The Long Poem and its Ends, 1797-1869

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Abstract

This is a study of five major English poets and the approaches they took to the long poem in the period 1797-1869. I argue for an ambivalence in these works about the very ends of length itself. These poems give various reasons for being long and come to question the very notion of progress towards a final goal. As a result, the long poem of this era develops a suspicion of its own possibility for definitive development.

The introduction covers some of the ways that long poems have been discussed in the context of other genres. I propose, by contrast, to investigate the ways in which some of the poems in this formal category attempt to theorise themselves: to explain what their ends are, in other words. I frame this in terms of the classical formal and narratological accounts of endedness, as well as the Romantic-era organic analogies from which many of them derive. In any case, I argue, the long poems of this Romantic and Victorian moment do not fit our received notions of the end. In fact, in trying to work out what they are for, these poems all interrogate the functions of literary purpose and development more broadly, and it is specific manifestations of that problem which I undertake to describe in the following chapters.

In the first chapter, Coleridge's thought helps explain the premises outlined in the introduction. Coleridge's lifelong preoccupation with parts and wholes, means and ends, is shown to emerge in the practical case of the long poem and in shorter works that he himself wrote. After following this through readings of his early criticism, 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', and his poem 'To William Wordsworth', I suggest the ways in which his definitions of poetry, including the famous but often misread comment that 'a poem of any length neither can be nor ought to be all poetry' respond to the same intellectual stimulus. To finish, his ideas of method, symbol, and constitution are explored in turn as they reveal an illustrative balance between the endless and the strictly determined.

The subsequent chapters analyse Wordsworth, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning. For Wordsworth, my chapter covers the poems written towards *The Recluse*. I show that an ambivalence around ends preceded the idea of *The Recluse*, and then investigate the ways in which the notion (and impossibility) of writing a master poem became a theme of those poems themselves. Through a reading of Wordsworth's river imagery, and the use of enjambment in *The Excursion*, I demonstrate the ways in which endlessness is figured as both benevolent or restrictive. In the second chapter, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is closely read, along with several earlier lyrics, to reveal a lyric practice which prevents *In Memoriam* from achieving a true progression from one section to the next. My focus is on the unusual tenses which Tennyson utilises to talk about past and recurring events.

The chapters on Robert and Elizabeth Browning see how the discussion of formal means and ends apply to the diversity and telos of a liberal society. In *Aurora Leigh*, I argue, an eccentric individualism is developed in order that individualism might be overcome. With this motion, however, the grounds of poetry seem undercut, as if the end of this long poem threatens the end of subjective poetry itself. *The Ring and the Book*, subject of my final chapter, is shown to continuously make allegories of itself, its excessive length and digressiveness. The ideas of writing a long poem because you have to, and simply because you can, take a political dimension in Browning's poem. Human eloquence is shown to have a momentum all of its own beyond its ambitions of speaking truly.

The thesis concludes with a short meditation on the methodological problems of reading long poems, and on the development of the form in American poetry.

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The deepest gratitude of all is to my parents for their love, support, and kindness.

What if our existence was but that moment! – What an unintelligible affrightful Riddle, what a chaos of limbs & trunks, tailless, headless, nothing begun & nothing ended, would it not be! And yet scarcely more than that other moment of 50 or 60 years, were that our all! Each part through infinite diminution adapted to some other, and yet the whole means to nothing – ends every where, and yet an end no where—[1]

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;
I listened till I had my fill:
And, as I mounted up the hill
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.[2]

William Wordsworth

[1] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, Merton Christensen, and Anthony Harding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957-2002), iii, 4057. References to this edition (hereafter *Notebooks*) are given by volume and section (not page) number.
[2] 'The Solitary Reaper', in *William Wordsworth. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.254.

Introduction

I.

This is a study of English long poems written between 1797, the year Wordsworth completed the first version of 'The Ruined Cottage', and 1869, when the final volume of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* was published. My argument is that there is an ambivalence, common among these poems, about the very ends of length itself. These poems give various reasons for being so long, but in each case that length is also subversive of their ends, as the thing they are trying to say is stalled, reiterated, or undermined. As a result, the notion of ended-ness or progress towards a final goal is itself questioned; these poems develop a suspicion of their own possibility for definitive development. The long poem thus problematises the relationship between the literal ending of the text (its movement from first to final lines) and sense of an ending, closure, or consolation. I begin with Wordsworth's attempt to provide a more consolatory ending to the 'unrelieved sadness' of the first version of his 'The Ruined Cottage'.[3] I finish as Robert Browning's polyphonic murder story tries to summarise: 'Here were the end, had anything an end'.[4] Along the way, Tennyson's recovery from grief comes at the expense of his extended elegy's wholeness, struggling to 'trust a larger lay', and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's heroine learns that she cannot 'contain her own conclusions'.[5] In each case,

[3] Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (London: Nelson, 1969), p.19.
[4] *The Ring and the Book*, ed. by J. Woolford, D. Karlin and J. Phelan, 2 vols (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), XII: 1.
[5] *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, revised edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p.392; *Elizabeth Barret Browning. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, ed. by Josie Billington and Philip Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.396.

the long poem's end does not definitively deliver on the promise of its means, but makes an uneasy virtue out of its potential endlessness.

II.

To say that these long poems problematise their length is not quite the same thing as agreeing with Edgar Allan Poe that the category is a 'contradiction in terms'.[6] Nor is it to side with T. S. Eliot in declaring that 'most of the long poems of the nineteenth century [...] are simply not good enough'.[7] Mark Storey's book *The Problem of Poetry in the Romantic Period* argues that the 'attempt to formulate an idea, or ideas, of what it means to be a poet', without arriving at 'any kind of consensus', influenced the resultant form of Romantic poems, and my argument takes a similar approach.[8] The 'problem' of the long poem, the attempt to work out what a long poem should be or do, results in poems that are preoccupied by an attempt to justify, apologise, or reflect on their lengthiness. A. C. Bradley lamented that, throughout the nineteenth century, poetry became preoccupied with itself. It was 'the infection of his time' that forced the Romantic poet's hand: the 'subject of his long poem must be poetry itself'.[9] Bradley thought this a bad state of affairs, but I argue that there is also a virtue in the self-reflexivity of these long poems. Matthew Arnold, a voice we still hear in Bradley's essay, compared Keats with Sophocles and Boccaccio: the former writes 'a treasure-house of felicitous words and images', but these parts do not create a whole.[10] Sophocles and Boccaccio, by contrast, knew to 'subordinat[e] expression to that which it is designed to express': a skill lost by writers in the

[6] Edgar Allen Poe, 'The Poetic Principle' (1848), in *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by G. R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p.698.
[7] Eliot made this judgment in his early essay 'Prose and Verse', quoted from *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Vol. 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, ed. by R. Schuchard and A. Cuda (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp.324-332, p.326.
[8] Mark Storey, *The Problem of Poetry in the Romantic Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p.viii.
[9] A. C. Bradley, 'The Long Poem in the Age of Wordsworth', *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan and co., 1909), pp.177-208, p.186-7.
[10] Matthew Arnold, *Poems* (1853) (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853), p.xxii.

wake of Romanticism.[11] The architectonic certainty, the feeling of knowing what you want to express, is exactly what these long poems struggle to achieve. Arnold's pointed comment that the great artist 'delineates his object' might obscure a poetry that is deeply invested in the problems of delineation itself, of being unable to fully determine its object or end, of knowing how to subordinate the parts of expression to some broader whole.[12] Wordsworth, for instance, begins his autobiographical long poem with a question: 'Was it for this?'. If not for *this*, then what indeed was his life in poetry *for*? The attempt to explain what their length is for is what I seek to trace through these long poems.

The theme of the end might be a suggestive one considering the various reasons with which the nineteenth century has been seen as a terminal one for the long poem. One can, it seems, see it as the moment in history when the long poem became impossible or bad, as Poe, Arnold, Bradley, and Eliot suggest. Such a view, as in E. M. W. Tillyard's early *The English Epic and Its Background*, might focus on the decline of the epic, or on a more philosophically engaged reading of Romantic aesthetics.[13] Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* continues Arnold's and Bradley's arguments to note that Pound's *Cantos*, being 'an assemblage of ideograms in a significant relation', effectively 'one vast image', is 'the only kind of long poem the Symbolist aesthetic will admit'.[14] Such views now seem austere. Herbert Tucker's *Epic* is the most prolific argument that 'our suspicion about epic's modern irrelevance should itself prompt suspicion' although critics have tried to dispel that suspicion before.[15] Brian Wilkie made much the same argument in 1965, suggesting no major break associated with the end of the eighteenth century: '*The Prelude* does not [...] differ from *Paradise Lost* more radically than *Paradise Lost* differs from *The Aeneid*'.[16] Recent work on the mostly forgotten (but very

[11] Arnold, *Poems* (1853), p.xxii.
[12] Arnold, *Poems* (1853), p.xxii.
[13] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and its Background* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954).
[14] Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, revised edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p.161.
[15] Herbert Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.3.
[16] Brian Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. viii.

long) 'Spasmodics', whose 'negative influence [...] was as important as the positive' has confirmed their importance to an understanding of central Victorians such as the Brownings, Tennyson and Arnold.[17] Whether or not all of these poems are 'not very good', as Eliot tells us, is another question; the notion that serious poets weren't trying to write long poems seems, at any rate, far-fetched.

Compared to the novel, of course, the long poem's moment of cultural supremacy was coming to an end. In some accounts, this happened before Wordsworth and Coleridge were thinking about what might be done to, or invented out of, the epic. Thomas E. Maresca describes the torch passing – 'the novel replaced the epic as the major literary form in English' – from Dryden and Pope to Fielding.[18] One reply to Tucker's dispelling of suspicion about the epic is to claim, as Kenneth Johnston does, that it was 'dying out in efflorescence': profuseness in any sense does not guarantee aesthetic success.[19] If 'the epic impulse left poetry for the novel', in Tillyard's account, and, as Wordsworth complained, students 'seemed to care for nothing but Bozzy's [Dickens's] next No. and the Classics suffered accordingly', the other generic event of this period is identified as a turn to the lyric.[20] As Clifford Siskin, for instance, tells us, 'the hierarchy of genres was, at the end of the eighteenth, and beginning of the nineteenth, centuries lyricised', which meant not just an increasing popularity of the lyric, but also the turning of other genres towards the lyric mode.[21] We might blame Wordsworth or Palgrave for this. Donald Davie declared that, after Wordsworth, poetry 'invites, as *The Prelude* does, the admiring reflection, "What an interesting mind he has"; not that older reaction, "What

[17] Richard Cronin, 'The Spasmodics', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by R. Cronin, A Chapman, and A. Harrison (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2002), pp.291-303, p.292.
[18] Thomas E. Maresca, *Epic to Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), p.ix.
[19] Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p.11.
[20] Tillyard, *The English Epic and its Background*, p.14; To Edward Moxon, April 1st 1842, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, vols 1-7 ed. by E. De Selincourt, vol 8 ed. byA. G. Hill, (Oxford: Clarendon pres, 1967-1993) vii, p.314.
[21] Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.11.

an interesting thing to say": poetry turning in on itself as Arnold and Bradley complained.[22] Anne Stevenson wonders whether the lyrics collected as the *Golden Treasury* 'bent the taste of the Victorians too much in the direction of the lyric', or whether Palgrave was merely 'representative of his time'.[23] The long poem is an outlier to both trends. We know, more clearly than ever thanks to books like Tucker's *Epic*, Adam Roberts's *Romantic and Victorian Long Poems: A Guide*, or Stefanie Markowits's study of *The Victorian Verse Novel*, that long poems persisted through this novelistic or lyrical era. As discussed below, modern critics have tended to view the mode with greater generic flexibility, but I nonetheless think there is an advantage to considering the 'old' view that this was an age that could not quite accommodate the long poem. One reason for that, I argue, is internal to the poetry, rather than a product of large-scale shifts of generic priorities. There is something to be gained by looking at what happens in these long poems on their own terms, without reference to the rise of the lyric and the novel.

Recent criticism of the long poem of this era has, admittedly, taken more flexible approaches to genre and form. Monique Morgan has investigated the interplay of lyric and narrative.[24] Tess Somervell has argued that the eighteenth century long poem 'used spatial forms to think about the various shapes that time might take'.[25] Stefanie Markovits takes it as an axiom that the verse-novel 'must be constructed as a hybrid entity'.[26] It must be admitted, that despite this astute recent work, studies of the long poem still offer a pioneering tone.[27] Somervell notes that 'the long poem as a category, which encompasses but is not limited to

[22] Donald Davie, *The Purity of Diction in English Verse; and, Articulate Energy* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006), p.90.
[23] Anne Stevenson, 'Why Palgrave Lives', *Victorian Poetry*, 37:2 (1999), pp.211-4, p.212.
[24] Monique Morgan, *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends: Temporality in the Nineteenth Century British Long Poem* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009).
[25] Somervell, *Reading Time in the Long Poem: Milton, Thomson, Wordsworth*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p.8.
[26] Markovits, *The Victorian Verse-Novel: Aspiring to Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.4.
[27] In one sense, because they involve genuine rediscovery. Adam Roberts notes, in his *Romantic and Victorian Long Poems: A Guide* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), which gives convenient record of many very long poems, that 'researching this volume has meant reading a large number of extremely good long poems, works which previously I had barely even heard of', p.1.

epic and romance, has not received much critical attention or theorisation'.[28] Tucker laments 'categorical erasure' and Elisha Cohn equally sees it as 'somewhat under-theorized'.[29] The clear supposition is that a more nuanced theorisation would help us read the poems. It may be, however that the potential for under-theorisation is not the just fault of critical method, but the result of the form of the long poems themselves. One implication of my argument is that these long poems are internally under-theorised, so to speak, since they cannot quite work out what they are practising – what, in other words, their right ends are. This is, I suggest, due to the attractions of endlessness itself as much as it is to the inability to fully articulate what one wants one's poem to do. That a poem might just go on for ever, or go on without a clear aim in mind, is both the great threat to the form, but also the condition of the fruitful ambivalence I want to describe.

On one level, then, this thesis is a various one. I begin with Coleridge's theoretical discussion of the long poem before moving through Wordsworth, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning. Their long poems all have different reasons for being long, different in their conflicts and ambivalences as well as their objects. There is, however, a claim for similarity here as well, which is that all these poems, along with their own specific sense of their right end and object, develop a suspicion of their own possibility for development and a conflicted (desiring, rejecting, delaying, hastening) relationship with the nature of endedness itself. I begin, then, with some remarks about what we mean when we ask about the end of the long poem.

Before doing so, the term 'long poem' itself needs some defence. It is a conveniently vague term and has been criticised as such. Herbert Tucker decries how 'poetry's shuffling preference today for the nondescript "long poem" seems a regrettable declension into one thin

[28] Somervell, *Reading Time in the Long Poem*, p.5.
[29] Tucker, *Epic*, p.8; Elisha Cohn, *Still Life: Suspended Development in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.113.

dimension'.[30] Even worse, for Susan Friedman, 'the descriptive simplicity of the term "long poem"' carries an 'implicit ideology of pure form and value-free aesthetics'. [31] Plenty of critics of modernist or postmodernist long poems have treated the term with similar reluctance. Brendan C. Gillot refers cautiously to the 'so-called "long poem"', which possesses a 'genre-bending un-nature', in the context of Charles Olson.[32] The suspicion is that the term licenses sidestepping the messy business of genre, as if speaking about the length would mean speaking of nothing else. That the arguments I present below do not just take this theme for its convenience can only be proven after the fact. For Wordsworth, the formal question of the long poem directly reflected ethical and political questions about the purpose of poetry. My chapters on the Brownings suggest that the poetic unity or disunity of their long poems has something to say about their liberalism. In each case, taking the particular qualities of the long poem, its need to organise large amounts of information or present them as part of an emergent process, the pull between the large structure and the small-scale image, line, or passage, reveals something useful about the poetry as a whole.

More fundamentally, I contend that the vagueness of the term 'long poem' has a virtue of its own. There is no hard and fast line between long and short poems; I take it that it will not be controversial to describe *The Prelude*, *The Excursion*, *In Memoriam*, *Maud*, *Aurora Leigh* and *The Ring and the Book* as the former. But the openness of the term might rather highlight the anxious generic hybridity in these works as they attempt to determine themselves – explain what they are and give an account for their end. Calling these works 'long poems' leaves their need to become something else profitably exposed. It also reveals a categorical arbitrariness, since the questions 'could a poem of this kind be shorter?', or 'is this long enough?' would be

[30] Tucker, *Epic*, p.18.
[31] Susan Stanform Friedman, 'When a "long" poem is a "big" poem: Self-authoring strategies in women's twentieth-century "long poems"', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 2:1 (1990), pp.9-25, p.10.
[32] Brendan C. Gillot, 'The Depth of Charles Olson's "Maximus Poems"', *English Journal of the English Association*, 66:255 (2017), pp.351-371, p.355

the groundwork of any stable generic definition of a long poem, but also the groundwork of the imbalance or instability which I propose to describe.

III.

Keats remarked, in a letter, that the long poem offers 'a little region to wander in', where the poet might find 'images [...] so numerous that many are forgotten'.[33] Byron, with brio, declared, 'You ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny – I have no plan – I *had* no plan – but I had or have materials'.[34] Not all poets aspired, then, to create something that had the sort of design or unity which Arnold described. Paul M. Curtis has imagined, in *Don Juan*, a form that exists 'without the hierarchical pattern of a cumulative logic'.[35] He is imagining much the same thing: long poem defined as the site on which a creative practice unfolds. Coleridge is, for the poems in this thesis, which do not forsake the idea of wholeness so easily, closer to the mark: 'The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly [...] by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution', but there is still, 'the journey itself', which has an organising role to play.[36] Crucially all of the parts, in Coleridge's theory, need to integrate with some scheme: none can be dispensed with, as in Keats's letter, lest we produce something like a 'sorites' of 'a conjunctive disjunctive', as he critiques in the couplet.[37] The poems I discuss in this thesis, all of them completed, with the possible exception of Wordsworth's long poems intended for *The Recluse*, require a more subtle approach than either an Arnoldian preference for subordination of part to whole, or the modern utopian sense of aggregation without constricting form. Coleridge was

[33] To Benjamin Bailey, 8th October 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), i, pp.168-71, p.170.
[34] *Byron's Letters and Journals: A New Selection*, ed. by Richard Lansdown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.334.
[35] Paul M. Curtis, 'Romantic Indirection', in *Romanticism and Form*, ed. Alan Rawes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.1-22, p.14.
[36] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), ii, p.14.
[37] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.19.

trying to do this with larger objects in view than the poem, describing life itself as 'a whole composed [...] of different parts, so far interdependent that each is reciprocally means and end'; but no matter the convenience of such a doctrine, bringing together classical wholeness with a romantic allowance for variation, it struggles to describe a literary form that must also develop across itself.[38] The unity described in such a theory, which keeps the 'diversity of "little things" while, at the same time, conscripting them in the end of greater unity' arises from a vision of a precisely endless vitalism, or one that takes its end as a starting point, the 'antecedent unity' from which the organism develops.[39] Poetry, in this light, is a unifying premise, and tells us little about the way in which a literary work might be said to have its purpose or achieve a significant ending.

Coleridge is the theorist, then, for these poems, which are ambiguously complete, rather than clearly fragmented. This allows an exploration what one critic of postmodern long poem has titled *The Obligation towards the Difficult Whole*: in coming to a stop, these long poems must come to terms with their end.[40] I am not, then, attempting to describe every long poem of this era, but rather something that I think is in common between its most enduringly read completed long works. In each case, I think the possibility or the anxiety of length is an essential part of what they have to say. If Coleridge's writings about poetry seem to bring together the advantages of an expansive diversity and an encompassing unity, then it preserves the dangers thereof as well. 'Coleridgean' ideas have, as a result, been seen as making the long poem seem impossible, or inevitable.

Kermode's analysis in *Romantic Image*, for instance, if literary-historically severe, nonetheless contains a valid interpretation of the relationship between formal ideas associated

[38] Coleridge, 'Theory of Life', in *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), i, pp.481-557, p.512; Coleridge, *Logic*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.67.
[39] Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.196.
[40] Brian McHale, *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

with ‘organicism’ and writing long poems. For Kermode, an organic ideal for poetry means making ‘a thing with a life of its own, with all its parts in some organic relation’, which means focusing on images and symbols (internally coherent) and denying discursive or narrative structures.[41] To escape this predicament we must read ‘the poetry of the past which has been excluded by earlier Symbolist [which is nearly identical with organic, in *Romantic Image*] assumptions, and above all to restore the long poem to the centre of activity’.[42] Kermode’s study effectively explains to us a poetry which prioritises the intense internal relationships of the part itself over the whole and this was a real theoretical concern (for Coleridge) and practical one for my other poets. Why read the entire *Prelude* when one can skip to the emblematic ‘spots of time’? As Tess Somervell has recently written of *The Prelude*, its ‘popular, critical and pedagogical reception has been one of fragmentation’, some of which must be attributed to that poem’s own insistence on spots and moments of almost limitless interpretive capacity, which seem to offer themselves up as the ends of interpretation.[43]

There is another interpretation of organic ideas of poetic language, given, for example in Isobel Armstrong’s *Language as Living Form*. For if organic structure might mean the synchronically perceived interrelation of parts to whole in the terms of some rule from within, it might also mean the diachronically observed growth of something according to a rule. Such is the argument put forward by Isobel Armstrong. Organic language is the site of the unfolding of a subjective or idealist world:

> Like its language, [poetry] will be a model of the structure of consciousness. Quite simply poems will have to be long. A poem of this kind has to be long enough to have a past on which it can reflect, long enough to contemplate itself, to interpret itself to itself, to transform and create new experience out of its own elements.[44]

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[41] *Romantic Image*, p.112.
[42] *Romantic Image*, p.196.
[43] Somervell, *Reading Time in the Long Poem*, p.202.
[44] Isobel Armstrong, *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p.xiii.

This is an organicism (and a poetry of process), which might well go on forever. *Aurora Leigh*'s central passage asks 'What matter for the number of the leaves, | Supposing the tree lives and grows? (V: 230-1). In this interpretation, it is not enough to say that long poems are desired, but that an endless poetry is required. The problem with thinking of poetry in terms of a living form is that lives do not, properly, end, but stop. As Cronin says of the Spasmodics, composition and revision became 'a process of continual expansion that could only be arrested by death'.[45]

In Christopher Ricks's view, 'poetry [is] a medium which is more totally and persistently involved in effecting something through its recurrent sense of an ending', but I think there is a value to keeping this starkly defined ending in mind.[46] Finality is surely an important quality of the ending, and the sort of recurrence Ricks describes is more interesting when revealed as a reversion from, or aversion to, an otherwise declared interest in a singular or terminal wholeness. When a poem or story as an event in language starts, the implication that it has some end might be there, 'just as we have certain expectations of the remainder of a sentence we have begun to read'.[47] I. A. Richards rather neatly imagines that 'a poem begins by creating a linguistic problem whose solution by language will be the attainment of its end', which makes a rather bold claim for the capacity of poetry to solve all the things of which it aspires to speak.[48] Richards's titular question, 'How Does a Poem Know When It Is Finished?', might after all, suggest that some poems do not know when they are finished and so decide to keep going, or that some authors mistakenly think their poem has solved something when, in fact, there is much more to say. This might appear to be a facet of compositional competency – good poets end their poems well – but that would seem to be a strict situation. As these long

[45] Richard Cronin, *Reading Victorian Poetry* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p.95.
[46] Christopher Ricks, 'A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines', *Essays in Criticism* 21:1 (1971), pp.1-32, p.19.
[47] Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, p.65.
[48] I. A. Richards, 'How Does a Poem Know When It Is Finished?' in *Poetries and Sciences: A Reissue of Science and Poetry (1965, 1935), With Commentary* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp.105-122, p.112.

poems suggest, being unsure if you are finished, or casting doubt on your declared end, might have an equally valid claim to the resultant form of a poem. Nonetheless, the idea that things have an end seems an inevitable one. Even Timothy Bahti, seeking to expose a more capaciously defined (or frustrated) sense of an ending in short lyric poems in his later deconstructive idiom, sees that both reader and text, seeking to understand each other, do so with an end in mind, in the form of '[d]irections given by a text to its reader as each together makes its way toward ends – of texts and understandings'.[49] To speak of an ambivalence about endings is to keep both sides in play: I do not mean that these long poems critique the end, but that the claims of getting to the end exist at the same time as ideas that undermine it, of endless process or reiteration.

The ending is, in its most famous critical defence, precisely the instrument to provide consolation to this situation. Aristotle's *Poetics* defines an end, without immediate controversy, as 'that which itself naturally occurs, whether necessarily or usually, after a preceding event, but need not be followed by anything else', explaining the situation with resonant plainness.[50] The implication is that endings are a particular kind of stopping, since they are significantly self-sufficient. The classic accounts of poem and plot endings come from Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Kermode respectively, neither of whom make much of the long poem. Their arguments are similar: Smith writes that 'haunted, perhaps, by the spectre of that ultimately arbitrary conclusion, we take particular delight, not in all endings, but in those that are designed' and Kermode declares that 'tracts of time unpunctuated by meaning derived from the end are not to be borne'.[51] In both cases, the ending satisfies an existential need: we need

[49] Timothy Bahti, *Ends of the Lyric: Direction and Consequence in Western Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.10.
[50] *Aristotle: Poetics. Longinus: On the Sublime. Demetrius: On Style*, trans. by Stephen Halliwell, W. Hamilton Fyfe, Doreen C. Innes, W. Rhys Roberts, revised by Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.55.
[51] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p.1; Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.162.

to create endings because we cannot bear the fact that we will suddenly stop, or that some things go on forever. 'We are in love with fulfilment, and our interpretations show it', Kermode tells us.[52] For Smith, the ending of *Paradise Lost*, one of the few non-lyrics mentioned, works because of 'thematic structure', and has 'almost nothing to do with its formal structure'; Kermode's major concern after the Renaissance is with prose fictions, rather than meditative, elegiac, epic or monologic long poems.[53]

There might, admittedly, be pessimistic as well as consolatory endings that still count as endings. Paul Ricoeur has described how 'an inconclusive ending suits a work that raises by design a problem the author considers to be unsolvable', at which point we realise that 'it is nonetheless a deliberate and a concerted ending, which sets in relief in a reflexive way the interminable character of the theme of the whole work'.[54] We might say that the endings of *In Memoriam* or *The Ring and the Book* represent the moment a process (grieving or liberal debate) realises that it must go on for ever and therefore calls it quits. That certainly wouldn't satisfy the austere sense of an ending as Kermode has it, but even the idea put forward by Ricoeur still supposes some satisfaction or consolation can be arrived at in the knowledge that *nothing* more can be done. One point I hope to make is that this is not quite true of these poems; the possibility for future development (or regression) is as critical to the end as the possibility or impossibility of future resolution. In arguing for the continuous and irreducible importance of their parts, these poems make it very hard to speak of the single 'sense of an ending', but that does not mean that their ambivalence towards ends acts as a critique of the idea of achieving fullness or wholeness.

To ask why a poem is this long (or this short), is to query whether a conclusive moment has been reached, whether, in other words, the poem's literal end, its final lines or passage, is

[52] Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass, and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), p.65.
[53] Smith, *Poetic Closure*, p.79.
[54] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984-8), ii, p.22.

associated in any climactically meaningful way with the thing it has been trying to do: whether the long poem has its ends after all. The problem might be described by the opening vignette of Armstrong's book, in which she reflects on a cabbage as described in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*:

> A cabbage is never just a cabbage because the consciousness watches itself grow in process with it. And it is right to speak of joy and pleasure because in this activity, man and nature, the self and the world, are reconciled and do not stand over and against one another, closed out, as separate entities. They need one another and are transformed by one another.[55]

Not all of the poets discussed below think that poetry is an attempt to do precisely this, but in Armstrong's portrait of the unfolding of the consciousness against and through its object as a model for what poetic language tried to do in Romantic poetry, she highlights a genuine instinct for process or activity in them, over finishedness. If poetry grows like a tree, a consciousness in comparison with a cabbage, then is it meaningful to speak of it having an end, or does it only arbitrarily come to a stop? Alternatively, the long poem might seem to be merely the repetition or reiteration of a principle, without prospect of development.

The contrasting case, for Armstrong, is Hopkins's ability to 'seize experience as wholeness and all-at-onceness', which is an idea in many ways equivalent to Coleridge's articulation of the symbol.[56] If one threat to the long poem comes from the prospect of a poetic endlessness, the other comes from the prospect of too much finality in any one part, the pre-eminence achieved by Wordsworth's spot, the 'translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal' of Coleridge's symbol, or the 'apocalyptic epic' of Kubla Khan, as E. S. Shaffer described it, which is also 'the apotheosis of a new form: the lyrical ballad'.[57] If a process is

[55] *Language as Living Form*, p.2.
[56] *Language as Living Form*, p.2.
[57] Coleridge, *Lay Sermons* ed. by Reginald James White (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p.29; E. S. Shaffer, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.95.

endless, we might still grasp the process behind it in some visionary instant, perceiving, for instance, that the Bible 'present[s] to us the stream of time continuous as Life and a symbol of Eternity, inasmuch as the Past and the Future are virtually contained in the Present'.[58] Kermode sees the movement of St Augustine across his psalm in the same light: 'When Augustine recited his psalm he found in it a figure for the integration of past, present, and future which defies successive time'.[59] The Kermodean ending is partly an attempt to theorise the possibility of doing something like this in language for a more sceptical and prosaic age, to get out of 'a discontinuous unorganized middle'.[60] In doing so, Kermode was revising what Coleridge had articulated through instantaneousness or circularity – the very thing he had demystified in *Romantic Image* – in the terms of diachronic structure and linear movement towards the end.

My point is not to set Armstrong against Kermode, or either against Coleridge, but to suggest that the problem of explaining the long poem is a common one. The ideas of poetry as a continuous development (and therefore endless) and of poems as internally organised wholes which reveal something greater than them are both valid and discernible within the poetry discussed below. Both struggle to explain why a poem should be *this* long, and what, ultimately, the long poem is for. As Coleridge puts it in one of his letters, the 'end of all *narrative*, nay, of *all*, Poems' is

> to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings a *circular* motion – the snake with it's Tail in it's Mouth.[61]

This process he evocatively calls 'miniaturing in order to manifest': hardly an instruction to write colossal poems.[62] But in a letter of the same year he would also announce that,

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[58] *Lay Sermons*, p.29.
[59] *The Sense of an Ending*, p.71.
[60] *The Sense of an Ending*, p.140.
[61] To Joseph Cottle, 7th March 1815, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), v, p.546.
[62] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, v, p.546.

the Totality of a System was not only capable of being harmonized with, but even calculated to aid, the unity (Beginning, Middle, and End) of a *Poem.* Thus, whatever the Length of the Work might be, still it was a *determinate* Length: of the subjects announced each would have it's own appointed place, and excluding repetitions each would relieve & rise in interest above the other —[63]

These do not map onto our interpretations of organicism exactly, but they reveal a division between a sense of poetic form as the site of a fixed and determined expression, whose organisation – beginning, middle, and end – is suited and harmonized with its greater 'end': 'the Totality of a System', and a sense of poetic form as the site of a developmental process, which everywhere demonstrates its unity, and whose endlessly expansive formal nature supplants its ability to have a singular or finite 'end': 'such is a Poem to that Image of God, which we were created into, and which still seeks that Unity, or Revelation of the *One* in and by the *Many*'.[64]

IV.

Fittingly, Coleridge is the subject of my first chapter. Those two letters of 1815 are the goal of the chapter; I seek to show how Coleridge might have arrived at two such various conclusions with the emphasis on his engagement with poetry, rather than on German philosophy. What Coleridge learned from Kant and Schelling undoubtedly and profoundly altered his solutions, but his questions and convictions regarding the nature of poetry preceded his deep acquaintance with them. In turn, then, I cover Coleridge's discussion of the epic from the 1790s on, then the curious fate of the determinedly, perpetually itinerant 'Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', and finally Coleridge's poetic response to Wordsworth's 1805 text of *The Prelude*, in which notions of achievement, incompleteness, death and life tell us as much about Coleridge's view of the

[63] To William Wordsworth, 22nd May 1815, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, v. p.570
[64] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, v, p.546.

long poem as they do about the implicit tensions between the two men in his creative imagination. Having done so, Coleridge's definitions of a poem are traced as they develop towards a mereological one, parts arranged equally in a whole, which seems motivated by the aim of avoiding end-reductiveness, of subordinating expression to one climactic part. I conclude by broadening the discussion to cover other areas of Coleridge's thought, particularly his organic conception of 'method', to suggest a temperamental aversion to a literal ended-ness, in favour of an unravelling or developing sense of 'the end [as being] necessarily antecedent to the formation of the rules', the means, the form of life, thought, or the long poem.[65]

I then discuss Wordsworth and the way in which his poems for *The Recluse* constitute a deep and consistent discussion of the possibility of finding a fit ending. Wordsworth's instinct, as he describes it in the first 'Essays upon Epitaphs' is that 'origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative', but also that the finite is related to the infinite.[66] Descriptions of rivers are the centre of my argument: in *The Recluse* poems, rivers are always flowing *somewhere* but also *always* flowing somewhere. For Wordsworth, the formal question of determination is also related, I suggest, to the moral sense of having enough courage to see something through. I trace the development of these ideas from the time before *The Recluse* in the 'Salisbury Plain' poems and early prose, before covering the problem of 'The Ruined Cottage' and the forms of ended-ness in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. The question of the end remains central to Wordsworth's poetics, I argue, since the question of *The Recluse* was always how to find the right organisation for, the right end to, poetry that had, in part, already been written.

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is the subject of the third chapter. My argument focuses on the way the component parts of *Tennyson*'s poem end. They do so in a way that is both final

[65] *Logic*, p.67.
[66] *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008-15), ii, p.51.

and open, suggesting that they might happen over and over again, and yet have happened in some distant past. Moreso than any other poems in this thesis, *In Memoriam* grew by accumulation, rather than design, but unlike Byron's *Don Juan*, the shadow of the whole or the end never leaves it. Looking at the way Tennyson's early lyrics end, or don't end, I then demonstrate the way in which the development of such a practice at length prevents the establishment of a clean narrative of progress.

The final two chapters, concerning the long poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, consider the ways in which their long poems engage with their liberalism. Individualism in particular, the idea of being an end in oneself but also perhaps the means to some other, higher end, relates to poetic activity. In *Aurora Leigh*, I argue that individualism is a divided thing, in that it means an instrumental capacity within each individual to develop themselves beyond individualism, but also the poet's particularly intense subjectivity, which is ongoing and unfinished. The word 'individualism' was not a common one in 1856, when *Aurora Leigh* was finished, and so I try and recover the openness of the term for Barrett Browning, without restricting it to the later formulation of self vs. state in the new liberalism which emerged after her death. I then cover the two types of individualism in *Aurora Leigh*, the one making an argument about social life and the other about poetic form and suggest that the two do not ultimately reconcile to each other. The last chapter describes Robert Browning's massive *The Ring and the Book*. Here, more clearly than in any of the other poems, the sheer fact of poetic excess is impressed upon the reader. My argument describes the reason the poem gives for its length as a virtuous product of a liberal interest in different opinions, and its hidden motives: a desire amongst its characters (and poet) to go on for their own sakes.

Chapter 1. Coleridge and the Constitution of the Long Poem

I long for the Person from Porlock
To bring my thoughts to an end,
I am becoming impatient to see him
I think of him as a friend.[1]

— Stevie Smith

Once more, then I do not deny to language altogether the power of depicting the corporeal whole according to its parts. It can do so because its signs, although consecutive, are still arbitrary. But I do deny it to language as the medium of poetry, because the illusion, which is the principle object of poetry, is wanting in such a verbal description of bodies. And this illusion, I say, must be wanting because the coexistent nature of a body comes into conflict with the consecutive nature of language, and although dissolving the former into the latter makes the division of the whole into its parts easier for us, the final reassembling of the parts into a whole is made extremely difficult and often even impossible.[2]

—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Introduction

This chapter describes Coleridge's wrangling with the practical matter of the long poem as poet and critic, and then attempts a more theoretical discussion of ends as they relate to broader notions he had of arranging parts into a progressive whole, such as through organic analogies or his concept of method. Despite the strong claims Coleridge makes for the unity of aesthetic forms, that unity often derives its value precisely from the diversity or plurality to which it is related. Murray Krieger wrote that when we think of form as united by some organic principle the 'call for unity [...] occurs only in the company of its opposite, the call for a variety that

[1] Stevie Smith, 'Thoughts about the Person from Porlock', in *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp.153-4, p.153.
[2] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. by Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p.88.

gives to any attempted unity a dynamic that threatens its stability'.[3] This is certainly true for Coleridge. In 1805, he noted that the 'master-movements & impulses of man' co-entail 'the gratification of the Love of Variety with the grat[ification] of the Love of Uniformity'.[4] If this refers most explicitly to unity and plurality, it also evokes the attractions of the boundless and of the strictly determined: the satisfaction of always having something more to say as well as of having the decisive final word. This is an illustrative framework for the reader of the long poem. We will find Coleridge's theoretical variety, which might equally mean progress or delay, and uniformity, which might similarly imply a virtuous coherence or vicious repetition, of this kind in the later long poems themselves.

This theme I turn to in the second part of this chapter, which covers theoretical writings in *Biographia Literaria*, *The Friend*, and elsewhere. Before that, I hope to show that the problem of finding an ending emerged practically in Coleridge's poetry and criticism in the lead up to the critical moment when he heard Wordsworth read *The Prelude* in its thirteen-book version in 1807. I propose three poetic sources of these ideas: his treatment of the epic, both as a speculative and practical-critical venture; the indeterminacy he discovered in writing and revising 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'; and finally, his poetic response to the completed thirteen-book *Prelude* in his poem 'To William Wordsworth'.

I am arguing, then, for a continuity of sorts between the younger Coleridge, writing 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', planning out epics in his letters, and the older Coleridge, for whom those concerns developed alongside the insights gleaned from reading German philosophy. Readers of Coleridge have pointed out this continuity before: Gregory Leadbetter, for instance, argues that 'the poetics of the 1790s continue in the metaphysics and criticism of the later Coleridge'.[5] Seamus Perry cites Nigel Leask's earlier book in support of a view that

[3] Murray Krieger, *A Reopening of Closure: Organicism Against Itself* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.41.bi
[4] *Notebooks*, ii, 2516.
[5] Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.5.

there is not an '"epistemological conversion" from native empiricism to a German philosophical idiom'.[6] If Kant and Schelling were of vital importance to Coleridge's later thought, this was largely because they offered potential solutions to problems that Coleridge had long been battling with. Leadbetter argues that Coleridge's sense of the poet's imagination meant the 'ability to receive and direct forces greater than itself' which implies a poetic consciousness that is never exactly done, defined precisely by transmutation, 'to become by power of Imagination another Thing – Proteus – a river'.[7] It is easy to see why such a theory might find it easier to exalt the poet than to give a satisfactory definition of the poem, since the ability of the poet to keep going on, to 'diffuse a tone and spirit of unity' through as many particulars, seems definitionally endless.[8] Stevie Smith understood the dangers and the wearying burden of such a habit when she responded to 'Kubla Khan', declaring that a poet's interrupters come 'like a benison'; otherwise 'they might have had to go on'.[9]

In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge tells us that every proper poem must 'contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise', but that reason could mean two distinct things.[10] Firstly, it could tell us that all the parts of a poem are arranged with the whole in mind, without being reduced to that whole. It could also imply the reason why something happens – its original cause. Criticism was restored when men realised 'the end was necessarily antecedent to the formation of the rules', Coleridge tells us.[11] In the earlier *Friend*, the methodical man is distinguished by the

> unpremeditated and evidently habitual *arrangement* of his words, grounded on the habit of foreseeing, in each integral part, or (more plainly) in every sentence, the whole that he then intends to communicate.[12]

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[6] Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p.77, quoted by Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division,* p.5.
[7] *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination*, p.55; *Notebooks*, iii, 3247.
[8] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.16.
[9] *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, p.153.
[10] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.12.
[11] *Logic*, p.67.
[12] *The Friend*, ed. by Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), i, p.449.

Here there is an absolute necessity to all the parts that will construct the whole. But the tension is there between a continuously developing vitalism and a sense of mereological wholeness, which is to say between the organisation a tree can be said to have as it grows, and the organisation between the parts of a tree as we perceive it in space.

Coleridge's prose seemed to embody some of this contradiction. Perry defends his digressiveness as a lecturer and conversationalist, and imagines that, if we take Wordsworth's opinion in *The Prelude* literally, it is 'a moot point whether *digression* is strictly possible, anyway, for one to whom "The unity of all has been revealed"'.[13] This is a good excuse for going off-topic in one's literary or philosophical lecture, but carries a serious implication for the critic of the long poem. If unity is something revealed, or something that poets practice, then it does not really inhere in poems in terms of their formal organisation. It is the premise of poetry, but not necessarily the condition of poems. In fact, the tendency rather seems for the endless than for the ended. In the *Logic*, Coleridge brings together two unities suggestively:

> 21a) We have already had occasion to distinguish the unity of totality, the oneness which we connect with the conception of a whole—of a watch, for instance—and which we may denominate the consequent or resulting unity, from the productive or producible unity—that of the proper germ, or *herat*, or plantule of a seed, apart from its lobes, eye, and coat, as the ground and productive principle of the future whole, and which we may call the 'antecedent' unity. [...]
> 21b) This twofold unity is comprised in the definition of the term 'constitution'.[14]

If poems have a productive unity, a premise which unifies them prospectively rather like the way the branches of a tree are implied by its seed, then the question of the end remains open. In this constitution, Coleridge attempts to bring together the determined form of something, which has a clear end in mind, like a watch, with the principle that brings it about. If the former

[13] Perry, *Uses of Division*, p.96.
[14] *Logic*, p.250.

has a linear telos, the latter has a circular one. In 1815, Coleridge could put both views of poetry forward as separate instructions, to Wordsworth and Joseph Cottle, and whilst he was able to combine the senses of unity into this later 'constitution', that ambiguous situation is precisely what describes the long poems below so well, since it articulates the not-quite-reconciled ambitions of formal wholeness and a sort of developmental unity which might come very close to an inability to attain any single end at all.

My point is not that Coleridge invented organic organisational analogies to respond to the long poem, and that those in turn inspired Wordsworth, Tennyson, and the Brownings. Rather, I argue that the major ideas of his theoretically mature period respond to the problem of working out what a long poem should be, amongst other more metaphysically primary concerns, and that this working out is a useful illustration of, and contribution to, the practical discussion to come. According to J. S. Mill, Bentham and Coleridge were the source of 'the greater part of the important ideas' in the nineteenth century, and the latter must have the foremost claim to the ways poets thought about poetry, and how criticism as a discipline learnt to read them.[15] Robert M. Maniques has noted, for instance, 'how often a romantic Coleridgean idea about the mind authorizes [a] cultural critique of Romanticism', especially in the context of the "New Criticism".[16] More tangibly, Hallam's circle in Cambridge was a firmly Coleridgean one, and if the Brownings were politically opposed to the late conservative thinker, it is hard to imagine Robert writing that a poet looks for 'primal elements of humanity' 'in his own soul as the nearest reflex of the absolute Mind', without calling to mind the famous formulation of the imagination in *Biographia Literaria*.[17]

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[15] J. S. Mill, *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge, with an Introduction by F. R. Leavis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.39.
[16] Robert M. Maniquis, 'Writing about Coleridge', in *The Oxford Handbook to Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Frederick Burwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.713-30, p.722.
[17] Robert Browning, 'Introductory Essay [to *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*]', in *Robert Browning. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, ed. by Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.159-173, p.161; c.f. the description of the 'primary IMAGINATION' in *Biographia Literaria* as 'a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (i, p.304).

First then, I consider the practical long poem, both as idea and as it relates to poetry Coleridge actually composed, and second, I trace the development of Coleridge's definition of a poem before considering how it might relate to a host of Coleridgean organisational ideas: symbol, method, constitution.

Part 1: The Long Poem in Practice

Coleridge and the Epic

In Coleridge's plans for, and reactions to, the epic, we see generic considerations diffuse into and suffer replacement by, a sense of the poem as a structural arrangement. The relationship between the parts of a poem and its whole is more significant than other generic markers suggested by words such as epic. This following section effectively tells the prehistory of Coleridge's formulation of a poetry as

> The species of composition, which represents external nature, or the human mind, – both in relation to human affections – so as to produce immediate pleasure - / and the greatest quantity of immediate pleasure in each part, that is compatible with the largest possible sum of Pleasure in the whole.—[18]

The definition would be further revised in the years leading up to *Biographia Literaria*, with the notion of structural interrelatedness ultimately separating from the criterion of pleasure, but it begins as Coleridge, and English literary criticism along with him, developed sensibilities around the particular case of the long poem.

'A happy age this for tossing off an Epic or two!---', Coleridge declared in 1800, surprised at the number of epics appearing on the booksellers' lists.[19] The next year he found himself warning John Thelwall that 'In a very very short time, the London Booksellers will be

[18] *Notebooks*, iii, 3615.
[19] To Josiah Wedgwood, Nov. 1st 1800, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i, p.157.

marvellously shy of EPIC poems'.[20] The cause of this predicted shyness was clear; Coleridge wished, for the sake of Thelwall's poem, that 'so many foolish Epic Poems had not been published lately'.[21] On the face of it, Coleridge seems to be agreeing with Kenneth Johnston, that the epic was 'dying out in efflorescence'.[22] The *Edinburgh Review*, tackling one such forgotten heroic strain, Charles Hoyle's *Exodus: an Epic Poem*, reports with blithe disdain that:

> A correspondent wrote us lately an account of a tea-drinking in the west of England, at which there assisted no fewer than six epic poets—a host of Parnassian strength, certainly equal to six-and-thirty bards; and Mr Hoyle, we believe was not of the party. How unreasonable then is it to complain, that poetry is on the decline among us! We ought, on the contrary, to rejoice, that so precious (however ungainful) an article of our staple manufactures is the only one which, in these disastrous times, our inveterate enemy is either unable, or unambitious, to diminish.[23]

In common between the review and Coleridge's letters is the reduction and cheapening of the epic. Later, in *The Friend*, Coleridge would, with similar sardonic enthusiasm, declare his excitement that 'an EPIC POEM (Spirits of Maro and Mænodes, make ready to welcome your new compeer!) advertised with the special recommendation, that the said EPIC POEM contains more than a hundred *names* of *living* persons!'.[24] Amateurs and tea-drinkers tossing off epics in quarto in spite of the critical judgement of their betters. All genres are susceptible to hack-work, presumably, but it is clear that where the epic survives in Coleridge, it does so as a description of the act of composition, rather than as a set of generic conventions that obtain in the works themselves.

Herbert Tucker writes, with mixed-metaphoric relish, that the 1790s were a time when a 'groggy genre was thawing out from neoclassical hibernation', with admittedly mixed

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[20] 23rd April 1801, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, ii, 723. In this letter, Coleridge censured Thelwall for publishing only an extract of his epic *The Hope of Albion*: 'It will appear a childish impatience if you have not finished the Poem. [...] But if you *have* written the whole, I should have advised you to have published *it alone* by Subscription' (pp.723-4).
[21] 23rd January 1801, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, ii, p.667.
[22] Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, p.11.
[23] '[Review of] "Exodus: an Epic Poem, in Thirteen Books" By Charles Hoyle of Trinity College, Cambridge', *The Edinburgh Review*, 11:22 (1808), pp.362-70, p.362.
[24] *The Friend*, i, p.211.

results.[25] Writing to Southey on the subject of Joseph Cottle, publisher of the *Lyrical Ballads* and author of four foolish amateur epics, Coleridge noted that 'had he gone on in his quiet way, on a little pony looking about him with a sheep's eye cast now & then at a short poem, [...] he would at last have become a better poet than many who have had much fame – but he would be an epic'.[26] Later, Coleridge proof-read Cottle's *Messiah* with consternation. Cottle is '*fizzling* & desperately disposed, spite of all poetic Decency, to let a third epic, called Messiah (O such an Epic!!) he gave me 10 pounds for reading thro', and correcting seven books out of TWENTY FOUR! & never galley-slave earned a penny so painfully and laboriously.'[27] This menial task is below Coleridge's abilities to the same degree that epic was above Cottle's. Coleridge later wrote one of his most extraordinary letters on the subject of long poems and epics to Cottle, but he is hardly the benchmark of true epic achievement, to us or Coleridge. Robert Southey, about whom Coleridge had more confidence, gives us a good example of someone who, in Coleridge's view, could write plenty of supposed epics but failed to do so in an appropriately heroic manner. Having dismissed Cottle's epics to Southey, Coleridge now dismisses Southey's to Cottle: 'He certainly will make literature more *profitable to him* from the fluency with which he writes', Coleridge mentions pointedly, and cites Wordsworth's opinion that Southey never felt 'burthened' enough by composition.[28] Just like the epics tossed off, motive and seriousness are the central criteria of epic, no matter what is read on the title page. Coleridge then describes the right plan for writing an epic:

> I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to a Poem. Ten to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable Mathematician, I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine — then the *mind of man* — then the *minds of men* — in all Travels, Voyages and Histories. So I would spend ten years — the next five to the composition of the poem — and the five last to the correction of it.[29]

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[25] Tucker, *Epic,* p.50.
[26] 22nd July 1801, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i, p.356.
[27] To J. J. Morgan, 1st June 1814, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iii, p.502.
[28] April 1797, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i. p.320.
[29] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i. pp.320-1.

What is clear here are the twin heroic virtues of capacity and seriousness; Southey appears a flippant poseur in this light. If this is a description of an epic poet, then the kind of poem being described remains vague. Perhaps it has come to mean only an ambitious long poem that is difficult to write. Heroism no longer pertains to the action inside the poem, but rather to the act of writing it.

In response to the profusion of epics around him at the end of the 18th century, then, Coleridge shifts some of the qualities of written epics onto the process of composing them. When we investigate the more general qualities of long poems themselves, however, we find a generic field that is open and unstable. In 1799, Coleridge wrote to Wordsworth:

> I wish you would write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, [...] for in my present mood I am wholly against the publication of any small poems.[30]

As a suggestion for inclusion in *The Recluse*, this is clearly a description of a long meditative or philosophical work rather than an epic one. Indeed, in 1814, when Coleridge complained to Wordsworth about the lack of philosophical content in the only part of *The Recluse* to be published, *The Excursion*, it is called 'the *first* and *only* true Phil[osophical] Poem in existence', with no reference to the epic.[31] When expressing his thanks to Wordsworth for finally applying himself to the project of *The Recluse* in 1803, Coleridge emphasises the effort and the scope of the poem above all: epic qualities attending to the act of composition rather than the poem itself. His friend has finally broken an injurious habit – 'writing such a multitude of short poems was in this instance hurtful to him' – and can proceed with the eagerly-awaited *Recluse*.[32] This is to be

[30] September 1799, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i. p.527.
[31] 30th May 1815, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iv. p.574.
[32] To Thomas Poole, 14th October 1803, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, ii, 1013.

A Great Work, in which he will sail; on an open Ocean, & a steady wind; unfretted by short tacks, reefing, & hawling & disentangling the ropes----great work necessarily comprehending his attention & Feelings within the circle of great objects & elevated Conceptions –[33]

A lone adventurer, Odyssean and Protean, the writer of *The Recluse* is involved in an epic undertaking, but Coleridge stops before using that word to describe the project as an epic itself. As before, the greatness of the work is tied to its ambition and scale, qualities associated with epic but not reducible to it. If epic ambition is to be maintained, then there is little sense of what any such poem will be like. *The Recluse*'s remit, '*Nature*, *Man*, and *Society*', 'signifies Everything' according to Kenneth Johnston.[34] This poem aims for a totality as various as the universe itself: an epic proposition for the poet indeed, but not with a strictly epic end in mind.

There is a separation then between the qualities associated with epic – its definitive status as the highest occupation of the poet and his or her *magnum opus*, and its existence as a genre. The word epic is still in common use in the first sense, referring to actions or things that are particularly impressive, conclusive, or large. For Coleridge, the notion of writing a long poem, covering a vast range of materials in a unified fashion, might derive from the epic, but the epic genre itself survives as one component of a broader formal question regarding the unity or disunity of poetry itself.

This is not to say that Coleridge did not like some contemporary epics, but he came increasingly to praise them in accordance with their organisational strength. Coleridge collaborated on one – Southey's *Joan of Arc* – and read many more, sometimes with enthusiasm. This enthusiasm tends to be qualified, however. Southey's *Chronicle of El Cid* has a 'scene' which is superior to any 'equal part of any Epic Poem, save the Paradise Lost', but only in one scene, and Coleridge maintains that he thinks of Southey's achievements often with the 'vexation of a disappointed Wish'.[35] Similarly, despite his elaborate praise of Southey in

[33] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, ii, 1013.
[34] Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, p.11.
[35] To Humphry Davy, 10th December 1808, *Collected Letters*, iii, p.136.

the first volume of the *Biographia* as a poet who has, in *Roderick*, 'surpassed himself in language and metre, in the construction of the whole, and in the splendour of particular passages', Coleridge privately admitted that he agreed with *Edinburgh Review*'s opinion of the poem, if not its tenor:' I do not much disapprove of the Ed. Rev. of Don Rodric: only the fiendish disposition'.[36] The charges of Southey's monotony, over-industry, and the 'unmercifu[l]' use of hyperbolic or grand language are not dissimilar from comments Coleridge himself made when he defended the labours pertinent to the proper epic. A lesser poet, William Sotheby, whose *Saul* has now fallen into obscurity, receives the astonishing praise from Coleridge that he might have written 'the best epic poem in our language', if only he would 'publish a second edition in smaller size'.[37] It is also the best epic in a particular subset of inferior works, 'the thread & transitions of which are woven *lyrically*: to which system, tho' it be not perhaps the best in itself, yet the character of David and of his age gives an especial propriety'.[38] This is the generous but guarded praise of a poet to one of his supporters (Sotheby had encouraged him to bring out the revised *Friend* and attended Coleridge's lectures), much like that in the correspondence between Coleridge and Cottle. In both cases, Coleridge's praise or criticism focuses on the presence or absence of the correct arrangement of the parts to their whole, a system of transitions and in the relation of passage to overall poem.

Coleridge planned his own epics, of course, although none were ever written. In addition to the 'plan' above, really a critique of Southey's method, an early notebook suggests an epic on 'the origin of evil', and for much of his life he maintained a plan for a poem on the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general and emperor-to-be, Titus.[39] In 1802, writing to Thomas Wedgwood, Coleridge explained that he 'ha[d] since my twentieth year meditated an heroic poem on the Siege of Jerusalem by Titus — this is the Pride, & the Stronghold of my

[36] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.64; To Dr Sainsbury, July 1815, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iv, p.580.
[37] To William Sotheby, 18th April 1807, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iii, p.12.
[38] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iii, p.12.
[39] *Notebooks*, i, 161.

Hope. But I never think of it except in my best moods.'[40] Coleridge would, of course, not find himself in those best moods often enough in the subsequent decade to get further with this plan, although Eleanor Shaffer claimed that Kubla Khan was both its major result and obstacle: 'it is no wonder he never set pen to paper to write the "last possible" epic; he himself had already gone beyond it and made it impossible'.[41] Coleridge never gave up on the idea, but it became exclusively hypothetical. In his *Table Talk*, Coleridge reported that 'The destruction of Jerusalem is now the only subject now remaining for an epic poem', but even this subject retains an 'insurmountable defect'.[42] Epic had little future for the sage of Highgate, then.

The things which Coleridge valued in the great epics of the past are worth noting, such as the 'endless subtle beauties in Dante': the same sort of thing he praised in Shakespeare's 'series and never broken chain of imagery'.[43] To Cottle, Coleridge praised Milton for precisely his expansive effect – 'the *story* of Milton might be told in two pages' – designed to caution Southey against too much writing at ease.[44] Shakespeare is not an epic writer, but one thing that Coleridge admired in all these cases was the strict necessity of their variousness, so that

> It would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand, than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare [...] without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say.[45]

Most significant, however, is the one way in which Shakespeare seems superior to Milton, and indeed to all other poets: he can 'become all things, yet forever remain[n] himself'.[46] This is the ideal of endless variety – always having something else to become – with a strict predetermination: that becoming is always determined by some poetic intelligence. Milton

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[40] 20th October, 1802, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, ii, p.877.
[41] E. S. Shaffer, *'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.18.
[42] *Table Talk*, ed. by Carl Woodring, 2 vols (London: Routledge; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) ii, p.441.
[43] *Notebooks*, iii, 4500; *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.21.
[44] To Joseph Cottle, April 1797, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i. p.319.
[45] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.23.
[46] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.28.

cannot get the balance right, since he loses some of that diversity in the oneness of his own poetic self: 'the other attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own ideal'.[47] This is the 'sublime possibility of an entirely internal kind of poetic creativity', but it is one that ultimately falls on the side of that unified internality, rather than the diversity it aims to convey.[48] If he means it more critically, Matthew Arnold implies something similar when he critiques Milton's 'laborious and condensed fulness', the feeling that 'his style will hardly contain' all of the things that it is trying to reduce into itself.[49] At any rate, the central issue remains bringing diversity into a oneness in a way that does least detriment to either, which is not in any way specific to the epic in Coleridge's mind.

