



Gray, Harrison, and the Debt to Classics

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Abstract

This paper examines the layered processes of literary adaptation in Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) and Tony Harrison's *v.* (1985), revealing how each poem negotiates a complex dialogue with its classical and modern antecedents. In the first section, Gray's elegy is shown to function as a "palimpsestuous intertext" that consciously transposes georgic and Epicurean elements from Virgil's *Georgics* and Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* into an English meditative form. Gray's own classical formation and explicit acknowledgment of Virgil and Lucretius as primary sources ground this transformation in rigorous philological practice. Drawing on adaptation theory, the essay demonstrates how Gray enacts "repetition without replication" through formal "transcodings" of classical imagery—shifting the locus from Italian fields to an English churchyard and infusing Epicurean atomism with eighteenth-century melancholy. In the second section, Tony Harrison's *v.* is presented as a radical "hypertext" that treats Gray's quatrains as its hypotext. Harrison preserves the iambic pentameter and rhyme scheme across 112 stanzas, yet fills them with urban desolation, working-class vernacular, and political urgency. The poem's deployment of graffiti capitals, a skinhead-poet dialogue, and classical allusions—transformed through what has been termed "classical vandalism"—subverts the elegiac consolation of Gray's model and refracts it through the social struggles of Thatcher's Britain. Through sustained close readings and critical perspectives on adaptation, this study argues that Harrison's *v.* not only honors Gray's formal legacy but also exposes its ideological limits, forging from elegiac tradition a modern cry for collective engagement. By juxtaposing these two poetic acts, the paper contributes to broader debates in adaptation studies and classical reception, illustrating how formal inheritance can be both a site of homage and a catalyst for transformative dissent.

Keywords: Harrison, "v.", Gray, Elegy, adaptation

Introduction

Gray's Palimpsest: Lucretius, Virgil, and Elegy

Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* enacts a self-conscious, creative appropriation of classical georgic and Epicurean models—an engagement grounded in both his rigorous classical formation and his own acknowledgment of those debts. As Robert Mack demonstrates, Gray's education at Eton and Cambridge endowed him with a facility in Latin and Greek verse that makes his elegiac diction feel "sonorous" and deeply allusive (Mack 33). George Whalley confirms that in his *Six Poems* (1753) Gray explicitly names Virgil and Lucretius among his primary Latin sources—along with Juvenal—thereby marking them as acknowledged hypotexts for his *Elegy* (Whalley 121). Yet, as Clarence Tracy warns, these classical echoes are never merely ornamental; they carry an emotional charge that bespeaks Gray's own "trembling hope" and the bittersweet uncertainty of eighteenth-century melancholia (Tracy 128).

Building on this foundation, Linda Hutcheon's tripartite model of adaptation—"an acknowledged transposition," "a creative and interpretive act," and "an extended intertextual engagement"—offers a framework for understanding Gray's poem as what she calls "repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 20). Gérard Genette's distinction between hypotext and hypertext further clarifies that Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and Virgil's *Georgics* function as the source strata over which Gray's *Elegy* inscribes its own elegiac meaning (Genette 5). Finally, D. Cooke Leitch reminds us that fidelity to a single source is "a hopelessly fallacious measure" of adaptation; rather, Gray's *Elegy* exemplifies the "plurality of meanings" generated by a web of precursor texts (Leitch 3–4).

Thus, Gray's *Elegy* emerges not as a pale imitation but as a richly layered palimpsest that both preserves and transforms its classical antecedents into a distinctively English meditation on mortality.

In the famed couplet, "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,/ And waste its sweetness on the desert air ..." (Gray ll. 7–8), Gray transposes Virgil's georgic lament for neglected fruit with striking fidelity: "...the apple reddens and drops from its stem, unseen,/ and the plump cluster of grapes dissolves in the air ..." (Virgil, *Georgics* II. 516–18). Both poets invoke Nature's indifference to human industry, yet Gray's echo is far from passive imitation. As George Whalley observes, Gray himself names Virgil as a principal Latin debt in his *Six Poems*, signaling a conscious hypotextual engagement (Whalley 121). Clarence Tracy further argues that this echo carries an emotional complexity—what he calls Gray's "trembling hope"—transforming the classical image into a register of personal and communal melancholy (Tracy 128).

Crucially, Gray relocates the scene from Italy's sunlit fields—under Ceres's providence—to the "twilight hush" of an English churchyard, where "the rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep" beneath its turf (Gray ll. 51–52). Stephen Prickett situates this re-visioning at the cusp of Romantic sensibility, where the ordered idyll gives way to a poignant awareness of mortality and change (Prickett 58).

This deliberate transformation exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon terms "transcoding"—a shift of genre and medium in which Gray's elegiac quatrains repurpose Virgilian georgic imagery into an English meditation on rural mortality (Hutcheon 35).

