

ENGL 238: Poetry and Modernity, Restoration to Romantic
Professor Jonathan Kramnick

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with
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How Mary Hillhouse Read Her Gray: Commonplacing the *Elegy*, 1768 – 1816
by Eve Houghton

“Gray failed as a poet,” complained Wordsworth in a letter to a friend in 1816. “He wrote English verses, as he and other Eton schoolboys wrote Latin; filching a phrase now from one author, and now from another.”¹ Following John Guillory’s influential reading in *Cultural Capital*, Wordsworth’s critique of Gray can be understood as an indictment of an older mode of reading and composition: commonplacing. The prescription to copy down sententious phrases into a “commonplace book” had been a foundational tenet of Renaissance pedagogy; and indeed, Wordsworth’s assertion that Gray wrote poetry “as he and other Eton schoolboys wrote Latin” suggests that the practice continued well into the eighteenth century. As many critics have noted, the etymological roots of the word “commonplace” are closely allied with location: in Walter J. Ong’s terms, the classical rhetoricians described the *locus communis* as “some kind of ‘place’ (*locus* in Latin; *topos* in Greek, whence our word ‘topic’), in which were stored arguments to prove one or another point.”² Guillory draws an explicit link between the rhetorical commonplace and the physical “commons” when he writes that “the locodescriptive poem literalizes the metaphor of place as an organizational principle of composition” (89). For Guillory, however, Wordsworth’s intimation that Gray is a talentless imitator marks a moment in English literary history at which “the ‘commonplace’ itself becomes synonymous with banality,

¹ Quoted in Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1993. 88. Subsequent references are indicated parenthetically.

² Ong, Walter J. *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1967. 80.

or mere truism” (88). In other words, the familiarity and legibility of the landscape—its “commonplace” appeal—might also open up the locodescriptive poem to charges of predictability or even plagiarism.

Gray’s locodescriptive poem *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) is a highly allusive text, containing numerous references to classical and vernacular poetry; indeed, Gray himself was an avid commonplacer and had a habit of “filching phrases” from other authors, as Wordsworth derisively terms it. But the *Elegy* is also one of the most oft-quoted poems in the English language, lending a familiar ring to many of its famous phrases. In this sense, if the poem could be described as “commonplace” in the modern derogatory sense of “devoid of originality or novelty; trite, trivial, hackneyed” (*OED* B1), it was also *commonplaced*, endlessly copied and circulated in manuscript. The *Elegy* was widely disseminated in print in the second half of the eighteenth century, of course, but it became a popular source for manuscript commonplace books as well. This paper thus takes Samuel Johnson’s observation that “the Church-yard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind”³ and grounds it in the material evidence of eighteenth century reading practices, suggesting that the poem’s famously (or notoriously) aphoristic quality is indeed indebted to the historical influence of the commonplace book as a mode of reader engagement. But although Guillory might be right to read Wordsworth’s disparagement of Gray as a critical moment in the formation of the English literary canon, asserting that “the commonplace book had to be discarded as a matrix of composition in order for the Romantic locodescriptive lyric to set itself against the rhetorical commonplace” (88), it is also possible to read the vehemence of the attacks on commonplacing as evidence of its continued appeal as a reading practice. The popularity and persistence of the Gray

³ Johnson, Samuel. *Lives of the Poets*. Vol. 3. London: G. Walker, 1820. 379.

manuscript tradition thus offers an alternative model of eighteenth century reading and composition practices, suggesting that the maligning of the “commonplace” was not a historical inevitability nor necessarily an opinion shared by the majority of ordinary readers—even as the critique of commonplacing in this period provides a powerfully disconcerting reminder that the locodescriptive poem might be about, after all, just another common place.

I. “For, what tho’ his *Head* be empty, provided his *Common-place-Book* be full?”

Although reading for sententiae had existed in various forms in antiquity and the medieval period, many scholars date the historical origins of commonplacing to the Renaissance. For early modern readers, the rhetorical notion of the *locus communis* found its literal expression in the commonplace book, a material repository of arguments, adages, aphorisms, and other quotations. In the rhetorical treatise *De Copia* (1512), Erasmus famously advised keeping a commonplace book on the grounds that “this will ensure both that what you read will stay fixed more firmly in your mind and that you will learn to make use of the riches you have acquired by reading...Finally, whenever occasion demands, you will have ready to hand a supply of material for spoken or written composition.”⁴ An anonymous account in a seventeenth century commonplace book echoes the assertion that commonplacing will promote superior memory and comprehension, rhetorical excellence, and even moral improvement:

To apply my selfe to reading these classick authors, as Virgill, Horace, Iuvenal, Persius to reade them understandingly, & thus I shall have ye Idiome of yt language I reade. To note some Rhetoricall expressions, description, or some very apt Simile, or a very applicative story, & ye most choise morall sentences, & here a man’s sense must direct him, when he considers how aptly such a thing would fitt with an exercise of his.⁵

⁴ Quoted in Moss, Ann. *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996. 111.

