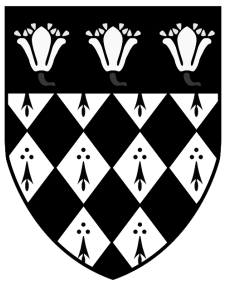
Forms of Unknowing in Victorian Poetry

A Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy



Robert Fergus McGhee

Magdalen College

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

TRINITY TERM, 2021

How vain it is to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being. Rightly used they may make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Table of Contents

	Acknowledgements	i
	Abstract	ii
	Abbreviations	iii
	Introduction: The Shadow and the Verge	1
	The Reign of Knowledge	
	Four Ways of Thinking About Poetry and Knowledge	
I.	Clough, Emerson, and Knowingness	50
	Dangerous to Know	
	The Froward Chaos of Futurity	
II.	Known Unknown: Browning and the Natural World	86
	A Craving After Knowledge	
	Love in a Leaf	
	Monstrosities	
	Landscapes of Unknowing	
	Wanting is—What?	
III.	Rossetti: Feeling Vague and Seeing Double	131
	Giorgione and the 'Cult of Vagueness'	
	Wonder and Familiarity	
	Things We Never Knew	
IV.	What Mary Knew: Secrets and Surmise in Meynell	181
	Partial Knowledge	
	Sacred Secrets	
	The Spirit of Surmise	
V.	Hardy's Mortal Knowledge	225
	Reading You Like a Book	
	Wistful, Wistless	
	Romancing Knowledge	
	Darklier Understood	
	Bibliography	274

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due, first, to the three colleges which admitted me as a student: Trinity College, Cambridge; Harris Manchester College, Oxford; and Magdalen College, Oxford. Second, to those whose generosity made my studies possible: the late Bob Michaelson, who funded the scholarship which enabled me to pursue a second undergraduate degree, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which funded my MPhil and co-funded my DPhil together with All Souls College, Oxford. Third, to the Master and Fellows of St Catharine's College, Cambridge, who did me the great honour of electing me to a Junior Research Fellowship while I was completing this thesis.

I am deeply grateful to my parents, and to my late great-aunt, Elizabeth Turnbull Campbell, for their patience and support through the long and mazy motion of my education. For the gifts of their learning and encouragement I am grateful especially to Michael Banner, John Sloan, Kate McLoughlin, Ewan Jones, and Robert Douglas-Fairhurst. The various editors of (and reviewers for) *Victorian Studies*, the *Review of English Studies*, and the *Cambridge Quarterly* challenged and sharpened my thinking along the way and were good enough to publish parts of this thesis while it was in development.[1] Edward Hicks kindly proof-read the entire text and I thank him for his careful eye.

I was comforted through a distressing year of ill health by the warmth and generosity of Laura Brazier, Curtis Rogers, Tristan Franklinos, Mary Fisher, Robert Thomas, John and Natalie Oxley, and Jonathan Holley, and am grateful for their friendship.

I owe an immense debt to the galvanising imagination and good humour of Matthew Bevis. More than anyone else, he opened my ears to poetry.

Henry Carter's love makes all the difference.

F. M.
Cambridge
October 2021

[1] See Fergus McGhee, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Déjà Vu', *Victorian Studies* 62.1 (2019), 61–84; 'Clough, Emerson, and Knowingness', *Review of English Studies* 71.300 (2020), 413–32; 'Rossetti's Giorgione and the Victorian "Cult of Vagueness"', *Cambridge Quarterly* 50.3 (2021), 279–95.

Abstract

This thesis argues that Victorian poets were persistently drawn to the experience of partial, uncertain, or elusive knowledge, situations in which knowing is felt to be simultaneously tantalising and potentially entrapping or chimerical: a set of conditions I group under the term 'unknowing'. Exploring the ways in which the idea of knowledge in the nineteenth century was saturated in value and feeling, I show how the resistance of certain objects to being fully known (people, God, art, nature, the future) could generate not merely frustration and disappointment but fresh sources of possibility and pleasure. For the poets I study, such concerns were intimately linked to the question of poetry's own relationship to knowledge. In the fibres of their poetry, as well as in the writings of some of the period's most inventive thinkers, I trace a vital and availing tradition which stresses how poetry may sharpen our awareness of that which exceeds or escapes our knowing.

My first chapter reads the poetry of Arthur Hugh Clough as a sustained dialogue with Ralph Waldo Emerson's critique of 'knowingness'. My second connects Robert Browning's interest in the natural world with notions of foiled or occluded knowledge, drawing on the writings of John Ruskin. My third chapter proposes two ways of thinking about knowing in the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: an aesthetics of vagueness stemming from Renaissance art theory, and the dreamlike phenomenology of déjà vu. My fourth chapter pursues Alice Meynell's interest in God's hiddenness as a potential resource of faith, linking it to the thought of John Henry Newman and the figure of the Virgin Mary. My final chapter explores Thomas Hardy's attention to the difficulties of knowing (and being known by) other people, showing how more fruitful modes of engagement may depend upon relinquishing the desire for secure knowledge.

Abbreviations

Unless stated otherwise, quotations from frequently cited works are from the editions listed below. Every edition is introduced in full on its first appearance in each chapter.

CPR	*Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jerome McGann. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.
CWB	*The Complete Works of Robert Browning*. 17 vols. Ed. Jack W. Herring. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1969–.
CWW	*The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. 10 vols. Ed. Ian Jack. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–.
PAM	*The Poems of Alice Meynell*. Ed. Frederick Page. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.
PMA	*The Poems of Matthew Arnold*. Ed. Kenneth Allott. Revd. Miriam Farris Allott. London: Longman, 1979.
PT	*The Poems of Tennyson*. 2nd edn. 3 vols. Ed. Christopher Ricks. Harlow: Longman, 1987.
PWB	*The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. 15 vols. Ed. Michael Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–.
PWH	*The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*. 5 vols. Ed. Samuel Hynes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983–95.
SPC	*Clough: Selected Poems*. Ed. J. P. Phelan. London: Longman, 1995.
TPC	*The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*. 2nd edn. Ed. F. L. Mulhauser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Introduction: The Shadow and the Verge

> There are some things we now know too well, we knowing ones: oh, how we nowadays learn as artists to forget well, to be good at *not* knowing!
>
> FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE[1]

Nietzsche's provocation, from the preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science* (1886), raises some rather unusual questions: what would it mean to be 'good at not knowing', why might that be desirable, and why might it be difficult? Moreover, what particular significance might 'not knowing' hold—as an experience, but also as an idea or ideal—in relation to art? This thesis proposes that such questions were of absorbing interest to poets and thinkers of the Victorian era and seeks to recover the wealth of responses offered in and through the poetry of the period. One of the reasons my questions sound unfamiliar is the powerful grip of two rival narratives about poetry, and Victorian poetry in particular: one asserting that poetry is a thoroughly knowledge-laden (or ridden) discourse; the other, that it is boldly (or feebly) indifferent towards knowledge and knowing. These narratives are variously framed as claims about content and about form, about what is represented in poetry as well as the kinds of experience poetry kindles or evades. As we will see, both embody traditions of thinking about literature which the Victorians themselves inherited and vigorously queried, sometimes dismantled, and often entrenched.

---

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [2nd edn. 1886], tr. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

The question of literature's relationship to knowledge drew salience and urgency from what the historian Martin Daunton has called the 'knowledge explosion' which transformed the nineteenth century.[2] The extraordinary energy devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, and the unprecedented expansion of incomes and educational opportunity, combined to produce dramatic advances in human understanding—from the physical sciences to historical scholarship to statistical analysis—whose fruits were more widely and rapidly diffused through society than ever before.[3] A cause as well as a consequence of these developments was that knowledge was raised to a central place in the Victorian social imaginary: as Alice Jenkins has argued, the so-called 'march of mind' was commonly associated not only with an irresistible sense of progress but with the dawn of a distinctive new era in British history.[4] In this context, defenders of poetry often found themselves on the backfoot: as Thomas Love Peacock remarked, it might seem that while 'the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance'.[5] In response, as Paul Fry writes, nineteenth-century apologies for poetry often ended up 'conceding truth to science', which had increasingly usurped the role of philosophy in Plato's 'ancient

---

[2] Martin Daunton, 'Introduction', *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*, ed. Martin Daunton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15.

[3] The literature on this subject is extensive. In addition to Daunton see, for example, Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, vol. 2: *From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Alice Jenkins, *Space and the 'March of Mind': Literature and the Physical Sciences in Britain, 1815–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Alan Rauch, *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); William C. Lubenow, *'Only Connect': Learned Societies in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015).

[4] I borrow the term 'imaginary' from the philosopher Charles Taylor: see 'What is a "Social Imaginary"?', in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23–30; Jenkins, *Space and the 'March of Mind'*, 9–10.

[5] Thomas Love Peacock, 'The Four Ages of Poetry (1820)', in *The Cambridge Edition of the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*, vol. 3, ed. Nicholas A. Joukovsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 134–57: 151. Joukovsky characterises the essay as 'an ironic account of the poetry of the Romantic period, as viewed from a Utilitarian perspective' (ibid., 135). See also Marilyn Butler, 'The Negative Voice: Peacock as Critic', in *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in his Context* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 272–313.

quarrel'.[6] Or as Michael Wood crisply puts it, in the later nineteenth century poetry's champions had begun to offer 'defences […] that were virtually indistinguishable from attacks'.[7] Later in this introduction I go on to show how Victorian defences of poetry frequently measured the 'progress of knowledge' against the loss of other possessions presumed to be more valuable: power, pleasure, wonder, faith, feeling. The era's leading poets, however, were more inclined to advocate for peaceful co-existence, or to stress the co-dependence of these supposedly incommensurable values: 'Who loves not Knowledge?' asks Tennyson in *In Memoriam* (1850), and yet 'What is she, cut from love and faith'?[8]

And yet if Knowledge with a capital 'K' is often married off in this way in Victorian poetry, knowledge with a little 'k' frequently proves harder to domesticate. Victorian poems sometimes express the hope that 'knowing all things, should we have all power' or that 'utter knowledge is but utter love', but at other times knowledge is 'mere knowledge' or 'dreadful knowledge'.[9] 'And knowledge struck me numb', confesses one of Thomas Hardy's speakers, while Arthur Clough anxiously circles the question of 'what avails to know?'[10] A willingness not only to portray but to scrutinise the range of feelings entertained about knowledge is what characterises this rich seam of Victorian writing, as it

---

[6] Paul Fry, *A Defense of Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3; Plato, *Republic*, X. 607, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 3rd edn., vol. 3, tr. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 1–338: 322. On the contours of the ancient quarrel, see Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann, *Plato and the Poets* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

[7] Michael Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 51.

[8] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'In Memoriam A. H. H.', CXIV. 1, 11, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 2nd edn., 3 vols, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn. (Harlow: Longman, 1987), 2. 435–36. Henceforth *PT*.

[9] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'A Sea-Side Meditation', l. 135, in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 5 vols, ed. Sandra Donaldson (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), 4. 231; Tennyson, 'The Ring', l. 40, in *PT*, 3. 175; William Bell Scott, *The Year of the World*, V. 123, in *The Year of the World: A Philosophical Poem* (Edinburgh: Tait, 1846), 100; George Meredith, 'Grandfather Bridgeman', XXIII, in *The Poems of George Meredith*, ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett, 2 vols (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), 1. 112.

[10] Thomas Hardy, 'A Hurried Meeting', l. 42, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, 5 vols, ed. Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983–95), 3. 154; Arthur Hugh Clough, 'The Questioning Spirit', l. 8, in *The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*, 2nd edn., ed. F. L. Mulhauser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 3. Henceforth *TPC*.

wrestles with the question posed by Christina Rossetti in 'The Convent Threshold': 'what is knowledge duly weighed?'[11]

Yeats had condemned Victorian poetry as rotten with 'curiosities about politics, about science, about history, about religion', while for F. R. Leavis, contrastingly, the poetry of the period was 'characteristically preoccupied with the creation of a dream-world': 'Wit, play of intellect, stress of cerebral muscle'—these 'had no place' amongst the poetic desiderata of the age.[12] The very juxtaposition of these accounts suggests the distortions inherent in them, and over the last few decades scholars of Victorian literature have increasingly attended to the ways in which poets explored and contested the uses of knowledge. Much recent criticism has shown how the pursuit of Yeats's so-called 'impurities' often expanded poetry's imaginative horizons and enriched its aesthetic enterprise, fostering new sources of formal creativity and fresh insights into the sensuous and absorptive possibilities of language.[13] Rather than stifling poetic potential, curiosity is typically the very thing that shines in this poetry's brightening glance. Complementary to this exploration of literature's many-sided engagement with discourses of knowledge, critics have also begun to examine the ways in which imaginative writing inquired into the aims and procedures of knowing *per se*, although these connections have largely been pursued in relation to the novel.[14] The last decade alone has seen a flowering of

---

[11] Christina Rossetti, 'The Convent Threshold', l. 105, in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, 3 vols, ed. R. W. Crump (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979–90), 1. 64.
[12] W. B. Yeats, *The Trembling of the Veil* [1921–22], in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 3, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York, NY: Scribner, 1999), 109–286: 172; F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), 14, 8.
[13] Studies of this kind include Michael Hurley, *Faith in Poetry: Verse Style as a Mode of Religious Belief* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and John Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).
[14] Landmarks in this area include Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993); Suzy Anger (ed.), *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Peter Garratt, *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer and George Eliot* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010).

scholarship on the relations between Victorian fiction and the epistemologically charged realms of probabilistic theory, philosophical scepticism, physiology, and mental science, as well as an enhanced understanding of the 'information revolution' amid which such developments took place.[15]

This thesis proposes a new direction for such inquiry by shifting attention towards the ways in which Victorian poets explored and disputed the nature and value of *ignorance*. I argue that Victorian poets were persistently drawn to circumstances in which knowledge appears fugitive, occluded, or withheld, situations in which knowing is felt to be simultaneously tantalising and potentially entrapping or chimerical—a set of conditions I group under the term 'unknowing'. The dynamics of unknowing come into play across a diverse range of epistemic domains, or what the anthropologist Karin Knorr Cetina calls 'epistemic cultures': from American Transcendentalism to Catholic theology, from observation of the natural world to the history of art, from philosophical idealism to the nascent sciences of psychology and neurology.[16] Unknowing, then, is a highly portable concept; this thesis promises neither a comprehensive historical survey nor a general theory, but a series of case studies which approach this concept from a variety of different angles, through the eyes of individual poets with disparate styles and interests. Situating close readings of poems in new intellectual contexts, I show how poets across the period—Arthur Hugh Clough, Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Alice Meynell,

---

[15] See Maurice Lee, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Dominic Mastroianni, *Politics and Skepticism in Antebellum American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); David Sweeney Coombs, *Reading with the Senses in Victorian Literature and Science* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019); Vanessa L. Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2012); Lee, *Overwhelmed: Literature, Aesthetics, and the Nineteenth-Century Information Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[16] See Karin Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

and Thomas Hardy—were engaged in a common pursuit: the search for ways to shape the experience of thinking and feeling on the outside, or outskirts, of knowledge.

The forms of unknowing I am concerned with, then, are historical, conceptual, and stylistic. They are also thoroughly transitive. Unlike the mystical technique recommended in the fourteenth-century *Cloude of Unknowyng*, which promotes the disengagement of the soul from all phenomena, the unknowing encountered in this study takes particular objects—the self, other people, the future, the past, plants, paintings, God.[17] Unknowing, as I am defining it, concerns what happens when the pretence, or desire, to know an object is successfully resisted by that object, bringing with it the discovery not merely of frustration and disappointment but fresh sources of excitement, possibility, and pleasure—the wealth of ways in which, in the words of Emily Dickinson, sometimes 'It's finer—not to know'.[18] Poets experimenting with these dynamics took full advantage of the capaciousness of the verb 'to know', which, as the philosopher John Grote observed in 1865, hesitates between meaning 'knowledge as acquaintance' and 'knowledge about', unlike most ancient and modern European languages (Grote pointed to the difference between *noscere* and *scire*, *kennen* and *wissen*, *connaître* and *savoir*).[19] But what was a stumbling block to the philosophers was an opportunity for poets, since the ambiguity can suggest the possibility that, say, familiarity might become an alibi for sensory and intellectual indolence, the enemy of experience and inquiry—or that knowing a person might turn into an investigative project, precluding opportunities for intimacy, dialogue,

[17] On *The Cloude of Unknowyng*, see Patrick J. Gallacher, 'Introduction', in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 1–14.
[18] Emily Dickinson, 'The Skies cant keep their secret!', l. 10, in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 98.
[19] John Grote, *Exploratio Philosophica: Rough Notes on Modern Intellectual Science* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, 1865), 60, 59. Philosophers today tend to speak about 'propositional knowledge' or 'knowing *that*' rather than 'knowledge about', as well as adding a third kind: 'knowledge-as-skill' or 'knowing how': see Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduciton to Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–47.

and growth. One of the reasons poets were so attracted to the thematics of unknowing in this period was the special pressure brought to bear on poetry's own ambiguous and much disputed relationship to knowledge in the nineteenth century—not least in the context of poetry's eclipse (in popularity, but also partly in critical esteem) by the more spacious, and allegedly more analytical, form of the novel. Accordingly, each of the poets I examine also engages, more or less directly, with the question of the knowability of poetry itself.

Such a wide-ranging project depends for its coherence upon certain strict parameters. These are first of all generic (poetry) and historical (Victorian, broadly conceived), but chiefly conceptual. The definition of unknowing which I have just outlined focuses attention on *conscious* ignorance; that is, it excludes the notions of 'neglecting, disregarding, ignoring' which Andrew Bennett, in his innovative if rather diffuse study, *Ignorance: Literature and Agnoiology* (2009), includes within his panoramic purview.[20] I will therefore be concerned neither with states of innocent unawareness, like that evoked by Lady Bracknell—'Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone'—nor with sublime or abjected states of vacancy or bafflement—'as dreams that die and know not what they were', to name an example from Swinburne.[21] Indeed, it was partly for this reason that I embraced the term 'unknowing' in preference to 'ignorance', which comes shaded by a sense of passivity or delinquency, and 'nescience', which suggests an outright incapacity for knowing, the kind of obliviousness Clough's antihero

[20] Andrew Bennett, *Ignorance: Literature and Agnoiology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 86.

[21] Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* [1895], 1. 416–17, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 10 vols, ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–), 10. 780 (henceforth *CWW*); Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'The Lake of Gaube', l. 5, in *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. 6, ed. Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise (London: Heinemann, 1926), 200. The classic example of the former is of course Thomas Gray's 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College' [1747]: 'Thought would destroy their paradise. / […] where ignorance is bliss, / 'Tis folly to be wise.' (ll. 98–100, in *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray: English, Latin and Greek*, ed. H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 10.

Claude momentarily envies in cattle: 'Take from me this regal knowledge; / Let me, contented and mute, with the beasts of the field, my brothers, / Tranquilly, happily lie'.[22]

These distinctions are helpfully parsed in the period by Cardinal Manning's account of Genesis 2–3, the foundational western myth of knowledge-as-temptation. Before eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Manning maintains, Adam's condition 'excluded all ignorance, for ignorance signifies the not knowing that which we ought to know'.[23] Rather, there was in Adam 'a nescience of many things': things 'he was not bound to know', things that lay 'beyond his state'.[24] The scope of unknowing, as I am defining it, sits aslant these two broad categories, designating a relationship to knowledge that is neither idle nor unwitting but passionate, conscious, and alert. The grammatical ambiguity of 'unknowing', its double life as adjective and verb, is availing in this respect since it suggests that un-knowing may be an activity as well as a state, a disavowal of knowledge possessed or pursued. The activity of unknowing need not be thought of as purely negative, however: Angela Leighton writes suggestively of 'the constantly renewed attention of not knowing' which poetry may perform and invite—an attention which transforms not knowing into a condition of possibility rather than limitation.[25] Realising one's ignorance, then, might be thought of as a lively, open-ended endeavour as much as a moment of *anagnorisis* in which one's knowledge is upturned. As Nietzsche suggested, not knowing can be a mission as well as an omission. Barbara Johnson expresses this well when she writes, 'If I perceive my ignorance as a gap in

---

[22] Clough, *Amours de Voyage*, 3. 211–13, in *TPC*, 120.
[23] Henry Edward Manning, *The Internal Mission of the Holy Ghost* (London: Burns and Oates, 1875), 5.
[24] Ibid., 6.
[25] Angela Leighton, 'About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 33.1 (2009), 167–76: 174.

knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance'.[26]

If words are one way of acknowledging and getting to grips with this experience, then it is noteworthy that there was a blossoming of the lexicon of unknowing throughout the Victorian period, as witnessed by the *OED*: from 'unknowledgeable' (1837) and 'knowledgeless' (c. 1843) to 'unbeknownst' (1848), 'unknowability' (1863) and on towards T. H. Huxley's influential coinage, 'agnostic' (1869).[27] Other neologisms speak to the currency of not knowing as a political slogan ('know-nothingism', 1854) and an attitude or disposition ('ignorantism', 1856, and 'ignorantist', 1851).[28] These linguistic developments took their place alongside a replenished vocabulary of knowing, from 'know-how' (1838) to 'knowful' (1855), 'know-it-all' (1873), and 'know-all-about-it' (1887).[29] In the middle of the century, the Scottish idealist philosopher J. F. Ferrier complained that while '[t]here have been many inquiries into the nature of knowledge', there had 'been no inquiry into the nature of ignorance'.[30] Ferrier's *Institutes of Metaphysic* (1854) sought to remedy this situation by providing 'a systematic doctrine of ignorance', arguing for the vital role of such a doctrine as a bridge between epistemology and metaphysics.[31] Ferrier was responsible for introducing the term 'epistemology' to Anglophone philosophy (in the same volume) as a translation for the German term

---

[26] Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 16.
[27] See 'unknowledgeable, *adj.*', *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021); 'knowledgeless, *adj.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2018); 'unbeknownst, *adj.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2021); 'unknowability, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2018); 'agnostic, *n.* and *adj.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2021). All accessed 1 September 2021.
[28] See 'know-nothingism, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. September 2019); 'ignorantism, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2018); 'ignorantist, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021). All accessed 1 September 2021.
[29] See 'know-how, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. December 2019); 'knowful, *adj.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2020); 'know-it-all, *n.* and *adj.*', *OED Online* (pubd. December 2019); 'know-all-about-it, *adj.*', *OED Online* (pubd. September 2018). All accessed 1 September 2021.
[30] James Frederick Ferrier, *Institutes of Metaphysic: The Theory of Knowing and Being* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1854), 398.
[31] Ibid., 390.

Wissenschaftslehre, coined by Fichte a few years before.[32] At the same time, he invented the term 'agnoiology' for his complementary study of ignorance, offering a startlingly lyrical justification for its hitherto neglected significance:[33]

> The agnoiology carries out and completes the work entered on in the epistemology. In the epistemology we beheld only the backs—the dorsal fins, if we may so speak—of the necessary truths; in the agnoiology we see under them, and all round them. We look upon them—like Horace's first mariner on the swimming sea-monsters—*siccis oculis*, as they turn up their shadowy sides, and gleaming abdomina.[34]

Ferrier's quest to anatomise ignorance rested upon the assumption that one could be ignorant only of that which could theoretically be known, hence his conception of ignorance as essentially a 'defect, imperfection, privation, or shortcoming'.[35] However strange and shadowy the undersides of those sea-monsters might seem, the time had come to look upon them with an unfazed eye and dredge the deep of its mysterious secrets. Ferrier's agnoiology, in other words, was (as its suffix suggests) a form of knowledge with a vengeance.

The focus of my study, by contrast, is with the ways in which knowledge is saturated in value and feeling, and hence the issues at stake are not primarily epistemological. Steven Connor has recently proposed the confessedly 'uncomely' term *epistemopathy* to express 'the production and development of complex states of feeling and imaginative projection in relation to knowledge', which is a useful description of what is at stake in this thesis.[36] Such states, Connor points out, 'will include irritation, rage, envy, lust, misery, boredom and melancholy just as much as satisfaction, assurance,

---

[32] See 'epistemology, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. June 2018); accessed 1 September 2021.
[33] See 'agnoiology, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2021); accessed 1 September 2021.
[34] Ferrier, *Institutes of Metaphysic*, 414–15.
[35] Ibid., 397.
[36] Steven Connor, *The Madness of Knowledge: On Wisdom, Ignorance and Fantasies of Knowing* (London: Reaktion, 2019), 10.

excitement, and triumph'.[37] The analysis of such feelings for and about knowledge did not need to wait for twentieth and twenty-first century phenomenology, however. The naturalist epistemology of John Henry Newman, for example, was grounded in the time-bound, psychological processes of belief formation, and hence consistently stressed 'the personal pronoun in knowledge', as Cyril O'Regan remarks.[38] Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) conjugated just the kind of fine-grained distinctions between epistemic postures and dispositions that this thesis seeks to explore through poetry: Newman is careful to discriminate, for instance, between the specificities of feeling aroused by 'knowing', by 'the consciousness of having that knowledge', and by 'the Pursuit of knowledge'.[39] The *Grammar*'s interest in the 'Modes of holding and apprehending Propositions', as distinct from the validity of the propositions themselves, leads it into an exploration of the anxieties and gratifications attendant upon epistemic experience, including 'the complex pleasure of wonder, expectation, sudden surprises, suspense, and hope' mustered by advances towards 'the unknown'.[40] Rather than seeking the finality and totality of a grammar, however, this thesis seeks to keep faith with poetry's own more wayward, ambivalent, and elusive feelings about knowing and *not* knowing.