The long poem more generally, involving the idea of epic but not reducible to it, offered an opportunity for renewal and change. Coleridge entertained the possibility of a very different kind of 'epic construction' in a letter of 1803:

> I have likewise written a Tragedy & a Farce / & have planned out a long comic Poem / of regular & epic construction / as long as Hudibras; but tho' with infinitely less Wit, yet I trust with more humour, more variety of character, & a far, far more entertaining, & interesting Tale. Each book will be in a different metre / but all in rhyme — & each book a regular metre. It seems to me, that a comic Epic Poem lies quite new & untouched to me — Hudibras is rather a series of Satires than a comic Poem. — My plan does not exclude the utmost beauty of Imagery & poetic Diction / and some parts will be serious & pathetic.[50]

His plan is generous and can include the serious, comic, beautiful, pathetic, *etc.*, and make use of multiple rhyming metres. What is important here, and similar to his treatment of Cowper's *The Task* in his *Biographia*, is Coleridge's insistence on the wholeness and variety of the plan. Without being clearly stated, the doctrine of unity in multeity, here glossed as the most variety and range whilst still maintaining wholeness, is implied. Epic is merely one of many qualities

[47] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, pp.27-8.
[48] Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, p.214.
[49] Matthew Arnold, 'On Translating Homer', in *Matthew Arnold. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, ed. by Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp.215-256, p.243.
[50] To Samuel Purkis, 2nd February 1803, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, ii, p.919.

to be brought into a satisfying whole. To the qualities of strenuous composition and sheer quantity is added, therefore, a need for reconciling unity. Range and effort are insufficient: Coleridge quotes Charles Lamb's bemusement at the state of Cottle's epic *Alfred*: 'he puts as many plums in his Pudding as my grandmother'.[51] Coleridge has not arrived at the more rigorous terminology he will apply in *Biographia Literaria* and his lectures, but it is clear that the nature of a poem, especially a long one, is distinguished by the successful organisation of its many parts into a real whole.

One final planned work confirms the emphasis on organisation above all. Reflecting on an earlier plan of his in *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge censures Cowper's *The Task* in the same way as he did *Hudibras* in the above letter. The issue is maintaining the most variety without losing overall unity, but here the search for a principle of unity is purely internal, bearing no relation to genre whatsoever. 'The connections are frequently awkward, and the transitions abrupt and arbitrary', Coleridge laments, with the charge of arbitrariness being the most critical.[52] If the earlier letter to Purkis suggested one way of evolving unity from the style of Butler, Coleridge's planned poem 'The Brook' is an attempt to do the same for Cowper:

> I sought for a subject, that should give equal room and freedom for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural connection to the parts, and unity to the whole. Such a subject I conceived myself to have found in a stream, traced from its source in the hills among the yellow-red moss and conical glass-shaped tufts of bent [....] Many circumstances, evil and good, intervened to prevent the completion of that poem, which was to have been entitled "THE BROOK."[53]

The critical factor is the combination of the parts of the poem into one whole. In the emphasis on a 'natural connection' which allows for maximal 'freedom', Coleridge seems to be suggesting something like the vision of *The Prelude* in his poem 'To Wordsworth': a sort of poetic process, rather than a finite imaginative product. What is described here is thus both a

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[51] To Josiah Wedgwood, 1st November 1800, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i, p.642.
[52] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.195.
[53] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.196.

poem of determinate length, starting at the spring and traced to the sea but also something endlessly flowing on. Wordsworth's child, as we shall see in the next chapter, sits by a river and finds that the question of its end provokes a divided answer. '[T]he word might be sea or ocean, accompanied perhaps with an image gathered from a map, or from the real object in nature', 'but the *spirit* of the answer must have been *as* inevitably,—a receptacle without bounds or dimensions;—nothing less than infinity'.[54]

Thinking about the construction of a long poem or epic seemed, for Coleridge, to immediately bring to mind a similar contrasting definiteness of form with other virtues: capaciousness, continuity, freedom. The attempt to bring those things together is the story of the rest of this chapter.

'Now oftimes and now fewer' – The ends of the 'Ancyent Marinere'[55]

> Forthwith this frame of mine was wrench'd
> With a woeful agony,
> Which forc'd me to begin my tale
> And then it left me free.
>
> Since then at an uncertain hour,
> Now oftimes and now fewer,
> That anguish comes and makes me tell
> My ghastly aventure. (611-618)

'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' comes to an end but the ancient Mariner himself finds no rest. The poem provides two 'reason[s] why it is so, and not otherwise', as Coleridge put it in *Biographia Literaria*, one of which is its "all creatures great and small" moral, and the other its presentation as the involuntary incantation of a traumatised imagination which wanders physically and in narrative away from the event it is nonetheless always drawn back to: the

[54] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, ii. p.51.
[55] 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', l.615, hereafter cited in the text by line number, is quoted from the 1798 version, published in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. I take my text from *Lyrical Ballads, 1798 and 1802*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

murder of the albatross. Everything that happens in the poem can be explained as either proceeding from the fateful crossbow shot or developing towards the revelation of its message, but the logic of the progression is obscure in either case. Leslie Stephen's quip, that the moral of the poem is 'that people who sympathise with a man who shoots an albatross will die in prolonged torture of thirst', sums up the difficulty of arranging the particulars of the Mariner's journey to their declared spiritual end.[56] At any rate, the poem seemed to develop from its premise without a clear notion of that end; Coleridge later responded to Anna Laetitia Barbauld's suspicion of the poem's lack of a moral:

> as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination.[57]

Coleridge thought it should be like one of tales of the *Arabian Nights*, and so lead the Mariner 'away from a world of harmony and conviviality' towards 'the arbitrariness and capriciousness inherent in the universe of the *Arabian Nights*' (and to at least attempt some return).[58] The crucial part of the comparison with the 'Arabian Nights' tale' is its strict necessity: 'a genie starts up, and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant', which tells us something about Coleridge's inability to fully explain what he had written.[59]

If the 'Ancyent Marinere' contains the 'germ of all Coleridge's utterances', then, I argue, it also contains the germ, in 1798, of the problem of the end as it emerged with a fuller articulation in the later prose.[60] My argument attends to the figure of the Mariner himself and the ends, if there is an end, of his experience. This might seem more psychological than poematic, but since the Mariner is so deeply associated with the story which he has to tell – it

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[56] Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library*, 3 vols (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1892), iii, p.359.
[57] *Table Talk*, ii, p.100.
[58] Peter Vassallo, 'Voyaging into the "Vast": "The Ancient Mariner", the Jinni and the Universe of "The Arabian Nights"', *Romanticism*, 24:1 (2018), pp.78-85, pp.81-2.
[59] *Table Talk*, ii, p.100.
[60] *Hours in a Library*, iii, p.358.

is emphatically 'The Rime *of* the Ancyent Marinere' (my emphasis) – it is not unreasonable to highlight the claims the poem is making for poetry and its ends, or endlessness, as well as for the experience of traumatic events, or reconversion.

Coleridge's claim that the poem is a work of 'pure imagination' is typically seen as downplaying the significance of 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', but if Coleridge does seem to be admitting defeat of one kind, he is also slyly defending the coherence of a poem which he cannot fully explain. Antony Harding makes a case for 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' as a 'radical critique of the nature poetry Coleridge had written up to 1797', which presumed a certain legibility of the divine in nature, since it reveals the centrally constitutive role of the Mariner's mind: 'he is constantly active in mythologizing the world around him'.[61] The poem is more interesting if we consider the active mythologising of the Mariner(s) as contrasted with the very real action of the supernatural, so that both have a claim to priority. The world of the 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' is best considered not as the product of the protagonist's imagination, or as the product of a vicious and arbitrary set of supernatural forces, but as produced by both in a way that we cannot fully discern. This doubleness has something to do with the lesson we draw from the poem's structure. Paul Ricoeur compares the function of plots to the Kantian faculty of judgment: '[emplotment] draws from the manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole' in the same way that Kant's judgment places an 'intuitive manifold under the rule of a concept'.[62] The plot is what allows us to see events as comprising a story and is also what grasps them together into that story. The determining judgment, which Kant calls that which places a particular under a known universal (*this* tree in the category of trees), is joined by the reflective (or indeterminate) judgment, which ascends from 'the particular in nature to the universal'.[63] Kant's reflective judgment does a lot

[61] Anthony John Harding, *Coleridge and the Inspired Word* (McGill: Queen's University Press, 1985), pp.46-7.
[62] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, i, p.67.
[63] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by James Creed Meredith, ed. by Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.15.

of work, since it is ultimately what links together the 'laws furnished by the pure understanding' and 'particular empirical laws' through the notion of the purposiveness of nature, which is the '*a priori* concept, which has its origin solely in reflective judgment'.[64] It is at once the central part of the Kantian psychology and its weakest link, since this obscure notion of nature's purposiveness is what brings together the rules which govern our perception of the sensible (in Kant's first critique) and the insensible (in Kant's second critique). It gives us the 'the ground of the unity of the manifold of [the world's] empirical laws'.[65] Similarly, for Ricoeur, the function of a plot is structural (making the events of a story into a whole), but also the foundational promise of unity – that the story is stable and knowable in some consistent or unified way – just like the reflective judgment suggests the universe is: 'This act, which I just said extracts a figure from a succession, reveals itself to the listener or the reader in the story's capacity to be followed'.[66]

That this promise is *not* made by 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' is the point I wish to make in this section. The meaningfulness of the 'Ancyent Marinere' somehow outstrips its significance, so that the point it seems to make on the whole seems so much less than its lurid parts. But that is not to say that the poem becomes chaotic; the effect is as much caused by the over-determining ambitions of the Mariner's initial crime and the final moral as it is by the general confusion of the poem's plot. It is perhaps not a surprise to note that 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' does not fulfil the demands of a narratological study written almost two centuries later with prose fictions in mind. The comparison with the grasping together and legibility of Ricoeur's analogy with Kant is useful, however, since it points us towards the problem, as I see it, which Coleridge discovered in 'The Ancyent Marinere', of writing a poem for which there seemed no adequate end: which did not, ultimately, reveal its legibility or one-

[64] *Critique of Judgment*, pp.15, 16.
[65] *Critique of Judgment*, p.16.
[66] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* i, p.66.

ness as a story with reference to its (purposeful) end as disclosed at its (narrative) end. Instead, 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' is a poem which is all premise: the murder of the albatross, necessitates all that follows and provides the grounds of an endless reiteration. That Coleridge never quite finished adjusting the poem is another suggestive point since the editorial action neatly mirroring the retrospective narrative of the Mariner himself. In Jack Stillinger's study, for instance, eighteen distinct versions of the poem exist, none of which gives a motive for the Mariner's original act, or for his sudden realisation of the beauty of the sea-creatures.[67] With reference to Coleridge, Fiona Stafford writes that 'poems begin in one way, but, within days, months, or years, turn out to begin with something quite different': as Coleridge adjusted the epigraphs to his poem, he altered the way it positioned itself as an oral text.[68] When it comes to the action that seals the Mariner's fate, however, it remains obscure in all versions, as if the adequate beginning can never be found. The break at the end of the first canto leaves a blank where we most benefit from psychological or narrative explanation.

Stillinger suggests that the killing of the albatross might be 'simply functional: it is the efficient cause of the Mariner's punishment', but the poem resists such a fundamental reduction. It was Wordsworth's idea, of course; he later records the innocence of his important suggestion: '"Suppose," said I, "you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary Spirits of these regions take upon them to avenge the crime"'.[69] Suppose, indeed. The poem then 'grew & grew till it became too important for our first object', a suggestive process of accretion, as more and greater horrors seemed appropriate as a follow on to the killing of the albatross.[70] Wordsworth certainly thought it was

[67] Jack Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp.61-7.
[68] Fiona Stafford, *Starting Lines in Scottish, Irish, and English Poetry: from Burns to Heaney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.7.
[69] *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Jared R. Curtis, revised electronic edn (Tirril: Humanities-Ebooks, 2011), p.4.
[70] *Fenwick Notes*, p.5.

a bit too long, suggesting that 'the metre is itself unfit for long poems' in his note to the second edition, and requesting its removal from the front place in the volume in favour of some 'little things'.[71] That the parts of the poem do not logically follow on from one to the other is a less threatening proposition than the idea that everything which happens to the Mariner is, with more or less obscurity, determined by an act that we can never fully understand. The efficient cause of the poem, like the efficient cause of the Mariner's anguish, is not reducible to, nor ended by, the sense of greater purpose. The moral of the poem does not fully explain its arbitrariness, just as the Mariner's realisation that 'He prayeth best who loveth best, | All things both great and small' (646-7) does not absolve him entirely of his guilt.

Many of the poem's earliest readers found the structure of the poem, if they saw any, to be bewildering. Wordsworth, honestly if not hugely charitably, added a note to the poem in the 1800 of *Lyrical Ballads*, observing some flaws in the 'Ancient Mariner', among which: 'thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other, and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated'.[72] Southey's anonymous review found that 'many of the stanzas are laboriously beautiful; but in connection they are absurd or unintelligible', and ultimately that 'Genius has here been employed in producing a poem of little merit.'[73] Equally, the *Monthly Review* found it to be 'the strangest story of a cock and a bull that we ever saw on paper', 'a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence', and the *British Critic* found that 'the beginning and the end are striking and well-conducted; but the intermediate part is too long, and has, in some places, a kind of confusion of images'.[74] The cock and bull story, finding the most circuitous narrative explanation for a trivial detail is an

[71] To Joseph Cottle, 24th June 1799, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i, p.264.
[72] *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, p.346.
[73] [Unsigned review], *Critical Review*, October 1798, xxiv, pp.197-204, reproduced in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Critical Heritage: Volume 1, 1794-1834*, ed. by J. R. de J. Jackson (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1968), p.53.
[74] *Monthly Review*, June 1799, xxix, pp.202-10 (*Critical Heritage*, p.56); [Unsigned Review], *British Critic*, October 1799, xiv, pp.364-5 (*Critical Heritage*, p.57).

essentially bathetic structure which definitionally does not justify its length in terms of a strict narrative end. 'The shaggy-dog story in verse' might be another formulation.[75] Such poems make a habit of not getting to their point.

Charles Lamb was an early defender of the benefits that might come from such an arrangement. He wrote, complaining about revisions to the text:

> For me, I was never so affected with any human tale. After first reading it, I was totally possessed with it for many days—I dislike all the miraculous part of it, but the feelings of the man under the operation of such scenery dragged me along like Tom Piper's magic whistle.[76]

Just as relegating the poem to an act of pure imagination defends it from the charge of incoherence by suggesting that the coherence it does possess is somehow beyond the prosaic sense of things, Lamb's defence of the poem largely accepts rather than rejects the criticism made by Wordsworth, instead ascribing a unity to the psychological journey undergone by the Mariner. Certainly, then, the rhetorical power of the poem cannot be reduced to the message it makes at the close, since so much of it is to be attributed to the activation of the reader's mental activities. When Coleridge refers to it as a poem of pure imagination as the cause of action, he is admitting that the principle which inspires the poem, which brings it into being, is not the message which happens to come at its end. In a sense the claim that there is no moral supports, rather than opposes, Lamb's view that the *Lyrical Ballads* were not really drawn up with the bold end of being 'Experiments on the public taste' but rather in the more improvised sense of 'having sprung (as they must have done) from living and daily circumstances', without a clearly articulated moral message, even if the intention behind the poetry was in some sense a moral one.[77]

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[75] C.f. Jack Stillinger, 'Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Shaggy Dog: The Novelty of "Lyrical Ballads" (1798)', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 31:2 (2000), pp.70-6, p.71.
[76] Quoted in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p.648.
[77] Quoted in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, p.648.

'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' joins other poems from the *Lyrical Ballads* in this regard, as a 'dramatic monologue or monodrama' as Seamus Perry suggests, which might encourage the sceptical sort of reading we apply to the personae of poems such as Browning's 'My Last Duchess' or Tennyson's 'St Simeon Stylites'.[78] We never, after all, receive confirmation that the wedding-guest has actually learned something: the emphasis is on the rhetorical force – 'one that hath been stunn'd | And is of sense forlorn' (655-6) – and he is both 'sadder' and 'wiser' (656). Even a generous reading of the poem's moral conclusion cannot say that its power derives neatly from the fact that it teaches us to be kind to animals. It clearly has some sadness or anguish in it which makes a claim of its own. Wordsworth's 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' similarly offers an allegorical sketch in which the exact message is harder to determine than the force of its telling.[79]

Miserly Harry Gill ought, readers probably agree, to have helped cold old Goody Blake, but when the speaker of the poem exhorts us, 'Now think, ye farmers all, I pray, | Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill' (127-8), it is hard to say exactly what we should be thinking of. The moral principle at work, charity of spirit, is clearly discernible, but is it meant to land with the force of a reminder or a threat: ought the reader to leave with a cheerfully grotesque reminder to be generous or instead to hear a more radical threat in the chattering of Harry's teeth, warning the landed class of the preternatural abilities of those below them; is the motivating feeling to be love or fear? One early reader certainly errs on the side of the latter; 'The hardest heart must be softened into pity for the poor old woman', Charles Burney wrote in the *Monthly Review*, but 'if all the poor are to help themselves [...] what imaginary wants and real anarchy would it not create?'.[80] Joel Pace has argued that the poem 'promotes a clear message of loving and

[78] Perry, *Uses of Division*, p.287.
[79] Quotation, cited by line number in the text, it taken from 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is taken (in the earlier version) from *Lyrical Ballads, 1798 and 1802*, pp.39-42.
[80] [Unsigned review], *Monthly Review*, June 1799, xxix, pp.202-10, repr. in *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robert Woof (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.74-7, p.75.

helping thy neighbour', which had a radical valence in the context of an American reception, but James O'Rourke has also suggested that Goody Blake conjures the old fearful 'accusation of witchcraft' as much as she represents an empowered lower class.[81] This is complicated by Wordsworth's own explanation that the poem instead aims to explain such supernatural phenomena as the result of human psychology. In his preface, he wrote that the justification for this 'rudest' poem in *Lyrical Ballads* was 'to draw attention to the truth, that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous'.[82] The exact nature of the rhetorical ambiguity of the poem is less important than the fact there is ambiguity at all; the confidence of the speaker (and perhaps of Wordsworth) in the allegorical efficacy of the lines is misplaced, and the significance of the tale is greater than the meaning which it is given. The same could be said of 'The Thorn', a poem which dramatises the same kind of imaginative overspill. The story of Martha Ray becomes reasonably intelligible, and the poem becomes rather a testament to the insufficiency of narrative explanation, the interrelatedness of 'indeterminacy' on the one hand and 'overspecification' on the other, to contain the imaginative potential of certain objects and events.[83]

'The Thorn' is not a very long poem, however, and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is shorter still; whilst the latter has an ambiguous moral and the former is energised by the slow accretion of tautology, neither outstay their welcome, or venture the inclusion of a second or third moral or crux. If 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is not a perfect fable, since there is a question about its message, it is at least structurally linear and has an illustrative form, even if

[81] Joel Pace, 'Rhyming Revolutions: "Lyrical Ballads" in America', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Sally Bushell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp.230-52, p.246; James O'Rourke, '"Goody Blake and Harry Gill," "The Thorn," and the failure of philanthropy', *European Romantic Review*, 9:1 (2008), pp.103-23, p.112.
[82] *Lyrical Ballads, 1798 and 1802*, p.112.
[83] Paul D. Sheats, '"'Tis Three Feet long and Two Feet Wide": Wordsworth's "Thorn" and the Politics of Bathos', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 22:2 (1991), pp.92-100, p.93.

to an uncertain end. ‘The Thorn’ is conversely a poem about getting nowhere, animated by ‘turns of passion’, as Wordsworth suggests in his note. Whereas the story of Harry Gill might need a retrospective analysis to tease out its real meaning, the latter instead requires a kind of poetic preface. We have to turn to a poem like ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’ to find both of these causes in action and a hint at what might cause such an organisational challenge for the long poem, combining as it does the poetic reiteration of ‘The Thorn’ with the moral ambiguity of ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’.

There is, in addition to the competing claims above, a radically brazen reluctance to explain itself, suggested by the bare statement of the first line of the poem: ‘It is an ancyent Marinere’ (1), and the revelation of the Mariner’s departure, delayed across its stanza: ‘The Marinere, whose eye is bright, | Whose beard with age is hoar, | Is gone’ (651-3). The addition of the glosses and other paratextual information further muddies the waters, but whilst all of this is crucially relevant to the question of the overall form of the ballad, ‘The Ancyent Marinere’ is most relevant here as an allegory for the sort of formal problems the later long poems will give, even if it is not particularly long itself. John Beer wrote, with unflinching optimism, that,

> *The Ancient Mariner*, with its bafflements and inductions of harmony, is thus a brief, limited experimental model for much more extensive and ambitious works which might, without violating the essential intractability of human experience, cause it to be glimpsed in a single unified movement.[84]

Beer’s final word is Coleridgean in its frustrating incisiveness, since it tries to reconcile the momentariness of the ‘glimpse’ with the extension and ambition of future poems. Why, after all, do we need an extensive poem if what is glimpsed is not inherent to the form of that poem, but rather some principle of unity beyond it? Beer’s argument rests on a sort of processual

[84] John Beer, *Coleridge’s Poetic Intelligence* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p.181.

interpretation, in which the Mariner's interaction with the world and the reader's interaction with the poem mirror each other, but if this movement can possess unity, it does so by denying the possibility of determinate poetic form. Beer's crucial word is the 'everlasting intercourse' between the subject and the world, or the subject and the poem, but if the heart of the poem is a virtuous hermeneutic or meditative circle, it may also present a vicious plurality feeding back into itself. Such a derangement Coleridge recorded in his notebook, trying to argue for the bottom-up complexity of sensations:

> So in a single drop of water the microscope discovers, what motions, what tumult, what wars, what pursuits, what stratagems, what a circle-dance of Death & Life, Death hunting Life & Life renewed & invigorated by Death – – the whole world seems here, in a many-meaning cypher – – [85]

This is disturbing for the long poem in particular because it suggests that extension and ambition are not vitally important: if we want to grasp something intrinsically unified (or disunified), the materials for it are there in the moment. Alternately, we have the 'unified movement', in Beer's suggestive phrase, which does not need to ever get anywhere in particular, since it is already, and by its nature, unified.[86]

The potential for reiteration is, of course, the condition of the tale-teller at the close of 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'. The reason given for this is simple: it forms one part of the mariner's obscure penance. The effect is to undermine our sense of the finality in the relationship between the Mariner's experience and the form of the poem we have just made our way through:

> Since then at an uncertain hour,
> Now oftimes and now fewer,
> That anguish comes and makes me tell
> My ghastly aventure.

[85] *The Notebooks*, iii, 4057.
[86] Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence*, p.181.

I pass, like night, from land to land;
  I have strange power of speech;
The moment that his face I see
I know the man that must hear me;
  To him my tale I teach. (615-23)

The Mariner's travels have never truly ended, and this tale telling is really a continuation of, not a conclusion to, the nightmarish predicament to which he was bound by the shooting of the albatross. The eccentric use of 'now' in the second line of the first stanza above, lost in the revised versions, puts the Mariner in a kind of temporal limbo, and whilst he now has a duty to tell some portion of his tale he remains distinctly at odds both with his species and with the world. Susan Langer noted that the present tense was used in English ballads, so that 'everything needed to create the context of the story is presented as a dateless condition', which seems very different from the narrative resolution as given by Kermode or Ricoeur.[87] The events of the Mariner's story have become the timeless context of his life, rather than the ordered, and therefore ended, building blocks of a resolved story.

Coleridge, incorrectly as it turned out, reported in *Biographia Literaria* that he had published a self-mocking epigram on this theme. It reads:

To the author of the Ancient Mariner.
  Your poem must eternal be,
  Dear sir! It cannot fail,
  For 'tis incomprehensible
  And without head or tail. [88]

Although Coleridge certainly meant it as a nod to the poem's obscurity, the joke is oddly profound since it is not just the Mariner's personal lack of an ending that thwarts a comprehensive interpretation but a playful gesture at the same lack of definition Coleridge would hear at the end of *The Prelude*. No poem can go on forever of course, but it might still

[87] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p.271.
[88] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.28.

remain formally undetermined if there is no obvious means of arranging and prioritising its parts. 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' demonstrates this most clearly in the way it presents the murder of the albatross, which is the precondition of all the events which follow, and its moral. Both are reductive in a sense; taking the albatross's murder as the crime which sets all that follows in motion has a formal similarity to the moral which seeks retrospectively to explain all the poem's parts. Just as the poem preaches a lesson of equality between God's creatures but is also a poem of the eternal separation of the Mariner from his kind, the narrative's sense of horrible inevitability is met with an equally horrible arbitrariness. The parts of this poem are not sufficiently connected to either prove their moral or avoid being reduced by it; but they are also insufficiently disconnected to allow the parts of the poem independent being, so 'The Ancyent Marinere' has the morbid finality of a perpetual, encompassing trauma, everywhere determined by its initial act, but never attaining a consolatory finality – it 'ends every where, and yet an end no where'.[89]

'To William Wordsworth' – The End of "The Prelude"

One evening in January 1807, William Wordsworth finished reading the poem we now call *The Prelude* at Hall Farm to the man whom the poem repeatedly addressed as a 'Friend'. Coleridge wrote a poem in response, with the lengthy title, 'To William Wordsworth. Lines Composed For the greater part on the night, on which he finished the recitation of his Poem (in thirteen books) concerning the growth and history of his own Mind'.[90] This personally ambiguous poem, in which Coleridge's 'homage' to Wordsworth meets 'a lament for his own wasted powers', registers another ambiguity about the nature of endings in the case of Wordsworth's

[89] *Notebooks*, ii, 4057.
[90] I will quote by line number from the text given in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, pp.200-3.

long poem.[91] Ewan Jones calls this poem 'the recovery of the conversation poem idiom, and its definitive terminus'; but that terminus seems to have something to do with the discovery of an imaginative definitiveness in *The Prelude*.[92] Seamus Perry has described how Coleridge's response echoes the 'watery metaphors' of Wordsworth's poem, 'equivocating between passively empiricist [...] and actively self-creating portraits of the mind' in his reception of the long poem.[93] There is another equivocation, I argue, between an idea of a poetry that might go on for ever and a notion of the poem which has a fixed form, leaving Coleridge distinctively in between both positions, 'Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close' (108). In Reeve Parker's account, *The Prelude* leaves Coleridge in a 'celestial condition of mind', but also brings him to a 'meditative climax'.[94] Just as this poem records mixed feelings of birth and renewal for Coleridge himself, it registers, as a piece of poetical practical criticism, mixed feelings about the ends of poems. As Tilottoma Rajan describes, 'the poem calls into question the models of psychological and applicative reading that it struggles to follow'; equally, I argue, 'To Wordsworth' questions the notions of development and achievement as they apply to a long poem.[95]

Wordsworth's poem was initially a diversion from, but later reconceived as an integral complement to, the long philosophic poem to be called *The Recluse*. Coleridge responded to the first version of Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, finished in two books in 1799, by exclaiming in a letter 'O let it be the tail-piece of 'The Recluse!' for of nothing but 'The Recluse' can I hear patiently. That it is to be addressed to me makes me more desirous that it should not be a poem of itself'.[96] Coleridge had taken a draft form of *The Prelude* with him

[91] Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Language of Allusion*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.196.
[92] Ewan Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.50.
[93] Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, p.180.
[94] Reeve Parker, *Coleridge's Meditative Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p.238.
[95] Tilottoma Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.127.
[96] To William Wordsworth, 12th October 1799, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i, p.538.

when he left for Malta in 1804, seeing it as a 'biographical, or philosophico-biographical Poem to be prefixed or annexed to the Recluse'.[97]

Coleridge returned to this moment when he lamented in *Biographia Literaria*, that he had been 'neglect[ful] of concentering my powers to the realization of some permanent work', quoting from his poetic response.[98] If the lines 'To William Wordsworth' do express a kind of incapacity, they also reveal a valuable astuteness.[99] The mixed feelings of this poem, which celebrates Wordsworth as it elegises Coleridge's own poetry, are an insightful record of a situation which was pregnant with 'latent tensions and ambivalences' as Stephen Gill has described it.[100] Critical consensus has tended to discover a defiance of sorts in Coleridge's equation of Wordworth's canonization with his own poetic funeral, ranging from a 'rejection of *The Prelude*'s central myth', to a more delicately positioned sense of 'partial resurrection'.[101] The latter, at any rate, is presented as being less final when quoted in *Biographia Literaria*: 'to verse rather than to prose, if to either, belongs the "voice of mourning"'.[102] As Coleridge's poem records an ambiguous finality in its depiction of personal achievement and creative death, however, it also makes a more subtle but suggestive comment about the form of the long poem. Here too, Coleridge's incapacity reveals a hidden insight. Just as his self-elegy hints at new life, his depiction of a poem closing rejects the finality of that ending, leaving a 'last strain dying' in the air, with Coleridge 'hanging still upon the sound'. Having discovered the relationship of parts and wholes as the central criterion of the long poem, and written a work that seems anxiously determined and indeterminate in 'The Ancyent Marinere', Coleridge's

[97] To Lady Beaumont, 26th March 1804, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, ii, p.1104.
[98] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.221.
[99] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.221.
[100] Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.255.
[101] Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of* Allusion, p.196; Morton D. Paley '"To William Wordsworth" and Coleridge's Later Poetry', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 26:2 (1995), pp.45-50, p.49.
[102] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.221.

response to *The Prelude* is the final influence I describe that leads towards the famous attempts to define poetry in the lectures and writings of the next years of his life.

The biographical situation of 'To Wordsworth' is well documented. Coleridge's return from Malta had been long expected by the Wordsworths. 'Should Coleridge return', he wrote to Sir George Beaumont, outlining the state of his *magnum opus* in August 1806, 'so that I might have some conversation with him [...] I might go on swimmingly'.[103] Their plans for the winter hung on Coleridge's return; 'we are the more willing to be kept in a state of suspense as long as Coleridge is unarrived', he told Beaumont in the same letter, with the negative 'unarrived' supplying a tone of some reproach.[104] Literary energies were also directed to Coleridge. As Wordsworth made progress with parts of *The Recluse*, others in the household occupied themselves with making fair copies of his autobiographical poem; Dorothy related in late 1805 that she had 'transcribed two thirds of the Poem addressed to Coleridge', and by the spring of 1806 the women of the household were involved with making 'two copies of William's poem'.[105] When they did finally catch sight of him in Kendal, William and Dorothy were deeply worried and disappointed by his mental and physical condition, with Dorothy writing that 'he [Coleridge] is utterly changed; and yet sometimes, when he was animated in conversation with things removed from him, I saw something of his former self'.[106] By the autumn of 1807 Coleridge would bitterly note 'their [the Wordsworths] Ignorance of the Deep Place of my Being – and o! the cruel cruel misconception of that which is purest in me'.[107] He felt betrayed and jealous of the vision of Sara Hutchinson and Wordsworth in bed together. 'To Wordsworth' is thus a record of a painful transition whilst the relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge culminating (in the achievement of Wordsworth's poem to Coleridge) as it

[103] *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ii, p.64.
[104] *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ii, p.65.
[105] *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i, p.662; ii, p.10.
[106] *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ii, p.86.
[107] *Notebooks*, ii, 3146.

collapsed. Coleridge seems both irretrievably stuck in his place and yet hinting at personal renewal in a poem that in Paley's view is 'a door that closes in one direction to open in another'.[108] That openness and closed-ness pertains to the description of *The Prelude* as well.

Compared with Coleridge's more formal remarks in his lectures or *Biographia*, the lines written after *The Prelude* might seem to be mere impressionism, but the looseness of Coleridge's verse is itself suggestive of the formal problem of defining the long poem which would emerge as a result of his more rigorous musings on poetry. Here, the question of definition is quite literal and phenomenal: 'To Wordsworth' gives us a description of *The Prelude* not quite ending. When Wordsworth's recitation stopped,

> Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close
> I sate, my being blended in one thought
> (Thought was it? Or Aspiration? Or Resolve?)
> Absorb'd, yet hanging still upon the sound—
> And when I rose, I found myself in prayer. (108-112)

The Prelude is diffused into and blurred with its lingering effects: the poetry seems to exceed the limits of the poem. This is a description of formal as well as biographical closure and openness, as if 'To Wordsworth' also records the moment when Coleridge found himself unable to conclusively describe what it is encountering; Coleridge's rhetorical presentation might suggest a lapse of terminology regarding the end of the long poem or its untheorized nature more generally. That there is a connection between this poem and Coleridge's frustrating later conclusion that 'a poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry' is one point of this introduction; but equally it is to show that, if Coleridge never conclusively succeeded in explaining the long poem – providing a fully reasoned formal justification for why a long poem should end – his theoretical struggle to do so does bear practical fruit. The ambiguous ends of the long poem emerge in 'To Wordsworth' before Coleridge's major theoretical works.

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[108] Morton Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p.12.

Coleridge registers the conclusion of the poem, but only barely. The literal definiteness of the poem, its final line, is deprioritized in favour of the mental state of its auditor, which continues still. Coleridge himself seems to have reached some resolution, 'blended' into a singular thought, but that thought immediately divides itself into three questions. Coleridge is unable to fully describe his feelings: has the poem left him convinced of an idea or inspired to action? 'Resolve' seems to bring these together, suggesting most obviously a sense of commitment to a cause – resolving to do something – but also that of a problem having been solved. The word suggests both the achievement of ambitions and the proposals of new ones – both an opening and a closure – but the whole is kept in suspension; Coleridge's re-finding of himself at the end of the poem in passive 'prayer' concludes the poem with a mental act that is itself unfinished. Crucially, for all the finiteness of Coleridge's blending and absorption, the sound of the poem is still in the air.

Ewan Jones has suggested that whilst 'Wordsworth's 'continuous lay' had been a confident prediction of poetical futurity now we find that even that song can come to an end,' but the mental event precipitated by *The Prelude* seems boundless.[109] Parker astutely notes a Miltonic echo in 'To Wordsworth', so that 'Coleridge's description of an ineffable intercourse following Wordsworth's recitation may return the compliment by echoing the pause after Raphael's account of creation', which gives a sense of joint finishedness and openness at the same time.[110] Practically, of course, the poem does have its ending and the final line cannot literally ring on. What is significant in Coleridge's description is the shadowy nature of the ending, as if *The Prelude* fades away into the psychological state of its auditors or refers to some later state. Earlier in his account, Coleridge equally downplays the ending of *The Prelude* when he assesses Wordsworth's achievement:

[109] Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form*, p.53.
[110] Parker, *Coleridge's Meditative Art*, p.238.

> O great bard!
> Ere yet that last strain dying awed the air,
> With stedfast eye I view'd thee in the choir
> Of ever-enduring men. (47-50)

The end of the poem is figured as a kind of suspension, dying away but not yet dead, but more importantly the judgment of Wordsworth's achievement does not rely on its completion. In fact, the performance of *The Prelude* aloud constitutes a kind of poetic being or activity rather than the achievement of some formally defined structure. The great amongst whom Wordsworth has now placed himself are timeless in a profane sense of enduring value, but also because they are portrayed by Coleridge as partaking in some continuous human activity. We learn that,

> They, both in power and act,
> Are permanent, and Time is not with *them*,
> Save as it worketh *for* them, they *in* it.
> Nor less a sacred Roll, than those of old,
> And to be placed, as they, with gradual fame
> Among the Archives of Mankind, thy work
> Makes audible a linked lay of Truth,
> Of Truth profound a sweet continuous lay,
> Not learnt, but native, her own natural notes! (52-60)

The implication is that *The Prelude* makes accessible something that is not limited to it. Through it the truth is rendered audible, and for all the emphasis on the 'linked' and 'continuous' nature of that truth, connectedness seems to precede the poetry as much as it is a product of its composition. As the natural and native music of truth itself, what seems to be described is a principle of poetry or poetic being, rather than of a defined poem, whose formal connectedness has nothing to do with a climactic termination.

The impression of this 'orphic song' as prophetic activity rather than a defined or structured poem intensifies when Coleridge recounts his own experience listening to it. 'Eve following Eve', Coleridge listened to Wordsworth in a continuous revery:

> My soul lay passive, by thy various strain
> Driven, as in surges now beneath the stars,
> With momentary Stars of my own birth,
> Fair constellated Foam, still darting off
> Into the darkness; now a tranquil sea,
> Outspread and bright, yet swelling to the Moon. (96-101)

In contrast with the eternal and permanent achievement of Wordsworth, the experience of the listener is various and momentary, but the constant and exciting sense of change is not matched with any notion of conclusion. Instead, this is an enduring, blissful state of imaginative emancipation echoing the conjecture of the much earlier 'Eolian Harp'. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge would describe the ideal reader of a poem as 'carried forward' by the 'pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself', without ultimately removing the focus of an end goal.[111] The images used here, as the Bollingen editors note, relate back to a notebook entry describing the writer, like a serpent, who 'varies his course yet still glides onwards', with digression supporting rather than diminishing the overall unity.[112] But in Coleridge's sublime poetic account of *The Prelude*, there is little in terms of telos or goal. The similarity with 'The Eolian Harp' suggests instead a continuous state of excitement in which an intrinsic or experiential unity is found – the 'one intellectual breeze' of 'The Eolian Harp' and Wordsworth's 'orphic song' give an *a priori* justification to diversity and variegation, since they suggest those things are the by-products of some other oneness that precedes them.

What, then, is the significance of this not only for poetry in general, but for the long poem in particular? The central problem is one of arbitrariness of form. The thing which Coleridge most critiqued in Pope was that 'the whole was as it were a sorites', which is to say a heap.[113] The philosophical problem of the sorites notes that taking a grain of sand from a heap does not alter the heap: couplets heap up, but they do not change the nature of the whole. 'To

[111] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.14
[112] *Notebooks*, i, 609; c.f. *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.14.
[113] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.18.

Wordsworth', however, in emphasising the psychological effect of the poem on the reader, and the openness of its ending, suggests that it is a sorites of another, more benign kind, but one that does not have a terminal wholeness, but rather a premise of wholeness. In the context of the long poems later in this thesis, the tension between those two wholenesses is the essential theme.

Part 2: Theory Without End

So, following 'To William Wordsworth' and its ambiguous ending, I propose to turn from the earlier Coleridge, who still entertained thoughts of composing a long poem of his own, to the later theorist, who wrote about the nature of poetry, life, and of thoughts organised into what he called 'method'. I have tried to suggest three poetic sources for these thoughts. In the critically formative years when he contemplated the state of the epic, the relation of parts to a whole became, for Coleridge, the central question of poetic form, which registered as the desire for a poetic form that would accommodate both an endless variety and a strictly determined sense of unity. The case of his 'Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' provided an example of a problematic sort of poem that seemed to arise out of, but not be constrained to, its premise, and in his reaction to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Coleridge felt the bringing in of a new dispensation for both men that did not correspond to any clear finality in that poem.

Coleridge perhaps never finished defining what a poem was. Even in the same year, he could produce wildly different notions, particularly where the long poem is concerned. In the letter to Wordsworth following the publication of *The Excursion* he could evince a belief in a poem moving along a linear, strongly teleological path:

Thus, whatever the Length of the Work might be, still it was a *determinate* Length: of the subjects announced each would have it's own appointed place, and excluding repetitions each would relieve & rise in interest above the other – .[114]

He could also, in the same year, report that,

The common end of all *narrative,* nay, of *all,* Poems is to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings a *circular* motion.[115]

If this suggests Coleridge will not give us a doctrine *per se*, the letters do indicate a productive sense of conflicted possibility, what Perry calls 'a genuine pattern of oppositions' rather than an idle confusion.[116] In this case, we have an opposition between the mereological and teleological feelings for poetic form, referring respectively to parts of a poem as they comprise a whole, and those parts as they develop towards some end.

Definitions of Poetry

In the Bollingen edition of *Biographia Literaria*, the editors suggest that Coleridge's statement that 'a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry', prefigures Poe's dismissal of the long poem altogether.[117] This is not quite right. Coleridge did not think that long poems were impossible, but that there was a tension between the ends of poetry, defined in the phenomenological terms of the reader's 'attention' or 'pleasure', and the nature of a poem defined as a formal interrelatedness of parts with their whole. In his 'The Principles of Genial Criticism', Coleridge supposes the 'different species of Poetry': 'poetry of language', 'poetry of the ear, or music; and poetry of the eye, which is again subdivided into plastic poetry, or statuary, and graphic poetry, or painting'.[118] In that light, Coleridge leads us to more

[114] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iv, p.574.
[115] To Joseph Cottle, 7th March 1815, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iv, p.545.
[116] *Uses of Division*, p.3.
[117] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.15.
[118] *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ii, p.358.

accommodating conclusions than Poe's, such as A. E. Housman's quietly tendentious claim that 'Poems very seldom consist of poetry and nothing else'.[119] The real tension in Coleridge's thought is not between the 'intensity' of poetry and the long duration of epic as it is for Poe, but rather between a view of the organised whole as simultaneous with its parts (as in the 'Principles of Genial Criticism') and one that sees the whole as a progressive accumulation, developing from an 'antecedent unity', as he put it later, in the *Logic*.[120]

The question of the ends of poetry occupies the central chapter in *Biographia Literaria*, where Coleridge sidesteps the question of ultimate ends in favour of discussing the 'immediate object' of poetry, which is revised down to 'a more continuous and equal attention, than the language of prose aims at'.[121] This is an enormously disappointing definition of poetry, rescued by the rhapsodic portrait of the unifying poet, quoted above. *Biographia Literaria* seems to be thinking on its feet here, as Coleridge revises his definitions within the text, as he is dictating. This idea is only the latest in a development, which began in earlier notebooks and lectures. Between lectures, Coleridge made slight alterations to his language which imply very different notions of what poetry ought to be. For example, in the 1811-2 lecture series, a definition is offered in the second lecture:

> [Poetry] is an art (or whatever better term our language may afford) of representing, in words, external nature and human thoughts and affections, both relatively to human affections, by the production of as much immediate pleasure in parts, as is compatible with the largest sum of pleasure in the whole.[122]

In the fourth lecture this receives a slight but significant revision:

> It is that species of composition which being together with some others opposed to Science, as having for its immediate object the communication of pleasure, not of Truth is yet distinguished

[119] A. E. Housman, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', in *A Shropshire Lad and Other Poems*, ed. by Archie Burnett (London: Penguin, 2010), pp.229-256, p.246.
[120] *Logic*, p.67.
[121] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.15.
[122] *Coleridge: Lectures on Shakespeare (1811-1819)*, ed. by Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p.16.

from all others by proposing to itself such a delight from the whole as is compatible with the distinct gratification from each component part.[123]

There is a shifting of priorities here which subtly but radically reframes the nature of poetry. In the first instance, there is a practical instrumentality, almost the point of pleasure-optimisation; a poem in this first reading is merely the means of getting the most pleasure ('largest sum') out of words. Make the parts of a poem, this definition enjoins the poet, as pleasurable as you can, so as to induce an overall increase, rather than decrease in pleasure. There is a sophisticated sense of structural balance beneath this apparent truism; clearly, one can still write an excellent bit of poetry and yet diminish the overall effect, as introduced in a much earlier notebook entry on Erasmus Darwin, which 'arrests the attention too often' and 'makes the great little'.[124] Whilst there is plenty of scope for Coleridgean meditation on the true nature and ends of that pleasure, the question of a poem's structure and nature seems oddly reduced in this definition, as if it is merely a sweeter end than the scientific one.

In the second, however, the structure is not only instrumental, getting most pleasure out of the words, but also a question of identity. The sort of pleasure we get in poetry is different from the other sorts of pleasure, not only because there is more of it, but because the kind of pleasure is different: a 'distinct gratification' from the parts that lives alongside 'a delight from the whole'. In *Biograpia Literaria*, the innovation is the separation of these two qualities, so that the poem (as a structure of parts and wholes) is defined separately from poetry (which has the telos of pleasure). The famous contradiction, that 'a poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be all poetry', thus means, on the one hand, a simple confession that things can have the structural wholeness of a poem without being subject entirely to the ends of poetry itself.[125] It would be foolish to claim that Plato was aiming solely for pleasure, no matter how poetic

[123] *Lectures on Shakespeare*, p.44.
[124] *Notebooks*, i, 132.
[125] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.15.

Coleridge found him: 'it would be not less irrational than strange to assert, that pleasure, and not truth, was the immediate object'.[126]

It is right, nonetheless, to see the long poem as the problematic case. Coleridge effectively gives up defining poetry after raising the question of the relation between the structure of a poem of length and the ends of poetry, which cannot explain it. Kathleen Wheeler reads *Biographia Literaria* as a sort of dialectic in which Coleridge leads us through 'the successive steps which the mind must surmount in order to reach the vantage point from which it is able, as in volume two, to engage in imaginative criticism', but if that is so, the process is not complete by the fourteenth chapter.[127] Concluding that a 'poem of any length' means something that 'excite[s] a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at', Coleridge moves to surer ground, where the claims for poetry can seek a higher pitch: 'What is poetry? Is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution to the other'.[128] It is, I think, doubtful that the impasse reached in the case of the long poem is absolutely overcome by the turn to the poet. It seems, rather, that having failed to give an account of what a poem is that might satisfy, Coleridge gives the poet the capacity of unification and manyness which 'a poem of any length' will require. 'He diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity', has the power of 'balance and reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general, with the concrete', *etc*.[129] The poet, in other words, creates the 'graceful and intelligent whole' that 'a poem of any length' seemingly cannot be.[130] The question of end or purpose seems moot: 'the poetic genius itself [...] sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind'.[131]

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[126] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.14.
[127] Kathleen Wheeler, *Sources, Processes, and Methods in Coleridge's 'Biographia Literaria'*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.156.
[128] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.15.
[129] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, pp.16-7.
[130] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.18.
[131] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.15.

The definition of a poem as the happy reconciliation of parts in a structure with a whole, gives way, in the context of the long poem, to a process of continuous transformation. This has implications for all poems, of course, not just long ones. On the one hand, however, it does support Armstrong's contentious that an organic, Coleridgean poem *must* be long, but on the other, more subversively, it provides the groundwork for the Coleridgean poetics of the instant, as described by Kermode. One thing we learn from the definitions chapter of *Biographia Literaria* is that the activity of the poet, continuous and unbounded, is more important than the quality of any particular poem. The other, however, is that, if things really are unbounded or endless, the only way they can be grasped, if not through an equally continuous sort of poetry, is perversely, surprisingly, through the instantaneous or symbolic, 'reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant'.[132] There is, then, a tension, arising from Coleridge trying to apply his definitions of the purpose and structure of poetry, its ends and its forms, to 'a poem of any length' which I suggest is between a poetry that might aspire to reach an end, and a poetry that is, in some sense, already ended, since its only true end is the 'IMAGINATION the SOUL that is every where, and in each'.[133]

'The Snake with its tail in its mouth'

Oddly, then, the unity of poetry is purchased at the cost of the unity of the poem, conceived as something with a beginning, middle, and end. In the final movement of this chapter, I dwell on the way Coleridge's ideas reconcile the ends of things and their endlessness. The late Coleridge defines a constitution as 'an *idea* [that] cannot be *adequately* represented in a correspondent scheme of means really existing', but nonetheless every particular of history might be seen as 'a progressive, though not always a direct, or equable advance in the gradual realization of the

[132] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.23.
[133] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.18.

idea'.[134] If a poem has an idea like this as its origin and destination, so that its end is 'necessarily antecedent to the means' as the *Logic* puts it, Coleridge makes it difficult to conceive of how poems might ever literally end, instead suggesting a continuous and developing aesthetic practice.[135] This largely anticipates the struggle, in the real long poems below, between the idea of having a fixed end or aim and the instinct to go on and on. On the one hand, a poem might be a tautology, endlessly reiterating the central idea which is its premise; on the other, however, it might be something more disturbing: a work that does not ceaselessly return to a unifying start point, nor to a defined end, but instead generates a variety that cannot ultimately be unified: 'the whole means to nothing'.[136]

I. Symbol

One solution that Coleridge developed to his problem of finding oneness was to render it accessible through moments which imply or make accessible the wholeness of a structure without claiming that structure is literally manifested.

In the 'Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism', Coleridge's revision of Kantian aesthetic ideas, he notes that visual beauty is when 'all "the many," which I actually see, each and all are really reconciled into unity'.[137] The idea of reconciliation suggests return to an original state. The difference is subtle but important: whether unity is produced by the work and inherent to it or is instead the idea of unity which the work partakes in but does not create, determines the importance we place on the overall text. If unity is rendered accessible by, but is not limited to the text, then the wholeness of the poem itself loses relevance in favour of a spiritual something else to which it everywhere refers. There are grounds for this elsewhere in Coleridge. In one of the preliminary sketches towards the later 'Essays on the Principles of

[134] Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. by John Barrell (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1972), p.9.
[135] *Logic*, p.67.
[136] *Notebooks*, iii, 4057.
[137] *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ii, p.372.

Genial Criticism', his 'Definitions of Aesthetic Terms', Coleridge describes the way in which experienced sublimity is symbolic of the truer sublime:

> Objects of Sense never can be of themselves *sublime*; but they may be the occasioning means of exciting certain feelings and Ideas, as Symbols of Power, Strength, &c—and in this sense a Cataract, a stormy Sea, is sublime—tho' not in the sense in which we call God, Eternity, Free-Will, Sublime.[138]

A poem, likewise, might allow access to unity even if it is not of itself fully unified. Again, the problem with this theory is that it justifies an ongoing poetry but leaves no good justification for a poem's ending. This is why Paul Hamilton wrote, of Schelling's influence on Coleridge, that they both conceived of 'the completion of science and the evolution of nature blending together in one vast, indivisible cyclical poem'.[139]

Hamilton's argument was inspired by an extraordinary letter, written by Coleridge to Cottle on the subject of his recent *Messiah*. Coleridge generously concedes that he did 'see your [Cottle's] plan', but finds it impossible to 'explain to the Public, so as to make it consistent with the received conception of a poem'.[140] The following description can hardly be said to be the received or conventional idea of a poem, and like many Coleridgean letters, it is hard to selectively quote: the form of the letter – clauses lapping over each other, circling around and yet veering off a central point – is itself significant, suggestive precisely of that endless digressiveness, as a poem can only be understood as the correlative of the mode of poetry. Coleridge gives us one of his definitions of a poem:

> The common end of all *narrative,* nay, of *all,* Poems is to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings a *circular* motion — the snake with it's Tail in it's Mouth. Hence indeed the almost flattering and yet appropriate Term, Poesy — i.e. poiêsis = *making*. Doubtless, to *his* eye, which alone comprehends all Past and all Future in one eternal Present, what to our short sight appears strait is but a part of the great Cycle — just as the calm Sea to

[138] *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ii, p.352.
[139] Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge and German Philosophy: The Poet in the Land of Logic* (London; New York: Continuum, 2007), p.191.
[140] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iv, p.545.

> us *appears* level, tho' it be indeed only a part of a *globe.* Now what the Globe is in Geography, *miniaturing* in order to *manifest* the Truth, such is a Poem to that Image of God, which we were created into, and which still seeks that Unity, or Revelation of the *One* in and by the *Many,* which reminds it, that tho' in order to be an individual Being it must go forth *from* God, yet as the *re*ceding from *him* is to *pro*ceed towards Nothingness and Privation, it must still at every step turn back toward him in order to *be* at all — Now a straight Line, continuously retracted forms of necessity a circular orbit. [...] The Immortal Finite is the contracted Shadow of the Eternal Infinite. — Therefore *nothingness* or *Death,* to which we move as we recede from God & the Word, *cannot* be nothing; but that tremendous Medium between Nothing and true Being, which Scripture & inmost Reason present as most, most horrible![141]

It is the omnipresent circularity of the events as they are revealed to the human understanding within the poem that is important. It is not the poem's ability to reveal this specific fact or that truth, but rather to hint at absolute or eternal reality. The danger for the long poem is that phrase 'miniaturing in order to manifest', not because it is an instruction to write literal miniatures, but because it reveals the problem of justifying determinate length. For the unity of a poem written thus is not reliant on its conclusion. The symbolic aspect of the structure actually undermines the notion of its end since the nature of the events is much less important than their organisation and their circularity. The letter could also be read *ad absurdum*: is Coleridge arguing that all poems should effectively reveal the same thing; could there be any difference between the ends of a poem apart from revealing this structural identity? One could theoretically build a globe as big as the earth; one could never produce a poem of infinite length, which is to say that a poem of 100,000 lines is no closer to infinity than one of ten.

Such an argument might be useful if one were defending the Bible against the incipient awareness of its piecemeal nature. The overall structure of the text has little to do with its effect, since we can apprehend the nature of that structure in the moment. The Bible's 'contents present to us the stream of time continuous as Life and a symbol of eternity, inasmuch as the Past and the Future are virtually contained in the Present'.[142] If all time is available in the

[141] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iv, p.545.
[142] *Lay Sermons*, p.29.

present, which is to say that the bible's prophetic capacity is continuous and unbroken, then its length would not be determined by any rhetorical or discursive intention. Coleridge's letter to Cottle implies that the form of the long poem is itself symbolic.

The point is not that long poems lose their justification, but that the idea of meaningfully determined length becomes nonsensical. In another context, Coleridge writes 'I feel it alike whether I contemplate a single tree or flower, or meditate on vegetation throughout the world'.[143] Indeed, throughout this discussion, Coleridge never makes it clear whether he is considering a single instance, or the power of vegetation in general. He describes the moment of daybreak:

> Lo!—with the rising sun it commences its outward life and enters into open communion with the elements, at once assimilating them to itself and to each other. At the same moment it strikes its roots [...] Lo!—at the touch of light how it returns an air akin to light [...] Lo!—how upholding the ceaseless plastic motion of the parts in the profoundest rest of the whole it becomes the visible organismus of the whole *silent* or *elementary* life of nature, and therefore, in incorporating the one extreme becomes the symbol of the other.[144]

This is one moment in a temporal process, admittedly, but the significant thing – the interaction between the natural world and the sun – is defined by instantaneousness. More crucially, even if we see this as the product of a temporal arrangement of events – sun rises, flower turns – their interrelatedness is constant, and symbolically referential. Just as Cottle's poem is to reveal a circularity, rather than achieve a formal conclusion of its own, the perceived disunity of things here described is revealed to be a symptom of an ongoing and developing process which foundationally unifies them, even as it proceeds in increasing diversity. Again, there can be no prospect of an end here. In fact, the notion of an end would fundamentally challenge the boundlessness which is part of the unity as it is here conceived.

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[143] *Lay Sermons,* p.72.
[144] *Lay Sermons*, p.72.

There is naturally a recipe here for formlessness as much as there is for a redemptive process or method; Coleridge described a very similar experience tending to chaos, rather than unity. A notebook entry of 1811 notes that 'swarm of Thoughts & Feelings, endlessly minute fragments & as it were representations of all preceding & embryos of all future Thought lie compact in any one moment'.[145] Georges Poulet, another perceptive reader of Coleridge's doubleness, that the Coleridge of this note both 'passively submits to the discursiveness and succession of Time', and is driven by the possibility that 'by the imaginative flight of his poetical powers or the intervention of speculative reasoning, [he might] *shape* all those little things into a whole'.[146] Part of the fear (and sublimity) of the note, however, is the very wholeness of those little things. It is the self-sufficing unity of the parts, revealing multitudes of their own, which is problematic for the whole. What really concerns Coleridge, then, regardless of whether we take the optimistic or pessimistic interpretation, is the incipient richness or wholeness that is accessible through particulars. Indeed, the very process of that unfolding wholeness comes to substitute for the achieved or relational wholeness which they might otherwise possess. From a poetic perspective, if all the parts of a poem have an equally revelatory potential, what good can come of the literal whole, wholeness being instead diffused throughout all the parts? Coleridge is left with the fear that life does indeed 'en[d] every where, and yet an end no where', but this seems as good a description of a poetry which might become so incidentally or circumstantially rewarding that its architectonic form is denigrated in comparison with the force which is motivating the growth of those incidents and circumstances. Within an organic framework, if the principle of growth can be perceived in all the seedlings, offshoots, and branches, what use is the entire tree? Whilst Coleridge's note superficially appears to express a fear of limitless plurality, it is equally a fear of a fruitless unity which has

[145] *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.123.
[146] Georges Poulet, 'Timelessness and Romanticism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 15:1 (1954), pp.3-22, p.8.

merely gathered together what was already equivalent with itself, since if all parts can independently act as ends, then it is difficult to see them reconciling into one final and encompassing *telos*.