⁵ Quoted in Brayman Hackel, Heidi. *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender, and Literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 147.

As Heidi Brayman Hackel notes, this reader sees no contradiction between reading for comprehension and reading to pick out “some very apt Simile.” Indeed, the ultimate end of “read[ing]...understandingly” is to feel at ease with the rhetorical tropes and figures of the classical authors: commonplacing becomes a means of mastering “ye Idiome of yt language I reade,” transforming the foreign into the familiar. In this sense, early modern readers often seemed to imagine the commonplace book as something like a trans-historical meeting place, a common ground which transcends linguistic and temporal difference.

But while the ideologies and methodologies of Renaissance commonplacing are well-known, less scholarly attention has been dedicated to eighteenth century commonplacing practices. This can perhaps partly be explained by the acceptance of a historiographic narrative which holds that commonplace books became an increasingly obsolete form of reading technology in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. David Allan’s revisionist account, however, invites a reconsideration of Georgian commonplacing as a rich tradition in its own right, contiguous with but distinct from early modern reading practices.⁶ Although new advances in print technology may have superseded some of the traditional uses of the manuscript commonplace book, it does not necessarily follow that commonplacing lost its cultural influence. Indeed, even Ann Moss, the historian who wrote the paradigmatic account of the “decline” of the commonplace book in the seventeenth century, also adds the disclaimer that “the commonplace-book was so firmly entrenched in the European mentality (and in the school system) that even writers who saw little or no intellectual profit in its quotations...did retain it as a working tool.”⁷ And citing Roger Chartier’s account of commonplacing as a constitutive mode of thought in the

⁶ Allan, David. *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. Subsequent references are indicated parenthetically.

⁷ Moss, 274.

Renaissance even for those who did not keep commonplace books, Allan asks if “it [is] also possible that that the literary preferences of most Georgian readers were influenced by the particular tastes that...had their roots very substantially in commonplacing?” (158).

But if the commonplace book remained an influential presence in eighteenth century literary culture, it also increasingly attracted detractors. Wordsworth was not the first to denigrate the “filching” of phrases associated with commonplacing; such complaints have a long history dating back to antiquity and the medieval period. Even as commonplacing, annotating, and other forms of reader markings were valorized as aids to attention and recollection, they could also come to stand for poor memory and intellectual dishonesty. In *Philobiblon* (c. 1354), Richard de Bury complains that “You may happen to see some headstrong youth lazily lounging over his studies...he distributes a multitude of straws, which he inserts to stick out in different places, so that the halm may remind him of what his memory cannot retain.”⁸ Paradoxically, here marks of readerly attention—in this case, bookmarking—become indications of indolence and failure to retain information. In *The Dunciad* (1728), Alexander Pope similarly portrays commonplacing as the tool of the lazy and undiscerning reader:

Of these, twelve volumes, twelve of amplest size,
 Redeem'd from tapers and defrauded pies,
 Inspired he seizes: these an altar raise;
 A hecatomb of pure unsullied lays
 That altar crowns; a folio Commonplace
 Founds the whole pile, of all his works the base:
 Quartos, octavos, shape the less'ning pyre,
 A twisted Birth-day Ode completes the spire. (155 – 162)

⁸ Quoted in Alexandra Gillespie, invited lecture for the Yale Program in the History of the Book and Yale Medieval Colloquium, 15 April 2015.

For Pope, the poet who keeps “a folio Commonplace...of all his works the base” is deficient in both originality and literary talent. As the stack of books increases in height, folios become quartos, octavos, and duodecimos: poor reading practices thus also lead to the production of literally and figuratively lightweight literary productions.

