Syntax of Death: Instability in Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

by W. Hutchings

The curfew tolls! the knell of parting day!

JOSEPH Warton's startling emendation of one of the most famous opening lines in English poetry looks like the work of a rather too eager enthusiast. He may, however, have simply wanted to tidy up what Gray had left oddly unclear. He has removed the transitive function of "tolls" and established "the knell of parting day" as the same as the "curfew" by putting the phrases in apposition to each other. As Gray wrote the line, the object was, in effect, much the same as the subject: "knell" acts as a cognate object, repeating the meaning of both "curfew" and "tolls." Indeed, all the major words in the line ("curfew," "tolls," "knell," "parting day") enforce, rather than qualify, one another's meaning. The tolling of a bell had, by Gray's time, accumulated almost inescapable associations with the passing-bell. Since the day is that which is being tolled for, "parting" is, it might be argued, redundant, especially as the time has already been fixed by "curfew." According to Joseph Cradock, Oliver Goldsmith once played at mending the poem "by leaving out an idle word in every line." His emended version of the first line ran "the curfew

2 OED gives 1526 as the earliest date for tolling the passing-bell; the quarto text of Henry IV Part II has a bell "tolling a departing friend" (I.i.103).

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tolls the knell of day.” Just as possible, semantically and rhythmically, would be “The curfew tolls for parting day”; or, more simply, “The curfew tolls the day”; or, simplest of all, “The curfew tolls.”

This last version takes us back to Warton, whose emendation excuses the tautology by having an exclamatory speaker (ludicrously unsuitable though this is for the rest of the poem). But he also clarifies the line by making the “curfew,” more naturally than in the original, intransitively toll: a curfew is what is tolled, rather than tolling something else. Gray’s probable sources do not accord to the curfew or bell such a transitive function.4 As George Watson has noted, the verb “tolls” in Gray’s line seems to want to be both transitive and intransitive: such verbs, he comments, “have the odd property of facing both ways.”5 The curfew tolls something; and yet what it tolls is, in effect, itself.

Other curious uncertainties are present in the opening quatrain. The third line, “The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,” presents us with a transferred epithet which invites a return to its semantic home. “The weary ploughman homeward plods his way” retains rhythm and rhyme, losing only some euphony, but gaining in precise sense. If word-order is loose enough to allow of such alteration, so too is line-order. Ian Jack has turned the quatrain into two couplets, claiming that the result is “respectable verse,” although the poem’s “great suspended chords” are thereby destroyed.6 But we can retain the elegaic stanza, as well as perfect sense, if we exchange the first and third lines:

The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,
The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

If a curfew can be allowed to toll a knell, it can easily leave the world to someone. Indeed, as Gray writes the quatrain, the curfew acts as a

4 In Il Penseroso, 74, the curfew is heard intransitively sounding; while the lines from Dante (Purgatorio, viii, 5–6) which Gray acknowledged as a source (letter to Bedingfield, 27 August 1756, Correspondence of Thomas Gray, ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, 3 vols. [Oxford, 1935], II, 477) have a bell being heard and seeming to mourn over the day which is dying. Henry IV Part II, quoted n. 2, is the closest to Gray.


possible subject of “leaves.” Each of the first three lines is a self-enclosed unit, each signifying parting, the end of a day. They are complementary even to the extent that they are syntactically parallel. The last line, which changes the pattern by introducing a conjunction and omitting a subject, thus invites any of these lines to contain its subject. Everything which is parting, a bell ending its tolling, a herd winding away, or a ploughman plodding home, is leaving the world to the elegist.

It might be claimed that the subject of the second line, “herd,” is plural, and therefore cannot be the subject of “leaves.” But there is yet more uncertainty about this very point: in the first seven quarto editions published by Dodsley, the verb in the second line was the singular “winds.” Although, as Roger Lonsdale says, Gray “significantly ‘corrected’ the 3rd and 8th,”7 the verb only became plural in the latter edition. “Herd” is one of those collective nouns (like “government” or “parliament”) whose number is ambiguous. Gray’s decision to change “winds” to “wind” may have been suggested by the following word, “slowly”: when read aloud, the “s” of “slowly” tends to slide over to “wind” and occupy an indeterminate area between [z] and [s]. Complete transference is never made in a reading, but it is worth noting that, if it were, the result would be highly appropriate: the herd would wind lowly like the humble villagers. As it stands, the line contains a play between “lowing” and “slowly,” and the elegist is to write that the rude forefathers will never again be raised from their “lowly bed” (20).