In the twenty-first century, an entire field has been opened up by scholars interested in the uses and abuses of ignorance as a subject in its own right. Cutting across history, sociology, psychology, and anthropology, this work has sought to investigate the 'realms of ignorance that saturate and define our world', in the words of one of its leading practitioners, the historian of science Robert Proctor.[41] In 2008, Proctor coined the term

---

[37] Ibid., 14.
[38] See Cyril O'Regan, 'John Henry Newman', in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology of Theology*, ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 510–22: 515.
[39] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [1870], ed. Ian T. Ker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 134, 135.
[40] Ibid., 9, 136.
[41] Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (eds.), 'Preface', in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), vii–viii: viii.

'agnotology' (from the same Greek root as 'agnostic' and 'agnoiology': *a* + *gnōsis*, 'lacking knowledge') to describe the study of how ignorance is produced and maintained in a wide variety of social and conceptual settings.[42] The main interest of the field Proctor baptised lies in understanding the pernicious effects (and complex causes) of ignorance in contemporary culture, from climate denial to political misinformation to various forms of sexual and racial prejudice, but some of the most recent work in this area has put forward a powerful defence of (carefully selected forms of) ignorance as vital to human well-being and even survival, and attended to its heuristic value in science, economics, ethics, law, and political theory.[43] Although such inquiries vary widely in scope, purpose, method, and rigour, their variety reflects the burgeoning, multidisciplinary nature of this nascent intellectual undertaking.[44] Historians and sociologists of knowledge have also begun to take seriously the historical role of ignorance in shaping everyday experience as well as intellectual debates at different times in the past.[45] Lukas Verburgt, for example, proposed in 2020 that historians ought to 'pay much more systematic attention to ignorance—to historical forms of not knowing and to historical strategies of dealing with unknowns'.[46]

Though I agree with Proctor that ignorance is much more than a lack of knowledge—that indeed there may be 'as many ways to think about ignorance as of

---

[42] See 'agnoiology, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2021). Accessed 1 September 2021.
[43] In these two areas, see for example (1) Proctor, *Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know about Cancer* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995); Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007); Linsey McGoey, *The Unknowers: How Strategic Ignorance Rules the World* (London: Zed Books, 2019); and Janet Kourany and Martin Carrier, *Science and the Production of Ignorance: When the Quest for Knowledge is Thwarted* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020); (2) Matthias Gross, *Ignorance and Surprise: Science, Society, and Ecological Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson (eds.), *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Renata Salecl, *A Passion for Ignorance: What We Choose Not to Know and Why* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Ralph Hertwig and Christoph Engel (eds.), *Deliberate Ignorance: Choosing Not to Know* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).
[44] For a sense of this field's breadth, see Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018).
[45] See, for example, Cornel Zwierlein (ed.), *The Dark Side of Knowledge: Histories of Ignorance, 1400 to 1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
[46] Lukas M. Verburgt, 'The History of Knowledge and the Future History of Ignorance', *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 4.1 (2020), 1–24: 8.

knowledge'—I share the philosopher Daniel DeNicola's preference for a line of inquiry that 'integrates ignorance and knowledge and explores their interactions'.[47] Not least because, as another philosopher, Nicholas Rescher, justly observes, 'ignorance is not an all-or-nothing matter; it is only too often a thing of aspects and facets'.[48] This is perhaps especially true for a poet, for whom 'knowing and not knowing are not absolute opposites', as Leighton suggests; 'the one can be layered over the other, and both remembered at once'.[49] Nineteenth-century writers were very much alert to the partial, aspectual nature of much of our ignorance. Even Keats, whose talismanic notion of '*Negative Capability*' has often been interpreted as part of an 'anti-epistemic' turn in his writing, at once qualifies the capacity for 'being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason' by describing it as a state of 'half knowledge'.[50] Keats does not, after all, describe a generalised state of uncertainty, Mystery, and doubt, but one rich in imponderables. Keats's answer to his own query in the margin of *Paradise Lost*, inspired by Milton's shadowy description of Pandemonium—'What creates the intense pleasure of not knowing?'—is similarly fructifying.[51] Rather than representing such unknowing as a collapse into incognizance, Keats evokes the capabilities it may sponsor: 'A sense of independence, of power, from the fancy's creating a world of its own by the sense of probabilities'.[52] John Ruskin, too, would connect the consciousness of 'partial knowledge' to intimations of a 'treasure

---

[47] Proctor, 'Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study)', in *Agnotology*, 1–35: 24; Daniel R. DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 13.
[48] Nicholas Rescher, *Ignorance: On the Wider Implications of Deficient Knowledge* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 1.
[49] Leighton, 'Poetry's Knowing: So What Do We Know?', in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 162–82: 169.
[50] Tim Milnes, *The Truth About Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66; John Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21 and 27 December 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, 2 vols, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1. 193, 194.
[51] See Beth Lau (ed.), *Keats's Paradise Lost* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), 87.
[52] Ibid.

inexhaustible': the very 'dimness' of our unknowings being, as he reflected in *Modern Painters IV* (1856), 'the sign and necessary adjunct of their inexhaustibleness'.[53] Like Keats, Ruskin distinguished this luxury of twilight from the 'deathful dimness' of 'the sealed eye and soul'.[54] 'To be content in utter darkness and ignorance is indeed unmanly', he declares, and yet,

> Our whole happiness and power of energetic action depend upon our being able to breathe and live in the cloud; content to see it opening here and closing there; rejoicing to catch, through the thinnest films of it, glimpses of stable and substantial things; but yet perceiving a nobleness even in the concealment, and rejoicing that the kindly veil is spread where the untempered light might have scorched us, or the infinite clearness wearied.[55]

Without descending into a facile scepticism or anti-intellectualism, this passage acknowledges that knowledge might be alternately scorching or wearying, as well as inhibitive of action, while at the same time lovingly evoking a state of ignorance that is far from being simply a form of refuge or renunciation. It is also emblematic of the two ways in which the poets in this study most often conceptualised states of unknowing: standing in the shadow of the unknown and hovering on the verge of knowledge. These two tropes are central to the architecture of ignorance as it is imagined in the nineteenth century, from Tennyson's passage through 'shadowy thoroughfares of thought' to Emerson's avowal that the best part of every mind 'is not that which he knows, but that which hovers in gleams, suggestions, tantalizing unpossessed before him'.[56] These two figures emerge repeatedly in

---

[53] John Ruskin, 'Of Turnerian Mystery:—Secondly, Wilful', *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 6, ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 88–105: 89, 90.
[54] Ibid., 90.
[55] Ibid., 89.
[56] Tennyson, 'In Memoriam A. H. H.', LXX. 8, in *PT*, 2. 385; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 16 vols, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960–82), 9. 341.

different contexts and with subtle modifications, providing a conceptual pattern that may be traced through the chapters that follow.

That the ways in which knowledge was conceived relied so extensively on the literary device of figuration suggests why literature might have much to contribute to the cultural history and phenomenology of knowing (and not knowing). As Subha Mukherji writes in the introduction to a collection of essays on knowledge in early modern literature,

> the representational complexity of literary works can capture the multiple facets of the experience of seeking knowledge. Such works take us closer to what it *felt* like to know, or to come up against, even dwell on, not just the condition of knowledge but epistemic impulses, the methods and motives of knowledge, as well as its ends—both in the sense of aims and of limits.[57]

It is precisely because all knowledge is 'humanly situated', argues William Franke, that poetry is so well placed to sound out and think through such methods, motives, and ends.[58] But why should poetry be especially suited to this activity compared to, say, a novel or a play? If, as Rita Felski maintains, 'knowledge and genre are inescapably intertwined'—since, as she argues, 'all forms of knowing […] rely on an array of formal resources, stylistic conventions, and conceptual schemata'—what is it about the resources and conventions of poetry in particular that favour the pursuit of forms of unknowing?[59] Answering that question is part of the burden of this thesis, and will rely substantially on the persuasiveness of the close readings it puts forward. But challenged to summarise, I would adduce the following reasons: the economy of poetry (most obviously in lyric, but also in narrative and dramatic poetry), and its consequently oblique social and psychological contexts in comparison with the thick-textured imaginative settings of the

---

[57] Subha Mukherji, 'Crossroads of Knowledge: Literature and Theology', in Subha Mukherji and Tim Stuart-Buttle (eds.), *Literature, Belief and Knowledge in Early Modern England: Knowing Faith* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3–36: 7–8.
[58] William Franke, 'Involved Knowing: On the Poetic Epistemology of the Humanities', *Humanities* 4.4 (2015), 600–22: 603.
[59] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 83.

novel in this period; poetry's semantic density, which calls up a volatile prismatic splendour of thoughts and associations; and the special salience of poetry's aural and visual textures, which does so much to sustain its constitutive resistance to restatement by other means.

By availing itself of such resources, poetry generates a particularly acute version of what Peter de Bolla calls the 'push-me-pull-me state of knowing' typical of encounters with great art.[60] Matthew Bevis suggests an unfulfillable desire for knowing may be lyric's founding dynamic: 'one revisits experience, seeks a shape in which to know it, but the shape that is created brings with it wonder at the fact that no experience can ever quite be known'.[61] Rather than satisfying the wish to know, the sought-for shape reinforces the gap between knowledge and experience, converting it from a technical challenge into a strange intimation. Perhaps, then, poetry could be said to reverse Socrates' claim that 'philosophy begins in wonder', *thaumazein*: rather than an affectively powerful state of not-knowing inaugurating the pursuit of knowledge, poems may engage our epistemic desires precisely in order to show what knowing can and cannot do for us, and what *un*knowing (of which wonder is only one possible version) might do instead.[62] Unlike Socratic ignorance, however, which is a reliable method for producing epistemic capital, such forms of unknowing promise nothing so failsafe or bankable. This thesis is committed to exploring those forms.

In doing so, a persistent analogy emerges between the forms of unknowing *represented* in poems and those which the poems engender *as poems*. Poetry, in other

---

[60] Peter de Bolla, *Art Matters*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 143.
[61] Matthew Bevis, 'Unknowing Lyric', *Poetry* 209.6 (March 2017), 575–91: 585.
[62] Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155.d, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 3rd edn., vol. 4, tr. Benjamin Jowett, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 107–280: 210. See also Aristotle's remark that 'a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant (*agnoein*)', and that therefore men 'philosophized in order to escape from ignorance': *Metaphysics*, 982.b, in *Aristotle: The Basic Works*, tr. W. D. Ross, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, NY: Random House, 2001), 689–934: 692.

words, engages with the experience of unknowing not just discursively and imaginatively but by exemplification, enacting the cognitive and affective processes by which knowing is variously stirred and stymied. But something even stronger than analogy is at work here, because this special capacity for *inducing* conditions of unknowing informs and enhances poetry's capacity to *portray* them. The whole poetic arsenal of form and figure, sound and structure, contributes particular affordances for thinking that in turn shape the distinctive modes of representation poetry can offer. Consequently, I aim to be consistently attentive to the thinking that takes place *in* language as well as through it, hewing as closely as possible to the ways in which syntax and diction, stress and intonation, metaphor and allusion interact in poems as they unfold in time. It is because I attach so much importance to poetic technique as an instrument of inquiry, as well as my wish to contribute something new to critical understanding of each of my authors, that I have chosen to organise my chapters around individual poets rather than broader thematic or historical categories. I agree with Jonathan Kramnick that 'the best way to be inter-disciplinary is to inhabit one's discipline fully': the greater specifically literary sensitivity with which texts are handled, the richer and more compelling will be their contribution to wider patterns of understanding.[63] My five chapters attempt to build up an intricate and often surprising picture of how it is possible to think and feel in situations where knowledge is uncertain or out of reach, as well as to trace the precise ways in which this mattered to particular people in a particular historical period. By embedding readings of individual poems within carefully selected historical, intellectual, textual, and biographical contexts (often unfamiliar to existing criticism of the poems in question) I aim to delineate how and why people in the Victorian period encountered and responded to forms of unknowing, and thus to bring to light a forgotten poetic trope and literary history.

---

[63] Jonathan Kramnick, 'The Interdisciplinary Fallacy', *Representations* 140.1 (2017), 67–83: 67.

In the remainder of this chapter I draw on scholarship in the sociology of knowledge, the history of literary criticism, and the philosophy of literature to set out the historical, cultural, and intellectual context for the five case studies which follow. Beginning with a discussion of the vital place which knowledge occupied in the Victorian imaginary and in nineteenth-century literary history, I go on to trace some of the ways in which new life was breathed into the ancient quarrel about poetry's epistemic status through the period.

The Reign of Knowledge

Discussions of 'knowledge' circulating in the early Victorian period were full of surging optimism, and chief among knowledge's hymnists was the Whig MP Henry Brougham. In an 1825 address, reprinted multiple times in subsequent decades, Brougham urged the scholars of the University of Glasgow 'to hasten the coming of that bright day, when the dawn of general knowledge shall chase away the lazy, lingering mists, even from the base of the great social pyramid', thus putting to flight 'the evil spirits of tyranny and persecution, which haunted the long night now gone down the sky'.[64] Though the natural sciences were often the focus of such encomia (unsurprisingly, given the astonishing advances in fields from astronomy to geology, biology to physics, as well as the technological transformations reshaping every aspect of life), it is worth noting that most of Brougham's speech was devoted to the personal and societal benefits of studying ancient Greek literature. Brougham's Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, founded in 1826, was far from narrow-minded about the possible meaning of both

[64] Henry Brougham, 'Inaugural Address' [1825], in *Inaugural Addresses by Lord Rectors of the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow: Robertson, 1839), 41–70: 66, 68.

'usefulness' and 'knowledge', though one might not suspect so from satirical representations such as Peacock's 'Steam Intellect Society' in *Crotchet Castle* (1831).[65] Over a period of twenty years the SDUK published a myriad of cheap texts on everything from 'The Domestic Habits of Birds' to the life of Michelangelo to the 'Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians'.[66] In 1832 the Society launched the educational *Penny Magazine* as a competitor to *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, another penny paper filled with articles on history, philosophy, and science.[67] 'It will not be our fault', declared Sir Robert Peel, addressing his constituents at the opening of a new library, and speaking with the self-congratulatory benevolence of enlightened society, 'if the ample page of knowledge, rich with the spoils of time, is not unrolled to you!'[68]

Peel, no starry-eyed utopian, was on the brink of his second term as Conservative Prime Minister, and lent his sizeable authority to the high hopes entertained for 'the progress of knowledge': such progress would transcend 'the asperities of party feeling' both political and religious, 'harmonizing the gradations of society, and binding men together by a new bond'.[69] Not only would it make its votaries 'better men of business', conducing to all possible 'worldly success', it would empower them to 'rise at once in the scale of intellectual and moral existence', equipping them with a 'more exalted faith' in the Almighty and an endless fount of 'pleasure and consolation'.[70] If this rhetoric sounds overcooked, it is as nothing to George Craik's 1830 love letter to the *Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties*. Craik speaks of being 'smitten by the love of knowledge', of those who

---

[65] See Peacock, *Crotchet Castle* [1831], in *The Cambridge Edition of the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*, vol. 6, ed. Freya Johnston and Matthew Bevis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 13.
[66] See James Rennie, *The Domestic Habits of Birds* (London: Knight, 1833); *Lives of Eminent Persons* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1833); Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 2 vols (London: Knight, 1836).
[67] See Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?: England 1783–1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 162–74.
[68] Robert Peel, *Sir Robert Peel's Address on the Establishment of a Library and Reading-Room at Tamworth* (London: Hooper, 1841), 13.
[69] Ibid., 23, 18.
[70] Ibid., 14, 22, 21.

have 'wooed' the truth 'with the unwearying ardour of a lover', and of the 'keen and overpowering emotion' of 'ecstacy' which is this courtship's climax.[71] What makes such rhetoric different from that of Plato, or the Renaissance, or even the Enlightenment, is its self-conscious directedness towards a wide popular audience.

Not everyone, however, shared such visions of knowledge as a social panacea. Many feared the political consequences of mass education: distracted by 'ologies and onomies', neglectful of their proper duties, and rendered troublingly articulate and ambitious, the educated working classes were often imagined to represent a dangerous threat to the established order.[72] The implications of the pursuit of knowledge for the social fabric were subject to suspicion throughout the period, as parodied in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891): 'If a man is a gentleman,' Lord Henry's uncle tells him, 'he knows quite enough, and if he is not a gentleman, whatever he knows is bad for him.'[73] It is too easy, however, to reduce the debate over the value of knowledge in the period to political caricature: heroic ambassadors for truth and justice ranged against the forces of ignorance and mystification. For one thing, as Boyd Hilton points out, the majority of 'liberal' commentators believed that 'scientific knowledge', far from liberating their social inferiors, would 'tame and moralize' them.[74] Moreover, some of the fiercest opposition to the diffusion of knowledge came from the political left: the Irish radical Bronterre O'Brien pronounced the kind of knowledge promoted by the SDUK to be 'trash': 'the only knowledge which is any service to the working people', he maintained, 'is that which makes them more dissatisfied' with their lot.[75]

---

[71] George Lillie Craik, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* (London: Knight, 1830), 16, 2, 19.
[72] See 'On the March of Intellect, and Universal Education', *Fraser's Magazine* 2 (September 1830), 161–70: 163.
[73] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1891], in *CWW*, 3. 195.
[74] Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?*, 174.
[75] Quoted in Patricia Hollis, *Class and Conflict in Nineteenth Century England: 1815–1850* (London: Routledge, 1973), 336.

Among the most influential critiques of the politics of the diffusion-of-knowledge movement in the first half of the period were those offered by Thomas Carlyle and John Henry Newman. Both were representative of wider political scepticism about the movement in associating it with Utilitarian politics. For Carlyle, the nineteenth century's 'all-pervading disposition' towards 'Mechanism' had produced a trivial and degraded conception of knowledge unworthy of the glorification it was increasingly accorded. An over-reliance upon routinised methods of analysis, Carlyle believed, had turned the modern mind into little more than a mechanical 'thought-mill' of alienated intellectual labour, a stain on the nation parallel with its factories and workhouses.[76] As James Secord has suggested, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) can be read as a scathing satire on the popular literature of science and 'useful knowledge', mocking the gap between such literature's lofty ambitions and the woefully inadequate means by which it sought to achieve them:[77]

> Shall your Science proceed in the small chink-lighted, or even oil-lighted, underground workshop of Logic alone; and man's mind become an Arithmetical Mill, whereof Memory is the Hopper, and mere Tables of Sines and Tangents, Codification, and Treatises of what you call Political Economy, are the Meal?[78]

Such modes of knowledge production, Carlyle argued, far from ushering in a new millennium of social harmony, conspired against the 'inward primary powers' and 'wondrous destinies' of man, just like the mills they mimicked.[79]

---

[76] Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times' [1829], in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, ed. H. D. Traill, 5 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 2. 56–82: 66; Carlyle, 'Wotton Reinfred' [written 1826–27], in *The Last Words of Thomas Carlyle* (New York, NY: Appleton, 1892), 1–150: 103.
[77] See James A. Secord, 'The Torch of Science: Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*', in *Visions of Science: Books and Readers at the Dawn of the Victorian Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 205–35.
[78] Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* [1836], ed. H. D. Traill (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896), 53.
[79] Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', 69, 82.

There is much lazy-mindedness in the way Carlyle elides a commitment to the narrowest and most brutal forms of political economy with the pursuit of science, logic, and mathematics. Newman was more circumspect, acknowledging that 'scientific pursuits' were both 'fruitful in […] benefits to the community' and 'intrinsically excellent and noble'.[80] The problem, he suggested, was in expecting such pursuits to furnish a guide to living, or effect the grand moral regeneration commonly ascribed to them: 'taking human nature as it is actually found, and assuming that there is an Art of life', Newman wrote,

> to say that it consists […] in the cultivation of Knowledge, that the mind is changed by a discovery, or saved by a diversion, and can thus be amused into immortality,—that grief, anger, cowardice, self-conceit, pride, or passion, can be subdued by an examination of shells or grasses, or inhaling of gases, or chipping of rocks, or calculating the longitude, is the veriest of pretences which sophist or mountebank ever professed to a gaping auditory.[81]

Throughout this sustained attack, occasioned by Peel's 1841 speech to which I referred earlier, Newman appeals to the better nature of the Conservative statesman by tarring what he calls 'the Knowledge School' with the brush of Benthamite political philosophy.[82] 'Let Benthamism reign, if men have no aspirations', Newman writes, but 'do not attempt by philosophy what was once done by religion. The ascendancy of Faith may be impracticable, but the reign of Knowledge is incomprehensible.'[83] The programme touted by Brougham and his followers was deluded, Newman suggested, because the ecstatic pleasures of knowledge would rapidly find themselves outbid by far less studious gratifications; it was incoherent, because it could not produce the *ought* of ethics from the *is* of information; and it was offensive, because to suggest that the poor could be

[80] Newman, 'The Tamworth Reading Room' [1841], in *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1872), 254–305: 304.
[81] Ibid., 268.
[82] Ibid., 275.
[83] Ibid., 292.

'consoled' in their afflictions by applying themselves to chemistry or calculus betrayed an obnoxious obliviousness to the conditions of their lives.

Many of the political hopes invested in knowledge at the dawn of the Victorian era were, as Newman predicted, disappointed (the SDUK itself was wound up in 1846); and as Secord notes, given the vertiginousness of some of those hopes, it could hardly be otherwise.[84] Nevertheless the Victorian period witnessed an extraordinary opening up of educational opportunity. There was a boom in the construction of museums and public libraries and an unprecedented extension of formal education, not only through the support and development of elementary, secondary, and tertiary institutions of learning but also through enterprises such as the Mechanics' Institutes.[85] The magisterial seventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, incomparably more expansive (and better-selling) than its previous incarnations, was published in twenty-one volumes between 1827 and 1842, and became an icon of the high value placed on knowledge (and the *idea* of knowledge) in Victorian culture; the launch of the eighth and ninth editions of 1860 and 1889 were major cultural events celebrated with much fanfare.[86] Collectively, such developments served to install knowledge not only as a cornerstone of national improvement but also as 'a new kind of social and cultural currency', as Alan Rauch has argued.[87]

Indeed, if it was less frequently presented as a cure-all for society's ills, the pursuit of knowledge had lost nothing of its status and allure as an ideal: 'We have long experienced that knowledge is profitable', declared R. W. Mackay in his grand, teleological history of human knowledge, *The Progress of the Intellect* (1850); 'we are beginning to find out that it is moral, and shall at last discover it to be religious'.[88] A

---

[84] See Secord, *Visions of Science*, 238.
[85] See W. B. Stephens, *Education in Britain, 1750–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988).
[86] See Herman Kogan, *The Great EB: The Story of the Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
[87] Rauch, *Useful Knowledge*, 2.
[88] Robert William Mackay, *The Progress of the Intellect*, 2 vols (London: Chapman, 1850), 2. 173.

similar apotheosis was conjured in a sermon preached by Mark Pattison, the classical scholar and reforming Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, in 1865, which worked up to a dazzling vision of the '*totum scibile*', the sum total of all that is knowable—as both stimulus to aspiration and object of sublime contemplation.[89] But if Pattison focused eyes on the prize of total knowledge, Mackay offered a more dynamic conception of knowledge more typical of nineteenth-century rhetoric, which fashioned it less as a pilgrimage towards a known destination than a voyage of exploration and a vale of soul-making.

In her enthusiastic review of Mackay's book, George Eliot quoted with approval its homage to the inexhaustible human quest for knowledge, which Mackay believed had taken over the task of unveiling the mysteries of the universe, forsaken by ossified religious traditions:

> Science, unlike the rude expedient which stupefied without nourishing the mind, gratifies the religious feeling without arresting it, and opening out the barren mystery of the One into more explicit and manageable 'forms' expressing, not indeed his essence, but his will, feeds an endless enthusiasm by accumulating for ever new objects of pursuit.[90]

Ignorance has a role to play in the thrill of this chase, being 'as it were the eyelid' through which the soul 'gradually opens itself to the truth'.[91] The physicist James Clerk Maxwell similarly committed himself to ignorance's heuristic value when he declared that 'thoroughly conscious ignorance' was 'the prelude to every real advance in knowledge'.[92] But if ignorance was the *prelude* to knowledge it was also a *product* of increasing knowledge, as Clough recognised:

---

[89] See John Sparrow, *Mark Pattison and the Idea of a University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 128–31.
[90] Quoted in George Eliot, 'Mackay's *Progress of the Intellect*', *Westminster Review* 45 (January 1851), 353–68: 367.
[91] Ibid.
[92] James Clerk Maxwell, 'The Kinetic Theory of Gases', *Nature* 16.404 (26 July 1877), 242–46: 245.

> We touch the line which we thought our horizon; it was [a] line of shadow which we enter and discern not. We approach, and behold, leagues away, and receding and receding yet again beyond each new limit of the known a new visible unknown.[93]

Every advance in knowledge, in other words, opens up hitherto inconceivable new domains of inquiry, like the discovery of new continents or galaxies. Clough's imagination is perhaps stirred here by Tennyson's hungry-hearted Ulysses, resolved 'To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought', a pursuit which finds a new point of departure in every arrival, forever seeking anew that 'untravelled world, whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move.'[94] But if this quest could be felt as exhilarating, a note of ambivalence is also detectible in both poets' imaginative construals of it. As Christopher Ricks observes, Tennyson's poem 'conveys a dragging sense of inertia, of *ennui*, played against the vocabulary of adventure and enterprise', and Matthew Campbell notes how the profusion of internal rhyme in the poem 'instils a procrastinating monotone into the vistas of future experience'.[95] When there is so much to know, one may be daunted and overwhelmed rather than inspired: Clough's 'receding and receding *yet again*' might be read as a protest at a quest so wearily unproductive as much as a testament to endless enthusiasm.

'Look, the world tempts our eye, / And we would know it all!' exclaims Matthew Arnold's Empedocles (in his 1852 *Empedocles on Etna*), before addressing the frustrations that have befallen his friend Pausanias in the pursuit:[96]

> But still, as we proceed
> The mass swells more and more

---

[93] Clough, 'Paper on Religion', in *Selected Prose Works of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Buckner B. Trawick (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1964), 287–88: 288.
[94] Tennyson, 'Ulysses', ll. 31–32, 20–21, in *PT*, 1. 617.
[95] Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 117; Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163.
[96] Matthew Arnold, 'Empedocles on Etna', ll. 317–18, in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott, revd. Miriam Farris Allott (London: Longman, 1979), 178. Henceforth *PMA*.

