



Intimations of Classical Notions of Time

in Thomas Gray's Early Poetry

KIRILL O. THOMPSON

National Taiwan University

Abstract

The present study makes the case that Thomas Gray (1716-1771) presents his poetic musings in his early odes and sonnet against the backdrop two classical conceptions of time, cyclical time and linear time, and this casts interpretive light on his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Gray's early poems (1742)—*Ode on the Spring*, *Ode to a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, and *Sonnet on the Death of Richard West*—open with pastoral scenes set in cyclical time as foils for ruminations about human existence in linear time. He goes from adopting a pastoral pose and viewing human life as a brief flutter in the *Spring* ode, to casting shadows over the pastoral scenes in the *Eton* ode, to lamenting the pastoral in his *Sonnet*. Gray's evolving view of life in linear time informs the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1750). The twilight opening of this poem contrasts with the morning openings of the early poems. Falling darkness throws the poet back into his private musings; the glimmering; darkening landscape stirs him to reflect on mortal truths. The *Elegy* closes with a forlorn pastoral poet whose Muse does not arrive to offer him access to redemptive cyclical time: who is this poet? Is it Gray? Is it Gray in youth? What is the message? In a later poem, *Hymn to Adversity*, Gray sees the possibility of rebirth and meaning in human life in linear time.

Keywords: classical allusion, pastoral, elegy, mortality, meaning of life

© Kirill O. Thompson

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

<http://interface.ntu.edu.tw/>

Intimations of Classical Notions of Time

in Thomas Gray's Early Poetry

KIRILL O. THOMPSON

National Taiwan University

Thomas Gray's (1716-1771) poetry is distinguished from other verse of the mid-18th century in mastery of form, compression of feeling, depth of conception, and exquisiteness of expression. Each of his verses ponders, from shifting perspectives, charged features of human existence. The more we know of Gray and his life, the more we appreciate the emotional charge ready to ignite within the well-crafted forms. In fact, Gray's mastery of form and compression of feeling were a function of his depth of conception.

The present study sets out to examine how, in exquisite poetry, Gray expressed his dark feelings, i.e. his melancholy, his sorrow, his yearning to recover his lost love—a kindred spirit—in his odes and sonnet according to classical conceptions of time, life and death, finally finding joy in the vicissitudes and travails of life. A windfall of inspecting Gray's use of classical allusion along these lines is the light it sheds on lingering questions concerning his masterpiece, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. The unique contribution of the present study lies in bringing to light Gray's allusions to classical conceptions of time that contextualize his reflections and heighten the intensity and poignancy of the poems under study.

After being largely received as masterpieces from the mid-18th until the mid-20th centuries; Gray's classical approach to poetry was questioned since Wordsworth's critique of Gray's sonnet in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1796), and Gray's major poems became somewhat problematic to scholars since mid-20th century in that the meaning and intent of his early odes seemed obscure and his *Elegy* stirred up inter-

pretive ambiguities for modern readers (Golden, 1964). My position is that the odes started to become obscure and questions of interpretation began to arise largely because modern readers were increasingly out of touch with Gray's classical allusions and thus the interpretive indications and clues they provide. In the present century, there is new interest in Gray's use of classical allusion, notably Lonsdale (1987) and Keener (2012). Some scholars attempt to penetrate the obscurity and answer the questions of interpretation by examining Gray's private life and relationships in eliciting a personal subtext (Downey and Jones, 1974; Gleckner, 1997; Curr, 2002). Others continue to register their intractable feeling of Gray's obscurity and his sense of isolation and disconnectedness (Hutchings and Ruddick 1993). I agree with Gleckner—who also finds intriguing allusions to Milton's *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost* in Gray's poems—that Gray was a sensitive, emotional man buffeted by the vicissitudes of life and love. Gray was particularly conscious of the temporality and fragility of human life, having been the only child of eight to survive of a kindly mother, who died young, and an abusive father who, happily, stayed away. Gray's life was literally saved and secured by a kindly uncle who sponsored his study at Eton and made sure he had funds for life. Moreover, in youth, Gray was devastated by the death of his closest friend from Eton, Richard West. The news came as a blow because these friends had parted not long before and Gray had recently sent a package of his writings to Richard; the package was returned a few weeks later with a note attached to the effect that the recipient was deceased. Through his effective use of classical allusion, not to mention his native poetic artistry, Gray sublimated his personal tribulations and travails into eloquent verse that speaks to and moves all readers who trouble to master them. As to the specific identifications of and some of the reflections on the classical allusions in Gray's poetry, I am indebted to the painstaking work of Tovey (1898) and Lonsdale (1969), both of whom made significant contributions in this area.