Gray was, of course, a good classicist. What he is doing in this quatrain is opening up his syntax in a manner found more in Latin than English. This has been noted in connection with line 35 by a writer to Notes and Queries who, in pointing out that more than one nominative can still take a singular verb, quotes Horace Odes 1, 24:

\[
\text{ergo Quintilium perpetuus sopor}
\text{urget? cui Pudor et Iustitiae soror,}
\text{incorrupta Fides, nudaque Veritas,}
\text{quando ullum inveniet parem?}
\]

\[
(5-8)
\]

Does, then, the sleep that knows no waking lie heavy on Quintilius! When shall Honour, and Justice' sister, Loyalty unshaken, and candid Truth e'er find a peer to him?8

Another classicist, Milton, copies the effect at the opening of *Lycidas*, an elegy like Horace’s ode:

Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,  
Compels me to disturb your season due.  

(6–7)

The effect of such grammatical license is to enforce the singularity of each of the subjects while suggesting the collective singularity of all the subjects. With the death of Quintilius neither honor, nor faith, nor truth will easily find his equal; and, in so far as these are all virtues, virtue has lost its great exemplar. In Gray’s *Elegy*, the curfew, the herd, and the ploughman each retires from the scene, leaving the world “to darkness and to me”; and the overall concept of life (as represented by the sound of the end of the day, and the spatial departure of animal and human life) leaves.

Now it may be objected that to treat Gray’s quatrain in this manner is to subject a serious poem to fanciful playing. But the nature of Gray’s syntax has invited just such playful tampering from such readers as Joseph Warton, Oliver Goldsmith, and Ian Jack. There is an extraordinary degree of instability about this poem, one which often expresses itself by making its syntax fluid, even indeterminate. Far from being something to be amended or ignored, this quality is the key to the *Elegy*.

The most notorious example of Gray’s apparent inability to make it clear exactly what he means comes in the second quatrain:

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds.  

(5–6)

If this were Latin, all would be perfectly clear, but using Latin word-order for uninflected English has produced confusion. Of course, eighteenth-century poetry often employs this kind of classicism for the purposes of dignity (or mock-dignity). But the careful poet will

ensure that either grammar or semantics ascertains which is the subject and which the object. When Swift writes that “A coming Show’r your shooting corns presage,” the plural form of the verb dictates the meaning. When Pope says of the monster Chimaera that “Her pitchy Nostrils flaky flames expire,” it is rather unlikely that flames should be exhaling nostrils.\(^9\) Even in more ambiguous instances, the sense generally demands that we choose only one subject and one object:

But our lewd tastes her lawful charms refuse,
And painted art's deprav'd allurements choose.\(^10\)

If the line is taken in isolation, our tastes might refuse her charms (“she” is Nature), or her charms might refuse our tastes; but the second line indicates that the former is the more likely meaning, and the larger context determines this. In the case of “all the air a solemn stillness holds,” however, neither grammar nor meaning dictates which is the subject and which the object. It is not clear whether it is more likely that an abstract noun should hold or be held by something which is insubstantial. The verb is an oddly tactile word to apply to either case. The effect of this indeterminacy is to create interchangeability between subject and object, a lack of syntactic definition.

The last line of this quatrain, “And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds,” is quietly uncertain in a different way. “Folds” could be either literal or metonymy for the sheep contained within them (as in Collins’ “From early dawn the live-long hours she told, / Till late at silent eve she penn’d the fold”\(^11\)). If taken in the latter sense (and it seems at best pointless to lull the actual enclosures), the word contributes to a circular idea: the tinklings which lull the folds are created by the folds themselves. “Drowsy,” of course, could be taken as a transferred epithet after the manner of “weary” in the first quatrain. Since “drowsy” means both “sleepy” and “soporific,” both the tinklings and the folds are drowsy. This kind of circularity supports Gray’s syntactic ambiguity: we are in a world where subjects and objects are losing their fixity, where stability is being undermined.