II. Method and Constitution

There are ways in which Coleridge attempted to return a final definitive end of sorts to a conception of thought or language which is also everywhere justified, even in fragments or at its outset. As outlined in *The Friend*, method is the means by which a mind is ordered: 'however irregular and desultory his talk, there is *method* in the fragments', and in the methodical work of the craftsman as much as the thinker '*every thing is in its place*'.[147] Coleridge means something similar when he describes the integrity of Milton and Shakespeare, whose *oeuvres* are so methodical that it would 'scarcely be more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand than to alter a word, or the position of a word [...] without making the author say something else,' and the method of Shakespeare is given an organic analogy.[148] In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge refers to the 'continuous undercurrent' of feeling which we might detect in a great poet, but in his essays in *The Friend*, this is raised to a higher pitch:

> In all his various characters, we still feel ourselves communing with the same human nature, which is every where present as the vegetable sap in the branches, sprays, leaves, buds, blossoms, and fruits, their shapes, tastes, and odours. Speaking of the effect, i.e. his works themselves, we may define the excellence of their method as consisting in that just proportion, that union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular, which must ever pervade all works of decided genius and true science.[149]

Here too, however, a mode of unity pervades in a spatial metaphor, and the idea is clearly of a tree growing out into greater diversity and plurality, rather than towards a unifying point. This

[147] *The Friend*, i, p.449.
[148] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.23.
[149] *The Friend*, i, p.457.

is somewhat in contradiction with an earlier sense of methodical thinking, as exemplified by Julius Caesar, who has the

> unpremeditated and evidently habitual *arrangement* of his words, grounded on the habit of foreseeing, in each integral part, or (more plainly) in every sentence, the whole that he then intends to communicate. However irregular and desultory his talk, there is *method* in the fragments.[150]

The achieved form of Caesar's language is less important than its a unified precondition, perceptible in even a small fragment. In terms of the form of the long poem, this is of little assistance, since a methodical approach seems to justify, before the fact, any kind of irregularity which is to actually occur. Paul Curtis has written of a supposedly anti-organic in *Don Juan*, whereby the poem holds 'discrete particular[s] before the reader's attention' and proceeds 'without the hierarchical patterning of a cumulative logic', with the aim of containing 'life's infinite variety'.[151] Notwithstanding the implicitly tragic ending of any poem written in this way, since it must end in fragmentation or death (or both), what Curtis describes is in fact totally possible within Coleridge's thought, since method as such allows for the *a priori* creation of wholeness as a premise, rather than an outcome, of composition.. The implication, however, unless we imagine an endless poem, is that such an approach places all the justification for the poem on the grounds of its possibility, which justifies the resulting structure, rather than being disclosed by it. Practically, we might wonder why we would ever need to get to the end of anything written by such a methodical mind.

One of the things Murray Krieger highlights in his essay is the problem, in organicism, of taking a spatial arrangement and making it temporal. If we want to speak of a tree as a metaphor for a life or an *oeuvre*, the leaves provide a spatial connection to each other; there is also a connection in time, between the seed and all that results, but this is not then an achieved

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[150] *The Friend*, i. p.449.
[151] Curtis, 'Romantic Indirection', in *Romanticism and Form*, pp.1-22.

unity, one that is realisable within form itself, but rather the deduced unity of the botanist or poet, who imagines the entire history of the tree. Such a unity, Krieger writes 'can be affirmed only while at the same instant being undone in the search for its continual reformulation by means of the struggle to encompass the ever-changing variety of the temporal'.[152] Which it so that such a unity must be unfinished; it has an end only to the extent to which that end represents a continuously changing unfolding. Language, as Lessing observed, was not the best medium for revealing contiguous bodies in time: 'the division of the whole into its parts easier for us, the final reassembling of the parts into a whole is made extremely difficult and often even impossible'.[153]

The same conclusion was reached in a different way by Giorgio Agamben in his *The End of the Poem*, which makes enjambment, the possibility to say something else, the very definition of poetry. A strictness emerges: 'it follows that the last verse of a poem is not a verse'.[154] Poetry begins, not from unity, but from a division, in Agamben's view, between 'sound and sense', but the idea is not so very different from Coleridge's. It makes it hard to conceive of a poem's end; Agamben reads a lyric by Dante and concludes that the poem 'collapses into silence [...] in an endless falling'.[155] As I have suggested above, the problem is not that this makes the long poem impossible. To the contrary, it makes length a positive and necessary virtue as it represents an aesthetic or intellectual practice that does not properly have an end. More than that, however, it makes poetry natively endless. If this is a problem for all poems, there are ways, suggestive above, of symbolically grasping process in an instant which might lead us to think of lyric or symbolic poetry. There is little to justify the exact length of any discourse, poem, or life in thought. The length of the poem cannot be brought within the

[152] Krieger, *A Reopening of Closure*, p.42.
[153] Lessing, *Laocoön*, p.88.
[154] Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.112.
[155] *The End of the Poem*, p.115.

unified idea of the poem, just as the exact height of the tree cannot be brought within the unity of the seed, since that idea suggests process, rather than result.

Nonetheless, by the time he was preparing his *Logic*, Coleridge declared that the end was the right place to start.

> The science of criticism dates its restoration from the time when it was seen that an examination and appreciation of the end was necessarily antecedent to the formation of the rules, supplying at once the principle of the rules themselves and of their application to the given subject.[156]

'Certain French critics', as Coleridge laments, made the mistake of confusing what the Greek dramatists actually did with what they wanted to do, and so misprized their means (the resultant form of their plays) as their end.[157] What Coleridge does not make precisely clear is how we find the end. In *Biographia Literaria*, we read that 'nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise', which seems to suggest we can indeed find the 'reason why it is so' purely through the study of the product before us.[158] One line of inheritance connects such a statement and comments such as Wimsatt's, that 'judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine', which we can do in isolation if we have to.[159] We might equally read the famous definition of a poet who 'diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and [fuses] each into each' and develop a conclusion that 'the unity of a poem reside[s] solely in the unity of intention', if intention is then discoverable as a kind of grasping together within the poem, rather than a certain poet's ambition to produce a certain thing.[160] We can discover the ends of a poem within itself.

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[156] *Logic*, p.67.
[157] *Logic*, p.67.
[158] *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), ii, p.12.
[159] William Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p.4.
[160] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.17; Audrey Wasser, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form*, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), p.49. The classic example is Cleanth Brooks's *Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947), which derives a criterion of poetic unity from an interpretation of Coleridge: 'the structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations, and

The later *Logic*, however, seems rather to revise Herder than anticipate the 'New Criticism' in the emphasis it places on an author's historicity.[161] Context is of vital importance to resultant form, and so we need to know *why* a pudding of *this type* was steamed by its specific author(s) order to truly understand it. In Coleridge's language, some of the features of the Greek tragedy grow out of their context, and even Shakespeare's end can only be appreciated as it is altered by its context. Crucially we have to discover both 'the end which our myriad-minded bard had in view *and* the local accidents that favoured or obstructed or in any way modified its manifestation'.[162] By the *Logic*, Coleridge seems to, as Seamus Perry has noted, 'prefe[r] the great end of unity to the diverse claims of its constituents', but he doesn't seem to be making much claim for that unity as an end within the texts themselves.[163] The notion of the end as something that might prospectively unify the result is a dangerous one, however. I. A. Richards's version is the more tractable, if restrictive, idea: 'a poem begins by creating a linguistic problem whose solution by language will be the attainment of its end'.[164]

In Richards's essay, the reason why a poem is the way it is and its purpose seem to coincide. Fittingly, frustratingly, by the time he was putting together notes for his *Logic*, Coleridge claimed he could bring these things together, almost, into a 'twofold unity':

> 21a) We have already had occasion to distinguish the unity of totality, the onenesss which we connect with the conception of a whole—of a watch, for instance—and which we may denominate the consequent or resulting unity, from the productive or producible unity—that of the proper germ, or *herat*, or plantule of a seed, apart from its lobes, eye, and coat, as the ground and productive principle of the future whole, and which we may call the 'antecedent' unity. [...]
> 21b) This twofold unity is comprised in the definition of the term 'constitution'.[165]

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interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings. [...] It unites the like with the unlike' (p.195).

[161] C.f. G. A. Wells, 'Herder and Coleridge's Evaluation of the Historical Approach', *The Modern Language Review*, 48:2 (1953), pp.167-175: 'Greek drama, says Herder, was the natural outcome of the conditions of the age. In Shakespeare's age, these conditions no longer existed. Hence it would be folly to expect his work to conform to that of the Greek dramatists' (p.168).

[162] *Logic*, p.67.

[163] Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division,* p.191.

[164] Richards, *Poetries and Sciences*, p.112.

[165] *Logic*, p.250.

As I quoted above, Coleridge's constitution is strictly impossible. As 'an *idea* it cannot be *adequately* represented in a correspondent scheme of means really existing', but nonetheless it can reduce the particulars of history to it, as 'a progressive, though not always a direct, or equable advance in the gradual realization of the idea'.[166] Perhaps in the case of a long poem, however, the situation is more complex. The productive principle behind a poem may not have such a wholeness as its end. In fact, the constitution of the long poem might be defined precisely by the separateness of these two unities, as Coleridge describes them. The premise of the poetry, the thing which causes it to be, does not, in the end, clearly produce a realised or completed whole. It may be, in fact, such as in the case of *In Memoriam*'s grief, or *The Ring and the Book*'s desire to expand and qualify the past, that the premise of the poetry has no such strict telos, even if the poems must inevitably be made to end. Ultimately then, Coleridge does not help us define the long poem, but this tension between an expectation of finishedness or wholeness and the productive premise of the poetry itself is formally constitutive, I argue, in the following long poems.

[166] *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, p.9.

Chapter 2. ‘Was it for this?’: The Course of Wordsworth’s *Recluse*

> All of the confusion, all of the chaos which we feel inwardly whenever we seek to learn something genuinely new, arises out of the search for a beginning that we cannot find. To find the beginning is to find the word that resolves all conflict.[1]
>
> — F. W. J. Schelling

Introduction

One way of avoiding the difficulty of the end, where the long poem is concerned, is to claim that its variousness or incompleteness, in a critical light, produces a wholeness or unity that does not depend on its conclusion. When we try and explain this, analogies are typically cyclical or reiterative. Swinburne suggested that ‘the merit of *Don Juan* does not lie in any part, but in the whole’.[2] The evidence for this: ‘the student of his work may recognise and enjoy the ebb and flow of actual life’.[3] Eliot apes the sentiment when he wipes out the English tradition of long poems; reading *The Divine Comedy*, *The Odyssey*, or *The Aeneid*, he finds ‘the movement toward and from intensity which is life itself’; ‘Milton and Wordsworth, on the other hand, lack this unity, and therefore lack life’.[4] These organic analogies, Eliot’s vital throb and Swinburne’s tide, carry the same inherent risk: an inability to explain linear movement through a text and to account for its end. Coleridge, as I argued above, saw this problem without quite articulating it or finding a single solution to determine the form of the long poem. At any

[1] F. W. J. Schelling, ‘Ages of the World, first version’, trans. by Joseph P. Lawrence, in *The Schelling Reader*, ed. by Benjamin Berger and Daniel Whistler (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp.133-142, p.134.
[2] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), p.242.
[3] Swinburne, *Essays and Studies*., p.243.
[4] T. S. Eliot, ‘Prose and Verse’, in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ii, p.326.

rate, the unity which Eliot and Swinburne see is not an architectonic one, but the unity of a process which keeps unfolding. The cost of such a theory is indeterminacy, a lack of justification for ending. One tragic conclusion is that the poem, as with *Don Juan*, stops when the poet dies. If a long poem does not have an end, does it ever get anywhere? In Isobel Armstrong's *Language as Living Form*, the late Wordsworth is presented as looking back on his earlier triumph, 'as if the eye and progress of his poem is a mystery to him', trapped in the cycling tendency of his own mind: 'Wordsworth can only go on repeating and recreating images of consciousness'.[5] We might, following Wordsworth himself, ask whether it was for *this* that he wrote two long poems and imagined one even longer still. At stake is the notion of the long poem being *for* anything at all apart from the evidence it gives of a poetic intelligence in process.

The subject of this chapter is Wordsworth, and the idea he and his closest readers had of the great poem which he might compose to bring together all he had written and all he had thought. This poem would be called *The Recluse*; Wordsworth's two long poems, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* constitute its introduction and middle portion respectively. The rest lies in fragments of blank verse: *Home at Grasmere*, the abortive first portion of *The Recluse* proper, but also several other poems gathered by the Cornell series under the evocative title of *Other Late Poems for "The Recluse"*.[6] Blank verse of a meditative strain is the clue that these fragments were 'for' *The Recluse*, and a certain interpretive leeway is justified where that preposition is concerned, since it brings together the dual sense of *The Recluse* as means and end, occasion and destination.

I first use the fragment 'St Paul's' as an entryway into the major themes, successes and disappointments of *The Recluse*. Then, introducing the idea as it appeared in Wordsworth's

[5] Armstrong, *Language as Living Form*, p.87.
[6] The full title is *"The Tuft of Primroses" with Other Late Poems for "The Recluse" by William Wordsworth*, ed. Joseph F. Kishel (Ithaca: Cornell, 1986).

prose, I discuss the ambitions for its wholeness within the context of his career, and then trace the way rivers are used to combine the ending and the endless as an analogy for poetic form. Finally, *The Excursion* is analysed as a comment on *The Recluse* more generally, demonstrating a rather less optimistic sort of endlessness in the figure of the Solitary.

Part 1: 'St Paul's'

Pressed with conflicting thoughts of love and fear
I parted from thee, Friend![7]

So, Wordsworth took his leave of Coleridge in April 1808. One year before, Coleridge had heard Wordsworth read *The Prelude* in Coleorton; the poem written in response to that occasion avoided describing the end of *The Prelude* for two reasons. Firstly, it was only the propaedeutic of a much longer poem, to be called *The Recluse*; secondly, and with greater formal resonance, Coleridge's expectations for what a long poem should be made it difficult for him to relate the literal end of the long poem with its broader ends. In fact, the very notion of direct endedness, of writing something that builds towards a single end and derived its significance from that ending, had come under threat. One point made above is that this was not the result of some abstract theory, but the direct outcome of a practical desire to see the long poem as the site of a non-reductive wholeness. Ideas of continuity, even circularity, jostled against a sense of linear progress; the climax of the long poem becomes deferred or delayed beyond its bounds. But Coleridge's organicism struggled to align an implicitly spatial holism (parts *arranged* in their whole), to include an organicism of telos, of parts in progressive development or growth towards an end. That these ideas do not quite coincide, and that they challenge as much as

[7] 'St Paul's', ll.1-2, in *William Wordsworth. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, p.300. All quotations from the shorter poems are from this edition, unless otherwise noted, and cited by line number in the text.

support each other, was the subject of my above discussion of Coleridge's productive inability to describe the ends of the long poem.

The case of Wordsworth's treatment of the long poem is both simpler and more obscure. We can speak, simply, of the long poems he did write, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. Doing so, however, forces us into the obscure realm of *The Recluse*, an idea for a long poem that seems, with critical hindsight, an impossible task. The most thorough book on *The Recluse*, by Kenneth Johnston, begins by stating that '*The Recluse* exists, not as an unrealized idea, but as a coherent though incomplete body of interrelated texts'.[8] This is a valid and useful proposition; we can, and should, read *The Prelude*, *The Excursion*, and the host of other shorter blank verse poems written 'for *The Recluse*' in their deep and evolving connection. To avoid thinking of *The Recluse* as an idea is, however, to avoid considering what *The Recluse* was for Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the others in the Wordsworth circle who so desired its completion. From the start the long poem called *The Recluse* was ideal rather than substantial, the notion of writing a sort of master poem which would provide internal resolution (to everything Wordsworth wrote) and reveal the metaphysical, epistemological, social resolution of the universe.

Romantic thinkers' need for the symbol, in Nicholas Halmi's analysis, lay not 'in identifying, still less in interpreting, actual symbols, but instead in establishing an ideal of meaningfulness itself'; *The Recluse*, similarly, should be spoken of as an ideal of organisation, the idea that you could write a long poem which, from its first mention, aspired to bring everything together.[9] At the offset, this meant something more like a container than a work of great unity:

> I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society. Indeed I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan. [...] the work of composition is carved out for me, for at least a year and a half to come.[10]

[8] Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, p.xi.
[9] Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.18-9.
[10] To James Webbe Tobin, 6th March 1798, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i, p.212.

This is an easy promise for a young man to make; it proved a difficult one for the mature poet to complete. In 1805, Wordsworth describes the effect of this idea as he completed the 1805 *Prelude*, which 'seemed to have a dead weight about it, the reality so far short of the expectation'.[11] In this letter he formulates the notion of *The Prelude* as the 'portico to the Recluse', but for all the success of *The Prelude*, it can only register as a form of disappointment: 'it was not a happy day'; 'the doubt whether I should ever live to write the Recluse [...] depressed me much'.[12] One event which had certainly knocked the earlier confidence was the death of his younger brother.[13] The anxiety of mortality is palpable in Wordsworth's conditional, 'if I am permitted to bring it [*The Recluse*] to a conclusion', which jars with his earlier confidence.[14] The end of the enlarged *Prelude* has similar worries about its possibility for completion:

> Whether to me shall be allotted life,
> And with life power to accomplish aught of worth
> Sufficient to excuse me in men's sight
> For having given this record of myself,
> Is all uncertain.[15]

The idea of *The Recluse* interferes with *The Prelude*, like all of the poems written under its aegis, by supposing a standard that is beyond the reach of a man's life and talents.

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[11] To George Beaumont, 3rd June 1805, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i. p.594.
[12] *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i, p.594.
[13] William and Dorothy's brother John was lost at sea off Portland in February 1805. William wrote to George Beaumont (11th February 1805, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i, p.541) of the tragic events: 'you will have learned by [the public papers] the loss of the Earl of Abergavenny East Indiaman, and along with her and a great proportion of the crew, that of her captain Our Brother'. As Richard Matlak has written, 'the incident has always been considered consequential for its inspirational influence', since it caused George Beaumont to paint his *Peel Castle in a Storm* (1806) and then Wordsworth to reply in his 'Elegaic Stanzas', 'Captain John Wordsworth's Death at Sea', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 31:3 (2000), pp.127-132, p.127.
[14] *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i, p.594.
[15] *The Prelude*, 1805, xiii, 386-90, in *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979). All references to *The Prelude*, given by line number in the text, are to this parallel text edition and refer to the 1805 version unless otherwise noted.

The idea of *The Recluse* is thus different from, and always beyond, the actuality of *The Recluse* as we find it in the completed long poems of *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. If Coleridge's theoretical conclusions made it impossible to definitively describe the ends of the long poem, then Wordsworth was similarly haunted by the notion of *The Recluse*, which suggested similar ideas of reconciling plurality into unity without reducing it. It is not my purpose here to explain exactly the thoughts going into *The Recluse* poems, but to examine the way the idea of the end, the climax, the development towards something, is variously thwarted, replaced, or extolled as a formal principle within them. This train of thought begins before 'The Ruined Cottage' and before Coleridge met Wordsworth, in the 'Salisbury plain' poems of 1793-5; Wordsworth had been thinking about the endlessness vs. the telos of human life, and the poems that describe it, since his return from France. The question posed by *The Recluse* is whether these long poems, and the *oeuvre* in which they sit, ultimately get any *where* at all, or do they instead suggest something more contentedly processional, happy to go on for ever?

The answer, I argue, is an ostensibly unhappy frustration of both ambitions. Poems cannot go on forever; they do have endings, or at least they will stop if we do not invent an ending for them. But under the impossible demands made by the idea of *The Recluse*, of *ultimate* connectedness that is also immediate, of an immanently apprehensible eternity or infinity of things within a world that is also proceeding according to some benign development, a poetry emerges whose form responds to both. A sort of hybrid ended-ness emerges, which forces a re-evaluation of our senses of literary endings. Frank Kermode wrote 'tracts of time unpunctuated by meaning derived from the end are not to be borne', but Wordsworth finds greater solace in the recognition that 'origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative', connecting the process of things (towards some goal) to their original movements.[16]

[16] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p.162; Wordsworth, 'Essays upon Epitaphs', in *Prose Works of Wordsworth,* ii. p.51.

Christopher Ricks, reading Wordsworth's blank verse, finds that poetry is 'more totally and persistently involved in effecting something through its recurrent sense of an ending' than prose, but Wordsworth is equally likely to describe a language that resonates in its endlessness or openness, a sense of beginning that might mean the impossibility of closure or its replacement with something more optimistic: 'the Maiden sang | As if her song could have no ending' ('The Solitary Reaper', 25-6).[17] Such is the situation made possible by the impossibility of *The Recluse*.

The opening quotation then brings us to the moment of that possibility, whereby a certain kind of determination is received which thwarts the progress of the overall work even as it seems to support it. Wordsworth was 'pressed with conflicting thoughts' when he left Coleridge in 1808. This was a precarious moment for the Wordsworths; the summer of 1807 had seen injury to the idyll of Grasmere, and they were yet to take their secure residence in Rydal Mount. William had gone to London on account of grievous news of Coleridge's health, where he received this message from Dorothy of March 31:

> We are exceedingly concerned, to hear that you, William! have given up all thoughts of publishing your Poem. As to the Outcry against you, I would defy it – what matter, if you get your 100 guineas into your pocket? [...] It is our belief, and that of all who have heard it read, that the *Tale* would bear it up – and without money, what *can* we do? New House! new furniture! such a large family! two servants and little Sally! [...] Do, dearest William! do pluck up your Courage – overcome your disgust to publishing.[18]

The poem was *The White Doe of Rylestone*, a long narrative; this was not the first or last time that William's courage would suffer a wounding insult on the score of an unpublished or unwritten long poem. Coleridge was not, at any rate, in a condition to do much encouraging; he was lecturing on poetry and taking opium, the latter proving a terminal obstacle to the

[17] Ricks, 'A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines', p.19.
[18] *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ii, p.207.

former.[19] In 1806, Wordsworth anticipated the effect Coleridge's return from Malta would have on *The Recluse*: 'Should Coleridge return, so that I might have some conversation with him upon the subject, I should go on swimmingly'.[20] In fact, Coleridge was less helpful, 'suffer[ing] much during the course of the week both in body and mind'.[21]

Johnston has suggested that the fragment of verse Wordsworth wrote after leaving Coleridge's lodgings constitutes an attempt to 'restart The Recluse by re-establishing its original author-audience relation', but it is a poem of farewell more than renewal, and Wordsworth is ultimately given courage to continue by the very thing which obstructs him.[22] He is right, of course, in that this poem is specifically about *The Recluse*, since that is exactly what was on Wordsworth's mind as he walked through snowy London. As Susan Wolfson has noted, when Wordsworth speaks of determination, the word 'is itself disturbed, oscillating between fate and subjective resolve', and the movement between one and the other is the line through the 'St Paul's' fragment.[23] 'Pressed' (1) by his thoughts away from Coleridge, and moving with 'feet masterless' (4), Wordsworth moves through the London streets. What he finds gives him 'an anchor of stability' (11), no more: an evocative word considering how often poetic facility is compared to the piloting of ships. What proceeds is, in miniature, a contrast between organic development and its end, disclosed but not accessible, effected on the level of the poem's syntax.

> Moving form was none
> Save here and there a shadowy Passenger
> Slow, shadowy, silent, dusky, and beyond
> And high above this winding length of street,
> This moveless and unpeopled avenue,
> Pure, silent, solemn, beautiful, was seen
> The huge majestic Temple of St Paul
> In awful sequestration, through a veil,

[19] C.f. *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ii, p.185.
[20] To George Beaumont, 1st August 1806, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ii, p.64.
[21] To George Beaumont, 8th April 1808, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ii, p.208.
[22] *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, p.260.
[23] Susan Wolfson, *Romantic Shades and Shadows* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), p.42.

Through its own sacred veil of falling snow. (20-9)

Ricks's reading of line endings quotes Herbert Lindenberger, who noted a 'brinksmanship' in Wordsworth whereby the reader is led 'to the edge of the abyss, only to reveal the saving hand of a higher power', which is quite true, but the enjambment here implies something genuinely slipping away from Wordsworth, as well as something that is gloriously retrieved at the last second.[24] The stillness of the scene is punctured across the line, 'Save here and there'; more powerfully the lists of adjectives, 'Slow, shadowy, silent, dusky' and 'Pure, silent, solemn, beautiful', which seem, in their context, to apply to pedestrians or the street, are revealed to be an anticipation of the sight of St Paul's cathedral. Hartman described the 'incremental redundance' at work in some of Wordsworth's description, whereby 'the quality of a thing redounds on the thing it qualifies [...] the part of the whole appears greater than the whole of which it is the part', but just as we can imagine the qualities of St Paul's moving in their separateness, replacing not just the whole of St Paul's but the qualities of the street and the people of London, it seems that all of these qualities lead us towards the impassive wholeness of the 'huge majestic Temple'.[25] The point of these lines, their end, is the emergence of St Paul's, which then retrospectively changes (creates) the significance of the preceding lines; but here it seems immediately to slip out of Wordsworth's grasp. The line breaks and we then find ourselves 'In awful sequestration'. If the delaying syntax of the previous lines suggests that we are being drawn into, resolved towards something, there is now an intractable isolation which is revealed to be at the root of the vision in the first place. If this was an attempt, as Johnston claims, to get the relationship between Wordsworth and his 'friend' back as medium of poetic communication, it is a perverse and isolating one. The repetition at the end of the fragment insists upon the separation (across lines and in space) between the poet and the thing he is

[24] Herbert Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude*, 1963, p.222. Quoted in Ricks, 'A Pure Organic Pleasure From the Lines', p.22.
[25] Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p.22.

perceiving, 'through a veil, | Through *its* own sacred veil': sacred for itself, perhaps, a *recluse*-iveness that is not for the poet. The fragment breaks off and was never integrated into a larger poem.

Starting with a fragment which seems to highlight the impossibility of ever getting somewhere bodes ill for a discussion of Wordsworth's long *Recluse* poems, but in the interrelatedness of the themes of purpose and purposefulness, static and dynamic resolve, the infinite potential of certain images (spots of time) and the need to walk on and write more, with their formal analogues: enjambment, delayed reference, sense broken rather than simply combined across the line, it forms a fitting, if not wholly representative, introduction. Above all, it is about the idea of *The Recluse*; there are, as mentioned above, clear personal reasons for Wordsworth's vulnerability at this moment, but the expectation of the composition of a great work was chief among them. The 'St Paul's' fragment dooms *The Recluse* as it gives Wordsworth something to go on. The end will always be out of reach and threatens eternal immobility or endless restlessness for the poet who seeks it. Such then, is the sense of *The Recluse*'s ending, and the context in which Wordsworth made his famous return to his own childhood.

Part 2: The 'Preface' to *The Excursion*

The decision had been made, in March 1798, that he would compose a giant philosophical poem: 'My plan', Wordsworth wrote to James Tobin, 'is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society.'[26] Coleridge is often faulted with setting an impossible standard for Wordsworth's *magnum opus*, but in this first cursory letter the seeds of later fragmentation and incompleteness are there to see. To declare, 'I know not any thing which will not come within

[26] To James Webbe Tobin, 6th March 1798, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i, p.212.

the scope of my plan', is to emphasise the things over the plan. *The Recluse* was to be the title of this poem, and expectations for what it might do would only grow. In 1799, Coleridge would demand of Wordsworth a poem to bring about a spiritual and philosophical rejuvenation in the minds of those who 'ha[d] thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind' following the failure of the French Revolution.[27] According to Kenneth Johnston, 'Wordsworth had got from Coleridge any substantial ideas about a philosophic masterpoem', but he also admits that ideas of the sort were almost inevitable for ambitious poets of the 1790s.[28] In Judith Thompson's description of the meeting of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and John Thelwall in Alfoxden, epic is conjectured to be the mutual conclusion of their discussions: 'they would have engaged in endless literary and political discussions on man, nature, and human life, which inspired and shaped a triumvirate of rival (and unfinished) epics: Coleridge's abortive *The Brook*, Wordsworth's magisterial *The Recluse*, and Thelwall's patriotic *The Hope of Albion'*.[29] Regardless of whose fault the idea of *The Recluse* was, it is very hard to say what, if any, architectonic idea was in the air in 1798.

The public revelation of the plan was much later. In 1814, Wordsworth published *The Excursion*, whose 'Preface' announced *The Recluse* to the reading public. He told his readers that he had written an autobiographical poem – *The Prelude* – and that *The Excursion* was only the middle part of a 'long and laborious' work (*Excursion*, p.38). Wordsworth famously used an architectural analogy to explain how all this would hang together, connecting *The Prelude* to *The Recluse* as 'the Anti-chapel [...] to the body of a gothic Church' (p. 38). This is, as the Cornell editors note, an 'organic model of relation between the parts with a clear definition of their distinctness': we get a full appreciation of the parts of a cathedral without their being

[27] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i, p.290.
[28] 'Who, among the bright young authors of the late 1790s was *not* contemplating an epic poem with some combination of the same elements? The words *Nature*, *Man*, and *Society*, signify Everything', *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, p.11. Johnston is, I think, closer when he writes that the "epic poem was dying out in English, but in efflorescence, not atrophy" than Tucker's portrait of a sudden renaissance in the 1790s.
[29] Judith Thompson, *John Thelwall in the Wordsworth Circle*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.44-5.

totally reduced to the whole which they constitute.[30] This sounds a great deal like what Coleridge described in the organic growth of *The Recluse* from the materials of *The Prelude*: 'the Poem on the growth of your own mind was as the ground-plat and the Roots, out of which the Recluse was to have sprung up as the Tree', but is different in one crucial respect.[31] For Coleridge, organic interrelatedness meant not only the mereological (relating parts to whole), but also the teleological (relating parts to their fit end). A cathedral has its purpose, of course, but our motion through it is not necessarily a progressive one towards an end point. It is a space to wander in, or in which to conduct a cyclical liturgy. Henry James found it a fit comparison for Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*: 'we walk but vaguely and slowly, rather bewilderedly, round and round it'.[32] Perhaps this is precisely what Coleridge had in mind when he added his emphasis to the comment that the philosophy he hoped Wordsworth would explain was 'not only capable of being harmonized with, but even calculated to aid, the unity (Beginning, Middle and End) of a *Poem*'; not then, the different kind of unity (space for meditation, the cycle of liturgy) of a cathedral.[33] Poems go from their beginning to their end; they ought to be, in Coleridge's words 'of determinate length', proceeding along a dialectic intellectual course rather than in the miscellaneous or excursive mode of 'clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings' (*Excursion*, p.39), as the 'Preface' has it. The plan, in Coleridge's mind, was certainly to get somewhere, moving in the final summary upwards and through: 'Facts elevated into Theory – Theory into Laws – & Laws into living & intelligent Powers – true Idealism necessarily perfecting itself in Realism, & Realism refining itself into Idealism'.[34]

Wordsworth's rejection of the systematic ambition of Coleridge seems less important, then, than his rejection of the progressive (and rhetorical) form Coleridge supposed that system

[30] *The Excursion*, p.5.
[31] To William Wordsworth, 22nd May 1815, *Collected Letters of Coleridge,* iv, p.573.
[32] Henry James, *Notes on Novelists*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), p.385.
[33] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iv, p.574.
[34] *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, iv, p.575.

might have. The critical issue is whether it is possible for any poem to contain its own ends within it; Wordsworth's remarks about *The Recluse* suggest rather that it cannot, and indeed that whilst poetry as a medium has its purpose and direction, it is not manifest in the conclusiveness of any particular poem. Wordsworth's 'Preface' declared that 'It is not the Author's intention formally to announce a system' but that there is a system there for the discovering: 'the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself' (*Excursion*, p.39). Modern critics have, in spite of this comment, found something of systematicity in the poem's form. Frances Ferguson describes a poem that 'operates under a system of interrupted checks and balances by which it produces antitypes for all the types it creates', and in a similar vein Alison Hickey sees *The Excursion* as a 'complex textual system' which encompasses, on some level, a scepticism about that structure itself.[35] Wordsworth's imagination, in Hickey's reading, acts as 'a singleness, a darkness, a blankness [...] recalling us in the midst of our systematising'.[36] At any rate, where Francis Jeffrey thought that writing upon system implied a level of moral sclerosis, modern readers find a flexibility of poetic practice which resonates with a generally developmental or processual approach to Wordsworth in general.

The starting point of such an idea is in another comment in *The Excursion*'s 'Preface'.

> Continuing this allusion, he may be permitted to add, that his minor Pieces, which have been long before the Public, when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connection with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little Cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses, ordinarily included in those Edifices. (*Excursion*, p.38)

One form of that proper arrangement was the highly categorised arrangement of his poems in the 1815 *Poems*, when Wordsworth first grouped his poems under the thematic titles which

[35] Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), p.197; Alison Hickey, *Impure Conceits: Rhetoric and Ideology in Wordsworth's Excursion*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.8.
[36] Hickey, *Impure Conceits*, p.123.

modern editions tend to dispense with.[37] As David Duff has wryly observed, Wordsworth's first collected works interacts and revises his most famous comment about the nature of poetry, since with it, 'Poetry is not just "emotion recollected in tranquillity," it's emotion re-collected in tranquillity – with each new edition'.[38] Anything in that volume, we are told, 'might be regarded under a two-fold view; as composing an entire work within themselves, and as adjuncts to the philosophical Poem, *The Recluse*'. The difficult question of the unity of this arrangement is a fragile one, as suggested by the editorial violence with which Wordsworth defended the individual integrity of his poems within the overall scheme:

> I should have preferred to scatter the contents of these volumes at random, if I had been persuaded that, by the plan adopted, anything material would be taken from the natural effect of the pieces, individually, on the mind of the unreflecting Reader.[39]

This double form, producing maximal individual integrity and overall organisational unity has the same having and eating cake quality we normally associate with Coleridge. We shall see below how similar impulses work within the long poems themselves, especially in *The Prelude*'s attempt to bring together the imagistic psychology of the spot, as self-contained, integral, distinct or sequestered, with its evocation of continuous intercourse and organic interchange. If Wordsworth thus gives us some licence for engaging with his entire creative output as either the centre or adjunct of *The Recluse*, there is a more cynical critical possibility. Much of the poetry Wordsworth was writing outside the bounds of the *Recluse* poems proper was an escape from the enormous ambition and expectation of that project. We might read those other poems as the shadow of *The Recluse*, as a telling record of the things that

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[37] Allison Turner has suggestively argued that the classificatory ambitions in Wordsworths *Poems* 1815 emerges partly from the way Dorothy engaged with nature in her journals: 'If, as Levin and others have suggested, Dorothy figures the natural world as a relational context – a field in which the value of any one object depends upon its placement – then William's turn towards classification suggests the influence of her thinking on his own': 'Nature and Classification in Dorothy and William Wordsworth's Writings', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 58:4 (2018), pp.833-854, p.836.

[38] David Duff, 'Wordsworth and the Language of Forms: The Collected "Poems" of 1815', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 34:2 (2003), pp.86-90, p.87.

[39] 'Preface to the Edition of 1815', *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, iii, 28.

Wordsworth could not, in fact, integrate within the project, or which provided a release from it. The alternative is to see this as that *bona fide* system which the 'Preface' announces, as Clifford Siskin has suggested: something that is definitionally excluded from the form possible for any poem, no matter how long or how well organised: 'the primary whole was not himself-as-author but the system-in-verse that was his lifelong project'.[40] System in Siskin's analysis is rather a starting point or principle than a goal, a law for the arrangement of material which, although produced by analysis, does not proceed analytically.[41]

A system viewed another way might also have a clear goal in mind, however, offering not just the occasion for poetry, a means of making it methodical before the fact, but also a way of developing towards some final point. M. H. Abrams, who also felt that a system had a circularity to it, working 'by virtue of the fact that its conclusion returns to and implicates the premise', nonetheless saw it as having a destination.[42] In Abrams's reading of the German idealists (and also in Coleridge's criticism of *The Excursion*), their search for *the* system imagined a movement through difference, contradiction and combination 'toward a final state in which all oppositions will be reconciled'.[43] System is a mechanism which comes back to its premise here, but in its highest form (as Coleridge thought of it) it also aims to progress towards something climactic. Siskin, who has the physical Galilean system of orbital movement in mind more than Abrams, imagines the opposite: 'system only became "interesting" when it became plural [....] It became, to use Galileo's word, "really" interesting when systems started showing up inside of each other'.[44] In the revised *Prelude* we read, for instance, of the power of geometric rules to describe the cosmos,

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[40] Clifford Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge, Ma: The MIT Press, 2017), p.196. There is an intrinsic (and impractical) open-endedness to such a project since a system places no upper limit on the phenomena which it purports to systematize.
[41] In other words, whilst we might derive a system from our analysis of phenomena, once it has been observed, the integration of new material into that system is a reiteration of the validity of that initial premise.
[42] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973), p.172.
[43] *Natural Supernaturalism*, p.173.
[44] Siskin, *System*, p.22.

> On the relation those abstractions bear
> To Nature's laws, and by what process led
> Those immaterial Agents bowed their heads
> Duly to serve the mind of earth-born Man
> From star to star, from kindred sphere to sphere,
> From system on to system without end. (*Prelude* 1850, VI, 123-8)

One distinction to be made, then, is between spatially-derived systems, as, here Siskin's or Wordsworth's, and a sense of system as an unfolding temporal predicament with a clear telos, as in Coleridge's view. When Coleridge asks Wordsworth to outline a system in his poem, he is not, of course, assuming that this will constitute the invention or the constitution of that philosophical system itself; but there is an important distinction between a sense of something as *developing* systematically as opposed to *moving* in a systematic way, since one would rely on the linear movement of a long poem for its expression, whereas the other could be achieved purely in the act of interpretation, 'retrieved by the reader'. As Scott Hess has suggested, Wordsworth's system might, in fact, be an attempt to put the author (and also, seemingly, the reader) at the heart of questions of aesthetics and taste.[45] Ultimately, it is less important to know exactly what the meaning of Wordsworth's system is than to see it as one site among many for the showdown between a sense of eternity (the system of things – the stable explanation for the way they are) and a sense of purpose and development (the system of things – the revelation of their destination in their nature).

The opposite view, as taken by Hazlitt, is to reject the idea that there is anything systematic there at all. He saw that the poem presented itself 'loose and irregular in the rude chaos of aboriginal nature', which seems to mean that it never sinks from the level of generality

[45] Scott Hess, 'Wordsworth's "System," the Critical Reviews, and the Reconstruction of Literary Authority', *European Romantic Review*, 16.4 (2005), pp.471-497. In this reading, Coleridge's idea of the clerisy effectively neuters the radical effects of Wordsworth's system (which sound a lot like liberalism), which seemed to give too much autonomy to the reader and the author, rather than established tradition.

to any concrete particularity.[46] 'To him the great and the small are the same; the near and the remote; what appears, and what only is. The common and the permanent, like the Platonic ideas, are his only realities. All accidental varieties and individual contrasts are lost in an endless continuity of feeling.'[47] Hazlitt cannot, in his review, quite make up his mind about the problem here; in the earlier portion, it seems that the excess of general sentiments is the problem, a continuousness that never gets anywhere, but later the sense is that Wordsworth has 'chosen to encumber himself with a load of narrative and description, which, instead of assisting hinders the progress and effect of the general reasoning', and the essay ends with the evocative enjoinder for Wordsworth to write as he did in the final part of Book VII of *The Excursion*: '*Esto* perpetua' – let it be for ever.[48] Hazlitt's inability to clarify his terms – is endless continuity bad in itself, or is it just in this mood? does narrative of all kinds intrude upon philosophy, or are some kinds of narrative useful to a philosophical end? – is suggestive, since these are exactly the sorts of questions *The Recluse* asks of the world and itself.

Perhaps, however, the very openness of *The Recluse* as an idea presents a critical opportunity. Rather than trying to define or defend it as a unified corpus, as Kenneth Johnston does, we can see it as a premise, an idea which Wordsworth could not unthink, even if he did not apply himself to it equally in practice. It invites us to imagine the categories of coherence and independence as they emerge in these quite different texts, and especially the ways in which they describe the dual ends, formal and purposive, self-integral and architectonic, of individual moments of poetry and poems. Johnston is, I think, closer to the real appreciation of *The Recluse* when he observes that '"the FIRST GREAT PHILOSOPHICAL POEM" (as Coleridge always headlined *The Recluse*) was not a discrete poem at all, but a germ of the modern secular idea

[46] Hazlitt reviewed *The Excursion* for *The Examiner* in three parts between August and October 1814. Quoted from *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage, Volume 1*, ed. by Robert Woof (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.366-381, p.369.
[47] *Wordsworth: Critical Heritage*, i, p.370.
[48] *Wordsworth: Critical Heritage*, i, p.371, p.381.

of the entire canon of imaginative literature constituting a scripture wherein we read and build our minds'.[49] The idea of *The Recluse* is thus necessarily organisational as well as substantial; it was not to write a certain sort of poem, but to imagine a means of realising a unified kind of poetry. To write about the way Wordsworth's poems imagined their ultimate end, their place in a wider structure, and the means by which the incidents of a life, society, or universe, could be assembled into something whole, whilst respecting their own individuality, is *de facto*, to write about *The Recluse.*

There is thus a tension between the finishedness (or unfinishedness) of the individual poem and a different kind of end towards which an entire body of poetry is written. Wordsworth certainly had an ear for what he perceived to be boundless or endless in song. In the poems of the Scottish Tour of 1803 (when he really ought to have been writing *The Recluse*), Wordsworth revels in the apparent infinitude of song. The 'Solitary Reaper', for instance, suggests not just the possibility of ongoing song, but the speculation that such a song really has the resources to do so: 'Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang | As if her song *could* have no ending' (25-6, emphasis mine); the next poem in the sequence, 'Stepping Westward' finds an openness of another kind:

> I liked the greeting; 'twas a sound
> Of something without place or bound;
> And seem'd to give me spiritual right
> To travel through that region bright. (13-6)

In both cases, the finite earthly sound, no matter how endless it might seem, does have some internal persistence in the memory of the poet: 'The music in my heart I bore, | Long after it was heard no more' ('Solitary Reaper', l.31-2). In 'Stepping Westward', the prospect is of open possibility:

[49] *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, p.xxiv.

> and while my eye
> Was fixed upon the glowing sky,
> The echo of the voice enwrought
> A human sweetness with the thought
> Of travelling through the world that lay
> Before me in my endless way. (21-6)

The optimism of such a sentiment is entirely in its endlessness, similar to the freedom felt at the start of the 1805 *Prelude* (which quickly turns into the desperate search for an end) and is surely the same optimism of the poet who presumes the discovery of a system, which once discovered cannot fail to integrate all the poetry he will come to write. Christopher Ricks, reiterating the maxims of Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria*, tells us that Wordsworth's poetry maintains an un-reductive unity, a sort of system: 'No fragmentation into separateness; but also no dissolution within a greedily engrossing unity'.[50] Coleridge, of course, thought that Wordsworth's poems were indeed formed of 'striking passages', rather than holistic connections: the lines live 'from their own independent weight or beauty'.[51] Ricks contrasts poetry and prose in a way that only a modern critic can, however, when he imagines the way the line endings of poetry undermine our sense of *the* end. Lines are 'those units which constitute poetry but not prose, and which make of poetry a medium which is more totally and persistent involved in effecting something through its recurrent sense of an ending'.[52] Said like that, the situation is a blithe one, but what are we to make of the contrast between that definitive 'effect[ing]' and that formal 'recurrence', and how interminable a prolixity are we to tolerate in the name of such recurrence? Equally, it becomes more difficult in this light to speak about the bounds of individual poems, if the effects to be achieved are the products of reiteration and persistence, rather than accretion or dialectic. Coleridge was alive to the danger of such an approach: looking for an ending in every couplet might make the whole merely a 'sorites', and

[50] 'A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines', p.3.
[51] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.106.
[52] 'A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines', p.19.

thus formally indeterminate: couplets heaped like grains of sand of uncertain contribution to the whole.[53]

The opposite of this recurrence is the more general 'sense of an ending' to which Ricks is alluding. Kermode tells us that 'tracts of time unpunctuated by meaning derived from the end are not to be borne', the burden of all fictions.[54] With Wordsworth we might make some adjustments: no other poet made so much of a return to his origins, after all: perhaps we ought to say that Wordsworth's tracts punctuate themselves with reference to the beginning. What is at stake, however, is not so much the difference between end or origin determination, but the difference between an approach which seeks to make a progressive whole of any kind in his poems, in terms of the internal structure of his long works (*The Prelude* and *The Excursion*) and of the entire corpus, and another which instead appraises poetry as an activity, continuously if variously deployed, but which does not derive its significance from the end as we find it within the form of individual poems. My argument is that *The Recluse* in its various forms can be characterised as variously resistant to and drawn towards the idea of getting somewhere or progressing towards a climactic point, and the idea of revealing something that is always the case, something static underlying the dynamic whole. The first is manifest in the particularly generous kind of development which Wordsworth's long poems expound, involving retro and pro-spection, wayward and backwardness, but which can nonetheless work through the logic of an end and cannot be expressed simply as a poetry of process or habit. The second is not just attributable to the early 'pantheistic Wordsworth', but to a constant train of thought which runs through his career, bubbling up most clearly in the form of rivers. It is ultimately in his treatment of rivers that Wordsworth conducts his most extensive assessment of the telos of experiences, lives, and the long poems he wrote.

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[53] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.19.
[54] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p.162.

Part 3: Wordsworth's Early Ends

The Recluse is perhaps best understood as the last in a series of ideas in which Wordsworth, with assistance from Coleridge, tried to understand his vocation as a poet. To work out what he was writing for, in other words. 'The Ruined Cottage' was the primary stimulus, suggesting a way forward; indeed the concept of *The Recluse* was partly invented to find a home for 'The Ruined Cottage', along with other blank verse fragments of the 1790s, hence the generous scope of the project as Wordsworth saw it. Declaring that he could not imagine 'any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan' sets the poem up to fail, of course, but it also reveals that from its outset the idea of *The Recluse* was substantially an idea for bringing things together, rather than a stimulus for purely new composition.[55] There are no simple beginnings or endings in Wordsworth, however, and his poetry was like that from the earliest days.

I start, therefore, before 'The Ruined Cottage' and before any sustained conversation with Coleridge. In his *Salisbury Plain* poems, Wordsworth traced the intellectual development he would later outline in *The Prelude*, exploring differing forms of protest poetry before setting out on the 'considerably advance towards "The Borderers", "The Ruined Cottage" and Wordsworth's greatest poetry of the "Mind of Man"'.[56] One other reason for taking these poems seriously as the real portico for a study of *The Recluse* poems is that Wordsworth continued working on them through the 1790s, up until the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* and the pivot towards *The Recluse*.[57] Indeed, work continued as he was announcing his long philosophical poem to his friends; Wordsworth promised the conclusion of *Salisbury Plain* to Joseph Cottle in May 1798, remarking that he would 'say nothing of Salisbury Plain 'till I see you, I am

[55] To James Webbe Tobin, 6th March 1798, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth,* i, p.212.
[56] Gill, '"Adventures on Salisbury Plain" and Wordsworth's Poetry of Protest 1795-97', *Studies in Romanticism*, 11:1 (1972), pp.48-65, p.49.
[57] In Stephen Gill's edition of *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), he outlines the story of the almost publication of *Salisbury Plain* in 1796, pp.7-8.

determined to finish it, and equally so that You shall publish.'[58] In the same letter, Wordsworth mentions an unqualified 'another plan', presumably *The Recluse*. At any rate, even if the *Salisbury Plain* poems present a dead end of sorts *vis à vis The Recluse* proper, its death is intimately connected, if not exactly simultaneous with, the birth of *The Recluse*, especially since they begin a discussion of endings (of lives and poems) that develops continuously from this early moment, through 'The Ruined Cottage' and into *The Prelude* and *Excursion*.

One place this early effort ended up was in 'The Female Vagrant': a story excised from Wordsworth's earlier Salisbury plain poems for separate publication in *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem ends thus:

> She ceased, and weeping turned away,
> As if because her tale was at an end
> She wept;—because she had no more to say
> Of that perpetual weight which on her spirit lay. (266-70)

The tale of her life is not properly at its end (only 'as if') and having no more to say suggests a precise denial of consolation at the end. The story ends, in this logic, because the language runs out of steam; like so many of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the point seems to be that narrative ends have little to do with the overcoming of emotional states or feelings of consolation; there is a contrast between the perpetuity of her suffering and the whimpering anti-conclusiveness of her story as it stops. In the first version of *Salisbury Plain*, which does not feature these lines, her story's ending is a symptom of momentary vacancy; she 'paused' (325), rather than 'ceased', in this account, driven backwards towards 'those hours that sealed her doom' (326).[59] This woman, like Coleridge's *Mariner*, is condemned precisely to a kind of endlessness. If the Mariner's situation is more literal, both he and the woman share a common dissociation of final

[58] *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, i, p.218.
[59] The first version of the Salisbury plain poems was simply called 'Salisbury Plain', before being revised into 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' (it was finally published as 'Guilt or Sorrow' in 1842). All texts, cited by line number, are taken from Stephen Gill's Cornell edition.

and rhetorical ends: their stories might mean something to us, but they bring their narrators no consolation. Their stories can stop, but they find no end.

The revised version of *Salisbury Plain*, which the young Coleridge thought sufficient evidence for Wordsworth being 'the best poet of the age', frames this inconclusive stop within a moral framework that flirts with circularity.[60] The final lines of the first *Salisbury Plain* represent a highly allegorised exhortation, full of rhetorical confidence:

> Heroes of Truth pursue your march, uptear
> Th' Oppressor's dungeon from its deepest base;
> High o'er the towers of Pride undaunted rear
> Resistless in your might the herculean mace
> Of Reason; let foul Error's monster race
> Dragged from their dens start at the light with pain
> And die; pursue your toils, till not a trace
> Be left on earth of Superstition's reign,
> Save that eternal pile which frowns on Sarum's plain. (541-9)

In the second version, the protagonist of the poem and audience of the woman's story is a wandering sailor, driven to murder for which he will hang at the poem's close. Frequently he suffers trances, losses of consciousness upon encountering events that overwhelm him, such as the story of the woman. Heidi Thomson has argued that these trances 'expres[s] and rehears[e] the loss of life he has experienced and will experience', signs of the coming end and evidence that it has already in some sense arrived.[61] One way of reading the poem's overall structure is of a return towards social sympathy and enlightenment, so that our abject, traumatised sailor, by acknowledging his guilt and accepting his punishment, ultimately does find spiritual end and solace. Hartman found the *Salisbury Plain* poems purgatorial, a 'middle realm where man in exile seeks self-renovation', in which Wordsworth glimpses but never quite grasps the movement towards *paradiso* which is the cohering line through Wordsworth's major poetry. [62]

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[60] To John Thelwall, 13th May 1796, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i, p.215.
[61] Heidi Thomson, 'A Perfect Storm: The Nature of Consciousness in Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain*', *English Studies*, 96:5 (2015), pp.525-540, p.526.
[62] Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale, 1964), p.125.

Nonetheless, Hartman's argument seems to say, such a poem must be written, such a journey described, so that Wordsworth can cross to the other side. The sailor in *The Adventures of Salisbury Plain* does not find the spiritual consolation which Richard Gravil finds in the final version of the poem, but he does walk to declare his crimes 'not without pleasure' once he has been discovered and is pleased to receive a swift execution.[63] His actions throughout the poem might be read as moral tests in which he unfailingly proves the foundations of good character in the face of economic, military, and penal systems which have compromised it and incited it to murder. The poem becomes, in Stephen Gill's words, a reflection on 'the causes of crime and its effect not only on the victims but on the criminal himself', and part of that reflection concerns precisely the ends of punishment.[64] Despite explaining why a good man came to become a murderer, justice for Wordsworth's sailor means the ultimate, terminal punishment.

The revisions Wordsworth made to the poem in transforming it into *Guilt and Sorrow*, published in 1842 concern precisely the end of the poem and the portrait of the end of the sailor's life. In the first version, the man is hung out on display, just as he saw a murdered man at the start of his journey.

> They left him hung on high in iron case,
> And dissolute men, unthinking and untaught
> Planted their festive booths beneath his face;
> And to that spot, which idle thousands sought,
> Women and children were by fathers brought;
> And now some kindred sufferer driven, perchance,
> That way when into storm the sky is wrought,
> Upon his swinging corpse his eye may glance
> And drop, as he once dropped, in miserable trance. ('Adventures on Salisbury Plain', 820-828)

[63] Richard Gravil has written that a spiritual conclusion emerged in the final version of the poem, which was published as *Guilt and Sorrow* in 1842, where the sailor finds that he will, "at the moment of his self-chosen execution, in expiation of man's law, be 'wafted' to bliss", *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation*, 2nd edn (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2015), p.359.
[64] Stephen Gill, '"Adventures on Salisbury Plain" and Wordsworth's Poetry of Protest 1795-97', *Studies in Romanticism*, 11:1 (1972), pp.48-65, p.55.

There is a circularity to this ending; the implication at the end is that another man, guilty of some obscure wrong, will come upon his body and the story of *The Adventures of Salisbury Plain* will repeat itself. The point, as raised by Quentin Bailey, is that 'brutal punishments could not deter crimes'; the execution inspires idleness and unnatural festivity, and the imagined future witness of the body is the 'sufferer', rather than the agent of his criminality.[65] The entire point must be, therefore, that there is no final end to this execution or poem. The later version does not so much revise as reverse this situation. Whereas the earlier poem portrays the sufferer of an unjust system, driven towards an arbitrary end to which the mind can only assent, the later one recasts his journey in the light of a personal, private transformation.

> His fate was pitied. Him in iron case
> (Reader, forgive the intolerable thought)
> They hung not:—no one on *his* form or face
> Could gaze, as on a show by idlers sought;
> No kindred sufferer, to his death-place brought
> By lawless curiosity or chance,
> When into storm the evening sky is wrought,
> Upon his swinging corse an eye can glance,
> And drop as he once dropped, in miserable trance. ('Guilt and Sorrow', 658-67)

Wordsworth exactly negates the situation speculated upon in the earlier poem, asking the reader to forgive him for the thoughts which he still cannot quite avoid entertaining. Of course, this takes an open ending and makes it a negative one: we only know what did not happen to him. In 'The Female Vagrant''s ending, Geoffrey Hill imagined that we both 'glimpse the remoteness of words from suffering' and see that she is nonetheless committed to language 'as the moral action'.[66] In this final version of the poem, the poem refuses exactly the sort of moral authority in ambiguity that Hill describes.

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[65] Quentin Bailey, '"Strike not from Law's firm hand that awful Rod"" Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain and the Penalty of Death, *European Romantic Review*, 21:2 (2010), p.235-249, p241. Bailey's argument eloquently sees Wordsworth exploring and ultimately moving beyond Godwin's rationalism in his Salisbury Plain poems.
[66] Geoffrey Hill, '"Perplexed Persistence": The Exemplary Failure of T. H. Green', in *Collected Critical Writings*, pp.109-27, p.123.

