

Thomas Gray's Finish

Hodgson, Andrew

DOI:

[10.1353/sel.2019.0024](https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2019.0024)

License:

Other (please specify with Rights Statement)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Hodgson, A 2019, 'Thomas Gray's Finish', *SEL - Studies in English Literature*, vol. 59, no. 3 (Summer 2019), pp. 531-557. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2019.0024>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:

Hodgson, Andrew. "Thomas Gray's Finish" *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 59 no. 3, 2019, pp. 531-557. Project MUSE, Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2019.0024> © 2019 Rice University

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Gray's Finish

1

“Of all English poets he was the most finished artist.”¹ Sir James Mackintosh meant to praise Gray, but his adjective might ring in contemporary ears with a suggestion of what is not so much perfected as passé. Gray himself regarded “extreme conciseness of expression, yet pure, perspicuous, and musical” as “one of the grand beauties of lyric poetry”;² and a good number of Gray’s critics have taken such conciseness to be the defining characteristic of his style. But Gray’s reputation for polished generality has attracted disdain as often as approval. While eighteenth-century readers spoke admiringly of “the accurate, the finished Gray”,³ heralding a writer whose “elaborate perfection” made him in David Cecil’s words the exemplary poet of an “epoch of prosperous stability”,⁴ the same qualities had, by the start of the nineteenth century, become cause for disapprobation. Coleridge regarded his manner as “frigid and artificial”.⁵ Byron said that he “smells too much of the oil: he is never satisfied with what he does; his finest things have been spoiled by over-polish – the sharpness of the outline is worn off.”⁶ Onward through the century judgements rebounded between those, like Mill, who perpetuated the Romantic distaste for Gray’s “elaborately studied” and – again – “artificial” manner,⁷ and the likes of Edmund Gosse, who could admire “the freshness and vigour of the mind that worked thus tardily and in miniature”.⁸

The aphoristic point of the final stanza of the “Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat” illustrates the quality at issue:

From hence, ye beauties, undeceived,
 Know, one false step is ne’er retrieved,
 And be with caution bold.
 Not all that tempts your wandering eyes
 And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;

 Nor all, that glisters, gold.

(37-42)⁹

Here is what Leavis called Gray's "strong conventionality".¹⁰ Its satisfactions are clear. The magisterial slowness of the closing line gives the impression that one often gets in reading Gray of a sentiment that has long existed proverbially being buffed up into perfected form.¹¹ Yet the lyric gloss conceals flaws. The lines came in for some roughing up from Johnson, who thought that the poem "ends in a pointed sentence of no relation to the purpose: if what glister'd had been gold, the cat would not have gone into the water, and if she had, would not less have been drowned".¹² Empson, defending the final line with the one hand for its "applicability to "two different notions of love" (it warns against both "snatching at a pleasure, real but dangerous" and "mistaking a false love for a true one") delighted on the other to concur with Johnson's opinion that it was "nonsense".¹³ But to criticize the lines as specious is to underrate the amplitude of their intelligence. There would be something narrow about a polished warning against the deceptiveness of surface allure that absolved its own surface from scrutiny. If Gray's neatly turned moral does not follow seamlessly from the details of the story to which it is appended, that might indicate a poet willing to undercut the qualities for which he is commonly admired. To be sure, to detect beneath the lines stirrings of disquiet at poetic artifice is to go against the grain of Gray's one-time assertion that "sense is nothing in poetry but according to the dress she wears" (*Correspondence*, p. 593). But Gray's best lines often wriggle free from formal attire, finding it ill fitted to their thought. Gray subjoined his praise for "extreme conciseness of expression" with the thought that conciseness was a quality that he had "always aimed at, but never could attain" (*Correspondence*, p. 551); and there is a case that this articulates a strength more than it confesses a weakness. To say as much is by no means unprecedented, despite Gray's reputation for artifice; and a large part of my purpose here is to gather some of the disparate observations of commentators who have found in Gray's style a fuller responsiveness to the contradictions and inconsistencies of experience than it is generally thought to possess. Gray's most compelling poems attest to a less settled consciousness than portraits of him as a writer who "had accustomed himself, & was able to polish every part" (*Correspondence*, p. 1291) have allowed. They often seek to have the final word, but they are intelligent, too, about the deceptions of finality. If Gray's poetry "glisters", it also heeds its own advice.

2

Gray's dishevelled finish is apparent in the way his poems themselves finish, or refrain from doing so. What is striking about Gray's output, as his biographer Robert Mack observes, is not just that he was "accustom'd to write little", but that he "wrote so little and left much incomplete".¹⁴ Gray's perfectionism forestalled perfection. Donne said that "In all Metricall compositions [...] the force of the whole piece, is for the most part left to the shutting up; the whole frame of the Poem is a beating out of a piece of gold, but the last clause is as the impression of a stamp, and that is it that makes it currant".¹⁵ And Gray knew as well as Donne the importance of an effective finale. "Your elegy must not end with the worst line in it", he once wrote to his friend Mason, "it is flat, it is prose; whereas that above all ought to sparkle, or at least to shine" (*Correspondence*, p. 568). But Gray knew, too, that the effectiveness of an ending might depend upon its not striving too obviously after effect. He praised the closing line of a poem by Richard West for being "bold, but I think not too bold" (*Correspondence*, p. 202). And when, writing to Horace Walpole in 1750, he paused mid-letter in mimicry of the "end" he had put to the "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard" – "a merit that most of my writings have wanted, and are like to want, but which this epistle I am determined shall not want, when it tells you that I am ever Yours, T. GRAY" – he started up again with an eye that viewed such "roundness" and "cleverness" as an outmoded high-Augustan fashion: "Not that I have done yet; but who could avoid the temptation of finishing so roundly and so cleverly in the manner of good queen Anne's days?" (*Correspondence*, p. 326-7). Another letter stutters to a close in a manner matched by the felicitously unfinished state of some of Gray's poems: "I had prepared a finer period than the other to finish with, but damn it! I have somehow mislaid it among my papers. You shall certainly have it next summer" (*Correspondence*, p. 341). In the same spirit, the "Ode to Ignorance" falters just as "Fancy" tries to "bring the buried ages back to view", and is, as Mack remarks, "perfect in its own imperfection, paradoxically complete in its very incompleteness" (Mack, p. 335). And with comparable aptness the "secret sympathies" Gray imparts in the final lines of the "Stanzas to Mr Bentley" are all the more intimate for the fact that the corner of Gray's manuscript is torn, leaving his communiqué forever private:

Enough for me, if to some feeling breast

My lines a secret sympathy []
 And as their pleasing influence []
 A sigh of soft reflection []
 (25-8)

The way that poems end occupied Gray's imagination because endings at large were his great theme. His most humane poems are "finished" with a hesitance responsive to his feeling for the ways that human lives do and do not come to an end with death. Gray's earliest extant English verses, the "Lines Spoken by the Ghost of John Dennis at the Devil Tavern" that he sent in a letter to Horace Walpole in 1734, extend a solicitude, at once tender and comic, towards the fate of "That little, naked, melancholy thing / My soul" (13-4) that ghosts almost all Gray's poems. The lines' winning fantasy of posthumous existence finds an appropriate form in the way that the poem, itself a kind of postscript, ends with a "P.S.". Having come to a close by protesting the exhaustion of "my muse" (36), their speaker returns to relay a few further snatches of gossip from the world below:

P.S. Lucrece for half a crown will show you fun,
 But Mrs. Oldfield is become a nun.
 Nobles and cits, Prince Pluto and his spouse,
 Flock to the ghost of Covent-Garden House:
 Plays, which were hissed above, below revive,
 When dead applauded that were damned alive.
 The people, as in life, still keep their passions,
 But differ something from the world in fashions.
 Queen Artemisia breakfasts on bohea,
 And Alexander wears a ramillie.

(42-51)

The inverted afterlife imagined here (“Lucrece” is the legendarily chaste Roman housewife; “Mrs Oldfield” is Anne Oldfield, actress and serial mistress) is animated by the wit with which Gray punningly rejuvenates dead metaphors: the plays are “revivals” in a more than theatrical sense; the “damnation” of critics is imagined as having succeeded in a bizarrely literal way. Gray never ended any of his mature poems with such insouciance. But these early “Lines” are shaped, nevertheless, by an openness to second thoughts that allowed Gray to display in his most accomplished work a worldly scepticism about his own refinement. His poems look askance at their own eloquence. The “Ode on the Spring” with which in 1742 Gray’s mature output began opens by celebrating the arrival of the “long-expecting flowers” that “wake the purple year” in a language grown out of dusty idioms: “long-expecting” picks up Dryden’s description of frost-bound flowers “expecting” the spring in *Astrea Redux* (22-3) (with a jokey suggestion they have been waiting from that poem to this); “purple year” goes back through Pope’s pastorals to Virgil’s *Eclogues* (via Dryden’s translation).¹⁶ But the stanza’s literary bricolage is appropriate to a poem whose pathos clusters around the sad wit with which it goes through the motions of calling new life into being, even as there hovers in the background the suspicion that such life has already passed it by. Gray’s celebration of the spring is cooled by his awareness that he is rehearsing a well-worn poetic theme. So when in the second stanza he entertains the prospect of taking advantage of the newly clement weather to moralize upon human endeavour, we are invited to view his aspersions from an ironic distance:

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!

(16-20)

Gray’s leisurely parenthesis casts its eye toward a muse who however neatly the platitudes are lined up, could hardly be said to be operating at full tilt here. But the poem refuses to “recline” in one position for

long. An impulse to second thoughts is hard-wired into Gray's stanza form: the apparently climactic tendency of the *aab ab* pattern of its final six lines – into whose contours Gray's syntax falls in all but one stanza – is shadowed by the presence within that pattern of the final *bcb* unit that sends the stanza circling back in upon itself. The impulse plays out on the canvas of the poem as a whole. After the third stanza's gaze has been distracted by the gorgeous but frivolous activity of the "insect youth" (25), the fourth appears to move the argument to a close by passing world-weary judgement on people's blindness to the transience of life:

To Contemplation's sober eye
 Such is the race of man:
 And they that creep, and they that fly,
 Shall end where they began.
 Alike the busy and the gay
 But flutter thro' life's little day,
 In fortune's varying colours drest:
 Brush'd by the hand of rough Mischance,
 Or chill'd by age, their airy dance
 They leave, in dust to rest.

(31-40)

It is the first articulation of one of Gray's great commonplaces. Its power lies in its tragic resignation: compared to the lines from Matthew Green's *The Grotto* which Gray acknowledged as a source, the emphasis is on the fragility of "life's little day", rather than on sniping at the vanity of the "race of man".¹⁷ Yet the best of Gray's poems seldom "end" at the point to which they seemed to be heading when they "began"; and his ode does not repose on this stanza's "sober" reflections, but extends into a final stanza in which the "insect youth" are allowed to answer back:

Thy joys no glitt'ring female meets,

No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
 No painted plumage to display:
 On hasty wings thy youth is flown;
 Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone—
 We frolic, while 'tis May.

(45-50)

The lines are both good humoured and self-lacerating. What in the previous stanza remained a general attitude is here given a personal sting: Gray's disapproval towards "they that fly" is twisted back into a portrait of himself as a "solitary fly" (44) whose "youth is flown". But Gray's flexible intelligence ensures that these final lines intensify as much as usurp his original stance. As P. F. Vernon noticed long ago, Gray ensures that the "sportive kind" (42) condemn themselves out of their own mouths. They laugh at Gray's deprivation, but to be without "hoarded sweets", "painted plumage" and "hasty wings" may be no bad thing.¹⁸ For all Gray's self-ironizing, his adjectives kick against the superficiality of the youths' attitudes. In any case, the youth's "accents low" have the impact of reiterating as much as challenging Gray's position, since their counter-voice, too, is premised on an awareness that youth flies, suns set, and springs go.

Gray's Ode joins Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 among the poems whose self-portraiture is liable to provoke an anxious glance in the mirror when you find out how old the poet was when he wrote it. "Gray had reached the age of twenty five", wrote William Lyon Phelps in a laconic note to these lines that distils the mix of incredulity and sympathy they leave in their wake (it is the flicker of fellow feeling in "reached" that does it).¹⁹ Gray's poem was written in answer to some verses sent to Gray by his friend Richard West encouraging him to "invoke the tardy May" (*Correspondence*, p. 201); Gray's response takes the line that, as far as he is concerned, the "May" is not so much "tardy" as already long gone. By the time he replied with the poem, circumstances had cruelly endorsed Gray's gloom: West had died of consumption, and the letter containing the poem was returned unopened.