George Watson has drawn attention to the way in which Gray plays with some of his verbs in the Elegy; but the poem’s indetermin-


\(^10\) Young, *Love of Fame*, v, 235–6.

acy is more wide-spread and fundamental than he suggests, and its implications go far beyond those of a game. Although instances will be found throughout the poem, the effect is especially prominent at the beginning: Gray, far from being simply vague, is establishing a key for his meditation. The impression thus created is one of radical insecurity. This is the more startling as the apparent subject-matter had, by the time the *Elegy* was published, become fashionable to the extent of cliché. The chief source for eighteenth-century solitary nocturnal contemplations is *Il Penseroso*, but Parnell’s *A Night Piece on Death* had brought the form into the century, while the 1740s saw a proliferation of gloom with Young’s monumental *Night Thoughts*, Blair’s *The Grave*, and Hervey’s prose *Meditations among the Tombs*. Gray, ever alert to the possible use and inversion of conventions, would have known that he was tapping a familiar vein. So he presents to the reader a lulling familiarity of subject-matter (his churchyard abounds with the regular props, an ivy-mantled tower, a moping owl, and so on) but shot through with an uneasy indeterminacy of syntax. Gray’s matter tells us that we know exactly where we are: his manner sets in doubt that confident assurance.

It is also at the beginning of the poem that the elegist for the only time refers to himself in the first person. As Watson notes, that line (“And leaves the world to darkness and to me”) is strangely close to zeugma: it yokes together, without a trace of violence, darkness and the self. As the world of life and light recedes, Gray’s syntax intensifies the isolation of the elegist before absolute blankness. The darkness is both immediately physical and a warning image of the final darkness of death, the poem’s central preoccupation. But the obscurity Gray is creating is also infiltrating his language, loosing his hold on stable syntax. As night falls, as the world fades on the sight, reality can no longer be firmly and clearly perceived. It is a time when distinctions become blurred, when objects cannot be surely grasped, but only held as nebulously as stillness the air, or air the stillness.

On one level, Gray is insisting on shaking a reader’s security upon seeing a poem with this title. Evening, for Gray, is not just a time for fashionable, self-congratulatory poetic musing: it is a time of real isolation and real disturbance, both for itself and for its symbolic approximation to death. Further, Gray is subtly preparing his ground for the poem’s own profound, and highly original, meditation. Once the opening setting of evening has been achieved, Gray’s immediate
subject is the blurring of distinctions. When the elegist rehearses the lives of the dead villagers, Gray carefully picks up earlier ideas:

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
The cock’s shrill clarion or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire’s return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

(17–28)

The blazing hearth reminds us of the true meaning of curfew, the hour for extinguishing fires (from the Old French “covre-feu”): with the villagers’ final curfew their blazing hearth is for ever quenched. The “lowly bed,” in taking up the “lowing” of stanza one, expresses the logical extreme of rural man’s humility. “Glebe” complements the “lea” o’er which the herd wind slowly, the arable land of the ploughman alongside the pastoral land. The “furrow” is the work of an earlier ploughman before he plodded his weary way home for the last time. His lowly bed is now the churchyard where “heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap” (14): he who ploughs the earth ends in earth. We see here one of the effects of Gray’s peculiarly circular writing: the furrow which breaks the glebe is actually the result of the ploughman’s breaking of the glebe. 12 A furrow is formed by action, but is left behind when he homeward plods his weary way. Life is a circular pattern, so that the “woods” which once bowed beneath sturdy strokes appear in the present scene as “those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade” (13) overlooking the churchyard. This series of connections links the lives (and deaths) of the villagers to the present expression of evening with its associated syntactic disturbances. Individuals share with evening the extinction of life and light. They are

12 Note how, in this line, Gray is careful to avoid what would have been a comically inappropriate use of fluid syntax by making the meaning determine subject and object: contrast, say, “Their harrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke.”
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reduced to eternal solitude, so unlike the ideal family community of
lines 21–4, to the state of being "me" confronting darkness.