1 Gray's Mastery of and Devotion to the Classics

Gray was well-qualified to make use of classical sources and classical allusion in his poetry: before venturing to write verse in English he had

INTERFACE

already mastered the classical languages well enough to write credible verse in Greek and especially Latin, mostly as occasional verse dedicated to close friends who were also devotees of and well-versed in the classical languages and the classics. He also translated some classical Greek verse and modern Italian verse into Latin.

Gray was a versifier who sought to express himself in time-honored diction and images from classical antiquity, as well as from the Renaissance. He did this less as conscious borrowing than with the sense that this was the most appropriate, exquisite, and meaningful way to write poetry; to him, poetry should sing in suggestive, sonorous language as exemplified in the classical languages and the classics. At the same time, Gray seemingly avoided Christian sentiments and took pains to express his deeper thoughts along classical pagan lines. Much of the poignancy of his verse derives from the feeling of the inescapable human alienation and mortality that he explores and in maturity later attempts to ameliorate.

2 The Early Odes and Sonnet

In adherence to the pastoral ideal, Gray structured his earliest English verse on the Horatian polarity of cyclical time and linear time. As shown by Lowrie (1992 50-55), in Horace's odes, cyclical time is presented in the context of a self-renewing nature of cyclically recurring processes, structured around the annual cycle of the seasons. Cyclical time contrasts with the devolving linear time experienced by human beings as they traverse the path from birth to death. Moreover, as folk societies turn self-conscious and historical, collective experience transforms from cyclical to linear, as well. This shift is marked by a change in orientation from annual seasonal rites and festivals to historical national and religious holidays. Accordingly, drawing on such classical masters as Horace, Virgil, and Lucretius, Gray opens all three of his earliest verses in English (1742) —*Ode on the Spring*, *Ode to a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, and *Sonnet on the Death of Richard West*— with pastoral scenes set in cyclical time as foils for subsequent dark

THOMPSON

ruminations about mortal human existence in linear time. Interestingly, he develops different ruminations in each of the poems, which reflect changes and developments in his experience and thought.

Gray opens his first poem in English, the *Ode on the Spring*—a reply to his friend Richard West’s *Ode to May*—by depicting an idyllic noontide scene in Nature, then focusing on a shepherd poet reclining beneath a shade tree by a stream. This meditative posture opens up the shepherd’s spirit to his Muse, who opens his eyes to this eternal moment in cyclical time—as revealed through that very perfect spring moment in human linear time. This revelation provides an occasion for him, the poet, to reflect on human life as fleeting, vain, insect-like, and generally futile. At the close of the ode, however, the poet pokes fun at himself, asking whether he, who also dwells in linear time, shouldn’t *carpe diem* rather than stand back and ruminate.

In the first stanza of the *Spring* ode, Gray pays homage to the “Homeric Hymns,” Lucretius (I 10ff. v. 737f) and Horace’s *Odes* (I iv 5) by opening with the genesis of spring from “Venus” fair train” to “disclose the... flowers,/And wake the purple year.” He then invokes the phenomena of spring, presenting spring as a vital phase in the cycle of seasons, and closes the remarkable stanza with: “The Attic warbler pours her throat,/ Responsive to the cuckoo’s note,/ The untaught harmony of the spring:/ While whisp’ring pleasure as they fly,/ Cool zephyrs thro’ the clear blue sky/ Their gather’d fragrance fling” (lines 5-10). Gray purposely invokes Lucretius’ conception of Nature as a perpetually self-renewing process, as illustrated vividly in the annual advent of spring. Specifically, the Lucretian *Natura* provides a tangible stage for Horatian cyclical time, the eternal time associated with the cycles of nature.