Of volumes yet to read,
Of secrets yet to explore.
Our hair grows grey, our eyes are dimm'd, our heat is tamed [97]

The quest, it seems, must be abandoned as futile as well as harmful: rather than invigorating the quester, it leaves him desolate and exhausted. Ruskin's writing frequently warns of such consequences, taking up the alarm sounded earlier by Newman and Carlyle: 'the desperate evil of the whole Renaissance system', he wrote in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853), is that 'knowledge is thought the one and the only good, and it is never inquired whether men are vivified by it or paralyzed'.[98]

Arnold's Empedocles suggests two ways of responding to the paralysis induced by knowledge-seeking. One is to take refuge in life's simple pleasures, the daily joys of 'the village-churl': this is the method which Empedocles himself enjoins upon Pausanias, though he shows his own confidence in it to be less than whole-hearted when he hurls himself into a volcano.[99] The alternative response, which Empedocles scorns, is to forswear the pursuit of knowledge as an impious trespassing of boundaries, like those who cry to the gods,

'You only can take in
The world's immense design.
Our desperate search was sin,
Which henceforth we resign,
Sure only that your mind sees all things which befall.'[100]

Glimpsed here is the long literary tradition of forbidden knowledge, from Pandora's box to Prometheus's betrayal of the gods; Odysseus and the sirens to Adam and Eve; Faust to Frankenstein. Roger Shattuck characterises this tradition by its envisioning of an

[97] Ibid., ll. 332–36, in *PMA*, 179.
[98] Ruskin, 'Roman Renaissance', in *The Stones of Venice III*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 11, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 2004), 43–134: 65.
[99] Arnold, 'Empedocles on Etna', l. 411, in *PMA*, 182.
[100] Ibid., ll. 342–46, in *PMA*, 179.

'insatiable greed for the unattainable' which goes 'beyond common hubris in refusing any limit, any horizon'.[101] Theodore Ziolkowski has traced the afterlives of some of the most influential of these myths across European and American literature in his large-canvas study *The Sin of Knowledge: Ancient Themes and Modern Variations* (2000), which shows how they have continued to resonate over time.[102] The spectre of an excessive, compulsive, or manipulative attachment to knowing—from St Augustine's *libido sciendi* (lust for knowing) to Nietzsche's *Erkenntnistrieb* (knowledge-drive) to Melanie Klein's 'epistemophilic impulse'—has haunted Western literature and philosophy for two thousand years and more: perhaps ever since Satan sought, in Milton's words, to 'excite' the human mind 'with more desire to know'.[103] 'All men by nature desire to know', declared Aristotle some time in the 4th century BC, yet the exaggeration or perversion of this desire had become a particular source of fascination and horror at the dawn of the nineteenth century, as Andrew Bennett has argued.[104] Bennett regards what he calls 'the narrative of epistemological recoil' as 'particularly notable in canonical poems of the Romantic period', pointing to examples such as Byron's Manfred, who discovers that 'knowledge is not happiness, and science / But an exchange of ignorance for that / Which is another kind of ignorance'.[105] Bennett traces several examples of such narratives in Romantic poetry in which, as he suggestively writes, 'the poet-figure within the poem […]

---

[101] Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1996), 105.
[102] See Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Sin of Knowledge: Ancient Themes and Modern Variations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[103] See John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 140–47, and Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche*, tr. Richard L. Collier (London: Continuum, 2000), 100–06; Melanie Klein, 'Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict' [1928], in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York, NY: Free Press, 1986), 69–83; John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4. 522–23, in *John Milton: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2003), 433.
[104] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980.a, in *The Basic Works*, 689; Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4. 522–23, in *The Major Works*, 433.
[105] Bennett, *Ignorance*, 64; George Gordon Byron, *Manfred*, II. iv. 61–63, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, 8 vols, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980–93), 4. 83.

comes up against the limits of human knowing' and 'is constituted as a poet by his engagement with or apprehension of his own ignorance'.[106] Richard Holmes reminds us that these thematics were far from hermetically literary, arguing that both Goethe's *Faust* (published in two parts in 1802 and 1832 respectively) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1811) gave shape to newly popular conceptions of the scientific genius as 'thirsting and reckless for knowledge, *for its own sake and perhaps at any cost*'.[107]

The topos of the pursuit of knowledge and its costs was principally associated in the Victorian period with the form thought to be the most thoroughly engaged with and implicated in epistemological issues: the novel. The critical literature on this subject is extensive, but a few emblematic instances may help situate poetry's own relations to knowledge and ignorance in the period. The Victorian novel takes questions of knowledge beyond the realms of learning and scholarship in which many of the forbidden-knowledge myths are rooted into the everyday drama of human relations. It was in this wider sense that one of the form's greatest practitioners, Henry James, defended it as 'a composition that treats of life at large and helps us to *know*'.[108] Yet in another context James would throw into question 'the rights and duties, the decencies and discretions of the insurmountable desire to *know*', wondering whether 'we pay more for some kinds of knowledge than those particular kinds are worth'—a question which simmers beneath the complex psychological intrigues and ordeals of James's own late fiction.[109] George Eliot was perhaps the Victorian novelist most explicitly invested in the epistemological seriousness of the form as well as one of the most committed to exploring the pathos and

---

[106] Bennett, *Ignorance*, 66. Bennett's examples include, in addition *Manfred*, Byron's *Cain*, Keats's 'Hyperion' poems, and Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*.
[107] Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder* (London: Vintage, 2010), xvii.
[108] Henry James, '*Nana* (1880)', in *Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, ed. Leon Edel (New York, NY: Library of America, 1984), 864–70: 869.
[109] Henry James, '*Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert* (1893)', in *Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, 295–313: 297. See Wood, 'What Henry Knew', in *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, 13–36.

pathology of knowing.[110] 'I wish he could know everything about me without my telling him', fantasises Gwendolen Harleth of Daniel Deronda.[111] This is the fantasy to which so-called 'omniscient' narration in nineteenth-century realist fiction has traditionally been seen to aspire.[112] As J. Hillis Miller has written, at its most radical this device epitomises 'the perfection of knowledge', the ability 'to remember perfectly all the past, to foresee the future course of events, and to penetrate with irresistible insight the most secret crevice in the heart of each man'.[113] George Levine and D. A. Miller have shown how the cultural purchase of knowledge is crucial to the emergence of realism as the dominant mode of the Victorian novel, while Franco Moretti has argued that the new genre of detective fiction was the distinctive form of a culture that 'knows, orders, and defines' in search of 'total scrutability'.[114] Yet James suggested that unknowing was the very condition of narrative possibility: 'It seems probable that if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us', he wrote:

> we should partake of the superior nature of the all-knowing immortals whose annals are so dreadfully dull so long as flurried humans are not, for the positive relief of bored Olympians, mixed up with them.[115]

And Eliot too offered a frightening portrait of what panoptical scrutability might look like in 'The Lifted Veil' (1859): far from guaranteeing sympathy, power, or tranquillity, Latimer's clairvoyant knowledge of others' inner lives proves 'our soul's need of

---

[110] On this subject see, for example, Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
[111] George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (London: Penguin, 1995), 432.
[112] See Rachel Sagner Buurma, 'Critical Histories of Omniscience', in *New Directions in the History of the Novel*, ed. Patrick Parrinder et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 121–33.
[113] J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 64.
[114] See George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms*, tr. Susan Fischer et al. (London: Verso, 1983), 143.
[115] James, 'Preface to *New York Edition*' [1908], in *The Princess Casamassima*, ed. Adrian Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 829–41: 832.

something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life'.[116]

That ignorance might be a condition of hope, rather than merely of failure, is proposed by Walter Pater in his essay on Michelangelo: 'what hope he has', Pater reflects, 'is based on the consciousness of ignorance—ignorance of man, ignorance of the nature of the mind, its origin and capacities'.[117] It is this quality of ignorance which sponsors Michelangelo's 'vague and wistful speculation' that is his principal talent as a poet.[118] Michelangelo spoke to the nineteenth century, Pater believed, in virtue of this tenacious admission of ignorance which functions as the seed of hope and imagination. Hamlet's famous words to Horatio reverberate with this particular emotional frequency throughout the Victorian period.[119] Ruskin (who at one time considered writing an essay on 'the uses of Ignorance') prays his readers 'very solemnly to put that idea of knowing all things in Heaven and Earth out of your hearts and heads', and insists that art begins where certain knowledge leaves off:[120]

> Whatever can be measured and handled, dissected and demonstrated,—in a word, whatever is of the body only,—that the schools of knowledge do resolutely and courageously possess themselves of, and portray. But whatever is immeasurable, intangible, indivisible, and of the spirit, that the schools of knowledge do as certainly lose, and blot out of their sight: that is to say, all that is worth art's possessing or recording at all[121]

---

[116] George Eliot, 'The Lifted Veil' [1859], in *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009), 1–44: 29.
[117] Walter Pater, 'The Poetry of Michelangelo', in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* [1873], in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 57–76: 75.
[118] Ibid.
[119] 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1. 5. 165–66, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 255).
[120] See Ruskin, 29 July 1845, in *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, ed. Joan Evans and John Howard Withehouse, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 2. 416; *The Eagle's Nest* [1872], in *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 22, ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1906), 115–292: 181.
[121] Ruskin, 'Roman Renaissance', 61.

Thoreau calls for a 'Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance' which would break up our 'boasted so-called knowledge' and restore to us 'the advantage of our actual ignorance':[122]

> My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence. I do not know that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before—a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy.[123]

This Shakespearean discovery, for Thoreau, seems to be a realisation that 'all that we called Knowledge before' is dwarfed by our new appreciation of the much wider dimensions of knowledge—in other words, that Horatio's philosophy was inadequate *as philosophy*—but also more strongly, and perhaps more truly to Hamlet's original meaning, that there is more in heaven and earth than can be spoken for by any amount of positive knowledge.[124]

In this respect Thoreau's point, however provocatively expressed, stands firmly in the main line of a major Victorian intellectual tradition, that of agnosticism. As Bernard Lightman has shown, in the nineteenth century agnosticism did not primarily have to do with the question of God's existence, but with a much more foundational philosophical conviction: 'the limitation of all knowledge of reality to the world of phenomena revealed to us by experience', as T. H. Huxley (who coined the term in 1869) maintained.[125] Beyond this basic conviction, nineteenth-century agnosticism came in many flavours:

---

[122] Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking' [1862], in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. 5 (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin: 1906), 205–48: 239.
[123] Ibid., 240.
[124] The Arden editors note that the word 'your' is 'Probably used colloquially […] in a general rather than a personal sense' (*Hamlet*, 255).
[125] T. H. Huxley, *Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 60. See Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

Huxley himself, for instance, identified Hume as agnosticism's intellectual forefather, whereas others derived their agnostic principles from Kant, testifying to disagreement about whether agnosticism constituted a 'pragmatic, evidence-based position' or one deriving from 'a prior understanding of cognitive principles', as W. J. Mander writes.[126] Mander's comprehensive recent study of nineteenth-century British metaphysics, tellingly titled *The Unknowable* (2020), examines these distinctions in detail, arguing that the idea of 'an ultimate but unknowable way that things really are in themselves' supplies the 'narrative arc that runs right through the metaphysical systems of the period'.[127]

The greatest public advocates for agnosticism from the 1860s onwards—Huxley, Herbert Spencer, John Tyndall, and Leslie Stephen—derived their thinking from an unlikely source: the sensational Bampton Lectures delivered by the High Church theologian H. L. Mansel at Oxford in 1858, entitled *The Limits of Religious Thought*.[128] Building on the work of the Kantian philosopher Sir William Hamilton, Mansel sought to demonstrate the 'inextricable' dilemmas involved in attempts to conceptualise an infinite God, insisting that such a God must be strictly 'incomprehensible'.[129] Ralph Jessop has shown that Hamilton's insistence that 'Of things absolutely or in themselves, be they external, be they internal, we know nothing' had already inspired Carlyle's rhetoric of 'nescience' from the 1840s, as in the introduction to *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841):[130]

> Science has done much for us, but it is a poor science that would hide from us that great deep sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never

[126] W. J. Mander, *The Unknowable: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 92.
[127] Ibid., 1.
[128] See Lightman, 'The Agnostic Conundrum', in *Origins of Agnosticism*, 6–31.
[129] Henry Longueville Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined in Eight Lectures* [1859] (London: Murray, 1867), 35.
[130] William Hamilton, 'Philosophical Testimonies to the Limitation of our Knowledge, from the Limitation of our Faculties', in *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature, Education and University Reform*, 2nd edn. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans: 1853), 591–601: 597. See Ralph Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 96–102.

> penetrate, on which all science swims as a mere superficial film. This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, *magical* and more[131]

Carlyle's evocation of this Nescience as 'sacred' previews what would become a major bone of contention among agnostics later in the period, with Tyndall, Huxley, and Stephen worrying that Spencer's doctrine of the 'Unknowable' risked elevating it into a new object of worship: 'the "Unknowable" in Mr Spencer's sense', wrote Huxley, was 'the name of a negation hocus-pocussed into a sham thing'.[132] A. O. J. Cockshut observes that Victorian agnostics often gave the impression of being in search of 'a new certainty to replace the discarded certainty of religion', and Anglicans such as R. H. Hutton, the editor of the *Spectator*, had much fun satirising the absurd spectacle of an anti-religious religious cult, the 'adorers of Inscrutability'.[133]

The poets in this study are far from being uncritical Adorers of Unknowability, nor do they engage directly in the kind of epistemological battles which preoccupied Victorian agnostics. Their philosophical and religious beliefs, politics, and tastes are wildly divergent, and yet they all share a common interest in knowledge itself as a kind of dream, and a common intuition that conscious ignorance may have its merits as well as its dangers. In their very different ways, they show how Victorian interest in the potential of unknowing went far beyond the domain of epistemological debate, affecting thinking about religious faith (as well as doubt), memory, the self, and interpersonal relations, love, death, nature, and the meaning of art. Before turning to these broader pastures, the

---

[131] Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* [1841], ed. H. D. Traill (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897), 8.
[132] Huxley to F. J. Gould, 1889, *Life and Letters of Thomas Huxley*, 3 vols, ed. Leonard Huxley (London: Macmillan, 1908), 3. 290.
[133] A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Unbelievers: English Agnostic Thought, 1840–1890* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1966), 73; R. H. Hutton, 'The Moral Significance of Atheism', in *Essays Theological and Literary*, 2 vols (London: Strahan, 1871), 1. 3–29: 28.

remainder of this introduction examines how poetry itself was variously situated along the axis of knowledge and ignorance through the period.

Four Ways of Thinking About Poetry and Knowledge

A comprehensive survey of the ways in which poetry's relationship to knowledge was configured over the course of the nineteenth century would be extremely valuable, but is well beyond the scope of this thesis. In the rest of this introduction, I weave together episodes from this broader story as a way of contextualising the second strand of my thesis, namely its emphasis on the experience of partial, uncertain, and elusive knowledge *as encountered in the reading of poetry itself.* I will sketch out four basic patterns of reflection on the relations between poetry and knowledge: (1) the characterisation of poetry as a throwback to an age of ignorance, either left behind by, or positively inimical to, the pursuit of knowledge; (2) the triumphant assertion of poetry's indifference to knowledge; (3) the affirmation that poetry itself is a form of knowledge, a way of knowing, or complementary to knowledge and knowing; and (4) the prizing of poetry for the ways it sharpens our awareness of that which exceeds or escapes our knowing. Importantly, there are different and indeed conflicting ways of articulating each of these broad tendencies, and although some of these tendencies are clearly incompatible with each other (poetry cannot be completely indifferent to epistemic questions *and* a form of knowledge), others are not: for example, we may recognise that poetry can provide rich experiential knowledge of ways of thinking and feeling, that it may train our capacities for moral perception, educate our emotions, or even constitute a distinctive mode of cognition, while also valuing the ways in which it eludes our knowing, cultivates uncertainty, and shows how the urge for knowledge might circumscribe, deform, or attenuate experience.

All these arguments have long pedigrees, but the particular ways in which they were framed in the nineteenth century, their intellectual character and rhetorical texture, were of course shaped by the specific social, intellectual, and literary conditions of the period.

I have already outlined some of the relevant social conditions in the previous section; scholars such as Allan Speight, M. A. R. Habib, W. David Shaw, and M. H. Abrams have traced relevant developments in the intellectual landscape, from the rise of Utilitarianism and the science of psychology to the legacies of German Romanticism and Idealism.[134] The most significant claim about the *literary* conditions of the period in this regard is that articulated by Philip Davis, who argues that the Victorian period was when 'poetry first began to lose its nerve and its place': 'Swamped by the thought of its questionable relevance within a new mass industrial and democratic society,' Davis writes, 'poetry became self-consciously peripheral.'[135] Throughout the period, questions about literature's relations to knowledge were implicated in wider tensions: between new and old, the masses and the individual, industry and *otium*, democracy and aristocracy.

Matthew Arnold, who would make so much of poetry's alliance with knowledge in his critical work, nonetheless lumped the progress of knowledge together with other maladies of the age in a well-known letter of 1849 to fellow poet, Arthur Clough:

> My dearest Clough these are damned times—everything is against one—the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great *natures*, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties[136]

---

[134] See Allen Speight, 'Philosophy of Literature in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 30–39; M. A. R. Habib (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 6: *The Nineteenth Century, c. 1830–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); W. David Shaw, *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age* (London: Athlone Press, 1987); M. H. Abrams, 'Science and Poetry in Romantic Criticism', in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 298–335.
[135] Philip Davis, *The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. 8: *The Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 456.
[136] Arnold to Clough, 23 September 1849, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 1. 156.

Note how 'the height to which knowledge is come' tops the list here, as though it were both source and symptom of all the other oppressions: decadence, exhaustion, pusillanimity, triviality, self-centredness (perhaps also the kind of superiorness that disdains millions of 'small' natures). Writing the prologue to *In Memoriam* that same year, Tennyson urged, 'Let knowledge grow from more to more / But more of reverence in us dwell': as though the problem lay not so much in the growth of knowledge *per se* as in the nature of human beings' response to it, and as though that were something which the measured language and solemn exhortations of poetry might help reorientate.[137] Writing at the other end of the period, Thomas Hardy remained worried about the consequences of the 'plethoric growth of knowledge' but was less confident in poetry's ability to redress the 'stunting of wisdom' which seemed to go with it.[138] Indeed, he held these seemingly inseparable forces accountable for 'the precarious prospects of English verse at the present day'.[139]

In the earlier part of the nineteenth century the view was often expressed that the advance of knowledge, and the wider 'progress' of civilisation to which it contributed, was bad news for poetry. As the Whig historian and statesman Lord Macaulay wrote in his essay on Milton (published in 1825 and first collected in 1843), 'we think that as civilisation advances, poetry almost necessarily declines'.[140] Macaulay's 'almost' is a concession to his subject, the most learned of poets in an age of learning: Milton is the grand exception who proves the rule. And the rule is: 'In proportion as men know more and think more, they look less at individuals and more at classes. They therefore make

[137] Tennyson, '[Prologue]' to 'In Memoriam A. H. H.', ll. 25–26, in *PT*, 2. 317. Ricks gives the date of the prologue as 1849 (ibid., 2. 315).
[138] Hardy, 'Apology', in *Late Lyrics and Earlier* [1922], in *PWH*, 2. 322.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Milton', in *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, 3 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1843), 1. 1–61: 5.

better theories and worse poems.'[141] Generalisation and abstract reasoning, for Macaulay, are simultaneously the enemies of poetry and the instruments of truth:

> as the magic lantern acts best in a dark room, poetry effects its purpose most completely in a dark age. As the light of knowledge breaks in upon its exhibitions, as the outlines of certainty become more and more definite and the shades of probability more and more distinct, the hues and lineaments of the phantoms which the poet calls up grow fainter and fainter. We cannot unite the incompatible advantages of reality and deception, the clear discernment of truth, and the exquisite enjoyment of fiction.[142]

The advance towards clear and distinct knowledge robs the poet's creations of their former epistemic authority, confining poetry to a rarefied realm of pleasure. For this tradition, Plato's conviction that poetry cannot give 'a self-validating, correct representation of the real world' (as Raymond Geuss summarises his position) becomes the central fact of poetry's identity.[143] Plato's fear of the corrupting consequences of poetic falsehoods, however, holds no terrors for what Macaulay calls 'an enlightened age', in which there is little danger of anyone mistaking poetry for knowledge.[144] If in the past such claims to knowledge were the poet's 'chief title to superiority', now he 'must unlearn much of that knowledge' with which modernity has equipped him or risk hindering his poetic enterprise.[145]

Macaulay's suggestion of a logical connection between advancing knowledge and declining poetry is expressed in a variety of different tones through the period. Towards the end of the eighteenth century Thomas Warton had given it a decidedly mournful inflection, lamenting the poetic price of 'treating every thing scientifically': for if society had gained much thereby in 'good sense, good taste, and good criticism', it had 'parted

---

[141] Ibid., 8.
[142] Ibid., 9.
[143] Raymond Geuss, 'Poetry and Knowledge', in *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 184–205: 184.
[144] Macaulay, 'Milton', 8.
[145] Ibid., 9.

with extravagancies that are above propriety, with incredibilities that are more acceptable than truth, and with fictions that are more valuable than reality'.[146] Jeremy Bentham, by contrast, spoke with all the relish of an executioner when he asserted that 'truth, exactitude of every kind, is fatal to poetry'.[147] Writing in the same year as Macaulay, Bentham was less sanguine about the potential for 'mischiefs' arising from what he called the 'natural opposition' between poetry and truth.[148] It was the prevalence of such positivistic thinking as Bentham's, M. H. Abrams suggests, which led to a tendency to 'convert this logical into a combative opposition' on the part of poetry's defenders, as in some of the remarks of Keats among the Romantics.[149] This tradition arguably reached its apogee in D. H. Lawrence's blazing denunciations of 'ghastly, obscene "knowers"'.[150] But the belief that Newton had 'destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colours' (as Keats and Charles Lamb are reported to have declared during a high-spirited dinner party) was not widely shared by Victorian poets.[151]

A stronger current in Victorian poetics sought to distinguish poetry from knowledge claims altogether, another critical gesture with a long history, from Sidney's 'the poet […] nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth' to I. A. Richards's doctrine of poetic 'pseudo-statements'.[152] For Thomas De Quincey, poetry's distinguishing characteristic was that, unlike scientific knowledge, it could never be superseded by later

---

[146] Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry* [1774–81], 4 vols, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (London: Reeves and Turner, 1871), 4. 21, 22.
[147] Jeremy Bentham, 'The Rationale of Reward' [1825], in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 2, ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: Tait, 1843), 189–266: 254.
[148] Ibid.
[149] See Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 299.
[150] D. H. Lawrence, 'Edgar Allan Poe', in *Studies in Classic American Literature* [1923], ed. Ezra Greenspan et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66–80: 73.
[151] As reported by Benjamin Haydon in *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, Historical Painter* [1853], in *The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Haydon*, 2 vols, ed. Aldous Huxley (London: Davies, 1926), 1. 269.
[152] Philip Sidney, 'The Defence of Poetry' [1595], in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 73–121: 102; see I. A. Richards, 'Science and Poetry' [1926], in *Poetries and Sciences* [1935] (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), 15–84, especially 58–66.

developments: ‘The very highest work that has ever existed in the literature of knowledge, is but a *provisional* work’, he argued in his 1848 essay on Alexander Pope, ‘Whereas the feeblest works in the literature of power, surviving at all, survive as finished and unalterable amongst men.’[153] De Quincey had insisted on this opposition between power and knowledge since 1823, when he wrote that

> The true antithesis to knowledge […] is not *pleasure*, but *power*. All, that is literature seeks to communicate power; all, that is not literature, to communicate knowledge.[154]

The search for some characteristic quality by which to distinguish poetry specifically from knowledge continued through the period. In spite of De Quincey’s strictures, ‘pleasure’ enjoyed a long career in this respect, as in the flamboyant assertion of E. S. Dallas, in his 1866 treatise on poetics, that ‘knowledge and pleasure hold together in an inverse ratio’.[155] For many others, of course, the true counterpoint was beauty: Edgar Allan Poe regarded himself as swimming against the tide in 1850 when he wearily asserted that ‘It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth’.[156] On the contrary, he asserted, ‘the real essence’ of poetry was not ‘Truth’, but ‘*Beauty*’.[157] Forty years later that tide had turned, but for an aesthete like Arthur Symons these two most slippery of terms were not necessarily rivals: poetry ought to be ‘beauty itself’, as well as the ‘soul of truth’.[158] This wasn’t quite all ye need to know, but it nonetheless addressed itself to an anxiety of knowing: for ‘it is with a kind of terror’,

---

[153] Thomas De Quincey, ‘The Works of Alexander Pope, Esquire’ [1848], in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. 16, edited by Robert Morrison (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 332–64: 338.
[154] De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected, No. III’ [1823], in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. 3, ed. Frederick Burwick (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000), 59–74: 70–71.
[155] E. S. Dallas, *The Gay Science*, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866), 2. 123.
[156] Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Poetic Principle’ [1850], in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 14, ed. J. A. Harrison (New York, NY: Crowell, 1902), 266–92: 275.
[157] Ibid., 271.
[158] Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899), 36, 32.