Death affects everyone, with no distinctions. So the elegist turns to
consider how this universality blurs temporary differences between
people:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,

And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,

Awaits alike the inevitable hour.

The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

(33–6)

The paths of glory lead to the grave as surely as does the humble
ploughman's weary plod. Significantly, this, the poem's most reson-
ant statement of death's destruction of individuality, follows one of
Gray's most subtle syntactic confusions. As with "wind" in the first
quatrain, the verb here is even affected by textual uncertainty, but
of a more radically troubling kind: the very text of this poem is an
object of tenuous stability. "Awaits" was the form found in the early
editions, but "await" crept into the ninth quarto and is the form used
for the printing of Dodsley's Collection in 1755 and William Mason's
1775 collected edition of his friend's poetry. This intrusion of the
plural furnishes a good example of how the pressure of Gray's syntax
pushes in two directions. The plural reading responds to the natural
feeling that the two preceding lines, with their multiple phrases,
should provide the subject. But it is the singular form, though the
less natural for an English reader, which reveals the full meaning.
The sentence could be seen as inverting its normal word-order, so
that it is the "inevitable hour" which is the true subject; or, as in the
first stanza, the list of singular subjects could be seen as leading to a
singular verb. As another correspondent to Notes and Queries puts it
in the course of a debate on this stanza, "the question is whether the
hour of death is conceived as lying in ambush or marching to at-
tack."13 He quotes as a Latin parallel Horace's famous "omnes una
manet nox" (Odes 1, 28, 15), where night is given the active role of
subject, and yet this role consists of lying passively in wait: it is the
human race which moves towards one still, dark point. Gray, by con-
fusing subject and object in a way that an uninflected language can,
creates a wider range of meanings: the hour of death, as "active"

13 Hibernicus, "Gray's Elegy: A Restored Reading," NSQ, CLXXXIV (1943), 203.
subject, waits passively for man's display, power, beauty, and wealth to come to it; each of these qualities of life waits for the hour which will extinguish it; and the combined quality of man's pride similarly attends the arrival of death. The result of such confusion of subject and object, of active and passive (and this is where the implication goes beyond that of a merely pedantic debate) is that the attributes of life and the inexorability of death are inextricably intertwined. Living is an action, but an active movement towards inaction. Death is passive, and yet acts to destroy action. As the elegist lives, now, in the graveyard, so life exists within the setting of death, as the end of each day is emblematic of the end of life, our final plod to death.

Death destroys distinctions between the great and the poor; and, more disturbingly, between the good and the bad. If the Elegy were straightforward eighteenth-century retirement verse, the moral qualities would be strictly and distinctly distributed:

For rural virtues, and for native skies,
I bade Augusta's venal sons farewell,

writes Shenstone in the first of his elegies. But, for Gray's Elegy, such easy demarcation is inappropriate: evening, death, and now life dispel the definite. Power is taken to exist in an ambiguous relationship with man; a common enough view, but here expressed in the characteristic mode of the poem, through insecure syntax:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.  
(45-8)

Ostensibly this, like the following stanzas, is a lament for the waste of talent, of potential achievement caused by the confinement of the poor to their limited environment. But power is something which is both wielder and wielded: the hands might have swayed the rod of empire, but so too might the rod of empire have swayed the hands. "Sway" as transitive verb provides the idea of wielding an emblematic rod of empire and of being controlled by that desired

\[ \rightarrow \] J. Fisher, "Shenstone, Gray, and the 'Moral Elegy.'" *MP* XXXIV (1937), 273–94 argues that Gray might have seen Shenstone's elegies in manuscript form before the publication of his Elegy.
authority. Subject and object are interchangeable. The following line resolves the syntax: poetry is clearly susceptible of control by the individual, whereas public “action” is ambiguous. The question implied is whether man has the capacity to govern his own life, to act as the stable subject of a transitive verb.

Stanza fifteen’s list of examples continues this uncertainty by playing between the worlds of retirement and action:

Some village-Hampden that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country’s blood.

