

# Fifty Shades of Gray

by Theodore Dalrymple (April 2014)

Few are the people who love dogs and cats equally, and there are those who love neither. I am a doggish person and I frequently stop in the street to admire, and often to speak to, dogs (they always reply, I find, with the greatest good sense). The strange thing is that their owners who have them on leads are always pleased and proud that their dogs should be so addressed by a complete stranger, though they would shrink away from such a stranger, as from a dangerous lunatic, if he addressed them, the owners, directly. Dogs are the greatest diplomats, or at least aids to diplomacy.

To cats I am indifferent. I don't object to them, except when they have a screeching fight below my bedroom window, and I recognise their elegance, but I find their aloofness faintly disturbing, unalloyed as it is to the kind of intelligence that dogs display. Cats incarnate the sin of pride. But I would rather have a cat in the house than no animal at all.

Recently I stayed with friends in Dublin who had a cat called Selim. Selim is completely black and has green eyes; he is very old and spends most of the day sleeping on the window sill. For some reason he has incurred the deep enmity of the neighbouring cat, a large tabby, who is much younger and more vigorous than Selim, and who at night comes to the window, scratching it with his claws, and making threatening noises that frighten Selim who would be in no condition to defend himself if his enemy were to effect entrance. I suppose it is all about territorial dominance or some such triviality; but we humans are not in a position to look down on feline territorial disputes as absurd or trivial. What else is human history, stripped to its essentials, than this, up to and including the current spat over the Ukraine and the Crimea? Indeed, the struggle between Selim and the tabby (whose name I do not know) is quite a good metaphor for recent events.

Now I happened one day to walk into a Dublin bookshop where I found a rather splendid edition of six of Thomas Gray's poems (not that he wrote very many more). Published in 1753, while Gray was still alive, it was the kind of luxurious though slender volume that people with more money than needs must once have bought to tickle their jaded desires. It was provided with grand, not to say grandiloquent, engraved illustrations by Richard Bentley. Apparently it was no sooner published than it sold out.

One of the poems in the volume is *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes*: Horace Walpole's cat, to be exact, whose name was Selima (I had read the poem several

times before, but had quite forgotten the cat's name). This coincidence, surely, was a signal from the gods that I should buy the book, and so I did.

Doctor Johnson, in his *Life of Gray*, has some rather severe things to say about the *Ode*. Selima (who was a tabby rather than black, though she had Selim's 'emerald eyes') climbed on to the edge of a bowl with goldfish in it and fell into the water in trying to grab the fish, and drowned after eight attempts to climb out:

The hapless Nymph with wonder saw:  
A whisker first and then a claw,  
    With many an ardent wish,  
She stretch'd in vain to reach the prize.  
What female heart can gold despise?  
    What Cat's averse to fish?

Dr Johnson says of the *Ode* that 'The poem on the Cat was doubtless by its author considered as a trifle, but it is not a happy trifle... Selima, the Cat, is called a nymph, with some violence both to language and sense...' This, surely, is to aim a howitzer at a sandcastle; it is like complaining that there is no excitement in a railway timetable. Railway timetables are not for excitement and humorous poetic trifles not for 'correct' mythological metaphors. Indeed, correctness would be an error.

But one is never more than a few lines in Doctor Johnson from good sense, for his writing abounds, as he says that Gray's *Elegy* abounds, 'with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo... I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them.' This is the effect also of so many of Johnson's own reflections, which are simultaneously obvious and revelatory. Referring to Gray's various travels, both in Britain and in Europe, Dr Johnson says that 'it is by studying at home that we must obtain the ability of travelling with intelligence and improvement.' This is precisely so: travel should be a philosophical activity and not merely a manifestation of restlessness or boredom, though it may be those things as well. 'Chance favours only the mind prepared,' said Pasteur of scientific experiment; he might have said the same of travel.

The curious thing about Gray is that he wrote one immortal poem, and one only. Two other lines are also immortal, if immortality consists of coining a phrase that becomes a cliché wherever English is spoken (but it was not a cliché when he coined it, so it reflects no ill on him). In his *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* Gray sees children playing happily and is

filled with melancholy:

Alas, regardless of their doom.  
The little victims play!  
No sense they have of ills to come,  
No care beyond to-day;  
Yet see how all round 'em wait  
The Ministers of human fate,  
And black misfortune's baleful train!

The last stanza reads:

To each his suff'rings: all are men,  
Condemn'd alike to groan,  
The tender for another's pain;  
Th'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.

Needless to say, the last lines would not meet with the approval of contemporary medical ethicists, those latterday Savonarolas of personal autonomy; but I doubt there is anyone living who has never found occasion to quote Gray's words as an excuse for his own lack of frankness.