Wordsworth had been contemplating the notion of ends in their political sense in the years before 'The Ruined Cottage' as well. In the seditious lines of the unpublished *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,* for instance, we read that certain ends justify means that would otherwise be outrageous or contrary to their spirit, since 'the obstinacy and perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence'.[67] What is allowed now is justified by what will be achieved then, not because it is good in itself. His later pamphlet, *On the Convention of Cintra*, published in 1808, has much to say about the regrettable impact of such thinking. In coming to such an agreement with Napoleon, 'the British Generals acted as if they had no purpose but that the enemy should be removed from the country in which they were upon *any* terms'.[68] This does not mount much of a rejection of the importance of ends in the argument of the *Letter*; after all Wordsworth's point is precisely that the British mistook their end in coming to the peninsula. But the argument does forbid precisely the sort of end-justification which the *Letter* expounds. Armies should march with 'universal morality' (*Prose*, I:247) that cannot be put aside on the grounds of expediency.[69] The 'sacred cause' requires 'the aid of intellect, knowledge, and love, and rejects every other. It is in vain to send forth armies if these do not inspire and direct them'.[70] As always with Wordsworth, and as much of my chapter will be busy with, the movement of water gives him his analogy, although in this case the exact tenor of the metaphorical river is unclear: it is clearly a righteous cause, but whether of the particular kind (the action of an army and its generals) or the most general (the development of civilization) is hard to say: 'The stream is as pure as it is mighty, fed by ten

[67] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, i, p.33.
[68] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, i, p.261.
[69] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, i, p.247.
[70] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, i, p.248.

thousand springs in the bounty of untainted nature; any augmentation from the kennels and sewers of guilt and baseness may clog, but cannot strengthen it.'[71]

That is not to say that an inflexible or categorical kind of morality is being espoused by the later Wordsworth. Justified war necessitates murder, of course, and Wordsworth is no pacifist. There is affinity as well as difference between the two positions; as David Bromwich has pointed out, the argument for 'republican nationalism', is associated with 'another people's act of national resistance': 'So complete is this equation that Wordsworth can say that the spirit of the French revolution is most alive in the work of destroying "the child of the revolution," Napoleon.'[72] In the language of *Cintra*, however, the movement of the stream has a quality of non-progressive purity. It *is* pure, just as certain other inflows *are* base or guilty, and the right destination can only be arrived by the intermediate regulation, rather than by the rush to the end. By contrast, when a river bubbles up in the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, purity is itself progressive, and that progression incorporates moral failures within its course, rather than seeing them as absolutely discrete in origin and use, as in the above quotation from *Cintra.* Wordsworth here excuses the waywardness of a free people on the grounds not of some internal value, but as a part of a necessary step: 'Having dried up the source from which flows the corruption of the public opinion, he will be sensible that the stream will go on gradually refining itself'.[73] In the later formulation, water is objectively good or bad, whereas in the earlier one, the water is growing progressively better as it flows along.

The other important alteration between the two figures is a certain loss of confidence and gain in precarity. Not everything in the later stream is good, nor is it all in aid of or supported by the overall march of progress. In Bromwich's view, one great question of *Concerning the Convention of Cintra* is what to do with a negative ambition, such as removing

[71] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, i, p.248.
[72] 'Romantic Nationalism and "The Convention of Cintra", *Romanticism and Politics*, 49:3 (2010), pp.601-610, p.602.
[73] 'Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff', *Collected Prose*, i, p.58.

a conquering army. There is a practical question – what should we do next? – but also a theoretical one: 'What if the *justice* of the cause extends only to mere "riddance"? What then becomes of the vast radiations of a feeling that cannot contain itself or rest content with so merely negative a triumph?'[74] What is at stake here is thus the question of the right end. Where, in fact, is that stream flowing? One answer given by *Cintra* is the rather ambitious 'ocean of eternal love'.[75] As in the earlier example, the figure of a stream bubbles up without clear introduction; this paragraph begins with another element entirely: 'let the fire, which is never wholly to be extinguished, break out afresh', but the argument is clear.[76] Man, fully awakened and joined with his comrades, will find that his passions, imagination, and reason develop wondrously. He made a similar point in a lengthy political letter. The poet in this case has a plan but finds that his materials are not quite aligned with it: his efficient and final causes do not coincide.

> Now a State ought to be governed (at least in these times) – the labours of the statesman ought to advance – upon calculations and from impulses similar to those which give motion to the hand of a great Artist when he is preparing a picture, or of a mighty Poet when he is determining the proportions and march of a Poem. Much is to be done by rule; the great outline is previously to be conceived in distinctness, but the consummation of the work must be trusted to resources that are not tangible, though known to exist.[77]

Here, then, the notion of political ends turns back to the ends of the long poem. Wordsworth contrasts the architectonic desire to make such and such a poem with the business of actually getting it done. The trust he places in the intangible resources of his consummation was, of course, not fully rewarded in the case of *The Recluse*. In fact, the poems written towards that ambitious goal show an ambivalence between the 'proportions and march of a Poem', the

[74] 'Romantic Nationalism and "The Convention of Cintra"', p.604.
[75] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, i, p.326.
[76] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, i, p.328.
[77] To Captain Pasley, March 28, 1811, *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ii, p.482.

scheme drawn up to write a poem for a particular end, and the wayward, backward, sideward looking habits of poetry itself.

The Recluse revolved, from the start, around finding a final place for poems which had already been written, as well as describing a poem that needed to be composed. The prompting poem was 'The Ruined Cottage'; the entire project of *The Recluse* might thus be described as an attempt to bring the story Wordsworth had written about Margaret, her abandonment and death, called (but not titled) 'The Ruined Cottage, to an end.[78] In the first version, the ending has no moral, but juxtaposes the itinerant narrator with an immobilised woman.

> —Yet still
> She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds
> Have parted hence; and still that length of road
> And this rude bench one torturing hope endeared,
> Fast rooted at her heart, and here, my friend,
> In sickness she remained, and here she died,
> Last human tenant of these ruined walls. (522-8)

It is not a happy ending, but it is, at least, an ending. Johnston has described the problem which Wordsworth faced as he set about preparing *Lyrical Ballads* and embarking upon *The Recluse*, writing about 'extremes of the human condition, for which *nothing can be done*' and asking the question 'How is it possible to write *poems* about these subjects?'[79] That it was eminently possible to write such poems – and indeed everyone agreed that Wordsworth seemed to have discovered his highest poetic pitch in doing so – suggests we should revise the question to consider instead what to do with such poems after they have been written: are they self-sufficient, ends in themselves, or instead parts of a broader project for which they act as example or promise of work to come? Margaret's problem seems, in the Pedlar's eye, to be her fixedness to a single spot. He is itinerant, passing through the world and observing its change.

[78] I take the MS B text, the earliest complete version of the poem, before the moralising coda was added in MS D, from Gill's *William Wordsworth. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, pp.149-62. Cited by line numbers in the text.
[79] Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, p.9

Margaret, like Tennyson's 'Tithonus' endures the premature ended-ness of the bereaved, but it is hope and love that are her undoing: the sufficiency of her grief, not its restlessness.

As I suggested above in my discussion of Coleridge, self-sufficiency can be as much an obstacle to coherence as incompleteness. When Thomas McFarland writes that 'Home at Grasmere', a poem written in 1800 and commonly held to be intended for the first part of *The Recluse*, is too successful to justify the rest of *The Recluse* he is making a Coleridgean argument: 'If [...] the virtual entirety of Wordsworth's joy and intensity is deposited in the first few hundred lines of that poem, it is to be expected that the remainder of his vast project [...] would find themselves involved in an unhappy paradox'.[80] This is reminiscent of Coleridge's warning about the danger of self-contained lines or passages, which 'becom[e] disjoined from its context, and forms a separate whole, instead of a harmonizing part'.[81] 'Home at Grasmere' commences with too much unity, the argument goes, and inevitably strays from it; looking for something else to say, he finds only things that lead him away from 'Perfect Contentment, Unity entire' ('Home at Grasmere', l.170), touching upon the ill omen of a pair of poached swans.[82] More worryingly, it gives little justification for the planned masses of philosophical verse to come.

I have tried to suggest an ambivalence in the pre-Recluse poems and then intensified under the aegis of writing a single unifying poem, between two ideas of poems and their ends. There is, then, a teleological Wordsworth in *The Recluse*, which sees things (poems, people) as proceeding towards ends, even if those ends normally disclose a more profound or fundamental telos. This developmental poet brings together different movements, forwards and back, retrospective and prospective, into a single movement. The other Wordsworth is not exactly

[80] Thomas McFarland, *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.99.
[81] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.18.
[82] As Kenneth Johnston puts it, 'If the swans are gone, just like that, with no explanation or meaning, what does it signify for the fate of another "solitary pair" coming into this valley', *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, p.90.

one who rejects ends, but who has an instinct for the sublime (or the horror) of the eternal, haunted or reassured by the infinite or boundless and the endless – things which have no end. Rivers are the testing ground for these ideas, as they were for Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*'s speculative long poem *The Brook*, but Wordsworth thought with greater length and depth on the movement of water, which offered a way of bringing together of telos (spring to sea) and waywardness, identity and change, endlessness and development. A river is always flowing *somewhere*, but it is also *always* flowing somewhere:

> Glide gently, thus for ever glide,
> O Thames! [...]
> Oh glide, fair stream! for ever so;
> Thy quiet soul on all bestowing,
> 'Till all our minds for ever flow,
> As thy deep waters now are flowing.
> ('Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames at Evening', l.17-24)

McFarland suggested that Coleridge led Wordsworth 'to act against his own tendency', in approaching the prospect of *The Recluse*, but Wordsworth's tendency is not necessarily easy to describe.[83] The word, in fact appears in a central moment in his first 'Essay upon Epitaphs' which highlights the particularly Wordsworthian approach to the nature of ends, their relations with origins, progress, and the unchanging. I will start there, before using the theme of rivers to lead us through the poems of *The Recluse* and their thematization of their ends. In one early unused fragment, Wordsworth flirts with a pantheistic or Parmenidean cosmology which would render the notion of an end nonsensical, except to the degree that there might be a private telos to the revelation of this endlessness.

> In weakness we create distinctions, then
> Believe that all our puny boundaries are things
> Which we perceive, and not which we have made—
> In which all beings live with God, themselves
> Are God, existing in one mighty whole,

[83] *Intensity and Achievement*, p.102.

> As undistinguishable as the cloudless east
> At noon is from the cloudless west, when all
> The hemisphere is one cerulean blue. (*Peter Bell* MS. (d.) 13-20)

It is not my purpose to suggest that thus is a self-consistent response to the world, which we could call *The Recluse*, but there is perhaps greater integrity to Wordsworth's attempt to find the ends for his poems than critics have given him credit for, and in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, along with other shorter poems destined for *The Recluse* we read of a great poet caught between a strong sense of purpose and a feeling for the insufficiency of all human purposes in the face of an omnipresent nature.

According to Bromwich, 'The long poem he withheld for most of his life (*The Prelude*) is a record of accidents, to which the author hoped to give coherence'.[84] Coherence in that light is necessarily organisational and retrospective. The tortured history of 'The Ruined Cottage', which eventually found a home in the first book of *The Excursion* is testimony to a genuine poetic restlessness of this retrospective kind on Wordsworth's account and is the strongest evidence for a continuously developing (if not always improving) poetic impulse, which was always involved in the effort to give coherence to its accidents. Keeping a poem open in this way might be attractive for the intellectual flexibility it provides; Stephen Gill has shown the deftness with which Wordsworth updated his poem, originally written in 1797, to become a 'witness of the 1840s'.[85] Another argument might be that there is something inside the poem itself which simulates returns and revisitings of a less textual or compositional kind. In Sally Bushell's reading, Wanderer and the revisitings he conducts within the story of the poem give us the 'essential structure for "The Ruined Cottage", requiring repeated re-readings of

[84] David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.4.
[85] Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth's Revisitings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.83. See also Gill's reading of Wordsworth's withholding of *The Prelude* for posthumous publication: 'by holding together both the past (chronicled in the poem) and the unfolding present (registered in revision) the poem on the growth of his own mind in its development bore witness that the growth was not finished', (p.142).

individuals in particular sites as separate moments in time', which is then a key of sorts for *The Excursion* entire.[86] The germ of *The Recluse* becomes, in Bushell's reading, one of quite literal 'open-endedness', commencing a literary activity that can never be said to end, or have an end.[87] Arguments of this kind, which include revision within a vision of composition that is organic in its reliance on some sense of unfolding in accordance with an author's life, beg a tragic conclusion.

Part 4: 'A Voice That Flowed'

In 1798, Wordsworth was taking refuge in blank verse poetry on the subject of his childhood. The lines, once arranged into the first version of *The Prelude*, began by asking whether his life up until that point amounted to much, whether a gloomy, procrastinatory winter in Germany was ripe ground for the realisation of enormous potential.

> Was it for this
> That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
> To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,
> And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
> And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
> That flowed along my dreams? (*1799*, 1-6)

There are two ways of reading this question. The first is given in the expanded form of the 1805 *Prelude*, where it is a statement of frustration. Wordsworth here, 'recoil[s]' and 'droop[s]' (*1805*, I, 167) suffering 'indolence' and self-doubt as he is 'unprofitably travelling towards [of all ends] the grave' (267). With our biographical hindsight, the question appears directly related to Wordsworth's inability to get started on *The Recluse*, the philosophical master poem which all his closest readers expected him to write, and which he would never deliver. This vision

[86] Sally Bushell, 'From "The Ruined Cottage" to "The Excursion": Revision as Re-reading', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 45:2 (2014), pp.75-83, p.81.
[87] 'From "The Ruined Cottage" to "The Excursion": revision as Re-reading', p.75.

reveals two Wordsworthian facts about the way things end: the end is recurrent (formal ends are such by the revelation of later purposes or ends) and tied to the beginning. The second, more speculative way of reading this question is less for its indignation and disbelief as an expression of its author's waywardness, and more for its prioritising of the doubtful ends of experience itself: if not for *this*, then for what? There is, then, in Wordsworth, a tension between a holistic, retro- and pro-spective view of human life and poetic form which is nonetheless teleological in its belief in progress towards an end, and a dimmer, less determined sense of a world that is not determined by its end point or destination, but rather by an inner tendency, which moves and develops in light of the infinite or eternal. A river is always flowing *somewhere*, but it is also *always* flowing somewhere. There is something worth exploring, then, in Wordsworth's question, which combines our two senses of ending by asking what the right end ought to be for those inspired by the 'ceaseless music' of the river Derwent.

The first book of the 1805 *Prelude* announces with some confidence, then, that 'One end hereby at least hath been attained' (I, 664), although the perfect tense might still raise an eyebrow. Attaining an 'end', for Wordsworth, seems to be defined by the possibility of some other, later, more significant *end*. Johnston does not make good on his own suggestiveness, then, when he notes of this beginning that 'if we did not know it was a beginning, we might take it for an ending', since Wordsworth is at pains to reveal the ending and ends that are indeed there in this beginning.[88] The telos of this opening reflection is to reveal the ends of the entire *Prelude*, to tell 'the story of my life' (668). The advantage of such a plan, since a biography is 'single and of determined bounds', suggests the alternative, and dangerous, possibility of a boundless poetry that cannot find a place to stop *or* a final purpose, persisting without ending or telos. If the end attained in the first book is the emergence of another, grander aim, this movement is repeated by the 1805 *Prelude* entire.

[88] *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, p.124.

> And now, O Friend! This History is brought
> To its appointed close: the discipline
> And consummation of the Poet's mind,
> In everything that stood most prominent
> Have faithfully been pictured; we have reached
> The time (which was our object from the first)
> When we may (nor presumptuously, I hope)
> Suppose my powers so far confirmed, and such
> My knowledge, as to make me capable
> Of building up a work that should endure. (XIII, 269-78)

The proposition is identical to that at the close of the first book. We have reached an ending, a point of significant close, but only to the extent that further purposes have been revealed. James Chandler made much of the image of the young Wordsworth rowing at night, claiming that '*The Prelude* is haunted throughout by that early eerie image of a child's rowboat abruptly reversing its course on a moonlit lake', the analogue for the ideological 'ur-turnabout' which Chandler identifies with 1797 and 'The Ruined Cottage'.[89]

So, one way of ending is to look forwards to more, later and better ends to come. In the 1805 *Prelude* Book IX, however, Wordsworth imagines his poem to be a river, flowing backwards to avoid the end.

> As oftentimes a river, it might seem,
> Yielding in part to old remembrances,
> Part swayed by fear to tread an onward road
> That leads direct to the devouring sea,
> Turns and will measure back his course—far back,
> Towards the very regions which he crossed
> In his first outset—so have we long time
> Made motions retrograde, in like pursuit
> Detained. (1-9)

This seems similar to Coleridge's instruction that a reader should resist the 'restless desire to arrive at the final solution', but it is in fact the opposite position.[90] The movement of

[89] James Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.236.
[90] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.14.

Wordsworth the poet is not that of someone choosing to avoid rushing to the end, but rather of one who knows that the end brings destruction and silence: the poetry will be finished, which is different from ending. James Mulvihill has written eloquently about the way rivers move, especially in *The Prelude*, so that they can act as a sly critique of a received enlightenment notion of linear progress. They give us the 'progressive tendency in nature and narrative alike in Wordsworth' but they also strive to get around it: 'the river often turns back upon itself or runs underground and on occasion the mountain has been passed over before the traveller realizes it.'[91] In this reading, Wordsworth contrasts the simple story of teleological development in events as we would like to see them with a more holistic and structural view; but whilst rivers offer a flexible analogue for progression, they are more fertile for the way in which they present something which is both ongoing and going somewhere. Wordsworth's rivers are *always* flowing down to their destination, but they are also *always* flowing there. There is an impulse to not arrive, just as there is a pleasure in flowing onwards.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the final sonnet of his *River Duddon* series.[92] As the Duddon comes to the sea, Wordsworth sees how the river makes 'radiant progress tow'rd the Deep | Where mightiest rivers into powerless sleep | Sink, and forget their nature' (XXXI, 4-6), and then, like a soul at peace, with

> Each tumultuous working left behind
> At seemly distance, to advance like Thee,
> Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind
> And soul, to mingle with Eternity! (XXXII, 11-4)

Advance is towards the eternal de-naturing sea. But even this is stripped of its finality. 'Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide; | The Form remains, the Function never dies'

[91] James Mulvihill, '"Calm Oblivious Tendencies": Wordsworth and the Long Term', *Clio* 27:2 (1998), pp.169-194, p.170.
[92] Quoted by poem and line number from *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820-1845*, ed. by Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004)

('XXXIII, Conclusion', 5-6). This was long a symbol of immortality to Wordsworth. Rivers brought telos and infinity together, as in the comment in the first 'Essays upon Epitaphs':

> Origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative. Never did a Child stand by the side of a running Stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: "Towards what abyss is it in progress? What receptacle can contain the mighty influx?" And the spirit of the answer must have been, though the word might be Sea or Ocean, accompanied perhaps with an image gathered from a Map, or from the real object in Nature—these might have been as the *letter*, but the *spirit* of the answer must have been *as* inevitably,—a receptacle without bounds or dimensions;—nothing less than infinity.[93]

The child wonders where the stream ends and comes up with two answers. The first is the boring and fixed answer: the river Derwent flows into the Trent, and then into the North Sea. The second is metaphysical: the water flows endlessly; there must be something boundless to absorb it all, and by extension, to give it back to us. Paul de Man found grist for the deconstructive mill in this passage, arguing that the contrasted literal and metaphorical uses of language show a divide between the aspiration to refer to the world and the working of language as itself. De Man supposes that Wordsworth's greatest poetry attempts to bridge this divide, to impossibly synthesise the fictive and the referential, but the first 'Essay upon Epitaphs' relies on it: 'the opposition between literal and figural functions here by analogy with the opposition between the name and the nameless'.[94] De Man misses the fact that Wordsworth is not, however, claiming to have proved the immortality of the human soul, only that the solution ought to inevitably supply itself to a child on the contemplation of a river, and that it is impossible to conceive of life without it. If we did not believe in our afterlife, we would suffer 'disproportion [...] astounding betwixt means and ends'; by a disarming logic, it is the very endlessness of our lives that allows our life to have *an* end or attain a final significance.[95]

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[93] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, ii, p.51.
[94] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.77.
[95] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, ii, p.52.

The opening of the ninth book of *The Excursion* gives us a vision of human life consistent with the riverine inspiration of the 1805 *Prelude*'s opening.[96] It does so, however, with a firmly teleological surface. Human life subsists in a valley, out of which we are climbing: 'Rightly is it said | That man descends into the VALE of years' (*The Excursion*, IX, 49-50), and age is 'As of a final EMINENCE' (53). From the top of that peak, the older man can hear again what the child discovered, with new clarity. The analogy does not so much compare a journey with aging as height with time, so that from the peak to which we ascend, the sound we heard before re-emerges with greater force, unencumbered by intervening obstacles.

> —how loud the voice
> Of waters, with invigorated peal
> From the full River in the vale below,
> Ascending!—For on that superior height
> Who sits, is disencumbered from the press
> Of near obstructions, and is privileged
> To breathe in solitude above the host
> Of ever-humming insects, mid thin air
> That suits not them. The murmur of the leaves
> Many and idle, touches not his ear;
> This he is freed from, and from thousand notes
> Not less unceasing, not less vain than these,—
> By which the finer passages of sense
> Are occupied; and the Soul, that would incline
> To listen, is prevented or deterred. (67-81)

What we hear, in the running of the water, is the 'mighty stream of tendency', which has been flowing, as it always must flow, like the same stream heard by the child. This feels comfortingly Wordsworthian; one of the most influential readings of Wordsworth's portrait of development tries similarly to marry circularity and linear progress, so that we climb out of the valley to listen to the same rushing water we heard in its deep clefts. M. H. Abrams wrote how *The Prelude*'s 'spiritual journey circles back at its conclusion to the literal journey with which it

[96] Quotation from *The Excursion* is taken from the reading text of *The Excursion*, ed. by Sally Bushell, James Butler, Michael C. Jaye, and David Garcia (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2006). Citation is given by line number in the text.

had originated', and so retrospection or recovery is admitted into a definition of progress.[97] No other poet made such a return to his own origins in search of the courage to go on, of course. But the ends of human life presented thus make little claim on the grounds of their ended-ness, but in the progressive revelation of something that has always been and will continue to be. The ending receives its significance from the precisely unending tendency of nature. The fate of the poet and his poetry is a less reassuring one.

Part 5: The Solitary as Emblem of *The Recluse*

The Prelude, then, which we tend to agree is the more successful of Wordsworth's long poems, toys with notions of the infinite and the finite, the endless and the ended, through the figures of rivers that flow onwards. In *The Excursion*, the same sort of optimistic compromise does not seem possible; I suggest, below, that the figure to whom *The Excursion*'s arguments are addressed in the poem, the Solitary is an emblem for the poetic project as a whole. In this poem, rather than the positive feeling of progress that is also return, there is restlessness in stillness and an ultimate turning away from resolution, rather than its recovery from an alternate source.

E. D. Hirsch's 'typological' study of Wordsworth and Schelling considered their joint arrival at, and then rejection of, a 'temporal-eternal vision', deeply convinced of the eternity of things (in that they are some facet of the absolute) and yet equally reliant on their changing in time.[98] Wordsworth moves, in 1807 as Hirsch has it, away from this awkward compromise towards Augustine's familiar separation of time, which has the effect of alienating man from God and the ultimate state of things: 'the synthesis [of time and eternity] is there, but not for man's experience nor his intellect'.[99] Examples to support this story are not hard to find. In the

[97] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p.268.
[98] E. D. Hirsch, *Wordsworth and Schelling: A Typological Study of Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale, 1960), p.62.
[99] *Wordsworth and Schelling*, p.81.

1799 *Prelude*, for instance, we read of an immanent apprehension of oneness: 'in all things | I saw one life, and felt that it was joy' (459-60); the 1805 version gives us the celebrated image of the Alpine landscape as

> Characters of the great apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of eternity,
> Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (VI, 570-2)

At the close of *The Excursion*, by contrast, the Pastor exclaims to God,

> if by thy decree
> The consummation that will come by stealth
> Be yet far distant, let thy Word prevail,
> Oh! let thy Word prevail, to take away
> The sting of human nature. (IX, 635-9)

This consummation between the mind of man and nature is the announced goal of *The Recluse*, but it has moved from a position of immanence to one of futurity. God is the 'self-existing Cause and End of all' (*Excursion* (IV, 80), but we cannot find that self-causing, self-sufficiency in nature itself, unlike in these lines, briefly included in the 1799 version of *The Prelude*:

> In weakness we create distinctions, then
> Believe that all our puny boundaries are things
> Which we perceive, and not which we have made—
> In which all beings live with God, themselves
> Are God, existing in one mighty whole,
> As undistinguishable as the cloudless east
> At noon is from the cloudless west, when all
> The hemisphere is one cerulean blue. (*Peter Bell* MS. (d.) 13-20)

Jonathan Wordsworth had the right idea, then, in his interpretation of the early Wordsworth as 'valu[ing] the giving, the reaching out, without feeling compelled to define what he is reaching towards'.[100] Engaging with the world, its suffering and beauty, is not an activity or a poetry

[100] Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (London: Nelwson, 1969), p.257.

with an *end*, but rather the revelation of integration as reversion to a state that was always so. As with most things in Wordsworth, it is possible to substitute end for beginning without much difficulty – if things don't end then they also don't really begin either, as with a mechanical or atheistic cosmology.

Whether these metaphysical ideas have a linear relevance to poetic structure might be doubted. In the 'Prospectus', published as part of the 'Preface' to *The Excursion*, for instance, Wordsworth introduces a strong sense of purpose and determination:

> —I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
> Would chaunt, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
> Of this great consummation. ('Prospectus to *The Recluse*', 55-8)

This does not mean that the poem itself will be strictly dialectic in its march; *The Excursion* ends by announcing that he will sort it all out later. The delaying syntax has something of Wordsworth's 'comedy of seriousness', as Matthew Bevis has recently described it, although it is hard to imagine Wordsworth having had any fun as he wrote it.[101] The *Recluse* to-do list only grows in the final lines as we wait for the final verb to arrive.

> To enfeebled Power,
> From this communion with uninjured Minds,
> What renovation had been brought; and what
> Degree of healing to a wounded spirit,
> Dejected and habitually disposed
> To seek, in degradation of the Kind,
> Excuse and solace for her own defects;
> How far those erring notions were reformed;
> And whether aught, of tendency as good
> And pure, from further intercourse ensued;
> This—(if delightful hopes, as heretofore,
> Inspire the serious song, and gentle Hearts
> Cherish, and lofty Minds approve the past)
> My future Labours may not leave untold. (*The Excursion*, IX, 782-795)

[101] Matthew Bevis, *Wordsworth's Fun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.17.

A sceptical reading in the light of *The Recluse*'s incompleteness might elicit a critical snigger by emphasising all the conditions which Wordsworth feels compelled to include to undermine our confidence in the project: the awkward enjambment questioning *what degree* indeed. Ending an 8000-line poem with 'untold' is a swaggeringly bathetic move, but one that critics have tended to find perplexing. the Solitary is not, in the end, corrected and brought back into the fold of the hopeful. In the suspension of these three characters, which do not ultimately all agree, there is a formal comment being made, since they stand not just for intellectual positions, but also for formal or poematic ones.

Wanderer is a figure of peripatetic progress, not so much in the direction of a clear goal, but with recurrence and re-visiting as his mode, whereas the Pastor tells a variety of stories rooted (literally) in the earth where he has made a spiritual abode. the Solitary has been identified with both Wordsworth and Coleridge as figures in need of rescue from dejection, but he is more symbolic of the poem to which he very nearly gives his name.[102] Bringing the Solitary to his conclusion is not quite the same as finding a way of finishing *The Recluse,* but if Wanderer and the Pastor present allegories of peripatetic revision and of dutiful fixedness, the Solitary is the representative of purposeless incompleteness, and in to that degree is a sort of negative representation of *The Recluse* itself.

the Solitary achieves the idealized retreat that Wordsworth imagines as a culmination in *Home at Grasmere*. As a young man, he wanders around 'a low cottage in a sunny bay' (III.523) with his bride, akin to the freedoms enjoyed by the young Wordsworth as described in the *Prelude*.

> But, there, lay open to our daily haunt,
> A range of unappropriated earth,
> Where youth's ambitious feet might move at large;

[102] Harold Bloom poignantly compares the loss of Wordsworth's brother and children with the Solitary's life in *Visionary Company* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p.205; Nicholas Roe imagines that the Solitary 'may be modelled as much upon Coleridge as [the unitarian preacher, Joseph] Fawcett', *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.23.

> Whence, unmolested Wanderers, we beheld
> The shining Giver of the Day diffuse
> His brightness, o'er a tract of sea and land
> Gay as our spirits, free as our desires,
> As our enjoyments boundless.—From these Heights
> We dropped, at pleasure, into sylvan Combs;
> Where arbours of impenetrable shade,
> And mossy seats detained us side by side,
> With hearts at ease, and knowledge in our hearts
> "That all the grove and all the day was ours." (III, 545-557)

His bride conceives and the two achieve their blissful state. 'In privacy we dwelt—a wedded pair | Companions daily, often all day long' (*Excursion*, III, 592-3); their children are 'heirs of our united love' (597). But these children die, and soon the mother follows. It is, in a sense, an inverse of the promise of 'Home at Grasmere', where Wordsworth imagined everyone he loved under one roof, including Coleridge: 'O Vale of Peace, we are | And must be, with God's will, a happy band' (873-4). If one argument goes that the 'Unity Entire' of 'Home at Grasmere' forestalled *The Recluse* by revealing the entire work in premature completeness, then the 'Solitary''s narrative is also testament to its revealed provisionality. Aside from the rarefied poetic problem of tempting fate by starting a poem with a vision of unity, there had been real physical and social decay in Grasmere. As James A. Butler has written, 'the entire symbolic pattern of the *Prelude* and 'Home at Grasmere – which was to make possible the writing of *The Recluse* – has disintegrated'.[103] Deaths, tree-felling and construction had all conspired to dampen the expectations for a stable habit of poetic living. In 'Home at Grasmere' the thought of 'inevitable pain' (841) is dismissed with a light confidence: a parenthesis asks us '(What need of more?)'. The difference between the first letter Wordsworth wrote, expecting that only two years of composition were needed to finish *The Recluse*, and the later poet, lamenting that he cannot show his dead brother the manuscript of his biography, itself a testament to not being

[103] James A. Butler, 'Wordsworth's "Tuft of Primroses": "An Unrelenting Doom"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 14:3 (1975), pp.238-49, p.24.

able to get the proper work done, is similar to that experienced by the Solitary. In both cases the overconfidence of youth is punished.

Fittingly, in the above passage, the sorts of enjambment tricks that Ricks so eloquently described are in effect. The couple 'beheld', saw the sun 'diffuse', rested on 'these heights'; in each case there is a sort of precarious possibility that is redeemed. The impression is of a concurrent continuity and harmony in the world and in the verse, both being kept on track, as it were. The same enjambment can be dispiriting. On board his ship to America, the 'Solitary' finds the Bible to refuse him the solace he craves, and in this case the lines open up onto a promise that is not delivered:

> Within the cabin stood
> That Volume—as a compass for the soul—
> Revered among the Nations. I implored
> Its guidance; but the infallible support
> Of faith was wanting. Tell me, why refused
> To One by storms annoyed and adverse winds,
> Perplexed with currents, of his weakness sick. (III, 869-877)

The lines poignantly ask, 'implore', for 'support' but it does not come. The effect is not quite a bathos; we don't find that the line after an enjambment leaves us surprised by fear or pain. As I suggested above, the effect is rather of things slipping out of the compositional hand, the provisional disappointment of frustration rather than ultimate failure. The lines continue to promise revelation: 'A motley spectacle | Appeared' (905-6), but when possibility arises it is dampened. The 'Solitary''s contempt for colonial society is not enough to live off, it 'soonest fails to please, and quickliest turns' – the possibility for renovation arises – 'Into vexation'. The inevitability in these cases gives a poematic texture to the 'Solitary''s dejection since it is the inability to redeem the open promise of his lines as well as the inability to reintegrate himself with the world. The final possibility comes with the appearance of a native American:

> But that pure Archetype of human greatness,

> I found him not. There, in his stead, appeared
> A creature, squalid, vengeful, and impure. (960-2)

Unpleasant lines for the modern reader, tempered somewhat by the desolation of the character who speaks them. Nonetheless, the disappointment is palpable. As before, the disappointment is reiterative, the discovery that is really was *for this* all the while. If the enjambments Ricks analyses highlight the sense of possibility which recurs in the endings offered by blank verse, then the Solitary suggests rather the opposite, as the possibility for disconfirmation offered by each of those endings is itself disconfirmed. Ricks's 'delicacy of doubt' is replaced with an indelicate determinism.[104]

The 'Solitary''s intellectual and physical wanderings run along a familiar Wordsworthian course of abstract rationalism, revolutionary politics, to the new world and back again. The restlessness is clear on the level of the line: 'Once more did I retire into myself. | There feeling no contentment, I resolved | To fly' (III, 838-40). The idea of America proves more compelling than the reality, and the freedom that is so motivating at the opening of *The Prelude* receives a hollow reiterative report: 'Here may I roam at large; --my business is, | Roaming at large, to observe, and not to feel.' (899-900). The figure of the Solitary is, then, charting not just the various moods that Wordsworth and Coleridge might have been in in the years when *The Recluse* seemed a vital possibility, he records some of the approaches taken within that poetry itself. Fittingly, his final description takes the figure of a 'mountain Brook', which could be a reference to Coleridge or to his own career, such use is made of rivers in *The Prelude* for the form of the poem and of Wordsworth's life.

> The tenor
> Which my life holds, he readily may conceive
> Whoe'er hath stood to watch a mountain Brook
> In some still passage of its course, and seen,
> Within the depths of its capacious breast,

[104] Ricks, 'A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines', p.26.

> Inverted trees, and rocks, and azure sky;
> And, on its glassy surface, specks of foam,
> And conglobated bubbles undissolved,
> Numerous as stars; that, by their onward lapse,
> Betray to sight the motion of the stream. (III, 974-83)

The depths of man are illusory; all that is real is foam. The giveaway word is 'lapse': a telling one to describe movement. This is effectively a revision of the 'one life' ideas in Coleridge's Aeolian Harp, except in this case the nisus of the universe seems to drag the 'Solitary''s life beyond itself, lapsing onward rather than flowing. Not quite determinism, it seems, but a dissociation between the momentary, improvised bubbles which make up the tenor of life and the dragging, lapsing stream whose movement is alien to it. And so, the Solitary's book concludes with the most disappointing enjambments of all, for he has just one remaining cause for optimism:

> A hope
> That my particular current soon will reach
> The unfathomable gulph, where all is still. (III, 996-8)

As we saw the mouths of rivers are the site of extinction as well as conclusion for the meandering course of a Wordsworth poem. Here, hope and destination offer possibilities at the end of the line, but it is all swept up into the stream of thought. The only thing the Solitary can do is expect the very fate that Wordsworth imagined for himself, before the theme of *The Prelude* found him, 'unprofitably travelling towards the grave' (*1805*, I, 270). Salvation, for Wordsworth, came in the form of his own memories. How could the Solitary recover, living as he had lived?

On the level of Wordsworth's career, we know that the Solitary is left forever in his lonely cottage. *The Recluse* presents a continuous failure to summon the resources of sufficient determination to bring the work to a close and see it through to its end. In 1841 Wordsworth was still being pestered with expectations of *The Recluse*. He told Aubrey de Vere in 1841 that

'the "Recluse" has never been written except a few passages – and probably never will'.[105] We can assume this curt and not exactly honest comment was occasioned by a question that had become tiresome to Wordsworth. It was all too easy to see a failure of resolve in the proliferation of Wordsworth's sonnets from 1802 onwards. As Oliver Clarkson has it, Wordsworth's smallness emerged contra the massive expectations of Coleridge for *The Recluse* and took its incapacity as an ethos. The lyrics might seem purposefully inadequate and bathetic as an aspect of a self-aware referential relationship, 'giv[ing] the impression of 'catching' at things which they know cannot really be caught'.[106] If Wordsworth's small poems offer a modern critic the possibility of a creative sort of knowing underachievement, in opposition to the attempted overachievement of *The Recluse*, the people who surrounded Wordsworth and transcribed his poems for them found no such consolation. Charles Lamb, pleased as he was with *The Waggoner*'s dedication nonetheless ends a letter of praise with an invocation: 'O for a potent voice to call forth the Recluse from his profound Dormitory, where he sleeps forgetful of his foolish charge The World.'[107] Mary Wordsworth asked Henry Crabb Robinson 'not to encourage the muse to *vagrant* subjects' as she hoped for his 'return to *the Recluse*' and exasperatedly reported to George Tickner that 'she had ceased to urge him on the subject, because she had done it so much in vain'.[108] Barron Field wrote with similar exasperation, 'I wish [Wordsworth] would either complete 'The Recluse' or lock up his desk', a decade later. Richard Gravil conjectured that the idea of *The Recluse* had become 'a useful domestic fiction': something that would reassure William's vocational seriousness to the rest of the household;

[105] As reported in Wilfrid Philip Ward, *Aubrey De Vere: a memoir, based on his unpublished diaries and correspondence* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1904), p.66.
[106] Oliver Clarkson, 'Wordsworth's Lyric Moments', *Essays in Criticism*, 65:2 (2015), pp.125-43, p.129.
[107] *The Letters of Charles Lamb, to which are added those of his sister, Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 3 vols (London: Methuen, 1935), i, p.251; Lamb would in a later letter (22nd January 1833) joke about 'batter[ing] a Recluse out of" Wordsworth, iii, p.243.
[108] 28th September 1836, *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle, 1808-1866*, ed. by Edith J. Morley, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), i, p.317; *Wordsworth: Critical Heritage*, ed. Robert Woof, p.1033.

but such an illusion seemed impossible to maintain.[109] His daughter Dora wrote, in a letter, that during a trip to Edinburgh with her father he had been 'busy composing most of the time' and made 'promises that the Recluse shall be his winter's employment'. She had her doubts: 'I think his courage will fail him when winter really arrives'.[110] Mary likewise imagined that mentioning the great work would frighten William into procrastination.[111] The figure of the Solitary increasingly appears to be the figure of *The Recluse*, stuck in a suspended redemption, like the Wordsworth of the 'St Paul's' fragment.

Michael O'Neill returned to Swinburne's 'ebb and flow' as he eloquently described *The Excursion* as a dialogic (indeed, trialogic) poem that 'blends movements towards resistance, instruction, acceptance and resilience, and yet continually threatens to fracture into one of these stances'.[112] It is nonsense to speak of endings in such a context, and equally difficult to speak of architectonic organisation; if there is variety or development, it is the symptom of the process, but the process itself, the poetic premise of the work, is primary. Byron held this position when he wrote to John Murray, 'You ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny—I have no plan—I *had* no plan—but I had or have materials'; that there is a method to the materials of poetry, and that such a method is sufficient to explain the course of a long poem, is the claim made by the sort of anti-teleological holism identified in Swinburne and Eliot.[113] Byron's engagement with Wordsworth was sensitive and deep as well as critical, but the size of *The Excursion* is a favourite punchline.

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[109] Richard Gravil, 'The 'Recluse' Project and its Shorter Poems', in *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.345-364, p.361.
[110] *Letters of Dora Wordsworth*, ed. by Howard P. Vincent (Chicago: Packard and Co., 1944), p.91
[111] To Sarah Hutchinson, 30th May 1820: 'Wm. Has been murmuring verses during our wanderings; and is now so comfortable in health and his eyes so free from inflammation that I trust, after we feel ourselves settled at Rydal, he will be able seriously to address himself to the Recluse – but I do not mention this hope, lest he should be scared by the prospect', *Letters of Mary Wordsworth*, ed. by Mary E. Burton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p.56.
[112] Michael O'Neill, 'Ebb and Flow in *The Excursion*', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 45:2 (2014), pp.93-8, p.94.
[113] *Byron's Letters and Journals: A New Selection*, ed. by Richard Lansdown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.334.

> Wordsworth's last quarto, by the way, is bigger
> Than any since the birthday of typography;
> A drowsy frowzy poem, call'd the 'Excursion.'
> Writ in a manner which is my adversion.[114]

Byron, to Wordsworth, was a symptom of 'meretricious excitement', as Jane Stabler has it, against which he tried his 'un-sensational unpopularity'.[115] There is similarity as well as critical difference between the two poets; Stabler has found a similar unevenness in both poets, which could be read as an ability to really get anywhere, of which Coleridge was aware in Wordsworth's case.[116] For Coleridge, Wordsworth's achievement did not really come in the fact of his lengthy continuousness at all; 'Wordsworth's poems being less derived either from excitement of curiosity or the rapid flow of narration, the *striking* passages form a larger proportion of their value.'[117] There is, as I have tried to show, something expressive in the melancholy continuity of the Solitary, in the poignant disconfirmation of the possibility of the line. To that extent, the Solitary is like the Wordsworth reported in the 'St Paul's' fragment, half-consoled, and half-resolved. Poetry lives, according to Agamben, in the possibility of enjambment, but for *The Recluse* and the Solitary, the lines suggest a weary inevitability, rather than an optimistic escape. The power of consummation, as Wordsworth put it in that letter to Paley, might involve delay or deferral of a plan, but it might also mean its distortion, corruption – infinitude as impossibility, rather than immortality.

Tennyson, in a very different situation, found himself departing from the house of his (late) friend, just as Wordsworth left Coleridge in London before finding some stability in the appearance of 'St Paul's'. For him too, the question of the long poem involved determination

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[114] Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. by Jerome McGann, *The Complete Poetical Works V* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980-93), III, ll.845-8.
[115] Jane Stabler, 'Byron and "The Excursion"', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 45:2 (2014), pp.136-47, p.140.
[116] Jane Stabler, 'Transition in Byron and Wordsworth', *Essays in Criticism*, 50.4, pp.306-328: 'Coleridge's account in *Biographia Literaria* of an "eddying instead of a progression of feeling" in Wordsworth's poetry also connects with Wordsworth's own doubts about Byron', p.317.
[117] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.106.

and resolve. For Tennyson, though, the long poem I discuss was written after the end, and before The End. In the intermediary period between the earthly death of his best friend and the apocalyptic resolution of all things, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* discovers a finality all of its own.

Chapter 3: The Unended Lyric in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

Life's processes are very simple. One or two moves are made and that is the end, the rest is repetitions.[1]

— William Carlos Williams

Introduction

After the death of Arthur Hallam in 1833, Alfred Tennyson wrote the first of his memorial elegies, the germ of *Maud* ('Oh! that 'twere possible') and his first Arthurian poem in blank verse, the 'Morte d'Arthur'. Just as we saw with Wordsworth, the question, 'what do I do with these lines?', is the primary one for Tennyson. If *The Recluse* was not just a plan to write a new poem, but also one that would give purpose and structure to verses that had already been written, then *In Memoriam*, *Maud*, and *The Idylls of the King* are likewise involved with the fleshing out, responding to, or determination of their foundational lines.[2] To these, *In Memoriam* adds a sense of formal and emotional reiteration, which may or may not try to consolidate or unify itself. Long poems cannot work out what they should be, whether their wholeness is important for their effect, and whether they present a progress towards anything in particular. *In Memoriam* seems to ultimately find some faith in the 'one far off divine event' with which it concludes, but it is unclear whether that same faith applies in miniature to its own form.[3] In its scepticism of its own ended-ness, *In Memoriam* is pre-eminent among our poems,

[1] William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, (New York: New Directions, 1923; repr. 2011), p.43.
[2] C.f. Kenneth Johnston, *The Recluse*, p.14.
[3] Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 'Epilogue', l.144. Quotation from *In Memoriam* it taken from *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 2014). All of Tennyson's poetry, unless otherwise noted, is taken from this edition, and cited by line number in the text.

since the concern for how things end is not just repeated but multiplied in its many-sectioned form; as Christopher Ricks has it, *In Memoriam* 'is involved constantly in ending and then again beginning'.[4] It is also a poem that loudly announces its lack of wholeness, which might needle the scholar of the long poem. These are 'wild and wandering cries' ('PROLOGUE', 41), 'half but idle brawling rhymes' ('EPILOGUE', 23) or 'short swallow flights of song' (XLVI, 15); strummed on a harp of which Tennyson 'cannot command all the strings' (LXXXVIII, 10); lisped with 'contradiction on the tongue' (CXXV, 4). Tennyson was nonetheless the poet who later decided that, in principle at least, 'the whole should show a continuous advance of thought and of movement, like a river fed by rillets; as every great poem, and all essays and treatises should'.[5] Chesterton claimed that Tennyson's 'English vagueness in thought' meant that, no matter how 'particular phrases are always flashing out the whole fires of truth', 'he always managed to make the main poem mean exactly what he did not mean'.[6] In the case of *In Memoriam*, the idea that these poems were, indeed, only provisional notes along a journey that only has a modest destination in mind is betrayed by the internal sense of endlessness in the individual poems. My argument for this chapter is thus a close one, attending to the way Tennyson uses verbs to suggest lyric states that are not quite *now*, and not quite *then*, neither finished nor ongoing. For a story to be made out of events, each event must come to its own close; *In Memoriam* is the long poem written when none of those events attain a satisfactory resolution.

Giving something an end for Tennyson did not necessarily mean taking a story to its literal conclusion, of course. His 'Morte d'Arthur' gives the first sketch of the *Idylls* by describing their concluding narrative moment; the composition of *Maud* allegedly involved a retrospective attempt to give 'Oh! that 'twere possible' some context: 'to render the poem fully

[4] Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, (London: Palgrave, 1970), p.215.
[5] William Angus Knight, *Retrospects (A Reminiscence of Tennyson)* (London: 1898), p.265.
[6] C. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (London; New York: Oxford University press, 1913), p.167.

intelligible, a preceding one was necessary. He wrote it; the second poem too required a predecessor: and thus the whole poem was written, as it were *backwards*'.[7] It seems as if the whole significance of the work really hangs upon that central lyric, to which the rest of *Maud* is as outbuildings and buttresses, to borrow Wordsworth's analogy. Coleridge portrayed Wordsworth as an epic mariner when concentrating on *The Recluse*; Tennyson had seen himself in 'a small vessel, built on fine lines' which would 'float down the stream of time'.[8] The image recurs when Tennyson wrote to James Bailey, the 'spasmodic' author of *Festus*, suggesting that 'the only thing your book wanted was to be made a little more shipshape in order to float down the stream of Time'.[9]

Scepticism regarding the coherent whole of a long poem is not hard to find in Tennyson; he had declared, 'if I meant to make any mark at all, it must be by shortness, for the men before me had been so diffuse, and most of the big things except 'King Arthur' had been done'; when he did come to make his big Arthurian statement he pointedly called them separate *Idylls*, derived from the Greek εἰδύλλιον (eidolon), glossed by John D. Rosenberg as a '"little picture", of a character or mood coloured by a single, dominant emotion'.[10] George Walter Prothero, writing after a conversation with Tennyson in December 1885, tells us that 'Tennyson talked of many things – Browning's Poems: the "Ring and the Book," "not a work of art." Aurora Leigh also a great creation but "not a poem"'.[11] There is the famous quip at the expense of Robert Browning's *Sordello*, and a 'pathetic incident', reported in the memoir, of Tennyson hiding a particularly long and bad poem under his sofa, where it continued to disturb him.[12]

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[7] Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan and Co, 1897), i. 379.
[8] *Tennyson: A Memoir*, ii, p.230.
[9] *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981-1990), p.283.
[10] *Tennyson: A Memoir*, i, p.166; John D. Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973), p.25.
[11] *Letters of Tennyson*, iii, p.332
[12] Hallam Tennyson describes: 'A most pathetic incident of this kind, my father told me, happened to him [...] when a Waterloo soldier brought twelve large cantos on the battle of Waterloo. [...] The epic lay for some time under the sofa in my father's study, and was a source of much anxiety to him. How could he go through such a vast poem?' *Tennyson: A Memoir*, i, p.392.The laureate only managed to read the first line before giving up.

George Saintsbury, who, like Eliot, felt something had changed with Tennyson, noted that he was 'the first poet in English of the very greatest genius who dared not to attempt work on the great scale, but put into short pieces […] what most of his forerunners would have spun into long poems'; Yeats saw his longer works as a half-successful rejection of a lyricism which Tennyson himself exemplified.[13] At any rate, the composition of *In Memoriam* as Tennyson describes it downplays any sort of *a priori* sense of a planned long poem; in fact it rather emphasises the necessity of wholeness only after the fact of having written at such length:

> The poem concludes with the marriage of my youngest sister Cecila. It was meant to be [but, presumably, did not succeed in being] a kind of *Divina Commedia*, ending with happiness. The sections were written at many different places, and as the phases of our intercourse came to my memory and suggested them. I did not write them with any view of weaving them into a whole, or for publication, until I found that I had written so many.[14]

If the question arising so vitally in our analysis of Coleridge above concerned whether the length of a long poem could be fully justified – can it be said to have a formal determinateness or a clear *telos*? – Tennyson seems instead blithely detached from a particularly high standard of unity or wholeness.

Ricks observes that the 'first and most obvious' question of *In Memoriam* is whether it 'constitute[s] a whole, a poetic unity, a poem?', but in light of Tennyson's own comments, the question rather ought to be 'does it matter?'.[15] A. C. Bradley, Eliot, and Ricks, all ultimately coincide in implying the answer is 'no'. Palgrave's comparison with Shakespeare's sonnets offers Ricks a way in, describing a form where 'separate poems, occasionally and loosely linked into groups, engaging with a multiplicity of matters and achieving the inner

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[13] George Saintsbury, *History of Nineteenth Century Literature 1780-1895*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1896), p.311; W. B. Yeats, in 'The Death of Œnone', *The Bookman*, December 1892, p.84, wrote that 'Modern writers [...] have been heavily handicapped by being born in a lyrical age, and thereby compelled for the most part to break up their inspiration into many glints and glimmers, instead of letting it burn in one steady flame', and that 'Lord Tennyson seems to have felt this with ever increasing intensity'.
[14] *Tennyson: A Memoir*, p.304.
[15] Ricks, *Tennyson*, p.202.

interrelationships of a *congeries* rather than of a single poem'; and in a similar fashion, Eliot observes that it is 'a long poem made by putting together lyrics, which have only the unity and continuity of a diary'.[16] Eliot's claim is perhaps rather less bold than Ricks interprets it: it is the unity of a diary *and no more*, and neither critic ties the wholeness of the poem to aesthetic unity, explaining the interactions of parts in a way that is very clearly organized after the fact. Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw describe the plain-speaking advantages of this method and its classical precedent in the introduction to their edition. Rather than any sense of organic many in oneness, there is the rhetorical craftsman's principle of *variatio* at work:

> Short poems having the same theme, subject, or literary form are carefully arranged in relation to each other. Sometimes similar poems are grouped together; sometimes they are widely separated so that the later one recalls the earlier; sometimes the same theme or subject is treated from different points of view.[17]

Timothy Peltason, who offers a defence of *In Memoriam* as a connected whole, nonetheless sidesteps the question of unity: 'Ricks does not define, and I cannot define, "unity" in a way that makes the question of its mere presence or absence an interesting one'.[18] Many readers of *In Memoriam* have, then, been happy to see it as a workable combination of parts which does not disguise the consciously artificial activity of their combination.

Whilst Robert Bernard Martin's critical biography of Tennyson assures us that 'for the Victorians, the wealth of detail, even of clutter [...] was no problem', this is not true in any simple sense.[19] The Keats in Tennyson might lead to 'confused multitudinousness', according to Matthew Arnold.[20] J. S. Mill, reviewing the early collections, found Tennyson's poetry to be so profoundly connected between its parts that excerption presented an act of intolerable violence to the poetry: 'the idea which would be given of the more perfect of Mr. Tennyson's

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[16] Ricks, *Tennyson*, p.204. Eliot, *Collected Prose*, iii, 327.
[17] *In Memoriam*, ed. by Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.29.
[18] Timothy Peltason, *Reading in Memoriam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.10.
[19] Robert Bernard Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p.343.
[20] To Clough, after August 1848, *Matthew Arnold. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, pp.3-4, p.4.

poems, by detached passages, would be not merely an incomplete but a false idea'.[21] Mill, however, who worries about readers getting stuck 'higgl[ing] about the details', is distracted himself when it comes to 'Mariana', since the overall effect of that poem comes all at once: 'from the very first line, the rust of age and the solitude of desertion are on the whole picture'.[22] If Tennyson's poetry gives verbal and sensuous scenery to feeling, then there is little use left for the literal progression of a poem. With this in mind, Martin compares the poem to the 'same impulses towards diversity' in contemporary architecture (Tennyson's uncle's manor house, for instance) and then, in extended fashion, to that of 'one of the great Romantic parks planted by Capability Brown or Humphry Repton'.[23] Martin is adapting the Coleridgean model from Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*, when the finality of a destination is contrasted with the 'attractions of the journey itself', but his argument emphatically replaces the linear nature of a journey with an aimless wandering.[24] So much of Martin's metaphor rests on the surprise in coming off the main track to find 'small and nearly self-contained areas [that] suddenly reveal themselves', or 'unexpected views', as if the temptation to race to the end, which Coleridge wants to guard against, has been replaced by an equally disruptive temptation to dwell in one especially evocative grove.[25]

Suggesting that there is no architectonic or argumentative unity does not preclude other sorts, of course; there might, for instance, be the unity of a process that endlessly repeats itself: plural 'lays', but of one 'Sorrow born' (XLVI, 1). Charles Kingsley perhaps led the way with his review, which calls *In Memoriam* 'a collection of poems on a vast variety of subjects, but all united, as their name implies, to the memory of a departed friend'.[26] Plenty of critical work

[21] *Lord Alfred Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by John D. Jump (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), pp.84-97, p.88.
[22] *Tennyson: Critical Heritage*, p.88
[23] *Tennyson: Critical Heritage*, p.88.
[24] *Biographia Literaria*, ii, p.14.
[25] Martin, *Unquiet Heart*, p.354
[26] *Tennyson: Critical Heritage,* p.182.

has described how Tennyson's poetry in general emerges as the result of a process or precondition (which might have its own contradictions), rather than because he drew up plans and executed them entire. Something enigmatic, contradictory or dynamic, might register with the force of a singular creative impulse: Eric Griffiths describes how 'swelling out and failing are vital motions of the poetry as of Tennyson's life, or anyone's life, the motions of the lungs', which is to say that the whole process of *the* motions together animates the poetry, rather than the separate facets which we observe in it.[27] Herbert Tucker wrote that Tennyson's 'conflicting moods, and dialectical poetics modes [...] let his writing go on', and John Bayley conjectured a self-awareness in Tennyson that 'he is writing 'beautiful' poetry as a means of making his life supportable'.[28] Griffiths portrays him in a double bind that is a singular poetic predicament: 'his double sense of poetry both as an expression of morbidity and as an expressive power which releases from morbidity.'[29] Just as his one grief can seem multitudinous, Tennyson's contradictions nonetheless possess unity to the degree that they function as a single continuous stimulus to the writing of poetry, which might have none of the wholeness of a conscious plan but still have the open-ended or procedural unity. The Tennyson of *In Memoriam* tells us, 'I do but sing because I must' (XXI, 23), and that a 'verse that brings myself relief' does so only 'by the measure of my grief' (LXXV, 2-3), the rhyme suggests a profound and disturbing connection between the perpetuation of grief and its mollification, as well as its resistance to expression in the conventions of discursive language. I am not suggesting that Hallam's death does not bring with it chaos, disorder, and contradiction, but that Tennyson's depiction of grief is particular because those are brought together into a single predicament that motivates his poetry. Hallam's death has

[27] Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.100.
[28] Herbert Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.378; John Bayley, 'Tennyson and the Idea of Decadence', in *Studies in Tennyson*, ed. Hallam Tennyson, (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp.186-205, p.195.
[29] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry,* p.145.

made me that delirious man
Whose fancy fuses old and new,
And flashes into false and true,
And mingles all without a plan? (XVI, 17-20);

but that delirium is not only one of confusion and plurality, but the result of plurality being mingled and fused into a catastrophic 'all'.

This might be a good thing as well: sleep is able to 'forg[e] at last | A night-long Present of the Past' (LXXI, 2-3), and give Tennyson an illusory restoration of Hallam. In both cases, the end of the lyric is important. Section XVI breaks off, after the question quoted above, in either relief or exhaustion, giving that 'all' an emphatic totality. It is unclear whether the 'flashes into false and true' come as a respite from or intense inquiry into the feeling which motivates them. The present perfect which opens LXXI – 'thou has forged' – inscribes a sense of present-pastness, whilst the dream itself moves into the present tense: 'While now we talk as once we talked'. I will discuss Tennyson's tenses at some length below, but the fictive nowness of the lyric present should be noted: we, reading this poem, know that Tennyson is not really talking in his dream. Tennyson shifts into a timeless collection of images and continuous properties, concluding with a vision of memory restored to a sort of timeless (tenseless) experience:

Beside the river's wooded reach,
The fortress, and the mountain ridge,
The cataract flashing from the bridge,
The breaker breaking on the beach. (12-6)

The impression of that final verse, devoid of temporal markers and of any verbs at all, is of something integral and self-contained, the suggestion of an immediate world, in its frozen dynamism ('flashing', 'breaking'). This has been achieved at the expense of human perspective, however; Tennyson and Hallam, the 'we' of the previous stanza, have disappeared. The imagistic conclusion of LXXI and the hanging question of XVI carry a similar finality.