(57–60)

As in the “rod of empire” line, the village-Hampden’s relative clause holds its verb back until the end of the clause (and, in this case, employs the impersonal “that” rather than the more normal “who” or “whom,” which would have clarified the syntax) and thus makes uncertain the identity of the subject. If Hampden withstood the tyrant, so too did the tyrant withstand Hampden. Hampden met his death on the battle-field in 1643, six years before the execution of Charles I. As in stanza twelve, the poet-figure is the one who is accorded syntactic security, and, here, the softness of “rest,” a verb which belongs to all three examples but is directly joined to some “mute inglorious Milton.” With Cromwell comes a complete reversal: though one may lament the lack of opportunity afforded the villagers, in this case such limitation avoided destruction, both physical (of his countrymen) and moral (of himself). Even if one manages to sway the rod of empire, the effects are as uncertain as the boundary between authority and tyranny. One’s “lot”(65) knows no distinction between good and bad, between circumscribing a virtue and confining a crime.

At this point, after line 72, we are offered alternative endings by the published text and the Eton College manuscript. The latter shows a briefer original conclusion by way of four stanzas which instruct the poet to cease his “anxious Cares” and pursue his retired existence “thro’ the cool sequester’d Vale of Life.” This offer has nearly tempted some critics into injudicious disagreement with Gray who, after all, decided to reject the brief ending for a longer, more involved one. Thus Roger Lonsdale remarks that, in its original form, “the
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Elegy is a well-constructed poem, in some ways more balanced and lucid than in its final version. But lucidity is precisely that which is denied in this remarkable study of the nature of life and death. We can now see that the original ending is entirely inadequate to the poem’s meaning, and inappropriate for its method. To resolve the elegist’s choice of life is to make a clear decision, to differentiate between opposites: to do this is to ignore the poem’s radical questioning and blurring of distinctions. The kind of life one leads is irrelevant to the major issue of death: any human action, any attempt to be an agent, is doomed to ultimate failure and pointlessness in the grave’s unyielding passiveness. To resolve the poem is to present action as both possible and desirable. It is to create a clear syntax for a poem whose repeated use of irresolute syntax denies the stability of action (and of the normal categories of retirement verse).

Gray’s clear decision (the poem, we recall, has accorded clear syntax to poets in their function as such) to end the Elegy as he does is ruthlessly correct: rather than opt for a vale of life, the elegist continues that path which leads but to the grave. The elegist yields his pleasurable vision of retired, sequestered life to the villagers, and the replacement passage (stanzas 20–3) explores the idea that, when each of us dies, each requires someone to remember him, or something to stir recollection or sympathy. The elegist has been re-creating the lives of the dead: the poem’s logic demands that he too, as a mortal man, will require the thoughts of a living human being.

The nature of death has been implied throughout: it is to turn a subject finally into an object. The act of writing a poem, as the elegist is doing, is to be active: but its subject in this case, death, is one which confuses and ultimately reduces that agency to passiveness. Who, then, will meditate in a churchyard and write an elegy for him? Who, that is, will take over the role of subject when the elegist has been finally transformed into an object? Another of the poem’s ambiguities, one which has been most fully discussed by Cleanth Brooks, now fits into place. This involves stanza 22:

15 Lonsdale, p. 114.
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?

(85–8)

The center of the problem is the question of whether “dumb Forgetfulness” is an attribute of life or death. Is the elegist asking what person, about to yield up his or her being to the oblivion of death, ever did so without casting one longing lingering look behind; or is he asking whether anyone could be so insensible in life as to give it up without casting one longing lingering look behind? If the latter is the case, any such insensibility will, in any event, soon be confirmed as the reality of death. To be so passive in life is to behave in a manner premonitory of death, to anticipate unconsciousness.

Any notion of immortality is strikingly absent at this stage of the poem. Gray himself noted that line 92, “Ev’n in our ashes live their wonted fires,” is indebted to a Petrarch sonnet which Gray had translated into Latin. The context, however, is significantly different. In Petrarch (and Gray’s Latin version makes this even clearer) the point is that the poem itself will live on, the ardo enshrined in the poet’s “rime diffusi” capable of inflaming thousands,

ch‘ i’ veggio nel penser, dolce mio foco,
fredda una lingua et duo belli occhi chiusi
rimaner dopo noi pien di faville.