Few are the people also who would deny that Gray's *Elegy In a Country Churchyard* is one of the great poems in English: it has that quality which marks out masterpieces from other works, namely that its impact never lessens however many times it is read. General Wolfe was reputed to have said, the night before the successful British assault on Quebec, when he read the *Elegy*, that he would rather have written these lines than take the city the following day: a remark, if he really did make it, that does him credit, at least in my opinion, for it implies that he valued literature above the profession of arms. I was about to say a correct valuation, but perhaps I should merely say one that coincides with my own. And Doctor Johnson relaxed his strictures on Gray's poetry by concluding his *Life*:

*In the character of his Elegy I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common*

*sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours... Had Gray written often thus it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him.*

The theme of the *Elegy* is the vanity of human pride, whether it be in temporal power, or learning, or riches, or accomplishment, or in anything else; *The Elegy* suggests an equality far beyond the political variety, namely an existential kind, for:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike the inevitable hour.  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

This is not an original thought, of course, but that is no real criticism as Pope knew, for:

True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,  
What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest,  
Something, whose Truth convinc'd at Sight we find,  
That gives us back the Image of our Mind...

That Johnson was sympathetic to the *Elegy* is not surprising, for his own greatest poem was *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, which expressed thought not dissimilar:

Yet hope not Life from Grief or Danger free,  
Nor think the Doom of Man revers'd for thee:  
Deign on the passing World to turn thine Eyes,  
And pause awhile from Learning to be wise...

(I once read, I forget now where, a very severe Johnsonian-style attack on the first lines of this poem, *Let Observation, with extensive View/ Survey Mankind , from China to Peru*: for, said the critic, 'with extensive view' added nothing to 'observation' and was so much mere pompous afflatus. But then Johnson might himself reply with Pope:

*A perfect Judge will read each Work of Wit  
With the same Spirit that its Author writ,  
Survey the Whole, nor seek slight Faults to find,  
Where Nature moves, and Rapture warms the Mind...*

and this is so because

*Whoever thinks a faultless Piece to see,  
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.)*

Thoughts about vanity were long on Gray's mind, for in his earliest published poem, *Ode on the Spring*, he says:

Where'er the oak's thick branches stretch  
    A broader, browner shade;  
Where'er the rude and moss-grown beech  
    O'er-canopies the glade,  
Beside some water's rushy brink  
With me the Muse shall sit, and think  
    (At ease reclin'd in rustic state)  
How vain the ardour of the Crowd,  
How low, how little are the Proud,  
    How indigent the Great!

Given the transience of human life, and that the paths of glory lead but to the grave, it is not surprising that Gray warns us that we should, in looking at the graves who left no great name behind them:

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.

Again, this was a sentiment in favour of humility with which Doctor Johnson would have sympathised. In my favourite poem of Johnson's, he movingly extols the humble labours of a poor and obscure surgeon, Robert Levet, to whom he had long given shelter:

CONDEMN'D to Hope's delusive mine,  
As on we toil from day to day,  
By sudden blasts or slow decline  
Our social comforts drop away.  
  
Well tried through many a varying year,  
See Levet to the grave descend;

Officious, innocent, sincere,  
Of ev'ry friendless name the friend.

Yet still he fills affection's eye,  
Obscurely wise, and coarsely kind;  
Nor, letter'd arrogance, deny  
Thy praise to merit unrefin'd...

His virtues walk'd their narrow round,  
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;  
And sure th' Eternal Master found  
The single talent well employ'd.

This, I think, is deeply felt, as are Gray's sentiments, though critics often level the accusation at eighteenth century poetry that its forms are better suited to the expression of witticisms than to that of deep feeling, thus necessitating and indeed provoking a Romantic revolution. For all that, however, Gray's lines never cease to move (me, at least); and when I move among a human crowd which seems to me unattractive I try always to remember the generous lines:

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page  
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;  
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

I am moved; but then unbidden into my mind come the lines:

I wish I loved the Human Race;  
I wish I loved its silly face;  
I wish I liked the way it walks;  
I wish I liked the way it talks;  
And when I'm introduced to one,  
I wish I thought "What Jolly Fun!"

And I console myself with the thought that Gray and Johnson did not always heed themselves their warning against the blandishments of the senior partner of the seven deadly sins, Pride, and I likewise recall La Rochefoucauld's wise remark, that it is easier to give good advice than to take it. This is why we return to the *Elegy* over and over, for its lesson is never learned.

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**Theodore Dalrymple's** latest book is [here](#).