West's Death forced the urbane "finish" of Gray's art up against inner tumult. Where the "Ode on the Spring" remains a nimbly self-deprecating affair, the "Sonnet" Gray

wrote on the death of West subjects epigrammatic polish to scrutiny under tragic pressure. The charge against the poem has always been that it is too highly finished to achieve the true voice of feeling. Wordsworth called upon it to indict a poet “curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction”;²⁰ Edward Thomas, refining Wordsworth’s position, said that what was wrong with the poem’s opening lines, “In vain to me the smiling Mornings shine, / And reddening Phœbus lifts his golden fire” (ll. 1-2), was their remoteness not from speech but from thought.²¹ But that the poem begins with Gray groping for solace amongst conventional platitudes is essential to its effect. Hopkins refuted Wordsworth’s criticisms with the observation that “in a work of art having so strong a unity as a sonnet, one part which is singly less beautiful than another may be as necessary to the whole effect”.²² Hopkins’s point is that the whole structure of the sonnet works to dramatize the breakthrough of authentic feeling: the lines which Wordsworth italicized as being “the only part of this sonnet which is of any value” (Wordsworth, p. 602), garner their plainspoken force from the way they play off against the more “elaborate” ones. And, to extend Hopkins’s feeling for the relation between single line and “whole effect”, it is striking how completely the second half of the sonnet reiterates the first in new accents. Alongside its presence in the final line, “In vain to me the smiling Mornings shine” (1) finds an echo in “Yet morning smiles the busy race to cheer” (9). The birds’ “Descant” (2) at the start of the poem joins in with “To warm their little Loves the Birds complain” (12) at the end, just as “Or Cheerful fields resume their green Attire” (3) resumes its attire in “The Fields to all their wonted Tribute bear” (11) (so the opening sequence of morning, birds, fields is played out in reverse in the final three lines). “These Ears, alas! for other Notes repine” (5) is replayed in a similar key in “I fruitless mourn to him, that cannot hear” (13) – a line in which “My lonely Anguish melts no Heart, but mine” (7) also finds company. The whole poem is bracketed by the phrase “In vain”. The movement bears the stamp of a mind paralysed by loss, but the poem returns upon itself with a deepened awareness of the futility of any effort to evade grief. It begins by reflecting on the inefficacy the restorative efforts of the natural world; it ends with reflection on the self-perpetuating pointlessness of Gray’s own poetic endeavours: “And weep the more, because I weep in vain” (l. 14). The poem learns to speak in a voice that transcends the polished formalities of poetry, but in doing so it only discovers the futility of its grieving.²³

The other poems Gray wrote in the wake of West's death are driven by a similar reluctance to brandish easy conclusions about suffering. The "Ode to Adversity" is headed with some lines from Aeschylus, addressing "Zeus, who has established as a fixed ordinance that wisdom comes by suffering". And the first two stanzas of the poem embrace adversity as a "Stern rugged Nurse" (13), whose tough love nurtures not only wisdom but 'Virtue' (10). 'The bad affright, afflict the best' (4) Gray appeals, in a line whose balance of sounds masks over-zealous piety – Gray seems happy for the "bad" to come off worse than the "good" here. But by the third stanza, Gray's enthusiasm for Zeus's "fixed ordinance" is starting to waver:

Scared at thy frown terrific, fly
 Self-pleasing Folly's idle brood,
 Wild Laughter, Noise, and thoughtless Joy,
 And leave use leisure to be good.

(17-20)

Nobody would cavil at the banishment of "Self-pleasing Folly", but it would be a stringent notion of "goodness" that left no room for "Laughter, Noise, and thoughtless Joy". And if this stanza speaks less what it feels than what it ought to say, by the end of the poem, Gray is explicit in his desire for Adversity to exert a "milder influence" (42) and "to soften, not to wound my heart" (44):

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.

(45-8)

The rhythms here are those of a poem that aspires towards a resonant close but finds that its responsibility to the precise turns and postures of the mind gets in the way. Vincent Quinn remarks of the

arch syntax of the penultimate line that “Gray chooses to invert the line [...] so that he can match ‘scan’ with ‘man’, thus finishing the poem with a clear-cut rhyme”;²⁴ but the “clear-cut” finish is achieved at the expense of a countervailing syntactical awkwardness in the service of “Exactness”. Mason said in his annotations in 1775, that “the many hard consonants, which occur in this line, hurt the ear”: “Mr Gray perceived it, but did not alter it, as the words themselves were those which best conveyed his idea, and therefore he did not chuse to sacrifice sense to sound”.²⁵ Mason must have had very sensitive ears; but he is right that the ungainly progress of the lines matches up to their difficult accommodation with adversity. The poem exchanges a polished rehearsal of the easy consolation that “what doesn’t harm you makes you stronger” for a more complex analysis of the fruits and costs of suffering. That analysis yields a sense that far from “tam[ing]” the “human breast” (2), Adversity might provoke a more “exact” self-awareness and a more forgiving attitude to others. And yet, in contrast to the bold accents of the poem’s beginning, the obdurate awkwardness of the closing lines makes no pretence that either such enlarged consciousness on behalf of others can be anything other than hard-won.

Gray is a poet of seemingly epigrammatic neatness whose poems dwell sceptically and ironically with received wisdom, seeking to prove its truth on their pulses. Where, the “Ode” “scans” the “defects” in its eager embrace of “Adversity” gradually, the power of the final stanza of the “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College””, another of Gray’s 1742 lyrics, is grounded in a more abrupt reconsideration of the poem’s conclusions:

To each his sufferings: all are men,
 Condemned alike to groan;
 The tender for another’s pain,
 The 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.