Symons wrote, 'that we wake up, every now and then, to the whole knowledge of our ignorance'.[159] For Symons, the poetry of Mallarmé and Verlaine offered to neutralise the terrors of this knowledge, 'freeing us at once of a great bondage'.[160] Truth itself, then—'that truth which is all but the deepest meaning of beauty'—was one more flag poetry might fly in place of the ensign of knowledge.[161]

Undoubtedly the most popular among these banners, however, were 'feeling' and 'sensation'. Arthur Hallam's influential distinction between poets of 'sensation' and 'reflection', proposed in his review of Tennyson's debut collection of 1830, sometimes hardened into the kind of division of labour insisted upon by Alexander Smith: between 'the philosophical enquirer, whose aim it is to *know*' and 'the poet, whose aim it is to feel'.[162] The speaker of Oscar Wilde's 'Panthea' summed up a whole tradition of post-Romantic poetics in the announcement that 'to feel is better than to know'.[163] Hallam, however, had allowed that the poetry of sensation could itself be 'an enlarger of our modes of knowledge', and poets were sometimes imagined as the consummate experts at fusing knowledge with feeling: 'To be a poet', Ladislaw tells Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, 'is to have a soul […] in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge'.[164]

This affiliation of knowledge with poetry represents the dominant way in which these two powerful repositories of cultural value were understood to relate to one another in the period. Of course, those who promoted this affiliation did not all mean the same

---

[159] Ibid., 171.
[160] Ibid., 174.
[161] Ibid., 146. Robert Eaglestone examines the tradition of thinking about poetry as 'truth' as opposed to knowledge in the work of Schlegel, Heidegger, and Adorno ('Critical Knowledge, Scientific Knowledge and the Truth of Literature', in *The New Aestheticism*, ed. John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 151–66).
[162] Arthur Hallam, 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson', *Englishman's Magazine* 1.5 (August 1831), 616–28: 617; Alexander Smith, 'The Philosophy of Poetry', *Blackwood's* 39.242 (December 1835), 827–39: 835.
[163] Wilde, 'Panthea', in l. 7, in *CWW*, 1. 110.
[164] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* [1872], ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2019), 209.

thing by 'knowledge' (even in their own writings), but as Nicholas Jenkins notes, 'the thrust of ideas about a singular correlation between poetry (itself a term with many meanings) and knowledge is persistent'.[165] Wordsworth, for example, had firmly distinguished poetry from 'matter of Fact, or Science', but the 'Poet' and the 'Man of Science' were united in their commitment to 'knowledge', just of different kinds: one 'standing upon external testimony', one 'carried alive into the heart by passion' (as he elaborated in the 1802 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*).[166] Rather than fencing these activities off from one another, this distinction clarified the way in which they might co-operate: Wordsworth's 'Poet', far from being driven out of business by the advance of scientific knowledge, might yet assimilate 'the remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or the Mineralogists' insofar as these become 'manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering human beings'.[167] In this way, the Poet could stand side by side with the scientist, 'carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the Science itself'—a capability that sponsors Wordsworth's opulent avowal that 'Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge'.[168]

Wordsworth's 'Preface' proved enormously influential in nineteenth-century discussions of the relations between poetry and knowledge. Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry', written as a response to Peacock's 'Four Ages of Man' but not published until 1840, added further spice to Wordsworth's extravagant words: poetry was 'at once the centre and circumference of knowledge', that which 'comprehends all science' and 'to which all science must be referred'.[169] The rhetorical temperature of such statements might be seen

---

[165] Nicholas Jenkins, 'Poetry as Knowledge', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edn. (Princeton, NK: Princeton University Press, 2012), 771–73: 772.
[166] William Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802', in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 740–60: 750, 751.
[167] Ibid., 753.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' [pubd. 1840], in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York, NY: Norton, 2002), 509–35: 531,

partly as a reaction to poetry's ebbing epistemic authority as science emerged as the paradigmatic engine of knowledge production; but it could also be seen as *participating* in that wider current of frenzied rhetoric about knowledge examined in the previous section. For Shelley as for Wordsworth poetry was not in competition with other kinds and sources of knowledge; rather, it offered to bring knowledge of all kinds to imaginative, ethical, and affective life:

> We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practise […] We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest.[170]

For all that knowledge was so widely and warmly wanted, Shelley discovered something wanting in knowledge: something which poetry might contribute or catalyse. This was an insight widely promoted throughout the period, for example by Leigh Hunt, who drew upon Wordsworth's famous distinction:

> Poetry begins where matter of fact or science ceases to be merely such, and to exhibit a further truth; that is to say, the connexion it has with the world of emotion, and its power to produce imaginative pleasure.[171]

Connexion is the keynote for this tradition, and Tennyson is its laureate: as in the passages from *In Memoriam* already mentioned, so elsewhere in his poetry the focus is on knowledge's integral part in a wider order of values, rooted in the conviction

> That Beauty, Good, and Knowledge, are three sisters
> That doat upon each other, friends to man,
> Living together under the same roof,
> And never can be sundered without tears.[172]

---

[170] Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', 530.
[171] Leigh Hunt, 'An Essay in Answer to the Question, "What is Poetry?"' [1844], in *Imagination and Fancy* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1845), 1–48: 3.
[172] Tennyson, 'To —. With the Following Poem [The Palace of Art]', ll. 10–13, in *PT*, 1. 435.

Even when explicitly contrasted with other qualities, the edge of competition or conflict tends to be softened by a sense of organic interconnection, as in the declaration that 'Knowledge […] is earthly of the mind, / But wisdom heavenly of the soul.'[173] For this reason, Tennyson does not figure as the subject of any one of my chapters; given the magnitude of his achievement, however, it is not surprising that he finds his way into every single one of them.

Like Tennyson, John Stuart Mill was interested in how poetry might calibrate the relations between knowledge, ethics, and feeling:

> The object of poetry is confessedly to act upon the emotions; and therein is poetry sufficiently distinguished from what Wordsworth affirms to be its logical opposite, namely, not prose, but matter of fact or science.[174]

Again, this distinction does not provide grounds for a quarrel but clarifies how poetry might be understood to convey 'real *knowledge*', as Mill explained in his correspondence with Carlyle.[175] The 'highest truths', he wrote, 'need neither explanation nor proof' but rather an art which 'delivers and embodies them'.[176] For Mill, as Ian Small observes, 'What was distinctly "poetic" in all art was not a set of formal attributes or features, nor the product of a series of attitudes brought to it by the reader or spectator, but rather its capacity to embody certain forms of moral and symbolic knowledge.'[177] For 'it is the artist alone', Mill declared, 'in whose hands Truth becomes impressive, and a living principle of action'.[178]

---

[173] Tennyson, 'In Memoriam A. H. H.', CXIV. 1, 21–22, in *PT*, 2. 436.
[174] John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties' [1833], in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 1, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 342–66: 343.
[175] Mill to Carlyle, 5 July 1833, in *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill: 1812–1848*, vol. 1, ed. Francis E. Mineka (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 163.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 13.
[178] Mill to Carlyle, 17 July 1832, in *Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill*, 113.

This tradition benefited enormously from the eloquence and influence of Matthew Arnold. His 1880 essay 'The Study of Poetry' is best remembered for the dizzying ambitions it harboured for poetry's future: 'most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry', it prophesied.[179] But if this seems to take up arms in the ancient quarrel, Arnold's attitude towards science was far more conciliatory, developing the idea of what poetry can do with (and *for*) science already broached by Wordsworth and Shelley. Indeed, he quotes with approval Wordsworth's assertion that poetry is 'the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science': 'and what is a countenance without its expression?' he adds.[180] Arnold had long affiliated poetry with knowledge: as early as the 'Preface' to *Poems* (1853) he insisted that 'What is *not* interesting' in poetry 'is that which does not add to our knowledge of any kind', and his central criticism of the Romantic poets was that they 'did not know enough'.[181] In 'Literature and Science' (1882) Arnold again returned to the question of literature's role vis-à-vis the burgeoning knowledge produced by scientific inquiry. Precisely because it was so important we should all be acquainted with the 'results of science', he argued, we must recognise that 'knowledge not put for us into relation with our sense for conduct, our sense for beauty, and touched with emotion by being so put' was likely to prove 'wearying' and 'unsatisfying'.[182] Catching up various threads reaching back through Mill, Shelley, and Wordsworth, Arnold finds a role for 'poetry and eloquence' alike in connecting an otherwise sterile, unattractive, or overwhelming knowledge to the vitalising forces of beauty and moral feeling.

---

[179] Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry' [1880], in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 9, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 161–88: 162.
[180] Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802', 753; Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry', 162.
[181] Arnold, 'Preface to First Edition of *Poems* (1853)', in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 1, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 1–15: 2; Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' [1864], in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 258–85: 262.
[182] Arnold, 'Literature and Science' [1882], in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 10, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1974), 53–73: 65.

This humanist tradition of poetry as allied with, or even contributing to, forms of intellectual inquiry and moral education was challenged by an ascendant tradition of thought descended from Hegel, which conceptualised the positive relationship between poetry and knowledge very differently. In the 1880s W. P. Ker, in a direct challenge to Arnold's demand that poetry should 'add to our knowledge', argued that works of art 'add nothing to knowledge'.[183] While they could not be '*understood* apart from their history' and might be 'explained' with reference to their formal properties, Ker reasoned, it would be a kind of category mistake to consider works of art '*only* as phenomena to be explained' or 'understood'—that is, to submit them only to what Kant called 'determinate' judgements, which relate objects to that which we already know.[184] 'Art satisfies the mind', Ker wrote,

> not by affording it new examples for experiment, from which to arrive at new truths of the objective world, but by presenting to it objects which have that freedom from dependence on other things and other laws.[185]

Hence he concludes, refining his earlier proposition, that 'Works of art add nothing to knowledge except themselves.'[186] Art then, as Hegel had argued, constituted a distinctive and self-sufficient form of knowledge. Ker draws a striking contrast between such knowledge and that fostered by rational inquiry: while science 'has to go on accomplishing its impossibilities, increasing the sum of knowledge, without drawing any nearer the end of the unknown', he wrote, art 'is a proof that completed knowledge—knowledge which does not imply an endless process—is possible to the mind.'[187] Thus for Ker art, of which poetry was the highest and most characteristic form, represented an 'attempt to find a cure'

---

[183] W. P. Ker, 'On the Philosophy of Art' [1883], in *Collected Essays of W. P. Ker*, vol. 2, ed. Charles Whibley (London: Macmillan, 1925), 234–71: 248.
[184] Ibid., 249, 250.
[185] Ibid., 249.
[186] Ibid., 250.
[187] Ibid., 253, 252.

for humanity's 'anxiously craving for increase in its knowledge of an inexhaustible manifold universe'.[188]

Ker's view of poetry as completed and perfectly satisfying knowledge was vigorously contested by the fourth tradition of thinking which I identify and pursue throughout this thesis: a tradition traceable in the work of Emerson, Ruskin, Pater, and Newman among others, but which is best represented, I suggest, by the poets themselves. For this tradition, Ruskin's question of whether knowledge might paralyse as well as vivify applies equally to the reading of poetry as it does to reading the world. In his lectures on Shakespeare, Coleridge identified one of the leading causes of 'false Criticism' as 'The greater delight in being reminded of one's knowledge than of one's Ignorance', and this wariness of knowledge as a readerly temptation or trap is in many ways a Romantic inheritance.[189] '[L]et us not […] go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like', pleads Keats, 'buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at'.[190] Such overdetermined modes of engagement risk flattering our preconceptions and flattening our experiences. In their place, we might learn to cultivate what Adam Phillips calls 'forms of appreciation that require neither defiance nor compliance'.[191] Keats suggests some of the shapes such forms might take:

> I have an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner—let him on any certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it—untill it becomes stale—but when will it do so? Never [192]

---

[188] Ibid., 253, 258.
[189] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton in Illustration of the Principles of Poetry: Lecture 1' [1811], in *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 5, 2 vols, ed. R. A. Foakes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 1. 181–200: 186, 187.
[190] Keats to John Reynolds, 19 February 1818, in *Letters of John Keats*, 2. 232.
[191] Adam Phillips, 'On Not Getting It', in *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Penguin, 2013), 34–80: 48.
[192] Keats to Reynolds, 19 February 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, 2. 231.

Rather than cutting knowledge out of the picture, might it not be one of those things which poetry invites us to wander with, muse on, reflect from, and dream upon? Derek Attridge offers a compelling account of how poetry may mobilise and experiment with our epistemic desires rather than simply satisfy them: 'We act out our knowing, our wanting to know, our wanting to know what it is like to know or not to know', he writes, 'or rather these things are acted out in the experience that is the event of the art-work.'[193]

E. S. Dallas suggested in 1866 that poets themselves 'use' knowledge 'to suggest something beyond knowledge': 'Through the splendid collision of facts', he wrote, 'we learn to catch at something which is not in the facts'.[194] That unknown 'something' reverberates in A. C. Bradley's 1901 lecture 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake', which wonders at how the 'unique expression' of a poem, which 'cannot be replaced by any other', 'still seems to be trying to express something beyond itself'.[195] What Dallas and Bradley are drawn to is that unaccountable surplus which, as Angela Leighton suggests, 'refuses to be […] solved or dissolved in paraphrase' even as it summons and strains our knowing: to the critic, therefore, it is at once 'a call to humility' and to 'perpetual, inventive answerability'.[196] James Longenbach suggests that what poetry offers us is the sensation of 'words leaping just beyond our capacity to know them certainly': this thesis sets out to study that many-sided bequest.[197]

***

[193] Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 258.
[194] Dallas, *The Gay Science*, 1. 316, 328.
[195] A. C. Bradley, *Poetry for Poetry's Sake* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 31.
[196] Leighton, 'Hearing Something: Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Jorie Graham', in *Hearing Things* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 158–80: 166, 177.
[197] James Longenbach, 'Composed Wonder', in *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 95–108: 108.

My first chapter brings the poetry of Arthur Clough into extensive dialogue with the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson for the first time, showing how Clough creatively adapts and revises Emerson's critique of 'knowingness' throughout his work. I argue that *Dipsychus and the Spirit* stages self-knowledge as a snare, shaping an Emersonian ethic and aesthetic of encounter as an antidote to complacent and proprietorial conceptions of knowing. Turning to Clough's wider poetry, I suggest how Emerson's stress on the unknowability of the future inflects Clough's own poetics of futurity, which sponsor a spacious sense of possibility in the present as embodied in the shapes and sounds of the poems themselves.

My second chapter connects Robert Browning's critically neglected interest in the natural world with notions of foiled knowing or occluded knowledge, tracing patterns of affinity between the ecological, the aesthetic, and the epistemological. This inquiry is guided by a sustained conversation with the writings of Browning's friend and admirer, John Ruskin, particularly in relation to ideas of the 'grotesque'—an aesthetic mode with which Browning's art has long been associated, but rarely in relation to its epistemological challenge. Neither a screen on which to project pre-existing conflicts and commitments, nor a luxurious abyss of unknowable otherness, nature in Browning's poetry holds up a mirror to the anxiety of explanation and, in so doing, emerges as a powerful analogue for poetry.

My third chapter explores two forms of unknowing in the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, bound to each other by questions about temporality. I begin with a reading of Rossetti's sonnet on Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre*, showing how the poem eschews the ekphrastic ideals it has usually been taken to embody in favour of an aesthetics of vagueness stemming from Renaissance art theory. Next, I trace a sequence of moments in Rossetti's poetry in which known and unknown seem superimposed upon one another,

blurring the boundaries between representation and reality and exposing a gap between knowledge and the *feeling* of knowing. I link such moments to Rossetti's fascination with the experience of déjà vu, first treated as an object of sustained medical and psychological research in the late nineteenth century. Such 'dreamy states' (as they were then known) model an effect Rossetti persistently sought from his own poems: a dreamlike commingling of presence and retrospect, strangeness and familiarity.

Alice Meynell's enduring interest in God's resistance to being fully known forms the subject of my fourth chapter. Unlike those who saw God's hiddenness as evidence of a terrifying absence or brutal abandonment, Meynell persistently shapes forms of unknowing as a resource for faith. I argue that this focus has striking affinities with the thought of John Henry Newman, the leading English Catholic thinker of the nineteenth century. What makes Meynell's shaping of these concerns distinctive is her adoption of the Virgin Mary as a figure for modelling and thinking through the limits of human knowledge of the divine. These questions turn out to be intimately linked to Meynell's acute sense of poetry's own refusal to yield crystallised knowledge.

My final chapter explores Thomas Hardy's attention to the dangers and difficulties of knowing other people. Hardy's poems dramatise the pitfalls of forms of interpersonal knowing modelled on investigative styles of reading, suggesting that more fruitful and imaginative modes of engagement may depend upon relinquishing the desire for secure knowledge. Turning from methods to motivations, I argue that Hardy tests the much touted connection between knowing and *loving* to breaking point, exposing the scepticism and despair hiding inside the fantasy of perfect knowledge posited by his friend, the idealist philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart. In its place, Hardy fashions a form of unknowing in which the opacity of persons (to themselves, and to others) fosters a flexibility and generosity of mind whose pattern he finds in poetry.

I

Clough, Emerson, and Knowingness

> The disease of our time is its smartness, cleverness—that hellish New England hunger to know something.
>
> WALT WHITMAN[1]

In his essay 'Montaigne, or the Skeptic' (from his 1850 collection *Representative Men*), Ralph Waldo Emerson closes in on a kind of cloistered conceitedness: '"Ah," said my languid gentleman at Oxford, "there's nothing new, or true,—and no matter."'[2] Emerson's Oxonian stooge has his genesis in a note of 1848, made during Emerson's first visit to the city at the invitation of a young Fellow and aspiring poet, Arthur Hugh Clough. Curiously, Emerson attributes the remark in his journal to a 'country gentleman'—perhaps one of his Oxford acquaintances had repeated it to him with this attribution and he later decided it was more characteristic of the teller.[3] Emerson had been giving lectures on Montaigne (among others) all over Britain in the months leading up to his meeting with Clough, and his British tour seems to have left a mark on his thinking about Montaigne's *Essays*, since shortly after leaving Oxford he acquired a brand new copy.[4] By an intriguing symmetry, two weeks before he began work on *Dipsychus and the Spirit*, Clough wrote to Emerson to

---

[1] Quoted in Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 8, ed. Jeanne Chapman and Robert MacIsaac (Oregon House, CA: Bentley, 1996), 272.
[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Montaigne, or the Skeptic', in *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* [1850], *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 4, ed. Wallace E. Williams and Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 83–106: 88.
[3] See *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 16 vols, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960–82), 10. 246.
[4] On the lecture tour, see Sealts, 'Historical Introduction', in *Journals and Notebooks*, 10. xi–lxv: xlv–xlvi; on Emerson's acquisition, see *Journals and Notebooks*, 10. 282. As Sealts explains, Emerson appears to have made significant changes to the 'Montaigne' lecture in 1849 as he revised it for publication, although no manuscripts survive ('Historical Introduction', lix).

thank him for a copy of *Representative Men*.[5] The essay on Montaigne in particular seems to have struck a chord with Clough, since he co-opts the very words of Emerson's gentleman scholar ('And nothing's new and nothing's true') for the jaunty counsel of despair which haunts Dipsychus in a dream.[6] Taking off from this circle of allusions, I want to suggest that Clough's most elusive of poems owes a profound debt to Emerson's essays, and to argue more broadly that Clough's poetry is animated by a resistance to the outlook of Emerson's languid Oxonian. The attitude that expresses itself in these terms is the one Emerson elsewhere called 'knowingness': the supercilious confidence in what one already knows, the complacent assumption that there is nothing else *to* know, the over-attachment to knowing as a means of orienting oneself towards the world.[7]

Emerson's interrogation of knowingness, then, puts in question a certain disposition, rather than erudition. Consider the winking insinuations of the dream-voice, which make knowing a matter of experience rather than learning: 'You should have gone at least to college, / And got a little ampler knowledge'.[8] The strain of 'knowingness' that these lines articulate is that which one Victorian commentator censured in contemporary music-hall, an affair of 'innuendoes', 'self-conceit', and 'shallow wit'.[9] This rather po-faced portrayal is indebted to Hazlitt's 1823 portrait of the cockney, condemned for his

---

[5] See Arthur Hugh Clough to Emerson, 22 July 1850, in *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. F. H. Mulhauser, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 1. 284.
[6] Clough, *Dipsychus and the Spirit*, 1. 7. 106–7, in *Clough: Selected Poems*, ed. J. P. Phelan (London: Longman, 1995), 195 (henceforth *SPC*). I have chosen to cite from this edition of *Dipsychus* because F. L. Mulhauser's standard Oxford scholarly edition (which I cite for all of Clough's other poems) conflates the second and third revisions of the poem, misrepresenting its textual history. The poem was never finished and remains in a fragmentary state in manuscript, presenting complex editorial issues which Phelan has confronted with greater care than anyone else. Phelan outlines the relevant issues in his article 'The Textual Evolution of Clough's *Dipsychus and the Spirit*', *Review of English Studies* 46.182 (1995), 230–39.
[7] Emerson, 'Experience', in *Essays: Second Series* [1844], *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3, ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 25–50: 31. For a more positive reading of knowingness as 'the glue of social discourse', see Simon Goldhill, 'On Knowingness', *Critical Inquiry* 32.4 (2006), 708–23: 722.
[8] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 7. 39–40, in *SPC*, 194.
[9] 'Our Music Halls', *Tinsley's Magazine* 4 (April 1869), 216–23: 219, 218. See also Peter Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture', *Past & Present* 144 (1994), 138–70.

'ground of native shallowness mounted with pertness and conceit', which forms 'that *knowing* character which he so much affects'.[10] The evolution in usage of the adjective 'knowing'—often held at an ironic distance in the period by the use of quotation marks or italics—testifies to the significant cultural currency which this attitude acquired over the nineteenth century. Early on it had signified familiarity with the secrets of the turf, and by extension an eye for fashion (as in the 'very knowing gigs' glanced at in *Sense and Sensibility*).[11] As the century progressed, however, it took on an increasingly satirical edge, and is almost always wielded to comic effect by Dickens and Thackeray, in whose hands it batters the pretensions of the workhouse board, Miss Mowcher, Pendennis, and many besides.[12] It is this very knowing deployment of the rhetoric of knowingness to which Edith Hall refers when she observes that, in the nineteenth century, 'those who used the term "knowingness" or its cognates in a tone of disparagement were invariably asserting a position of superiority in class, taste and actual education'.[13]

And yet this is only half the story, as a sentence from one of George Eliot's letters suggests: 'If there is one attitude more odious to me than any other of the many attitudes of "Knowingness"', she wrote, 'it is that air of lofty superiority to the vulgar.'[14] Similarly, Thomas Carlyle had the intellectuals rather than the masses in his sights when he repeatedly inveighed against 'the *vulpine* intellect, with its knowingness', a quality he

---

[10] William Hazlitt, 'On Londoners and Country People', in *The Plain Speaker* [1826], *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, vol. 8, ed. Duncan Wu (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), 61–70: 67, 65.
[11] See 'knowing one, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. November 2010), accessed 1 September 2021; 'knowing, *adj.*', 4b, *OED Online* (pubd. November 2010), accessed 1 September 2021.
[12] See Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* [1838], ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 10; *David Copperfield* [1850], ed. Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), 319; William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis* [1849–50], ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1994), 228.
[13] Edith Hall, 'The Aesopic in Aristophanes', in Emmanuela Bakola et al. (eds.), *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of the Genres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 277–97: 283.
[14] George Eliot to Eugène Bodichon, 12 May 1863, in *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954–79), 4. 85.

elided with 'Scepticism' and 'lofty self-complacency'.[15] Bridging these two broad characterisations of knowingness was the contemporaneous emergence of the term 'know-it-all', which the *OED* traces to 1849, along with the associated phrase '*to think one knows it all*'—'to have an inflated idea of one's knowledge, wisdom, expertise […] to be oblivious to one's deficiencies'—which it dates to 1857.[16] These mid-century developments in the language gave broader cultural traction to a phenomenon previously associated with the rather recherché term 'sciolist' ('A person whose knowledge is only superficial, esp. one who makes much of it').[17] In his journal for 1853–54, Emerson identified this term with a refrain similar to that of his Oxford man: 'The young sciolist', he wrote, 'learns to say what is true in this is not new, & what is new is not true'.[18] While Emerson's sciolist is distinguished from his Oxonian by admitting the possibility of novelty and truth, both figures root their identity in their superior knowledge even as their capacity for knowing has dwindled into a clutch of rhetorical and psychological reflexes. It is this ethos that Clough's dream-voice inhabits, and he has mastered its Victorian repertoire: for if he struts with music-hall swagger, he also strikes a philosophical tone with his dismissals of love, justice, and even pleasure as the delusions of inferior minds: 'O piddling merchant justice go, / Exacter rules than yours we know'.[19] The dream-voice's 'we' invokes an imagined community, indeed an aristocracy, of knowers, inviting the listening Dipsychus into the collusive ranks of those supposedly in the know.

---

[15] Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as King', in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* [1841], ed. H. D. Traill (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897), 196–244: 227, 215; *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels* [1839], 2 vols, ed. H. D. Traill (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 2. 183.
[16] 'know-it-all, *n.* and *adj.*', A, *OED Online* (pubd. online November 2010); 'know, *v.*', P34, *OED Online* (pubd. online November 2010). Accessed 1 September 2021.
[17] 'sciolist, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. online March 2014), accessed 1 September 2021.
[18] See Emerson, *Journals and Notebooks* 13. 271.
[19] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 7. 99–100, in *SPC*, 195.