For in my thoughts I see, O my sweet fire, a tongue cold in death and two lovely eyes closed, which after us will remain full of embers.17

Gray’s adoption of the imagery of fire takes up the earlier curfew and blazing hearth, whereas Petrarch’s image continues the familiar idea of the flames of love. Where Petrarch burns with passion, even if it is unrequited (“Lasso, ch‘ i’ardo” or “Uror io” as Gray’s version begins), the fires in the Elegy are going out forever. The elegist makes no claim for his poem (it is just “lines” relating the villagers’ artless tale), nor is there any vibrant relationship to immortalize. It is only in the response of the living that the dying find any answer to their needs, in the “pious drops” required by the “closing eye” (90). But the elegist’s total isolation, established in the very first stanza, leads him to the

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obligation to create for himself such a living person. He has no companion who, after his death, will think of him as he has of the villagers. The chain of life requires that, when the elegist becomes an object as the villagers have been objects for his meditation, a new subject should keep him syntactically present: even a passive object has some life in a sentence.

So, at line 95, he summons up a "kindred spirit," another lonely contemplative figure who, perchance, will pass his grave as he has those of the rude forefathers. In this poem devoid of certainty, even this severely limited form of immortality is emphatically conditional:

For thee who, mindful of the unhonoured dead,
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say...

(93-7)

The tale may be artless, but the telling is highly artful. The syntactic confusion of subject and object has been used to render the nature of death. Now the elegist himself enters into this inexorable pattern. The subject who relates the tale of the rude forefathers is transformed into "thee," distanced, and an object. The role of subject is then taken over by the kindred spirit. But the process does not stop here, for the distancing of the self is carried to extraordinary, but very logical, lengths. If the elegist is now conceiving of himself as the poem's object rather than its subject, then he must hand over the narration to someone else. This is precisely what happens with the entry of the hoary-headed swain, who takes over the poem. The elegist's transformation into object appears complete. It is emphasized by the fact that the only time in the poem that the first person singular pronoun occurs in the nominative is in the swain's narration: "One morn I missed him on the customed hill" (109). The elegist who, diffidently, began as an indirect object to whom the world was left is now a direct object. The Elegy's uncertain relationship between subject and object allows us to accept that the writer of a poem could end up as its object. The fact of death's inevitability demands that such a transition take place.

Yet that transition is not a simple affair. There is the obvious irony
that the learned poet who has been writing about the poor villagers is now one of their number. Further, the language in which the swain talks of the poet is highly ornate, ostentatiously conventional. The image of the elegist so presented is that of the currently fashionable melancholic man of sensibility:

'There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
'His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

(101–4)

The pose is reminiscent of that in the Ode on the Spring, a poem which is set at noon, "Noon-Tide," indeed, being its original title. If we recall that Gray there makes the poet who moralizes on the great and the proud as he sits by "some water's rushy brink" beneath a "rude and moss-grown beech" (13–15) become at the end of the poem the object of the flies' moralizing, then we shall be prepared to see the poet-figure in the swain's account as even more definitely an object. The process in the Elegy is, as befits the nature of the whole poem, more complex and extreme than in the Ode on the Spring. The process of the disintegration of the self as subject is not one which the elegist can make abruptly. In this section of the poem he is casting "one longing lingering look behind" at himself as poet. No hoary-headed swain would speak like this: the poet is putting words into the mouth of his creation rather than completely yielding the narration to him. This is hinted at in the introduction to the speech, where "haply" is a word of hoary literary usage, and even the description of the swain as "hoary-headed" is part of current poetic jargon. For example, Robert Blair in The Grave, that archetypal sensationalist poet, writes of a sexton as a "hoary-headed chronicle" (453).18 The pose and the language are fashionable and literary.

Gray, ruthless as ever, destroys this vestige of the poetic subject by moving the narration on to death itself, as the swain tells of how two morns (the "poetic" language lingers on) passed without the poet being seen at his customary, conventional haunts:

18 The date of composition of the Elegy is a vexed matter, but Blair's The Grave was published early enough (1743) for Lonsdale to regard it as a source for "hoary-headed" (p. 135).
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'The next with dirges due in sad array
'Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.