The question, aiming as it is at the central problem of Tennyson's thinking, has moved as far as it can towards the *aporia* of grief; the break after the question suggests that nothing more can be said. The dream has moved to its furthest point of development: the emergence and endurance of his memory-scenery. Built into both, however, is the potential for continuity: the answer to the question, the intrusion of movement (for how long will that 'breaker' be 'breaking'?).

The critics I quoted above take what might seem to be an optimistic view of Tennyson's poetic predicament. Isobel Armstrong has called *In Memoriam* a 'great triump[h] of idealist language over itself', since it 'builds itself out of its collapse by giving full play to the language which threatens its destruction'; but the repeated endings of the lyrics might also suggest the continual collapsing of whatever brief thing Tennyson can get down.[30] In the endings of the poems above, both options are possible: Tennyson's endings offer triumphant (of good or evil) finality and a lingering openness. If Wordsworth's moment or spot claimed an uneasy 'pre-eminence' over the continuous experiences which proceed from it, then Tennyson's lyric moments might, because they can never be said to properly end, consist entirely of distraction, as when Martin compares the poem to the vistas of a landscape garden. Narrative structures, whether they be stories or arguments, are built from represented events, assuming of course that one event ends so the next can begin. Aristotle, for instance, wrote that a whole 'has a beginning, middle, and end', and that these terms are defined by their interrelations, so a beginning is 'that which does not itself follow from something else, but after which a further event or process naturally occurs', whereas an end is the opposite: following naturally from another event but producing nothing further.[31] Tennyson's individual lyrics offer such a terminal movement, internally suggesting the possibility of movement to come but not

[30] *Language as Living Form*, p.204.
[31] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p.55.

necessarily inviting a literal progression or continuation. Robert Douglas Fairhurst has written of the 'danger which Tennyson regularly confronted', whereby 'individual poems can [...] over-extend themselves', which he analyses in the sense of a poem's composition and reception (some poems getting too much attention in both activities).[32] Some of *In Memoriam*'s poems do this in a more literal sense, representing not one step along a larger journey, but rather a complete whole unto themselves in which the themes of finality and continuity are represented, but not present in terms of formal connections to other lyrics in the series.

As such, my argument, which is partly inspired by a reading of T. S. Eliot's essay, concerns the way things happen, and then stop happening, in *In Memoriam*. My point is not only that the chronological progression leading from grief to relief is weaker than the line which takes the skating Wordsworth to the top of Snowdon, say, but that the internal structure of the poem's parts intrinsically disposes Tennyson's poem to reject or contradict narrative chronology or organisation. I highlighted certain contradictory aspects of Tennyson's poetic mode above; we should add to those a contradictory finishedness, which emerges from the extended retrospective tenses which Tennyson employs in his shorter poems. In *In Memoriam*, the ambivalent sort of ended-ness, which I argue is a product of Tennyson's lyric tenses, wreaks havoc upon the notion of the whole, whilst also suggesting that every poem does indeed contribute to the perpetuating sameness of grief, the poem's 'productive unity' as Coleridge might have it.[33] Armstrong describes how 'each isolated lyric is a precarious stepping stone which might not lead to another when language breaks down', which puts it nicely.[34] But the threat of something leading to another thing is just as worrying, in the case of a momentary relief, as the thought that nothing will happen next, in the case of despair.

[32] Robert Douglas Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2002), p.234.
[33] *Logic*, p.250.
[34] *Language as Living Form*, p.204.

The effect of putting all of the lyrics of *In Memoriam* together is, in Eliot's words, to give it 'only the unity and continuity' of a diary; but that word 'only' is a painfully Tennysonian one.[35] It refers to things that happen once (I only read one long poem at Oxford) and things that happen over and over again in some desperately limited way (I only read long poems); the mutual sufficiency (only the best will do) and limitedness (he's only a literary critic) of things; and, in 'Mariana' a sort of inevitability of utterance. In that way the 'onliness' of *In Memoriam* distinguishes it from Tennyson's 'Break, break, break', for example, since all of its sections register as both final and provisional statement, open and closed, the ultimate statement about a feeling as well as an impoverished and provisional one. The development of that onliness is the effect of *In Memoriam*'s length. That might mean that *In Memoriam* as a process ought to go on for ever, or at least until its author dies and his contradictions cease, but it also gives it the strange feeling of being ambiguously and continuously final.

Part 1: Tennyson and Eliot's Timeliness and Only-ness

Alfred Tennyson's fortune, in T. S. Eliot's estimation, shifted according to his timeliness, his relationship with his time. In 1920, Eliot would describe Tennyson as 'a very fair example of a poet almost wholly encrusted with parasitic opinion', but by 1942 this relationship had reversed, retaining the indelible interdependence of Tennyson and his age.[36] Eliot then called him the 'voice of his age', praising his 'foreshadow[ing]' of a Victorian intellectual crisis and his ability to perceive it 'before it had come to other men'.[37] Neither comment makes a claim for pristine

[35] 'In Memoriam', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, *Volume 5: Tradition and Orthodoxy*, 1934-1939, ed. by Iman Javadi. Ronald Schuchard and Jayme Stayer (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber, 2017), pp.323-336, p.331.
[36] 'William Blake', *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot,* ii, p.188.
[37] 'In Memoriam', p.331; Eliot, 'The Voice of His Time', *The Listener*, 12 February 1942, pp.211-2, p.212. Barri Gould has recently written of the way Tennyson's elegies anticipate and respond to the laws of thermodynamics *avant la lettre*, in her *ThermoPoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science,* (Cambridge, Mas, MIT, 2010), pp.33-67.

originality, but if the early modernist regarded Tennyson's poetry as almost wholly depleted by the demands of received opinion, the later, (more English, Anglican and Tennysonian) Eliot sees instead a vital purpose for the poet in the expression of his time. Eliot even comes to aestheticise literary timeliness itself when he describes the 'grandeur and the tragedy of the Victorian age'.[38]

The 'In Memoriam' essay was written and reworked in 1936, as Eliot was moving from the former position to the latter.[39] It is, in A. Walton Litz's analysis, an act of self-confession: the very timely statement of a modernist coming to terms with his Victorian inheritance.[40] The Tennyson of *In Memoriam* is now a very great poet, but one that ultimately shirked his duty, refusing to lead his age through the hell he had discovered; he 'turned aside from the journey through the dark night, to become the surface flatterer of his own time'.[41] If both *In Memoriam* and 'In Memoriam' are timely in the sense that they clearly document a certain cultural moment in English letters, then they are also specifically of their *poet*'s time. Tennyson's concerns about the development and purpose of the earth are eminently Victorian, but figured in the particular terms of a private grief. Eliot, for his own part, was returning to Tennyson for particular poetic reasons; the poetry he hoped to write would have Tennysonian echoes.[42] Crucially, he was contemplating a long, meditative poem, which might also be a series of poems; the Tennyson of *In Memoriam* and *Maud* seemed a fitting comparison for the architect of *Four Quartets*.[43]

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[38] 'The Voice of His Time', p.212.
[39] Eliot names Coleridge as an abiding interest; on Eliot's 'Coleridgean cast of mind', see Seamus Perry, 'Eliot and Coleridge', in *Coleridge's Afterlives* ed. J. Vigus and J. Wright (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), pp.224-251, p.237.
[40] C.f. A. Walton Litz, 'T. S. Eliot's Victorian Influence', in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp.470-88, p.483. On Eliot's reintegration with his "nineteenth century heritage", see Helen Gardner, *T. S. Eliot*, Harvard English Studies no. 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p.41.
[41] 'In Memoriam', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, p.331
[42] I. A. Richards was the first to spot the influence of Tennyson upon *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Four Quartets* asking Eliot 'have you or have you not been reading Tennyson?'; he found *Burnt Norton* II, 10-11 to be a 'perfect poetic quotation', of *In Memoriam* XLIII. in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume 8: 1936-1938* ed. by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber & Faber, 2019); Christopher Ricks has written about allusions to Tennyson in his *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, (London: Faber, 1988), p.246.
[43] In Litz's words, 'by the mid-1930s the problems of Tennyson's poetry had become living issues in his [Eliot's] mind', and, specifically, 'the problems Tennyson faced – the construction of a long poem without narrative

Eliot's slyly ambivalent apology for Tennyson's artistry and his view of Tennyson's ultimate failure are representative of a poet consciously negotiating the nature of his own poetic surface and the relationship with his own public. The vision of a poet whose 'spirit had surrendered' is a deeply anxious one, but there is a formal worry here too about how to organise a long poem and make every part of it essential, to write a 'diary of which we have to read every word'.[44] Since it immediately suggests the ideas of continuity and return, progression and reversal, this formal anxiety discloses the third and most obvious shared sense of timeliness between *In Memoriam* and Eliot in the 1930s: the thematic importance of the presentation of time itself.[45]

It is not my purpose here to treat of the way Tennyson related to the ideas of his time, but my subject remains nonetheless the ambiguous timeliness of *In Memoriam*. The connection is suggested by Eliot; one early essay by C. C. Mays compares Tennyson and Eliot and the shadow which Eliot described in 'The Hollow Men', falling 'Between the idea | And the reality', or 'Between the conception | And the creation', as being similar to the shadow which falls on Tennyson as he contemplates the difference between what he 'wants to believe', and the 'means at his disposal by which he can communicate'; I too take a gap, an unlit corner of Eliot's essay as my starting point.[46] Like all readers of Tennyson, Eliot celebrates his ear for a good line: it is enough, in Eliot's analysis, to register as a literary historical event. What is suggestive for our purpose, is the unexplained ease with which Eliot transitions from the smallest unit of critical enquiry to the largest:

The blue fly sung in the pane (the line would be ruined if you substituted *sang* for *sung*) is enough to tell us that something important has happened.

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structure, the fusing of personal emotions with a local landscape – had become Eliot's challenges as well', p.483. The connection is also highlighted by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue in their edition of *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p.882.

[44] 'In Memoriam', p.327.

[45] Linda Hughes describes the whole of *In Memoriam* as the recovery of the "reassurance of cyclical time", which resonates as much with Coleridge's letter to Joseph Cottle as it does with *Four Quartets*; Linda Hughes, *The Manyfacèd Glass: Tennyson's Dramatic Monologues*, (Athens, Ohio; London: Ohio University Press, 1987) p.143.

[46] C. C. Mays, 'In Memoriam: An Aspect of Form', *University of Toronto Quarterly,* 35.1 (1965): 22-46, p.24.

> The reading of long poems is not nowadays much practised: in the age of Tennyson it appears to have been easier. [...] But Tennyson's long poems are not long poems in quite the same sense as those of his contemporaries.[47]

But what exactly has happened? And what draws Eliot from that vowel sound to the dubious fate of the long poem? I suggest that this gap in Eliot's argument is a quietly profound one, snce it is precisely the way in which moments happen or don't happen, their ambivalent timeliness, which is so crucial to the question of the wholeness of *In Memoriam*. More importantly, there is a gap, in Eliot's essay just as in *In Memoriam* itself, between the small and the general, the part and the whole, so that they ultimately fail to speak to each other.

The comment about 'Mariana' marries vagueness to specifity. It would be hard, ultimately, to account for the reason 'sung' is better than 'sang', and to claim this as a major literary historical event carries with it some ambivalence. Is Eliot saying that technically perfect aural effects are the only thing that a Tennysonian poem might do? One of Tennyson's earliest reviewers, W. J. Fox, worried that this might be the case. Fox praised Tennyson as the 'master of musical combinations' but implied that this was not quite sufficient to meet a poet's 'deep responsibilities to his country and the world'.[48] Eliot's own conclusions on this account have been quoted above.

Beyond Eliot's explicit theme, that this important happening attaches itself to 'Mariana' is telling. 'Mariana' is, after all, a lyric poem about nothing happening, 'a study of frustration' as Buckley described it, or about things having happened, or being about to happen, or happening in a way that is so continuous that they barely register as events.[49] Nothing, after all, seems to have the finality of a happening in 'Mariana': 'The rusted nails fell from the knots | That held the pear to the gable-wall' (3-4), and seem to do so in perpetuity; Mariana's tears 'fell with the dews at even' (13), and did so presumably every evening. In Herbert Tucker's

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[47] 'In Memoriam', p.325.
[48] *Tennyson: Critical Heritage,* p.21-3, p.21.
[49] Jerome Buckley, *Tennyson: The Growth of the Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.40.

analysis, Tennyson is the 'most finished, the most inevitable of poets', but this rubs against Tennyson's general belatedness; Tucker also 'find[s] in Tennyson a poetry of aftermath'.[50] The point would be that Tennyson is both the poet of things that are always conclusively happening, but also that have inconclusively happened or been happening for ever. Angela Leighton has written of the way Tennyson's 'nervous, fidgety verbs which repeatedly betray him' never convey the sense of confident happening that they should.[51] In Leighton's analysis, Tennyson's verbs try 'to find the transitive sense of an intransitive loss'; Michael O'Neill similarly wrote of *In Memoriam* and Shelley's *Adonais*, that they turn 'post-mortal existence into a topic tense'.[52] O'Neill's cryptic phrase 'topic tense' bears close attention. 'Topic' could archaically refer to place, more likely subject matter, and more technically 'the part of a sentence which is marked as that on which the rest of the sentence makes a statement'.[53] Speculatively, this grieving tense, a temporal quality of the verbs, makes death seem the argument within which everything that can happen or be stated occurs, the 'large grief which these enfold' (*In Memoriam*, V, 11). For the purposes of my thesis, the central thing to note is that Tennyson's poetry so often seems to come after the end, belonging to the world in which all has been finished.

Even before Hallam's death, however, some of Tennyson's verbs seemed unclear in their happening. Returning to Eliot's chosen line, the choice of sang over sung in 'Mariana' draws attention to a critical word – a euphemism for poetic expression, but also to a potential arbitrariness: have these two words become interchangeable according to their sound? According to the *OED*, sang definitively replaced sung as the simple past tense of sing during

[50] Herbert Tucker, 'Tennyson and the Measure of Doom', *PMLA*, 98.1 (1983), pp.8-20, p.14, p.9.
[51] Angela Leighton, 'Touching Forms: Tennyson and Aestheticism', *Tennyson Research Bulletin*, 7:5 (2001), pp.223-238, p.234.
[52] 'Touching forms', p.234; Michael O'Neill, 'The Wheels of Being: Shelley and Tennyson', in *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence: New Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp.269-282, p.280.
[53] C.f. 'topic, adj. and n.' *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/203386. Accessed 30 January 2023.

the 19th century, citing Benjamin Smart's dictionary of 1836 which still fell in favour of sung, noting that 'Sang for the *pret.* is less in use'.[54] If the language as a whole had not quite decided by Tennyson's day as to which word was to be used, then his *oeuvre* indicates that he tended, in his maturity, to use sang as the preterit or simple past, with sung acting as participle, as we would expect.[55] In the early lyrics, things are less clear; in 'Mariana in the South', for example ('At eve a dry cicala sung' (85)), or in 'The Two Voices' ('Among the tents I paused and sung' (125)).[56] *In Memoriam* uses sung and sang as a simple past tense in equal measure.[57] It is hard to know what to make of this, Tennyson appears to be vary usage according to the dictates of rhyme; it is immensely convenient to have two sounds for the same sense. I contend, however, whilst a strong argument cannot be made for the benefit of choosing 'sung' over 'sang', Tennyson's cavalier treatment of these different forms of the verb does present a meaningful entry point to a very idiosyncratic sense of verbal timeliness. We might ask, deciding between 'sung' and 'sang', when the *singing* is actually taking place – when does the poem begin, and when does it end?

The importance of time in *In Memoriam* is obvious – 'no other English poem explores so many dimensions of time' – but Tennyson's tenses do things to time beyond its implicitly representative exploration.[58] If there is a something obscurely 'pastlike' about the 'lyric present' in George T. Wright's analysis, then Tennyson's lyric past is mysteriously present-like.[59] Such would be an entire thesis unto itself; for the purposes of my analysis of *In*

[54] 'Sing.', *OED Online*. 'Sing', in Benjamin Smart, *A New Critical Pronouncing Dictionary*, (London: T. Cadell, 1836), p.567.
[55] Fourteen times in *The Princess,* for instance, never substituted for 'sung'. In *Idylls of the King*, 'sang' is always used for the simple past: 'that night the bard | Sang Arthur's glorious wars, and sang the King' ('Guinevere', 283-4), with 'sung' as a participle: 'Full many a war song had he sung' ('Guinevere', 276).
[56] Alongside 'correct' usages of sang/sung, in 'Locksley Hall' and others.
[57] Four times for each form; 'sang' is used in XXIII, XXX, XCV, CIII, 'sung' in XXX, LXXVII, LXXXIX, CII.
[58] Philip Collins, 'Tennyson in and out of time', in *Studies in Tennyson*, pp.131-54, p.133.
[59] George T. Wright, 'The Lyric Present', *PMLA*, 89.3 (1974), pp.563-79, explains the lyric present: 'It borrows, no doubt, from the historical present, from our experience of present verbs used to describe a past action; we catch, therefore, in Yeats's or Keats's lines a sense *as of* past action – not that the poet ever tells us that the event is a past one, but that in some obscure way we feel it as *pastlike*, though not exactly past [...] we do not feel the action as one that is regularly performed, neither does it seem an action performed just once. It is too definitely

Memoriam, the particularly Tennysonian 'lyric past' and imperatives need to be concentrated on, since their unfinishedenss is what leaves the parts of the poem uneasily reconciled with its whole. Tennyson's poems happen to him; they are not events of their own, and, as such, struggle to be ordered into a narrative sequence.

Wright's analysis extends Susanne Langer's work, and her analysis of the lyric present, that 'the tense of subjectivity is the "timeless" present', is the foundation of his essay.[60] Langer tells us that 'the lyric poet creates a sense of concrete reality from which the time element has been cancelled out', but with Tennyson we cannot describe a simple 'eternal present', since so often what we are dealing with is an infinite past, that seems to be both out of time and doomed within it.[61] When we hear that 'the blue fly sung in the pane' ('Mariana', 63), we can apply all the language of suspension and eternity to the image, but we are nonetheless placed within the frame of some obscure anteriority. Each description in 'Mariana' gives us, as Mill has it 'not mere pictures, but states of emotion embodied in sensuous imagery' – the emphasis should fall on *state*.[62] The fictive endlessness of the description is cramped by the poem's pastness, as if these things happened forever, yesterday. One reading is to suppose some event terminally happening between this state and ours; an implied narrativity thus haunts 'Mariana' in the evocation of an unspoken or unspeakable event between the poem and its readers.

Ryan Netzley, suspicious of the pristine 'nowness' of a present tense poem asks, 'in what does this *now* consist, other than in its opposition to next, then, before, after, and other temporal shifters?'; but 'Mariana' and other of Tennyson's lyrics, give us an equally tricky

there, not only in the sense that it can be returned to again and again but in the sense that it remains, it abides' (p.565).

[60] Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p.268. The notion of the lyric present remains fertile critical ground, c.f. a study of Eliot and Pound by Jeremy Stevens, 'What the Nightingale Sings: History, Lyric, and Modernist Epic', *ELH*, 87:1 (2020), pp.245-272, which analyses the poetic treatment of history: 'The lyric present has the advantage of truncating or lessening the impact of the unknown horizon of history by making all times *now*', p.256; and Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric*, discussed below.

[61] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p.268.

[62] *Tennyson: Critical Heritage*, pp.84-97, p.95.

'then-ness', which implies change and temporal definition without giving it the full expression of narration.[63] 'Mariana''s refrain announces its constancy:

> She only said, 'My life is dreary,
> He cometh not,' she said;
> She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
> I would that I were dead!' (9-12, *etc.*)

In this static, enervated despair, in which nothing can change, this is the *only* thing that can be said. That 'only' carries a sense of narrative disappointment to it, as if each stanza is an ignored invitation for Mariana to do something but also resists the intrusion of differentiated time. Just as the facts of Mariana's scenery are constant, she is capable of only one thing, which registers in Tennyson as an endless repetition, rather than a singular finite statement – 'reiterative immobility', as Seamus Perry has it.[64] What she says once is also what she says always. The word is ultimately a lie because what she says does change; the poem ends:

> Then, said she, 'I am very dreary,
> He will not come,' she said;
> She wept, 'I am aweary, aweary,
> Oh God that I were dead!' (81-4)

The adverb 'then' suggests both 'what always results' and also 'this specific result'; at sunset, this is what Mariana always says, but that implied cyclicity is not supported by the linear progress of the poem, which instead suggests a definitive change. The momentum of the regular iambic introduction ('she only said') is replaced with the flat thud of 'Then, said she', and Mariana's own lyric present, 'he cometh not', gives way to a terminal futurity: 'he will not come'. Ricks wrote that 'Tennyson's essential genius is exploratory of the human situations for which there seems to be no denouement', but the *feeling* of imminent or achieved denouement

[63] Ryan Netzley, *Lyric Apocalypse: Milton, Marvell, and the Nature of Events* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p.18.
[64] Seamus Perry, *Alfred Tennyson* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005), p.19.

might still be integral to that situation.[65] Mariana's final words return to what she has been saying all along, but now animated by an even greater despair.

As such, the effect of the tenses in 'Mariana' or the thing that importantly happens when we read 'the blue fly sung in the pane', is a kind of ambiguous timeliness, that describes something that is neither exactly a single experience nor the kind of eternally present, crystalised lyric which Wright and Langer describe. It has none of the reassurance of an identical repetition, since 'Mariana' does portray the same emotion given a new stress; in that sense, 'Mariana' has a clearly determined ending. On the other hand, the return to the refrain and the ambiguity of that 'then' hint at a continuity, as if the poem is a description of a state that has always been that way, and all that can be determined is the terror of her situation's indeterminacy. The fact that the poem is in the past tense then becomes crucial since, for all this uncertainty, 'Mariana' is finished and done. If this lyric past carries a sense of eternal recurrence with it that is more common in the English poetic present, it also brings with it a wholly new ambiguity, enshrining within itself the unreconciled claims of its continuity and finality.

'Mariana' is an extreme example, perhaps, but illustrative in two ways. Firstly it shows us that Tennyson's past can manipulate time in the same way as the present, evoking perpetuity or the hypostasis of temporal actions, whilst nonetheless keeping things at a temporal distance from the actual 'now' of the poem, and secondly it shows that the 'now' of that poem, the moment when the poetry is actually being said, is obscurely situated in some futurity which is not the confident position of a narrator, since the happenings of the poem seem to not have conclusively finished. In other words, we get all the distance of retrospection, with none of its perspicacity. Tenses and temporal markers – we shall see how the word 'till' operates similarly in *In Memoriam* – operate to disguise, rather than fix the temporality of the parts of the poem.

[65] Ricks, *Tennyson*, p.276.

Eliot's impression that 'something has happened' turns out to be absolutely correct in its vagueness and its specificity, although not quite in the way he intended.

Langer observed the mingling of tenses in English ballads, a 'mingling of past and present constructions', so that the lyric, timeless present gives way to a narratorial past tense.[66] In her analysis, the opening setting and the conclusion of a ballad have a fictive timelessness which gives way to chronological events once the action of the story starts. Tennyson uses techniques like this in less predictable ways, however. Take the opening of 'Mariana in the South':

> With one black shadow at its feet,
> The house through all the level shines,
> Close-latticed to the brooding heat,
> And silent in its dusty vines,
> A faint-blue ridge upon the right,
> An empty river-bed before.
> And shallows on a distant shore,
> In glaring sand and inlets bright. (1-8)

This is a descriptive passage hanging off a single verb, and the effect is of the constant but singular recurrence as described by Wright. The effect is shattered by the intrusion of the past 'But 'Ave Mary' made she moan' (9). The disjunction between tenses is the same disjunction between a setting that is stationary and a character that is ambiguously dynamic, though devoid of agency. Mariana's moans seem to be the only thing that can happen in the poem amidst a cluster of static happenings. Another example comes from 'The Lady of Shalott':

> Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
> Little breezes dusk and shiver
> Thro' the wave that runs for ever
> By the island in the river
> Flowing down to Camelot. (10-5)

[66] *Feeling and Form*, p.270.

The present tense makes this description appear permanent or to be occurring so regularly that the verb merely states a truth, rather than describes an action.[67] That the wave is running 'for ever' gives a sense of perpetuity which is also momentariness, just as in the description of the Lady's position:

> But in her web she still delights
> To weave the mirror's magic sights,
> For often through the silent nights
> A funeral, with plumes and lights
> And music, went to Camelot:
> Or when he moon was overhead,
> Came two young lovers lately wed;
> 'I am half sick of shadows,' said
> The Lady of Shalott. (64-72)

Weddings, funerals, the movement of the moon – all related to the cycle of life – are all presented as regular occurrences. Tennyson's lyric present might be said to be the tense of cyclical happening, but it is a cycle that is always close to breaking. The third part of 'The Lady of Shalott' marks a movement into the past tense, which is a movement out into narrated time, breaking the spell which imprisons and sustains the lady.[68] Tucker notes that 'each of the four parts shuts down at the moment when description yields to directly quoted speech', but the latter two parts of the poem do continue to yield: the first stanza ends with the 'reaper weary' (33) who 'whispers' (35) in the present tense, whereas the latter concludes with something directly *spoken*: '"I am half sick of shadows," said | The Lady of Shalott' (71-2).[69] The Lady, 'at odds with the stringency both of the unforgiving plot in which she finds herself and of the rigid verbal structures that convey it', nonetheless makes the poem yield to the narrative happening of her speech.[70] The reaper is a component part of the cyclical present environment;

[67] The difference between 'the sun rises every day' and 'the sun rose at 7am this morning'.
[68] Noted by Langer, *Feeling and Form*, pp.271-2.
[69] Herbert Tucker, *Tennyson and the Romanticism*, p.100.
[70] *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, p. 100.

when the lady speaks, she breaks her grammatical frame with her mirror. Various interpretations of her actions have been suggested, ranging from triumphant to disastrous acts of an artistic intelligence, but for our purposes we should observe the competing claims of the poem's two temporalities.[71] The poem slips into the past without warning, in the middle of the sentence: the lady 'still delights', but the funeral 'went to Camelot' and the 'moon was overhead'.

All of this begs the question of whether it really was Hallam's death that caused him to question the progress of men through and beyond their lives. The figures in all of the early lyrics certainly cannot 'rise on stepping-stones | Of their dead selves' (*In Memoriam*, I, 2-3). Armstrong picks up this comment elegantly, noting that it relates to poetry as much as the moments of one's life. 'Each isolated lyric is a precarious stepping-stone which might not lead to another'.[72] To this, I add the emphasis on Tennyson's word 'dead'. It is not enough to drive connections between moments which seem discontinuous. They must end, for the next to begin. The inability of Tennyson's individual parts to definitively end attains a chronic and accumulating effect, so that *In Memoriam* is a smothering of verses as much as a progress through them. We cannot understand the particular qualities of its doubt and its faith without seeing how the final but not quite ended lyric practice of Tennyson interacts with the form of the long poem.

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[71] Flavia M. Alaya, for instance, reads it as 'a poem about rebirth – about death only in its mythical sense as an initation into a new creative life', 'Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott": The Triumph of Art', *Victorian Poetry*, 8:4 (1970), pp.273-289, p.283. The other opinion is that the Lady moves from the isle of art where imagination has ossified and into the real world where it is necessarily destroyed: c.f. Daniel Albright, *Tennyson: The Muse's Tug of War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986): 'In "The Lady of Shalott" allegory is irresistible; the soul of the artist enacts a dream about the poverty of its transfigurations of the real world' (p.33). Erik Gray has suggested that the Lady acts like an artist, heroically attempting to 'surrende[r]' herself 'to a higher power, to a Muse or other source of inspiration', even if that results in failure, in his essay 'Getting It Wrong in "The Lady of Shalott"', *Victorian Poetry*, 47:1 (2009), pp.45-59, p.46.

[72] Isobel Armstrong, *Language as Living Form*, pp.175-6.

Part 2: ‘sung [...] the song we sang’ – The Tense of *In Memoriam*

In Memoriam also has a crucial instance of ‘sung’, this time in direct correspondence with ‘sang’. Erik Gray has argued that Tennyson uses polyptoton – variation of sounds or forms of a word – because it ‘powerfully reinforces two crucial motifs in the poem: evolution and speculation’, but a rhyme of this kind might also give a sense of being dragged back or determined by what has gone before.[73] That may be a good or a bad thing, depending on whether the thing remembered is pleasant. This section stands out primarily because it features a movement into the past tense, the present having previously been used to describe the build-up to Christmas. Later Christmas poems are likewise given in the past, as if they are more stable or narratable events then the momentary speculations and memories of the rest of the poem. As I suggested above, however, the past is never quite a dead self in Tennyson’s lyric poetry.

> We paused: the winds were in the beech:
> We heard them sweep the winter land;
> And in a circle hand-in-hand
> Sat silent, looking each at each.
>
> Then echo-like our voices rang;
> We sung, though every eye was dim,
> A merry song we sang with him
> Last year: impetuously we sang:
>
> We ceased: a gentler feeling crept
> Upon us: surely rest is meet:
> ‘They rest,’ we said, ‘their sleep is sweet,’
> And silence followed, and we wept.
>
> Our voices took a higher range;
> Once more we sang: (XXX, 9-22).

[73] Erik Gray, ‘Polyptoton in “In Memoriam”: Evolution, Speculation, Elegy’, *Studies in English Litearture, 1500-1900*, 55.4 (2015), pp.841-60, p.845.

A. C. Bradley noted that 'The Poet audaciously, for the sake of the sound, uses the two forms 'sung' and 'sang' in successive lines', and Tennyson probably did feel that 'Rang' and 'sang' would be too close together for his liking. [74] The effect is nonetheless striking, perhaps more so because it might be attributed to the arbitrary preference for one sound over another. The verse makes a tense distinction of its own, between the time of 'we sung' and the time of 'we sang with him', as if Tennyson is using two different forms of the verb. This then allows Tennyson to demonstrate a reversal of mood: 'once more we sang' relates back not to the song they had just been singing, but rather to the one which they had sung with Hallam the previous year. It is an evocative coincidence, perhaps, that the latter registers as the conventional narrative past, whereas the former alludes to the enervated pseudo-happenings of 'Mariana', as if within that stanza, the echo of Hallam moves Tennyson's poem out of its temporal rut.

The next stanza is equally significant, since it gives us a representation of what it might be like to end a song: with a restive silence. There is something allegorical in that line: 'and silence followed, and we wept', which could speak for the gaps between all the poems in *In Memoriam*. Somehow the feeling and the conviction of the echoing song is not enough, and the next song is less cheerful than it seems, observing that the dead 'do not die | Nor lose their mortal sympathy, | Nor change to us, although they change' (22-4). Sympathy was a crucial word for Hallam, who had written an essay about its central place in human ethics, but here the word registers with fragility. Whereas Hallam's sympathy is the 'simple affection of the soul, by which it is pleased with another's pleasure and pained with another's pain' experienced (crucially) 'immediately', Tennyson's is fully mediated through verbal ambiguity.[75] Is the sympathy 'mortal' because it is the part of mortals to sympathise with the dead, or rather 'mortal' because the dead sympathise with the living, or because the sympathy, like all things,

[74] A. C. Bradley, *A Commentary on Tennyson's In Memoriam* (London: Macmillan, 1907).
[75] Arthur Hallam, *The Remains of Arthur Henry Hallam* (England; John Murray, 1863), p.160.

is subject to death? In the manuscript, the last line achieves an even more ambiguous form, observing that the dead go 'burning up from change to change'. Like in the 'night-long present of the past' quoted above, Tennyson is aware of the fictitiousness of the thing he believes in, but also eager to preserve what might be credible within that fiction.

The poem ends in an imperative declaration:

> Rise, happy morn, rise, holy morn,
> Draw forth the cheerful day from night:
> O Father, touch the east, and light
> The light that shone when Hope was born. (29-32)

There is confidence in Tennyson's imperative taken in isolation; a moment that *was* gives way to an utterance that simply *is*. Jonathan Culler writes:

> Apostrophes invoke elements of the universe as potentially responsive forces, which can be asked to act, or refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave. […] Asking winds to blow or seasons to stay their coming or mountains to hear one's cries is a ritual action, whereby voice calls in order to be calling, and seeks to manifest its calling, to establish its identity as a poetical voice.[76]

Tennyson establishes his identity only for the poem to end, however. Just like the memory of travelling in France with Hallam, the poem's confidence is a terminal one, and so the fact that *In Memoriam* continues onto the next passage, the next movement of the change that is not quite change, immediately undercuts the imminence of the apostrophe, turning its *now* into a *then*. Tennyson makes his present past and the past present, disrupting the sense of time moving in a straightforward or linear way.

In section LXXXV, Tennyson is reflecting once again on a past poetic self, quoting and slyly revising the first verses of *In Memoriam*. The first section imagines time mocking Tennyson: 'Behold the man that loved and lost, | But all he was is overworn' (15-6), but now

[76] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2015), p.216.

we learn that he really 'felt it when [he] sorrowed most': ''Tis better to have loved and lost, | Than never to have loved at all—' (LXXXV, 2-4). Progress then, from one stepping-stone to another, but separation from the past self would mean separation from Hallam, and so the notion of progress is not an unquestioningly positive one. Tennyson then reflects upon the solidity of his faith:

> And whether trust in things above
> Be dimmed in sorrow, or sustained;
> And whether love for him have drained
> My capabilities of love;
>
> Your words have virtue such as draws
> A faithful answer from the breast,
> Through light reproaches, half exprest,
> And loyal unto kindly laws.
>
> My blood an even tenor kept,
> Till on mine ear this message falls,
> That in Vienna's fatal wall
> God's finger touch'd him, and he slept. (LXXXV, 9-20)

The tense is vague. Whether trust in things above *will* be dimmed? Or are they dimmed already? The address is also surprising: it could be to Hallam or to Tennyson. At any rate, we are in a narrative or speculative mode until the curious lapse into the present in the third stanza above. The present turns the narrative of 'this is how I felt' into a statement of 'this is how I happen to feel'. Tennyson could not, of course, have heard this news more than one time; the impression is that such news cannot quite be turned into narrative. In these lines we see Tennyson trying and failing to move his grief into the past, since the past is where we can say events have happened, and from there we can skip to the next stepping-stone:

> Whatever ways my days decline,
> I felt and feel, though left alone,
> His being working in mine own,
> The footsteps of his life in mine. (41-4)

Both present and past, the stanzas argue, have become the same, since Hallam precedes them both. What Tennyson feels, and what he felt, in the odd speculative mood occasioned by the first line, occur in the same poetic frame of the second line, looking openly towards the rest of his life but also closed to the degree that he will always be after Hallam's death and before some eventual restitution. In another example, Tennyson reflects on the course of the friendship with Hallam. Here the narrative suggests the pastness of the past. The poet is coming to terms with the events of his life.

> The path by which we twain did go,
> Which led by tracts that pleased us well,
> Through four sweet years arose and fell
> From flower to flower, from snow to snow:
>
> And we with singing cheered the way,
> And crowned with all the season lent,
> From April on to April went,
> And glad at heart from May to May:
>
> But where the path we walked began
> To slant the fifth autumnal slope,
> As we descended following Hope,
> There sat the Shadow feared of man;
>
> Who broke our fair companionship,
> And spread his mantle dark and cold,
> And wrapt thee formless in the fold,
> And dulled the murmur on thy lip,
>
> And bore thee where I could not see
> Nor follow, though I walk in haste,
> And think, that somewhere in the waste
> The Shadow sits and waits for me. (XXII, 1-20)

The shift is almost imperceptible in the last verse, but Tennyson moves from a reported action to a present statement. He *could* not follow Hallam, in the past, even though, right now, he walks in haste. As with the above, an attempt to recount gives way to a lyric expression that does not quite end. In this case, the next section begins with an emphatic 'Now' (XXIII, 1). The difference between then and now is slighter than it should be, which means that the new 'now'

– the moments Tennyson reports himself undergoing in his grief cannot quite become a then either.

The present tense, even when it offers consolation for the grieving man, does so in the mode of a paralysis. Tennyson describes the struggle to remember and convey Hallam's nature.

> I cannot see the features right,
> When on the gloom I strive to paint
> The face I know; the hues are faint
> And mixed with hollow masks of night;
>
> Cloud-towers by ghostly masons wrought,
> A gulf that ever shuts and gapes,
> A hand that points, and pallèd shapes
> In shadowy thoroughfares of thought;
>
> And crowds that stream from yawning doors,
> And shoals of puckered faces drive;
> Dark bulks that tumble half alive,
> And lazy lengths on boundless shores; (LXX, 1-12)

The specificity of the vision contrasts with the lyric present. Tennyson finds his memory of Hallam corrupted, intruded upon by shadowy interlopers. Then, everything changes.

> Till all at once beyond the will
> I hear a wizard music roll,
> And through a lattice on the soul
> Looks thy fair face and makes it still. (LXX, 13-6)

Till implies a fixed change. It is a promise of release: something happened *until* it changed. The finite moment of an end comes 'all at once', restoration from outside, and brings the frenzy of imagination back to a stillness. But, as with Tennyson's other, 'only-ness', the 'all at once' registers as a recurrence. This is something that happens repeatedly, Tennyson's poem tells us, and so the promise of moving from one stepping-stone to another, of finding a way of getting to the next stage, the next poem, is not a trustworthy one. Later in *In Memoriam*, Tennyson will describe how 'nothing stands', the 'hills are shadows, and they flow | From form to form'

(CXXIII, 5-6), but the horror of these lyrics, which is the same as the possibility they hold for return, is that they *do* stand in their inevitable inconclusiveness. Whilst the world loses its forms, Tennyson 'cannot think the thing farewell' (CXXIII, 12). David Shaw describes the poems as 'hav[ing] the concision of gravestone inscriptions', and the cluster of them gathered together certainly invites the same ritual return.[77] As Wordsworth tells us, we write epitaphs in order to 'guard the remains of the deceased from irreverent approach' and 'to preserve their memory'.[78] The gravestones of *In Memoriam* act instead to guard the grief they are supposedly working through.

Much depends on the word 'till' in *In Memoriam*. It predicts the pristine end – 'My Arthur, whom I shall not see | Till all my widowed race be run' (IX.17-8) – but also affirms the fact that they have not quite ended yet. Some of *In Memoriam*'s most confident moments are undercut by this ambiguity.

> If thou wert with me, and the grave
> Divide us not, be with me now,
> And enter in at breast and brow,
> Till all my blood, a fuller wave,
>
> Be quickened with a livelier breath,
> And like an inconsiderate boy,
> As in the former flash of joy,
> I slip the thoughts of life and death;
>
> And all the breeze of Fancy blows,
> And every dew-drop paints a bow,
> The wizard lightnings deeply glow,
> And every thought breaks out a rose. (CXXII, 9-20)

The grammar of the verse is strained. Tennyson imagines what would happen but moves from a conditional statement to a prayer: 'be with me now'. The verses then lose themselves in ecstatic vision, but bracketed so many times ('if', 'till', 'like', 'as') that the confident present

[77] David Shaw, *Tennyson's Style* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p.132.
[78] *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, ii, p.49.

tense is undercut. There is a missing future auxiliary, and the poem discloses itself as wish-fulfilment in language. Here the 'till' signifies less the inevitable movement from one place to another, from cradle to grave, and more a hope that a meaningful movement of that form is possible. As Alastair Thomson has described it, we often read *In Memoriam* 'in a state of puzzled suspense, not sure if we have been foxed by some elegant periphrasis intended only to slide away from the problem'.[79]

The reiteration which literally happens in the case of the long poem intensifies this situation. We read of one such progress – the emergence of consolation – out of poetry. Again, it is unclear whether this is something that happens, or something that has happened, or something that Tennyson wants to have happened:

> And in that solace can I sing,
> Till out of painful phases wrought
> There flutters up a happy thought,
> Self-balanced on a lightsome wing: (LXV, 5-8)

The lines call to mind the 'short swallow-flights of song' (XLVIII, 15) which is what Tennyson claimed all the verses of *In Memoriam* are. The claims for what poetry might do to help the grieving man are very modest, but in the case of a poem like *In Memoriam*, the fact of its being challenges the evasive humility. Alan Sinfield, echoing J. S. Mill's early perception, supposes that 'through his syntax, Tennyson does his best to avoid imposing a meretricious order on the inexplicable and to preserve the simultaneity and equality of the impressions which compose it', which is to take these lines literally, emphasising the small over the large.[80] Paull F. Baum's not hugely appreciative study, *Tennyson: Sixty Years After*, laments, of *Maud* that 'as always with Tennyson – the parts are greater than the whole', but such is the argument made by Sinfield and *In Memoriam* itself.[81] If Sinfield suggests that Tennyson allows parts the space to breathe,

[79] Alastair Thomson, *The Poetry of Tennyson*, (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p.114.
[80] Alan Sinfield, *The Language of Tenyson's In Memoriam* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p.100.
[81] Paull F. Baum, *Tennyson Sixty Years After* (Chapel Hill: University of North Caroline Press, 1948), p.142.

without reducing them to a whole, then *In Memoriam*, claiming that it does not 'trust a larger lay' (XLVIII, 13), underplays its own developing wholeness. Poems do not, regardless of whether they celebrate or despair, simply fly away.

In the *Memoir*, Hallam Tennyson quotes Henry Sidgwick's response to *In Memoriam*'s ending as 'too completely triumphant': 'Faith must give the last word: but the last word is not the whole utterance of the truth'.[82] The implication is that the poem ought not have ended the way it did, but perhaps more importantly, should not have ended at all. 'Assurance and doubt must alternate in the moral world in which we at present live, somewhat as night and day alternate in the physical world'.[83] Just as with Coleridge's organic analogies for method or form, there is no single end possible for a poem like this. I have suggested above that the lyrics in *In Memoriam* do not end neatly enough for them to be arranged in succession, alternating like day and night. Tennyson's temporal structures within his poems incline to stasis, paralysis, or an open-endedness that is distant from the poet in time. Observing the difference between the whole truth and the last word is one of the most sensitive responses to *In Memoriam*, but the question of whether it is really a whole, instead of a series of parts that stubbornly endure, stepping-stones to nowhere, remains a challenging one. The timely potential in Tennyson's lyric practice is extended and accumulated. Before the poem ends, Tennyson hears the voice of Hallam 'on the rolling air' (CXXX, 1), and as a 'cry above the conquered years' (CXXXI, 7). His poetry, however, gathered together in the monotony of *In Memoriam* suggests the persistence of all its poetry, whether despairing or relieved, morbid or lively.

The poem ends with the image of river flowing out to sea, and then a vision of the evolution of nature, but ultimately settles for neither of these. Tennyson is looking around for a summative stanza. The moon is presiding over

[82] *Tennyson: A Memoir*, i, p.304.
[83] *Tennyson: A Memoir*, i, p.304.

> The white-faced halls, the glancing rills,
> [Which] catch at every mountain head
> And o'er the friths that branch and spread
> Their sleeping silver through the hills. ('Epilogue', 113-6)

They come to 'rest' (121) by the ocean, when the figure changes. We have not, in fact, traced the movement of waters, like Wordsworth, to their end in the endless ocean:

> and ocean sounds,
> And, star and system rolling past,
> A soul shall draw from out the vast
> And strike his being into bounds
>
> And moved through life of lower phase,
> Result in man, be born and think,
> And act and love, a closer link
> Betwixt us and the crowning race
>
> Of those that, eye to eye, shall look
> On knowledge; (121-30)

The cycle of the water gives way to the progress of some ill-defined evolutionary ideal. But progress does not hold for long. The final lines of the poem put off its wholeness, looking towards 'One God, one law, one element' (142). *In Memoriam*, at the last, refuses the awareness of its own form in favour of the deferred unity which will make it void. It shirks the obligation of the ending. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, we shall see how another poet, claiming divine unity, used the long poem as a means for demonstrating its attainment.

Chapter 4. The Double Nature of *Aurora Leigh*'s Individualism

> IX.—I believe that religion is the yearning ever intenser and intenser, of the Human spirit, for more harmonious and joyous identity with the Spirit of Universal Being:
> Poetry pictures the forms of Universal Being:
> Poetry becomes Religion when it proceeds from the Multiformity to the Unity of the Universe, and Religion becomes poetry when it proceeds from the unity to the Multiformity of the Universe.[1]
>
> — William Maccall

> Life's but a means unto an end—that end
> Beginning, mean and end to all things—God.[2]
>
> — Philip James Bailey

Introduction

> You will not compass your poor ends
> Of barley-feeding and material ease,
> Without a poet's individualism
> To work your universal.[3] (II, 475-8)

Even in pursuit of regrettably unpoetic ends, *Aurora Leigh* sternly warns against forsaking the particular means of the poet, here identified with something called 'individualism'. This chapter is largely an attempt to work out what that 'poet's individualism' might mean in the context of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's long poem, 'the greatest *poem* in the English language'

[1] William Maccall, *The Elements of Individualism: A Series of Lectures* (London: John Chapman, 1847), p.5.
[2] Philip James Bailey, *Festus*, ed. by Mischa Willett (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), Scene 7, 92-3.
[3] All references to *Aurora Leigh* and other poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, unless otherwise noted, are cited by line numbers in the text, and taken from *Elizabeth Barrett Browning. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*.

according to John Ruskin.[4] One thing that involves is the recovery of the openness of the word in 1856. According to M. W. Taylor, 'before the 1880s, "individualism" had been a pejorative term used to describe the allegedly egoistical and atomistic social theory of liberalism', before emerging as a cornerstone of the new liberalism.[5] In 1859, two years after *Aurora Leigh*, J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* would be published, praising individuality but not exactly individual-*ism* as an end in itself, as would Darwin's *On the Origin of Species,* which encouraged Spencer to see 'differences between people [as] evolutionary, or organically purposive', and Samuel Smiles's *Self Help* which celebrated the 'strong individualism which makes and keeps Englishmen really free'.[6] Regenia Gagnier puts it plainly: 'the philosopher of Individualism in the nineteenth century was Herbert Spencer', who 'biologised the division of labour', influenced by Darwin, to reveal that 'all Progress is progress toward individuation' in the decades after Barrett Browning had died.[7] *Aurora Leigh*'s individualism thus precedes the most famous mid-century expression of individuality (*On Liberty*) and the moment when a term 'scarcely used by the political economists and the Benthamites [...] came to be embraced by the whole spectrum of English liberals'.[8] Barrett Browning is an early contributor to the reformulation of 'individualism' as a good thing, but not exactly by prefiguring economic individualism. The synthesising retrospection undertaken by liberal thinkers from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, has tended, in John Burrow's view, 'to treat anything that does not fit as residues or

[4] Letter to Robert Browning, 27th November 1856, (repr. in *The Brownings' Correspondence: An Online Edition*, ed. by Ronald Hudson, Philip Kelley, Scott Lewis, and Edward Hagan (Winfield, Ka: Wedgestone, 1984-) <https://www.browningscorrespondence.com>, §3927). Letters reproduced in this online edition are cited by their entry number; articles and reviews quoted from it are cited by their longer entry code.
[5] M. W. Taylor, *Men Versus the State: Herbert Spencer and Late Victorian Individualism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p.2.
[6] Regenia Gagnier, 'The Law of Progress and the Ironies of Individualism in the Nineteenth Century', *New Literary History*, 31:2 (2000), pp.315-336, p.318; Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help With Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (London: S. W. Partridge & co., 1859; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.21.
[7] Gagnier, 'The Law of Progress and the Ironies of Individualism in the Nineteenth Century', p.317.
[8] Steven Lukes, 'The Meanings of "Individualism"', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32:1 (1971), pp.45-66, p.64.

mere incoherence', and the individualism of *Aurora Leigh* is no exception, borrowing more from Romantic theories of poetry and an apocalyptic spiritualism than economic realism.[9]

'A Poet's Individualism' is thus an avant-garde expression of a liberal political philosophy and a claim for the purpose and nature of poetry. Since Barrett Browning clearly thought those two things were the same, my aim is to approach the form of this long poem through its ideas, since those ideas clearly appeal to and rely on poetry. *Aurora Leigh* is an expression of, as much as an argument for, a kind of poetic individuality. The poet's individualism is, however, a more divided and surprising thing than it might seem; it gives us insight into a protean moment in the development of Victorian liberal philosophy and its anxieties about the integrity of the individual, the place of the aesthetic, and the telos of history. In all of these cases, poetry is invited to provide instrumental expression for ideas – 'poets get directlier at the soul, | Than any of your œconomists' (VIII, 540-1) – but also to convey an apocalyptic certainty beyond mundane variousness, a certain end for the uncertain means of the liberal world:

> Art's a service,—mark:
> A silver key is given to thy clasp,
> And thou shalt stand unwearied, night and day,
> And fix it in the hard, slow-turning wards,
> And open, so, that intermediate door
> Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form
> And form insensuous, that inferior men
> May learn to feel on still through these to those,
> And bless thy ministration. (IX, 915-23)

Aurora Leigh argues that 'poets should | Exert a double vision' (V, 182-3), and my argument is likewise divided between the intellectual or political individualism of poetry and the more formal or personal sense of poetry as caused by the particular individualism of the poet. I call

[9] John Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p.5.

these, taking leave from *Aurora Leigh* itself, '*the* poet's individualism', which is what poets do for a liberal society, and '*a* poet's individualism', which relates to the particular subjectivity of the poet herself. The niceness of the distinction is defended below.

Much work has focused on the genre(s) of *Aurora Leigh*, but I do not think it an act of unreasonable critical stubbornness to stick with the term 'long poem', rather than a hybrid epic or verse-novel.[10] For many critics, genre offers opportunities to reveal a formal subversion: 'Barrett Browning's attack on generic purity undermines constructions of gender difference'; the 'positive fragmentation' of *Aurora Leigh* 'expose[s] the limitations of various genres when taken individually'.[11] The fundamental challenge of the form remained equivalent to that which I articulated above with reference to Coleridge and Wordsworth some thirty years prior: organising a whole that would admit variety of parts, with an ambiguous relationship to its own development. The first signs of the poem that would eventually be called *Aurora Leigh* are in a letter of December 1844 to Mary Russell Mitford:

> I want to write a poem of a new class, in a measure—a Don Juan, without the mockery & impurity, .. under one aspect,—& having unity, as a work of art,—& admitting of as much philosophical dreaming & digression (which is in fact a characteristic of the age) as I like to use. Might it not be done, even if I could not do it? & I think of trying at any rate.[12]

These comments happily rhyme with Coleridge's plan for 'The Brook', which would 'give equal room and freedom for description' whilst 'supply[ing] in itself a natural connection to the parts, and unity to the whole'; for the purposes of this thesis, Barrett Browning's desire to do something new with the long poem is perhaps sufficient justification to stick with the term.[13]

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[10] Recent work on *Aurora Leigh* as an epic poem includes Tucker's *Epic,* pp.377-384; Eleanor Reeds, 'Voicing an Epic for the Age in "The Prelude" and "Aurora Leigh"', *Victorian Poetry*, 57.2 (2019), pp.225-246; Peggy Dunn Bailey's chapter about the poem which argues that it 'deconstruct[s] binary opposites (such as woman versus artist)', in '"Hear the Voice of the [Female] Bard": *Aurora Leigh* as a Female Romantic Epic', in *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621-1982*, ed. by Bernard Schweizer (London: Routledge, 2017), pp.345-403, p.345.
[11] Markovits, *The Victorian Verse Novel*, p.16; Morgan, *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends*, p.154.
[12] *Brownings' Correspondence*, §1798.
[13] *Biographia Literaria*, i, p.196.

At any rate, *Aurora Leigh* is a long argument for the importance of poetry, first and foremost. There has been plenty of criticism of the novel, according to Rebecca Richardson, which thematises how 'the novelistic protagonist must discipline or compromise their desires to adapt to a wider cultural and economic system'; *Aurora Leigh* does not quite, as a verse novel, fit that framework.[14] Its individualism is pre-economic and grounded in apocalyptic vision that has much more to do with Romantic claims for poetry than later Victorian anxieties about the social whole.

Thinking about *Aurora Leigh* as an experimental long poem then allows us to explore its uneasy alliance between content and form, means and end. The progress of one individualism does not neatly match the progress of the other: the individualism which allows the poet to write from her life does not have the same ends as the individualism which is required of her by progress. One clue might be the way in which that awkward '-ism' throws off Barrett Browning's metre. Elsewhere in the poem, the eponymous heroine wonders

> What, if even God
> Were chiefly God by living out Himself
> To an individualism of the Infinite,
> Eterne, intense, profuse,—. (III, 749-52)

Just as the grandest claim is made for the term – a speculative theology of pan-individualism – it chafes against the limits of the blank verse. Coventry Patmore found these lines 'turgid and unpoetical', but they might be a fitting emblem of individuality itself, pursuing its interest beyond the limits of the line.[15] Caroline Levine has written of the way Barrett Browning's antislavery poems use 'jolting off-rhythms' and hybrid stanza forms to show that both political

[14] Rebecca Richardson, *Material Ambitions: Self-Help and Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022), p.11.
[15] 'Review of "Poems" (1856) and "Aurora Leigh"', *The North British Review,* February 1857, pp.443-462 (repr. in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, §E570200B).

and poetical form 'operate according to multiple principles of organization'.[16] Certainly, many critics have found that Barrett Browning's verse has a musicality in diversity, but *Aurora Leigh* ultimately does insist upon an apocalyptic unity hidden behind an earthly plurality, the relationship of all things to God's 'one central Heart!' (IX, 890), and vision of a world that is, indeed, 'Complete, consummate, undivided' (VII, 839). I take that delaying, uncomfortable line 'an individualism of the Infinite' as a suggestive starting point, then, because my point is precisely that the means of *Aurora Leigh*'s poetic individualism, the thing which motivates and perpetuates poetry, carries a sense of internal endlessness along with its argument for a clearly defined spiritual end.

Part 1: Victorian Individualism, 1856

I.

The moral conclusion of *Aurora Leigh* seems simple enough: let people do their best for themselves as individuals and the social and economic whole will improve. 'New hearts in individual growth' (IX, 943) are the mechanism by which change will come, in a passage that celebrates plurality. Our reward is the arrival of 'new dynasties' (945), 'New churches, new œconomies, new laws' (947), 'new societies' (948). What Aurora has learned, through the course of her story, is that even a theory of individualism 'must [be] brought home to her by experience'; and so even the ideal of diversity is impoverished in the face of the actual individuality and difference in the world.[17] It would seem that there is an equivalence between such an idea and the sort of thing affixed as epigraph to J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*, published two

[16] Caroline Levine, 'Rhyme, Rhythm, Violence: Elizabeth Barrett Browning on Slavery', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.309-322, p.314.
[17] Matthew Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse 1830-1870: English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.113.

years after *Aurora Leigh* in 1859. Mill chose a quotation from Von Humboldt as his emblem, announcing that his 'grand, leading principle' was the 'absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity'.[18] Critiques of this position contend that it is made in conscious, or unconscious, bad faith. John Gray, in the postscript to his *Mill on Liberty: A Defence*, observes that diversity was accommodated only in the 'unshakable expectation of cultural convergence on a universal liberal civilisation', which is therefore a Western, market-driven one.[19] *Aurora Leigh*'s expectation is firmly Christian, however, rather than capitalist; God seems to underwrite the diversity and plurality of the evolving world: 'He shall make all new' (IX. 949). In that sense, the received notion of a liberal individualism, glossed by Burrow as the belief that 'Order is present in human society not in the realm of ends [...] but only in the rationality of our choice of means', does not quite apply to *Aurora Leigh*, since there seems to be some clear divine telos, discernible to the poet and revealable to 'inferior men' (IX, 921).[20] We might disagree with the destination to which Barrett Browning suggests the world is heading, but she cannot be accused of hiding such a telos, as Gray accuses Mill of in *On Liberty*.

