

Headnote for Thomas Gray

By John O'Brien

Students and faculty at eighteenth-century English universities wrote a good deal of poetry, sometimes as work, but very often for pleasure. Students would be assigned to translate poetry from Latin and Greek, the study of which made up a major part of the curriculum. They would also compose original poetry of their own in the classical languages, sometimes as part of an assignment, but sometimes for pleasure, including the pleasure of showing off their skill. Colleges might hold competitions for the best poem in Latin or Greek in a given year. More often, students would also write satirical poems, religious poetry, or love poetry, which could be addressed to real or to imaginary lovers. Faculty members and fellows at both universities would also write poems. Poems written by men associated with universities would largely circulate in manuscript copies among their friends in and outside the colleges, sometimes for years and over great distances. Such poems would sometimes reach print, perhaps in a miscellany collection of poems by various authors, sometimes in periodicals and newspapers. This could be intentional—a poet sending in a poem to a newspaper for the purpose of seeing his work published—but was also sometimes unintentional or accidental, as publishers were always on the look-out for material and might print a poem they liked that made its way to them through the various networks by which manuscript poetry circulated.

Of all of these writers of verse associated with eighteenth-century academia, Thomas Gray (1716-1771) is perhaps the only one whose work became famous in his own day, and has been read and taught continuously since then. Gray's best-remembered poem, "An Elegy Wrote in a Country Church-Yard," has probably been the most popular poem of the era ever since it was first published in 1751, and remains one of the most widely-read, taught, translated, and studied poems in English literature, and Gray one of the most influential poets in English. But Gray probably thought of himself first and foremost, not as a poet, but as an independent scholar. He inherited enough from his father to live comfortably as a gentleman of leisure, and he took up residence as what was called a "fellow-commoner" at Cambridge University, first residing at Peterhouse College and then at Pembroke College. Gray spent his time at Cambridge reading widely: law, classical literature and philosophy, science, travel, botany, the history of poetry in the romance languages and the languages of the British Isles, medieval art and architecture. He kept meticulous notes on his reading, participated in the life of the colleges, and had a wide correspondence with friends. But Gray never taught students or published his scholarship in the way that modern scholars do. Rather, he put learning into poems such as "The Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard," which grew out of his studies in Greek poetic form (which provided the Pindaric ode), and the history of European poetry since the classical period. Modern scholars now view these works as brilliant and significant works that tell us a lot about how an erudite man and a skilled poet brought together the period's understanding of poetry's history and place in the world.

Gray was born in the city of London, and his parents both practiced trades there; his father Philip was a scrivener (that is, a copier of legal and business documents), and his mother Dorothy ran a millinery shop (that, a shop that sold women's hats) with her sister Mary. That would seem to suggest a certain level of domestic stability, but Thomas Gray's childhood sounds more like something out of a Dickens novel. His mother bore twelve children, but Thomas was the only one who survived infancy; child mortality was high in this period, but that kind of loss was extraordinary. Gray's father was verbally and physically abusive; his mother went to court for a legal separation on the grounds of her husband's cruelty, but the legal system was so biased against women that she was forced to stay with her husband. What rescued Thomas from seems to have been a desperately miserable household was being sent to Eton College when he was nine years old; two of his mother's brothers taught there and were able to look after him. It was also at Eton that Gray first started reading—and writing—Latin poetry. He met several people who would be important friends: Richard West, the son of a man who had been the lord chancellor of Ireland; Thomas Ashton, and, most importantly, Horace Walpole, the son of the-then first minister Sir Robert Walpole. It was after Eton that Gray went to Cambridge, and although he never completed a degree, and while there was a period

when he was preparing for a legal career in London (probably at the insistence of his parents), he stayed at Cambridge most of the rest of his life.

In 1739, Gray and Walpole went together on what was called “Grand Tour” of continental Europe. Eighteenth-century English male aristocrats like Walpole routinely spent a couple of years touring Europe, gaining skills in languages (especially French and Italian), sightseeing, meeting their counterparts in continental countries, buying up art to bring home, and having romantic affairs, before returning home to England to manage their family’s estates. After about a year and half, Gray and Walpole had a fight while on their way from Florence to Venice (we still do not know what prompted it), and split up, returning home separately. It took a few years for the rift between the friends to be healed, but Walpole eventually became a great advocate for Gray and helped him get his works, including “An Elegy Wrote on a Country Churchyard,” published in London.

That poem, commemorating the dead, seems to come out of several losses that Gray suffered in the 1740s. The first and most prominent was that of another friend from Eton, Richard West, with whom Gray was studying for a legal career. West died in 1742 at the age of 26 (we don’t know the cause, but he had been sick for a while); Gray composed a sonnet called *On the Death of Richard West* and, many scholars think, began sketching a more comprehensive elegy. In 1749 Gray’s aunt Mary died, and it seems possible that this was a prompt for Gray to complete the poem, which he finished in 1750 and sent in manuscript to Walpole. (Another prompt may have been Walpole’s own brush with death at the hands of robbers that year; he was attacked in Hyde Park and a bullet just missed his head, burning his wig.) Walpole’s copy of the poem was in turn either stolen or copied by someone and ended up in the hands of William Owen, the publisher of a short-lived journal called *The Magazine of Magazines*. When Gray learned that Owen planned to publish it, he asked Walpole to rescue the situation by getting an authorized version in print immediately. The poem was an instant success, and has never been out of print since. But Gray did not rush to capitalize on the success; he stayed in Cambridge, continuing his studies and working on other poems.

Gray never married, and the fact that all of his most intense relationships were with other men inevitably leads to speculation about his sexuality. About which we know virtually nothing for certain; there is no evidence that he ever had sex with a woman or a man. But same-sex behavior was condemned in this period, and so strictly forbidden that it was possible for a man to be hanged if caught having sex with another man. So we should not expect to find the kind of evidence that would serve as proof. (We know that after Gray’s death, Horace Walpole and William Mason went through his correspondence and expurgated them heavily; there’s a reasonable chance that part of their goal was to eliminate any passages that might raise suspicion.) The modern scholar George Haggerty has argued persuasively that Gray’s turn to elegy is a way of expressing his sense of loss at being unable to pursue romantic love with other men: “the expression of same-sex desire.... always constitutes desire within a close-like framework that couches desire itself in terms—melancholy, madness, sensation, platonic love—that culture provides for the purposes of naturalization and accommodation.” In “Elegy Wrote in a Country Churchyard,” Gray articulates the perfect tone for expressing a kind of desire that he knows he cannot make public.

Image: Thomas Gray by John Giles Eccardt (1747-48), National Portrait Gallery, London