These characterological definitions of knowingness are supplemented in the period by Coleridge's suggestive account of it as a form of literary affect. In his lecture notes on Sterne, Coleridge censured

> A sort of *knowingness* the wit of which depends 1st on the modesty, it gives pain to; or 2ndly the innocence & innocent ignorance over which it triumphs; or 3. on a certain oscillation in the individual's own mind between the remaining Good and the encroaching Evil of his nature, a sort of dallying with the Devil[20]

Just such an oscillation is the subject of Clough's bedevilled verse-drama, whose 'two-souled' hero pre-empts his own 1853 call for a poetry 'in all points tempted as we are'.[21] Clough's writing craves the drama of temptation, the unresisted torsions of 'the appetite, / The enjoyment, the aftervoid, the thinking of it'.[22] Unlike *Faust*, however, which pursues the consequences of its protagonist's submission to the temptation of knowledge, *Dipsychus* is a protracted dalliance with knowingness in various forms. Coleridge's further suggestion that knowingness has to do with immodesty anticipates Emerson's critique of 'impudent knowingness' in his essay 'Experience'—a phrase whose sexual connotations are exfoliated by his subsequent observation that 'The art of life has a pudency, and will not be exposed'.[23] As Richard Poirier has glossed this passage, such knowingness, 'resentful of anything it cannot explain […] exposes the genitalia, as if, by pointing to this or that or any other single organ, it could explain desire or the productivity of mind'.[24] Alexis de Tocqueville regarded this fault as a peculiarly American one: 'they readily conclude', he wrote in 1840, 'that everything in the world can be explained and that

---

[20] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Lectures on the Principles of Judgement, Culture, and European Literature: Lecture 9' [1818], in *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 5, 2 vols, ed. R. A Foakes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 2. 167–82: 174.
[21] Clough, 'Recent English Poetry', *North American Review* 77 (July 1853), 1–30: 3.
[22] Clough, *Adam and Eve*, 1. 3–4, in *The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. F. L. Mulhauser, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 165 (henceforth *TPC*).
[23] Emerson, 'Experience', 40.
[24] Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 53.

nothing surpasses the limits of intelligence'.[25] In similar vein, Clough's college friend John Campbell Shairp deplored the 'too great knowingness' of the Whiggish historiography on which his generation had been reared: with such chroniclers 'the most complex characters are explained down to the ground', he complained, and 'when they have said their say, there remains no more behind'.[26] By contrast, Emerson asserts that, for each man, 'The last chamber, the last closet, he must feel, was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown'.[27] In a culture saturated with knowingness, Clough and Emerson repeatedly pressed the claims of this residuum. 'Let there be Priests, if you please, to preserve the known', Clough confided to his notebook as he was composing the first drafts of *Dipsychus*; 'But there shall also be Priests to vindicate the unknown.'[28]

Reading Clough alongside Emerson gives the lie to Geoffrey Tillotson's claim that 'for Clough there was no virtue in ignorance of any sort' and encourages us to see the poems' characteristic unsettledness as something other than the melancholy music of one who 'felt more than most men the weight of the unintelligible world', as Clough's friend Walter Bagehot would later write of him.[29] Isobel Armstrong has observed that Matthew Arnold's 1865 portrait of Clough as Thyrsis, the shattered shepherd-poet—whose 'piping took a troubled sound', 'a stormy note / Of men contention-tossed, of men who groan'—set the tone for Clough's critical reception throughout the nineteenth century and

---

[25] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [1835–40], tr. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, NY: Library of America, 2004), 484.
[26] John Campbell Shairp, *Aspects of Poetry: Being Lectures Delivered at Oxford* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1881), 431.
[27] Emerson, 'Circles', in *Essays: First Series* [1841], *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 177–90: 182.
[28] Clough, 'Paper on Religion' [c. 1850], in *Selected Prose Works of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Buckner R. Trawick (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1964), 287–89: 288. Trawick suggests this dating at 338.
[29] Geoffrey Tillotson, 'Clough's Bothie', in *Mid-Victorian Studies*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Kathleen Tillotson (London: Athlone Press, 1965), 118–44: 119; Walter Bagehot, 'Mr Clough's Poems', *National Review* 13 (October 1862), 310–26: 326.

beyond.[30] John Addington Symonds, for example, described the prevailing view of Clough's poems in 1868 as 'the waverings of a discontented spirit ill at ease'.[31] It is a short step from here to Coventry Patmore's 1888 estimate of the poetry as a 'slough of introspection and doubt', and on towards George Saintsbury's uncharitable portrait of the poet as one 'with neither the strength to believe nor the courage to disbelieve'.[32] But in truth Arnold's portrayal merely reinforced existing prejudices. In one of the most sustained Victorian appraisals of Clough's work, published in response to the collected edition published shortly after the poet's death in 1861, W. Y. Sellar regretted the poems' 'morbid misgivings' at considerable length, while Lytton Strachey's swaggeringly subversive account in *Eminent Victorians* (1918) of the overgrown schoolboy 'with the weak ankles and the solemn face' merely echoes the condescension of some of Clough's most conservative early Victorian critics, like the 1849 reviewer who censured his 'unhealthy exhalations'.[33]

Restoring Emerson to the frame significantly qualifies this long critical tradition, and is no less inviting when one reflects that the connections between each writer's work remain conspicuously underexplored. Only Paul Giles and Adam Phillips, who persuasively identify Emerson as an interlocutor in *Amours de Voyage*, have taken up Evelyn Greenberger's suggestion, now nearly fifty years old, that the evidence 'warrants

---

[30] Isobel Armstrong, *Arthur Hugh Clough* (London: British Council, 1962), 12; Matthew Arnold, 'Thyrsis', ll. 48, 223–24, in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott, revd. Miriam Farris Allott (London: Longman, 1979), 541, 549 (henceforth *PMA*).
[31] John Addington Symonds, 'Arthur Hugh Clough', *Fortnightly Review* 24 (December 1868), 589–617: 605.
[32] Coventry Patmore, 'Arthur Hugh Clough', *St James's Gazette* 7 (August 1888), repr. in *Arthur Hugh Clough: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Thorpe (London: Routledge, 1972), 335–39: 338. George Saintsbury, *A History of Nineteenth-Century Literature 1780–1900* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 317. See also Edmund Gosse's 1921 assessment of Clough as 'a derelict schooner' for whom life 'all petered out' and Katharine Chorley's later, Freud-inflected account of his 'deep-seated fear of committing oneself'. See Gosse, 'Clough', in *Books on the Table* (London: Heinemann, 1921), 127–36: 132, 130, and Chorley, *Arthur Hugh Clough: The Uncommitted Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 360.
[33] W. Y. Sellar, review of *Poems by Arthur Hugh Clough* (1862), *North British Review* 37 (November 1862), repr. in Thorpe, *Critical Heritage*, 175–94: 193; Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* [1918], ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2003), 164; unsigned review of *Ambarvalia* and *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*, *The Guardian* 4 (March 1849), repr. in Thorpe, *Critical Heritage*, 78–84: 83.

more sustained attention and interpretation than it has hitherto received' and 'may yield further insight into a turbulent period in Clough's life and writings'.[34] Given that Clough's poetic output is largely concentrated during those years in which his friendship with Emerson was most intense—roughly 1848 to 1854—Greenberger perhaps even understates the case. Clough's recent bicentenary seems an opportune moment to reopen inquiries.[35]

Emerson's concept of knowingness also provides a new point of reference for wider critical discussion about Clough's intellectual bearings, which in recent years has tended to construe his poetry as an arena for testing the strength of 'scepticism' against various contemporary ideals: the 'spiritual optimism' of the New World (Paul Giles) or the 'sincerity' and 'commitment' of republican duty (Anna Barton).[36] Unlike scepticism, knowingness denotes neither a method nor a philosophical position, but rather a particular manner of holding a position. It therefore has affinities with the quality of mind Clough called 'positiveness', which Gregory Tate paraphrases as 'moral and intellectual overconfidence'.[37] Emerson's term, however, is perhaps the more versatile, both because it suggests how this attitude might involve a travesty of knowing and because it avoids the impression that such overconfidence is always in the interest of assertion rather than denial. While Tate pitches Clough's 'irrepressible scepticism' against the perceived threat

---

[34] See Paul Giles, 'Arthur Hugh Clough and the Poetics of Dissent', in *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 112–34; Adam Phillips, 'Arthur Hugh Clough: The Reception and Conception of *Amours de Voyage*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 385–99; Evelyn Greenberger, *Arthur Hugh Clough: The Growth of a Poet's Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 105.

[35] During these years Clough wrote the *Ambarvalia* lyrics, *Adam and Eve*, *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich*, *Amours de Voyage*, and *Dipsychus*. Following his return from the United States in 1853, Clough's poetic output was limited to revisions of the latter two poems and the short *Mari Magno* tales composed during his final months.

[36] Giles, 'Poetics of Dissent', 120; Anna Barton, 'Liberal Republicanism: Clough, Barrett Browning and Swinburne', in *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Liberal Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 179–232: 186.

[37] Gregory Tate, 'Clough, Arnold, and the Dialogue of the Mind', in *The Poet's Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 59–90: 59.

of 'positiveness', Emerson will suggest how scepticism itself might manifest as knowingness.[38] Angling a critical lens on the phenomenon of Victorian knowingness, then, provides a way of rethinking Clough's intellectual affiliations, offering a new perspective on his artistry while building a fuller picture of the transatlantic traffic in ideas in the mid-nineteenth century. In this chapter I show first how thoroughly *Dipsychus* is engaged in a conversation with Emerson's essays: exposing the sinuosities of self-deception involved in two rival kinds of knowingness, those Emerson dubbed the 'materialist' and the 'abstractionist', the poem shapes a powerful antidote in the form of unknowing encounter. Turning to Clough's wider poetry, I then explore how the Emersonian theme of the unknowability of the future fosters a spacious sense of freedom and possibility in the present.

Dangerous to Know

Having devoured Emerson's essays as a student, Clough later secured an introduction through family friends and in late 1847 invited him to Oxford, an offer which Emerson took up the following spring. Within six months of that visit, Clough had quitted his fellowship of Oriel College—a shocking, principled resignation from an essentially religious institution that mirrored Emerson's own abandonment of his ministry in the Unitarian Church at the very same age of twenty-nine.[39] The pair maintained a close friendship, Clough admitting that he had 'largely learnt' from Emerson, and Emerson

[38] Ibid., 65. For the same reason Emersonian knowingness sits slightly aslant to that which Andrew H. Miller identifies in a wonderfully evocative essay on John Henry Newman. Miller explicitly defines 'knowingness' as a 'denial of skepticism', though he does not historicise either term. See 'Responsiveness, Knowingness, and John Henry Newman', in *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 142–61: 142.
[39] See Anthony Kenny, *Arthur Hugh Clough: A Poet's Life* (London: Continuum, 2005), 64, 125–26, 134.

avowing that Clough 'interested me more than any other companion'.[40] Clough even joined Emerson in America for a time in the early 1850s, intent on a new life in the country where he had spent his early youth, but he returned to England in 1853 and married Blanche Smith the following year.[41]

The relationship between Emerson and Clough is perhaps best conceived less as a question of 'influence' (what, after all, could be less Emersonian than emulation?) than of tenacious attention and friendly provocation, in both directions. Another passage in Emerson's journals from 1848—a year in which he and Clough kept daily company for a month in revolutionary Paris ahead of a further two months of close contact during Emerson's English lecture tour—describes a rapport sustained by companionable independence of mind.[42] ''Tis, I think, the most real benefit I have had from my English visit, this genius of Clough', Emerson wrote. 'I found him the best *pièce de resistance*, & tough adherence, that one could desire.'[43] Adherence, rather than adherent, because what Emerson admires is Clough's ability to grasp ideas, not merely nod along—a tactility of mind suggested by this passage's other terms of approbation, 'tenacity' and 'apprehensiveness'.[44] Emerson's Gallicism, meanwhile, carries not only the redundant sense of something superlative but, more importantly, the ideas of strength and endurance conveyed by the French phrase *de résistance*, meanings which bring it into parallel with 'tough adherence'.[45] And yet it is also shaded by the other meaning of resistance as opposition, and both senses are operative on those occasions Emerson names 'resistance' as an attribute of genius. 'The Over-Soul', from the 1841 series of essays which Clough

---

[40] Clough to Emerson, 26 November 1847, in *Correspondence*, 1. 187; Emerson to Blanche Clough, 14 January 1862, in *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 408.
[41] See Kenny, *Life*, 234–64.
[42] See ibid., 129–30.
[43] Emerson, 22 December 1848, in *Journals and Notebooks*, 11. 64.
[44] Emerson, *Journals and Notebooks*, 11. 64.
[45] See 'résistance', *Collins Robert French Dictionary*, 9th edn. (Glasgow: Collins, 2010), 832.

read in five days shortly after graduating, hails those who 'must always be a godsend to princes, for they confront them, a king to a king, without ducking or concession, and give a high nature the refreshment and satisfaction of resistance'.[46] Emerson returns to the theme in the later essay 'Character', describing the 'ingenious' man as a 'goad' who, instead of dispensing 'nimble pieces of benevolence and etiquette […] shall stand stoutly in his place, and let me apprehend, if it were only his resistance'—a process which procures 'great refreshment for both of us'.[47] Rather than hypostatising genius into an essence, Emerson conceives it as a power that manifests itself in encounter. In Clough's poetry, insisting on such an ethic and aesthetic of encounter becomes a powerful means of contending against knowingness.

Dilemmas of encounter—'What are we to resist, and what are we to be friend with?', as Clough puts it in *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich*—power the drama of *Dipsychus*, taking their cue in part from Emerson's essay on Montaigne.[48] *Dipsychus* not only asks the same questions which Emerson raises in that essay—the 'Why? and Whereto?' of religious belief, and of social arrangements like marriage and the market economy—it also shares its dialectical method of interrogating these questions.[49] Emerson frames his discussion like this:

> Shall the young man aim at a leading part in law, in politics, in trade? It will not be pretended that a success in either of these kinds is quite coincident with what is best and inmost in his mind. Shall he, then, cutting the stays that hold him fast to the social state, put out to sea with no guidance but his genius? There is much to say on both sides.[50]

---

[46] Emerson, 'The Over-Soul', in *Essays: First Series*, 157–76: 172. For Clough's reading, see *The Oxford Diaries of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Anthony Kenny, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182.
[47] Emerson, 'Character', in *Essays: Second Series*, 51–68: 58–59.
[48] Clough, *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich*, 9. 50, in *TPC*, 89.
[49] Emerson, 'Montaigne', 85.
[50] Ibid., 90.

In 1850 such questions were far from academic for Clough. He was agonising over political and economic problems, not least those presented by his experience in the short-lived Roman Republic. And if he had hoped that London's nonconformist University Hall would offer a refuge from the sectarianism which poisoned Oxford for him, he had been sadly undeceived—as he wrote to Matthew's younger brother Tom Arnold in late 1849,

> I have no confidence in my own tenure. For intolerance, O Tom, is not confined to the cloisters of Oxford or the pews of the establishment, but comes up like the tender herb—*partout.*[51]

He had turned thirty, and was wondering more urgently than ever what to do with his life—the 'Why? and Whereto?' of it all.

Emerson structures these questions as a missed encounter between two versions of knowingness, which he dubs the 'materialist' and the 'abstractionist' respectively.[52] It is a structure which echoes that of Emerson's earlier 1841 lecture, 'The Transcendentalist', which located similarly antagonistic tendencies within the same, self-divided mind: 'The worst feature of this double consciousness,' Emerson proclaimed,

> is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other, never meet and measure each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise.[53]

Dipsychus brings Emerson's fantasy of a double consciousness to life, availing itself of the more dramatic construction of the letter essay on Montaigne while hinting that the

---

[51] Clough to Tom Arnold, 29 October 1849, in *Correspondence*, 1. 274.
[52] Emerson, 'Montaigne', 88.
[53] Emerson, 'The Transcendentalist', in *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* [1849], *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, ed. Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 201–16: 213.

alternative types there delineated may exist in the same person ('Myself or not myself?' Dipsychus wonders of the Spirit).[54]

The first party identified in 'Montaigne' are the men of 'talent and action', conversant with 'facts and surfaces; cities and persons'.[55] Emerson's paratactic briskness mimics the superficial orderliness of a mind for whom persons are blithely interchangeable with places. The worldly-minded Spirit who shadows Dipsychus expresses himself in similarly ship-shape fashion: everything fits neatly together in his hudibrastic couplets as in his worldview. Like Emerson's materialists, the Spirit takes for granted the authority of a common standard conceived in the thinnest of terms—his 'stock of knowledge' is a hoard of 'facts' and 'common sense'.[56] Yet if he defers to common knowledge the Spirit also enjoys a more collusive sense of knowingness in rhymes like 'piety' / 'society' and 'robbing' / 'stock-jobbing'.[57] Fashioning himself as one who simultaneously sees through and exploits prevailing pieties, there is an irony about the Spirit's name that is entirely apt. In early drafts, however, Clough called him 'Mephistopheles', and he bears a striking resemblance to Goethe's version of this character as evoked by Emerson in another essay from *Representative Men*, 'Goethe, or the Writer'.[58] Like Goethe's tempter, Clough's Spirit has been 'stripped of mythologic gear' and made to sound like a 'gentleman': he is 'real', 'modern', and 'European', with his 'savoir-vivre, savoir-faire'.[59] Emerson's portrait of Mephistopheles is heavily indebted to Carlyle, who represented Goethe's character as a diabolical knower, 'the Devil, not of Superstition, but of Knowledge'.[60] Puffed up with

---

[54] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 2. 19, in *SPC*, 163.
[55] Emerson, 'Montaigne', 85.
[56] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 5. 143, 2. 4. 115, 2. 3. 175, in *SPC*, 222, 215, 211.
[57] Ibid., 1. 4. 101–2, 1. 5. 166–67, in *SPC*, 176, 182.
[58] See Clough, *Selected Poems*, 157. The Spirit also answers to 'Mephistopheles' at 2. 2. 44 and 2. 7. 58, in *SPC*, 203, 229.
[59] Emerson, 'Goethe, or the Writer', in *Representative Men*, 149–68: 159; Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 2. 72, in *SPC*, 204.
[60] Carlyle, 'Goethe's Helena', in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* [1838–39], ed. H. D. Traill, 5 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 1. 146–97: 157.

'self-conceit' about his 'shrewd, all-informed intellect', Carlyle's Mephistopheles—like Clough's Spirit—is blind to the narrowness of his knowledge.[61]

Carlyle's antipathy to knowingness maps out the terrain which Emerson was to claim for his own in 'Experience', from his *Second Series* of 1844 which Clough commended to his sister Anne.[62] Among Emerson's targets in this essay are physicians and phrenologists who profess to draw up the 'inventory' of a man's 'fortunes and character' by 'such cheap signboards as the color of his beard, or the slope of his occiput', and it is in this context that he memorably concludes, 'The grossest ignorance does not disgust like this impudent knowingness'.[63] In this passage, Emerson explicitly aligns knowingness with 'materialists', the same class he rebukes in 'Montaigne' as those who 'make themselves merry with the philosopher, and weigh man by the pound'.[64] Such downright, no-nonsense types 'believe that mustard bites the tongue' and that 'there is much sentiment in a chest of tea'.[65] Clough's Spirit appears to be of this party: 'This is what comes of drinking tea', he sneers when Dipsychus turns lyrical about resisting his enticements.[66]

The Spirit's distinguishing characteristic, however, like that of Emerson's Mephistopheles, is his recruitment of 'intellect' to 'the service of the senses', evident in his witty dismissal of philosophical idealism:

> These juicy meats, this flashing wine,
> May be an unreal mere appearance;
> Only—for my inside, in fine,

---

[61] Ibid.
[62] As Greenberger notes, 'Clough must have been familiar with both Emerson's first and second series of essays by 1845, when Anne, whose reading Clough guided, was studying the second series' (*Growth of a Poet's Mind*, 104–5). Among Clough's papers in the Bodleian is an inventory of his library at his death, which includes 'Emerson's Essays', 'Emerson's Poems', 'Emerson's English Traits', and 'Emerson's Representative Men' (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. misc. c. 359, f. 155[r]).
[63] Emerson, 'Experience', 31.
[64] Ibid.; 'Montaigne', 87.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 6. 32, in *SPC*, 187.

> They have a singular coherence.[67]

Coherence, mimed here in the Spirit's feminine rhyme, is a quality about which Clough's poem persistently encourages suspicion. The Spirit imposes coherence through the levelling effect of his cynicism, which interprets everything as a product of (or an opportunity for) self-seeking. His ruthlessly reductive theory of human motives derives part of its appeal from its deconstructive verve, the way it makes friends of apparently contradictory phenomena: describing himself as 'This compound of convention and impiety, / This mongrel of uncleanness and propriety', he allows rhythm and rhyme to break apart the chiastic structure of his sense and fetch out hidden correspondences ('*c*onvention' / 'unc*l*eanness', 'imp*iety*' / 'propr*iety*').[68]

The Spirit's tactics foster a dynamic of knowingness akin to that evoked by Coleridge: a 'dallying with the Devil',

> so that the mind has in its own white & black angel the same or similar amusements as might be supposed to take place between an old Debauchee and a Prude—resentment from the prudential anxiety to preserve appearances, & have a character, and an inward sympathy with the Enemy.[69]

Simultaneously debunking and delighting in the stage-play of appearances, Clough's Spirit tunes the form as well as the substance of his speeches so as to invite collusion in his debaucheries. Meanwhile Dipsychus, worried about 'the good word / Of fellow men' and 'sanction of the law', supplies the amusement of Coleridge's prude with his self-titillating portrait of the prostitute, his own rhetoric acting like the very 'pawey fingers' he condemns:[70]

---

[67] Emerson, 'Montaigne', 87; Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 5. 76–79, in *SPC*, 179.
[68] Ibid., 2. 5. 49–50, in *SPC*, 219.
[69] Coleridge, 'Lecture 9', 2. 174.
[70] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 3. 207–8, 1. 3. 110, in *SPC*, 172.

> The ripe lips paled, the frolick pulses stilled,
> The quick eye dead, the once fair flushing cheek
> Flaccid under its paint; the once heaving bosom—[71]

Yet there is another, graver aspect to Dipsychus's parrying of the Spirit: his Platonic yearning to escape material conditions altogether. As the Spirit scornfully puts it, Dipsychus attempts to 'Live in metaphysic', regarding any active role he might take in life as fatally corrupt and corrupting, leaving only the non-option of 'abstaining': 'Oh, could I shoot my thought up to the sky, / A column of pure shape', he yearns.[72] Sexualised imagery notwithstanding, this Dipsychus turns out to be less like Coleridge's libidinous prude than one of Emerson's 'abstractionists', who decry all those 'who are not devoted to their own shining abstractions' as 'monsters'.[73] Indeed, it is because he is unable to conceive of participation in the world except via the trope of sexual knowledge that Dipsychus attempts to barricade himself against experience, casting the Spirit as a 'filthy Belial'.[74] The abstractions to which Dipsychus is devoted twinkle inaccessibly overhead, so abstract they are scarcely named except in the circular language of purity: 'Clear stars above', he cries,

> Take up my being into yours; assume
> My sense to know you only; steep my brain
> In your essential purity.[75]

Longing to be assumed into a heaven of abstraction, to exchange being for pure knowing, Dipsychus's desire for 'essential purity' slides between a visceral horror of worldly corruption and an impossible demand for certainty: he refuses in one breath to 'call the

---

[71] Ibid., 1. 3. 106–8, in *SPC*, 168.
[72] Ibid., 2. 5. 154, 1. 5. 52, 2. 3. 140–41, in *SPC*, 223, 178, 210.
[73] Emerson, 'Montaigne', 86.
[74] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 3. 24, in *SPC*, 166.
[75] Ibid., 1. 2. 51–54, in *SPC*, 164.

unstable sure / The unlovely lovely and the filthy pure'.[76] Praying to be left alone to 'know my knowledge to the world unknown', this Dipsychus is a study in knowingness of a more exclusive and precipitous order than that envisaged by Coleridge—as if the only thing one could do with one's knowledge were to know it, and as though such knowledge, '*my* knowledge', were private property.[77] If for a moment it sounds like knowing is something Dipsychus might *do* 'to the world', this possibility is peered at only to be foreclosed by 'unknown', whose own ambiguity of reference suggests both that Dipsychus's *knowledge* is unknown and that, by remaining unknown *himself*, he intends to keep it that way.

Stanley Cavell, most Emersonian of philosophers, sheds further light on Dipsychus's brand of knowingness with his portrayal of the post-Cartesian sceptic, whom he characterises as

> the thinker wishing to bring assertion to its greatest fastidiousness, refusing our knowledge as of the world, so refusing the world, because he cannot satisfy our apparently *pure* demand for certainty, or demand for pure certainty.[78]

This overweening will to knowledge finds an echo in Dipsychus's lament that the world in which he finds himself does not match up to the 'true world which our reason knew', his baffled quest for 'purity', 'perfection', and 'permanence'.[79] Like the Spirit, Dipsychus is entranced by the idea of coherence, except that his version is ruthlessly exclusionary rather than ruthlessly reductive. 'Life should be as the gondola!' becomes his refrain in the lengthy canal scene, 'In one unbroken passage borne / To closing night from opening morn!'[80] The iambic stress-pattern throws a desperate weight onto Dipsychus's 'should',

---

[76] Ibid., *Dipsychus*, 1. 5. 65–66, in *SPC*, 179.
[77] These lines are omitted from Phelan's edition as they belong to the third revision; therefore see Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 5. 83, in *TPC*, 240.
[78] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.
[79] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 1. 3. 7, 1. 2. 54, 1. 5. 52, 1. 3. 209, in *SPC*, 165, 164, 172.
[80] Ibid., 1. 5. 255, 1. 5. 27–28, in *SPC*, 185, 177.

but the regulating force of his metre is no more sustainable than his epistemology: as the Spirit protests, 'I'm deadly weary of your tune, / And half-*ennuyé* with the moon'.[81] Dipsychus's demand for certain knowledge constitutes a refusal of the world in advance, because it defines the knowledge he so anxiously desires as not of this world, the celestial preserve of stars and sky.