The second stanza settles on a charmed spot in nature where the narrator, the sensitive shepherd poet, is stirred by his Muse to discern in the bright spring noontide a glimpse of cyclical time: Gray thus intimates his own privileged access to the intersection between linear and cyclical time and laments misguided humanity: “How vain the ardour of the crowd,/ How low, how little are the proud,/ How indigent the great!”

INTERFACE

(lines 18-20).

Classical poetry abounds with descriptions of the sensitive poet reclining at midday beneath a shade tree by a gurgling stream. The most apropos examples include *Lucretius* (ii 29-33), Horace's *Odes* (I I 20-2, II xi 14-6), and especially Virgil's *Eclogues* (I 1-2), in which the poet reclining "by the quiet spring of some holy stream... broodest over the Muse of the woodland," or "at ease in the shade teachest the woods to echo fair Amatyllis." While there is poignancy in the poet's finding a moment of communion with his Muse in nature who intimates cyclical time, like Horace he remains keenly aware of his/our mortal entrapment in linear time.

Consequently, reposing with his hands in the shade by the stream, the poet next contemplates, by dint of contrast, linear time as he gazes at summer insects, "Eager to taste the honied spring,/ A float amid the liquid noon:/.../ Quick-glancing to the Sun" (lines 26-30). The image of herds in noontide repose also appears in Virgil's *Eclogues* (ii 8), and Horace's *Odes* (III xxxix 21-2) as well as in Pope's *Summer* (86-7). Virgil invokes the buzz and bustle of summer insects to accentuate the vitality of spring in contrast to still, silent winter in *Georgics* (iv 22) and *Aeneid* (iv 407). Gray consciously adopts the marvelous adjective "liquid" from Virgil's *Georgics* (iv 59): *Nare per aestatem liquidam* ("floating through the clear summer air").

The exquisite closing lines of this stanza are a shade anthropomorphic: "Some [insects] show their gayly-gilded trim/ Quick glancing to the sun." Although the insects are unconscious of the brevity of their lives as they frolic in the "eternal" spring sunlight, the poet attributes to them a touch of anxiety in their burst of life. As Seneca and Marcus Aurelius noted, differences between life spans, as between human beings and summer insects, in linear time are negligible in the eternal perspective of cyclical time; thus, human life is not appreciably longer than insect life. From the perspective of cyclical time, human beings too "flutter thro' life's little day,/ In Fortune's varying colours drest:/ Brushed by the hand of rough Mischance,/ Or chill'd by Age, their airy dance/ They

THOMPSON

leave in dust to rest” (lines 36-40).

Ultimately, however, the poet realizes that he is no better off than the moth-like others: human life is a brief, meandering flutter. His life too will fly off on hasty wings, his spring will soon be gone. Gray thus has invoked the pastoral setting not just as an ironic counterpoint to vain-glorious human life, but one that reflects back with double irony on himself. In the end, he admits himself to be but a “solitary fly,” which has no glittering females, hives of hoarded sweets, or painted plumage.

Gray opens *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* with a similarly idyllic depiction of the distant campus nestled along the wandering river Thames—described with a hint of irony in terms reminiscent of Virgil on the river Mincius (*Georgics* iii, 14-15). Yet, at the same time, mentions of fair Science, Henry’s shadow, and Windsor’s heights, place the scene in historical time, i.e., the linear time of collective, self-conscious experience, thus indicating that this is an unreal Arcadia. The motto: “I am a man; a sufficient excuse to be miserable,” adopted from Meander casts further shadow over the sunny opening scene.

In contrast to the second stanza of the *Spring* ode, where the poet reclines with his Muse by a stream, Gray now stands far above the fields “once loved in vain” (line 12). While thinking of his “careless childhood stray’d” (line 13), he feels a momentary bliss, a second spring, from the gales blowing up from the campus below. But, the bliss is momentary and the second spring seems illusory, for the breezes are not Zephyrs and Eton is not Arcadia. Gray intimates that his initial spring itself had not been genuinely idyllic or prelapsarian. Gazing at the young boys at play, he asks, “The captive linnet which enthrall?/ What idle progeny succeed/ To chase the rolling circle’s speed, /Or urge the flying ball?” (lines 27-30).