Gray's engagement with Lucretius is marked by both fidelity to the Epicurean source and creative transformation within his elegiac vision. In *De Rerum Natura* I.448–58, Lucretius celebrates the cyclical renewal of life—"the green or golden pomp of springing flowers" that "burst their sweet fragrance" only to return to elemental dust (Lucretius I.448–58). Gray recharges this motif in his *Elegy* when he invokes "the breath of life [that] returns to heaven again" (Gray ll. 27–28), recasting Lucretius's consolation—that death disperses atoms back to the cosmos—into a poetic meditation on the transience of corporeal existence (Gray ll. 27–28). Clarence Tracy highlights how this echo is imbued with an eighteenth-century "trembling hope," transforming learned allusion into a charged reflection on personal and communal mortality (Tracy 128).

Similarly, in Book III.993–1013, Lucretius assures his reader that "death is nothing to us, since when we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not" (Lucretius III.1001–3),

dissolving fear through materialist philosophy. Gray internalizes this doctrine in the churchyard's "silence" (Gray l. 61), where the poet's sober acceptance of mortality acquires new elegiac depth within the setting of Stoke Poges (Mack 9).

Under Genette's hypotext/hypertext framework, Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* functions as a foundational hypotext over which Gray's *Elegy* inscribes its elegiac hypertext, creating a palimpsest of classical philosophy and English melancholy (Genette 5). As Leitch reminds us, Gray's reliance on multiple classical precursors—including Virgil's georgic images—generates a "plurality of meanings" that defies fidelity-based criticism and reveals the *Elegy* as a richly layered adaptation rather than a simple pastiche (Leitch 4).

Genette's hypotext/hypertext model offers a powerful lens through which to view the *Elegy*'s classical layering: Virgil's *Georgics* and Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* function as Gray's hypotexts—the foundational strata from which he draws imagery and philosophical consolation—while the *Elegy* itself becomes the hypertext that both preserves these antecedents and reconfigures them within an English elegiac framework (Genette 5).

George Whalley's study of Gray as a "quiet Hellenist" underscores the poet's own admission of debt: in his *Six Poems* of 1753, Gray names Virgil and Lucretius (alongside Juvenal) as his primary Latin sources, thereby consciously marking them as his hypotexts (Whalley 121). Robert Mack further demonstrates that Gray's rigorous classical education at Eton and Cambridge—where he mastered Latin hexameters and Greek lyric forms—made these intertextual gestures feel "natural and idiomatic," seamlessly integrating classical registers into his English verse (Mack 33).

Yet the *Elegy* is not a slavish reproduction. As D. Cooke Leitch argues, fidelity to a single source is "a hopelessly fallacious measure"; rather, Gray's poem draws from a "web of precursor texts," generating a "plurality of meanings" that transcends one-to-one mimicry (Leitch 2006, 4). This plurality is evident when we consider not only Virgilian georgic imagery and Lucretian atomism but also Gray's allusive nods to Juvenal's moral satire and to vernacular pastoral traditions (Whalley 122; Prickett 58).

Moreover, in their essays collected in *Thomas Gray among the Disciplines*, Abbott and Levinson remind us that Gray's classical allusions operate across disciplinary boundaries—melding poetic, philosophical, and antiquarian modes—so that the *Elegy* emerges as a truly palimpsestuous text, writing over its classical hypotexts yet inscribing a distinctively eighteenth-century sensibility (Abbott & Levinson 47). In this light, the *Elegy*'s engagement with its classical sources exemplifies Hutcheon's notion of "repetition without replication"—a creative act of appropriation that honors its antecedents while forging new poetic meanings (Hutcheon 20).

Thus, in Gérard Genette's terms, hypotext/hypertext framework makes clear that the *Elegy* functions as a hypertextual palimpsest, one that both preserves and reshapes its Virgilian hypotext into something distinctly eighteenth-century and English (Genette 5).

a hypertext inscribed over its classical hypotexts of Lucretius and Virgil (Genette 5). By consciously naming those poets among his primary Latin debts (Whalley 121), Gray signals an "acknowledged transposition" of georgic and Epicurean models that he then "repeats without replicating" in a

distinctly English idiom (Hutcheon 2006, 20) ^[6]. The movement from Ceres's fertile fields and Lucretius's cosmic cycles to the "shaded plot" of Stoke Poges—his own "rude forefathers" beneath the turf—is another example of Hutcheon's "transcoding" (Hutcheon 35; Mack 33).