Another objection aims more squarely at individualism itself. Amanda Anderson, recent apologist for literary liberalism, summarises this critique as revealing 'a view of the world that systematically disavows the structural inequities of the capitalist system, the conditions of power animating the social field, and the ways individuals are always embedded in myriad social relationships'.[21] But if this is a critique of atomic individualism, the belief that isolated individuals are fundamental, rather than nations, classes, or groups, it does not neatly apply to *Aurora Leigh*. The word 'individualism' partly emerged as a critique of that very outcome, and as Burrow has suggested, we need to question the extent to which the development of

[18] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty,* ed. by David Bromwich and George Kateb (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p.71.
[19] John Gray, *Mill on Liberty: A Defence,* 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 1996), p.132.
[20] *Whigs and Liberals*, p.3.
[21] Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p.4.

individualism of this kind is 'the central line [...] of nineteenth-century thought', excluding wayward or eccentric developments as false or nonsensical.[22] Friedrich Hayek did not, I imagine, read *Aurora Leigh*, but it is not hard to guess whether he would have categorised its individualism, supernaturalist in its ambitions and aiming at a kind of combinatory diversity, as a false individualism, 'the product of an exaggerated belief in the powers of individual reason', although we would need to reformulate his position as a criticism of an overambitious claim for the powers of individual poesis rather than reason *per se*.[23] At any rate, my aim is to reveal the richness of *Aurora Leigh*'s individualism, rather than its neatness, and to do so within the context of the early Victorian period, rather than through the lens of twentieth century liberals. Fittingly, then, I am trying to consider *Aurora Leigh's* individualism in its individuality, as an attempt, on the part of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to account for the nature, origins, purpose, and end of the social and spiritual life of humans as the parts of a larger whole.

That spiritual life is the crucial difference. If Aurora ultimately 'condemns both those who value only spirit and those who believe that only the material is real', it is through the enlargement of spirit to the inclusion of the material.[24] This movement was given in more schematic form in a notebook entry, quoted in Margaret Reynolds's edition:

1. [Italy & [against] England]
   <Aurora born in Italy>
   Education against development
   System against instinct
   Love & philanthropy

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2. The Ideal against the practical—

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3. The Ideal works itself out.[25]

[22] *Whigs and Liberals*, p.3.
[23] Friedrich Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (London: Routledge, 1948), p.8.
[24] Joyce Zonana, 'The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh" and Feminist Poetics', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 8:2 (1989), pp.240-262, p.246.
[25] *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (New York: Norton, 1996), pp.348-9, p.349.

There is no talk of individualism in this scheme, but it is nonetheless through the action of *the* poet's individualism – the faculties of the poet understood in the abstract – that 'the ideal works itself out' – out of its ideality and into a practical vision of order and telos in an individualised world. We shall see, in the second half of this chapter, how *a* poet's individualism, the manifestation of her self in poetry, seems to offer only ambivalent support for this end, since it is a process that cannot definitively work itself out. Individualism, as Anna Clark has it, 'the Victorian idea of the self', seems to 'hav[e] been created by Spencer and political economy [...] or by evangelicism'; *Aurora Leigh* is not quite an evangelical poem, but its individualism is deeply spiritual, rather than strictly economic, and in that sense develops a sense of higher direction and purpose beyond itself.[26]

II.

For all its familiarity now, the word 'individualism' was not a common one in 1856, when *Aurora Leigh* was finished, and especially not in the 1840s, when Barrett Browning began contemplating a long poem of this kind. The word seems to have emerged into English from two directions: from French, via Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*, and within English socialist discourse of the 1830s, in which individualism tends to carry a negative connotation, developing a positive formulation in James Elishama Smith's writing and the lectures of William Maccall. In his *Autobiography*, J. S. Mill, noting the 'common property' of the idea of liberty, nonetheless laments its restricted profusion in England. Maccall is the named predecessor.[27] Maccall, unitarian minister to Mill's agnostic, frames his individualism more in terms of imagination and creativity than in terms of economic self-interest. Crucially,

[26] Anna Clark, 'James Hinton and Victorian Individuality: Polygamy and the Sacrifice of the Self', *Victorian Studies*, 54:1 (2011), pp.35-61, p.35.
[27] 'In our own country, before the book *On Liberty* was written, the doctrine of Individuality had been enthusiastically asserted, [...] by Mr. William Maccall, in a series of writings of which the most elaborate is entitled *Elements of Individualism*', J.S. Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. by Mark Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.143.

individualism for Maccall, as for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, seems to mean the realisation of religious potential within each individual as an unfolding of God within them. 'Religion is the yearning ever intense and intenser, of the Human Spirit, for more harmonious and joyous identity with the Spirit of Universal Being', Maccall lectured, and furthermore 'this yearning is surest, speediest, fullest satisfied when the Individual is faithfullest to his Individual nature'.[28] That sort of individualism, which imagines not endless diversity but individuality as the means by which diversity can be accommodated or overcome is much more familiar to *Aurora Leigh* than the kind of individualism that would be aimed against state interference in the later part of the nineteenth century by figures like Herbert Spencer.

On the whole, the point made by *Aurora Leigh* is fairly straightforward. According to Matthew Reynolds, Aurora discovers that 'the most important function of poetry is to defend "individualism" against its twin enemies, social "conventions" and the "universal" ambitions of [...] socialist schemes for reform'.[29] But *Aurora Leigh* certainly has universal ambitions for its individualism. It is a less doctrinaire word than it might now seem, after the synthesising retrospection undertaken by liberal thinkers from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, as Burrow has described. *Aurora Leigh* is not incoherent in its individualism, but it is eccentric. Individualism, I argue, is the means by which Barrett Browning proposes individualism itself can be overcome, revealing the fundamental organic interrelatedness of all things in God's love, separating it from naturalist or empirical liberalisms like that of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, and resonating with obscurer, earlier voices such as James Elishama Smith, the first to develop a 'new, militantly positive conception of individuality' in the 1830s, or William Maccall, who lectured on individualism in the 1840s.[30] In Smith's periodical, *The Shepherd*, we read, in 1835, of the origin and ends of individualism within divine being:

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[28] Maccall, *The Elements of Individualism*, p.5.
[29] Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse*, p.111.
[30] Gregory Claeys, '"Individualism," "Socialism," and "Social Science": Further Notes on a Process of Conceptual Formation, 1800-1850', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 47:1 (1986), pp.81-93, p.92.

All fresh water is corruptible; it merely lasts for a short time. If exposed to the air it putrefies and becomes nauseous; nor can it ever recover its purity until it has mingled with the waters of universalism in the salt and incorruptible ocean. So it is with the creeds and systems of individualism; they all come from the same great salted fountain, and in that salted fountain it is their final destiny to be united again.[31]

For socialist Smith, just like the heroine of Barrett Browning's poem, 'none of the socialist plans of Owen, Saint-Simon, or Fourier, being each only an "individual's social system", could ever constitute the end of human development'; as Philip Lockley describes it, Smith eventually argued for 'a role for individuals in the progression towards social communion'.[32]

This spiritual individualism is close to *Aurora Leigh*'s individualism: as the reviewer for *The Examiner* glossed it, the 'gist of the whole lesson' is a focus on 'individual home life' – not quite individualism as isolation, then – 'of which Love is the highest guide; first God's love'.[33] In William Maccall's 'articles of faith', we read 'XIII.–I believe that the Revelations of God are perpetual and that every individual, while a fresh Revelation of god and of the Universe, is the highest of all revelations to himself', which suggests not exactly self-determination – individuals developing their own ends – but rather individualism as the means by which God's determination can be most readily revealed.[34] *Aurora Leigh* is a similar contribution, then, to a discussion about the nature of individuality as a means versus an end in itself, which does not give us the familiar or received notion of 'individualism', considered as the atomic individualism of Jeremey Bentham, for example, or as the sort of economic individualism which runs through Herbert Spencer to Hayek and beyond.[35]

[31] James Elishama Smith, *Shepherd*, 24, February 7th 1835.
[32] Philip Lockley, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England: From Southcott to Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.248.
[33] 'Review of "Aurora Leigh"', *The Examiner*, 29 November 1856, p.756 (*The Brownings' Correspondence*, E561129A).
[34] *Elements of Individualism*, p.5.
[35] As Michael Freeden puts it in his *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Bentham's 'extreme individualism [...] did not see society as a unit with its own attributes and ends' (p.29).

As an individualist poem, then, *Aurora Leigh* attempts to reconcile the origins of society with an idea of its ends, in a way that we need to rescue from notions of a monolithic 'romance of liberal individualism' as Elaine Hadley has described it.[36] For all the dominance of this individualism in hindsight, it did not always appear inevitable: Mill wrote to Maccall in 1849 that 'there never was, except during the middle half of the eighteenth century, a time so unpropitious for one of your opinions'.[37] Hadley sees that individualism 'seemed to offer prudent resistance against the manifold systemic powers of mid-century England' to writers like Arnold and Mill, but one coercive system they were worried about, following Toqueville, was exactly the malignant effects of unfettered self-interest.[38] Individualism, is here employed as a warning about the side effects of liberalism, the site of what Amanda Anderson has called the 'bleak'-ness of liberalism as 'a body of thought [that] cannot be said to [...] disavo[w] those psychological and political forces that work against its aims', especially when those forces are disclosed by the means of liberalism itself.[39]

In French, the term appeared in the 1820s as 'a term of opprobrium, one that characterized the Enlightenment stress on political liberalism, freedom of conscience, individual rights, and the pursuit of economic self-interest'.[40] Far from being an attractive end, individualism is one dangerous by-product of liberalism with which it must contend. The *OED* gives the first English attestation of this sense in 1840, in Henry Reeve's translation of Toqueville's *Democracy in America*, where the word was accompanied by a note apologising for how strange 'it may seem to the English ear' and explaining that there is 'no English word

[36] Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) p.62.
[37] *The Later Letters of John Stuart Mill 1849-1873*, ed. Francis Mineka and Dwight Lindley, 4 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) i, p.19.
[38] Hadley, *Living Liberalism*, p.62.
[39] Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, p.45.
[40] George H. Smith, *The System of Liberty: Themes in the History of Classical Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.175.

exactly equivalent to the expression' in the French.[41] For Toqueville, individualism is more refined and considered than simple selfishness: 'Egotism originates in blind instinct: individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment'; but it nonetheless runs a destructive social course.[42]

> Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries, from him; it throws him back for ever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.[43]

This is a more psychological framing of the same vision Edmund Burke had outlined, although he had not superadded the doctrinal connotations of the -ism, of a society which 'crumble[s] away' and is 'disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality'.[44] In Toqueville's view, the negative effects of individualism in America are kept in check by the freedom to associate and a 'principle of interest rightly understood': 'an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist each other'.[45] In this liberal society, individualism must be tempered, lest it render the term 'liberal society' a contradiction in terms, but the individual still has the means of getting beyond his or her shallow individualism through association. Another lead from France came in 1848, when *The Times* editorial observed the views of the socialist historian, Louis Blanc, then minister of labour in the revolutionary provisional government in Paris:

> One of the chief national advantages indicated by this suggestive historian as derivable from the conquest of Algiers is the importation into France of the traditional Communism of the desert to the explosion of that pernicious and hateful "individualism" which a false civilisation has generated.[46]

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[41] Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. by Henry Reeve (3 vols.; London: Saunders and Otley, 1838-40), iii, p.202.
[42] *Democracy in America*, iii, p.203.
[43] *Democracy in America*, iii, p.206.
[44] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by F. M. Turner and M. D. McMahon (New Haven: Yale, 2003), p.127.
[45] *Democracy in America*, iii, p.253.
[46] 'Whatever may have been the complicity of M.' *The Times*, 21 Apr. 1848, p.4.

The word, unfamiliar as the scare quotes may attest, nonetheless entered English with a strongly negative connotation: 'a term of opprobrium, one that characterized the Enlightenment stress on political liberalism, freedom of conscience, individual rights, and the pursuit of economic self-interest' as they might tend to socially destructive ends.[47] The *OED* is useful here. Charles Kingsley talks, in 1856, of 'selfish individualism', and our attention is drawn to J. S. Mill using the word in a critical mode:

> Again, the moral objection to competition, as arming one human being against another, making the good of each depend upon evil to others, making all who have anything to gain or lose, live as in the midst of enemies, by no means deserves the disdain with which it is treated by some of the adversaries of socialism, and among the rest, by Mr. Newman. Socialism as long as it attacks the existing individualism, is easily triumphant.[48]

Crucially, these writers observe (and regret) individualism as a symptom of modern life. It is something for liberalism to apologise for and counter.

Bringing these things together into a single doctrine was largely a product of looking back. Friedrich Hayek, for instance, a particularly vehement individualist, could marshal ostensible anti-individualists in support of some deeper, truer current of individualism, as he saw it, a clear example of the 'highly selective reading' which Burrow has argued against in the centring of political philosophy around developing a single kind of individuality.[49] Thus Edmund Burke, who feared that a society might 'crumble away [and be] disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality', becomes, for Hayek, 'one of the greatest representatives of true individualism'.[50] Alexis de Toqueville, who defined individualism precisely as the negative outcome of certain democratic freedoms, nonetheless joins Burke and Adam Smith in

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[47] George H. Smith, *The System of Liberty: Themes in the History of Classical Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.175.
[48] J. S. Mill, 'Newman's Political Economy', *Westminster Review*, October 1 1851, pp.44-53, p.45.
[49] *Whigs and Liberals*, p.3.
[50] Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p.127; Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p.3.

Hayek's analysis.[51] Hayek, in the sceptical view of Colin Bird, was not discovering a continuous tradition, but actively producing a synthetic individualism which married what he calls 'methodological individualism', which has an epistemic or meta-social claim about the foundational nature of individuals, rather than, say, classes, relations, traditions, in society, with an economic anti-interventionism that specifically 'concern[ed] the scope and limits of the expanding British state in the late nineteenth century'.[52] There is, in the terms of my thesis, a claim being made in this individualism about the origins of social life, the theoretical claim that everyone is first and foremost an individual, and its ends, the rather more practical sense that individuality is both end in itself, and the best means to some other end.

The End is a vexed subject for liberalism, of course: Hayek defines his ideas explicitly against pre-determining a telos, but his sense of political thought developing towards individualism is implicitly teleological.[53] Francis Fukuyama advanced the most (in)famous argument of this kind, which has a note of its own bleakness at the end.[54] The victory of liberalism seems to mean the loss of a diversity that liberalism should cherish: 'the end of history will be a very sad time [...] the worldwide ideological struggle that called for daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation'.[55] The melancholy ending of Fukuyama's essay has more than a hint of Wordsworth's 'was it for this?' about it; Aurora Leigh reaches a similar conclusion about her own individualism when she realises that she cannot 'in this ragged, narrow life of mine, | Contain my own conclusions' (VII, 919-20). That the victory of a liberal orthodoxy, diverse as it might be, nonetheless

[51] 'The "individualism" to which they [Burke and de Toqueville] are opposed is something altogether from that of Smith', *Individualism and Economic Order*, p.5.
[52] Colin Bird, *The Myth of Liberal Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.9.
[53] Collectivism 'differs from liberalism and individualism in wanting to organize the whole of society and all its resources for [their] unitary end', in Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.60.
[54] First advanced as 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp.3-18. The idea has its defenders, such as in Deirdre Nansen McCloskey's 'Fukuyama Was Correct: Liberalism *Is* the Telos of History', *Journal of Contextual Economics*, 139 (2019), pp.285-304.
[55] 'The End of History?', p.18.

constitutes a loss of some kind, will return in the next chapter, in the context of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*.

The outcome of this process in *Aurora Leigh* might seem toothless from a modern perspective, a 'theory of art and politics unconnected with material reality and deeply elitist', as Cora Kaplan introduced it.[56] There are disturbing elements within the story: 'critics were troubled not only by the more risqué elements of the story, such as Marian Earl's rape, but also by its hybrid experimental form', but the culmination of Aurora's story with a closing love plot and outpouring of muscular Christian progressivism was not a controversial one.[57] One of the few resolutely critical early reviewers, for instance, complained that the poem 'declaims against conventionalism of all kinds; yet when the reader finishes the story he will admit that nothing more conventional was ever devised or penned'.[58] Barrett Browning certainly felt that there was something unusual within *Aurora Leigh*, 'an amount of spiritual truth in the book to which the public is unaccustomed', but if I am claiming that there is something vitally unusual about *Aurora Leigh*'s individualism, it is not so much about the outcome of her philosophy, but of the process by which it is arrived at: there is something unconventional about *Aurora Leigh*'s conventionalism.[59] Unlike later individualisms, hers is based on a supernaturalist and combinatory outcome, vouchsafed by God:

> No earnest work
> Of any honest creature, howbeit weak,
> Imperfect, ill-adapted, fails so much,
> It is not gathered as a grain of sand
> To enlarge the sum of human action used
> For carrying out God's end. (VIII, 705-10)

[56] Cora Kaplan, 'Introduction', in *Aurora Leigh: and other poems*, ed. by Cora Kaplan (London: The Women's Press, 1978), p.12.
[57] Markovits, *The Victorian Verse-Novel*, p.17.
[58] 'Review of "Aurora Leigh"', in *The Press*, 22 November 1856 (*The Brownings' Correspondence*, §E561122C).
[59] To Arabella Moulton-Barrett, December 10th 1856 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §3935).

In sum, then, whether we think individualism of this sort is 'implicit in most of Western or Christian political tradition' or instead an 'ill-defined amalgam', it was clearly neither in 1856, when *Aurora Leigh* was published, and the word was barely in its second decade of usage in English.[60] We can, however, speak meaningfully of a cluster of concepts that refer to the fundamental nature of human society, as well as its ultimate nature or purpose. The major development in *Aurora Leigh* is the realisation, through individualism itself, that we are not really reducible to individuality, but rather more fundamentally real as we are related and united within God's love, 'All reddened, sweetened from one central Heart' (IX, 890).

Individualism, in the first theoretical sense refers to the idea that individuals, rather than classes, nations, or groups, are the foundational stuff of human society. As Mill puts it, 'human beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and may be resolved into, the laws of the nature of the individual man'.[61] Opening Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, we similarly read that

> It is vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be *for* the interest of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.[62]

This is a form of atomic individualism, typically associated with liberal thought. In its diversitarian tendencies, of which Bentham is one source, it argued that 'different minds are different. Not only are they different, but their difference is a good thing'.[63] There is a nice correlation of origin and ends in this view, so that the ethical conclusions return to the axiom from which they started. The opposite to that view typically comes from a Hegelian tradition,

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[60] Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p.2; Bird, *The Myth of Liberal Individualism*, p.5.
[61] J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Deductive*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1872), ii, p.469.
[62] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, revised edn, 2 vols (London: W. Pickering, 1823), i, p.4.
[63] Kathleen Blake, *Pleasures of Benthamism: Victorian Literature, Utility, Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.144.

from the left, where Marx famously noted that a pure individual (developed outside of his context) 'is as much of an absurdity as is the development of a language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other'; or from the right, such as the British idealist F. H. Bradley, who similarly declared that a man 'is what he is because he is a born and educated social being and a member of an individual social organism'.[64] An individual, in this light, 'is what he is, in brief, so far as he is what others are', which means that 'personal morality' cannot be separated from (indeed, cannot exist outside of) 'political and social institutions'.[65]

Individualist origins do not necessarily lead to individualist ends, and the same is true for positions which reject individualism. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, starting with the same premise as Bentham developed a harshly authoritarian theory of the state, and Spencer construed society as an organism with a firmly individualist economics in mind.[66] Barrett Browning seems to evince a robust defence of the rights of individuals to self-determine, but the ultimate revelation of *Aurora Leigh* is that unifying relations of divine love are the true origin and ends of the individual life and of historical change. In that sense, *the* poet's individualism can be said to develop beyond itself, which is to say that it finds, in the 'hurtle of united souls' (IX, 835) something which makes a more tendentious claim for unity than a blithely combinatory or aggregative whole, as some critics have suggested.[67] I can find no evidence that Barrett Browning read William Maccall's *Elements of Individualism*, but my claim is not that of inheritance, but of comparative similarity as writers and thinkers of a certain

[64] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), p.84; F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.151.
[65] Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, pp.151, 170.
[66] In the sense of a progressive evolution, as glossed by M. W. Taylor, so that 'the process of the emergence of an individualistic social order could be subsumed under general laws of evolution', *Man Versus the State*, p.137.
[67] Amy Kahrmann Huseby, for instance, has described the poem as 'refus[ing] statistical smoothness in favour of a mathematical form of aggregation characterized by internal divisions, one that prefers collection to fusion', as a model of the way a liberal society includes divisions within itself, in '"Half-Poets" and "Whole Democrats": The Politics of Poetic Aggregation in Aurora Leigh, *Victorian Poetry*, 56:1 (2018), pp.1-26, p.3.

but now obscure moment in liberal thought when individualism was receiving its positive formulation in religious and ideal, rather than rationalist and economic, terms.

III.

This phrase 'poet's individualism' appears twice in *Aurora Leigh* with an unassuming but critical difference. It bookends the central plot of the novel: the love story of Aurora Leigh and her cousin Romney. George Eliot thought it a rather conventional story, with 'nothing either fresh or felicitous in structure or incident'.[68] The protagonist, Aurora, daughter of a staid Englishman and a passionate Italian woman, is born in Florence, orphaned young and sent to England; despite the best efforts of an evil aunt, she manages to discover nature, God, and poetry. In book two, her cousin Romney proposes to her, but she rejects him on the grounds that he wants 'A wife to help his ends—in her no end!' (II, 402). The individual must, according to Coleridge, not be used 'merely as a means' but 'included in the end, and form part of the final cause', and Aurora is similarly suspicious of Romney's attempt to reduce her individuality to ends as he sees them.[69] There is a major difference of viewpoint between poetic, spiritual Aurora, and rationalist empiricism of Romney and Aurora warns him:

> A starved man
> Exceeds a fat beast: we'll not barter, sir,
> The beautiful for barley.—And, even so,
> I hold you will not compass your poor ends
> Of barley-feeding and material ease,
> Without a poet's individualism
> To work your universal. It takes a soul,
> To move a body: it takes a high-souled man,
> To move the masses. (II, 472-480)

[68] 'Review of "Aurora Leigh"', *The Westminster Review*, January 1857. (*The Brownings' Correspondence*, §E570100I).
[69] *The Friend*, i, p.190

The predominant impression is instrumental; individualism is the means of best appealing to individuals. The idea is that Romney's universal scheme, even if it totally rejects the broader spiritual or aesthetic claims of poetry, will not be able to change individuals without poetry's ability to move them. There is also the open question of the end of social development more broadly: a sentiment similar to Emma Goldman's often misquoted notion that pursuit of 'the cause' should not deny 'everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things': to have poetry as well as barley.[70]

After her rejection of Romney, the main plot of the poem proceeds.[71] Aurora tries to make it as a poet in London, has some success and writes a poem on the subject of her own life which she sells to finance a trip to Florence, via Paris. The poem is a major success, but Aurora feels unsatisfied; finally, Romney reappears in Florence. Everything Romney has tried to do meanwhile has resulted in miserable failure. He appals the landed class he was born into by getting engaged to Marian Erle, a daughter of itinerant workers, who then disappears just before the wedding. As a model for social reform, he turns his ancestral home into a commune which is promptly burnt down in an act of ungrateful arson.

In the eighth book, Romney, blinded and betrayed by those he sought to help, finds Aurora. At this point his submission to Aurora's poetic doctrine is total, remembering their earlier conversation:

> oh, I recollect
> The words . . and how you lifted your white hand,
> And how your white dress and your burnished curls
> Went greatening round you in the still blue air,
> As if an inspiration from within
> Had blown them all out when you spoke the same,
> Even these,—'You will not compass your poor ends
> 'Of barley-feeding and material ease,

[70] Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York: Knopf, 1934), p.56.
[71] This is a necessarily brisk summary of the main points of the poem's plot. The subplot of the novel regards the fate of Marian Erle, the working-class woman to whom Romney is engaged. Shocking the poem's reviewers, Marian is sold into prostitution before the wedding can take place by the evil Lady Waldemar. Aurora finds her in Paris with a child and takes her to Florence.

> 'Without the poet's individualism
> 'To work your universal.' (VIII, 421-30).

Romney has, however, misquoted. The article has swapped from the indefinite to the definite. This alteration, barely registering as a revision, is suggestive nonetheless. In the former instance, individualism seems to be the distinguishing faculty of a poet. The poet stands out from others in her ability to address people in their particularity, rather than treat them as a class. Romney ridicules Aurora: 'The human race | To you means, such a child, or such a man' (II, 189-90), and this particularity is precisely what *Aurora Leigh* argues the poet is for. As Dolores Rosenblum puts it, the 'aesthetic' in *Aurora Leigh* 'irradiates the individual life *as* individual life', which is to say reveals it as primarily individual.[72] But the openness of the indefinite article suggests one individualism amongst many: an individuated individualism.

The definite article suggests a change. The implication is that there is now a fixed individualism which poets as a class have. The sense of the poet's vocation is different. In the first version, it is the poet's prerogative to develop their own individuality, whereas in the latter part the implication is that a poet is a poet to the extent to which they obtain to a definite faculty of individualism. These two roles are not necessarily exclusive, of course, but it seems that a world in which 'the poet's individualism' is central is not one in which we can have many different poets' individualisms. William Maccall, as quoted above, saw individualism as self-revelation: 'every Individual [...] is the highest of all Revelations to himself', but this faculty seems appropriated specifically to poetry by Barrett Browning, to keep open the door between the real or practical world, and the 'substantial' and 'archetypal' (VII, 842) world which underlies it.[73] The individualism of subjective experience and the individualism of the prophet might exist in the same person, but they are not the same thing and one seems to develop at the

[72] Dolores Rosenblum, '"Casa Guidi Windows" and "Aurora Leigh": The Genesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Visionary Aesthetic', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 4.1 (1985), pp.61-8, p.63.
[73] Maccall, *The Elements of Individualism*, p.5.

expense of the other. *Aurora Leigh*'s conclusion is a personal culmination: Aurora and Romney are finally united as a couple; but it also represents the final disappearance of her individual voice into the prophetic role of *the* poet. Herbert Tucker describes the poem's conclusion as 'a fully sensuous feminism of the incarnate self', but it is not precisely Aurora's individual self that is rendered incarnate, but the communal vision shared with Romney.[74]

Among the many targets of Frank Kermode's critique of Romanticism in *Romantic Image* is the separation of the artist from society and from discourse. J. S. Mill follows Coleridge and Wordsworth, according to Kermode, in believing that 'the higher degree of sensory organisation which distinguished poets from other men was fundamentally only a way of seeing and feeling *more*, not of seeing and feeling *differently*', but in Barrett Browning's poetry the difference of poets seems axiomatic.[75] In her earlier sonnet, 'The Soul's Expression', for instance, the poetic soul is noted for its intrinsic power, the 'music of [its] nature' (3), rather than because it has anything particular to say to us. But this is to be a difficult process:

> With stammering lips and insufficient sound,
> I strive and struggle to deliver right
> That music of my nature, day and night,
> With dream and thought and feeling, interwound; (1-4).

The poet's nature is inherently musical, is already a 'song of soul' (9), that can only be produced by 'inly answering all the senses round', i.e., a combined effort of the external sense and inner feeling. This is a portrait of an ultimate poem, both the highest and the last of its kind. 'But if I did it' (12), she concludes, 'my flesh would perish there, | Before that dread apocalypse of soul' (13-4). The divine potential of the individual soul is relatedly clearly to its loss. Perhaps most crucially for us, the song and the self are 'sublime and whole' (10), possessed of inherent unity. The poet as terrible prophet features in some of Barrett Browning's other pre-*Aurora*

[74] Tucker, *Epic*, p.374.
[75] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, p.28.

Leigh works, as well. In 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship', for instance, the poet 'hear[s] my hot soul dropping on the lines' (324), prefiguring in more subjective language *Aurora Leigh*'s ambition to right 'the burning lava of a song' (V, 214), and in his highest strains of eloquence 'stood all vibrating with thunder' (327). The difference is that, by the end of *Aurora Leigh*, the poet's individualism has been harnessed, in expression not of their soul, but of something like the spiritual underpinning of society. The poet becomes prophet, not of their own subjectivity, but *through* their subjectivity, which thereafter loses the qualities of discursive personhood. Barrett Browning probably did not have a strictly climactic sense of apocalypse in mind (the OED has the first attestation of this meaning in the 1890s), but the overall impression carries the full sense of destruction, as well as revelation. We can fully see what the poet's soul is only as it enters its terminal stage.

For Mill, one good reason for encouraging diversity of thought, almost for its own sake, is that the moment when everyone could indisputably agree about anything is epochally distant; the free propagation of new ideas will be required 'until mankind shall have entered a stage of intellectual advancement which at present seems at an incalculable distance'.[76] If we knew exactly where we were going, the argument goes, we wouldn't need to argue about directions, but for Barrett Browning, the spiritual endpoint of all things is, at least to the prophet-poet, knowable. Aurora defends the status of the poet as a vessel of new ideas and sage of individuality, indeed, but the broader view of social progress is underwritten by the teleological confidence of a spiritual or supernaturalist metaphysics. To give the above quotation in full, Aurora is rejecting Romney's strictly material view of human progress:

> what then, indeed,
> If mortals were not greater by the head
> Than any of their prosperities? what then,
> Unless the artist keep up open roads
> Betwixt the seen and unseen,—bursting through

[76] Mill, *On Liberty*, p.112.

> The best of your conventions with his best,
> The speakable, imaginable best
> God bids him speak, to prove what lies beyond
> Both speech and imagination? (II, 464-72)

The references to the unseen world and the absolute best suggest that incontestable truths can be discovered by the poet, and that the essential falsity of this visible world is joined with another one, of spiritual truth, which is less contestable. *On Liberty* makes a service of original genius that is similar to Barrett Browning's, but within the context of a materialist epistemology. Mill gives his celebrated defence of individual genius:

> Originality is the one thing which unoriginal minds cannot feel the use of. [...] The first service which originality has to render them is to open their eyes: which being once fully done, they would have a chance of being themselves original.[77]

But if genius develops in Mill's individual, Barrett Browning sees the individual as possessing a much more intermediary role: 'if we say a true word, instantly | We feel 'tis God's, not ours, and pass it on' (VII, 873-4).

Both Mill and Barrett Browning share organic views of human life, but whereas that inward principle explains *in toto* the individual for Mill, for Barrett Browning, on the other hand, buried within each person is the promise of their ultimate redemption. Just as the poet sees that 'life develops from within', she also states that

> man, the two-fold creature, apprehends
> The two-fold manner, in and outwardly,
> And nothing in the world comes single to him,
> A mere itself,—cup, column, or candlestick,
> All patterns of what shall be in the Mount;
> The whole temporal show related royally,
> And built up to eterne significance
> Through the open arms of God. (VII, 802-809)

[77] Mill, *On Liberty*, p.121.

If things are not just merely themselves, and poets have access to a sense of truly stable prophetic knowledge, then the liberal individualism of *Aurora Leigh* starts to look rather like an eccentric puzzle. On the level of social reality, there is liberal humility and plurality; on the level of ultimate or spiritual reality, however, *Aurora Leigh* suggests absolute unity in God. The poet's individualism reveals not only her development as her best self, but rather her movement into a prophetic role that is not only externally ordained but different in kind from the sort of individuality which the masses might be encouraged to possess. The final end of *Aurora Leigh*'s individualism is therefore not within individuality itself.

Just as Geoffrey Hartman argued that 'Wordsworth thought nature itself led him beyond nature', I suggest that *Aurora Leigh*'s individualism leads Aurora beyond her individualism.[78] That is not to say that *Aurora Leigh* is insincere about its liberal individualism, but that the particular attention bestowed by 'individualism' is precisely what reveals the 'eterne significance' of objects and people. In addition, Aurora makes the final key step of acknowledging the importance of interpersonal love, revealing an interdependence between individuals based on the metaphysical interrelatedness of all things around God. The young Aurora finds in books that 'error on to error [...] | Still brought me nearer to the central truth' (I, 799-800), but whilst no liberal position would deny the possibility of truth itself, merely the confidence we can place in its knowability, *Aurora Leigh* suggests that the diversity or incompleteness of the world can be reconciled into God's unity. This is manifest as a sort of *telos*: the poet's vision is explicitly an eschatological one that can interpret the 'significance and correspondence' (122-3) between the observable world and 'that spirit-world | Outside the limits of our space and time, | Whereto we are bound.' (V, 123-5) The ambiguity of 'whereto' combines temporal and spatial direction – bound to journey towards but also tied together right now – so that the *true* nature of things is not only what they are, but also what they shall be.

[78] Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814*, p.33.

The poet is thus a double creature as well as supreme individual: her ability to operate in both worlds, to mix the 'seen and unseen' is what justifies her social authority. Stone sees the poem as arguing that 'neither the ideal nor the practical can suffice in itself', but that sufficiency still leaves room for the prioritisation of the ideal.[79] Certainly, *Aurora Leigh* does not see the ideal as end in itself, but if Aurora's has changed (and it certainly has in some ways), she nonetheless maintains that she was 'right upon the whole' (VIII, 536) about poetry, and if Romney's literal blindness allows him spiritual vision at the poem's close, it is surely the work of the ideal in the practical, not alongside it.

It is here that the question of the long poem emerges, since once again a claim is being made concerning the role of poets and poetry without defining what the ends of the poem itself are. One early reviewer suggestively criticised the poem for its 'vague preluding'; not, I think, a reference to Wordsworth's poem but rather to the fact that *Aurora Leigh* promises to justify the power of poetic vision and then ends as soon as it appears.[80] The thing that makes the poetry happen, its means, seems to be the very divisions and incompleteness of Aurora's individualism; once those are worked out, the poem must stop, and so the ecstatic argument for poetry seems to be made at the expense of this specific poem. *Aurora Leigh*'s complex and double narrative structure does not, in fact, quite resolve itself; the poem's ending, I argue, rhymes with *Maud*'s in suggesting that the form of this long poem is a conflicted, if necessary, derangement, rather than a stable whole. As *Aurora Leigh*'s ending dissolves into prophecy, the implication is that this long poem must stop so that the real poetry can begin.

[79] Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p.151.
[80] '[Review of] "Aurora Leigh"', *The Leader*, 29 November 1856, pp.1142-44 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §E561129B).

Part 2: The Individualism of *Aurora Leigh*

I.

Barrett Browning believed in the unified meaningfulness of reality, intelligible as God's logos and accessible as such by the inspired poet. Some well-known facts bear repeating. Spiritually, Barrett Browning was raised a non-conformist and a strain of vigorously individualist spirituality stayed with her.[81] Most strikingly, she was caught up in the mid-century craze for contacting the dead and believed in angels; some of the more ambitious claims of *Aurora Leigh* make more sense when taken in this context of immanent supernaturalism.[82] Her husband was more sceptical, even if his poetry's treatment of rhetorical influence and power might toy with the same forces as mesmerists or mediums, as Daniel Karlin has suggested.[83] At any rate, when *Aurora Leigh* tells us that 'in the artist's ecstasy' she might see 'The spiritual significance burn through | The hieroglyphic of material shows' (VII, 860-1), there is a clear profession of some absolute knowledge which is not subject to liberal humility.

Some measure of what the 'ideal' might mean has been given above: the poet is able to see the place of things beyond their reality and in their spiritual ideality as part of god's creation, just as William Maccall articulated in his *Elements of Individualism*. One transparently crucial difference, then, between Barrett Browning and alternative mid-century

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[81] As Linda Lewis has described in her *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (Columbia, 1998), Barret Browning chafed against organised services: 'She was highly critical of most sermons, and in the years before her marriage her frail health provided a convenient excuse to skip them' (p.12).

[82] Barrett Browning thoroughly believed in phenomena that her husband dismissed. Daniel Dunglas Home, the Scottish spiritualist about whom Robert wrote 'Mr Sludge, the Medium'. His second wife's biography, which laments the 'bad taste' Robert employed pillorying Home, relates one story. A wreath of flowers having been gathered, 'During the séance this wreath was raised from the table by supernatural power in the presence of us all, and whilst we were watching it, Mr. Browning, who was seated at the opposite side of the table, left his place, and came and stood behind his wife, towards whom the wreath was being slowly carried, and upon whose head it was placed in full sight of us all, and whilst he was standing close behind her. [...] Mrs. Browning was much moved, and she, not only then but ever since, expressed her entire belief and pleasure in what then occurred'; Madame Dunglas Home's *D. D. Home: His Life and Mission*, (Cambridge 2011, original 1888), p.55.

[83] 'She [Barrett Browning] recognized that Browning's behaviour went counter to his rhetoric, and that there was a connection between the power she felt in him personally (the power which frightened, thrilled, and drew her) and the power of his poetry, its commanding qualities of form, scope, and language', in Daniel Karlin, 'Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, and "Mesmerism"', *Victorian Poetry* 27:3 (1989), pp.65-78, p.70.

liberal thinkers, like Matthew Arnold or J. S. Mill is her religion. Mill wrote, for example, that 'history, so far as we know it, bears out the opinion, that mankind can perfectly well do without the belief in a heaven'.[84] Matthew Arnold announced his agnosticism in his 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse', standing in front of an abbey which seemed a 'living tomb'.[85] Perhaps he had something like this passage of *Aurora Leigh* in mind when, in *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold attacked that 'specially British form of Quietism', which suggested everyone do what they like and hope God will sort it out.[86] Relying on destiny, for Arnold, is insufficient:

> It seems too much to ask of Providence, that while we, on our part, leave our congenital taste for the bathos to its natural operation and its infinite variety of experiments, Providence should mysteriously guide it into the true track, and compel it to relish the sublime. [...] No doubt we have an infinite variety of experiments, and an ever-multiplying multitude of explorers.[87]

To this, *Aurora Leigh* responds with an enthusiastic celebration of poetry's virtues as mediating and direction-giving. It is not through culture or a strategic limitation of freedom that the process of historical change is to be safeguarded, but instead through the unhindered development of the poet and her ability to discover absolute truths. In Paris, *en route* to Florence, Aurora wonders whether 'after all, | A larger metaphysics might not help | Our physics' (VI, 204-6). In her ideas about ultimate reality, Barrett Browning distinctively tries to combine the individualism of particular people with the potential she sees in it for combination and reunification: 'What, if even God | Were chiefly God by living out Himself | To an individualism of the Infinite?' (III, 749-751)

The worry here, for a liberal, would be that *Aurora Leigh*'s poet does not discover new ideas to contribute to the marketplace but absolute values; the world is wrong to say, 'A man produced this', when 'much rather they should say | "'Tis insight and he saw this"' (VII, 852-

[84] J. S. Mill, *Nature, The Utility of Religion and Theism* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1874), p.120.
[85] 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse', l.72, in *Matthew Arnold. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, pp.171-7.
[86] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.92.
[87] *Culture and Anarchy*, p.92.

4). The problem which *Aurora Leigh* must solve, therefore, is to accommodate poetry to a liberal individualist view of society whilst maintaining its exclusive right to truths that come from beyond. In a sense then, *Aurora Leigh*'s spiritualism challenges its liberalism by guaranteeing it. Caroline Levine has written that Barrett Browning's prosody requires a 'formalism [that] will have to take account of forms as organizing and shaping, yes, but also as plural and colliding, jumbled and constantly altered, each, thanks to the others, incapable of imposing its own dominant order', but clearly for *Aurora Leigh* diversity, incompleteness and plurality all persist within the dominant order of a Christian God.[88] The extension of this is that the poet, spiritually superior as she is, becomes the sole channel for the working of unity in a world that is plural and conflicted. In their first conversation, Romney laments that

> All success
> Proves partial failure; all advance implies
> What's left behind; all triumph, something crushed
> At the chariot-wheels; all government, some wrong: [...]
> Under and over, in the social spasm
> And crisis of the ages. (II, 267-75)

Romney learns that he cannot fix this through a rational scheme. Indeed, there is no man-made order which can be brought to bear upon the flux of men's affairs, but the poet can

> open, so, that intermediate door
> Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form
> And form insensuous, that inferior men
> May learn to feel on still through these to those,
> And bless thy ministration. (IX, 919-23)

The poet thus rises above the clashing of particulars which she nonetheless extols as the necessary action of man's humility, but not as one voice among many in exchange of

[88] Caroline Levine, 'Rhythms, poetic and political: the case of Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *Victorian Poetry*, 149.2 (2011), pp.235-52, p.250.

provisional ideas. The artist has an 'ecstasy' all of her own, seeing 'The spiritual significance burn through | The hieroglyphic of material shows' (VII, 860-1).

II.

The goal to which *Aurora Leigh*'s thus reaches is the translucence of unity in divided reality: as in Barrett Browning's sketch for the poem's plan, 'the ideal works itself out'.[89] I have described how the poet in *Aurora Leigh* is portrayed as having some supreme insight into the workings of a liberal society, effectively implying her superiority to it; what remains is to show how that individualism develops to a point where it can no longer be taken as foundational, so that the wide range of worldly individualities are revealed as facets of God's unified nature, which is then presented as essentially relational. This is perhaps best seen as a shifting of priorities, rather than as a total transformation: Aurora certainly believes in God at the poem's opening. Over the course of the poem's action, however, a belief in the internal rule of development inside each individual becomes insufficient.

At the poem's beginning, Aurora has a sense of her own atomic autonomy. Romney's generalisations are foolish, because he has neglected to remember that 'every creature, female as the male, | Stands single in responsible act and thought, | As also in birth and death' (II, 436-8). Aurora's beliefs about the importance of poetry in social reform will not change, but this portrait of her autonomy will be replaced. The most important constant in her presentation is her sense of optimism, contrasting their dispositions: 'He, overfull | Of what is, and I, haply, overbold | For what might be.' (I, 1108-10) Whilst this describes a speculative hope about life at the poem's beginning, it also suggests a more personal sense of what she herself could become. Aurora clarifies her initially spiritual sense of herself:

'I,' means in youth

[89] *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds, p.349.

> Just *I*.. the conscious and eternal soul
> With all its ends, —and not the outside life,
> The parcel-man, the doublet of the flesh, (III, 284-7)

The realisation her isolated self's spiritual poverty is the movement of the older Aurora: in order for her individual development to continue, she must no longer be 'Just I'. Aurora's sense of her own eternal nature gives her the courage to pursue her art, which is, at first, a fully satisfying vocation:

> What is art
> But life upon the larger scale, the higher,
> When, graduating up in a spiral line
> Of still expanding and ascending gyres,
> It pushes towards the intense significance
> Of all things, hungry for the Infinite?
> Art's life, —and where we live we suffer and toil. (IV, 1150-6)

Aurora is, at this point in the story, explaining her isolation (and even abjection) to Romney. Her portrait of a suffering, isolated artist is reminiscent of Kermode's critique in *Romantic Image*, but Barrett Browning's long poem insists that these are a product of a personal failure, rather than a statement of her values. At this point in the poem, the individual artist seeks to get at the eternal, infinite significance of all things, conceiving all things in those terms.

Most studies of *Aurora Leigh*'s poetics treat its fifth book as a clear statement of Barrett Browning's own principles, but it is a part of the narrative as much as any other part of the story and describes Aurora's credo as she is in London before departing for the continent. Unlike George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, 'In Which the Story Pauses a Little' at the start of the second book for the inclusion of novelistic ideas, *Aurora Leigh*'s poetical reflections are inside the narrative.[90] Most of what she says is, naturally, in keeping with Barrett Browning's own ideas,

[90] George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.159.

which I will treat more fully in the later part of this chapter, but the important emphasis for the development of *the* poet's individualism is that this results in a devastating loneliness:

> O my God, my God,
> O supreme Artist, who as sole return
> For all the cosmic wonder of Thy work,
> Demandest of us just a word . . a name,
> 'My Father!'—thou has knowledge, only thou,
> How dreary 'tis for women to sit still
> On wintry nights by solitary fires,
> And hear the nations praising them far off,
> Too far! Ay, praising our quick sense of love,
> Our very heart of passionate womanhood,
> Which could not beat so in the verse without
> Being present also in the unkissed lips,
> And eyes undried because there's none to ask
> The reason they grew moist. (V, 433-46)

Aurora withers away in her isolation, although her poetry is perversely successful – one of the odd ironies of this metapoetic facet of the poem. So that at the end of book seven, just before Romney will reappear, she describes herself as unable to 'write, nor read, nor even think', her individual self 'dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost.' (VII, 1305, 10). This loss of self comes with a sense of its own insufficiency:

> As well suppose my little handkerchief
> Would cover Samminiato, church and all,
> If out I threw it past the cypresses,
> As, in this ragged, narrow life of mine,
> Contain my own conclusions. (VII, 919)

There is an eschatological as well as a more prosaic sense to her sense of conclusion; the question is Wordsworth's: what is all this life for? Peggy Dunn Bailey sees this rightly as a turning point in the poem: 'internally divided, she cannot bear witness for "God's undivided work"' [...] by the end of Book 7, the division becomes so intense that both woman and artist

are disabled'.[91] Angela Leighton perhaps misses the note of desperation in the seventh book of *Aurora Leigh* when she sees Aurora as 'release[d] from the burden of her past, and from the burden of disinheritance', since the disconnection from her childhood registers as a loss of self, which will only be gained with the arrival of Romney.[92]

Aurora's major realisation, once she reconciles with Romney, is that 'art is much, but love is more' (IX, 656). This is an expansive epiphany, since it doesn't require her to diminish any of her ideas about the importance of poetry or art, but it does connect the individual with the whole and suggest a reorganisation in favour of union rather than division. Some pages back the reader has learnt that 'all society, | [...] Is but the expression of men's single lives, | The loud sum of the silent units' (VIII, 875-7), but love allows for this to be overcome, suggesting that reality is better described in the terms of one unified and interconnected system which is divided only in its manifestation. This is precisely what the poet, by virtue of her individualism and doubleness, can discover. It is not just the irreducible core of individuality of each person which individualism allows to thrive, but also the potential within each to be reconciled within God. Romney speaks the doctrine at the poem's close: 'Fewer programmes; we who have no prescience. | Fewer systems; we who are held and do not hold. | Less mapping out of masses' (IX, 865-7); there is a sense of Christian as well as liberal humility here, but broadly the feeling is that the development of individuals as individuals is more important than programmatic or systematic social reform. Later Romney will declare that 'new hearts in individual growth | Must quicken', producing 'New churches, new œconomies, new laws' (IX, 943-8). The means and the ends of social change are plural. When Romney decries systems and programmes, he continues with the acknowledgement that 'the soul [...] itself | Obeys our old rules of development' (IX, 877-8). The nature of these old rules remains obscure, it seems to

[91] Peggy Dunn Bailey, '"Hear the voice of the [female] bard": *Aurora Leigh* as a Female Romantic Epic', in *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621-1982*, ed. by Bernard Schweizer (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.345-403, p.393.
[92] Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p.139.

suggest that the soul's development is contrasted with the way society will flower. At any rate, what is described leads to unity: love, discovered in the individual, reveals her to be intimately connected to others and bound to the whole. The primary factor is 'God's love', and then proceeding from there Romney describes its discovery and progress within the individual:

> 'And next,' he smiled, 'the love of wedded souls,
> Which still presents that mystery's counterpart.
> Sweet shadow-rose, upon the water of life,
> Of such a mystic substance, Sharon gave
> A name to! human, vital, fructuous rose,
> Whose calyx holds the multitude of leaves, —
> Loves filial, loves fraternal, neighbour-loves,
> And civic, . . all fair petals, all good scents,
> All reddened, sweetened from one central Heart!' (882-90)

The point seems to be that individuality has a clearly anti-individual *telos*; what is individual within each member of a society is the capacity to transcend that individuality. Unity, for Barrett Browning, is not something that already exists in reality but does, as a foreshadowing of a later more perfect state, have some ideal existence. If love is Aurora and Romney's great discovery, it reveals to them, through their own new interdependence, the nature of all the other relations between individuals, as well as the interrelatedness of all things with God.

One interpretation is, as with *The Press* reviewer quoted above, that this represents a miserable descent into the most conventional of high Victorian portraits of marriage, but this relationality also suggests a more radical shift into an idealist conception of the individual. Barrett Browning died before the idealism would flourish in British academic philosophy, but this crucial shift at the end of *Aurora Leigh*, acknowledging that individualism effectively means capacity to engage in relationality, anticipates F. H. Bradley and perversely uses the development of the individual to reveal that 'what we call an individual man is what he is because of and by virtue of community'.[93] The difference for Barrett Browning is that this

[93] Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p.150.

happens in reverse. If individuality is the symptom of community for Bradley, relationality is the telos of a highly developed individuality in *Aurora Leigh*. Not, then, the sort of free association which liberals like Toqueville imagined would soften selfishness, but rather the realisation, on the most fundamental level, of metaphysical connectedness.

The change concerns what we conceive of as the essential identity of the individual and whence it receives its determination as an individual thing. Organic imagery is the field of this idea's unfolding, much as it is for Mill. He writes that,

> Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.[94]

For Mill this organic imagery clearly means that within each human there are differing forces which encourage his or her development. The difference between forces is more significant than the similarity. Aurora feels the same way when she tells Romney that she wants to 'grow | within my wayside hedge' (II.849-50), mockingly emphasizing the desired peripherality of a poet's life to the busy linearity of the thoroughfare. In both views, life is a growth outward, and a free life is one in which the outer form is determined by the inner. For Barrett Browning, however, there is also a growing *towards*, as well as a growing *from*. Development of the individual is not just determined by the autochthonous and autotelic inner nature of that individual, but by the soul that has been put there, which does have a clearly defined spiritual destiny:

> And as the soul
> Which grows with a child, makes the child grow, —
> Or as the fiery sap, the touch from God,
> Careering through a tree, dilates the bark,
> And roughs with scale and knob, before it strikes
> The summer foliage out in a green flame—
> So life, in deepening with me, deepened all

[94] *On Liberty*, p.123.

> The course I took, the work I did. (III, 328-35)

The notion of development is similar, but there are key differences between the implied origins and destinations of the soul and Mill's 'inward forces'. The origins for Mill are rather vague, but surely naturalist, springing from the Benthamite core rather than the Romantic tempering of his philosophy. By the concluding image of the central rose, however, this internal soul is not portrayed as an autonomous unit which might combine with others, but instead as essentially united, through God's love, in a whole host of interactive relationships.

The poet's individualism is thus understood to be a progressive movement from the atomic individuality of separable autonomous beings and towards the realisation of those individuals in a truer relational form, between themselves and with God. All beings have at the core of their individuality, the capacity to get beyond that individuality. At the moment when Romney and Aurora finally kiss, Barrett Browning echoes the revelatory mode of 'Tintern Abbey':

> And, in that hurtle of united souls,
> The mystic motions which in common moods
> Are shut beyond our sense, broke in on us,
> And as we sate, we felt the old earth spin,
> And all the starry turbulence of worlds
> Swing round us in their audient circles, till
> If that same golden moon were overhead
> Or if beneath our feet, we did not know. (IX, 835-42)

The question is thus not quite the same as the one emerging from my quotations from Mill and Bradley. If those tried to discern what the individual is, where it starts, and the forces which comprise it, then *Aurora Leigh* concerns how we can develop through individuality, from one sort of individualism to another.

This is the argument made by Barrett Browning's long poem for *the* poet's individualism. What remains, however, is the particular experience of Aurora herself as an

individual, which, to borrow Reynolds's phrase, offers an 'irreducible core of individuality [...] which will always offer resistance to universalist prescriptions for human well-being'.[95] That extends to the scheme of individual development outlined above, so that poetry's origins in individualism exceed or subvert the claims made by *Aurora Leigh* in the argument it makes for *the* poet's individualism as a function of a liberal society.

Part 3: Aurora's Individuality

I.

The political argument in *Aurora Leigh* thus appears to be that individualism concludes by growing beyond itself into interdependence, justified not by the current nature of things, but rather by a divine interrelatedness to which the world is moving and which is already open to the intuition of poets. On the face of it, the poem's celebration of poetic individualism seems a simpler case. If *Aurora Leigh* encourages us to move 'inward evermore | to outward' (V, 226-7), that individual core is revealed to be something eminently dividable and fragile. The poem begins with a vision of a self that can barely 'hold together what he was and is' (I, 8) and even in the triumphant poetic theorising in the fifth book, Aurora declares that,

> Bubbles round a keel
> Mean nought, excepting that the vessel moves.
> There's more than passion goes to make a man
> Or book, which is a man too. (V, 395-398)

The relationship between passion and form is the vital one. There is certainly a sense of individual passion explaining why and how poetry gets written, but as a precondition, not a formal end or determination of a specific poem. Here too, this poet's individualism, portrayed

[95] *The Realms of Verse*, p.112.

as the subjectivity of *Aurora Leigh*'s heroine, is ultimately insufficient. Firstly, however, just as *Aurora Leigh*'s political individualism needed contextualising within an obscurely undecided moment in liberal philosophy, its poetic individualism needs some justification, responding as it does to a particularly, if not avowedly, individualistic moment in English poetry: the 'extreme subjectivity' of the 'Spasmodic' poets, for whose heroes 'egotism is [a] spiritual disease' as well as 'the condition of Spasmodic poetry'.[96] Richard Cronin describes how 'the hero's recovery [from egotism] necessarily concludes' these poems, a fact traceable through to *Maud*, whose lyricism seems a product of a deranged mind, and also to *Aurora Leigh*.[97] As Herbert Tucker memorably comments, 'the elephantiasis of Festus imaged the enormity, not just of the author's egotism, but of the culturally constitutive individualism for which his amazing effrontery had spoken from the first'.[98] This sort of poetic individualism seemed to grow in the 1840s as writers like William Maccall first began to consider a positive political connotation for the word. The individualism of Aurora herself, 'a poet's individualism' is not, however, prone to the same sort of moral or aesthetic excess, and as the condition and origin of poetry, the claim made by Barrett Browning for poetry's ends as a guide through individualism seems challenged by the endlessness or divisiveness of the poet's own personal individualism. The difference between a poem stopping and a poem ending is the crucial one. *Aurora Leigh*, more than any other of these long poems, seems definitively conclusive, but if that conclusion is reached by overcoming the premise of poetry itself, then the demonstration of poetic individualism seems ephemeral, as if the poetry needs to stop, for the revelations to begin.[99]

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[96] Richard Cronin, 'The Spasmodics', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2002), pp.291-304, p.292-3.
[97] Cronin, 'The Spasmodics', p.293.
[98] Tucker, *Epic*, p.437.
[99] Tucker's chapter 'On Impulse: Spasmodic Epic 1850-60', *Epic*, pp.339-384, gives a highly comprehensive literary historical account of the spasmodics.

II.

For this, did *Festus* Baily ransack all the mines of Ophir and all the windows of the Palais Royal to overwhelm us with wreaths of rubies and crowns of chrysoplatz. Such vulgar gimcrackery of language did for a day, but it has become as common as that Carlylian fondness for the vaguely vast, that Brummagem sublime, which fills the Poet's corner of every provincial newspaper with the eternities, and the abysses, and the empyrean—the empyrean described as abyssmal, or etern, to rhyme with epergne.[100]

Charles Laporte has argued that *Aurora Leigh* is, in part, a response to the spasmodic poet Alexander Smith's *A Life Drama*, and the term is used by some early reviewers, typically as an insult or as a negative counterexample.[101] *The Nation* described a 'spasmodic school of criticism about Mrs Browning' in its critical review, and then blames *Festus* for the excesses of *Aurora Leigh*.[102] The spasmodics, in the poetic landscape of the 1840's, during Barrett Browning's formative years in London, stood for a poetry focused on the subjective life of the poet. In them a certain kind of Romantic individualism reigned supreme, privileging the insight of the poet above all others, and writing long poems with the confidence that nothing produced by such a poet could fail to justify itself. If Coleridge implied a limitless poetry of process containing momentary multitudes at odds with the determinate form he also desired, then the spasmodics fell fully into a belief in an implicitly endless organic form. George Gilfillan, who took it upon himself to promote spasmodic poetry, wrote of Barrett Browning that her anti-child-labour poem 'The Cry of the Children' is powerful because 'it is no poem at all – it is just a long sob', and this is characteristic of an approach to poetry that saw depth of feeling as a hallmark of divine inspiration.[103] My aim in this brief section is not to give a thorough account of the spasmodic poets – they are too many and too voluminous – but rather to give an account of Barrett Browning's alliance, as it were, with their poetic individualism.

[100] '[Review of] *Aurora Leigh*', *The Nation*, 13 December 1856 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §E561213B).
[101] Charles Laporte, '"Aurora Leigh, A Life-Drama", and Victorian Poetic Autobiography', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 53:4 (2013), pp.829-51.
[102] *Brownings' Correspondence*, §E561213B.
[103] George Gilfillan, *Modern Literature and Literary Men: Being a Second Gallery of Literary Portraits* (1849; repr. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1850), p.246.