(91-100)

The stanza begins with a ring of finality. Its opening quatrain achieves a terse summation of the centrality of suffering to human experience. If its businesslike syntax hardly feels like an expression of “tenderness”, it achieves a humane clarity. Yet the calm with which the opening four lines accept the inevitability of suffering serves, even more emphatically than in Gray’s “Sonnet”, as the backdrop for the interjection of an impassioned personal voice. The pained exclamation “Ah” introduces a seemingly fluid, emotion-harried syntax. Bradshaw’s edition has a note: “Lines 96 and 97 should be taken with 95: – ‘Since sorrow never comes too late, and happiness too swiftly dies, why should they know their fate?’ The punctuation here is correct, as would also be a comma after fate and a query after flies; but some editors have a comma after flies.”²⁶ This tidies matters up; but it remains the case that Gray wrote and punctuated the sentence in a way that needs tidying up, and the temptation to read the lines with a comma after ‘flies’, even if it would not drastically affect the meaning, points to a shiftiness that is scarved by the serene formality. The syntax as it stands throws into relief the bareness of the penultimate sentence: “Thought would destroy their paradise”. The line affects compassion but it evokes a drastically conscribed notion of what constitutes “paradise”. And the impracticalities of a life innocent of ‘Thought’ shadow the familiar closing lines, which are both a remarkable instance of Gray’s knack for compressed proverbial finish, and an example of the ironies which that finish can encompass. Like the “Ode to the Spring”, the poem ends by shutting itself up (“No more”). And yet for all the air of assurance, it proves a curiously futile piece of instruction, since to have reached this point in the poem, one has to have passed through a series of stanzas which have stripped away “ignorance”. The act of reading the poem destroys the possibility of attaining the “bliss” it recommends.

3

Thomas Hardy, a writer whose advocacy for “not having too much style – being, in fact, a little careless, or rather seeming to be, here and there”,²⁷ makes him sound a very different kind of poet to the “pure, perspicuous, and musical” lyricist Gray at least “aimed” to be (*Correspondence*, p. 551), once spoke with odd

sympathy about Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard" as poem that "has almost made itself notorious by claiming to be a lyric in particular humours, situations, and weathers, and waiving the claim in others".²⁸ Hardy was driving at the "Elegy"'s manner of courting and eluding lucid generality – the oscillating confidence in its own lyric clarity that makes it, in Stephen Bygrave's words, a poem that "dramatizes the Augustan ideal under stress";²⁹ and in this respect, as in so much else, the "Elegy" is the heart of Gray's achievement. The "Elegy" is remarkable for its restlessness as much as its monumentality. It is a poem, in Eugene McCarthy's words, "filled with what seem to be easy sentiments which on reflection become unsettling": it "does not assure or comfort with epigrammatic platitudes; in many respects it offers insecurity".³⁰ Its style gravitates towards the polished and epigrammatic, but always in order to scrutinize rather than acquiesce. Memorable statements are marooned in wavering currents of thought and feeling. Empson wrestled with the "massive calm" of the poem's most famous stanza, whose implied comparison of the social arrangement with the natural world "makes it seem inevitable, which it was not, and gives it a dignity which was undeserved":³¹

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

(53-6)

Yet the poem entertains the parallel between the gem and the flower and the unfulfilled lives of the villagers without explicitly endorsing it. The stanza is laconically self-enclosed. Its images pass across the surface of the poem offering consoling analogies whose pertinence we are invited to test as readily as concede. The colder assessment of the immediately preceding lines, that "Chill Penury repressed their noble rage, / And froze the genial current of the soul" (ll. 51-2), is far from complacent; and the way the jarring of moods plays against the serene, hymn-like procession of the stanzas is typical of the mobility of mind at work in a poem that never lets a single attitude settle.

When Gray sent the “Elegy” to Walpole he told his friend to “look upon it in the light of a thing with an end to it; a merit that most of my writings have wanted and are like to want” (*Correspondence*, p 326-7). But the “Elegy” is no more assured in its “ending” than Gray’s earlier lyrics are, and its conclusions are always liable to find themselves ensnared by new beginnings (it is a poem, after all, which opens out from English poetry’s most famous evocation of things drawing to a close). “The strong wayward current of its rhetoric is exploratory”, says Robert Wells, admiring the way that the “Elegy” “unfolds and surprises itself”, as “Gray veers away from the conclusion he had originally planned, and re-enters his subject, to discover the unwritten poem standing at the edge of the one he has been writing”.³² That original conclusion had seen Gray resolving his anxieties at the unfulfilled potential of the villagers with four stanzas which find consolation in what is usually described as an attitude of Christian stoicism.³³ It is a just label in so far as the poem in this original version rejects the misconceptions of the “thoughtless” multitude who “bow” to “Majesty” and “idolize Success” whilst really owing their “Safety” to their “Innocence”; and what was originally Gray’s penultimate stanza is soothing:³⁴

Hark how the sacred Calm, that broods around
 Bids ev’ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease
 In still small Accents whisp’ring from the Ground
 A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace

But the poem in its earlier version did not rest on this “grateful Earnest”. Instead, Gray developed the thought into a final stanza which feels far less reassuring:

No more with Reason & thyself at strife;
 Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room
 But thro’ the cool sequester’d Vale of Life
 Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

The lines have a confidence that is both firm and terrifying. Death is not accepted but actively “Pursued” as a solution to the inequalities the poem perceives in life; and the whole stanza is strikingly free from the grateful Christian optimism of that which preceded it: the “Doom” it envisions sounds as much like oblivion as a promise of heaven’s “eternal peace”. So while one understands Roger Lonsdale’s characterisation of this earlier version of the “Elegy” as “a well-constructed poem, in some ways more balanced and lucid than in its final version”,³⁵ even in its original ending Gray’s hallmark restlessness and resistance to easy solutions are at work. The two final stanzas’ memorable simplicity blurs on further scrutiny. One’s impulse is to take the quatrains as self-enclosed units – so Gray’s semi-colon after “strife” initially seems puzzling: it gets in the way of lines which one takes to mean “do not give space to cares and wishes which will put you at war with yourself and with reason”. But actually the sentence extends further back than that. “No more with Reason & thyself at strife” describes the state of contentment one will experience in “eternal Peace”; and the last three lines occupy a clause of their own: “Give room to cares and wishes if necessary, yes; but most of all, pursue your fate quietly”. It is a good instance of the habit of unsettling seemingly “easy sentiments” which McCarthy observes in the poem’s style. Gray’s attitude through his final clause, too, is more intricate than it might first appear. “Anxious Cares” are what Pope’s Belinda suffered;³⁶ but if that allusion hints at an inclination to cock a snook at panics about immortality, “endless wishes” succeeds it with a dizzying power: it describes “wishes” that existence might be endless, but also wishes that, since they can never be fulfilled even if existence is endless, are by their nature destined to be “endless” themselves.