Pope’s low opinion of commonplacing seems to have been shared by at least one of his fellow Scriblerians. “For, what tho’ his *Head* be empty, provided his *Common-place-Book* be full?” asks Jonathan Swift sarcastically in *A Tale of the Tub* (1704). By associating commonplacing with slavish imitation, Pope and Swift mount an effective critique of a well-established mode of reading. The figure of the poet with an empty head but a full commonplace book becomes a powerful specter of failed intellectual integrity, even as commonplacing retained much of its influence in the Georgian period. Indeed, the confluence of these two literary-historical forces—the increasing availability of commonplacing as a subject of satire, and its continued prominence as a cultural practice—might do much to account for the often conflicted and contradictory attitudes to commonplacing in the second half of the eighteenth century.

II. Commonplacing Gray’s *Elegy*

Thomas Gray’s *Elegy* lends itself well as a case study in eighteenth-century commonplacing practices due to its enormous popularity in manuscript. Allan notes that the poem was “quickly embraced by commonplacers” (175) soon after its first appearance in print, an assertion which is borne out by the presence of Gray’s poems as extracts or complete transcriptions in a number of commonplace books in the James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. A survey of these commonplace books cannot account for the full diversity and complexity of the Gray manuscript

tradition, of course, but might suggest a few insights about the early reception of the *Elegy* and eighteenth century commonplacing practices more broadly.

Certainly all the Beinecke commonplace books support the mainstream critical assertion that the Renaissance emphasis on commonplacing classical authors was superseded in the eighteenth century by a gradual shift in focus to vernacular poetry and empirical observation. Ann Blair notes that eighteenth century printed commonplace books often focused on “recent developments, notably in the sciences, rather than on...classical quotations,”⁹ and Allan makes a persuasive case for the turn to the vernacular in manuscript commonplace books as well. This does not, however, imply a total or exclusive shift away from the Renaissance emphasis on domesticating the “classick authors.” An 1800 commonplace book entitled “Memorandums,” (Osborn d286), for example, moves smoothly between classical and vernacular sources: Gray’s last stanza of “Ode on a Prospect of Eton College” (f. 10r) appears only a few leaves after quotations from Homer. The compiler’s choice to label his or her commonplace book as a collection of “Memorandums” positions the book as a gathering of aphorisms on social and moral subjects; the inclusion of Gray (alongside his predecessors and contemporaries Milton, Pope, and Goldsmith) expands the range of references to include vernacular poetry, but is still broadly consistent with the early modern pedagogical tradition.

By contrast, a commonplace book owned by a young woman in the 1760s defines itself in markedly different generic terms. Autographed “Mary Hillhouse this Book given her in the year 1769,” this commonplace book (Osborn c156) is titled “Amusements: 1768-9”—although a passage from Gray’s *Elegy*, a comparatively sedate poem, appears on f. 145r. The effect of this seeming generic incongruence, however, is to position Hillhouse’s commonplace book as a

⁹ Blair, Ann. *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2010. 269.

personal, idiosyncratic verse compilation: reading for pleasure and “amusement,” not necessarily for moral or intellectual profit. In this sense, the commonplace book of Mary Hillhouse suggests that Gray’s poetry could take on different affective valences, depending on the reading preferences of the compiler.

The *Elegy* might be subject to even more drastic alterations: for example, Hillhouse excerpts the final three stanzas but labels them “The Epitaph” (f. 145r), with no indication of its placement within the longer work. The reader thus encounters the excerpt as if it were an entirely separate poem. A similar division between “The Epitaph” and the *Elegy* appears in a volume inscribed “Wm [William] Hartley’s Book 1769” (uncat. MSS, Osborn collection).¹⁰ This commonplace book includes an entire copy of the *Elegy*, but concludes with “The Epitaph” on a separate page (f. 8r). The impulse to differentiate between the final three stanzas and the *Elegy* as a whole (or even to present them as two discrete works) reflects a print tradition which often presented “The Epitaph” in a typographically different form than the rest of the poem.¹¹ But it also suggests that manuscript commonplacers had no compunction about presenting the *Elegy* in the pieces and fragments which seemed most appealing to them, even if those choices—such as abstracting “The Epitaph” from its context—now seem somewhat eccentric.

But if the manuscripts in the Osborn collection can reflect the sometimes idiosyncratic preferences of their compilers, they are also attuned to contemporary conventions of reading and commonplacing. The definitive instructional text for eighteenth century commonplacers was John Locke’s posthumously published *A New Method of Making Common-Place-Books* (1706), which revises the Erasmian method of compiling *sententiae* by elaborating a complex and

¹⁰ I am grateful to university archivist Diane Ducharme for these details about the manuscript, which has not yet been catalogued.