The first of these 'spasmodic' poems was *Festus*, published anonymously in 1839, and a school of poets soon spawned in its wake. As Heather Morton summarises, 'spasmodic works were always thematically subjective, focused on and through a particularly sensitive hero-poet, whose wide experience allowed him to speak to and for his age'. Crucially, they were very long and many of them grew longer after their publication; *Balder* (1854) by Sydney Dobell grew from some 8,000 to an extraordinary 40,000 lines between its first and last editions, and these poets clearly anticipate similar 20th century 'epics' or sequences which followed the poet through their mature life. In Tucker's narrative, the spasmodic craze came to a crashing halt thanks to a spoof article by W. E. Aytoun in *Blackwood's*, as well as Matthew Arnold's *Preface* of 1853. Barrett Browning clearly saw *Aurora Leigh* as on the side of the spasmodics, writing with surprise that 'the review in Blackwood proves to be by Mr Aytoun, & coming from the camp of the enemy (artistically & socially) cannot be considered other than generous'.[104] She saw herself as more liberal than Aytoun, whose criticism of the spasmodics carried with it a fair amount of sneering classism.[105] Nonetheless, her brief critical career suggests a truly-felt engagement with, and defence of, this offshoot of English Romanticism. *Festus*, in particular, was a work to which she returned with some frequency through the decade or so in which she entertained the composition of *Aurora Leigh*, and clearly still in her mind in 1854 when she was around four thousand lines into composition.[106] The author visited her in 1855, when she was in London. Robert's absence allowed her to indulge in her interests: '& as Robert wasn't at home the first half hour, I had some private conversation with him about "spirits" & men', which included another spasmodic, Alexander Smith.[107]

[104] To Julian Martin, February 1857 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §3969).
[105] Kirstie Blair has described how Spasmodism influenced Swinburne, for instance: 'his impeccably Establishment and aristocratic background and his classical education distanced him from the clerks, secretaries, and struggling journalists who wrote spasmodic verse, but if his poems are seen as in part a gesture of support for spasmodic principles, then he is deliberately transgressing these class boundaries': 'Swinburne's Spasms: "Poems and Ballads" and the "Spasmodic School"', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 36:2 (2006), pp.180-196, p.185.
[106] C.f. her letter to Eliza Anne Ogilvy, 19th February 1854 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §3343).
[107] To Henrietta Cook, 8 October 1855 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §3650).

The first reference to the poem that would become *Aurora Leigh* is in 1844, the year in which she had published her name-making volume of poems, but also the year in which Barrett Browning was helping Richard "Hengist" Horne prepare his poorly received *New Spirit of the Age*.[108] This work championed 'The Author of Festus', then unknown, in a triumphant concluding chapter. The question which Horne sought to answer is of the structure of *Festus*, which Barrett Browning and most readers found wanting: 'the modern artist can never be too earnestly exhorted to think well of his design, and the construction in all its parts'.[109] Prose in its most purple plumage outlines the origins of poetry in 'the secret wells of being' and 'yearning towards some vaster region'.[110] The final lines of his book read:

> The only artist-work that does good in its day, or that reaches posterity, is the work of a Soul that gives Form. But without the impassioned life of that soul, the best-reasoned form and structure are but cold vanities, which leave man's unstirred nature just where they found it, and therefore are of no service on earth.[111]

When she received the draft of this essay, Barrett Browning responded by reporting 'more delight & admiration than anything critical in my remembrance'.[112] Clearly these tenets mingled happily with the poetry she was assembling for the 1844 *Poems*. She had already put 'The Author of Festus' in her assessment of the only five poets of genius of the contemporary moment in 1843 and written urgently to Horne asking if he knew who had written the poem.[113] He didn't, although he thought he did, and praised the 'ungoverned passion' of the work.[114] The excess of form, like the excess of content, is redeemed by the fierceness of the poet's vision

[108] Horne and Barrett Browning conducted a lengthy correspondence, exchanging literary ideas in preparation for this volume. Barrett Browning's work substantially made its way into the entries on Carlyle and Tennyson.
[109] R. H. Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age*, 2 vols (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1844), ii, p.303.
[110] *New Spirit of the Age*, ii, p.303.
[111] *New Spirit of the Age*, ii, p.310.
[112] To Richard Hengist Horne, 26th February 1844 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §1552).
[113] To Mary Russell Mitford, 9th October 1843 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §1396). The other 'men of genius' are Tennyson, Macauley, Robert Browning, Heraud. At this point Barrett Browning thought, following Horne's mistake, that John Bolton Roggerson was the anonymous author of *Festus.*
[114] Richard Hengist Horne to EBB, June 1st 1843 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §1272).

that underwrites it. Structural irregularity or tedious long-windedness barely even register as a flaw in Horne's account, which resonates with *Aurora Leigh*'s own defence of organic form:

> Five acts to make a play.
> And why not fifteen? why not ten? or seven?
> What matter for the number of leaves,
> Supposing the tree lives and grows? exact
> The literal unities of time and place,
> When 'tis the essence of passion to ignore
> Both time and place? Absurd. Keep up the fire,
> And leave the generous flames to shape themselves. (V, 228-35)

The confidence of the statement belies its one critical weakness, for there is no room in this organic metaphor for endings. A tree, like a poem, can only persist by growing longer and longer.

There is a direct link between the spasmodic discussions of the 40s and this poetic declaration of the 50s, which is in some measure a response to Matthew Arnold, since it is precisely 'vital heat, passion & imagination' that he lacks.[115] She finds Arnold's poetry accomplished but devoid of necessary soul: 'There is power & nobility of thought surrounded by a chrystalline atmosphere in Arnold's poetry'.[116] The impression is of ideas caught in a static structure, with no room for movement. She tellingly raises the alternative of James Bailey, author of *Festus*: 'There's the author of *Festus*– Beat Bailey, swear at Bailey, call Bailey names if you like . . nobody can doubt he's a poet, though he should sin a hundredfold more offensively than he does sin. Now, in Arnold, the thing is not so clear.'[117] Certainly, Arnold's 'Preface' of 1853 explicitly praised a contrasting architectonic faculty as the one which 'distinguishes the artist from the mere amateur', consisting of 'that power of execution, which creates, forms, and constitutes'.[118] Admittedly, this is still a faculty of the mind, but it is a mind

[115] Letter to Eliza Anne Ogilvy, 19th February 1854 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §3343).
[116] *Browning's Correspondence*, §3343.
[117] *Browning's Correspondence*, §3343.
[118] *Poems* (1853), p.xx.

considering and, on occasion exercising, restraint in order to achieve a better outcome, rather than one following its passions. For example, he criticises Keats's poem 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil': 'although undoubtedly there blows through it the breath of genius, is yet as a whole so utterly incoherent, as not strictly to merit the name of a poem at all'.[119] Furthermore, if the spasmodics placed all their emphasis on the character of the poet, Arnold's falls on the form of the work produced. In Arnold's brusque phrasing:

> poets are, like all other authors or artisans, valuable according to the quality of the article which they produce. If their handiwork be good, genuine and true, it will pass at once into circulation and be prized.[120]

The major point of criticism for Aytoun and Arnold was a lack of overall structure, which readers of spasmodic poetry had been long aware of. *Fraser's Magazine*, in a retrospective review of Robert Browning's *Sordello*, *Poems* (1849), and *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, noted that

> Instead of painting his arguments, and arguing by his paintings, Mr. Browning is content to let mere lumps of the one alternate with mere lumps of the other, after the manner of Festus, though, we need not say, with infinitely less credit and clumsiness.[121]

Fans of *Festus* did not so much disagree with this as apologise for it, or reconstrue it as a virtue; Horne wrote to Barrett Browning that the author of *Festus* had 'pre-eminent powers of graphic description, and ungoverned passion in composition'.[122] In one reading, a fragmented or disunified poem might be the product of a poetics of virtuous excess, rather than formal delinquency. Barrett Browning is more balanced, noting the 'extraordinary inequality' of the

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[119] *Poems* (1853), p.xxii.
[120] '[Review of] "Firmilian"', *Blackwoods,* May 1854.
[121] '[Review of] "Sordello"; "Poems" (1849); and "Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day"', *Fraser's Magazine*, February 1851, pp.170-177 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §R510200A).
[122] Richard Hengist Horne to EBB, June 1st 1843 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §1272).

scheme, and, to Robert had written that 'that the fine things were worth looking for, in the design manqué'.[123]

The crucial issue for the form of *Aurora* Leigh is whether the unbridled individualism of a (fictional) poet is sufficient to justify the form of a poem. The major reason for this is the acknowledgement that subjectivity is shown to be something divided in the texture of the poem, so that the poetry of subjective individualism must be moved beyond just as liberal individualism must be transcended. Poetic individualism, in that light, seems in need of some other end which it cannot, in itself, supply. As Aurora finds, dejected in Florence, that the 'cannot contain [her] own conclusions' (VII, 920), she is commenting on her form-making capacity as well as her subjective loneliness. Those two things are, in fact, deeply and critically related. As a young woman, Barrett Browning imagines Keats as an autochthonous genius, the product of no developmental process, but instead some inherent unity. He is 'the man who never stepped | In gradual progress like another man' (I, 1003-4), but instead 'turned grandly on his central self, | Ensphered himself in twenty perfect years' (1005-6). This idolisation is pernicious, however, since *Aurora Leigh* charts the moment when this inward-looking poetry becomes insufficiently determined within itself; even if it remains the substance of poetry, it cannot be its end goal, since it seems precisely endless, and must seek an end elsewhere.

Tellingly, for the form of *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning reviewed an epic by Horne for *The Athenaeum* in unsurprisingly positive terms. She makes several suggestive comments about the state of epic in British poetry, as she sees it, in this cultural moment. The review apologises for the outlandishness of *Orion* on account of the changing tastes of the reading public:

> In the first place, we had lost the habit of epic poems; they have gone out of fashion like the toga; and for a generation which reads and writes running, to draw a long epic breath seemed tending to prodigy. [...] There is something ghastly in the stir of an epic poem, --it is as if the

[123] 7th January 1846 (*Brownings' Correspondence*, §2164).

Black Prince's armour moved of itself, and rode away from the Tower on one of her majesty's cream-coloured horses.[124]

The form is now static and stodgy, obsolete as classical or medieval dress. More properly, it is the *idea* of epic that Barrett Browning rejects since its existence is dubious at best; 'If the drama is dead, the Epipoeia is buried', she writes.[125] She finds, for example, that Horne's poem is not really a proper epic after all, with its mixture of Christian ideals and classical architecture, and seems unsure what to call it, settling on 'spiritual epic'.[126] In *Aurora Leigh*, by contrast, it is the image or sonnet at massive rest. The poet can stand 'Like Atlas, in the sonnet,—and support | His own heavens pregnant with dynastic stars; | But then he must stand still, nor take a step.' (V. 87-89). Her definition of the epic is balanced between the expression of subjective experience and a representation of the world beyond it. The poet is, however, caught ''twixt two incessant fires, —his personal life's | And that intense refraction which burns back' (375-6), implying at least the primacy of the internal fire; but this is Aurora's comment halfway through her story, when she is still caught in the depth of her own individualism. At the poem's close, it is Romney, not Aurora herself, who determines the poet's future purpose, and that purpose is one of mediation, to open the eyes of those who are spiritually blind. That means leaving the inner endlessness of individuality, the subjective impulse that made such lengths of spasmodic verse, in search of an end that does not seem within the long poem at all.

III.

Just as Aurora's poetic individuality yearns to get beyond itself, however, and so cross over from pure individualism into a poetry with rhetorical and social purpose, the state of that prior individualism is shown to be driven by a division within itself, which is also the condition of

[124] '[Review of] *Orion'*, *The Athenaeum*, 24th June 1844, pp.583-584, p.584.
[125] '[Review of] *Orion'*, p.584.
[126] '[Review of] *Orion'*, p.584.

the poetry itself. As I have tried to suggest, the revelation is not that Aurora and Romney are exactly one person, but rather that their being has altered from that of implicitly divided individuals into profoundly united ones through their relationality in God. There is a clear *telos* at work, rather than an organic process. Indeed, it is Aurora's comments on the nature of poetry in book V that are partly to blame for her isolation and dejection she finds in Florence. The discussion of the spirit and flame of poetry is striking, but it is firmly within the narrative; concluding with the miserable, repeated declaration: 'I am sad: | I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine' (V, 409-10). As a pure process, the artist's unfolding organic vision is insufficient; so is having some general readerly success. Built into the poem's form, then is an expectation of union – its own conclusiveness and its connection with a reader. *Aurora Leigh*'s poetry cannot simply be an ongoing process of metrical and narrative diversity since it has a clear end design on the reader which is simulated in Romney's response. In her earlier 'Vision of Poets', a dream-vision in which dead poets conduct a ritual induction for a sleepless follower, the poet is described:

> His aimless thoughts in metre went,
> Like a babe's hand without intent
> Drawn down a seven-stringed instrument.[127]

This is suggestive stuff for the 'thinking in verse' approach, but it lends the status of the long poem's end a rather morbid aspect: *A Vision of Poets* ends with the maxim, 'KNOWLEDGE BY SUFFERING ENTERETH, | AND LIFE IS PERFECTED BY DEATH.'[128] As Aurora discovers, however, the poetic being which she inhabits is not, on its own enough, developing as it does towards a lonely pessimistic conclusion before the return of Romney. The length of *Aurora Leigh* thus figures as a symptom of Aurora's own dividedness; its ending is thus an attempt to get beyond

[127] 'A vision of Poets', cited from *Poems* (1844), 3rd edn, 2 vols (London: Chapman & Hall), i, pp.199-250, p.202.
[128] 'A Vision of Poets', p.249.

a reflective confusion between past and present which animates the entire poem. 'Unlike *Aurora Leigh'*, Cronin writes, *Casa Guidi Windows* 'acknowledges the importance of the sum as well as the units'; the latter half of Aurora Leigh, adrift in Europe, is a poet in search of her sum: the whole that will make her individualism matter.[129] Julia Markus, in her edition of *Casa Guidi Windows* describes the two 'I's of Barrett Browning's poem as both the individual position of the woman and the quasi-objective stance of the poet as type, 'the "I" of the poet who sees with intensity and conviction the true and the beautiful, and attempts to translate this vision for mankind'.[130] It seems ultimately, however, that those two things converge in the prospect of interpersonal love, which sees the first I dissolve into the other.

In book seven Aurora finds that Italy, for all its historical potential, cannot lift her out of her dejection.

> My old Assunta, too, was dead, was dead—
> O land of all men's past! For me alone,
> It would not mix its tenses. (VII, 1155-7)

This journey – pilgrimage, even – to the land of her birth, has not allowed her to circle back to happy childhood memories. Aurora has heard Italy 'crying through my life' (V, 1193) but finds the streets 'narrow' and 'unrecognizing' (VII, 1216), the failure of a Wordsworthian return to childhood to bring about restoration. The irony of Aurora's comment above is that *Aurora Leigh* does mix its tenses, particularly in its second half. In fact, the poem's narrative maintains a sophisticated doubleness of its own, with the story of the poet writing the story of her life, *Aurora Leigh*, in parallel with that story. At the opening of book three, for instance, the narrator is writing about the beginnings of her literary career in London, but clearly not before she has left England. It is hard to place these comments in time, and there is no clear reason to suppose

[129] Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.192.
[130] *Casa Guidi Windows*, ed. by Julia Markus (Barre, Mass: Imprint Society, 1977), p.xxxi.

they belong to a stable linear progression of their own. The poem begins with the declaration that Aurora 'will write my story for my better self' (I, 4), but if this is taken as the narrator's comments before the framing of book 3, where she is still in London, this is hardly a position of biographical authority. It complicates matters that Aurora, within the poem's story, writes a biographical poem of her own.

The effect of these interjections from a future date gives the poem a sense of ephemerality in two senses. Firstly, it suggests that the composition is being motivated by direct feeling, certainly not recollected in tranquillity. When she relates finding Marian Erle in Paris, the narrative breaks off mid-sentence:

> But she—
> I'll write about her, presently.
> My hand's a-tremble as I had just caught up
> My heart to write with, in the place of it.
> At least you'd take these letters to be writ
> At sea, in storm!—wait now.. (VI,. 414-8)

Similarly, at the poem's end, Aurora reflects:

> But what he said . . I have written day by day,
> With somewhat even writing. Did I think
> That such a passionate rain would intercept
> And dash this last page? (IX, 725-8)

The spasmodic interpretation of *Aurora Leigh* works well here, as do the arguments for the poem's formal flexibility constructing an innovative and novel form of narrative time. One critical consensus amongst approving modern readers is that *Aurora Leigh*'s hybridity is a bold rejection of a constrictive unity. [131] Early reviewers found the metre to be uneven or irregular,

[131] Mary Mullen, for example, is another critic who sees a virtue in Barrett Browning's pluralist approach to the "combination of multiple social, literary, and historical temporalities", in 'Two Clocks: "Aurora Leigh", Poetic Form, and the Politics of Timeliness", *Victorian Poetry* 51:1 (2013), pp. 63-80, p.80. See also Morgan, *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends*, p.154, and Karen Hadley, '"Tulips on Dunghills": Regendering the Georgic in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Poetry* 52:3 (2014), pp.465-481, another account of Barrett Browning reforming a genre by loosening its restrictions.

but the same impulse to pluralism has recovered for modern readers an openness in the verse to the rhythms of speech, informal reflection and narrative, so that a 'flexible use of blank verse links readerly liberty to the broader freedoms she wishes for English civic life'.[132] Reynolds combines the variousness of narrative, metre and diction into a processual vision: 'the work is less a unity than a process of unification'.[133] As I have suggested in the chapter on Coleridge above, however, such arguments describe the form of poetry; they do not tell us how to set the limits of a poem, or suggest how it might reach an end in-keeping with its nature.

It is possible to construct a presentism out of this technique of course. I have already hinted at the poetics of process imagined by some critics, so that both narratives are moving forward, developing simultaneously. In the triumphalism of the fifth book, which must be read in the context of a developing process rather than as a pristine authorial statement, there is a significant break between the authorial present and the narrated past. In this moment, Aurora's loneliness inflects her poetics since her feelings for Romney register as a lack. A poet should have 'made his heart beat fast enough for two' (V. 406), but Aurora has failed in this regard; 'I am sad | I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine', implying a division within herself as cause:

> He has shot them down,
> My Phœbus Apollo, soul within my soul,
> Who judges, by the attempted what's attained,
> And with the silver arrow from his height,
> Has struck down all my works before my face
> While *I* said nothing. Is there aught to say?
> I called the artist but a greatened man:
> He may be childless also, like a man. (412-9)

Aurora's own experience contrasts with the poetic faculty within her, admitting that this poetic capacity does not necessarily create enduring poems. It is possible to have the full inspiration of a heightened individualism, and still render nothing incarnate. After a line break, the

[132] Emily Harrington, 'The Measure of Time: Rising and Falling in Victorian Meters', *Literature Compass*, 4:1 (2007), pp.336-354, p.341.
[133] *The Realms of Verse*, p.123.

narrative resumes, in the past tense: ‘I laboured on alone’ (420). The temporal gap here is as concerning as the division spoken in the last paragraph, since it proceeds with the full authority of its narrative undermined. Speaking in a constant present, inflected with the past, seems to be associated with a practical incapacity.

The next two books, before Romney arrives in Florence, show Aurora falling increasingly into a dejected separation from her work and feeling of deranging memory. The pattern of mixed past and present continues, with a general trend of Aurora’s speculations tending towards a sense of personal lack. In the paragraph, beginning ‘I walked on, musing with myself | On life and art,’ (VI. 203-225), as Aurora reports her strolling thoughts in Paris, she is drawn, seemingly against her will, to the same thought that dogs her: ‘Yet Romney leaves me . .’ The poem then jerks into the present: ‘God! What face is that? | O Romney, O Marian!’ (225-6), and then in a verbless evocation of a mind in its formal derangement:

> Walking on the quays
> And pulling thoughts to pieces leisurely,
> As if I caught at grasses in a field,
> And bit them slow between my absent lips,
> And shred them with my hands.. (226-9)

Aurora’s thinks in an aimless graze, both present and past held together. The seventh book takes this further, beginning in a diaristic mode – 'She’s there now’ (VII, 139); ‘It is strange, | To-day while Marian told her story’ (175-6); ‘I will write | Plain words to England’ (232-3). But when the letter is written, Aurora is now back in the authorial seat: ‘The letter written, I felt satisfied. | The ashes, smouldering in me, were thrown out | By handfuls from me’ (375-7). The implication is that the present tense parts of the book as a product of passion or loss of composure, so that the effect of the poem’s narration is less the beneficent blending of multiple temporalities, but rather the attempt of a stable narrative voice to take control of events and memories that will not lie quiet, as if Aurora Leigh is trying to escape.

A triumphantalist metapoetry thus rubs against the thwarted poetry of reflection, as if the narrator of the poem is trapped between homo- and hetero-diegetic roles allowing neither her poetics nor her subjectivity full rein. Later, another long disquisition on the nature of poetry is introduced in a conflicted temporality. Aurora is trapped, reading and rereading news about Romney Leigh, and this repetitive motion shows narrative breaking into a temporally ambiguous list of particular impressions:

> The closed persiani threw
> Their long-scored shadows on my villa-floor,
> And interlined the golden atmosphere
> Straight, still, —across the pictures on the wall,
> The statuette on the console, (of a young Love
> And Psyche made one marble by a kiss)
> The low couch where I leaned, the table near,
> The vase of lilies, Marian pulled last night,
> (Each green leaf and each white leaf ruled in black
> As if for writing some new text of fate)
> And the open letter, rested on my knee, — (VII, 661-72)

Aurora seems unable to tell her story here, drawn back into the detail of the situation. The reference to what Marian did last night betrays a sense of disordered presentism; *Aurora Leigh*'s narrator is in the odd position of neither being in the midst of the action, or speaking about it from beyond it, but rather somehow doing both at once, as if these thoughts have only just happened, or are committed to narrative arbitrarily. There are then almost 400 lines in which the role of the poet is discussed, in terms which the poem as a whole agrees with, but to no avail. The next line reads 'The days went by' (1039), and this moment of speculative intensity, poetic intelligence responding to acute dejection, fades into an indistinct narrative. After leaving London, then, Aurora's thoughts as she repeatedly explains the high power of poetry and her personal disappointment, we have a vision of a poetry which is not only 'committed to an aesthetic of division', as Richard Cronin has put it, but which contrasts that

instinct for variousness with an equal impulse to redeem it within some broader unity, whether that be in the realm of divine telos, or personal reconciliation of past and present.[134]

IV.

In the final movement of *Aurora Leigh*, there is one last temporal break. Aurora is debating whether to reveal to us the conversation between herself and Romney:

> But what he said . . I have written day by day,
> With somewhat even writing. Did I think
> That such a passionate rain would intercept
> And dash this last page? What he said, indeed,
> I fain would write it down here like the rest,
> To keep it in my eyes, as in my ears,
> The heart's sweet scripture, to be read at night
> When weary, or at morning when afraid,
> And lean my heaviest oath on when I swear
> That, when all's done, all tried, all counted here,
> All great arts, and all good philosophies,—
> This love just puts its hand out in a dream,
> And straight outreaches all things. (IX, 725-37)

A suspicious reading might query the timing. The final lines of the poem seem to dissolve into apocalyptic immanence: Romney and Aurora seem to literally see the foundations of the city of God. Aurora's implication in these lines, that the future might be full of its own weariness and tears, could be said to subvert the neatness of the conclusion, but it is in fact more evidence for the unifying power of her interrelatedness with Romney. This redeems the divided past/present of the narratorial voice, since it now anticipates a future that is already decided and concluded before the facts. Whatever comes to Aurora and Romney, it will be contained by their love, which thus forms the mirror of the apocalypse to which the individuals of the poem's politics are growing. It is also, a reference back to the opening of the poem, in which the problem of Aurora's individualism is expressed most clearly. Aurora declares that she

[134] *Reading Victorian Poetry*, p.33.

> Will write my story for my better self,
> As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
> Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
> Long after he has ceased to love you, just
> To hold together what he was and is. (I, 4-8)

She writes for posterity, in the confidence that it will be her better self reading the poem when it is done, but the simile that follows betrays that confidence. The poem is to be a self-portrait but its audience, supposedly the painter's future self, has transmuted into a friend and lover. The portrait is to dwell in embarrassed privacy, rather than in the public mode of *Aurora Leigh*, and the image is animated by a feeling of deep loss, distance and fragmentation. Reynolds reads these lines as 'welcom[ing] the reader [...] into her personal circle', but for all its intimacy there is something esoteric or obscure about the opening.[135] The ambiguity of temporal reference (*when* will Aurora start writing?) tempts some subversive readings: if these words post-date the comments in book five then they radically subvert its claims for a public-facing poetry that catches the spirit of the age; if they instead post-date the end of the poem, they disclose a tragic rather than comic conclusion to the love plot. Since there is no way of deciding, and *Aurora Leigh* makes a habit of integrating the uncertain moment of its composition with the events of its story – at any rate this book describing her birth is the most retrospective – the ambiguity remains the important thing, especially since the simile emphasizes so strikingly the acute gap between what one was and what one is.

The first book's presentation of memory reveals a deep ambivalence regarding the past. Certainly, there is nothing akin to 'tranquil restoration' here; instead, her memories either impress her with their own affective incompleteness, as when she begs for her father's absent touch, or their confused terminal circularity, as in the figure of a corrupted ouroboros:

> What succeeded next

[135] *The Realms of Verse*, pp.115-6.

> I recollect as, after fevers, men
> Thread back the passage of delirium,
> Missing the turn still, baffled by the door;
> Smooth endless days, notched here and there with knives;
> A weary, wormy darkness, spurred i' the flank
> With flame, that it should eat and end itself
> Like some tormented scorpion. (I, 215-22)

Aurora Leigh begins with an allusion to the 'Intimations Ode', and it is tempting to read *Aurora Leigh*'s depiction of memory in comparison with *The Prelude*.[136] There is very little evidence for a major impression of *The Prelude* on Barrett Browning, however, and the Brownings gave their copy away soon after receiving it in Florence.[137] That *Aurora Leigh* responded directly to *The Prelude* seems to me improbable, even if Wordsworthian memory entered Barrett Browning's poetic consciousness through 'Tintern Abbey' and the 'Intimations' ode. There is something similar in the way Aurora is described as retiring constantly to the portrait of her mother which hung in her childhood room:

> That way, went my thoughts
> When wandering beyond sight. And as I grew
> In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously,
> Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
> Abhorrent, admirable, or grotesque,
> With still that face. (145-151)

There is a literal reflexivity as well as a psychological one; Aurora is remembering what it was like to grow up with this picture continuously beside her. It is not quite a spot of time but a focus for daydreaming and remembering nonetheless; the great icon of an absence, a dead

[136] As in Eleanor Reed's 'Voicing an Epic for the Age in *The Prelude* and *Aurora Leigh'*, *Victorian Poetry*, 57:2 (2019), pp.225-246.

[137] Barrett Browning promised to lend (or give away) her copy of *The Prelude* in a letter to Isa Blagden in early (the editors imagine the 3rd) December 1850, c.f. *The Brownings' Correspondence* §2890. It seems that this copy of *The Prelude* arrived with Charles Eliot Norton, along with a copy of *In Memoriam*. The trunk containing the books, as far as I can tell, only arrived in Florence on 28th November 1850, as detailed in a letter from Norton (repr. *Brownings' Correspondence*, SD1459.). This is no proof that Wordsworth's long poem did not receive attention, but there is little positive evidence that it did. By contrast, Barrett Browning reported to her sister that 'We have been reading together Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' in the evenings, shortly after they received their copy, on 16th December (c.f. *Brownings' Correspondence*, §2896.)

mother, becomes a figure of constancy, just as 'the incoherencies of change and death | Are represented fully, mixed and merged, | In the smooth fair mystery of perpetual life' (I, 171-3).

Ultimately, Aurora Leigh must let go her own idiosyncratic incoherencies in order to become what she might be. Romney and Aurora, having spent the night in spiritual and intellectual convergence, see the sunrise and together 'wheeled by Seeing spirits' (951) they are directed to a vision of the coming day. Having mocked poetry's ability to conjure 'dangerous spirits' (II, 79) in the poem's second book, Romney can now perceive the spiritual reality, the demonstration of which was, as Barrett Browning described it to John Kenyon, the ultimate purpose of the poem. This revelation is both about to happen and already happening; the vision is that of St John:

> faint and fair,
> Along the tingling desert of the sky,
> Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,
> Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass
> The first foundations of that new, near Day
> Which should be builded out to heaven, to God. (XI, 952-7)

Those foundations come towards us in pairs of alliterative adjectives.[138] The same nearness and farness are there in the image of the sky, pregnant with energy and emptiness. There is, then, a direct connection between the present and the future, such that the foundations of the latter can be glimpsed. Certainly, they are real enough to promise finality to Romney, who 'fed his blind majestic eyes | Upon the thought of perfect noon' (960-1), when this variegated world will reach one impeccable, perfected zenith. All that remains is for Aurora to enunciate what blind Romney can already see:

> And when
> I saw his soul saw, —'Jasper first,' I said,
> 'And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;

[138] In the manuscript, the first reading is 'faint and *far*' (emphasis mine), which the finished text takes as 'faint and fair', resolving into the 'new, near day', c.f. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, p.553.

The rest in order,.. last, an amethyst.' (XI, 961-4)

The ellipsis is crucial because it signifies, through punctuation, the poem's eschatological confidence. It is as if, in that lacuna, Romney and Aurora perceive the entire future history of the world, the remaining events in their successive order, built on the foundations of the now and destined to attain crystalline perfection. The promise made by the revelation is precisely the narratability of the future, the translucence of its preordained end—and the loss of Aurora's own divided individualism.

Just as *Aurora Leigh* suggests that political individualism develops beyond itself towards a profoundly relational sense of social and religious life, it ultimately finds that poetic individualism must also move beyond itself. As a long poem arguing for the importance of poetry, *Aurora Leigh* is thus a development towards the moment when Aurora the poetic individualist unites her efforts with Romney. We have no sense of what poetry belongs to that relational future. *Aurora Leigh* ends just as its major poetic principles are overcome, and thus presents itself less as an emphatic testament to the stable and knowable power of poetry and more as propaedeutic to some other, greater poetry which it cannot, ultimately, express – Aurora's end remains beyond herself, and beyond the lines of *Aurora Leigh* as well. If this presents a pessimistic sort of end for the long poem, then her husband's longest poem reveals a darker vision. *The Ring and the Book* questions whether a long poem can indeed, be ended, or whether the force of a poetic language, feigning an interest in plurality, is really concerned above all with its virtuoso self-perpetuation.

Chapter 5. ‘Beyond the facts’: Robert Browning’s Endless Book

> But a closer inspection shows that this expansion has not come about through one and the same principle having spontaneously assumed different shapes, but rather through the shapeless repetition of one and the same formula, only externally applied to diverse materials, thereby obtaining merely a boring show of diversity.[1]
>
> — G. W. F Hegel

> There are two sorts of talkative fellows whom it would be injurious to confound / & I, S.T. Coleridge, am the latter. The first sort is of those who use five hundred words more [than] there needs to express an idea – that is not my case [...] The second sort is of those who use five hundred more ideas, images, reasons &c than there is any need of to arrive at their object / till the only object arrived at is that the mind’s eye of the bye-stander is dazzled with colors succeeding so rapidly as to leave one vague impression that there has been a great Blaze of colours all about something.[2]
>
> — Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Introduction

In the final moments of *The Ring and the Book*, the fictional persona of Robert Browning reaches his conclusion: ‘Our human speech is naught, | Our human testimony false’ (XII, 834-5).[3] For a poem comprising some 21,000 lines of speech and testimony, this seems rather

[1] *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.8.
[2] *Coleridge’s Notebooks; A Selection*, p.74.
[3] References to *The Ring and the Book*, cited parenthetically by book and line number in the text, are, unless noted otherwise, taken from the Longman annotated edition: *The Ring and the Book*, ed. by J. Woolford, D. Karlin and J. Phelan, 2 vols (London and New York: Routledge, 2022). This new edition reprints the first published text of the poem, as it appeared once the fourth volume had been published in 1869, rather than Browning’s revised text of 1889. As Richard D. Altick, earlier editor of the poem, has put it, ‘Revision’ in the case of this poem therefore was by no means necessarily synonymous with ‘improvement’; ‘the text of 1868-9 has a superior claim, because it represents the poem [...] in the precise form in which Browning chose to submit it to the ‘British Public, who may like me yet’, in his ‘Introduction’ to *The Ring and the Book*, ed. by Richard D. Altick (London: Penguin, 1971), p.14.

damning; Danny Karlin has called it 'one of the most staggering mule kicks of all literature'.[4] But the hoof does not come completely out of the blue. For one thing, as the Longman edition notes, 'this kind of scepticism about the reliability of historical testimony was elevated to the status of a hermeneutic principle by many nineteenth-century historians', quoting Thomas Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, and J. S. Mill in support.[5] Equally, a modern reader, unlikely to try *The Ring and the Book* before shorter Browning monologues, will have learned to keep their wits about them. The dramatic monologue seems designed exactly to 'dramatis[e] the hermeneutic problems in interpretation and communication'.[6] Choosing to develop the monologue form, rather than the narrative blank verse of *Sordello*, say, is in Langbaum's view 'the *first* sign of the poem's relativism' (emphasis mine).[7] We might ask whether Browning could have reached any other end, starting at this formal premise, and whether the length of *The Ring and the Book* has anything to do with it.

One clue might be in the fact that this final summary is a verbal echo of a sentiment expressed only 200 lines before, when one of the speakers of *The Ring and the Book* reflexively criticises the 'ampollosity' (XII, 643) of a sermon. If there is something expected about *The Ring and the Book*'s relativism in theory, its practical manifestation in a poem of such hugeness, or ampollosity, leads us to a less expected conclusion. G. K. Chesterton wrote that 'it is the great epic of the age, because it is the expression of the belief [...] that no man ever lived upon this earth without possessing a point of view', but that is not the only thing expressed by *The Ring and the Book*.[8] These characters do not have 'points' of view, they make arguments that unspool from line to line; their impulse to go on at such length illuminates and darkens Browning's poem and its liberal or relativist message as we might receive it. In an early article,

[4] Danny Karlin, 'Resurrection Man', *LRB*, 24:10, 23rd May 2002. Web. < https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v24/n10/danny-karlin/resurrection-man>
[5] *The Ring and the Book*, p.96.
[6] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p.266.
[7] Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p.109.
[8] G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p.171.

Isobel Armstrong argued that one of the books of the poem is 'a violent joke against the misuse of reiteration', but by her own admission, this is a parody of the very mechanism which sustains the poem as a whole: '*The Ring and the Book* sustains itself by virtue of repetition rather than in spite of it'.[9]

The twelfth book of *The Ring and the Book*, 'The Book and the Ring', acts as a sort of reflective summing up, in which new voices are heard and old ones have their final say. The legal case, inside and to the side of which Browning has spun a series of lengthy monologues, has concluded; the triumphant lawyer writes two letters, the second of which pre-empts Browning's conclusion. He quotes from a sermon preached by an Augustinian friar, not found in Browning's source, the legal documents and transcripts he picked up in a Florentine market.

> Who trusts
> To human testimony for a fact
> Gets this sole fact—himself is proved a fool;
> Man's speech being false, (601-4)

Browning's final conclusion about the falseness of testimony is, in fact, a verbal echo of a third-hand comment made by one of his characters. Rather than leading us away from the tangle of testimony, by acknowledging its interminable complexity, those famous final lines directly connect back to the central muddle of the poem. More worrying for the optimist, Bottinus's response to the friar, whose ideas anticipate a more secular formulation in Browning's final summary, then seems to be a reproach to Browning himself. The friar announces that he will 'choos[e] obscurity' (642), by which he means lack of fame, but which also seems a comment on *The Ring and the Book*'s own obliquity. Bottinus replies: 'Didst ever touch such ampollosity?' (XII, 643).

[9] Isobel Armstrong, '*The Ring and the Book*: The Uses of Prolixity', in *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong, 2nd edn, pp.177-98, p.186, p.96.

This is one of many words in *The Ring and the Book* which seem, as Matthew Reynolds has it, 'on the borders of our linguistic competence', spoken in 'the double tongue called translationese'.[10] Reynolds does not discuss this word, Browning's coinage from Italian, but the idea is exactly right. We catch the feeling of 'ampleness' here, without knowing where the word comes from. In Richard Altick's Broadview edition, he explains the origin of the word in 'the medieval Latin, "ampullo", possibly by way of John Florio's Italian-English dictionary (1598), where it appears as "Ampollóse"—"bubling [*sic*.], puffing or windie words without substance"'.[11] The *OED* gives it as 'swollen or pretentious inanity'. One thing that Bottinus particularly rejects, and which also registers as a self-reference to Browning's text, is the friar's comment that 'every man [is] a liar—save the Pope!' (648). The Pope occupies a strange moral centre in the poem. In fact, as I argue below, it is precisely through his own fallibility that he achieves authority. The word anticipates sentiments, in the reception of the poem, that 'it is decidedly too long [...] a weariness of the flesh to read so many arguments [...] so many varying shades of the same argument': the perception that behind all these character lurks one relentless reiterating singularity of poetic purpose. [12] So much of the poem's bulk seems occupied with peddling inanity: 'the poem is too long'; 'The first speakers are simply critics [...] their talk may be likened to the conversation of the subordinate characters with which the historical plays of Shakespeare open'.[13] Thomas Carlyle declared that the story of Browning's poem 'might have been told in ten lines' and, on another occasion, told Browning that it was 'of all the strange books produced on this distracted earth [...] this was altogether the strangest and the

[10] Matthew Reynolds, 'Browning and Translationese', *Essays in Criticism*, 53:2 (2003), pp.97-128, p.99.
[11] *The Ring and the Book*, ed. by Thomas Collins and Richard Altick (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2001), p.754.
[12] John Rickards Mozley, '[Review of] "The Ring and the Book"', *Quarterly Review*, April 1869, pp.328-59 (repr. in *The Ring and the Book*, ed. by Thomas J. Collins and Richard D. Altick (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview, 2001), p.789). The appendix to this Broadview edition, which prints the later revised text, comprises an enormously helpful 'critical heritage' for *The Ring and the Book*. I identify it as '*The Ring and the Book* (Broadview)' when citing from this appendix.
[13] Sir John Skelton, *Fraser's Magazine*, 80, November 1869, pp.670-77 (repr. in *The Ring and the Book* (Broadview), p.798).

most preposterous in its construction'.[14] Coleridge praised Milton for precisely the same expansive effect – 'the *story* of Milton might be told in two pages' – but at the same time regretted Southey's ability to 'write too much at his ease'.[15] Browning's long poem makes a similar virtue and vice out of celebrating its own ampullosity, as a liberal largess of mind and a relentless capacity for long-windedness. *Ring and the Book* makes deranged eloquence the condition of man, the sort of thing the *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly* reviewer described as 'verbiage overshadow[ing] thought', or, rather, drowning it out.[16] The shadowiness of the *The Ring and the Book*'s verbosity is the theme of this chapter.

The Ring and the Book is, I argue, both a joke at the expense of free speech, and its most extensive poetic celebration. Speech might be free in the sense of an extensive toleration of various views, but it might also be free to the degree that one is given space and time to speak. The long poem is the site of noble liberal diversity and of irresolute perversity, whereby the singular impulse to write a poetry of force jostles against the desire to give everyone a chance to speak. Discussing the organic poem, Armstrong argues that it 'has to be long enough to have a past on which it can reflect [...] to transform and create new experience out of its elements', and the implicit endlessness of this process has a happy liberal connotation.[17] If *The Ring and the Book* suggests a single process that must go on, since anyone who gets a word in has their own point of view, it also questions that necessity. J. S. Mill, as we saw in the last chapter, countenanced the necessity of originality 'until mankind shall have entered a stage of intellectual advancement which at present seems at an incalculable distance', and *The Ring and the Book* does not deny the possibility of some far-off consensus.[18] The long poem, in this case,

[14] Reported in David Alec Wilson and David Wilson Macarthur, *Carlyle in Old Age (1865-1881)* (London, 1934), pp.175-6 (reprinted in *The Ring and the Book* (Broadview), pp.788-9, p.789).
[15] To Joseph Cottle, April 1797, *Collected Letters of Coleridge*, i, p.319.
[16] John R. deC. Wise, *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, 91, April 1869, p.577 (*The Ring and the Book* (Broadview), pp.790-1, p.791.
[17] Isobel Armstrong, *Language as Living Form*, p.34.
[18] Mill, *On Liberty*, p.112.

challenges the instrumental defence of individual expression, obliging us to 'learn and love | Each facet-flash of the revolving year' (I, 1360-1), tolerating for their own sake the excesses of the venal, the pedantic, and murderous with those of the pure and noble. We find 'variance now, the eventual unity' (1363), but that unity perhaps reveals itself as the impulse to keep speaking as an act of poetic impulse means self-preservation, rather than self-expression. Count Guido, taken off to die, declares:

> Sirs, have I spoken one word all this while
> Out of the world of words I had to say?
> Not one word! All was folly—I laughed and mocked. (XI, 2415-7)

Guido wishes to take back what he has said, but there is a pathos of a sort to the acknowledgment that, at least verbally, his life is being brought to an abrupt stop: the long poem as living form indeed. Throughout the poem, Browning plays with characters' awareness of their delaying and digressive tendences: a persistent allegorisation, I argue, of the length of *The Ring and the Book* as both a necessary evil and a voluntary one. Ultimately, the impulse to keep speaking expresses a deep anxiety about the very diversity which it celebrates.

Part 1: 'An Inordinate Muchness'[19]

The Ring and the Book is the longest poem in this study, and one of the longest poems ever written in which nothing exactly happens. The poem takes the form of twelve books, each of which is made up of a single uninterrupted dramatic monologue. The first and last books are spoken by a fictionalised version of Browning himself, framing the occasion of the poem: the discovery of the 'Old Yellow Book' at a market in Florence in June 1860 (I, 33-83). This pamphlet gave the legal arguments for and against Count Guido Franceschini in the trial

[19] Henry James, 'The Novel in "The Ring and the Book'', in *Notes on Novelists, with Some Other Notes* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1914), pp.306-27, p.306.

convicting him of murdering his wife Pompilia and her parents on January 2 1698. Guido might have escaped the death penalty on account of having taken minor orders, but Pope Innocent XII ruled that punishment should be carried out. Pompilia had run away from Guido with a priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, in 1697, but Guido caught them and Pompilia was sent to a convent. It became clear that Pompilia was pregnant, and she went to live with her parents in Rome, where Guido and his accomplices found and murdered her and her parents. Between the opening and closing books of the poem, Browning allots three monologues to 'the world's outcry' (I, 839) – the opinions and assessments of onlookers – and then three to the main actors in the story: murderous Guido, Caponsacchi the priest, and finally Pompilia, testifying as she dies. Then two lawyers speak, for and against Guido, before the pope.

Whilst the case was a genuine *cause celebre* in late 17th century Rome, the question of whether a husband should be allowed to kill his wife has never seemed a hugely complex one to *The Ring and the Book*'s readers. Julia Wedgwood told Browning that the effect was like 'a somewhat slight picture has been put into an elaborately carved frame', with the 'elaborateness of Guido's portrayal' contrasting with the 'simple stupid brutality' of his act as seen on its own terms.[20] The editors of the Oxford Browning concur, noting that '*The Ring and the Book* elevates a provincial scandal [...] into a psychological masterpiece'. Compared with Shelley's *The Cenci*, for instance, another work about an evil Guido in an old Italian legal document centring around a murder, Browning's story is morally straightforward. Shelley imagined telling a story that would 'be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart', arising from a genuinely horrifying moral quandary: does Beatrice's ill-treatment justify the killing of her father?[21] No one before or since has seriously

[20] *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, p.183.
[21] In his 'Preface', Shelley writes of the "restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice", who had responded to the "incestuous passion" of her monstrous father by murdering him, c.f. 'The Cenci' in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.314-99, p.317.

questioned whether Guido did the wrong or the right thing when he murdered Pompilia. Similarly, B. R. McElderry quotes *Fraser's Magazine* to explain one justification for its size:

> The art consists, we are told, in reproducing the effect of a trial, where the argument ebbs and flows, disclosing the "speaker's individual idiosyncrasy" and allowing each speaker to enlarge "on one particular episode which is not mentioned, except in passing, by the others."[22]

But this feels like special pleading. *The Ring and the Book* does elaborate different parts of the story across its books, but never to the point that we gain a deeper understanding of the narrative facts of the case. We know that he does not seriously entertain the view that Pompilia might have been unfaithful, even if there was evidence to the contrary, and as L. S. Swingle puts it, if we are asked to be 'like a jury' in examining the poem, 'Browning the judge has directed us to a verdict even before the witnesses have been called.'[23]

The Ring and the Book anticipates this charge with a confrontational confidence. Having given his summary of the case, the narrator asks us:

> Was this truth of force?
> Able to take its own part as truth should,
> Sufficient, self-sustaining? Why, if so –
> Yonder's a fire, into it goes my book,
> As who shall say me nay, and what the loss?
> You know the tale already. (I, 372-377)

The poem is not so long exactly because we are trying to get the facts right. Browning's comic contempt for his British readership registers with even greater intensity now that the original four volumes are collected together, and we feel in our hands the weight of what the narratorial voice claims we will lose if the book is burnt right now. The stakes are theatrically high: Browning threatens to destroy both his poem and the source material (his 'book' is ambiguous), asking his readers to decide whether these basic facts are indeed sufficient. The idea of a truth

[22] B. R. McElderry, 'The Narrative Structure of Browning's The Ring and the Book: Research Studies of the State College of Washington 11, (1943), pp.193-233, p.80.
[23] L. J. Swingle, 'Truth and *The Ring and the Book*: A Negative View," *Victorian Poetry*, p.263.

that might sustain itself is suggestive; the argument made by the ring conceit is that by 'fus[ing] my live soul and that inert stuff' (469), the poet's imagination with the 'lingot truth' (459), that truth can be made to live.

> Well now; there's nothing in nor out o' the world
> Good except truth: yet this, the something else,
> What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
> This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
> That quickened, made the inertness malleolable
> O' the gold was not mine, – what's your name for this?
> Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
> Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
> The somehow may be thishow. (I, 698-706)

Browning's authorial persona feigns an alchemical innocence, creating the 'thishow' out of the potential 'somehow' of the case's facts and remarking on its goodness seemingly after the fact. This is not a comment on the entire poem, however, but only the first go at telling the story. Lines 457-678 of the first book tell the story in the first poetised version, which is then assayed to be 'good yet see[m] untrue' (700). Browning then announces the rest of the poem: the resurrection of the voices which will occupy so much of his readers' attentions. When he returns again, in the final book, there is less confidence. Rather than attaining a 'self-sustaining' truth, the voices fade into general obscurity, 'till it melts, | Trickles in silent orange or wan grey | Across our memory, dies and leaves all dark' (XII, 16-9). From the start to the end, then, Browning's fiction of composition is intensely, if not consistently self-aware, which means, like the other characters of *The Ring and the Book* it stakes its claim, reflects on its success, and harbours hidden intentions.

Henry James referred memorably to the 'clustered hugeness or inordinate muchness' of its 'affronting mass' in a celebratory lecture which suggested that a sensible novel might have been more propitious than Browning's colossus.[24] Equally, George Santayana found there to

[24] *Notes on Novelists*, p.306.

be something morally deficient about its structural unkemptness, as if the 'twelve monstrous soliloquies' of the poem revealed a barbaric grotesqueness, or, in Walter Bagehot's phrase, a celebration of 'abnormal specimens'.[25] Santayana was ill-disposed to praise Browning's scepticism but he was absolutely right to observe the formal result of Browning's instinct for the particular, eccentric, and wayward as something slightly different from 'the apotheosis of the insignificant' as Chesterton put it.[26] Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote that, whilst most poets lost their way when waxing fantastical, 'the thing that makes Browning drunk is to give him a dram of prosaic reality', and wondered if the prose-drunk volumes of *The Ring and the Book* would be bearable 'without the intervening walls of the station-house to tone down their exuberance'.[27] Browning's speakers do, in Santayana's phrase, 'ruminate on [their] own accidental emotions, on [their] love-affairs', amongst many other things, but most crucially 'on [their] hopes of going on so ruminating for ever', a useful addition to Armstrong's description of the necessity for length within the context of a living form.[28] In the case of two of *The Ring and the Book*'s speakers, they keep monologuing until their final breath, and Santayana is absolutely right to identify an aggressively monopolising instinct inside the monologues.

This may not be a wholly bad thing, of course. *The Spectator*'s broadly positive review comments, with affectionate semi-approval, that Browning 'overflows, as he always overflows'.[29] At least one modern critic has perceived that Browning's poem entertains the possibility of growing even longer to compass an even fuller range of details. Lee Erickson suggests that 'there is really no good reason, for example, why a few more people weren't allowed to get a word in', asking us to 'imagine a poem on the scale of Balzac's *Comèdie*

[25] *The Works of George Santayana, Volume 3: Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, ed. by William G. Holzberger and Herman J. Saatkamp, jr. (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1989), p.128; Walter Bagehot, *Literary Studies, Volume 2* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co: 1911), p.338.
[26] Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, p.164.
[27] In a letter to William Allingham, in *The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, 2 vols (Oxford, 1965-7), ii, 678.
[28] *The Works of George Santayana, Volume 3: Interpretations of Poetry and Religion,* p.129.
[29] *Spectator*, 41, *The Ring and the Book* (Broadview), p.774.

Humaine!'.[30] I imagine that few readers who have made it to the end of *The Ring and the Book*, or have undertaken to do so on multiple occasions during the course of doctoral study, would agree. Unlike the novels of Wilkie Collins, or, to take a cinematic reference, Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, in which the true details of a story are revealed through differing perspectives, Browning's long poem takes a tautological approach. As the Longman editors suggest, the 'radical innovation' was to 'use multiple narrators to tell the *same* story', not to use multiple narrators in the service of *a* continuous narrative.[31] 'Enough of me!' (I, 773) Browning's persona cheerfully declares at the start of the poem and much hangs upon the extent to which we attribute the characteristics of the poem to the good faith attempt to ventriloquise, or to a less benign impulse to go on. Another way of putting that question is to ask whether there is any diversity at all in 'The Ring and the Book'

In the view of its two most pedantic characters – the defence and prosecution lawyers – length is indeed a kind of monstrosity. Dominus Hyacunthus De Archangelis, having overcome the distractions of his gourmandising imagination to produce his defence speech, imagines it 'landed and stranded' (VIII, 1730), a 'monster of defence-- | Leviathan into the nose whereof | I have put fish-hook' (1731-4). We will never get to see the speech after he has endeavoured to 'regularize the whole' (1744). Likewise, his opponent, Johannes-Baptista Bottinius, laments the length of his speech:

> There's my oration—much exceeds in length
> That famed panegyric of Isocrates,
> They say it took him fifteen years to pen.
> But all those ancients could say anything!
> He put in just what rushed into his head:
> While I shall have to prune and pare and print.
> This comes of being born in modern times
> With priests for auditory. (IX, 1570-7)

[30] Lee Erickson, *Robert Browning: His Poetry and Audiences*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1983), p.234.
[31] *Ring and the Book* (Longman), I. 99.

The indecorous or unwieldy effect about going on at such length is thus apparent to at least two of the speakers of *The Ring and the Book*. Both lawyers represent different ways of organising a long whole: Archangelis aims to 'circumstantially evolve [the] fact[s]' (VIII, 139), fleshing out the bone of a case when 'the main defence o' the murder's used to death, |[...] dry bare bones' (VIII, 258-9) ; Bottinius by contrast aims to present 'the main central truth' of the case, even if it is 'less distinct, part by part' (IX, 99-100). Correspondingly, one finds that he has an irregular whole, whereas the other has ended up unable to succinctly summarise what has 'rushed into his head'. These are parodic accounts – Browning knowingly described the lawyers as 'buffoons' – but they parody the method of *The Ring and the Book* as much as legal pedantry.[32]

Coleridge once wrote, complainingly, that his 'illustrations swallow up [his] thesis', but *The Ring and the Book* seems to present rather all illustration and no thesis.[33] Santayana reproached Browning's poetry for 'its failure to approach any finality', and the *The Ring and the Book* seems deeply conscious of its indeterminacy: 'Here were the end, had anything an end' (XII, 1).[34] One reading of the line is a comment on the loose ends of the story. For example, Browning's authorial persona wonders about the fate of 'Gaetano', the child of murdered Pompilia, 'Did the babe live or die? I fain would find! | What were his fancies if he grew a man?' (XII, 814-5) and imagines whether his life would 'make bright my page' (817). There are, then, unresolved questions for the subject of this poem, which might inspire more poetry or an even fuller treatment of the theme. The other, more emphatic reading, however, regards a scepticism about ended-ness more generally, for it is not just this story which engenders loose

[32] In a letter to Julia Wedgwood, Browning explained to her the content of the second two volumes, including the observation that 'then come the two buffoon lawyers'; *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood; A Broken Friendship as Revealed by their Letters*, ed. by Richard Curle (New York: Frederick A. Stokes company, 1937), p.164.
[33] *Notebooks*, ii, 2372.
[34] George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, ed. by William G. Holzberger and Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1990), p.115.

ends and unresolved questions, but the fate of all stories and intellectual endeavours to do so. There is always more to say about everything, so the choice to stop here is motivated by practical, temporal, concerns, rather than any achievement of union or synthesis. William O. Raymond described Browning's aesthetic as a 'distillation of a crucial moment of human experience', but the method of *The Ring and the Book* seems to be a celebration of residue rather than '*elixir vitae*'.[35]

Even if this ending is arbitrary, there is one good justification for an extraordinarily long poem behind it. In the first book of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning rehearses the day he found the 'Old Yellow Book', and then tells the story within it several times before introducing all the characters who are to speak. The framing is within the liberal fallibility which we saw jostling against poetic authority in *Aurora Leigh*; here, Browning discusses:

> Let this old woe step on the stage again!
> Act itself o'er anew for men to judge,
> Not by the very sense and sight indeed—
> (Which take at best imperfect cognizance,
> Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,
> What mortal ever in entirety saw?)
> --No dose of purer truth than man digests,
> But truth with falsehood, [...]
> [...] by voices we call evidence. (I, 824-33)

The fallibility of each of the books to follow – and Browning's authorial persona is careful to warn of their biases in turn – is what justifies their inclusion. This is an aggregative and progressive epistemology: we learn more the more sources we have, and since no source can claim absolute authority, diversity of views is to be encouraged. It makes sense to have a long poem to fit more ideas in, even if we are unlikely to get to the point where there is no more use for their diversity: 'the variance now' leads to the 'eventual unity (I, 1363), even if that unity is indefinitely deferred, like Mill's 'stage of intellectual advancement which at present seems at

[35] William O. Raymond, *The Infinite Moment*, 2nd edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp.7, 10.

an incalculable distance'.[36] It is hard to see what point the poem wants to make about freedom of speech, however. On the one hand, *The Ring and the Book* is a poem about the dangers of freedom of speech more than its benefits, but unlike the Mill-ite view of individualism needing protection from itself, since a wide extension of liberties might paradoxically encourage rather than guard against a tyrannous majority, there is no sense in this poem of anyone not being allowed to talk.[37] Certainly, the presentation of the Roman citizens queueing up to see the murdered bodies of Violante and Pietro Comparinini shows as much fear of the masses as in *Aurora Leigh*, but if there is a 'bleak liberalism', to use Amanda Anderson's phrase, in the poem, it is the bleakness of tedium and patience required to sift through a potentially endless list of minutely various accounts. Isobel Armstrong offers a good reading of *The Ring and the Book*'s nuanced position here: 'If *vox populi* is not *vox dei* it is not, as Bagehot called it, *vox diaboli* either'.[38] The ambivalence, however, is made more explicit but also less vital by the fact that, for all the chattering in the poem, it has no bearing on the outcome of the case.[39] There is no discussion or exchange of ideas, merely a compounding of accounts: a poem 'massively without encounter', as Eric Griffiths put it – huge precisely because none of its speakers are restricted by the encounter with counter-opinion.[40] All of the corrupt aspects of rhetorical language are presented with none of their advantages – getting closer to the truth in free debate; or their major downsides – mob opinion and tyranny of a majority viewpoint.

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[36] Mill, *On Liberty*, p.112.
[37] What Burrow calls the 'double action' of mid-century liberalism, which imagined, in opposition to Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', a darker force of mass-coercion, so that the individual would require protecting from the excesses of individual liberty itself. C.f. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals*, pp.50-1.
[38] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p.292.
[39] In fact, as Browning's lawyers are well aware, the entire trial was conducted in silence. The Roman courts received arguments in written form, debated them privately, and then gave their verdict. Neither the trial, nor the Pope's consideration of the case belong to a free public sphere. The most thorough account of the legal system at the time of Guido's trial is still John Marshall Gest's *The Old Yellow Book*, (Boston: Chipman Law Pub, 1925), esp. 'The legal system and the courts of Rome in the time of the old yellow book' pp.51-69. Gest, himself a lawyer, writes in defence of his profession's honour: 'He missed the opportunity of portraying the majesty of Law, as the controlling force, the saviour of human society, ruling and overruling the passions of men and women.' (p.628) He also emphasises how much the legal debate rested on the nature of punishment, rather than on guilt and innocence.
[40] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, p.195.