Clarence Tracy's notion of Gray's "trembling hope" (Tracy 128) infuses these allusions with eighteenth-century melancholy. D. Cooke Leitch's critique of fidelity reminds us that the *Elegy* draws instead from a "web of precursor texts," generating a "plurality of meanings" that transcends one-to-one mimicry (Leitch 4). Abbott and Levinson further observe how Gray's intertextual layering crosses disciplinary boundaries—melding poetic, philosophical, and antiquarian registers—to produce an elegiac voice at once learned and deeply personal (Abbott & Levinson 47).

Through this creative appropriation, Gray forges an elegiac idiom that mourns both personal and communal mortality while acknowledging—and dynamically reshaping—the enduring authority of Lucretius and Virgil. Through these transcodings of georgic imagery and Epicurean consolations, Gray's *Elegy* reveals itself as a dynamic act of adaptation—one that both honors and transforms its classical hypotexts into a distinctly English elegiac voice.

Having demonstrated how Gray's *Elegy* functions as a palimpsest of classical georgic and Epicurean thought, we now turn to Tony Harrison's *v.*, a poem that treats Gray's elegiac quatrains as its own hypotext, preserving formal contours even as it radically reshapes their ideological and cultural resonance.

Harrison's Hypertext: *v.* and the Debt to Gray

Harrison opens his poem, *v.*, with a violent reimagining of Gray's pastoral calm. Although he preserves Gray's iambic pentameter and ABAB quatrain scheme across exactly 112 stanzas—an explicit formal homage to Gray's *Elegy*, in his opening quatrain, he writes:

Beeston Hill's unholy ground—
 "Your parents' jobs" are blotted out by SHIT. (ll. 1–2, 5–6)
 Pencil-scratched names gape from the wall
 Like missing teeth in a filthy skull. (ll. 3–4)

Here, the graphic profanity of "SHIT" and the image of "names gape[ing]... like missing teeth" violently "vandalize" Gray's genteel "country churchyard" (Gray ll. 51–52), as Christine Regan notes: "Harrison deploys graffiti capitals to contest Gray's genteel elegiac voice" (Regan 14). Where Gray's *Elegy* speaks with a single, consoling voice, *v.* is polyphonic.

In Stanza 12, Harrison stages an exchange: "Get yer fuckin' money ready" snarls the skinhead./ "Poet, ye graze on words, we graze on broken glass." (ll. 47–48) This dramatic doubling—poet versus skinhead—echoes Gray's solitary speaker yet fractures it into a class-based confrontation, "expos[ing] the limits of Gray's liberal resignation" (Regan 23). As Neil Astley argues, Harrison here "occupies the canonical British literary tradition on behalf of dispossessed peoples," valorizing the form even as he disrupts its ideological complacency (Astley 10).

Although *v.* teems with vernacular energy, Harrison nonetheless invokes classical allusion, much as Gray invoked Lucretius and Virgil. In Stanza 64, he writes: "Here lies the horde of Hamlet's restless bones:/ Ghosts of Leeds miners

rumble in these stones." (ll. 253–54) By naming "Hamlet's restless bones," Harrison playfully resurrects Gray's "rude forefathers" (Gray l. 51) through the lens of radical classicism, as Susan Jones has observed: "Harrison's bequest of Shakespearean and classical names situates working-class experience within a broader literary heritage" (Jones 67). This appropriation of canonical figures into a Leeds graveyard exemplifies Robert Mack's observation that Gray's own classical training enabled seamless intertextual play—and that Harrison intensifies this play by recasting it in overtly political terms (Mack 33).

Harrison transforms Gray's elegiac meditation on mortality into an urgent "state of the nation" critique. In the closing stanzas, he proclaims: "This country's ditches overflow with hate—/ But our dead know a better measure yet." (ll. 111–12) D. Cooke Leitch's call to eschew fidelity-based criticism is especially apt here: Harrison draws on Gray, on Lucretius, and on Virgil, but refracts those sources through the harsh light of Thatcherism, generating a "plurality of meanings" that no singular hypotext can contain (Leitch 4).

Harrison then shatters the poem's singular voice by introducing a "skinhead" alter-ego who confronts the "poet" in a moment of theatrical doubleness in ll. 47–48. This exchange echoes Gray's consoling monologue but fractures it into a confrontation over whose reality matters. When the skinhead finally "aerosolled his name"—"He aerosolled his name. And it was mine" (Harrison l. 273)—Harrison gives form to what Neil Astley calls his "radical classicism," occupying Gray's canonical mode on behalf of the dispossessed while exposing the *Elegy*'s liberal resignation (1991, 10). As Clarence Tracy argues, this doppelgänger moment grants a distinct vernacular voice to "the mute, inglorious poor," challenging Gray's elegiac acceptance with a hard-edged demand for social accountability (Tracy 67; Gray ll. 41–42).