The caged finch reinforces the sense that these idle progeny are not dwelling in an authentic Arcadia, protected from devolving linear time, and change. Drawn from Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, and perhaps from Medieval Wheel of Life diagrams, the circle image suggests that

INTERFACE

the young boys have embarked on the circles that circumscribe the set phases of human life in linear time: each start leads inexorably to a finish; the circle of childhood already implies adolescence and youth, and so on to decline, decrepitude, and death. Seneca and Marcus Aurelius similarly regarded human life as proceeding through sequences of circles marking phases in linear time (within the overarching cyclical time of Nature). While the Stoics speak of arranging one's life prudently in accordance with the proper phases, Gray is interested in the inevitability with which each phase comes to a close: each circle turns in on itself. Metaphorically, the boys' setting the initial circle into motion marks their entry onto the slippery slope of devolving linear time. This idea is continued on Medieval Wheel of Life diagrams of the phases of human life. A stained-glass window in the Canterbury Cathedral has such a diagram, which includes the images of the circle and ball: "The first of the figures, labeled *infantia*, is a baby. The second, *pueritia*, carries a curved stick like a hockey stick in his right hand and what appears to be a ball in his left... the stick and ball represent *pueritia* as the age of play" (Burrow 1986 90). Gray focuses on *pueritia* as the verge of puberty, *adolescencia*, when ambition, desire, and pride start to appear in boys (and girls) and begin to energize them. In fact, Gray depicts the preadolescent boys as already at once bold and driven, and yet as hearing troubling voices in every breath of wind as they snatch at fearful joy (*Aeneid* ii, 728-9; I, 513-4).

In the final stanzas of the *Eton* ode, Gray echoes Virgil in delineating the "Fury passions," the anxiety-ridden ambition, and the fretful desire that drive adult life as a stressful chaotic struggle. *Aeneid* (vi, 273-81) reads: "Just before the entrance, even within the very jaws of Hell, Grief and avenging Cares have made their bed; there pale Diseases dwell, and sad Age, and Fear, and ill-counseling Famine, and loathly Want, shapes terrible to view; and Death and Distress; next Death's own brother Sleep, and the soul's Guilty Joys, and, on the threshold opposite, the death-bearer War, and the Furies' iron cells, and savage Strife, her snaky locks entwined with bloody fillets." Statius also has: "Wild Passion leaps and blind Mischief and Angers flushing red, and Discord holding a two-edged sword" (*Thebaid* vii, 47-50).

THOMPSON

Gray next draws on Sophocles in describing the fruits of the workings of the Fury Passions. He bids us look ahead to the suffering, pain, and death that accompany, “slow-consuming Age.” *Oedipus Coloneus* 1229-1238, for example, reads: “For when he has seen youth go by, with its light follies, what troublesome affliction is strange to his lot, what suffering is not therein? – envy, factions, strife, battles, and slaughters; and, last of all, age claims him for her own, -- age, dispraised, infirm, unsociable, unfriended, with whom all woe of woe abides.” Chastened by such reflections, Gray gradually starts to display compassion for the heedless young boys at play in the schoolyard below: “Why should they know their fate,/ Since sorrow never comes too late,/ And happiness to swiftly flies?” (lines 96-99).

The *Sonnet on the Death of Richard Gray* too opens with an idyllic pastoral sunrise with chirping birds and cheery green fields, and allusions to Virgil, Ovid, and Lucretius, all clearly indicative of Horatian cyclical time. But, Gray whose bosom friend has recently died cannot participate in the joy; the death of this precious friend has made the pastoral delights turn doubly hollow: “In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,/ And Phoebus lifts his golden fire:/... / I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,/ And weep the more because I weep in vain.”

Gray has gone full circle from adopting a pastoral pose and viewing human life as a brief, vainglorious flutter in the *Spring* ode, to intimating the unreality of seemingly pastoral scenes in the *Eton* ode, and finally to viewing the pastoral as empty from a personal point of view in the sonnet to *West*.