The “Elegy” persistently wrong-foots its reader. Its syntactical sleights of hand give the impression of a poet balancing intricately opposed attitudes to the facts of loss. When Gray revisited the poem and rewrote the above stanzas, he arrived at one of his most memorable and pathetic summations of the lives of the poor. What had been an instruction becomes an observation, but the lines remain jostled by ambiguity:

Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife,
 Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
 Along the cool sequestered vale of life

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

(73-6)

“If there were no comma after ‘strife’, the sense of this couplet would be precisely the opposite of what Gray intended”, observed W. Lyon Phelps, editing the poems in 1894: “No wonder he was particular about his punctuation” (Lyon Phelps, p. 141). But as Duncan C. Tovey noted in response, “Even with the comma, there is some carelessness in employing the word ‘stray’ so close upon ‘far from’ &c. &c. with which there is a natural temptation to connect it. It is not in perfect lucidity of expression that Gray shines.”³⁷ Tovey is right; and the subtlety of Gray’s phrasing depends upon its ability to encompass conflicting senses in a manner resistant to “perfect lucidity”. Beneath the lines’ ostensible meaning (“they never deviated from the right path because they lived lives well apart from the madding influence of crowds”) runs an intimation different to the sense Phelps imagines to hold sway and more in tune with the feeling for the pathos of stifled opportunities which colours the second half of the final poem: that the people’s “sober wishes” and humdrum desires never learned to reach beyond those of the massed “crowd” of humanity of which they are a part.

Gray’s embarkation upon what Wells calls “the unwritten poem standing at the edge of the one he has been writing” is catalysed by his recognition of the innate human desire to be remembered. Where in the earlier version Gray had heard emanating from the graveyard the “still small accent” of grateful contentment, he now detects the cry of the “natural desire” for fame he outlined in his prose commentary to the fragmentary “The Alliance of Education and Government”, composed prior to the completion of the Elegy in 1748-49: “It is impossible to conquer that natural desire we have of being remembered; even criminal ambition and avarice, the most selfish of all passions, would wish to leave a name behind them” (Lonsdale, *Poems of Thomas Gray*, p. 91).

Yet even these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

(77-80)

The force of the stanza radiates from its emphatically-positioned verb “Implore”, which strives with affecting intensity against the “frailty” of the memorial and the modesty of the “passing tribute” it appeals for: throughout the “Elegy” Gray’s lyricism pays tribute to the force of the “uncouth rhymes” it ostensibly exists to augment. Gray’s “Yet” here is the descendent of the turns of argument upon a surge of feeling at the end of the Spring and Eton College Odes, and it drives Gray’s revision to the original ending to rise to its heartening climax, with its visionary attestation to the claims and desires which outlast death:

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
 This pleasing anxious being e’er resigned,
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
 Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
 Ev’n from the tomb the voice of nature cries,
 Ev’n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

(85-92)

The first stanza frames a question. Earlier, the poem had asked, half-rhetorically:

Can storied urn or animated bust
 Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
 Can Honour’s voice provoke the silent dust,
 Or Flatt’ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

(41-44)

Gray had answered that stanza with an implicit “no”, sending the poem on a trajectory towards its acquiescence in the facts of death and the consoling thoughts of an afterlife. His later question kicks back against the self-assurance of that original resolution, to say that, if “urns” and “busts” are engaged in a futile protest against mortality, they at least bespeak an impulse that cannot be quelled. The effect is to ruffle the possibility that the poem might offer any straight answers to the issues it explores: what outlasts death is the evidence of a desire that something should outlast death.

For some, this is the last of the good writing in the “Elegy”. “The first critical point that must be made in any discussion of the poem”, averred F. W. Bateson, “is the inferiority of the last fifty-six lines”: “The remaining verses (with the exception of the “Epitaph”) can only be described as thin”.³⁸ “Even the ‘Elegy’ flags a little towards the end”, said Leslie Stephen, glumly.³⁹ Admittedly, the poetry never recovers the control and depth of pathos that drives the superb and surprising tonal shift from hushed evocation of deathbed intimacy to sublime visionary confidence in “the voice of nature” in the stanza above. But the close of the poem succeeds differently. The perceived falling off has to do, first, with the clichés in which, turning to consider his own fate, Gray imagines himself being remembered by a local “hoary swain” – in whose eyes he appears as little more than a stock figure: “His listless length at noontide would he stretch, / And pore upon the brook that babbles by” (103-4). Yet the colourlessness of the writing is affecting as well as wittily unsentimental. The poem’s reworked ending acknowledges a tragic gap: the swain is no more capable of effectively memorializing Gray than Gray is the villagers. And so he is forced to wheel out the sort of platitudes Gray himself trades in at the start of the sonnet on West. A sense of the tragic hovers around the flatness of the swain’s account:

One morn I missed him on the customed hill,
 Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
 Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
 Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

The next with dirges due in sad array

Slow through the church-way path we saw him born.

(109-114)

The lines are powerful in their indifference. Gray's demise is imagined as causing merest ruffle in the swain's daily routine. "I missed him" means "I failed to spot him"; the phrase works by fending off the pressure of the more emotional sense of "miss" as "to notice with regret the absence or loss of; to feel the lack of" (*OED* 19). For a moment "Another came" sounds like it is talking about another poet lined up to take Gray's place, rather than a new day. "Born" elicits a mordant pun, but it does flag up the question of what sort of afterlife death gives birth to. The slow movement of the funeral procession achieves symmetry with the ploughman who winds slowly across the landscape at the start of the poem. Bateson saved the poem's Epitaph from disdain, but that, too has met its detractors. Walter Savage Landor wrote of "the tin-kettle of an epitaph tied to the tail";⁴⁰ Cleanth Brooks, remembering Landor's judgement, echoed his doubts that the Epitaph was "adequate".⁴¹ The Epitaph's admirers defend its structural ingenuity. Peter Sacks observes how carefully an assurance that Gray's memorial will be read is folded into the poem.⁴² But any case that the Epitaph is consolatory still has to contend with the impersonal register of the writing, which is consoling in only the most general terms. The stanzas veil as much as they divulge, and what survives is only a record of "A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" (118):

No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God.