¹¹ An early print edition (London: R. Dodsley, 1751), for example, renders “The Epitaph” in italic type.

detailed system of organized note-taking. Rather than advising readers to organize quotations under Latin generic labels such as “Memoria” or “Eloquentia,” Locke advised creating an alphabetical index subdivided by page numbers, for easy access to all the entries in the commonplace book.¹² *A New Method* went through several editions and spawned legions of imitators, and its influence is keenly felt in the Osborn collection manuscripts. The commonplace book of Frances Cornwalls, “begun in July, year 1799,” (Osborn d248), for example, is highly attentive to the generic categorizations of poems and prose—the first volume of her commonplace book includes a multi-page alphabetical index of short titles. As suggested by Locke, Cornwalls devises her own vernacular generic categories, labeling each entry “Verses,” “Ballads,” “Advice,” “Song,” “Prose,” “Parody,” “Anecdote,” “Extempore,” “Epigram,” “Epitaph,” “Ode,” and even “A Pun.” Indeed, the Lockean method of commonplacing was so influential in shaping eighteenth century reading practices that its devotees included not only ordinary readers, but also one very prominent commonplacer: Thomas Gray himself.

III. “The Complete Picture of His Mighty Mind”

Thomas Gray’s three folio commonplace books are currently held at Pembroke College Library, Cambridge University. Gray’s biographer Robert Mack notes that the volumes are, like Frances Cornwalls’s books, also organized according to Locke’s method, with “subjects... filed in an index prefixed to each volume by, respectively, first letter and then first vowel.”¹³ The contents of the commonplace books reflect Gray’s formidable erudition, including passages on Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, as well as commentaries on Locke’s philosophy. Indeed, Gray seems particularly attentive to the intertextuality of classical and vernacular sources; in his

¹² Allan, 51.

¹³ Mack, Robert. *Thomas Gray: A Life*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. 381.

commentaries on Socrates, for example, he notes that a passage “has some Resemblance to Mr Locke’s Definition of Knowledge.”¹⁴ It seems likely that Gray’s well-documented interest in Locke informed his passion for commonplacing; as Frederick M. Keener writes, the Lockean method of note-taking “promotes continuing inferential activity, even what may be justly considered a dialectical search for truth very much in the manner of Socrates.”¹⁵ This conception of commonplacing as a painstaking, endlessly recurrent quest for truth might perhaps be linked to the project of the *Elegy*, a poem which in one of its most famous passages dramatizes the discovery of previously unknown and unseen treasures:

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. (*Elegy*, 53-56)

These lines are a powerful social critique of an educational system which relegates some voices to illiteracy and marginality, as many critics have noted.¹⁶ But in its preoccupation with seeking, searching, and even digging out these “gem[s] of purest rays,” this passage might also be read as an exercise in the acquisitive (or archaeological) work associated with commonplacing. There is something of the collector’s pride in Gray’s account of the iridescent underwater jewel and the sweet flower, previously “born to blush unseen” but now displayed to the view of the appreciative reader. As David Fairer has suggested, the *Elegy* is itself “an ample page / Rich with the spoils of time” (49-50), an observation which connects Gray’s bounteous store of

¹⁴ Keener, Frederick. *Implication, Readers' Resources, and Thomas Gray's Pindaric Odes*. Newark: U of Delaware, 2012. 216.

¹⁵ Keener, 207.

¹⁶ Indeed, this is Guillory’s main line of argument in the chapter on Gray and Wordsworth in *Cultural Capital*.

quotations in his commonplace books to the poem's allusions to Lucretius, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, and Thomson, among others.¹⁷

Gray's commonplace books might also provide tantalizing insight into his reading and composition practices. This possibility was articulated as early as 1814, when the commonplace books were published in incomplete form by an early Gray editor, Thomas Mathias. In his "Postscript to this Edition of Gray's Works," Mathias justifies his editorial procedure for presenting the commonplace books:

The volumes which contain the manuscripts are three in number, in small folio: they form, what is strictly called a commonplace book, and of course the heads of the articles have no connection with each other from the manner of their being disposed, but are taken "ad libitum" . . . [I] conceived that the best mode would be to divide them into sections, admitting only those compositions, remarks, or fragments which were original; as there are many articles which are only compilations from different authors, or abridgments from works of eminence or of curiosity, which, though drawn up with great ability, can never be styled, or considered, as part of an author's works. . . . By this arrangement and disposition, it is easy, without blending one subject with another, to consider all that has been selected; which, with Mr. Gray's poems, letters, compositions, occasional observations and fragments, given before to the world by Mr. Mason, form the complete picture of his mighty mind and of the stores of erudition with which it was enriched and adorned.¹⁸