3 Newfound Appreciation of Human Life in *Hymn to Adversity*

Gray’s later poem, *Hymn to Adversity*, set squarely in human linear time, illustrates Aeschylus’s insight that wisdom comes through suffering. Observing human existence through eyes unblinkered by the pastoral, Gray now presents adversity as the potter of one’s destiny, tamer of the human breast, and crucible of character. Adversity was

INTERFACE

not identified with any particular god in classical antiquity, but Pindar in *Olympics* xii personifies Fortune as a daughter of Jove. Also, the image of a chain forged of unbreakable adamant derives from Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* 6. Adversity, this tamer of the human breast, serves to counter the rise of the fury Passions, mentioned in the *Eton* ode. The manner in which we face adversity shapes our destiny—collective as well as personal. Thus, each stanza of the *Adversity* ode delineates a certain approach to adversity and its usual outcome, rotating between positive and negative approaches. Adversity spawns virtue and patience in us, just as sorrow spawns compassion. Fleeing adversity fosters weakness and dependency. To the sensitive, adversity fosters wisdom in sable garb and melancholy with leaden eyes; but, to the aggressive, adversity releases gorgon terrors. That is, adversity is viewed by the Impious as something like the Furies seen by Orestes after the death of his mother, “Like Gorgons,/ In robes of black, with serpents in their hair/ Coiling abundant” (Aeschylus, *Choephoroe* 1048). Finally, echoing *Aeneid* I 630, the sensitive poet beseeches adversity to soften, not wound, his heart: “The gen'rous spark extinct revive/ Teach me to love, and to forgive,/ Exact my own defects to scan,/ What others are to feel, and know myself a Man” (lines 45-48).

Gray now starts to see more significance in actual human life as lived in linear time—albeit a brief, uncertain struggle—than in pastoral idylls. Why then does he continue to draw on classical sources? Why does he supplicate Adversity as the daughter of Jove? Why does he portray Adversity as the fount of virtue, patience, compassion, and wisdom? As Gray poeticizes stages in his spiritual growth in the face of Adversity, especially depression, estrangement, and loss, he is keen to portray the formation of virtue, compassion, and wisdom in the context of natural process. Thus, he takes care to draw on classical Stoicism and to avoid allusion to Christianity that would conceive the moral progress of humanity as based on original sin, repentance, atonement, faith, scripture, and supernatural revelation. Gray sees a measure of greatness in the human capacity to develop, mature, and ultimately to flourish in the face of Adversity.

4 Mature View of Life and Mortality in *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

A proper understanding of Gray's early odes and his progress in appreciating human life in linear time facilitates appreciation of his masterpiece, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1750). Despite its stately verse and marmoreal quatrains, the *Elegy* presents a slightly different message to each reader. To critics, the poem is full of puzzles, notably about the role of the opening stanzas, the reflections on life and death comprising the main body of the poem, and the significance of the rustic poet at the end.

The opening stanzas record the poet's observations at eventide from a churchyard overlooking a rural landscape. He hears the curfew's toll and discerns a ploughman and 'lowing herds that recede into falling darkness. In effect, his consciousness empties out and he proceeds to engage in nocturnal ruminations.

Notably, this twilight opening contrasts sharply with the pastoral morning and noontide openings of the earlier poems: those were sharp, vivid daytime depictions of nature in cyclical time that served as foils to linear human life. Now Gray centers on the parting of day and people's retiring for the night, i.e., images of life's end in linear time. Falling darkness throws the poet back into his private subjective consciousness: the sublimity of the glimmering landscape stirs him to reflect on mortal truths we tend to avoid by day. Notably, unlike the young daytime pastoral poet dependent on a Muse for inspiration, the cultivated, mature nocturnal elegist looks within to discern deeper truths of life and death.

The stanzas comprising the main body of the *Elegy* convey the poet's mature reflections on life in the linear time of human experience, on human mortality. Viewing the rustic forefathers' graves around him, the poet imagines *tableaux vivant* of their lives as manifesting a georgic fullness. Echoing *Lucretius* iii 894-6, Horace's *Odes* II xiv 21-2, and Virgil's *Georgics*, Gray imagines their lives as active, productive, and in step and at-one with nature; he imagines them cooperating with their

INTERFACE

neighbors and loving their families. He imagines their lives as good, and ventures to imagine their absence from life after death. While hinting at the “rueful” in contemplating their death, Gray also indicates something of the joy felt in Virgil’s “idyllic present.” Thus, when he proceeds to ask Ambition and Grandeur not to look askance at the rude graves of these obscure rustics, his point is not the bland truism that all lives are of equal worth, nor is it Horace’s reminder that death comes equally to all: in light of the *tableaux vivants* of the full, georgic sort of lives led by the rustic forefathers, we are led to understand that, by saying “the paths of glory lead but to the grave,” Gray indicates that devotees of power and glory are apt to lose sight of certain life essentials that oft go unnoticed until death is nigh.