(113–14)

Death dissolves the poeticisms even as it dissolves the elegist. Inversion and ostentatious alliteration ("dirges due") and poeticism ("array") give way to the simple, direct, largely monosyllabic account of the funeral procession. The language here may not be quite a selection of that really used by swains, but even Wordsworth exempted the inversion of "in my breast the imperfect joys expire" from his attack on Gray's widening of "the space of separation betwixt Prose and Metrical composition" in the sonnet on the death of Richard West.¹⁹ The brevity of the funeral's description contrasts with the poetic amplitude of the description of the poet when alive. That the line contains a reference to the title of the poem reinforces the manner in which the elegist has been subjected to inversion: as he has pondered in a country churchyard on how the paths of glory lead but to the grave, so is he borne along a church-way path.

Gray's eventual decision to omit the "redbreast stanza" should now be explicable. This is the stanza which intervened between stanza 29 and the epitaph in the Eton College manuscript and some early editions:

There scatter'd oft, the earliest of the Year,
By Hands unseen, are show'rs of Violets found;
The Red-breast loves to build and warble there,
And little Footsteps lightly print the Ground.

William Mason, though finding the lines "beautiful," "exquisitely fine," wrote that Gray "thought (and in my opinion very justly) that it was too long a parenthesis in this place."²⁰ The parenthesis, indeed, would disrupt the poem's remorseless logic. To return to such language (Thomson's celebrated robin in "Winter" acts as an unavoidable literary antecedent) is wrong precisely because it makes, in Mason's words, a "very beautiful stanza." The swain tells the kindred spirit to approach and read the epitaph: to interrupt this approach to

²⁰ The Poems of Mr. Gray . . . by W. Mason (York, 1775), pp. 110–11.
the grave with a return to a very literary life is wrong because the elegist is now, for the purposes of the poem, dead.

Without the “redbreast stanza” we are directly confronted with the epitaph. Here, we might expect, all tension will be finally resolved. But a comforting epitaph would imply certainty about the nature of death, the function of the complete object. Gray even avoids this certainty:

Here rests his head upon the lap of earth.

(117)

This is the conventional epitaphic “hic jacet”: the head reposes peacefully upon the consoling lap of mother earth. But take this line together with the next, and the result is disturbing:

Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.

(117-18)

The head which is the subject of the first line taken in isolation becomes the object of the two lines, “rests” being converted from an intransitive to a transitive verb, and “youth” taking over the role of subject. Of course, that which is being rested is a part of that which is doing the resting; at the end of the poem we are again close to the confusing effect of “The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.” The youth who is actively placing his head upon the earth is also passively resting on that earth.

Bertrand H. Bronson argues that the point is that “rests” is actually a transitive verb, whereas it looks at first as if it is intransitive. Gray’s purpose is to deny the convention: “It is not a mere Hic jacet. A more willing submission is implied: not simply lies but lays to rest.” But Gray’s fluid syntax is there to avoid the definite. The verb “rests” hovers uneasily between transitive and intransitive, so that we are uncertain of the extent of active or passive being implied. This continues the whole poem’s concern with the possibility of action; but now the action is within the realm of death. Is the youth actively resting his head, or is his head passively resting? This uncertainty alerts us to the fact that this is to be no conventional epitaphic state-

Instability in Gray's Elegy

ment, either of the kind which asserts immortality or the kind which ignores such an issue.22
The good Christian's assurance of an after-life seems present in the last line, "The bosom of his Father and his God." Yet the build-up to this line is far from assured:

Large was his bounty and his soul sincere,
Heaven did a recompence as largely send:
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend.

(121–4)

Conventional talk of heaven and the departed's humility accompanies a little problem. Is the single friend he gained a human being or heaven itself? The line can be read in both ways, and the implication continues the questioning of immortality. One sense makes the elegist's only solace a human life (one which is, therefore, as transitory as he himself is), the other makes eternal life a solace for a life of solitude. It is worth adding here that one of the most familiar biographical speculations about the Elegy is that it was initiated by the death of Richard West in 1742.23 The sonnet which is definitely about that death is remarkable, not least for its absence of any hint of belief in immortality. A conventionally Christian context in the Elegy's epitaph allows Gray to sustain the uncertainty.