(125-28)

"Formal conclusions that transcended the immediate misery were thought imperative" by eighteenth-century poets, Marshall Brown has observed, "for an ending signified not only the fulfilment of a formal obligation to the reader, but also an affirmation of order".⁴³ Yet Gray could hardly have come up with a

more “frail memorial” (78) to end on. The parenthesis makes these lines notoriously difficult to construe and to speak aloud, and the vision of future existence they advance is one of tremulous limbo. One of the problems of the original ending was its neatness: it is hard to believe that someone is content to remain unremembered when they state the matter so memorably. The Epitaph, which makes no bones about its desire to be remembered, is potent in its fragile reticence. Refraining from exposing Gray’s “merits” or “frailties”, it offers solace through its sad acceptance that adequate remembrance, and even achieving the intimacy with another human being that would allow you to live on in their memory, are “trembling hopes” at best.⁴⁴

4

Edwardian Poet Laureate William Watson rehearsed the prevailing view of Gray when he spoke in some stately lines of:

Gray, who on worn thoughts conferred
That second youth, the perfect word
That elected and predestined phrase
That had lain bound, long nights and days
To wear at last, when once set free
Immortal pellucidity.⁴⁵

Watson’s sentence itself seems to take an eternity to unfold, so that its manner achieves sympathy with what his poem perceives the qualities of Gray’s style to be. But “immortality” is just what Gray’s words never appear assured of, and the way that Gray upsets the “pellucidity” of their finish is a central aspect of that. Gray’s poems seldom, as, say, Shakespeare’s sonnets do, put trust in the “immortality” of art. The “Ode on the Spring” and the “Eton College” Ode end by recommending their own neglect; the “Sonnet” on the death of West laments its own vanity; the “Elegy” speaks with a refined awareness of its own limitations. It may be the case, as Mack argues, that “confronted with questions concerning the unfathomable, guiding forces of human life and of the universe in general, Gray sought temporary

refuse in the simple, articulate structures of poetic form” (Mack, p. 352); but the truth of that statement relies on placing adequate emphasis upon “temporary”. Gray thought that fame was important – “it extends our existence and example into future ages; continues and propagates virtue, which otherwise would be as short-lived as our frame” (Lonsdale, *Poems of Thomas Gray*, p. 91) – but he was crisply sceptical about the prospect of achieving it through literature. He judged, for instance, that Collins and Joseph Warton “both deserve to last some years, but will not” (*Correspondence*, p. 261). He sometimes spoke of his own poems as if they were mayflies: “I do not think them worth sending to you, because they are by nature doom’d to live but a single day, or if their existence is prolong’d beyond that date, it is only by means of news-paper parodies, & witless criticism. This sort of abuse I had reason to expect, but did not think it worth while to avoid it” (*Correspondence*, p. 1070). Gray had in mind in this last instance “The Progress of Poetry” and “The Bard”, the Pindaric odes he published in 1757; and both poems are characteristic in the difficulties they encounter in imagining their own future. The odes try to point a new direction for poetry, but arrive at their conclusions, if not with a sense of bathos, then with less than a clear and confident notion of the way forward.

Defeat is built into the very design of “The Bard”: Gray enters into the voice of a thirteenth-century poet to envision a future course of British poetry whose particulars nevertheless dwindle before Gray’s own birth. “The succession of Poets after Milton’s time”, as Gray’s note to the lines describes them, are audible only through “distant warblings” which “lessen” on the ear before being “lost in long futurity” (133-134). The poem ends with the Bard, having prophesied the resurgence of a British poetic line, “plunging” triumphantly into “endless night”. Johnson criticised the resolution for taking the easy way out (“suicide is always to be had without expense of thought”)⁴⁶ but its impact is enriched by the energies Gray elicits from “endless”, which plays off against the finality of the pentameter couplet in which it is encased to suggest a typically complicated apprehension of the difficulty of reaching an end – and of Gray’s sense of the murk of his own belatedness. But if there is irony in the poem’s conception, it does not easily find a home in its style, which muffles its ears to the accents of poetic “futurity”. For all their agitation of rhyme and metre, Gray’s Pindaric Odes are the least supple of poems. Their writing, Johnson said, is “laboured into harshness”; it displays a “kind of cumbrous splendour which we wish away.”⁴⁷ What Johnson identifies is not a complexity or irregularity or open-endedness at odds with

surface polish, of the kind which I have been tracing, but rather ungainliness produced in the pursuit of grandeur. “The Bard’s” syntax dithers through ever-shifting patterns of metre and rhyme in a manner appropriate to descriptions of how Edward “wound with toilsome march his long array” (12) down Mount Snowdon, but entirely unsuited to envisioning or engendering a new dynamism in English poetry. Here, for one instance, is the imagined call to arms with which the final section of the epode opens:

‘The verse adorn again
 ‘Fierce War, and faithful Love,
 ‘And Truth severe, by fairy Fiction drest.
 ‘In buskin’d measures move
 ‘Pale Grief, and pleasing Pain,
 ‘With Horror, Tyrant of the throbbing breast.

(125-130)

Gray’s “adorn” and “move” must be among the least energetic imperatives in English poetry. Any urgency in the lines is strangled by the ambiguity whether the “verse” is agent or object of their appeals and by the repetitiousness of their rhythms. The clogged grandeur of “The Bard” is surprising because in the same years as Gray was labouring on the poem, he also composed the “Ode on the Pleasure Arising from Vicissitude”, a reworking of the “Ode on the Spring” which arrives in its final completed lines at a limpidity far better attuned to the “distant warblings” of a future age:

The meanest flowret of the vale,
 The simplest note that swells the gale,
 The common Sun, the air, the skies,
 To him are opening Paradise.

(45-8)

These lines, too, diverge from the restlessness I have been tracing beneath the “finish” of Gray’s style, but they do so thanks to their simplicity. If they are stripped of the ironies of the “Ode on the Spring”, they likewise lack the pretence of “The Bard”. They retain a sense of the virtues of provisionality and process, both in the way “opening” captures a continually awakening consciousness, and in the poignancy of their position in the poem: with these lines, Gray’s ode breaks down, fragmenting on the cusp of new vision.