This account is striking for its self-consciousness and anxiety about commonplacing as a reading practice. Mathias clearly feels that Gray's commonplace books require a strong editorial hand to shape them into coherence: the individual subject headings "have no connection with each other" and constantly threaten to "[blend] one subject with another," and thus cannot be presented in undigested form. The specter of plagiarism—or at least of a compromised claim to poetic originality—also seems to hang over Mathias's stated intention of "admitting only those

¹⁷ Fairer, David, and Christine Gerrard, eds. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2015. 419.

¹⁸ "Postscript to This Edition of Gray's Works." *Works of Thomas Gray*. Vol. 2. Ed. Thomas Mathias. London: T. Caldwell, 1814. 583.

compositions, remarks, or fragments which were original” and his disclaimer that “compilations from different authors...can never be styled, or considered, as part of an author’s works.” But for all these reservations, Gray’s commonplace books also offer the seductive promise of providing the reader with access to “the complete picture of his mighty mind” and “stores of erudition.” In this sense, the commonplace book is portrayed as less than an original work but, paradoxically, as something *more* than the authorial composition. Even as the editor attempts to disavow the possibility that the books might merely consist of borrowed fragments, then, they are also held up as a means of gaining privileged access to the inner workings of the author’s mind.

IV. Coda: “A Mirror in Every Mind”

This preoccupation with Gray’s commonplace books as “a picture of his mighty mind” shares striking affinities with Samuel Johnson’s claims for the universal appeal of the *Elegy*. However, Johnson’s praise is grounded in the assertion that the poem “finds[s] a mirror in every mind,” not just the mind of one exemplary reader:

The Church-yard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returned an echo. The four stanzas beginning ‘Yet e’en these bones’ are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here persuades himself that he has always felt them.¹⁹

Johnson deploys the figure of the common reader—readers like Mary Hillhouse, Frances Cornwalls, or William Hartley—in his account of the text’s commonplace qualities, suggesting that the poem is paradoxically both original and familiar. As Guillory has observed, here the *Elegy* “seems to have been uttered by the *Zeitgeist*” (91), as if Gray naturally expressed himself in sententious, easily quotable commonplaces: phrases which, although “never seen...in any other place” are nonetheless immediately appropriated by the reader who “persuades himself that

¹⁹ Johnson, 379.

he has always felt them.” If Gray’s own commonplace books are a picture of his authorial genius, then, the *Elegy* becomes a mirror for *all* readers, functioning like a shared commonplace book that is endlessly circulated among the widest possible readership community.

Although Wordsworth’s disparaging remarks in 1816 may have asserted an unbridgeable distance between the locodescriptive lyric and the merely “commonplace,” Johnson’s praise of Gray’s *Elegy* invites an alternative account which aligns the appeal of the locodescriptive poem with the reading practices associated with commonplacing. In this interpretation, his assertion that the reader “*persuades* [emphasis mine] himself that he has always felt them” foregrounds of the labor of dissemination—the poem finds a mirror in every mind through ordinary, everyday acts of reading and circulation. Copying down sententious quotations thus becomes a means of constituting the *locus communis*, of taking “notions” which have “never [been] seen...in any other place” and re-placing them in a new, universally accessible landscape. Commonplacing might then be understood as a form of popularized poetic diction, not dissimilar to Wordsworth’s own stated intention in the *Lyrical Ballads* to “choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them...in a selection of language really used by men.”²⁰ In this sense, the forcefulness of his rhetoric against Gray’s commonplacing might be understood, not as an indication of the vast gulf between the Romantic locodescriptive lyric and the rhetorical commonplace, but instead as a testament to just how closely and uncomfortably Wordsworth knew himself to be aligned with these older modes of reading and composition. The widespread circulation of manuscript excerpts from Gray’s *Elegy* suggests, too, that reports of the death of commonplacing in Georgian England have been greatly exaggerated. Even as the word “commonplace” began to take on its modern derogatory connotations in this period, then, the

²⁰ Wordsworth, William, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*. Ed. Fiona Stafford. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. 96.

circulation of the *Elegy* in manuscript reminds us that, for many readers, the commonplace was not a term of affront or a euphemism for plagiarism but rather a collective meeting place, an accessible form of eloquence, and a space of common understanding.