence who is a very good one and my particular friend, Dr Cocchi; and who (which was a very material thing in these parts) understands and talks English, like an Englishman. In about twenty hours time, Mr Walpole began to grow better; and we left him with his Florentine doctor in a fair way of recovering soon. I was with him perpetually till the doctor came and if he had been worse, had got leave of Lord Lincoln to stay behind for some days to take care of him: but I thank God all went well before my Lord went away; and we took our leaves of him with pleasure, and hope to see him next week at Venice, whither he is bound as well as we, and then for England. You see what luck one has sometimes in going out of one's way; if Lord Lincoln had not wandered to Reggio, Mr Walpole (who is one of the best natured, and most sensible, young gentlemen that England affords) would in all probability have been now under the cold earth.

When Walpole was well enough he joined Lincoln and Spence at Venice, which couldn't have been too pleasant with the estranged Gray there, and returned to England in their company. Doubtless he described the immediate cause of the quarrel to Mann, but when he got his letters back from Mann and copied them he deleted the episode and the originals were burned. So we shall probably never know what precisely caused the rupture; it could have been anything after two years of travel with one of the travelers an outgoing young man who loved masquerades and elegance and was paying all the bills and the other a highly sensitive recluse touchily aware of his inferior position. Walpole and Gray were not the first or last friends to end their travels by separate routes; even Saints Barnabas and Paul ended theirs with "a sharp contention" and they, unlike Gray and Walpole, were never reconciled. Walpole's explanation of the break to William Mason thirty-odd years later sounds true to me as well as generous:

I am conscious that in the beginning of the differences between Gray and me, the fault was mine. I was too young, too fond of my own diversions, nay, I do not doubt, too much intoxicated by indulgence, vanity, and the insolence of my situation, as a prime Minister's son, not to have been inattentive and insensible to the feelings of one I thought below me; of one, I blush to say it, that I knew was obliged to me; of one whom presumption and folly perhaps made me deem not my superior *then* in parts, though I have since felt my infinite inferiority to him. I treated him insolently: he loved me and I did not think he did. I reproached him with the difference between us, when he acted from conviction of knowing he was my superior; I often disregarded his wishes of seeing places, which I would not quit other amusements to visit, though I offered to send him to them without me. Forgive me, if I say that his temper was not conciliating; at the same time that I will confess to you that he acted a more friendly part, had I had the sense to take advantage of it; he freely told me of my faults. I declared I did not desire to hear them, nor would correct them. You will not wonder that with the dignity of his spirit, and the obstinate carelessness of mine, the breach must have grown wider, till we became incompatible.

In a few years they were reconciled and their adult friendship continued unbroken until Gray died; yet Walpole was clear-eyed. "I agree with you most absolutely in your opinion about Gray," he wrote Montagu in 1748, "he is the worst company in the world—from a melancholy turn, from living reclusely, and from a little too much dignity, he never converses easily—all his words are measured, and chosen, and formed into sentences; his writings are admirable; he himself is not agreeable."

Bentley's Designs for Gray's Poems was inspired by Walpole's eager-



Thomas Gray by Benjamin Wilson.

ness to help his friends who he believed were geniuses. Gray's lesser regard for him is shown by his destroying most of Walpole's letters, an act understandably wounding to Walpole. Yet Gray was one of his closest friends and I was delighted not long ago to get a portrait of him by Benjamin Wilson, a version of the one at Pembroke College, Cambridge. While it was being cleaned the church at Stoke Poges emerged before the poet's glassy smile and to the cleaner's pleased surprise. Nearby in the New Library at Farmington is Gray's biographer, William Mason, gazing at Gray, pencil in hand. Not far away is an accession that has arrived from Italy since I began this chapter, an animated bust of Dr Cocchi, a welcome addition to the library that would not have been formed without his timely intercession at Reggio.