Cavell's insight suggests that Dipsychus's yearnings might be the twin, not the rival, of the dream-voice's sceptical assertions. This suggestion finds support in the text, for Dipsychus tacitly accepts the sceptical conclusions of his dream-tormentor, acknowledging his heavenly fancies as a screen for darker perceptions:

> O in our nook unknown unseen,
> We'll hold our fancy like a screen
> Us and the dreadful fact between.[82]

Moreover, while critics have tended to read the dream utterances as a 'logical extension' of all the Spirit has said, in fact the Spirit is quick to dissociate himself from the dream's more metaphysically charged discourse: 'really, you owe some apology / For harping thus upon theology', he objects.[83] Far from being a common-or-garden 'materialist' like the Spirit, the dream-voice aspires to the '*transcendently* cynical' part Clough himself confessed to playing sometimes at society parties.[84] This latter attitude is recognisable as a species of the 'all-corroding, all-dissolving scepticism' that Clough's erstwhile colleague at (and fellow fugitive from) Oriel, John Henry Newman, considered endemic in mid-

---

[81] Ibid., 1. 5. 226–27, in *SPC*, 184.
[82] Ibid., 1. 7. 50–52, in *SPC*, 194.
[83] Ibid., 1. 7. 132–33, in *SPC*, 196. For the standard view quoted here, see Mark Storey, 'The Sound of Distant Laughter: Clough', in *Poetry and Humour from Cowper to Clough* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 145–78: 172.
[84] Quoted from his unpublished letter to Blanche Smith, 21 January 1852, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Lett. e. 77, f. 65^{v} (emphasis mine).

Victorian intellectual culture.[85] *Dipsychus* suggests that this attitude is beguiled by the very sense of certainty it pretends to despise.

In making this suggestion Clough extends and refines upon Emerson's argument in 'Montaigne'. Emerson had suggested that the 'materialist' treads a path towards 'disgust' through the 'indifferentism' of his Oxford gentleman ('"there's nothing new or true,—and no matter"'). *Dipsychus* plots a slightly different trajectory: by cutting Emerson's final clause and attributing the remainder of his words to Dipsychus's dream ('nothing's new and nothing's true') he makes the phrase sound less like the Spirit's insouciant 'common sense' and more like an echo to Dipsychus's passion for the absolute. Dipsychus's sense of disgust, his persistent fear of filth and pollution, is shown to thrive not on indifferentism but on fastidiousness (even if, as we saw earlier, this fastidiousness is sometimes performative). It is the 'materialist' Spirit, by contrast, who contests his horror of contamination:

> To use the undistorted light of the sun
> Is not a crime; to look straight out upon
> The big plain things that stare one in the face
> Does not contaminate; to see pollutes not
> What one must feel if one won't see, what *is*,
> And will be too, howe'er we blink, and must
> One way or other make itself observed.
> Free walking's better than being led about; and
> What will the blind man do, I wonder, if
> Some one should cut the string of his dog?[86]

These lines are among the strongest in *Dipsychus*, lending weight to the Epilogue's intriguing suggestion about the Spirit: that 'perhaps he wasn't a devil after all'.[87] When he urged Dipsychus to 'see things simply as they are' a few scenes earlier, it was easy to dismiss this as a token of his narrow-minded knowingness: seeing things as they are turned

[85] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* [1864], ed. Ian Ker (London: Penguin, 1994), 218.
[86] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 5. 127–36, in *SPC*, 222.
[87] Clough, 'Epilogue' to *Dipsychus*, in *SPC*, 231.

out to mean adjusting one's vision to the cramped perspective of 'plain good common sense', rather than some more exacting, Arnoldian demand for objectivity.[88] Yet these later lines cannot be brushed aside as mere sophistry; their critique of blinkered vision identifies how both Dipsychus and the Spirit himself make experience hostage to their knowingness.

The alternative proposed to such forms of avoidance is the Emersonian one of self-reliance: 'Free walking's better than being led about'. The conviction of this claim owes much to the passage's subtle command of rhythm: rather than the clinching and clenched predictability of the Spirit's usual hudibrastics, these lines ramify in volatile and unexpected ways, giving form to his profession of freedom in the tactful deployment of pauses, inversions, and extrametrical syllables. The nub of the Spirit's argument, 'To see pollutes not'—which hovers momentarily as an independent unit of sense—gains its force from the way it compresses the mounting rhetorical tension roused by the overrunning syntax and hammering monosyllables of the previous lines. As for Clough's curiously passive construction of seeing ('must / One way or other make itself observed'), this harbours an echo of Emerson's insistence on the 'perfect faith' owed to 'involuntary perceptions' in 'Self-Reliance'.[89] To open one's eyes to such encounters is to break free from the shackles of the already known: to 'cast away' one's 'hoarded knowledge' that one might begin to 'know any thing rightly', as Emerson puts it in 'Circles'.[90] The Spirit's prosody makes palpable this sense of bursting bonds, the crafty introduction of an extra beat at the end of line 134 priming a reversal of rhythm from rising iambs to tumbling dactyls and trochees, feet whose momentum instantly recalls the vigorous dactylic energy of Clough's *Bothie*. The culminating image of the blind man, meanwhile, is a further

[88] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 3. 168, 2. 3. 175, in *SPC*, 211.
[89] Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', in *Essays: First Series*, 25–52: 37.
[90] Emerson, 'Circles', 189.

remembrance of 'Self-Reliance', in which Emerson had described 'conformity' as a game of 'blindman's-buff'.[91]

The Emersonian imperative to 'look straight out' is one Clough returned to in a letter to Blanche, portraying it as a means of clearing the ramparts erected by knowingness: 'The plain rule in all matters is, not to think what you are thinking about the question, but to look straight out at the things and let them affect you; otherwise how can you judge at all?'[92] Instead of the peculiarly self-conscious activity of thinking what you are thinking, a cognitive regress like Dipsychus's desire to know his knowledge, Clough advocates a vulnerable mode of receptivity and encounter as the basis for judgement, like that which Emerson had advanced in 'Intellect': 'Our thinking is a pious reception […] We only open our senses, clear away as we can all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see.'[93] Where Emerson closes the gap between seeing and thinking, Clough effects a parallel reconciliation between looking and judging; knowing, in both cases, is reinvented as a form of engagement rather than proprietorship.

This is an ideal, however, which Clough believed Emerson's writing did not always live up to. After meeting Emerson in person for the first time, Clough told Tom Arnold how pleased he was to find him 'much less Emersonian than his Essays. There is no dogmatism or arbitrariness or positiveness about him.'[94] Even in an essay like 'Montaigne' Emerson cannot resist the thundering injunction to 'let us know what we know for certain', a summons which risks reinscribing the recursive knowingness which the same essay so gleefully explodes.[95] Freedom from dogmatism, arbitrariness, and

---

[91] Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', 32.
[92] Clough to Blanche Smith, 9 March 1853, in *Letters and Remains of Arthur Hugh Clough* (London: Spottiswoode, 1865), 250–51. Compare also Claude's determination, in *Amours de Voyage*, to 'look straight out, see things, not try to evade them', 5. 100, in *TPC*, 129.
[93] Emerson, 'Intellect', in *Essays: First Series*, 191–206: 195.
[94] Clough to Tom Arnold, 16 July 1848, in *Correspondence*, 1. 216.
[95] Emerson, 'Montaigne', 90.

positiveness, by contrast, requires keeping the door open to the possibility of being gainsaid, cultivating an appetite for encounter—and resistance—that is as demanding as it is hospitable. Confronted with the failure of his quest for coherence, Dipsychus catches a glimmer of how it might be reimagined in these terms:

> Hints haunt me ever of a More beyond:
> I am rebuked by a sense of the incomplete,
> Of a completion over-soon assumed,
> Of adding up too soon.[96]

If he cannot bring himself to disavow completion, Dipsychus finds that the gap between this ideal and his attempts to realise it can nonetheless be figured as tantalising surplus as well as reproachful deficiency. His 'More beyond' may seem at first like a metaphysical makeshift, akin to his earlier proposal to 'Fix perfect homes in the unsubstantial sky, / And say, what is not, will be by-and-by'.[97] Yet by rooting the problem firmly in terrestrial time, the following lines make it sound less like a theological convenience and more like an Emersonian intuition of the inexhaustibility of experience. Taking the measure of the world would then appear as an open-ended invitation rather than an exercise in futility. The use of such arithmetic, Dipsychus perceives, is precisely this ability to take a new account. As 'Spiritual Laws', one of those essays that first ignited Clough's enthusiasm for Emerson, had suggested, 'To make habitually a new estimate,—that is elevation'.[98]

To ears still ringing with such exhortations, Arnold's chief complaint against Clough—that in his poetry he was 'ever learning, never coming to the knowledge of the truth'—might sound inadvertently gratifying.[99] No critic seems to have recognised that this frequently cited remark of Arnold's is almost a direct quotation from the Tractarian Isaac

---

[96] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 4. 39–42, in *SPC*, 213.
[97] Ibid., 1. 5. 71–72, in *SPC*, 179.
[98] Emerson, 'Spiritual Laws', in *Essays: First Series*, 75–96: 83.
[99] Arnold to Clough, 30 November 1853, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 1. 282.

Williams's influential 1838 treatise 'On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge' (*Tract LXXX*). It is a borrowing which is unlikely to have escaped Clough's notice, since 1838 marked what Anthony Kenny has described as 'the high point' of Clough's undergraduate 'flirtation with Tractarianism'.[100] Appealing to biblical and patristic example, Williams's tract argued for a wise discretion in the communication of religious truth, a doctrine referenced with contempt by the Spirit in *Dipsychus* ('You think half-showing, half concealing, / Is God's own method of revealing').[101] Arnold's allusion suggests that, by declining to rest in the security of knowledge (however dimly perceived), Clough's poetry risked what Williams called the 'unsettledness and inconsistency' of 'religious enthusiasm', which he characterised as 'a state of ever learning, and never coming to the knowledge of the truth'.[102] The wider context of Williams's remark is telling not only because the pejorative term 'enthusiasm', commonly levelled against Dissenters, ranges Clough with the Transcendentalist (and *quondam* Unitarian) Emerson against the Establishment, Anglican Arnold, but also because his supplementary charges glow with Emersonian resonance. It was Emerson, after all, who would write that 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds' and who would warn, or rather promise, his readers that he would 'unsettle all things'.[103]

Such 'onward thinking' inflects Clough's characteristic impulse towards dissent, pre-eminently self-dissent, the notorious 'dialogue of the mind with itself' which Arnold repudiated in the 1853 'Preface' to his *Poems* and which has become a commonplace of Clough criticism.[104] Yet Clough had pre-empted Arnold's critique in an unpublished essay

---

[100] Kenny, *Life*, 44.
[101] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 1. 31–32, in *SPC*, 200.
[102] Isaac Williams, 'On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge', in *Tracts for the Times*, vol. 4 (London: Rivington, 1840), 1–82: 57.
[103] Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', 33; 'Circles', 188.
[104] Emerson, 'History', in *Essays: First Series*, 1–24: 14; Arnold, 'Preface to First Edition of *Poems* (1853)', in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 1, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 1–15: 1.

written around the same time: though 'I cannot be in two places at once', he reasoned, 'shall I therefore refuse to visit them at different times?'[105] Clough saw that self-dialogue could be a cure as well as a disease: a baiting of boredom and despair, or at least a way of being less dutiful towards one's discontentments. Throughout the poems one senses the relief, the secret glee, of the pious schoolboy who once confessed in his diary: 'Feel almost inclined to sin because it seems monotonous to be good all day'.[106] Emerson's admiration for how 'the mind goes antagonizing on' in 'Experience' translates Arnold's notion of self-dialogue into a more positive register, no longer the pattern of helpless soliloquies but a model of alert, receptive, flexible intelligence, in flight from the captivity of knowingness.[107]

The Froward Chaos of Futurity

The desire not to let one's knowingness pre-empt one's experience makes a potent ally of the future, whose unknowability underwrites spacious notions of freedom and possibility in the present. Engagement with questions of futurity is not only crucial to *Dipsychus* but also the principal means by which Clough's conversation with Emerson is carried on beyond this poem. '[T]he coming only is sacred', declares Emerson in 'Circles', and his dethronement of knowingness in 'Experience' is at the same time the enthronement of the future: 'I had fancied that the value of life lay in its inscrutable possibilities; in the fact that I never know, in addressing myself to a new individual, what may befall me', Emerson writes.[108] 'Shall I preclude my future, by taking a high seat, and kindly adapting my

[105] Clough, 'Notes on the Religious Tradition', in *Selected Prose*, 289–96: 293. Based on the manuscript source, Trawick dates the essay to 1852–53 (338).
[106] Clough, unpublished diary entry, quoted in Rupert Christiansen, *The Voice of Victorian Sex: Arthur H. Clough* (London: Short Books, 2001), 22.
[107] Emerson, 'Experience', 39.
[108] Emerson, 'Circles', 189; 'Experience', 32.

conversation to the shape of heads?'[109] 'Self-Reliance', too, anchors its argument in the promise of futurity, decrying the misplaced reverence for one's past word or act that threatens to cripple 'self-trust'.[110] 'But why should you keep your head over your shoulder?' it demands; 'Greatness appeals to the future'.[111] In the opening letter of *Amours de Voyage*, Clough's anti-hero Claude draws a similar lesson from Rome's sedimentary layers of material culture, under whose historic heft he feels 'buried'.[112] In the same way, it is a 'blessing', he tells Eustace,

> to be rid, at least for a time, of
> All one's friends and relations,—yourself (forgive me!) included,—
> All the *assujettissement* of having been what one has been[113]

Claude's savoursome French loanword is not mere hexametrical ostentation but carries a singular nuance. As a contemporary dictionary explained, *assujettissement* implied an habitual state of subjection to be distinguished from the more transitive subjugation implied by *sujétion*: the difference, it noted, was between being under the yoke and dragging one's yoke ('Par *l'assujettissement*, nous sommes sous le joug; et par la *sujétion*, nous traînons notre joug').[114] To wish to be rid of one's *assujettissement* is therefore to aspire to nothing less than a change in being, as the rest of Claude's line suggests. His apparent tautology ('having been what one has been') is partly, of course, a way of avoiding describing what he has been, but it also captures the grammar of his predicament. It is the *having been* of what one has been that turns a simple statement of retrospect ('I was') into a testament to the past's jealous hold on the present; the perfect participle

---

[109] Ibid.
[110] Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', 33.
[111] Ibid., 33, 34.
[112] Clough, *Amours*, 1. 38, in *TPC*, 95.
[113] Ibid., 1. 28–30, in *TPC*, 95.
[114] *Dictionnaire Universel des Synonymes de la Langue Française*, 3rd edn., 2 vols (Paris: Locquin, 1839), 1. 71.

converts the knowledge of what one has been from an epistemological into an ontological question, raising the stakes of what it means to be knowing about oneself.

Not allowing the self to be terrorised by what it knows (or thinks it knows) about itself is a theme Emerson warms to in 'Circles'. The 'man and woman of seventy', he writes, 'assume to know all', yet such omniscience is self-enslaving: 'In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten […] No love can be bound by oath or covenant to secure it against a higher love'.[115] Claude, too, refuses to be bound by self-knowingness:

> Oh, I cancel, reject, disavow, and repudiate wholly
> Every debt in this kind, disclaim every claim, and dishonour,
> Yea, my own heart's own writing, my soul's own signature! Ah, no!
> I will be free in this; you shall not, none shall, bind me[116]

The passion of this protest lies in its appearance of breathless self-revision, the apparent crossings-out which dramatise the unchallengeable authority of the present moment: 'cancel' seems cancelled by 'reject', which seems rejected by 'disavow', and so forth. This self-revising syntax is not limited to one passage but a distinguishing characteristic of Claude's voice; one could say that not knowing what he might say next is one of the things we know him by.

When Claude later asks himself whether he would risk his own life for the English ladies in the event of a siege, he is unwilling to answer in advance: 'Really, who knows? […] Am I not free to attend for the ripe and indubious instinct?'[117] Instinct—a word rich in Emersonian resonance—is put beyond doubt because it is beyond knowing, is the opposite of knowing. After waving Emerson off from Liverpool in July 1848, Clough committed to his diary the Emersonian advice 'to follow one's own fancy, the leading of one's heart &

---

[115] Emerson, 'Circles', 189.
[116] Clough, *Amours*, 3. 192–95, in *TPC*, 119–20.
[117] Ibid., 2. 67, 84, in *TPC*, 105, 106.

the instinct of the inner sense'.[118] A similar faith in 'a kind of impetus within, / Whose sole credentials were that trust itself' is the culminating statement of Clough's *Adam and Eve*, which he was writing in the same year.[119] Such affirmations grant the future an authority unconstrained by any knowing in advance.

Yet elsewhere in Clough's poetry such faith in future instinct is engaged more critically. Dipsychus, for example, delivers an Emersonian lecture about instinct which he then proceeds to scrutinise:

> Oh, it is great to do and know not what,
> Nor let it e'er be known. The dashing stream
> Stays not to pick his steps among the rocks,
> Or let his water-breaks be chronicled.
> And though the hunter looks before he leap,
> 'Tis instinct rather than a shaped-out thought
> That lifts him his bold way. Then, instinct, hail;
> And farewell hesitation.[120]

These lines endorse Emerson's proposition that the alternative to knowing is being led by one's unknowable instincts, echoing 'Circles'' claim that

> The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why[121]

Yet even before Dipsychus goes on to critique this reliance upon instinct, his choice of words suggests an implicit reservation about such unknowing action. If Emerson is audible in this passage, so too is King Lear on the verge of madness, in his words just before the storm: 'I will do such things— / What they are yet I know not'.[122] Dipsychus's images of dashing water, rocks, and bold leaps bring to mind the tempest-tossed heath and

---

[118] Clough, 15 July 1848, in *Oxford Diaries*, 251.
[119] Clough, *Adam and Eve*, 14. 44–45, in *TPC*, 187.
[120] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 3. 93–100, in *SPC*, 209.
[121] Emerson, 'Circles', 190.
[122] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2. 2. 469–70, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 256.

Gloucester's blind, despairing urge to vault from the cliffs. Moreover, when Dipsychus produces Hotspur as a figure who embodies the life of instinct, the words he gives him ('To Horse, To Horse') are in fact Lear's, as reported by Gloucester ('He calls to horse, but will I know not whither').[123]

Yet if Lear haunts Dipsychus's speech in this way, are we to read this as a challenge to Emerson's celebration of unknowing action, suddenly exposed as uncomfortably close to madness, or as an Emersonian challenge to the determinism of allusion itself, a rejection of the idea that Lear's words have only one kind of import, one possible string of consequences? Dipsychus's ensuing critique of instinctive action, which maintains that such action is no longer possible at this stage in history, might be thrown back at him in a similar way. 'No, no', he asserts, 'The age of instinct has, it seems, gone by / And will not be forced back'.[124] Dipsychus describes Napoleon as the last great representative of 'instinct', echoing Emerson's account of him in *Representative Men* as a man of 'prompt invention' who 'took Occasion by the beard'.[125] Yet it is perhaps Dipsychus's very conviction of the post-Napoleonic age's fallenness—his insistence that the modern individual is emptied of agency and left figuratively 'fiddling with a piston or a valve'—that prevents Dipsychus himself from taking the initiative.[126] If he is unable to act without knowing how or why, it is because he is prevented from doing so by his excessive knowingness about himself ('For nothing else we can be', he insists).[127] Or rather, his knowingness is a pretext for his passivity, a way of suppressing his fear of the future and of the unknown. As Jonathan Lear has written of Oedipus's knowingness, 'the

[123] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 3. 109, in *SPC*, 209; Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2. 2. 487, in *King Lear*, 258.
[124] Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 3. 104–6, in *SPC*, 209.
[125] Emerson, 'Napoleon, or the Man of the World', in *Representative Men*, 127–48: 141; Clough, *Dipsychus*, 2. 3. 45, in *SPC*, 207.
[126] Ibid., 2. 3. 123, in *SPC*, 210.
[127] Ibid., 2. 3. 137, in *SPC*, 210.

stance of "already knowing" functions as a defense: if you already know, you do not need to find out'.[128]

Claude, too, holds his knowing like a screen against the uncertainty of the future. 'Is it the calling of man to surrender his knowledge and insight,' he ponders, 'For the mere venture of what may, perhaps, be the virtuous action?'[129] Claude's scornful rhetorical question may carry the ring of assurance, but his alliteration cuts across his reasoning, hinting that there might be virtue in venturing. Far from offering adventure, however, Claude imagines the future as fundamentally vulnerable and in need of his protection: 'Must we abandon the future', he rather abstractly asks, 'for fear of omitting the present'?[130] By shrinking from action in the present, Claude claims to make room for the future and save it from any particular train of consequences. Yet this is effectively to lock down the future, to limit it to a frozen version of the present, as Claude's later exclamation lays bare: 'Ah, let me look, let me watch, let me wait, unhurried, unprompted! / Bid me not venture on aught that could alter or end what is present!'[131] This is a fantasy which seeks to confine the future within the reassuring (Emerson would say the degrading) bounds of the knowable.

'And isn't our need for knowledge', asks Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, 'the will to uncover among everything strange, unusual, and doubtful something which no longer unsettles us?'[132] Given Nietzsche's deep and enduring affinity with Emerson, it is admirable that his translator, Josefine Nauckhoff, catches the Emersonian note of his rhetoric here.[133] 'People wish to be settled', 'Circles' observes; 'only in so far as they are

---

[128] Jonathan Lear, 'Knowingness and Abandonment: An Oedipus for Our Time', in *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 33–55: 34.
[129] Clough, *Amours*, 2. 86–87, in *TPC*, 106.
[130] Ibid., 2. 90, in *TPC*, 106.
[131] Ibid., 2. 274–75, in *TPC*, 111.
[132] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [1882], 5. 355, tr. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams et al., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 214.
[133] See Mason Golden, 'Emerson-Exemplar: Friedrich Nietzsche's Emerson Marginalia', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 44.3 (2013), 398–431.

unsettled is there any hope for them'.[134] Emerson's meaning is double: only as far as people are unsettled may we presume to hold out hope for them, but also, more literally, only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope left for themselves. For if one is completely settled, one has nothing to hope towards. Claude's fear of the unsettling risks pinning him down in this hopeless situation, for all his talk of the freedom of the soul:

> There are two different kinds, I believe, of human attraction:
> One which simply disturbs, unsettles, and makes you uneasy,
> And another that poises, retains, and fixes and holds you.
> I have no doubt, for myself, in giving my voice for the latter.[135]

Claude's preferred means of defending against the unsettling is that suggested by Nietzsche:

> Ah, did we really believe that the Present indeed is the Only!
> Or through all transmutation, all shock and convulsion of passion,
> Feel we could carry undimmed, unextinguished, the light of our knowledge![136]

If Claude recognises that his fantasy of fixity is an impossible dream, that his present knowledge might be only a guttering flame, he chooses not to greet the unseen with a cheer but to focus on the one thing he *does* know for certain—namely, that he will die.

It is only knowledge of this 'certain release', this 'exit secure', he contends, that makes tolerable the cognitive dissonance between the binding vows of marriage and the slipperiness of the heart's affections; only 'with the terminus all but in prospect' will he condescend to 'Talk of eternal ties and marriages made in heaven'.[137] Focussing on the future in this way becomes a means of surviving the uncertainties of the present, a reversal of the Emersonian reverence for the future's ability to unsettle us. 'Shall we come out of it

---

[134] Emerson, 'Circles', 189.
[135] Clough, *Amours*, 2. 264–67, in *TPC*, 111.
[136] Ibid., 3. 114–16, in *TPC*, 117.
[137] Ibid., 3. 120, 121, 111–12, in *TPC*, 117.

all, some day, as one does from a tunnel?' he wonders towards the end of the poem.[138] Claude's tunnel vision exposes the poverty of knowable futures: his knowingness allows him to imagine only a petrified present or the finality of death. As Emerson warns in 'Self-Reliance', in such circumstances knowing risks becoming a substitute for living: 'man […] does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future'.[139]

When Claude does hazard a more imaginative conception of the future, it is to insist on the inevitable failure of all his amorous engagements. Claude tells Eustace he feels himself

> entering into all sorts of relations,
> Tying I know not what ties, which, whatever they are, I know one thing,
> Will, and must, woe is me, be one day painfully broken,—
> Broken with painful remorses, with shrinkings of soul, and relentings,
> Foolish delays, more foolish evasions, most foolish renewals.[140]

Claude's rejection of any ties as binding has here mutated into a fatalistic determinism, as if every tie 'must' therefore be broken one way or another. His monomania—'I know one thing'—is a tell-tale symptom of knowingness, as Emerson suggests in 'Intellect':

> How wearisome the grammarian, the phrenologist, the political or religious fanatic, or indeed any possessed mortal whose balance is lost by the exaggeration of a single topic. It is incipient insanity.[141]

If Claude's self-revisions sometimes sound impatient for change, here their repetitiousness ('broken,— / Broken'; 'Foolish […] foolish […] foolish') betrays a terrifying circularity of thought. Claude's nightmarish vision of the future culminates in 'renewals' that keep this cycle stuck in its grooves. David Shaw has observed that *Amours* is composed of

---

[138] Ibid., 5. 181, in *TPC*, 132.
[139] Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', 39.
[140] Clough, *Amours*, 1. 229–33, in *TPC*, 101.
[141] Emerson, 'Intellect', 200–1.