Such felicitous incompleteness puts “Vicissitude” in tune with the more self-ironising spirit Gray’s other Pindaric Ode, “The Progress of Poetry”. Where “The Bard” affects a finality it can only hazily imagine, “The Progress of Poetry”, is open about its own hesitancy. Gray made an apparently odd distinction when, mid-way through the composition of the poem (which took him four years) he sent an uncompleted version to Walpole: “It wants but seventeen lines of having an end, I don’t say of being finished” (*Correspondence*, p. 364). Yet if this implies a fault, as so often in Gray, the poem’s disturbance of firm resolution sponsors imaginative amplitude. Its closing section begins by carrying over from the final antistrophe an homage to Dryden, whose lyrics are praised as sparkling with the gifts which “Fancy” “Scatters from her pictur’d urn / Thoughts, that breath, and words, that burn” (109-110). (It is testament to Gray’s words’ own power to “burn” and “breathe” new life that they were rekindled by Shelley as he sought an image for his own poetry’s power to inspire at the end of the “Ode to the West Wind”.) Gray then approaches his finale through an abrupt alteration in mood and voice:

But ah! ‘tis heard no more –
 Oh! Lyre divine, what daring Spirit
 Wakes thee now?

(111-13)

Dryden’s music falls away and a plainer voice enters. The question is a genuine one, to which Gray goes on to supply a response – but for a moment it hangs wistfully in the atmosphere of the poem as though it were a rhetorical lament that there is nobody left to take on the mantle. The rest of the poem, a single sentence, unwinds Gray’s answer through an account of the character of this “daring Spirit” (which is

Gray himself). It begins with the confession that Gray inherits nothing of Pindar's grandeur, ("Nor the pride, nor ample pinion" (114)), before rounding off with a counter-assertion:

Yet oft before his infant eyes would run
 Such forms, as glitter in the Muse's ray
 With orient hues, unborrow'd of the Sun:
 Yet shall he mount, and keep his distant way
 Beyond the limits of a vulgar fate,
 Beneath the Good how far – but far above the Great.

(118-123)

The syntax has a poise that propels apparent confidence: the first "yet" means "even so", the second means "in future". But the closing line is hardly the triumphant cry it might have been. Its studied ambiguity leaves the future Gray imagines uncertain. The caesura splits the line with a force that makes it feel less a whole than two halves, so that its rhythm suits the way the syntax see-saws between opposed meanings: whether Gray intends an artistic judgement ("how far below me the merely 'Good' poets will be – how far above me the truly 'Great' ones") or a moral one ("how far beneath the 'Good' I'll be – but how far above the supposedly 'Great' is impossible to say. In its blend of control and hesitation Gray's ending finds a style, as Bradshaw noted, to express "his pride, and, at the same time, his retiring disposition" (Bradshaw, p. 195).

"What has one to do when turned of fifty, but really to think of finishing?" Gray asked Walpole in 1768 (*Correspondence*, p. 1018). In truth, the difficulties of "finishing", in their different guises, preoccupied Gray throughout his career. The usual line on Gray might follow Eliot's characterisation of him as exemplary of a group of writers "incompetent to find a style of writing for themselves".⁴⁸ And, to be sure, the struggle towards self-definition is central to the pathos of Gray's life as a man and a poet. "An only life can take so long to climb / Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never", as Larkin put it.⁴⁹ But Gray's poems read less like a series of false starts than of drawn out closes. "Literature [...] seems indeed drawing apace to its Dissolution" Gray remarked in apocalyptic mood in 1744, three

years after the death of Pope (*Correspondence*, p. 265); and one way of viewing the force of his style is as the result of an intense, faltering attempt to cling on to the elegance of Augustan manner. But it is a style responsive to a feeling for the refusal of human lives to “finish” neatly, too; and on that account it is fitting to end with the poem that Wordsworth admired as “almost the only instance among the metrical epitaphs in our language of the last century, which I remember, of affecting thoughts rising naturally and keeping themselves pure from vicious diction; and therefore retaining their appropriate power over the mind”.⁵⁰

Lo! where this silent marble weeps,
 A friend, a wife, a mother sleeps:
 A heart, within whose sacred cell
 The peaceful virtues lov'd to dwell,
 Affection warm, and faith sincere,
 And soft humanity were there.
 In agony, in death resign'd,
 She felt the wound she left behind.
 Her infant image, here below,
 Sits smiling on a father's woe:
 Whom what awaits, while yet he strays
 Along the lonely vale of days?
 A pang, to secret sorrow dear;
 A sigh; an unavailing tear;
 Till time shall every grief remove,
 With life, with memory, and with love.

The epitaph is for Gray's friend Jane Clerke, who had died in childbirth. It is remarkable for the humanity with which it apprehends the pathos and consolation of the ways death both is and is not the end. Death appears as at once a muting of voice and something that endows a new eloquence. The poem knows that

in death you at once cease and do not cease to be what you were in life to those who survive you: “A friend, a wife, a mother”. And Clerke’s own death is the more painful for the tenderness with which she herself apprehends and suffers this fact: “She felt the wound she left behind”. The line is at once a tribute to Clerke’s compassion and a bleak demonstration of the distress such tenderness brings. Wordsworth admired the simplicity of the ending, but its “power” owes to its subtlety. That “time shall every grief remove, / With life, with memory, and with love” sounds like a resonant statement of time’s power to eradicate – “life”, “memory”, and “love” are all things one wishes to cling on to. And yet the force of the writing, beyond its memorability, lies in its ability to make us feel fully the confusions of the situation it describes – to balance against the desolation a due weight of gratitude for the fact that “grief”, too, will disappear. The effect is concentrated in the final phrase “with love”. “Love” indicates the final quality which time will mow down, but it also describes the care and benevolence with which that mowing is done: in certain states, the lines say in an undertone, time’s destructiveness is felt as an act of love. Surprising the expectations established by the steadiness of the rhythm, the intimation typifies Gray’s ability to sustain a humane and authenticating tact beneath a finished art.

¹ Sir James Mackintosh, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir James Mackintosh*, ed. Robert Mackintosh, 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1835), ii. p. 177.

² Thomas Gray, *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1935), p. 551.

³ Anna Seward, *Letters of Anna Seward, Written between the Years 1784 and 1807*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1811), 2: 202.

⁴ David Cecil, *Two Quiet Lives* (London: Constable, 1948), p. 78.