Gray presents his sense of these crucial life essentials that connect the living with the dead, and make human life meaningful in the climactic stanzas of the poem on the rustics buried in the churchyard:

For to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
 This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
 Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?
On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
 E'en in our Ashes live their wonted Fires (lines 85-92).

Facing decline and death, one realizes that love and affection are essential to a full and meaningful life—and death. Facing death, one wants to feel an affectionate touch and see heartfelt tears. Such impulses are so natural that one easily imagines the flickering ashes of the dead crying out to be remembered in the warm embers of the living. This insight is borne out by the images of georgic life: a life of labor and toil in close touch with nature, facilitated by cooperation and interpersonal concern. Gray’s perspective here is classical and humanistic.

Gray discerns a universal link between the living and the dead, and

THOMPSON

depicts it as an intuitive bond woven of the felt dying ashes of the living and the sensed living embers of the dying. Striving for realism and truth over sentiment and edification, Gray draws on a litany of classical and renaissance sources in expressing his reflections. In 1768, Gray himself mentioned Petrarch's *Sonnet* 170 as a source: "For in my thoughts I see, O my sweet fire, a cold tongue and two lovely eyes, which after our death will remain fully embers." Also, sober *Lucretius* iv 925-6 reads: "Since, if no part of the spirit were hidden in the limbs, like fire covered in a heap of ashes." Ovid in *Tristia* III iii 42 has: "Yet do you ever give to the dead the funeral offerings and garlands moist with your own tears? Though the fire change my body to ashes, the sorrowing dust shall feel the pious care." Propertius in *Elegies* II xiii 42 warns: "Not at all unconscious and witless of the truth are the ashes of man, i.e., of the way one's memory is regarded after death." Ausonius' *Parentalia*, Praefatio 11-12 reads: "Our dead bones laid to rest rejoice to hear their names: and thus even the lettered stones above their graves would have us do." And, Pope in *Eloisa to Abelard* 54 has: "Warm from the soul, and faithful to its fires."

The identity of the rustic poet in the closing stanzas of the *Elegy* remains a mystery. Early readers tended to think that Gray was using this poet figure to contemplate his own death, particularly in the wake of the passing his dear friend Richard West. Recently, it has been argued from parallels in the *Elegy* to John Donne's *Devotions on Emergent Occasions* (1624) that Gray intended each reader to identify with the young poet; however, the consensus view remains that the poet represents Gray himself. Gray himself, however, in writing the *Elegy* (as well as the *Ode to Adversity*) drops any lingering pastoral conceits and focuses rather on human life and death in real linear time. Thus, the claim that the young aspiring poet is Gray is strikes me as contrary to reason: as author of the *Elegy*, Gray has advanced beyond the stance of the pastoral poet in understanding human life and death. At the same time, the rustic poet is remarkably like the poet in the *Spring* ode (and in earlier Latin verse to Richard West and Horace Walpole). Indeed, the setting is the same: Burnham Beeches near Stoke Poges.

INTERFACE

What is different this time around is that the Muse does not arrive to provide access to redemptive cyclical time, and the poet feels abandoned and woebegone. Why the difference? The poem hints that that young poet cannot receive the Muse because of mental blocks borne of cares and lost love, and perhaps because the times have changed, as well.¹ Consequently, he cannot spiritually tap into the “spring” of the babbling brook, which now appears as a river of no return. Thus, heedless of other options and deluded about the significance of human life, the poet takes his own life: in this sense, Gray in these lines contemplates the life and death of his *self-projection as a poet dedicated to the pastoral ideal*, a poet dedicated to tender feelings and idyllic images.

That the young poet is buried and memorialized by the villagers shows that, no matter how alienated he had felt, the community still embraces him as one of their own and buries him in the sacred ground alongside their forefathers (and foremothers). Thus, the poet is incorporated into Gray’s mature Stoic vision. In essence, the story of the poet in life and in death represents Gray’s spiritual change from a sentimental pastoral poet into a mature poet of human life, appreciative of the poignancy of human life unto death as a positive struggle through adversity for virtue, compassion, and love. While Gray needed to bury his earlier poetic incarnation, it remained precious to him as a memory of his halcyon days with his closest friends, Richard West in particular.