The final stanza of epitaph and Elegy appropriately hovers in suspension of certainty:

22 Contrast, for example, the following epitaph by William Shenstone, in which one sees both the conventional *hic jacet* formula and a bland religious assertion:

Here, here she lies, a budding rose
Blasted before its bloom,
Whose innocence did sweets disclose
Beyond that flower's perfume.
To those who for her death are griev'd,
This consolation's given;
She's from the storms of life reliev'd
To shine more bright in Heaven.

(*Epitaph in Halesown Churchyard, on Miss Anne Powell*)

Shenstone's efficient epitaph is typical of the clarity and certainty common to this type of poem. Gray's tension is the more apparent when set alongside such examples.

23 See, for example, Odell Shepard, "A Youth to Fortune and to Fame Unknown," *MP*, XX (1922–3), 347–73.
That the elegist's merits and frailties alike wait tremulously continues the duality of good and bad at the heart of the stanzas about the villagers' limited lives. But, in addition, the play between active and passive is still present. "Repose" is intransitive, a word of passiveness; and yet "hope" implies mental activity. Even that activity is "trembling," a word which expresses the epitaph's hovering uncertainty; even that apparently clear last line occupies an uncomfortable syntactic role. Not only does it recall the earlier "lap of earth," but it is also in apposition to "dread abode": the comforting bosom is also a place of fear. It is entirely appropriate that a parenthesis about trembling should mediate between fear and comfort.

The epitaph, then, is still making us think, still disturbing us, even as it uses the language of conventional Christianity and conventional epitaphs. Gray does not want to round his poem off neatly, because death is an experience of which we cannot be certain, but also because the logic of his syntax demands continuity rather than completion. The elegist invoked a kindred spirit to inquire after him, and it is that kindred spirit whom the swain tells to read the epitaph. This then comes at the end of the poem which we have been reading. This invented character thus becomes us, the readers, who approach the epitaph through the Elegy.24 As in the Petrarch sonnet quoted earlier, the poet's tongue is now cold, so that any embers can only glow within the poem itself. The obvious syntactic way of expressing the relationship between author and reader would be to say that the latter is indirect object, the former subject: the writer writes, the poem is the object written, the reader is the person to whom that object is left. The elegist began as the person to whom the world was left; and then actively imagines the life of the villagers before envisaging his own death. As kindred spirits (if we were not we should not be reading the poem in the first place), we are invited to ponder the elegist's life, since he is now what the villagers were in the poem. Whether or

24 Cf. Cleanth Brooks, who comments that "the poet has prepared us, the readers, to be the 'kindred Spirit' if we wish" (p. 99).
not there is a God, and whether or not He is punitive or forgiving, at least an object can make sense if put into a sentence structure with an appropriate subject. To that extent the elegist lives when we read his poem.

Gray's poetry elsewhere searches for an audience. In the sonnet on West, the emotional center is that the death of his friend has removed from Gray the only reader who could properly appreciate his poem; and yet that poem would not exist if West had not died. The paradox is total and cruel: there is no audience, no reader, and the poet writes in a void. Gray never published that sonnet, and only published the *Elegy* when it was clear that a copy was to be printed without his approval. In the *Elegy*, Gray creates an audience which is completely absent in the sonnet; but this can only be achieved by turning the self into an object for another's contemplation. The elegist invents his appropriate reader because he needs him as the closing eye requires some pious drops. As the poet accepts his own death, so his reader fulfills the role of keeping alive in his ashes their wonted fires. We then become what the elegist was to the villagers. Logic moves us remorselessly on: we in turn shall need a kindred spirit to act in this way for us. The West sonnet closes with “in vain,” the phrase with which it opens, thereby enforcing its hopeless circularity: the sonnet goes round and round, turned in on itself, because there is no external audience. The *Elegy* creates that audience within the poem, so that its circularity is of a different kind. As subject dissolves into object, so only a new subject can sustain the syntax of life and death.

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