'expansive, circling hexameters […] often rolling over and over like huge ocean waves without actually advancing'; there is something monstrously circuitous about Claude's vision of the future, which by yielding to his knowing saps the present of life.[142]

Turning to Clough's wider *oeuvre*, it is striking how those poems which claim to disclose knowledge of the future are often among the weakest, and at their weakest in their endings. In a sense, then, it could be said that Claude's problem is often Clough's. Prophetic conclusions in Clough tend to shout very loud and ring very hollow; prophecy flings wide its jaws and eats the poetry: 'ye yet shall see // Each other, yet again shall meet. / Ah, joy! when, with the closing street, / Forgivingly at last ye greet!'; 'Thou shalt receive, thou shalt believe, / And thou shalt do, O Man!'; 'The Summum Pulchrum rests in heaven above […] Some day thou shalt it view'.[143] In confronting these disappointing denouements, however, the qualities of Clough's best verse are rendered more visible. The effect of Clough's most famous poem, 'Say not the struggle naught availeth', may be dulled by familiarity, but set against this company one notes how the speaker shares in the addressee's thrill of anticipation rather than narrating it from a lofty height: 'In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly, / But westward, look, the land is bright'.[144] Most significant, however, is the way the hopeful expectation of this poem, unlike those others, is sponsored by the unknowability of the future. Its metaphors imagine ways to challenge our knowing assumption that 'as things have been, things remain': the smoke of battle that limits our knowledge of what is going on in the field, the tide whose silent progress upstream escapes our notice, and the sunrise whose effects on the landscape we are liable to miss with our narrow angle of vision.[145]

---

[142] W. David Shaw, *Victorians and Mystery: Crises of Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 175.
[143] Clough, 'Sic Itur', ll. 18–21, in *TPC*, 9; 'The New Sinai', ll. 125–26, in *TPC*, 20; 'Blank Misgivings of a Creature moving about in Worlds not realised', ll. 17, 20, in *TPC*, 34.
[144] Clough, 'Say not the struggle naught availeth', ll. 15–16, in *TPC*, 206.
[145] Ibid., l. 4, in *TPC*, 206.

A few years after composing his elegy for Clough, Arnold confessed that he had left 'the whole *prophet* side' of his friend's character out of account—he had wanted to write a pastoral idyll, to 'deal again with that Cumner country', he told Shairp, and prophets do not belong in pastoral idylls.[146] What 'Say not' demonstrates is that prophecy is more than a matter of prognostication, and that if the poet's role is, as Emerson proposed, 'an office of announcement and affirming', one of the things poetry may affirm in a culture of knowingness is the value of not knowing.[147] This value is at the heart of Clough's lyric 'Where lies the land to which the ship would go?', in which Clough exchanges the inquisitive perspective of Wordsworth's quayside observer in the sonnet on which this poem is modelled ('Where lies the land to which yon Ship must go?') for the ignorance of the ship's crew:[148]

> Where lies the land to which the ship would go?
> Far, far ahead, is all her seamen know.
> And where the land she travels from? Away,
> Far, far behind, is all that they can say.[149]

Simple yet hauntingly effective, the Tennysonian repetitions of the second and fourth lines push past and future away into equal and opposite spheres of unknowing, expanding the experience—and the significance—of the present, while their substitution of spondees for iambs correspondingly extends the time taken to voice these lines. The seamen's not knowing whence and whither they are voyaged is ambiguously pitched: on a first reading, the lines seem plangent, as if the sailors are sadly reconciled to their ignorance. Yet the central stanzas take advantage of this uncertainty to spring a surprise, revealing the crew's

---

[146] Arnold to Shairp, 12 April 1866, in *Letters*, 3. 35.
[147] The *OED* distinguishes between prophecy in the sense of 'inspired speech', and prophecy in the narrower sense of prognostication ('prophecy, *n.*', 1b and 2a, *OED Online* (pubd online June 2007), accessed 1 September 2021); Emerson, 'The Poet', in *Essays: Second Series*, 1–24: 8.
[148] William Wordsworth, 'Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?', in *Poems, in two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 137–38.
[149] Clough, 'Where lies the land to which the ship would go?', ll. 1–4, also 13–16, in *TPC*, 342.

not knowing their destination, and forgetfulness about their departure, as a source of excitement and pride. The poem welcomes the carefree leisure thus purchased, allowing them the opportunity to pace arm in arm along the deck, enjoying the 'foaming wake far widening as we go'; still more does it welcome the opportunities to 'fight with wind and wave' on stormy nights—'The dripping sailor on the reeling mast / Exults to bear, and scorns to wish it past'.[150] The mariners' splendid life exists outside of onshore time, in an idealised realm without knowledge of either past or future, an unknowing which sponsors their delicious pleasures and their highwire daring.

Clough had originally thought of calling the poem 'Mari Magno', the title he later chose for his Chaucerian collection of 'Tales on Board'.[151] As Kenny notes, this phrase

> echoes a famous passage of Lucretius, beginning "*Suave mari magno*", which describes the pleasure that watching ships battling with the elements at sea can give to someone safe on shore.[152]

Yet it acquires profoundly ironic overtones in the context of Clough's lyric. Lucretius's image is a metaphor for the consolations of philosophy, its serene sanctuaries fortified by the teachings of the wise ('*edita doctrina sapientum templa serena*').[153] Yet in Clough's poem the wisdomless life on the wave is something dwellers on *terra firma* can only envy, beached on the headland of their knowledge. A manuscript draft of the poem, now in the Bodleian Library, is written on the reverse of one of Clough's unpublished 'Letters of Parepidemus', written for an American magazine on board the *SS Canada* in 1852. 'We did come from somewhere', Clough wrote, 'we are going some whither; but really it is an effort to call that to mind.'[154] Whereas Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlets* of 1850 declared

---

[150] Ibid., ll. 6, 8, 10, 11–12, in *TPC*, 342.
[151] See Mulhauser's note in *TPC*, 750.
[152] Kenny, *Life*, 276–77.
[153] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 2.8, tr. W. H. D. Rouse, revd. Martin F. Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 94.
[154] 'Letter of Parepidemus, A', Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. misc. d. 512 f. 57^{r}.

that ‘It is a Time to make the dullest man consider; and ask himself, Whence *he* came? Whither he is bound?’, Emerson’s 1841 essay ‘The Over-Soul’ had cautioned,

> Do not require a description of the countries towards which you sail […] For the soul is true to itself, and the man in whom it is shed abroad cannot wander from the present, which is infinite, to a future which would be finite.[155]

Clough’s poem offers a vision of this ideal, lyricising as well as literalising Emerson’s affirmation in ‘Circles’ that ‘“A man […] never rises so high as when he knows not whither he is going”’.[156]

It is therefore a little ironic that Emerson should have criticised the ‘baulking end or no end’ of *Amours de Voyage*, in which Mary and Claude announce their intentions to set out for England and Egypt respectively. For baulking ends—whether in the sense of termini or preconceived objectives—might be considered an eminently Emersonian activity. As ‘Nature’ has it, ‘Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere.’[157] In *Amours*, *Dipsychus*, and other poems, Clough puts in question the desirability of a round and final success, testing Claude’s nineteenth-century cliché—‘When we know, we are happy’—to breaking point.[158] As in Emerson’s essays, knowing in Clough’s poetry turns out very often to be a trap: a blasphemy against the future, the sabotage of hope. If, as Benjamin Jowett once remarked, Clough had ‘a kind of faith in knowing nothing’, this was not, as so many of his contemporaries and subsequent critics have believed, the paralysed resignation of a ‘Too

---

[155] Carlyle, ‘The Present Time’, in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* [1850], ed. H. D. Traill (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 1–47: 2; Emerson, ‘The Over-Soul’, 168.
[156] Emerson, ‘Circles’, 190. Emerson attributes this apophthegm to Oliver Cromwell.
[157] Emerson, ‘Nature’, in *Essays: Second Series*, 97–114: 110.
[158] Clough, *Amours*, 5. 201, in *TPC*, 132.

quick despairer', but the natural allegiance of one for whom, like Emerson, there is no knowing beforehand.[159]

[159] Benjamin Jowett to Miss Elliot, 2 February 1862, in *Letters of Benjamin Jowett*, ed. Evelyn Abbott and Lewis Campbell (London: Murray, 1899), 177; Arnold, 'Thyrsis', l. 61, in *PMA*, 541.

II

Known Unknown: Browning and the Natural World

> That man is always happy who is in the presence of something which he cannot know to the full, which he is always going on to know.
>
> JOHN RUSKIN[1]

Like Clough, Robert Browning expressed a marked hostility to postures of knowingness throughout his writing, which he articulated with increasing frequency and ferocity as he grew older. 'A Pillar at Sebzevar', from *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884), is a rhetorical *tour de force* devoted entirely to this subject:

> This constitutes the curse that spoils our life
> And sets man maundering of his misery,
> That there's no meanest atom he obtains
> Of what he counts for knowledge, but he cries
> 'Hold here,—I have the whole thing,—know, this time,
> Nor need search farther!'[2]

If writing like this is never quite proved on the pulse, it nevertheless raises useful questions for thinking about Browning's wider engagement with the epistemic: the issue of what 'counts for knowledge', and to whom; the relation between knowing in part and knowing the whole; and the critique implied in the double meaning of Ferishtah's command to

---

[1] John Ruskin, 'Roman Renaissance', in *The Stones of Venice III* [1853], *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 11, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 43–134: 65.

[2] Browning, 'A Pillar at Sebzevar', ll. 39–44, in *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, 17 vols, ed. Jack W. Herring (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1969–), 15. 191 (henceforth *CWB*). Three scholarly editions of Browning's works are in progress—from Ohio, Clarendon, and Longman respectively. For the sake of consistency I have chosen to cite from the Clarendon edition wherever possible and otherwise from the Ohio edition, as both follow the last authorially-supervised text of 1888–89, unlike the Longman, which has only covered Browning's work up to 1871. I am aware of the textual problems which beset the first four volumes of the Ohio (which prompted an editorial overhaul) and never refer to these early volumes. For a concise discussion of the textual issues surrounding the three editions, see Clyde de L. Ryals, review of *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. 1, ed. Ian Jack and Margaret Smith, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 84.4 (1985), 562–67.

Hold! as 'stop' and 'grasp', a pun which hints at the possible hastiness and coerciveness of knowing. The sentiment voiced by Browning's Persian sage is at one with the poet's own well-known ethic of imperfection ('A man's reach should exceed his grasp') and his corresponding antipathy to states of completion or repose ('Burn and not smoulder, win by worth, / Not rest content with a wealth that's dearth').[3] Applied to the pursuit of knowledge, this rhetoric inflects Browning's work so persistently that it becomes something of a hobby-horse which he rides through a host of different epistemic contexts: history, morals, metaphysics, natural science. All such forms of knowledge, Browning repeatedly suggests, are intractably provisional, but this provisionality is obliging rather than obstructive, for in this as in all else in the Browning universe, 'Most progress is most failure'.[4]

The poems' favourite way of staging this felicitous failure is as the metamorphosis of a person's knowledge into ignorance, and vice versa: 'What he considers that he knows to-day / Come but to-morrow, he will find misknown'; 'Knowledge turns nescience'; knowledge 'ends in ignorance on every side'.[5] By the same token, *La Saisiaz* (1878) argues that

> loss so much the more exalts
> Gain about to be. For at what moment did I so advance
> Near to knowledge as when frustrate of escape from ignorance?[6]

---

[3] Browning, 'Andrea del Sarto', l. 97, in *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, 15 vols, ed. Michael Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–), 5. 267 (henceforth *PWB*). 'Rephan', ll. 106–7, in *PWB*, 15. 471. The most searching exploration of this theme is Herbert Tucker's *Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1980). See also Browning's enthusiasm for an 'age of transition' in preference to 'times of comparative standing still, rounded in their impotent completeness': Browning to Elizabeth Barrett, 17 May 1846, in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, 27 vols, ed. Philip Kelley et al. (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1984–), 12. 336.
[4] Browning, 'Cleon', l. 272, in *PWB*, 5. 426.
[5] Browning, 'A Death in the Desert', l. 598, in *CWB*, 6. 255; 'With Charles Avison', l. 359, in *PWB*, 15. 229; 'With Francis Furini', l. 284, in *PWB*, 15. 157.
[6] Browning, *La Saisiaz*, ll. 360–62, in *CWB*, 14. 113.

My concern, however, is less with Browning's preachments in this vein than with the way such concerns are distinctively styled in his poetry: the motivations he traces for knowing, the affective palette with which he colours states of knowledge and ignorance, above all the ways in which his commitment to 'acknowledged ignorance' is embedded in his poems' own habits of knowing and unknowing.[7]

In this chapter, I will first examine some of the more overt dramatisations of knowledge-seeking in Browning's poetry, showing how these produce a considerably more mixed set of feelings about knowing and unknowing than one might expect from the didactic rhetoric to which I have just alluded. This initial discussion provides the frame for the stranger story I then wish to tell about Browning's forms of unknowing. For the principal claim that I wish to make in this chapter is that Browning's curiosity about forms of unknowing comes to the fore in the presence of the natural world. Or, to put it another way, it is when Browning is pursuing this curiosity most keenly that nature is brought into play in his poetry—not only as a source of imagery, but as a site of encounter. This, I suggest, is why Browning's engagement with the natural world often crops up in the oddest and most unexpected of places: in the byways of his poetry, sometimes far-flung from the monologues which are the centre of his poetic achievement, sometimes to be found nestled *within* them, though critically disregarded.

For Browning has rarely been thought of as a 'nature poet'. Among the vastitudes of the secondary literature, studies of his poetry's engagement with the natural world are limited to two brief discussions from the turn of the twentieth century and little more than a handful of more recent articles and book chapters.[8] My chapter builds on a remarkably perceptive insight of an early critic, Stopford Brooke, who observed in passing that for

---

[7] Ibid., l. 340, in *CWB*, 14. 112.
[8] Both Stopford Brooke and G. K. Chesterton devoted large portions of their studies to Browning's treatment of nature: see Stopford A. Brooke, *The Poetry of Robert Browning* (London: Webster, 1902), 57–114, and G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 133–59.

Browning, 'Nature exists […] to make us feel our ignorance'.[9] It is true that Browning did not write poems about landscapes, sea-worlds, animals, or flowers—but he wrote about all of these things, sometimes with stunning creativity and power, in poetry from across the length of his long career. As one early *Browning Society* paper observed, those passages in which he writes about nature are almost always 'sudden, brilliant, and brief'.[10] What connects them, I want to suggest, is a shared concern with foiled or occluded knowledge.

I pursue this concern in three parts, each of which is informed by a dialogue with the work of Browning's friend, the art critic and moralist John Ruskin.[11] Ruskin's vivid sense of 'the final elusiveness of all natural phenomena' (in the words of Frederick Kirchhof) breathes through much of Browning's writing on the natural, particularly in relation to ideas of the 'grotesque'—an aesthetic mode with which Browning's art has long been associated, but rarely in relation to its epistemological challenge.[12] Bringing Browning and Ruskin's writing into conversation enables the tracing of patterns of affinity between the ecological, the aesthetic, and the epistemic.

The first section of this three-part argument situates Browning's poetry in relation to nineteenth-century natural theology, showing up the difficulties involved in attempting to transmute understanding of the natural world into the desired precious metal of religious knowledge. In the process, I discover a close kinship between Browning's anti-instrumental way of approaching the natural world and the ways in which he thought about

---

[9] Brooke, *The Poetry of Robert Browning*, 59.
[10] Howard S. Pearson, 'Browning as a Landscape Painter', in *The Browning Society's Papers, 1886–7*, Part VIII (London: Trübner, 1886), 103–18: 110.
[11] On Browning's friendship with Ruskin, see David J. DeLaura, 'Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-Five Unpublished Letters', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 54.2 (1972), 314–56.
[12] Frederick Kirchhof, 'A Science against Sciences: Ruskin's Floral Mythology', in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 246–58: 247. Commentary on Browning and the grotesque starts with Walter Bagehot and G. K. Chesterton (examined subsequently in this chapter) and continues with Isobel Armstrong, 'Browning and the "Grotesque" Style', in *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations* (London: Routledge, 1969), 125–51 and 'Browning in the 1850s and after: New experiments in radical poetry and the Grotesque', in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 284–317, and more recently, John Woolford, *Robert Browning* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2007).

(and defended) his own poetry. In the next two sections, I turn to theories of the grotesque to illuminate the ways in which Browning's handling of the natural world emphasises its resistance to being brought under the command of knowledge. In one of the liveliest and most sophisticated recent inquiries into the grotesque, Frances Connelly has characterised it as 'a state of change breaking open what we know'.[13] This breakage, I propose, happens in two primary ways in Browning's poetry, which I illustrate with reference to two particular contexts: pre-Darwinian taxonomy and eighteenth-century conventions of landscape art. Nature in Browning's poetry kindles the alluring sense that what seem like wholes are in fact merely parts, encouraging the perpetual suspicion that we may be missing something—as though bringing us to the brink of knowledge just out of reach. This is also, I suggest, one effect of the poems themselves.

A Craving After Knowledge

It is the mixedness of feeling they give rise to which distinguishes Browning's forms of unknowing from more single-minded expressions of confidence in knowledge and ignorance arising from Enlightenment and Romantic intellectual traditions respectively. Elizabeth Barrett Browning gave voice to the former when she proudly declared to Robert, 'I never regret knowledge […] I mean I never would *un*know anything […] even were it the taste of the apples by the Dead sea'.[14] Barrett Browning's image glances peripherally at the apple in the Garden of Eden, implicitly asserting that no knowledge, however distasteful or disastrous, should be forbidden. This unflinching faith in knowledge (at whatever cost) inflects Barrett Browning's poetry too, from Adam's reliance on the

[13] Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.
[14] Elizabeth Barrett to Browning, 11 October 1845, in *Correspondence*, 11. 123.

'known / subduing the unknown and taming it' in *A Drama of Exile* (1844) to the rousing crescendo in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851), 'O holy knowledge, holy liberty, / O holy rights of nations!'[15] Knowledge, in Barrett Browning's imagination, is often (if not always) bound up with the causes of freedom, progress, and modernity, returning an enthusiastic echo to the Enlightenment battle-cry, *Sapere aude!* (Dare to know!)[16]

This triumphal rhetoric finds a reverse image in Romanticism's cherished ambition, first articulated by Novalis, to reinvent the known as the unknown: to reawaken 'the Child's sense of wonder and novelty', as Coleridge dreamed, by purging 'the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being'.[17] Rather than seeking to tame the unknown, the aim is instead to release the known back into the wild, making 'familiar objects be as if they were not familiar' and unravelling the wish to know anything 'to the full', as in the words of Ruskin which provide an epigraph to this chapter.[18] Later in the same essay, from the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853), Ruskin offers a powerful Victorian restatement of the Romantic principle of defamiliarisation, eloquently and explicitly cast into the language of knowing and unknowing. Men's souls, Ruskin writes, ought not to be

> dead walls encompassing dead heaps of things known and numbered, but running waters in the sweet wilderness of things unnumbered and unknown, conscious only of the living banks, on which they partly refresh and partly reflect the flowers, and so pass on.[19]

---

[15] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'A Drama of Exile', ll. 1000–01, in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), 1. 36; *Casa Guidi Windows*, ll. 184–85, in ibid., 2. 531. Compare also Barrett Browning's statement on 'the mission of the poet', from the preface to *Poems* (1844), which affirms the 'obvious truth […] that if knowledge is power, suffering should be acceptable as a part of knowledge' ('Appendix I. 1844/5 Prefaces to *Poems*', in ibid., 2. 567–70: 569).

[16] Kant took this phrase (derived from the Roman poet Horace) as a motto for enlightenment: see Immanuel Kant, 'An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?' [1784] in *Practical Philosophy*, tr. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–22: 17.

[17] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* [1817], *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 7, 2 vols, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 1. 80.

[18] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' [pubd. 1840], in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York, NY: Norton, 2002), 509–35: 517. On this subject see M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, NY: Norton, 1973), 377–84.

[19] Ruskin, 'Roman Renaissance', 66.

Partly reflecting and partly refreshing life's bounty, such souls exist in a symbiotic relationship to nature, which—like a poem (the analogy is unacknowledged but irresistible)—they both imitate and illuminate. And having done so, they 'pass on': the phrase at once conjures an image of perpetual motion, like Byron's 'wanderers o'er Eternity, / Whose bark drives on and on', and of leave-taking, the willingness to let things slip through one's fingers, dramatically at odds with the acquisitive instincts of Ruskin's age.[20] Browning's poems, too, often inscribe a longing for knowledge to be shared or shed, and are repeatedly troubled by the idea that holding onto knowledge might be a burden or affliction. In 'By the Fire-Side', the silence is so overwhelming that 'you half believe / It must get rid of what it knows / Its bosom does so heave', while in 'Saul', the very stars ache with 'the strong pain of pent knowledge'.[21] 'Easter-Day' pushes Ruskin's figure of knowledge as a kind of deadweight to the point of peril, reflecting ruefully (here in the context of Christian belief) on

> a freight
> Of knowledge cumbersome enough
> To sink your ship when waves grow rough,
> Though meant for ballast in the hold.[22]

Ruskin perhaps sounds nowhere more like Browning than when he describes the happiness of the soul as a state 'not of triumph or joy in what it knows, but of joy rather in the continual discovery, of new ignorance'.[23] But if Browning's rhetoric of knowing and unknowing draws heavily on this Romantic inheritance, his *dramatisations* of human relationships to knowledge are almost always more self-divided than those of either Ruskin or Barrett Browning.

---

[20] George Gordon Byron, *Child Harold's Pilgrimage*, III. 669–70, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, 8 vols, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980–93), 2. 103.
[21] Browning, 'By the Fire-Side', ll. 158–60, in *PWB* 5. 73; 'Saul', l. 320, in *PWB*, 5. 384.
[22] Browning, 'Easter-Day', ll. 436–39, in *PWB*, 4. 398.
[23] Ruskin, 'Roman Renaissance', 65.

The eponymous heroes of *Paracelsus* (1834) and 'A Grammarian's Funeral' (from *Men and Women*, 1855) pursue knowledge with single-minded devotion, but this commitment is presented with a very double-minded mixture of admiration and reproof. On the one hand, the sixteenth-century magus Paracelsus is celebrated as one who dared 'aspire to KNOW'.[24] While his idiosyncratic researches in alchemy, cheiromancy, and astrology prove to be absurd dead ends, his rejection of classical medical authorities such as Galen and Avicenna ally him, so the poem suggests, with the architects of the scientific revolution to come. Like Browning's Sordello, he is a glorious failure who is also the indispensable forerunner of subsequent success. In his notes appended to the poem Browning even went so far as to hail Paracelsus as 'the father of modern chemistry' for his pioneering pursuit of chemical cures.[25] The professor's mistake, the poem somewhat schematically presses upon the reader, was not only the excessiveness of his desire for knowledge—his Marlovian over-reaching—but, more importantly, his neglect of all other ends, especially love. As John Maynard writes, the poem strongly parallels and anticipates Tennyson's insistence on the 'proper limitations of knowledge' as well as the need for caution lest knowledge 'outstrip and unbalance our moral sense' or our 'capacity for love'.[26] Browning's Grammarian, who 'decided not to Live but Know', is a trickier case, since his complete disavowal of limits ('Let me know all!') and his disarmingly honest unconcern with other ends ('Hence with life's pale lure!') seem to be alternately satirised and lionised, perhaps even both at once (as the poem's disputatious critical history can testify).[27]

---

[24] Browning, *Paracelsus*, I. 282, in *PWB*, 1. 159.
[25] Browning, 'Note to *Paracelsus*', in *PWB*, 1. 511.
[26] John Maynard, *Browning's Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 291.
[27] Browning, 'A Grammarian's Funeral', ll. 139, 61, 112, in *PWB*, 5. 462. On the poem's reception see the Oxford editors' introduction in *PWB*, 5. 454–56.

Browning's first published poem, *Pauline* (1833), appears to demonise what the speaker calls the 'craving after knowledge', which is personified as a 'sleepless harpy':

> This restlessness of passion meets in me
> A craving after knowledge: the sole proof
> Of yet commanding will is in that power
> Repressed; for I beheld it in its dawn,
> The sleepless harpy with just-budding wings,
> And I considered whether to forego
> All happy ignorant hopes and fears, to live,
> Finding a recompense in its wild eyes.[28]

This highly original allegorisation turns the tables on traditional depictions of Ignorantia with her attributes of poppies and bats, symbolising the 'sleep of reason'.[29] Here it is the terrifying sleep*less*ness of the harpy which is the source of her horror, her relentless destructiveness. Deriving its name from the Greek *harpazō* ('to seize'), the harpy is, as Simona Cohen writes, a 'female monster of insatiable hunger, known as temptress, seductress, and tormenter of victims'.[30] Browning turns her into an emblem of the self-annihilating pursuit of knowledge, and yet this passage makes manifest the seductiveness of such a quest in the anticipated 'recompense' of the harpy's 'wild eyes'.

At the same time, it suggests that ignorance is not a costless and unalloyed good. The arrestingly many-minded concatenation of 'all happy ignorant hopes and fears' (amended from 'all hopes and fears' for the 1889 edition) shows Browning still thinking at the very end of his life about the range of affects blended in states of ignorance. Ignorance, here, is not simply bliss—perhaps it is even fear that makes the speaker's imagined happiness possible (perhaps that is the price of hope?) Browning's lack of punctuation puts all four qualities as it were on a level, as though happiness, ignorance, hope, and fear were

---

[28] Browning, *Pauline; A Fragment of a Confession*, ll. 620–27, in *PWB*, 1. 73.
[29] On the traditional iconography, see George Levetine, 'Some Emblematic Sources of Goya', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 22.1/2 (1959), 106–31.
[30] Simona Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 249–50.

mutually imbricated rather than discrete and clearly parsable: the lack of a comma between 'happy' and 'ignorant' makes his fears, like his hopes, seem not severally happy and ignorant, but something more like happy-ignorant. Browning's revision also squeezes in an extra syllable on ig*nor*ant—such that the word has to be tripped over in utterance—with the effect of emphasising the self-consciousness of the speaker's ignorance. He actively chooses to bid the harpy's wild eyes 'close from me for ever', for fear that he might 'perish'.[31] And yet this is not simply a grand refusal of knowledge, since he announces that it 'lies in me a chained thing, still prompt / To serve me if I loose its slightest bond'.[32] He suppresses his 'craving after knowledge', then, but he does not forswear knowledge in the tradition of many of his Romantic predecessors. Perhaps he discovers a craving *after* knowledge in a different sense: something in his desire which is unfulfilled by knowledge, whose lack only becomes apparent *consequent upon* knowledge. If Barrett Browning often imagined knowledge taming and subduing the unknown, and celebrated lives lived (and lost) in its service, Browning was habitually sceptical about the sufficiency of knowledge and the risks of pursuing it as an ultimate end.

