**FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS: ASSONANCE IN GRAY’S *ELEGY***

We’re all familiar with end-rhymes in the work of earlier poets that just don’t work in terms of modern pronunciation (‘prove’ / ‘remove’ / ‘love’, or ‘blood’ / ‘wood’ / ‘food’). However there is one end-rhyme in particular that interests me in the context of Gray’s famous *Elegy*. I’m not referring to the famous way in which he rhymes ‘toil’ and ‘smile’ in stanza 8.

Consider the diphthongs in these words: ‘bowl’ [əʊ] and ‘scowl’ [aʊ]. I’m convinced that for Gray both words would have used the first such vowel-sound, and that the second one developed *after* his time. It follows that words such as those that we today pronounce as follows: ‘rose’, ‘flows’, and ‘goes’ would in Gray’s time have rhymed perfectly with ‘douse’, ‘cows’, ‘sows’ and ‘prows’.

Here are some randomly selected end-rhymes from the work of slightly earlier poets that at least bear out the hypothesis that both sounds were identical for most Midlands and Southern English-speakers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Had there been space and years enough **allow’d**,

His courage, wit, and breeding to have **show’d** . . .

*EPITAPH To Be Written under the Latin Inscription upon the Tomb of the Only Son of the Lord Andover,* by **Edmund Waller**

Heaven was scarce heard of until He came **down**,

To make the region where love triumphs **known**.

*Of Divine Love*, Canto II, by **Edmund Waller**

Devils are chain’d, and tremble; but the **Spouse**

No force but love, no bond but bounty, **knows**

*Of Divine Love*, Canto V, by **Edmund Waller**

How can the joy, or hope, which you **allow**

Be stylèd virtuous, and the end not **so**?

*IN ANSWER OF SIR JOHN SUCKLING’S VERSES,* by **Edmund Waller**

How Sir your friend! and Traytor to my **Crown**!

Reveal him, or his Treasons are your **own**.

*Alcibiades*, Act IV, by Thomas Otway

Call me still vile, incestuous, all that’s **foul**.

—Oh, pity, pity my despairing **Soul** . . .

*Don Carlos Prince of Spain,* Act V, by **Thomas Otway**

In Western Clime there is a **Town**

To those that dwell therein well **known** . . .

*Hudibras*, First Part, Canto I, ll. 659-60, by **Samuel Butler**

He snatch’t his Whiniard up, that fled

When he was falling off his Steed,

(As Rats do from a falling **house**,)

To hide it self from rage of **blows** . . .

*Hudibras*, First Part, Canto II, ll. 937-30, by **Samuel Butler**

Quoth Hudibras, the day’s thine **own**;

Thou and thy stars have cast me **down** . . .

*Hudibras*, First Part, Canto III, ll. 869-70, by **Samuel Butler**

I’m certain, ’tis not in the **Scroll**,

Of all those Beasts, and Fish, and **Fowl**

*Hudibras*, Second Part, Canto III, ll. 429-30, by **Samuel Butler**

For thee did Canaan’s Milk and Honey **flow**,

Love drest thy Bow’rs, and Lawrels sought thy **Brow** . . .

*The Second Part of Absalom and Achitophel*, ll. 879-80, by **John Dryden**

My contention (very hard to prove) that for Gray the [əʊ] sound was the one that united both modern diphthongs is based on little more than the fact that it’s more of a ‘closed’ vowel than its alternative. Why might this matter in Gray’s poem? Because if one reads all the words contained in it that have this sound (in an accent not unlike that used by modern Canadians, or like that employed by those with strong West Country regional accents), what impresses itself forcefully on any listener is how frequently Gray chooses it. This is especially true of the opening verses.

No one who knows and loves his work can be unaware of how fastidiously he uses not just end-rhyme, but also internal rhyme, in particular assonance. If I’m right, then is it fanciful to see the frequent repetition of this closed vowel sound as some kind of phonetic mimicry of the tolling of a bell (or of the curfew mentioned in line 1)? What could be more appropriate in an *Elegy*?

The curfew t**o**lls the knell of parting day,

The l**ow**ing herd winds sl**ow**ly **o**’er the lea,

The pl**ough**man h**o**meward plods his weary way,

And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

N**ow** fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,

And all the air a solemn stillness h**o**lds,

Save where the beetle wheels his dr**o**ning flight,

And dr**ow**sy tinklings lull the distant f**o**lds:

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled t**ow**er

The m**o**ping **ow**l does to the moon complain

Of such as, wandering near her secret b**ow**er,

M**o**lest her ancient solitary reign . . .

And so on . . . However, apart from these two lines in stanza 7: “H**ow** jocund did they drive their team afield! / H**ow** b**ow**’d the woods beneath their sturdy str**o**ke!” this particular assonantal effect becomes increasingly less frequent as we move into the main body of the poem, and as that melancholy curfew’s bell becomes more and more distant.

I agree that it is indisputably a curfew, and not a death-knell. However its connotations are strongly crepuscular and vespertine, and it must surely have a metaphorical link with the death-knell itself in the context of this particular poem.

It is, I suspect, a measure of Gray’s peculiar sensitivity to the power of assonance as a means of conjuring up one particular mood—in this case, one of sombre reflections on mortality—that he should have chosen to foreground this specific closed diphthong at the start of his poem.

**Kevin Maynard**