As a result, some of those who have found moral seriousness in *The Ring and the Book* have done so by justifying its method rather than its announced end. The *Quarterly Review* pointedly commented that 'it is a weariness of the flesh to read so many arguments pro and con – so many varying shades of the same argument', but the reviewer also found something underpinning the apparently arbitrary comparison of these different perspectives:

> A distinct moral purpose runs through the poem; not a moral, not an obtrusive excrescence, not anything that can be expressed in a few neatly compacted sentences at the end; but a course of deep meditation on human action and the problems of life.[41]

An early opinion most sympathetic to a justified length therefore nonetheless balks at the repetitious form of the poem. Later on, a sense of continuous process was used to explain either the poem's scepticism or the means by which it reaches beyond doubt and back to a sense of faith. E. D. H. Johnson saw the characters as 'asserting [their] will in opposition to the evil which [they] perceive' and that together the poem's iterative form demonstrates successes and failures to construct personal moral truth.[42] Other approaches have presented the whole poem as 'an unceasing transition from image to image, statement to statement, a movement which both produces meaning and produces truth'; Patricia Rigg has advocated for the dynamic interrelatedness of movements as we read the poem towards and away from truth, thus revealing the origins and the limits of knowledge.[43] Conflating Browning's *Sordello* with the

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[41] *Quarterly Review* 126 (April 1869), pp.328-59.

[42] In an argument that 'Browning's poetry supports William James's pluralistic contentions', see E. D. H. Johnson, 'Browning's Pluralistic Universe: A Reading of *The Ring and the Book*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 31 (1961), pp.20-41, p.31. John Killham responded to Johnson, arguing instead that the poem is 'an elaborate Victorian monument to the faith that truth does not depend upon human testimony, but is absolute': 'Browning's 'Modernity': *The Ring and the Book* and Relativism', in *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*, pp.153-74, p.172.

[43] Warwick Slinn, 'Language and Truth in "The Ring and the Book"' *Victorian Poetry*, 27:3 (1989), pp.115-133, p.129. Rigg writes that, 'As we read, we "become" the enthusiastic, creative reader who shapes the poem, spiralling inward toward the truth implicitly associated with Pompilia. However, there are equally forceful decreative impulses that make up the reading process and bring us spiralling back outward in skepticism that historical detail can be "ordered" into art in any fixed and stable way', Patricia Rigg, *Robert Browning's Romantic Irony in "The Ring and the Book"*, (Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), p.9-10. For a similar recent emphasis on the act of dynamic reading opposing to a critically conceived notion of (implicitly static) form, c.f. Michelle Niemann's 'Browning's Critique of Organic Form in *The Ring and the Book*', *Victorian Poetry*, 52:3 (2014), pp.445-464, and Michael Rizq's 'Fact, Rhythm, and Resistance in *The Ring*

poet himself, Herbert Tucker described him as 'one of the most confirmed transients in English poetry', and the notion of restlessness and changefulness, ending in the ultimate deferral of a judgment opposes any sense of the architectonic unity of the work, since the integrity of that aesthetic position precludes finishedness.[44] The difficulty with imagining a poet who finds endless openings for new poetry, no matter how optimistically presented, is that it de-theorises the end of the poem. Rigg's book suggests that 'there is no superfluous text in the highly repetitive process of this poem', since Pompilia 'hovers' in the state of 'becoming'.[45]

One apology for the poem's length thus suggests that it is the result of a developing procedure, but the notion of ever reaching the end is sacrificed to make it possible. In the first book, Browning summarises the authority of the Pope who speaks in the tenth book: 'Then comes the all but end, the ultimate | Judgment save yours' (1220-1). The end of the poem is therefore not to get to the truth, but to encourage some deeper, later end in the reader's mind. As Langbaum puts it, 'the only reason for dramatizing the story at all is not to impose truth upon it but to make the truth accessible'.[46] Explaining himself at the other end of the poem, Browning explains that poetry, or art, 'may tell a truth | Obliquely' (XII. 855-6), a word picked up by Carol T. Christ as she sees *The Ring and the Book* foreshadowing the modernist long poem: the 'characteristic of the poem [...] consists in the obliquity whereby the poet implies a structure rationalizing and containing the particular fragments the poem presents'.[47] Or, as Philipp Erchinger puts it, truth can only 'be conveyed indirectly', with that conveyance taking a literal sense: it means 'to carry an established piece of knowledge from one [...] position to

and the Book', *Victorian Poetry*, 59:4 (2021), pp.391-410. Cheryl Walsh has argued similarly about other monologues, 'The Voices in Karshish: A Bakhtinian Reading of Robert browning's "Epistle"', *Victorian Poetry*, 31:3 (1993), pp.213-26. Walsh has a more liberal impulse, suggesting that Browning 'regenerates the dead dogma of Christianity and transforms it into a living dialogic truth' (p.224).

[44] *Browning's Beginnings*, p.119.

[45] Rigg, *Robert Browning's Romantic Irony in "The Ring and the Book"*, p.10.

[46] Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p.133.

[47] Carol T. Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.115.

another'.[48] In that sense, the end of Browning's huge poem is to bring us to the point where we recognise that there is no *single* earthly end to the pursuit of truth, but instead to believe that there is still some order, structure or purpose, not subjective chaos. That might mean, as with *Aurora Leigh*, finding a use for a certain kind of monologic individualism, showing how 'a decadent society quibbling about legalisms and hereditary rights is contrasted with a few individuals capable of acting decisively on their convictions'.[49] There is a final act of poetic humility, then, in letting everyone speak; the poem is long, and indeed could be longer still, since tolerance and liberality demand it.

The unresolved issue, then, is whether the length of *The Ring and the Book* ought to be seen as a sort of oblique poetic in-direction, in which a sidewise and various approach to the truth of the matter is a symptom of a capacious and liberal desire to know the facts from all sides, or instead as a poetic ampollosity or mis-direction, whereby a desire for variation to the point of perversity generates, out of a relatively straightforward moral problem, a seemingly interminable set of linguistic positions. G. K. Chesterton, sensitively but disapprovingly, noted:

> A liberal may be defined approximately as a man who, if he could by waving his hand in a dark room, stop the mouths of all the deceivers of mankind for ever, would not wave his hand. Browning was a liberal in this sense.[50]

When Browning encourages us to 'learn and love | Each facet-flash of the revolving year' (I. 1360-1), including, presumably, the murderous and venal as well as the pure and good, Chesterton is absolutely right. But allowing everyone to speak is rather different from bringing them back from the dead and making them speak. The kind of liberalism in *The Ring and the Book* does not just avoid limiting the speech of deceivers, it invites them to the stage, animates

[48] Philipp Erchinger, *Artful Experiments: Ways of Knowing in Victorian Literature and Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp.204-5.
[49] Lawrence Poston, III, 'Browning's Political Skepticism: "Sordello" and the Plays', *PMLA*, 88:2 (1973), pp.260-70, p.270.
[50] Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, p.87.

them with alliterative eloquence, and offers them space and time to have their say. Browning puts it in a rather gothic way.

> I can detach from me, commission forth
> Half of my soul; which in its pilgrimage
> O'er old unwandered waste ways of the world,
> May chance upon some fragment of a whole,
> Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse,
> Smoking flax that fed fire once: prompt therein
> I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play,
> Push lines out to the limit, lead forth last
> (By a moonrise through a ruin of a crypt)
> What shall be mistily seen, murmuringly heard,
> Mistakenly felt. (I, 749-59)

In the first case, the poem must be long, because enquiry into the truth of human affairs can never exhaust its use of testimony: there are always more questions to ask and more witnesses to entertain. In the second, the poem's length is rather the symptom of a less ethically instrumental relishing of variousness to the point of perversity. In both senses, the ending of the work is inconclusive since the processes of liberal enquiry or deliberate perversity do not themselves have a strict end. *The Ring and the Book*, perhaps more happily than any of my other poems, seems to have that 'deliberate' and 'concerted' ending described by Paul Ricoeur, which is nonetheless an open one: 'its inconclusiveness declares in a way the irresolution of the problem posed'.[51] Nonetheless, we are dealing with two strictly different senses of *The Ring and the Book*'s ends. In the optimistic view, inconclusiveness is a triumphant result since it hints at a purpose that lies strictly beyond the text itself: so, to 'bring music from [the reader's] mind' (XII, 860) one 'write[s] a book shall mean beyond the facts' (862). In a negative one, inconclusiveness arises from the momentum of poetry's perverse ampollosity, self-sustaining and restless.

[51] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, ii, p.22.

One way *The Ring and the Book* does offer a genuine plurality is in the explanations its speakers give for speaking so freely. The first book enjoins us:

> Rather learn and love
> Each facet-flash of the revolving year!—
> Red, green and blue that whirl into a white,
> The variance now, the eventual unity. (1360-3)

But, as Coleridge knew, the swirling of colours might lead less to unified transparency, but to the 'vague impression that there has been a Blaze of colours all about something'.[52] It is thus the functioning of the various books in *The Ring and the Book* as allegories of the virtuously or viciously long poem as it keeps goes on, whrling into whiteness, or blazing into noise, which I now seek to illustrate. My focus is on the trilogy of books most clearly focused on the legal affairs: the books of the lawyers and the Pope.

Part 2: 'My Monster of Defence': The Lawyers in *The Ring and the Book*

In an essay on *The Ring and the Book*'s approach to purity, whether it be epistemological or sexual, Tucker imagines that the *Ring and the Book* 'generalizes the *in medias res* condition of narrative openings to the human condition'; but the situations of the characters in *The Ring and the Book* are not so much 'in the middle of things', but 'in between things'.[53] Normally, characters speak after they have made their decision. Chesterton compared the old epic poets, 'who had learnt to speak', with the new one in Browning, 'the poet who has learnt to listen', and in no other poem is the burden of listening or reading felt with such acuteness. What Browning understands is that an allowance for freely diverse opinions does not just present

[52] *Coleridge's Notebooks; A Selection*, p.74.
[53] Herbert Tucker, 'Representation and Repristination: Virginity in *The Ring and the Book*, in *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*, ed. by Davis Lloyd (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp.67-86, p.84.

alternative viewpoints, but that each of those viewpoints brings with it an entire living, breathing life in language: you cannot have points of view without the people to speak them, and this immediately incorporates aesthetic and psychological preoccupations of language into the performance. It is that, rather than the variability of truth or knowledge, which *The Ring and the Book* so massively demonstrates.

One obstacle to my view here is that the characters in the poem are much less different to each other than the figures in Browning's *Men and Women*, for instance. As Mary Sullivan noted, the speakers 'are not sharply individualized by philosophical attitude and historical moment', and there is 'no sharp differentiation in vocabulary or localized allusions'.[54] The *Athenaeum*, in the most enthusiastically adulatory contemporary review of the poem, found that Browning 'never quite hid[es] his identity' and the overall effect is most 'delicious, indeed, when the disguise is most transparent'.[55] One major give away is a similarity of form; *The Ring and the Book*'s metre is frequently quickened by the addition of unstressed syllables, and all of these distinct characters are, we are led to believe, equally impassioned with alliterative frenzy.[56] Ultimately, this feeling of a single poetic practice repeating or revealing itself in many guises is in constant dialogue with the ostensible impulse towards diversity of opinion in the poem, casting doubt on the ethical motives of the latter.

One way of reading this, as in the case of the first three characters, is that the poem's conclusion that all human testimony is false means that everyone is speaking in bad faith. *The Ring and the Book* has something more sophisticated to say on the matter, implying that interest

[54] Mary Sullivan, *Browning's Voices in the Ring and the Book: A Study of Method and Meaning*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969) p.xii.
[55] December 26, 1868.
[56] Joseph Phelan has written briefly but suggestively about Browning's place in the context of mid-century prosodic debate, where patterns such as alliteration are used to respond to a 'collapsing of the distinction between prose and verse', in *The Music of Verse: Metrical Experiment in Nineteenth-Century Poetry*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.147.

and disinterest are combined in verbal acts and do not have a strictly binary moral character. Mill's distinction is one central Victorian one:

> Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavouring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.[57]

The crucial difference is one of intention, both as the hidden motive of a work and the thing it wishes to achieve. We have, then, a poem that simulates eloquence, or an eloquence that simulates poetry. So much of the poem involves the disclosure of hidden motives. 'Half-Rome' damns adulterous wives to his audience so that the auditor's cousin may be warned off his own wife, 'The Other Half-Rome' sides with Pompilia because he is embroiled in an inheritance case similar to hers, and 'Tertium Quid' speaks with equanimity only because he wishes to secure social advantage: '(You'll see, I have not so advanced myself, | After my teaching the two idiots here!)' (IV. 1639-40), he concludes.[58] Matthew Bevis has clarified Mill's disinterest as a political and aesthetic tool for us as 'not absence of interest, but an attempt to mediate between interests', which is certainly the ostensible approach of Browning's persona as it apologises for itself in the opening and closing books of the poem.[59] Browning, as Bevis has it, develops 'a poetics that seeks to be "heard"', but that also questions the possibility of giving different or equal hearings to something.[60] He plays the showman, promising to bring forth these voices onto a stage before us, but he is also himself the receiver of his material, distracted by its imperfection and the imperfection he can make of it. It is not just that his characters are full of hidden intentions that are less than righteous that challenges disinterest, but the constant

[57] J. S. Mill 'What is poetry', in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume I – Literary and Autobiographical Essays*, ed. J. M. Robson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1996), p.349.
[58] c.f. II, 1537-47 and III, 1674-1694.
[59] Matthew Bevis, *The Art of Eloquence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.11.
[60] *The Art of Eloquence,* p.148.

attraction to the details in the poem, the colour and the sense of imperfection, the virtuoso performance over the performance of virtue, that shows a poetry that struggles to mediate. It often finds itself revelling instead in the brilliant 'Buzzing and blaze' of opinion and misrepresentation.[61] More importantly, to our notions of dis-interested language, spoken for its own sake, and eloquence that carries some intention, *The Ring and the Book* adds a sense of *self*-interested language – self-conscious in its rhetorical surface and addressing itself, which is not quite the same as Mill's self-confession.

Pope Innocent and the lawyers are both speaking to themselves. Even though Archangelis and Bottinius are imagining the effect of their speech as they compose it, the monologue we get is in fact their private thoughts, and Browning is at pains to humanise them as much as he ridicules their pedantic and morally non-sensical arguments. Even at the most debased end of the poem, the drive to speak and keep speaking, which is the real theme of the poem, is manifest in the craftsman's sense of rhetorical efficacy. In his first monologue, we find 'Half-Rome' complaining that his inside source on the murder was lamentably laconic: 'Too wary he was, too widely awake, I trow. | He did the murder in a dozen words' (II, 172-3). The relish with which he tells the tale is linked to how long he can make it last, and how he can keep its threads together as 'We follow the murder's maze from source to sea'. In an aside early on – and *The Ring and the Book* is full of asides that regard the self-conscious making of the monologues – 'Half-Rome' feels he is getting carried away with his image:

> Who but Violante sudden spied her prey
> (Where was I with that angler-simile?)
> And threw her bait, Pompilia, where he sulked, (II, 321-3)

And later on, returns to the same conceit, describing the Comparini,

> Who, as I told you, first had baited hook

[61] As Browning describes the market in Florence where he found the 'old yellow Book', c.f. I, 35.

> With this poor gilded fly Pompilia-thing,
> Then caught the fish, pulled Guido to the shore
> And gutted him. (II, 1355-8)

There is a pleasure in holding all these thoughts and devices together, which is surely the poet's as much as his characters'. His satisfaction is very much similar to Browning's in the wrangling into some concordance things which seems stubbornly disparate.

Indeed, that the characters of *The Ring and the Book* are trying to manipulate their audiences, even the absent ones, is a given, but there is also an aesthetic appreciation of the case which, verging on voyeurism, nonetheless implies some genuine core of fascination about the details of the case and its representation. Moreover, whilst they are dishonest in their narration, they are totally transparent to us, and so they become reliably unreliable narrators. 'Tertium Quid', who comes after the first two biased books, is an aristocratic Roman who seeks to gain preferment by an entertaining telling of the case.[62] His habits, as Mary Sullivan writes, are to 'enjo[y] the sense of removed superiority to the petty passions of the actors in the drama', and the theatricality of his performance is a parody of Browning's.[63] He keeps switching between perspectives, directing his audience: 'One word on the other side' (IV, 903); 'But then on the other side' (1043); 'let's see clearly from this point!' (1214), etc., and his constant deference to the presumably feeble judgment of his aristocratic audience also mimics Browning's addresses to the British public. 'Tertium Quid' is also like the poem in not really getting anywhere. He speaks for some 1640 lines, and his conclusion, 'The long and short' (1618), avoids pronouncing any judgment on the case itself, and instead attacks only the notion of a nobleman being tortured. His examination of both sides is revealed as a piece of sophistry:

> It seems unduly harsh to put the man
> To the torture, as I hear the court intends,
> Though readiest way of twisting out the truth;

[62] His book concludes with the aside '(You'll see, I have not so advanced myself, | After my teaching the two idiots here)', (IV, 1639-40).
[63] *Voices in the Ring and the Book*, p.69.

> He is noble, and he may be innocent.
> On the other hand, if they exempt the man
> [...]
> What crime that ever was, ever will be,
> Deserves the torture? Then abolish it!
> You see the reduction *ad absurdum*, Sirs? (1621-31)

The argument is that, on the one hand, Guido should be spared torture and, on the other, that torture should be abolished. His audience, appropriately, do not seem to take an interest in the debate.

Hyacinthus

After much wrangling, Archangelis has finished preparing his case. His client is a confessed murderer: the count Guido Franceschini, who testified:

> I killed Pompilia Franceschini, Sirs;
> Killed too the Comparini, husband, wife,
> Who called themselves, by a notorious lie,
> Her father and her mother to ruin me.
> There's the irregular deed. (IV, 109-13)

His lawyer has the unenviable task of proving this murder was but the righteous response of wounded nobility to proven dishonour, although such a cause might seem more propitious in the eyes of 17th century Rome, where *The Ring and the Book* is set, than in his day or ours.[64] Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, ironically acting as 'Pauperum Procurator', summarises his argument: Pompilia was killed, 'so to lesson wives' and so that, 'in a word', Guido 'might creditably live' (VIII, 1718-23).[65] The reader might wonder why it has taken him 1730 lines of blank verse to do this, liberally larded as it is with Latin quotation and digestive rumination. His monologue is also interesting in that he is writing down what he is composing aloud. In

[64] Although in the original legal case, debate focused solely on whether Guido should escape the death penalty.
[65] Hyacinthus is, of course, acting as the servant of established nobility.

that sense, *The Ring and the Book* is like *Aurora Leigh* in drawing attention to the sprezzatura brilliance of the compositional moment at the expense of a pre-ordained structural unity. Hyacinthus is aware, however, that there is more work to be done, exclaiming with smug awe:

> Done! i' the rough, i' the rough! But done! And, lo,
> Landed and stranded lies my very speech,
> My miracle, my monster of defence—
> Leviathan into the nose whereof
> I have put fish-hook, pierced his jaw with thorn,
> And given him to my maidens for a play!
> I' the rough: to-morrow I review my piece,
> Tame here and there undue floridity. (VIII, 1729-36)

Many readers might be glad were Browning to have visited Hyacinthus on the morrow to exchange this monstrous monologue for the revised version. In fact, the Lawyer's books were somewhat arbitrarily increased after it was decided to put the poem into four, rather than three volumes. Browning wrote to George Smith, his publisher, that he should not 'concern [himself] about the thinness of Vol. III: it will be increased to the size of the other two,--I made a note that I should increase parts 8 & 9 in the list of parts, I gave you.'[66] Adam Roberts's *Guide* to long poems suggests that 'Both colossal examples of legal quibbling and pedantry are represented as beside the point', and Browning certainly agreed.[67] He told Julia Wedgewood 'I hate the lawyers'. [68] They are not, however, totally beside the point, since they provide the clearest expression of *The Ring and the Book*'s lengthy self-awareness.

Hyacinthus knows what he has done. He admits not only his inclination to the florid but that his argument is on some level an affront to nature, whether 'miracle' or 'monster'. I disguised another aspect of its monstrosity through selective quotation above. Hyacinthus does not summarise in plain English but also in Latin, the language he is thinking and writing his speech in:

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[66] Robert Browning to George Smith, 8 July 1868, quoted in *The Ring and the Book* (Longman), p.13.
[67] Adam Roberts, *Romantic and Victorian Long Poems: A Guide,* p.65.
[68] *Letters to Julia Wedgwood*, p.164.

> *Occidit ut exemplum præberet*
> *Uxoribus*, killed her, so to lesson wives
> *Jura conjugii*, that the marriage-oath,
> *Esse servanda*, must be kept henceforth:
> *Occidit Denique*, killed her, in a word,
> *Ut pro posse honestus viveret*,
> That he, please god, might creditably live. (VIII, 1717-23)

The sentences break into small units which leaves us disconnected from the clarity of the argument: one effect of these Latin translations, appearing as they do when Hyacinthus is elaborating his points with legalistic precision, is to make the poem much harder to read; every sentence is chopped into its syntactic units and the whole is left almost illegible. The sentence from which this is excerpted is thirty-two lines long; the one before it is almost seventy, and in both of them Latin and English jostle. Perversely, Hyacinthus's verbal refrain is the Latin 'occidit', meaning 'he killed'; part of Browning's comedy, yes, since the lawyer is rhetorically emphasising Guido's terrible act, but also indicative of a general strategy of heaping up which Hyacinthus employs. The word tolls a gloomy anaphora: 'our noble Count, | *Occidit*, did the killing' (1635-6); '*Occidit*, for he killed, *uxorem*, wife' (1641); '*Occidit*, I repeat he killed the clan' (1662); '*Occidit*, and he killed them here in Rome' (1672); '*Occidit*—killed them, I reiterate—' (1696); '*Occidit*, killed, I round you in the ears;' (1711); '*Occidit ut exemplum præberet* | *Uxoribus*, killed her so to lesson wives' (1717); '*Occidit Denique*, killed her, in a word' (1721). These two long sentences, broken up linguistically and punctuated by reference to death, also reveal Hyacinthus's typically granular arguing strategy. One opportunity this repetition affords him is to show off his mental dexterity and prove by cleverness that he can justify a murderer without diminishing the murder itself. When he sets out to begin his argument, Hyacinthus laments that 'The main defence o' the murder's used to death, | By this time, dry bare bones' (258-9), even as he relishes the opportunity, but if the central argument has been made there is plenty of room for accumulated detail at the edges, adding meat back

to the stripped carcass. Like *The Ring and the Book*, it is deeply unclear whether reiteration is getting us anywhere, or whether it responds to the macabre inclinations of its author.

Hyacinthus's syntactic granularity, then, is not merely habit of style. It is, in the oldest sense of rhetoric, tied deeply to the overall structure of his argument and to its emphasis on accumulating detail rather than a single thrust. Hyacinthus imagines an opponent's response: 'you take ship-carpenter, not pilot so,–', fixing the 'puny points' whilst letting in the sea, 'No good of your stopped leaks and littleness!' (251-6). The image of the beached whale at the book's close, when Hyacinthus has completed his speech, transforms this wormy ship into a massive organic whole, and whilst Hyacinthus speaks of profound issues, it is by way of 'littleness' aggregated that he fleshes out this colossus. An argument can be discerned: Hyacinthus is trying to justify killing for dishonour from first principles; but it quickly falls into precisely the kind of piecemeal defence suggested by the image of the ship. Browning takes the Latin from his source but dramatizes the process of its composition so that the speech as he read it is drawn out, digressed from, and thwarted by procrastination; it is an errant intelligence accumulating. A critic once rightly observed that 'Browning's casuists are never really routed from the standpoint of reason', but the revelation of Hyacinthus's book is the very unreasonableness of his cleverness, driven to aggregate as it is by pride and a relish for its own perversity.[69] The first meaning of casuistry meant not 'bad reasoning', but a kind of reasoning grounded in example and precedent, and Hyacinthus is therefore a committed casuist in both senses, using example, anecdote, and particular, to sweeten a vicious and vapid whole. There is a literal compositional truth to this; having gathered all this material together, Hyacinthus needs only 'Regularize the whole' (1754) to produce a finished speech. Substantially, then, if not formally, his argument is the product of particular thinking, which we encounter in its brazenly irregular form.

[69] Raymond, *The Infinite Moment*, p.133.

This irregularity begins before the argument proper. Hyacinthus tries to find the way into his case:

> Thus circumstantially evolve we facts,
> *Ita se habet ideo series facti*:
> He wedded,—ah, with owls for augury!
> *Nupserat, heu sinistris avibus*,
> One of the blood Arezzo boasts her best,
> *Dominus Guido, nobili genere ortus,*
> *Pompiliæ....*
> But the version afterward!
> Curb we this ardour! (VIII, 139-46)

In the manuscript, 'version' is replaced with 'Latin'; the meaning is that Hyacinthus's flourishes of Latin are the result of his passion and a sign that he is getting carried away. What we are reading is merely meant to be notes for the speech, but when Hyacinthus slips into Latin he is swept into the drama of the fictional courtroom and a love of correct Latin. Ruskin famously said that Browning's 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St Praxed's Church' revealed the renaissance in all its 'love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin', but for Hyacinthus, in the context of *The Ring and the Book*'s manifold resurrections, his Latinate garrulity seems formally knowing as well.[70] The first line above is telling: the matter of his argument evolves, develops, and grows in a circumstantial manner. There is a legal spuriousness here, relevant to Hyacinthus's oblique strategy for exculpating his client, but also an organisational claim, as if there is no central idea or fact, only laboriously enumerated circumstances on autopilot, as Matthew Reynolds has described: 'when his mind is only half on his job, the precedents and sub-Ciceronian sentences can adduce and write themselves'.[71] Equally, the tortured syntax of the first line and pile of quotations gives us a comic impression of Hyacinthus muttering over

[70] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, ed. by Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 6 vols (London: George Allen, 1904) iv, p.449.
[71] Reynolds, 'Browning and Translationese', p.121.

his manuscript as he gets ready to write, it suggests some of the disorientation inherent to his strategy. The automatised composition produces a waywardness of its own.

The first step made is to justify revenge from first principles, or, in the hyperbolic excess of Hyacinthus's argument, to prove

> That Revelation old and new admits
> The natural man may effervesce in ire,
> O'erflood earth, o'erfroth heaven with foamy rage,
> At the first puncture to his self-respect? (685-88)

Or, as he puts it later, to bid 'revenge | Back to its simple proper private way | Of decent self-dealt gentlemanly death.' (841-3) The evidence to support this is, indeed, circumstantial. The story of an elephant killing an unfaithful woman is given as evidence in support of the naturalness of revenge; comparison with an animal is used to prove that, void of a right to revenge, man 'live[s] for low tastes alone, | Mean creeping cares about the animal life?' (540-1). The perversity of the argument – man is both better and worse than natural law – is neglected in favour of anecdotes from classical and biblical sources: Theodoric, Solomon, Scaliger, Theocritus and Æliean. Even within the anecdote, Hyacinthus's argument moves in accident and ornament whenever he happens upon an opportunity to evolve his circumstances. Arguing that man, the noblest of creatures, ought not to be upstaged by vengeful elephants, he calls him '—confessed creation's master-stroke | Nay, intellectual glory, nay, a god, | Nay, of the nature of my judges here,—' (534-6). Building up his examples through the animal, heathen, and finally Christian world, Hyacinthus declares 'Why cite more? Enough | Is as good as a feast' (834-5). Hyacinthus thinks he has done his job some thousand lines prematurely.

In fact, Hyacinthus relishes the opportunity to keep going. Building a monster out of littleness. His metaphors for his argument support the self-interest (between disinterest and manipulative interest). Seeing the prosecution as a fox hunt after him, he questions the best course of escape:

> The old fox takes the plain and velvet path,
> The young hounds' predilection,--prints the dew,
> Don't he, to suit their pulpy pads of paw?
> No! Burying nose deep down i' the briery bush,
> Thus I defend Count Guido. (VIII. 303-7)

Between the bloodthirsty spectator and the lawyer who savours his learning with his fritters there is a similar pleasure in keeping the self together through, and in spite of, its rhetorical performance. The extended poem is proof of a capacity to keep speaking which has its intrinsic pleasures, perhaps more so for the speaker than the audience, in its impressiveness and sense of composure. Elsewhere, Hyacinthus uses an alchemical metaphor which resonates intensely with the goldsmithing conceit Browning employs. Hyacinthus the alchemist does not concern himself,

> [...] with showing brass
> Transmuted into gold, but triumphing,
> Rather about his gold changed out of brass,
> Not vulgarly to the mere sight and touch,
> But in the idea, the spiritual display. (387-391)

This is clearly a preference for the virtuosic over the practical or useful. It is vulgar to actually indulge in the making of gold; far better to deal in the world of spirits and ideas, or poetry.

Bottinius

There is less feeling of luxury in the mock-oration given by the 'Fisc.', or lawyer employed in the prosecution of Guido Franceschini. Bottinius finds that his speech which will never be delivered, 'much exceeds in length | That famed panegyric of Isocrates, | They say it took him fifteen years to pen' (IX. 1570-2). As shown above, He finds that as a modern man he is unable to write clearly and succinctly, despite his belief that his argument consists of 'just one portrait' (164) of Pompilia. He yearns for the immediacy of speech and its supposed simplicity. It seems

that the only means he has for composing his argument is to pretend that it is indeed speech; the book is fittingly, mostly devoid of asides and compositional commentary. Length here is directly compared with confusion, as if the great burden of the facts is pressing heavily on Bottinius. He declares that he will describe only Pompilia, in a characteristically Browningian act of deictic demonstration, and notes that 'I leave the family as unmanageable, | And stuck to just one portrait, but life-size' (63-4). When he gets going, it is an act of heroic venturing: 'I dare the epic plunge' (217), and later he finds that 'I entangle me | With my similitudes,--if wax wings melt, | And earthward down I drop' (574-6) – a fittingly clumsy allusion to Icarus. He is then both writer of an epic and its hero bent on a dangerous or doomed task: trying to describe with coherence one of the lives involved in this crime. This is not to say that Bottinius appears merely diligent. He is smarmy in address and has a distressing habit of guiltily justifying things that he declares to be untrue.

He is then distracted, much like the entire poem, by the false as much as the fair; like Browning's persona in the opening, he finds 'the somehow may be thishow' (I, 706). For Bottinius cannot stop himself from imagining exactly the case he wishes to prove false: that Pompilia did seek an affair with Caponsacchi, and that their escape was an elopement rather than necessary flight.[72] The Fisc.'s approach is to concede that some licentiousness may have taken place without admitting it fully, before declaring that it wouldn't matter anyway, since the end was noble. As he entertains the justification for a kiss, he tells us that it is in order 'not to grasp a truth I can release | And safely fight without, yet conquer still' (IX, 708). In his argument, he is constantly stripping away his supports, since his faith in the purity of his portrait of Pompilia is such that it could come to justify anything. He declares brazenly that 'the lady here | Was bound to proffer nothing short of love | To the priest whose service was to

[72] Which is, as Carlyle predicted, pretty much the truth of the matter, so far as archival research has shown. C.f. *Robert Browning: His Poetry and Audiences*, pp.222-3.

save her' (508-9), and that the court, if it 'permit[s] the end—permit[s] therewith | Means to the end' (518-9). Pompilia becomes some sublime all-justifying end, but this does not help Bottinius with his concision, for he must entertain every maybe and every doubt to affirm that none of them really matter anyway. The most astonishing instance of this is the claim that Pompilia has experienced some kind of divine conception. We are assured the child is Guido's – just as we are assured that none of the kissing or flirting which so much of the speech apologises for ever happened – but then a better alternative is offered: 'Spontaneous generation, need I prove | Were facile feat to Nature at a pinch?' (1350-1) This gives Browning an opportunity to play on a contemporary belief in the possibility of spontaneous generation – elsewhere Bottinius instructs us to 'steep horsehair certain weeks | In water, there will be produced a snake' (1355-6), but also to flirt with a potentially blasphemous comparison between the immaculate conception and Pompilia's birth. Sometimes the grammatical mood of these speculations is very ambiguous indeed. Having suggested that Pompilia bestowed her charms upon all and sundry in Arezzo where the Franceschini resided, Bottinius suggests that none of this would diminish the husband's wealth. But, imagine that it does, 'even so, he [the imaginer] shall be satisfied!', by the casuistry at work, for, 'Concede we there was reason in his wrong, | Grant we his grievance and content the man' (327-9). It is clear from context that Bottinius is trying to use a permissive mood: 'let us concede', and 'let us grant', but they clearly also suggest a real admission.

The justification for this method is that all these accumulated digressions are licensed by the transcendent unity of Pompilia's good nature. Bottinius's opening offers a kind of parody of symbolic art-making, of the kind Kermode describes in *Romantic Image*, whereby a notion possessed of an almost magical obstruction to prosaic sense or communicability is gestured at numinously in a poem. He wonders how he can 'undertak[e] to produce | A faultless nature in flawless form?' (IX. 194-5). The lengthy conceit with which he chooses to open his defence

conceives of the making of an argument, and thus a long poem, in terms of picture-making. The subject of the flight to Egypt is chosen. First the painter does preliminary anatomical work: 'getteth him studies | From some assistant corpse of Jew or Turk', sketching the parts of a body to 'Ensur[e] due correctness in the nude' (31, 41). This is not yet, art, however. To the body beneath the superficial details must be superadded: 'If some flax-polled soft-bearded sire be found, | May simulate a Joseph' (44-5), then he is sketched with reference to his surface. At this point he has produced 'fifty studies one by one' and boasts that 'I have served my lords' (70), but none of this is the true integral image yet, which comes '*e pluribus unum*' (91), unifying the fragments and surpassing them to reveal something 'Less distinct, part by part, but in the whole | Truer to the subject' (99-100). The product has a symbolic being:

> Not those mere fragmentary studied facts
> Which answer to the outward frame and flesh—
> Not this nose, not that eyebrow, the other fact
> Of man's staff, woman's stole or infant's clout,
> But lo, a spirit-birth conceived of flesh,
> Truth rare and real, not transcripts, fact and false. (102-107)

The image produced is beyond the world which provided the materials for it. It appears to be of a different ontological order, a 'spirit-birth', and presents true truth, rather than a false empirical observation. This is clearly more than mimetic and almost what Kermode is talking about when he defines a symbolic mode as that which seeks the 'utterly original and not in the old sense "imitated"' and is then 'a means to truth, a truth unrelated to, and more exalted than, that of positive science, or any observation depending upon the discursive reason'.[73] The major difference is that Bottinius is not a disinterested artist, apart from the world, and this is substantially a rhetorical flourish with clear argumentative purpose. Even as he conceives of this symbolic bringing forth of spirit, he imagines where the painting might reside in,

[73] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, p. 53.

> our eximious Rome
> And—who knows?—satisfy its Governor,
> Whose new wing to the villa he hath bought
> [...] soon
> ('T is bruited) shall be glowing with the brush. (109-113)

Any symbolic pretensions give way to a taste for the excessive and ornamental.

In order to defend this unified vision of Pompilia, Bottinius finds himself forced to talk about all the things she is not, or might be – again, the 'somehow may be thishow' (I, 707). We might read this symptomatically as ironic self-disclosure; all these speculations are evidence of the extraordinary weakness of his argument, since it involves so much special pleading and resolutely refuses to do the required thing – provide an argument for Guido's wrongdoing: 'His fate is sealed, his life as good as gone, | On him I am not tempted to waste word, (1395-6). This 'mixture of self-mastery and inadvertent self-disclosure' is found in the preceding book as well.[74] Browning has Hyacinthus conclude with a Freudian slip, for example, misreading Horace to mean large breasts rather than pearls, and the undercurrent of thought in the book is full of food, wealth and flesh.[75] When we bear in mind his lament for going on at such length, however, we see how this is also a symptom of a long poetics of plurality. Just as consciously as *The Ring and the Book* takes a crime and reveals it in its manifoldness, Bottinius unconsciously demonstrates precisely how doubt and speculation are inevitably secreted by 'the facts'. We are meant then, not just to read this book as a comic exploration of the means a lawyer will use to make his case. In this conflation of means and ends we see the poem discussing its own method and dilemma: is this business of imagining alternative viewpoints necessary, as Bottinius thinks, or a distraction, since every alternative viewpoint seeks to usurp the centre ground. It is thus "merely" rhetorical only if we take rhetoric to mean persuasive ornament or trope. As Ricoeur has it, rhetoric was originally status as the '*technê* that made

[74] Findlay, in 'Taking the Measure of *Différance*: Deconstruction and *The Ring and the Book*', *Victorian Poetry*, 29:4 (1991), pp.401-14, p.409.
[75] c.f. *The Ring and the Book*, p.511 n2.

discourse conscious of itself', which connects the superficial techniques of persuasion to the argumentative structures that allow textual meaning to exist.[76] Bottinius shows us how a rhetorical position that hopes to express something singular can be drawn inevitably away from it, in the structure and content of its argument. How the poet can never 'put in just what rushed into his head' (1576), in the sense that there are always further caveats and rejoinders to oppose the spontaneous expression of his point. In another sense, however, it is precisely because he has to say all that comes into his mind that Bottinius is driven to keep going. This is not an ethical prerogative; it demonstrates how the willed desire to write something unified is superseded by the way it *has* to be done, which is at length and gesturing to that which lies beyond it.

Part 3: Speech, breath, and a truth of force

The Pope is *The Ring and the Book*'s most honest man, its author included.[77] It is up to Innocent XII to finally decide the fate of the murderous Count Guido Franceschini, the rightness or wrongness of his actions having been variously debated across the previous nine books of blank verse. Robert Browning, who was finishing up the papal part of his poem roughly a year before the First Vatican Council began constructing its defence of infallibility, presents his Pope in a

[76] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003), p.9.

[77] Thus excluding the figure of the murdered innocent Pompilia, who speaks *The Ring and the Book*'s seventh book, from the comparison. Julia Wedgwood, with whom Browning conducted a lengthy epistolary debate about *The Ring and the Book*'s moral nature, felt that Pompilia's monologue was 'a lovely Snowdrop growing out of that dunghill', *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, p.170. The early readers of the poem were content to see her as 'a living Victorian angel in the house', as Katherine Anne Gilbert has put it, in her essay, 'The Politics of Character: The Lawyers and Pompilia in Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book"' (1868-69), *Victorian Poetry*, 49:3 (2011), pp.317-45, p.318. Modern critics, Gilbert included, have queried whether she might in fact be subject to the same linguistic contingency as the rest of the work. William Walker's essay, '"POMPILIA" AND POMPILIA', *Victorian Poetry*, 22:1 (1984), pp.47-63, determines that 'the truth of what she says is not beyond question and cannot legitimately be taken as the criterion of truth' (p.61), although in his deconstructive argument there is naturally no such criterion to speak of anywhere.

light of conscious humility.[78] He declares that, if he is mistaken, it is thanks to his nature: 'Mankind is ignorant, a man am I: | Call ignorance my sorrow, not my sin!' (X, 257-8). The Pope is suspicious of language; he is an old man, anticipating heavenly judgment which will ask him what he has done, not what he has said: 'Show me thy fruit, the latest act of thine!' (342). This act will be to finally authorize Guido's death warrant, and by acknowledging that this is but the fallible and somewhat arbitrary act of a man, he rises above the promises of truth made by the poem's other monologues. In the opening strains of his speech, he conjectures:

> Some surmise,
> Perchance, that since man's wit is fallible,
> Mine may fail here? Suppose it so,--what then?
> Say,--Guido, I count guilty, there's no babe
> So guiltless, for I misconceive the man!
> What's in the chance should move me from my mind? (236-41)

In one reading, the Pope is brazenly, if heroically, admitting the flimsy basis of his truth; regardless of Guido's real guilt or innocence, he tells us, the judgment is the same, since it is determined by the myopic viewpoint of this very human Pope. One of the earliest critics to argue for a robust pluralism in the poem describes it as demonstrating how 'the individual engenders truths on the world, that he does so by rebelliously asserting his will in opposition to the evil which he perceives', but the Pope's claim is rather more radical, since he barely raises his opinion about Guido to the level of truth at all, instead emphasising the impermanence of his judgment. On another reading, however he is revealing a kind of

[78] The Vatican council, convoked by Pius IX in 1868 would promulgate the declaration of *Pastor Aeternus*, which transformed the de facto notion of papal infallibility into Catholic doctrine. The triumph was short lived, since this declaration of worldly authority was followed closely by the capture of Rome by the Italian Government. Browning joked that Rome 'should grow bilious at the nine hundred & odd bishops' gathered in November 1869 (p.162), and then wrote mockingly to Isa Blagden in October 1870, on the occasion of the Pope's imprisonment: 'In what way is he a prisoner, poor old "infallibility"?' (p.348). The theme had been on Browning's mind since the 1850s, when his wife had been reading Edmond About's *La Question Romaine*, c.f. *Browning's Correspondence*,§4491; Heather Morton has argued that *Bishop Blougram's Apology* 'exploits the difficulty of believing that an intelligent, well-educated man might believe in miracles, papal infallibility, and a host of other Catholic "superstitions"' in '"A Church of Himself": Liberal Skepticism and Consistent Character in "Bishop Blougram's Apology"', *Victorian Poetry*, 45.1 (2007), pp.29-48, p.44.

assertiveness suggested above, even if it is not an assertion of absolute truth. Whilst the Pope does not trust words, he also knows that what he must do is act, not speak. The death warrant he is to authorise will be 'The thought, which, clothed in deed, I give the world | At chink of bell and push of arrased door.' (X, 280-1) There is a connection with his judgement as a thought (Guido should be killed), but it comes into the world with the simplicity of a command, rather than the richness of a discourse.

Here the Pope's deeper honesty is revealed, since he admits not just that his judgement has some arbitrariness to it, but that the reasons for him speaking are likewise not fully justified. The decision has been reached with absolute certainty, but yet the Pope 'dall[ies]' (197) and 'pause[s]' (234) before he summons his messenger. The two thousand lines he is to speak happen within this pause. Donald Hair has described Browning's Pope as his 'model reader', since 'he struggles silently and alone with texts and their meaning; he interprets those texts, arrives at a judgment of them, and acts on that decision', but this is not exactly the process we see dramatised in *The Ring and the Book*.[79] There is struggling and interpretation in his monologue, of course, but the decision has been reached already; we are in the limbo between the finality of his decision and the open possibility of the act. It is also, for the reader, not a silent struggle. Anyone who has soldiered through the Pope's monologue will testify to his speechifying. He has confidence in his judgment, admitting the possibility of it being wrong, and it is not on moral grounds that he takes the time to give his monologue:

> Therefore I stand on my integrity,
> Not fear at all: and if I hesitate,
> It is because I need to breathe awhile,
> Rest, as the human right allows, review
> Intent the little seeds of act, my tree,--
> The thought, which, clothed in deed, I give the world
> At chink of bell and push of arrased door. (275-81)

[79] Donald S. Hair, *Robert Browning's Language*, 1999, p.212

The true self-interest is revealed here, not just because the Pope is doing this to meet a psychological need, but because speaking, like breathing, has a claim of its own as the extensive manifestation of the living human.

This long rehearsal of the fact of his case registers not as an intellectual activity – trying to get the right answer about the case – but rather as an act of emphatic self-expression. This intensifies when the speakers of the monologues oppose their self-expression, read as expiring breath, to the imminent expiration of their lives. Pompilia, who lies dying as she speaks, initially pre-empts her death:

> Ah! Friends, I thank and bless you every one!
> No more now: I withdraw from earth and man
> To my own soul, compose myself for God. (VII, 1768-70)

After a line break, however, and with a comic tinge, the next verse paragraph begins: 'Well, and there is more! Yes, my end of breath | Shall bear away my soul in being true!' (1771-2). Pompilia's enthusiasm thus dramatizes the only possible end for a language of organic authenticity, which continues to speak until it literally cannot. The same equivalence, between breathing and speaking, as in the Pope's pause, suggests a deep and unrhetorical connection between speaking and being. In a sense this is then not "free" speech, except in the very profound sense with which an idealist philosophy might speak of will embedded in all acts of the human mind, but rather a kind of necessary exhalation of words. In a similar way, but with the opposite effect, Guido fears death because it equates to silence. By turns defiant and mocking, Guido retains some dignity until he faces his end and asks 'Sirs, have I spoken one word all this while | Out of the world of words I had to say?' (XI, 2417-8). His life in language is coming to an end, even as Guido has had more lines of the poem than anyone else allocated to his point of view. It has been a point of contention among scholars of the poem, whether Guido's final lines then present some authentic view of himself, but his promise of 'my first

true word, all truth and no lie' is never delivered; in his final lines we hear him working through all the desperate arguments he can to stall the inevitable.

All of the characters, even the enlightened fallible Pope, speak and keep speaking, because there is a momentum to unconstrained language itself. Matthew Arnold wrote, long before *The Ring and the Book*, that Browning was a man with 'a moderate gift desiring movement & fulness, and obtaining but a confused multitudinousness'.[80] He would later complain about 'the confusion of the present times'; 'the multitude of voices counselling different things', which is an old critique of liberal freedom of speech.[81] One idea raised by Coleridge was that of a tautological long poem, in which the initial idea is repeated over and over again, but *The Ring and the Book* suggests something else: a poem that seems stubbornly opposed to absolute tautology, saying the same thing in a very slightly different way in a seemingly endless loop. Burke once dismissed the desire for unbounded toleration as 'a zeal' [...] 'not for the propagation of his own opinions, but of any opinions', and *The Ring and the Book* is ambivalent enough about its need for being so long to support Burke as well as liberal Browning.[82] The zeal is the crucial thing. The question which set Browning going was not whether the truth had been found, but rather whether it was a 'truth of force?' (I, 372). The admixture of poetry to truth should make it means to that end. But it is the very endlessness of the poetic practice, the desire to go on, to which the length of *The Ring and the Book* attests. Eloquence or poetry, unlike truth, has a force of its own.

Browning finishes his narration:

> Such, then, the final state o' the story. So
> Did the Star Wormwood in a blazing fall
> Frighten awhile the waters and lie lost.
> So did this old woe fade from memory:
> Till after, in the fulness of the days,

[80] Letter to Clough, after August 1848, *Matthew Arnold. 21st-Century Oxford Authors*, pp.3-4, p.4.
[81] Quoted in Sarah Wood, 'Arnold and Translation: "The Ring and the Book"', in *Robert Browning: A Literary Life*, pp.146-77, p.146.
[82] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

> I needs must find an ember yet unquenched,
> And, breathing, blow the spark to flame. It lives,
> If precious be the soul of man to man. (XII, 823-30)

There is no recognisable finality to this 'final state', which crashes into the sea but remains a fiery embryo. Browning anticipates the moment when he will 'find' this story and attests to its enduring vivacity, so the major narrative conclusion of the case of Count Guido Caponsacchi seems to be that Browning will one day discover it. Fittingly, where Byron saw his long sceptical epic as a 'versified aurora Borealis', Browning sees his story as a firework in its ascent and an apocalyptic star in its descent. Byron sees *Don Juan* as a momentary and pluralising process, 'non-descript and ever varying', delighting in a playful presentism, but *The Ring and the Book*, finished as it is, cannot entertain this optimistic refusal of ended-ness, so the same glimmering momentariness fizzles into rhetorical rocketry. The firework of this story explodes and illuminates for 'a breathless minute-space' the 'upturned faces' of late 17th century Rome. 'In its explosion', Browning tells us, 'you have seen his act', which is a metaphor for the form of the poem as much as it extends the image of the firework; it is exactly by exploding this story into ten different varieties that Browning has made it visible. Herbert Tucker wrote of *Sordello* that 'to learn to read it is to learn to read Browning': a poem dominated by the endeavour to 'spring, dispread, | Dispart, disperse,' to 'mark/Apart' what might so easily come together', and *The Ring and the Book* reiterates this procedure within the endlessly reiterative basis of its structure.[83] The difference here is that the gleeful separation is coloured by the darkness of a murder, and the darkness of an eloquence that acts against its better liberal judgment, deranging, extending, and denying an end to this very longest of poems.

There is also, finally, the sense that, just as his characters keep speaking voluntarily, as an act of self-presentation, like the Pope of Guido, or find that they go on at a length they

[83] Herbert Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings*, p.85, p.87.

cannot control, like Hyacinthus and Bottinus, Browning's poetic performance similarly cannot control its own forces. Harold Bloom, in his last book, described that 'each of Browning's major figures is a polyphony of voices, and all are constituent aspects of his own buried personalities', but in the case of *The Ring and the Book*, the performance is fully exhumed.[84] Danny Karlin has written of how Elizabeth knew that 'Browning's behaviour went counter to his rhetoric, and that there was a connection between the power she felt in him personally (the power which frightened, thrilled, and drew her) and the power of his poetry, its commanding qualities of form, scope, and language'.[85] Karlin means that Browning's poetry has something mesmeric to it, as it rehearses, interrogates and celebrates the showman's powers of eloquence to illuminate and deceive, enlighten and coerce in equal measure. *The Ring and the Book*'s length is testament to the mesmerising, limitless variety of Browning's poetry. It is an exercise in voluntary virtuosity, but one that also suggests an independent poetic momentum that challenges its author's ability to 'comman[d] qualities of form, scope and language', as Karlin has it. The verbosity of *The Ring and the Book* thus reflects the power of its poetic intelligence, its capacity always to carry on, but it also represents the failure of that poetic intelligence to direct those same powers to their right end. Browning, summoning his poetic ghosts at will, is equally caught up in that power of eloquence. The mesmerist-poet does not, after all, know how to bring his show to an end.

[84] Harold Bloom, *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles: The Power of the Reader's Mind Over a Universe of Death* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p.334.
[85] Daniel Karlin, 'Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, and "Mesmerism"', *Victorian Poetry* 27:3 (1989), pp.65-78, p.70.

Conclusion

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.[1]

— Walt Whitman

Is what I have written prose? The only answer is that form in prose ends with the end of that which is being communicated – If the power to go on falters in the middle of a sentence – that is the end of the sentence – Or if a new phase enters at that point it is only stupidity to go on.[2]

— William Carlos Williams

I.

The origin of this thesis was a methodological anxiety. How is it that a reader such as myself, aspiring above all to be close and attentive, accurately represent such a thing as the long poem? Samuel Johnson, describing Addison's poetry, added that he was describing 'his general character; to which, doubtless, many single passages will furnish exceptions'.[3] It struck me when I first read this, and indeed still does strike me now, that the natures of literary exemplarity and exceptionality are vexed ones. Especially in the case of the long poem, the necessity of dispensing with the vast majority of a text seems to highlight critical intuition as much as exactness, since only a handful of passages can be retained for analysis. To this is added a problem of expansion: when we analyse short poems, and we learn to read poetry in this manner, we tend to convert them to essays of greater length. Proving one is right about a short poem is easy: it is conceivable that all the particulars of a sonnet might be considered in

[1] Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Jerome Loving (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.30.
[2] William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions, 1923; repr. 2011), p.78.
[3] Samuel Johnson, *Johnson's Chief Lives of the* Poets, annotated by Matthew Arnold, 2nd edn (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1889), p.203.

turn, if not exhausted. There is precedent for working on longer subjects in the biblical or classical commentary, of course, but a literary critical essay seems to be more combinatory or synthetic in its ambitions. Colin Burrow defends Christopher Ricks's approach by revealing that 'an unstated premise of Ricks's method is that a well-chosen local observation about a text can lead to a fuller understanding of it or its author's nature', which is convincing and undoubtedly true.[4] What, however, makes an observation 'well-chosen', and why do such choices inevitably remain unstated? It seems that it has something to do with the subject of this thesis: the apprehension of the right end of a text – of what it is trying to do.

Writing about long poems is hard not only because of the effort involved in reading and re-reading, but because one has to believe that the parts one has chosen really are the best parts. That could mean, worryingly, that one is misrepresenting the whole; less concerningly, although with equal potential to delay, the chance of finding new evidence is always there. It strikes me, having printed this thesis off, that it is still very much shorter than *The Ring and the Book*; I have no doubt that, had I time to reread it, I would now think slightly differently and quote from it differently, which is, in the final analysis, a cause for optimism.

I have tried to approach these issues of critical method, of exemplarity and representation, from the other side, as it were. If we, as readers try to work out what we will quote, what lines to take as emblems of a whole that is so much larger than them, then the flipside of that effort is the authorly question of how to organise parts into a whole, conceiving of the long poem as extensive means to some end or other. These poems, in particular, adjacent to narrative, flirting with fragmentation, dramatise both the pull towards and the pull away from clarity and coherence. In my introduction, I quoted Tess Somervell, who very recently stated that the long poem has been left rather under-theorised.[5] This thesis is not, ultimately, a

[4] Colin Burrow, 'Ti tum ti tum ti tum', *LRB*, 4319, 7 October 2021
[5] Somervell, *Reading Time in the Long Poem*, p.5.

theory of what long poems are like, but it does, I hope, illustrate some of the ways in which very great Romantic and Victorian long poems attempted to explain themselves, and a common ambivalence which emerged regarding within them regarding the notion of finding an end or progressing towards wholeness. An awareness of this goes some way to helping us rise to the challenge of the long poem.

II.

There is always more to say, of course, especially where long things are concerned. As Barrett Browning was finishing *Aurora Leigh*, Walt Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, commencing a very American tradition of long poem writing. Whitman, curiously enough for the writer of 'Song of Myself', agreed with Edgar Allen Poe:

> But I was repaid in Poe's prose by the idea that (at any rate for our occasions, our day) there can be no such thing as a long poem. The same thought had been haunting my mind before, but Poe's argument, though short, work'd the sum out and proved it to me.[6]

Whitman's self-in-poetry nonetheless unfolded and accumulated across his life in the form of a long poem. Richard Poirier describes his 'lifelong habits of evasion and concealment, punctuated with hints that at some point, somewhere along the line, a "secret" is to be revealed'.[7] His poetry, too, presumably. In the penultimate poem of *Leaves of Grass*, 'Grand is the seen', the old appeal to literary immortality is joined by a declaration of endless multiformity and capacity to change:

> Grand is the seen, the light, to me—grand are the sky and stars,
> Grand is the earth, and grand are lasting time and space,
> And grand their laws, so multiform, puzzling, evolutionary [...]
> More evolutionary, vast, puzzling, O my soul!
> More multiform far—more lasting thou than they.[8]

[6] *Leaves of Grass*, p.433.
[7] Richard Poirier, 'In Praise of Mess', *LRB*, 20:11, 4th June 1998, pp.20-23, p.20.
[8] *Leaves of Grass*, p.421.

Moving into the twentieth century, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, which Kermode saw as an inevitable conclusion rather than rejection of Romantic poetics dramatised again the relationship between the part and the whole. In the fragmentary final cantos, we discover:

> A tangle of works unfinished.
>
> I have brought the great ball of crystal;
> Who can lift it?
> Can you enter the great acorn of light?
> But the beauty is not the madness
> Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me.
> And I am not a demigod,
> I cannot make it cohere.[9]

To speak of modernism and fragmentation is not new, but as I hinted at in my chapter on Tennyson, the connection between the modern long poem (*Four Quartets*, in that case) and the Victorian one was more alive than we might think. Such a story might be told by first tracing the convergence of the poetry I have described above with that of Whitman, developing on its own across the Atlantic.

In 2021, Nathaniel Mackey, an American poet, published a three-volume long poem, *Double Trio*, which traces its origins back to the distinctively American art of Ornette Coleman and poets like Whitman, Pound, Olson, etc. Alongside that lineage, however, is a comment in sympathetic resonance with Coleridge, and the problem or opportunity, of the long poem which I have tried to articulate in those distant years 1797-1869. Coleridge did not invent parts and wholes, means and ends, of course, but he did write more eloquently and powerfully on them than anyone had before in English, and the difficulty of doing so was the same difficulty that Wordsworth, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning encountered in their long poems. Mackey, with the American rhythms of jazz and Whitman in his ear, speaks

[9] *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, collected and rev. edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p.795-6.

nonetheless in the same terms as Coleridge: 'Philosophically and technically, the work meant to be always pertaining to the relation of parts to one another and of parts to an evolving whole'.[10] Such is true of all the poems I have tried to describe.

[10] Nathaniel Mackey, *Double Trio I: Tej Bet* (New York: New Directions, 2021), p.xvi.

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