Critical accounts of Harrison's radical classicism underline that his classical borrowings are never mere decorative flourishes but energetic acts of cultural reinvention. As Neil Astley observes, *v.* represents Harrison's most sustained "occupation of the canonical British literary tradition on behalf of dispossessed peoples," a project that valorizes Gray's inherited forms even as it ruthlessly upends their ideological complacency (Astley 10). Across 112 quatrains, Harrison retains Gray's iambic pentameter and ABAB rhyme—yet he fills them with the vernacular grit of Leeds skinheads and miners, as when he intones in ll. 253–54. By invoking "Hamlet" alongside the "rumble" of mining ghosts, Harrison welds Shakespearean majesty to working-class grievance, deploying classical reference as a tool of social critique rather than genteel homage.

In *Harrison and the Classics*, Clarence Tracy coins the term "classical vandalism" to describe precisely this tactic: Harrison "defaces" high-cultural forms with working-class dialect and grievance, much as Gray once "reinscribed" Lucretius and Virgil into an English elegy (Tracy 67). The poem's register careens from the profane—"Your parents' jobs are blotted out by SHIT" (Harrison ll. 2, 6)—to the quasi-epic in ll. 47–48. This collision of cultural registers foregrounds the political stakes of Harrison's appropriation: he does not simply cloak working-class voices in classical form, but subjects those forms to a vernacular insurgency that unsettles the reader's expectations of both "high" and "low" poetics.

Through this radical re-voicing, Harrison both honors Gray's formal innovation and exposes its historical limitations, transforming eighteenth-century elegiac consolation into a twentieth-century lament for communities rendered invisible by economic and cultural neglect (Astley 10; Tracy 67).

"v." confirms Gray's *Elegy* as a foundational hypotext that Harrison's poem both preserves and radically reshapes. The opening quatrains retain Gray's formal elegance even as they descend into urban desolation, and by the close, Harrison has transfigured pastoral melancholy into a raw "urban elegy" in ll. 111–12. Here, the quiet resignation of Gray's "short and simple annals" gives way to an urgent cry: the poem's landscape is no longer the "shaded plot" of Stoke Poges but the flooded ditches of Thatcher's Britain, where hatred and neglect run rife (Gray ll. 27–28; Regan 14). In the same stroke that Harrison preserves Gray's iambic pentameter and quatrain form, he recasts classical consolation into "class struggle," demanding that we read these "better measure[s]" not as passive memorials but as collective imperatives to resist social injustice (Regan 14).

Harrison's v. also turns Gray's elegiac mode inside out, transforming "formal elegance" into "street-level urgency." He sprays not only walls but the very language of high culture with working-class vernacular: "I spat on your guilt-edged volumes./ Scrawled 'No future' on the spine." (Harrison ll. 105–6) By defacing "guilt-edged volumes," Harrison enacts what Stephen Prickett calls a rupture "at the cusp of Romantic sensibility," exposing the eighteenth-century liberal resignation of classical forms and forging in their place a twentieth-century cry for political engagement (Prickett 58). This is "classical vandalism" at its most powerful: the poet honors Gray's rhetorical inheritance only to unmask its ideological underpinnings, compelling us to confront history's unspeakable inequities through the very forms once used to console them.

In v., Harrison treats Gray's elegiac quatrains as his own hypotext, simultaneously preserving their formal grace and radicalizing their ideological underpinnings—a hypertextual adaptation that demands we read classical form as a vehicle for contemporary dissent.

Conclusion

This study has traced two distinct yet interconnected acts of poetic adaptation that together illuminate the dynamic possibilities of literary inheritance. In the first section, Thomas Gray's *Elegy* emerged as a palimpsestuous hypertext that knowingly draws upon Virgilian georgic imagery and Lucretian Epicurean thought—translating ancient consolations into an English elegiac idiom through formal "transcodings" and a richly layered intertextual strategy. Gray's rigorous classical training and explicit naming of his sources underscore the deliberate, creative nature of his appropriation.

The second section demonstrated how Tony Harrison's v. treats Gray's elegiac quatrains as its own hypotext, preserving their metrical grace even as it radicalizes their cultural and ideological resonance. By flooding Gray's formal contours with graffiti capitals, working-class vernacular, and political urgency—a tactic aptly termed "classical vandalism"—Harrison both honors and upends the eighteenth-century model, transforming pastoral melancholy into an urban, collective elegy.

Together, these case studies contribute to adaptation theory

by exemplifying how poetic form can serve as both a site of homage and a catalyst for subversion. They also enrich our understanding of classical reception in English literature, showing that adaptation need not imply servile imitation but can inaugurate new modes of dissent and communal engagement. In doing so, Gray and Harrison alike remind us that the past lives on most powerfully when its forms are actively repurposed to speak to the urgencies of the present.

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