5 Conclusion

A later fragment titled *Ode on the Pleasure Arising from Vicissitudes* (1754) expresses a further development of Gray’s view. He opens by celebrating a golden spring morning close on the heels of winter, again with allusions to *Lucretius* I 10-4 & I 259-61. Indeed, this opening stanza is more lively and vivid than the opening of the *Spring* ode. Drawing on *Lucretius* v 281, “the generous fountain of clear light, the ethereal sun,” the last four lines of the second stanza body forth the joy they celebrate:

¹ The Elegy was written at the beginning of the age of industrialization in England, heralding a break with rustic classical sensibilities and the rise of urbanization and modern sensibilities.

THOMPSON

“But chief, the Sky-lark warbles high/ His trembling thrilling ecstasy;/
And, lessening from dazzled sight,/ Molts into the air and liquid light.”
Does Gray still hanker after cyclical time? Not at all. He is here celebrating a charmed moment nested in “real” linear time: a wizened Gray now acknowledges that our humanly life is not a simple devolution or downward spiral. Everything proceeds in cycles: pleasure to grief, misery to comfort, woe to bliss: “The hues of Bliss more brightly glow,/ Chastened by sabler times of woe;/ And blended form with artful strife,/ The strength and harmony of Life” (lines 41-44). Just as winter turns to spring and nature revives anew, a wretch (like the poet), long wracked and tormented with pain can regain his vigor and “breathe and walk again.” Indeed, to the recovering convalescent: “The meanest flower of the vale,/ The simplest note that swells the gale,/ The common Sun, the air, the skies,/ To him are opening Paradise” (lines 49-52).

One who has suffered will more fully appreciate the life that remains available to him or her. At the same time, regarding how one is to face this woe-begotten life driven by circles and shaped by strife, Gray offers the Stoic counsel that the answer lies *within*:

Humble quiet builds her cell,
Near the source whence Pleasure flows;
She eyes the clear crystalline well,
And tastes it as it goes (lines 53-56).

“Humble quiet” is Gray’s poetic expression for Stoic *ataraxia*, or tranquility, a mental state grounded in a person’s cultivated virtue and wisdom that affords him or her the pleasure of well-being and at-oneness with the world. Gray at last found the pristine spring that feeds pastoral streams, the crystalline well deep within the human psyche. Not surprisingly, Gray went on to write increasingly expressive verse in diverse forms.

INTERFACE

References

- Burrow, J.A. 1986. *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Curr, Matthew. 2002. *The Consolation of Otherness: The Male Love Elegy in Milton, Gray, and Tennyson*. Jefferson, NC and London: MacFarland & Co. Publishers.
- Downey, James, and Ben Jones, eds. 1974. *Fearful Joy: Papers from the Thomas Gray Bicentenary Conference at Carleton University*. Montreal: Montreal-Queens University Press.
- Farquharson, A.S.L., trans. 1944. *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antonius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gleckner, Robert F. 1997. *Gray Agonistes: Gray and Masculine Friendship*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Golden, Morris. 1964. *Thomas Gray*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Hutchings, W. 1995. "Conversations with a Shadow: Thomas Gray's Latin Poems to Richard West." *Studies in Philology* vol. XCII, issue 1 (Winter): 118-139.
- Hutchings, W.B. and William Ruddick eds. 1993. *Thomas Gray; Contemporary Essays*. Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press.
- Keener, Frederick. 2012. *Implication, Readers' Resources, and Thomas Gray's Pindaric Odes*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Lonsdale, Roger. 1969. *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*. London: Longmans.
- . 1987. "Gray's *Elegy*: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution." In *Modern Critical Interpretations: Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. H Bloom ed. New York: Chelsea House.
- Lowrie, Michelle. 1992. *Horace's Narrative Odes*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Shepherd, W.G., trans. 1983. *Horace: The Complete Odes and Epodes*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Tovey, D.C. 1898. *Gray's English Poems, Original, and Translated from the Norse and Welsh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[received February 15, 2019
accepted October 16, 2019]