⁵ Quoted by Alistair Macdonald, ‘Gray and His Critics’, *Fearful Joy: Papers from the Thomas Gray Bicentenary Conference at Carleton University* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 1974), p. 185. I am indebted here to Macdonald’s account of Gray’s critical history.

⁶ Thomas Medwin, *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron* (London, 1824), p. 111.

⁷ John Stuart Mill, letter to Edward Lytton Bulwer, May/June 1837, *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 336.

⁸ Edmund Gosse, *A History of Eighteenth Century Literature (1660-1780)* (London: Macmillan, 1889), p. 239.

⁹ Thomas Gray, “Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat”, *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longman, 1969), pp. 84-5. All future reference to Gray’s poetry is to this edition.

¹⁰ F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) p. 101.

¹¹ Variations on the phrase occur in Chaucer’s *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* (242-3), Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (II.viii.14.5), Shakespeare’s, *Merchant of Venice* (II.vii.65), and Dryden’s *Hind and the Panther* (ii. 215), as Lonsdale points out (*Poems of Thomas Gray* p. 85).

¹² Samuel Johnson, “Life of Gray”, in *Samuel Johnson: The Major Works*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 765.

¹³ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), pp. 121-3.

¹⁴ Robert L. Mack, *Thomas Gray: A Life* (London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), p. 399.

¹⁵ John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953-62), 4: 41.

¹⁶ See A. Johnston, “‘The Purple Year’ in Pope and Gray”, *RES* 14 (1963): 389-93.

¹⁷ Gray’s note to the lines directs readers to a passage beginning at line 57 of Green’s 1732 poem. Gray transcribed the relevant passage in a letter to Walpole remarking “The thought on which my second ode turns is manifestly stole from hence: – not that I knew it at the time, but, having seen this many Years before, to be sure

it imprinted itself on my Memory, & forgetting the Author, I took it for my own" (*Correspondence*, pp. 299-300).

¹⁸ P. F. Vernon, "The Structure of Gray's Early Poems", *Essays in Criticism* 15.4 (1965): 381-93 at p. 386.

¹⁹ William Lyon Phelps, *Selections from the Poetry and Prose of Thomas Gray*, ed. William Lyon Phelps (Boston, 1894), p. 129.

²⁰ William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" in *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 601-2.

²¹ Edward Thomas, *Walter Pater: A Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1913), p. 209.

²² Gerard Manley Hopkins, letter to R. W. Dixon 30 June-3 July 1886, *The Complete Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Volumes I & II: Correspondence*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), p. 795.

²³ You can think of the rhymes as part of the poem's doubled-back structure, too. The ostensible *abababab cdcdcd* pattern is already repetitive; but the *a* and *d* rhymes ("shine", "Men") and *b* and *c* rhymes ("Fire", "chear") sound so close together that the distinction is blurry, and the impression is of a poem cycling through the same two sounds throughout.

²⁴ Vincent Quinn, *Pre-Romantic Poetry* (Tavistock: Northcote House/British Council, 2012), p. 45.

²⁵ William Mason, *The Poems of Mr. Gray. To which are prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings by W. Mason* (York, 1775), p. 78.

²⁶ John Bradshaw, *The Poetical Works of Thomas Gray: English and Latin*, ed. John Bradshaw (London 1891), p. 186.

²⁷ Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 108. The loose-strung composition of his sentence itself offers a fine example of the kind of 'carelessness' it endorses.

²⁸ Quoted by Dennis Taylor, "Thomas Gray and Thomas Hardy: The Poet's Currency", *ELH* 65.2 (1998): 451-77 at p. 466. Taylor describes the "Elegy" as a poem in which "Gray strings together the great clichés of his time, but the string keeps knotting up" (p. 466).

²⁹ Stephen Bygrave, "Gray's *Elegy*: Inscribing the Twilight", *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*, ed. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), p. 164.

³⁰ B. Eugene McCarthy, *Thomas Gray: The Progress of a Poet* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 105, 143.

³¹ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1986), pp. 4-5.

³² Robert Wells, "On Thomas Gray", *Poets on Poets*, ed. Nick Rennison and Michael Schmidt, (Manchester: Carcanet-Waterstones, 1997), p. 154.

³³ See, for instance, Ian Jack, "Gray's 'Elegy' Reconsidered", *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (London: Oxford UP, 1965), pp. 139-69.

³⁴ Lonsdale provides the original stanzas in a note (*Poems of Thomas Gray*, p. 130-1).

³⁵ Roger Lonsdale, "The Poetry of Thomas Gray: Versions of the Self", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 59 (1973): 105-23 at p. 116.

³⁶ Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* iv. 1, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 232.

³⁷ Duncan C. Tovey, *Gray's English Poems, Original and Translated from the Norse and Welsh*, ed. Duncan C. Tovey (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1922), p. 155.

³⁸ F. W. Bateson, *English Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1966), p. 183.

³⁹ Leslie Stephen, "Gray and His School", *Hours in a Library*, 4 vols. (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 4: 23.

⁴⁰ John Forster, *Walter Savage Landor: A Biography*, 2 vols. (London, 1869) 2: 422.

⁴¹ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Dobson, 1949), p. 21.

⁴² Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spencer to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 136-7.

⁴³ Marshall Brown, *Preromanticism* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1991), p. 275.

⁴⁴ In a discussion of "the supposed 'badness' of the poem's closing verses" Vincent Quinn has deftly brought out a submerged homosexual impulse in the parentheses as Gray's sexuality collides with his Christian faith; my reading is in sympathy with Quinn's detection in these lines of "a stutter, a hesitation that casts doubt on the poem's previous assurance" (Quinn, p. 93-98).

⁴⁵ William Watson, 'Retrogression', l. 74-9, *Retrogression and Other Poems* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1917), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Johnson, "Life of Gray", p. 768.

⁴⁷ Johnson, "Life of Gray", p. 768.

⁴⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Johnson's 'London' and 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'", *English Critical Essays: Twentieth Century*, ed. Phyllis M. Jones (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), p. 303.

⁴⁹ Philip Larkin, 'Aubade' l. 14-15, *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Archie Burnett (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 115.

⁵⁰ William Wordsworth, “Upon Epitaphs”, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols., ed. Alexander B. Grosart (London, 1876), 2: 66.