In one of his courtship letters to Barrett in 1845, he found a figure for these risks in claiming to identify a swarm of mistrusts within the bedbound poet which made her reluctant to receive him as a visitor. Each one, he wrote, 'I could detect, and catch struggling, and pin to death in a moment, and put a label on, with name, genus, and species, just like a horrible entomologist'.[33] The route to knowing, on this account, lies through killing, and Browning takes a palpable pleasure in the spectacle of his deadly scholar, whom one feels would hold his own among the *dramatis personae* of the monologues. Browning's epistolary flourish of caricature suggests that a person's

[31] Browning, *Pauline*, ll. 629, 628, in *PWB*, 1. 73.
[32] Ibid., ll. 631–32, in *PWB*, 1. 73.
[33] Browning to Elizabeth Barrett, 16 May 1845, in *Correspondence*, 10. 223.

relationship to the objects of their knowing may be one in which they murder, not just to dissect, but to collect.

Paracelsus has a mania for collecting knowledge itself. Though he rejects the Aristotelian framework on which medieval natural philosophy was based, he ironically confirms the ancient thinker's founding insight that 'men by nature desire to know'—and inflects Aristotle's categorising habits of thought with an appetitive warmth of feeling: 'I still must hoard and heap and class all truths / With one ulterior purpose: I must know!'[34] Such knowing is far from the chaste, self-abnegating endeavour which George Levine has traced through nineteenth-century prose narrative in parallel with scientific epistemology.[35] Rather, it is both a taste and a technique, a desire as well as a discipline. The horrible entomologist has a passion for possession, but also for cataloguing: as a phrase from one of Browning's later poems puts it, everything in his world is 'niched and known', as though knowing could be a way—perhaps the most efficient, certainly the most respectable—of being done with something.[36]

If Clough's poetry suggested the impoverishment of relying on a hoarded stock of knowledge, Browning's shows how the contrary drive towards *increasing* that stock can also become parasitic on experience, since its acquisitive energies tend towards a picture of knowledge as something to be heaped up or shelved away. Heidegger draws out this paradox in a reflection on the German term for curiosity, *Neugier*—literally, 'greed for the new'. The drive towards 'continual novelty and changing encounters', writes Heidegger, is also a way of '*not tarrying* in the environment with which one concerns oneself': it is 'a

---

[34] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980.a, in *Aristotle: The Basic Works*, tr. W. D. Ross, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, NY: Random House, 2001), 689–934: 689; Browning, *Paracelsus*, III. 705–6, in *PWB*, 1. 329.
[35] See George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
[36] Browning, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, or Turf and Towers*, l. 155, in *CWB*, 11. 186.

kind of knowing […] just in order to have known'.[37] In his 'Essay on Shelley' (1852), Browning contended to the contrary that 'The world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned'.[38] His poetry is correspondingly on the lookout for any means by which the complacency of our knowing might be punctured: for new ways of 'putting us to ignorance again'.[39]

Love in a Leaf

One of the best ways Browning discovers for doing this is strangely akin to the worst, as personified by the horrible entomologist: that is, close attention to the natural world. In 'Christmas-Eve' (1850), the speaker develops a lengthy argument for the necessity of the Incarnation, in the midst of which he turns to nature as a demonstration of God's love:

> He who endlessly was teaching,
> Above my spirit's utmost reaching,
> What love can do in the leaf or stone,
> (So that to master this alone,
> This done in the stone or leaf for me,
> I must go on learning endlessly)[40]

Looked at in one way, these lines might be seen as a classic application of natural theology, in which God's character is made legible by the 'Book of Nature'. This genre of thought had been given renewed impetus in the 1830s by the Bridgewater Treatises, established to demonstrate 'the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as manifested in the Creation'.[41] The concluding statement of one of those tracts, William Prout's

---

[37] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 216, 217.
[38] Browning, 'Essay on Shelley', in *PWB*, 4. 427.
[39] Browning, 'Cleon', l. 59, in *PWB*, 5. 419.
[40] Browning, 'Christmas-Eve', ll. 341–46, in *PWB*, 4. 343–44.
[41] William Prout, *Chemistry, Meteorology, and the Function of Digestion, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology* (London: Pickering, 1834), vii.

Chemistry, Meteorology, and the Function of Digestion, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology (1834), pursues the same themes as Browning's poem: the relations between the natural world and the nature of the divine, and the unending task of studying these relations. 'The tendency of knowledge, and of its due application', wrote Prout,

> is to abstract the attention from inferior things, and to fix the mind on the source of all knowledge and of all power—the GREAT FIRST CAUSE; who exists and acts throughout the universe; whom we can approach only, by studying His works; and whose works, an eternity, will be inadequate to explore.[42]

As this passage suggests, some of the most ardent collecting of natural knowledge in the first half of the nineteenth century was performed by natural theologians, seeking to build a cumulative case for Christianity out of the manifold fine-tunedness and amenity of nature. Browning would go on to critique this methodology in his poem 'Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island' (from his 1864 collection, *Dramatis Personae*).[43] Yet 'Christmas-Eve' is already reconceiving the question of how to think about the natural world. For unlike Browning's Caliban, who exposes the logic of the natural theologians in construing a cruel god from the brutalities of nature he perceives all around him, the speaker of 'Christmas-Eve' does not reason from nature to God, concrete to abstract (as Prout had enjoined), but from love to leaf, principle to presence.

What love has done in the stone or leaf—let alone what it *can do*—is not something which may be learned and thrown aside. When the Bridgewater authors referred (as they frequently did) to the endlessness of the task set before them, they had in mind the sheer abundance and fecundity of natural entities and processes: the way in which the earth

---

[42] Ibid., 557.
[43] Browning, 'Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island', in *CWB*, 6. 259–70. On the Bridgewater Treatises, see John M. Robson, 'The Fiat and Finger of God: The Bridgewater Treatises', in *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, ed. Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 71–125.

'teems with endless examples', nature's 'endless variety of forms', matter's 'almost endless train of properties'.[44] The learning which 'Christmas-Eve' imagines, by contrast, is literally endless, because it is not a question of numbers but attention, not of mastery but experience. This sense of mastery perpetually denied is embedded in the poem's form, its rhyming couplets surging forwards with Browning's intensely involuted syntax, an effect far removed from the clinching closure of the form's eighteenth-century models. Browning's choice of preposition, too, distinguishes his speaker's interest from that of the natural theologians, arousing as it does a curious sense of the individual stone or leaf as a miniature scene, or theatre, of love—of love as operative *in* the natural world, rather than doing its work *through* it (as though nature were a mere vehicle for love), or *with* it (as though it were love's tool, or accomplice), or *for* it (as though it were the object of that love).

This counter-intuitive sense of learning as distinct from knowing is further illustrated in the 'Essay on Shelley' by Browning's quotation from Shelley's 'The Boat on the Serchio', which enumerates how the sun kindles every element of creation into wakefulness each day, from the animals to the woods and rocks:

> All rose to do the task He set to each,
> Who shaped us to his ends and not our own;
> The million rose to learn, and One to teach
> What none yet ever knew or can be known.[45]

Attempting to teach (or learn) what can't be known might seem a doomed or even perverse enterprise. The Longman editors gloss this imagined pedagogy as that of 'a teacher who teaches in riddles', which is certainly one way in which Browning's poetry itself has often

---

[44] William Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*, 2 vols (London: Pickering, 1836), 1. 595; Peter Mark Roget, *Animal and Vegetable Physiology, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*, 2 vols (London: Pickering, 1834), 1. 408; William Whewell, *Astronomy and General Physics, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology* (London: Pickering, 1833), 302.
[45] Browning, 'Essay on Shelley', in *PWB*, 4. 437.

been received; yet a riddle implies a solution, which is just what 'The Boat on the Serchio' and 'Christmas-Eve' rule out.[46]

Later in the 1850s John Ruskin would call the poems in *Men and Women* (1855) 'a set of the most amazing Conundrums that ever were proposed to me', complaining that they induced headache and itemising his perplexities in tones of increasing exasperation: 'I don't understand […] I don't understand […] I don't understand at all!!!!!!!'[47] In his reply, Browning again described poetry as being 'all teaching', but as in the 'Essay on Shelley' this clearly signified a very different kind of teaching from that which Ruskin's own writings sought to provide, or for which Browning himself would later be acclaimed.[48] 'Do you think poetry was ever generally understood', Browning asked, '—or can be? Is the business of it to tell people what they know already, as they know it […] ?'[49] If we lay the stress on Browning's 'generally' (as meaning 'the general population') then his answer might suggest a certain high-handedness; John Woolford has called it a moment in which he 'arrogantly declares his own infinite superiority to his readers', a fit of pique at odds with the poet's otherwise more generous attitude to his audiences.[50]

But this is to miss how Browning's letter applies pressure to the very notion of understanding. Coleridge had suggested that 'Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood'; Browning, by contrast, seems to imply that understanding (at least as it is commonly conceived—telling people what they know already, as they know it, as he trenchantly defines it) were entirely the wrong thing to

---

[46] Browning, 'Essay on Shelley', in *The Poems of Browning*, vol. 3, ed. John Woolford et al. (London: Longman, 2014), 726.
[47] Ruskin to Browning, 2 December 1855, in *Correspondence*, 22. 14.
[48] See, for example, Henry Jones, who portrayed the poet as 'the exponent of a system of ideas on moral and religious subjects, which may fairly be called a philosophy', in *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1891), 1.
[49] Browning to Ruskin, 10 December 1855, in *Correspondence*, 22. 30.
[50] John Woolford, *Browning the Revisionary* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 50.

expect from a poem, or even a sign that one had failed as a reader.[51] 'I shall never', he continued, 'feel other than disconcerted & apprehensive when the public, critics & all, begin to understand & approve me.'[52] A later letter to a puzzled reader, seeking information about the subject of Browning's poem 'Jochanan Hakkadosh', makes the point even more forcibly:

> you imagine that with more learning you would "understand" more about my poetry […] as if you would somewhere find it already written—only waiting to be translated into English and my verses.[53]

On the contrary, Browning maintained, an encyclopedic knowledge of the historical personages and events referred to in the poems would certainly 'make the student learned enough in another direction', but 'not one bit more in the limited direction of the poem itself'.[54] Learning in that latter direction, Browning suggests, is not a matter of information.

Piecing these various passages and remarks together, then, a compelling implicit analogy emerges: learning to read a poem is like learning to read the natural world, a reading that shakes up what we know—not so much with new knowledge which displaces or reshapes it (though Browning certainly allows for that), but with a sense of poetic and physical matter alike as resistant to attempts to know them fully, and of the balance-loss and the buoyancy felt through that resistance. If Browning was not the first or the last to compare a poem to a natural object, he is markedly less interested in the objective nature of the poem or natural thing than he is in the analogous mode of perception which these

---

[51] Coleridge, *Anima Poetae: From the Unpublished Note-Books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Heinemann, 1895), 5.
[52] Browning to Ruskin, 10 December 1855, in *Correspondence*, 22. 31.
[53] Browning to Elizabeth Purefoy Fitzgerald, 17 March 1883, in *Learned Lady: Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs. Thomas Fitzgerald, 1876–1889*, ed. Edward C. McAleer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 157.
[54] Ibid.

kinds of object solicit and reward (hence why a stone will serve as well as a leaf—which could not be said, for instance, of Coleridge).[55] The essential feature of this mode of perception is that it is not circumscribed in advance by the teleological demand to arrive at knowledge.

Monstrosities

The taxonomic organisation of the natural world, raised to new heights of complexity and sophistication by Carl Linnaeus and others in the late eighteenth century, rested on the assumption that each species designated an unchanging type which could be precisely and securely placed within a rational and intelligible hierarchy.[56] This approach was derived from Aristotle's conception of the constant formal structure of each species, where form (*eidos*) was understood both as the organism's nature 'throughout its development' *and* as that towards which the natural process of growth was directed.[57] Underlying the variations which appeared from generation to generation lay the unchanging structure of the species.

In *On the Generation of Animals*, Aristotle described those cases in which nature 'departed from the type' as monstrosities (*terata*).[58] Browning's contemporary readers often sought to understand his poetry's passion for the unusual, incongruous, or out-of-the-way (in both subject and style) in Aristotelian terms, as 'deviations and disparities or, speaking critically, monstrosities', as Henry James wrote of *The Ring and the Book*.[59] This

---

[55] For an incisive recent discussion of this tradition within Romanticism, see David Fairer, 'Organicism: The Idealist Tradition', in *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790–1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15–32.
[56] See Lisbet Koerner, 'Carl Linnaeus in his Time and Place', in *The Cultures of Natural History*, ed. N. Jardine et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 145–62.
[57] See Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 15–54: 19.
[58] Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, tr. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1187.
[59] Henry James, 'The Novel in *The Ring and the Book* (1912)', in *Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, ed. Leon Edel (New York, NY: Library of America, 1984), 791–811: 801.

interest in monstrosities is evinced in the monologues' cast of variously dotty and depraved characters drawn from the nooks and crannies of history, often via what John Pettigrew has fittingly called 'the fifty-odd—very odd—volumes of the *Biographie Universelle*', published between 1811 and 1828.[60] John Maynard informs us that, in respect of the natural world, Browning's favourite reading included 'the Roman compilations of curious and often highly dubious animal lore of Pliny the Elder and Aelian' as well as Nathaniel Wanley's *Wonders of the Little World* (1678), a

> strange book […] filled with a huge variety of anecdotes and sensational facts […] sometimes extraordinary, sometimes downright marvelous, now and then prurient or disgusting.[61]

As Maynard explains, this latter text professed to be answering Francis Bacon's call for an encyclopedia showing the heights to which mankind had attained in all fields of human endeavour; in reality, however, its focus lay on 'freakish extremities', documenting curious 'Prodigies of love, of vice, of envy, of pygmy or giant size'.[62]

Like his own reading, Browning's poetry deals with 'imagery of natural prodigality' and 'oddities of nature (bizarre animals, fungal growth)': the very features by which the editors of a collection of essays on the Victorian grotesque identify their subject.[63] 'When we think of Browning's natural world', writes Carol Christ, 'we think of newts, shrimps, mushrooms, jellyfish, and water beetles'.[64] Browning is drawn to the life of animals and plants as much by their grotesqueries as their beauties: 'Nature might mean flowers to Wordsworth and grass to Walt Whitman,' as Chesterton observed, 'but to

---

[60] John Pettigrew, 'Preface', in *Robert Browning: The Poems*, 2 vols, ed. John Pettigrew (London: Penguin, 1981), 1. xiii–xxi: xix.
[61] Maynard, *Browning's Youth*, 339, 89.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Colin Trodd, Paul Barlow, and David Amigoni, 'Introduction: Uncovering the grotesque in Victorian culture', in *Victorian Culture and the Idea of the Grotesque*, ed. Colin Trodd et al. (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–20: 4.
[64] Carol Christ, *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 71.

Browning it really meant such things as […] the monstrosities and living mysteries of the sea', like those depicted in 'The Englishman in Italy'.[65]

The association of the grotesque with particular kinds of organic life was suggestively articulated by Wolfgang Kayser in his seminal 1933 study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, where he observed that

> Certain animals are especially suitable to the grotesque—snakes, owls, toads, spiders—the nocturnal and creeping animals which inhabit realms apart from and inaccessible to man. Partly for the same reason (to which their uncertain origin is added) the same observation applies to vermin.[66]

This sense of the hiddenness and inaccessibility of the physical 'realms' such creatures inhabit suggests an analogous sense of the unknowability of their subjective experience. Kayser identifies the bat as the 'grotesque animal incarnate', which embodies 'the strangeness of something totally different' from mankind, and it is therefore perhaps no coincidence that the philosopher Thomas Nagel chose this animal as the subject of his classic thought experiment about the otherness of animal consciousness, the impossibility of 'know[ing] what it is like to be a bat'.[67]

Browning anticipated Kayser's analogy in a letter he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett in 1846. 'I suspect […] you have found out by this time my odd liking for "vermin"', he surmised:

> What a fine fellow our English water-eft is […] I always loved all those wild creatures God '*sets up for themselves*' so independently of us, so successfully, with their strange happy minute inch of a candle, as it were, to light them[68]

---

[65] Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, 150; see Browning, 'The Englishman in Italy', in *PWB*, 4. 39–54.
[66] Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, tr. Ulrich Weisstein (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1981), 182.
[67] Ibid., 183, 182; Thomas Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', *Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974), 435–50: 442.
[68] Browning to Elizabeth Barrett, 4 January 1846, in *Correspondence*, 11. 277. The whole letter teems with grotesque life: toads, lizards, newts, frogs, and snakes.

The little water-eft, who exists 'so independently of us', belongs to what one Victorian critic aptly referred to as Browning's beloved '*terrae incognitae*', a land populated by 'monsters' of nature and character alike.[69] For since the patristic period, and the writings of St Augustine in particular, monsters had been seen as 'the sign of that which extends beyond [the] human capacity to know', as Kathleen Long explains.[70] Late medieval natural philosophers in particular responded to the idea of the monster with the epistemologically unstable attitude of wonder, which 'limned cognitive boundaries between the natural and the unnatural and between the known and the unknown', as Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston have shown at length.[71] The wondrous and the monstrous, both of which represented 'the atypical, the marginal, the strange', were thus drawn into the grotesque's net of unknowing.[72]

As Park and Daston suggest, deviations, disparities, and monstrosities imply (indeed require) a normative standard against which these terms may acquire definition, and it was just this which Walter Bagehot offered to identify in his influential 1864 review, 'Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry'. According to Bagehot, whereas Wordsworth produced 'pure' art which 'describes the type in its simplicity', that is, its 'finished perfection', Browning's art works by contrast: 'It enables you to see, it makes you see, the perfect type by painting the opposite deviation.'[73] Browning was to put this model of aesthetics into the mouth of the Greek poet Strattis in a passage of *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875). Strattis offers a Bagehotesque toast to the Comic Muse: 'Hail […] / The hero of each painted monster—so / Suggesting

---

[69] Frank Walters, *Studies of Some of Robert Browning's Poems* (London: Sunday School Association, 1893), 42.
[70] Kathleen Long, 'Montaigne on Monsters and Monstrosity', in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 715–31: 721.
[71] Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 20.
[72] Ibid., 114–15.
[73] Walter Bagehot, 'Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry', *The National Review* 19 (November 1864), 27–67: 38, 56.

the unpictured perfect shape!'[74] What Strattis is describing is the technique of conservative satire practised by Aristophanes, which pushes 'deformity'

> to such gross extreme
> That, outraged, we protest by eye's recoil
> The opposite proves somewhere rule and law![75]

The foil which the poem presents to Aristophanic comedy is Euripidean tragedy, which, though it shares in Aristophanes' willingness to 'drop to, dally with, earth's dung', also dares to shunt things in the opposite direction, to 'lift earth to sky'.[76] Euripides, Browning suggests, disowns the conventions of his own genre and makes his

> shag-rag hero-race,
> The noble slaves, wise women, move as much
> Pity and terror as true tragic types[77]

In this way, Euripides' depiction of the lowly, the deviant, and the deformed does not shore up some distant ideal of perfection to which these are mere antitheses, but collapses the very ideal which finds them wanting, such that 'what's most ugly proves most beautiful'.[78] As the poem goes on, this collapsing of categories gathers still more steam as a synthesis between the two authors' methods is eventually proposed:

> Comedy and tragedy combine,
> Prove some new Both-yet-neither, all one bard,
> Euripides with Aristophanes
> Coöperant![79]

---

[74] Browning, *Aristophanes' Apology*, ll. 1388–90, in *CWB*, 12. 60.
[75] Ibid., ll. 1375, 1377–79, in *CWB*, 12. 60.
[76] Ibid., ll. 2125, 2122, in *CWB*, 12. 94.
[77] Ibid., ll. 2191–93, in *CWB*, 12. 98.
[78] Ibid., l. 2172, in *CWB*, 12. 97.
[79] Ibid., ll. 3340–43, in *CWB*, 12. 159. On Browning's self-conscious identification with Euripides in the poem, see Donald Smalley, 'A Parleying with Aristophanes', *PMLA* 55.3 (1940), 823–38. Jane A. McCusker reveals the resonances between Browning's Aristophanes and Matthew Arnold in 'Browning's "Aristophanes' Apology" and Matthew Arnold', *The Modern Language Review* 79.4 (1984), 783–96.

This 'new Both-yet-neither' shows up the inadequacy of prevailing concepts of genre, offering a model of the grotesque as one which breaks down stable taxonomic categories rather than propping them up, as Bagehot supposed. Ruskin, for all his increasingly strained attempts to taxonomise the grotesque into different types, insisted that it was always formed out of an unstable *combination* of what he called 'sportive' and 'terrible' elements, being a kind of genre-bending 'Both-yet-neither'. In the nineteenth century the grotesque was often associated with comedy as well as horror: Victor Hugo's influential 'Preface' to his 1827 play *Cromwell*, for example, claimed that the grotesque was a 'seed of comedy', while Thomas Wright's study *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (1875), and John Addington Symonds's essay 'Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque' (1888), drew these apparently opposing modes into co-operant closeness.[80] The Ruskinian grotesque, then, shows up the inadequacies of prevailing categories of knowledge, rather than reinforcing them.

In this way it parallels the kind of unravelling of taxonomies Darwin was effecting in the realm of evolutionary biology. Bagehot, we recall, had explicitly borrowed 'the language of science' (that is, of Linnaean taxonomy) to suggest that Browning's poetry 'deals […] not with normal types but with abnormal specimens'; and 'the language of old philosophy' (that is, of Aristotelian form) to associate it 'not with what nature is striving to be, but with what by some lapse she has happened to become'.[81] His essay thus forced 'science' and 'old philosophy' into an alignment that, by 1864, had become highly precarious in the light of Darwin's work. Attempts rigidly to categorise particular species had been exposed as misguided attempts to fix what were in fact unstable and constantly

[80] Ruskin, 'Grotesque Renaissance', 151; Victor Hugo, 'From *Cromwell*: Preface' [1827], in *The Essential Victor Hugo*, ed. E. H. Blackmore and A. M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2004), 16–52: 28. See Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875); John Addington Symonds, 'Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque', *Littell's Living Age* 177 (Apr-Jun 1888), 344–49.
[81] Bagehot, 'Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque', 56.

evolving organic forms. As Jonathan Smith writes, Darwin's thought drew 'variation, eccentricity, and irregularity' from the margins of natural science into the centre, promoting a 'blurring of boundaries and blending of categories' previously regarded as inviolable.[82] Bagehot may have invoked the language of science against Browning's incorrigible preference for an 'odd mixture', but the science was increasingly on Browning's (and Ruskin's) side.[83]

Landscapes of Unknowing

Bagehot's concern was with the depiction of character, but the taxonomic figures which he drew from natural science have equal relevance to Browning's depictions of nature, which—in the style of nineteenth-century geology and evolutionary theory—are continually breaking down the structural certainties of knowledge about the natural world. The eponymous speaker of Browning's monologue *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society* (1871), a thinly-veiled portrait of the recently deposed French Emperor Napoleon III, turns to the natural world as the best image of a world in revolutionary turmoil:

> See!
> Where winter reigned for ages—by a turn
> I' the time, some star-change, (ask geologists)
> The ice-tracts split, clash, splinter and disperse,
> And there's an end of immobility,
> Silence, and all that tinted pageant, base
> To pinnacle, one flush from fairy-land
> Dead-asleep and deserted somewhere,—see!—
> As a fresh sun, wave, spring and joy outburst.
> Or else the earth it is, time starts from trance,
> Her mountains tremble into fire, her plains
> Heave blinded by confusion: what result?

[82] Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 249.
[83] Bagehot, 'Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque', 56.

> New teeming growth, surprises of strange life
> Impossible before, a world broke up
> And re-made[84]

The Prince's vision of creative destruction witnesses apparently the most permanent features of the landscape torn to shreds, a dramatic splitting and splintering that ushers in an outburst of fresh vitality, like the luxuriant Italian soil described in *Sordello* (1840), in which 'mere decay / Produces richer life'.[85] The endless and unpredictable changeableness of the natural world thus provides the paradigm, throughout Browning's long career, for one of his key epistemological themes. As the later poems figure it, this is the idea that as everything 'decomposes but to recompose', so 'knowledge means / Ever-renewed assurance by defeat', with the hopeful consequence that 'Earth's young significance is all to learn'.[86] Situated within this wider context, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau's account of ecological rupture carries a potent epistemological charge, hinted at in his references to 'confusion' and 'surprises'.

Frances Connelly has argued that change, confusion, and surprise are indispensable to the operation of the grotesque: the 'mutability of the seen and known,' she writes, 'is essential to how the grotesque works. The response to something as grotesque is triggered when it ruptures the boundaries of what we "know".'[87] Such ruptures necessarily give rise to a measure of confusion, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in seeking to give succinct expression to his far-reaching study of the grotesque in art and literature, has called it above all 'a species of confusion'.[88] Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau's vision of an earth 'blinded by confusion' is an image of violence and loss, but it is a loss which purchases

---

[84] Browning, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society*, ll. 329–43, in *CWB*, 10. 133–34.
[85] Browning, *Sordello*, I. 473–74, in *PWB*, 2. 218.
[86] Browning, 'A Death in the Desert', l. 100, in *CWB*, 6. 359; 'A Pillar at Sebzevar', ll. 22-23, in *CWB*, 15. 191; 'With Gerard de Lairesse', l. 391, in *PWB*, 15. 189.
[87] Connelly, *The Grotesque*, 8.
[88] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), xv.

something more valuable than the 'trance'-like vision which is sacrificed. Blinding, on this account, produces a kind of renovation of the senses and imagination; it is an unknowing that impels that which had seemed impossible. The Prince's paradoxical edict, 'And there's an end of immobility'—reminiscent of Browning's Duke of Ferrara ('Then all smiles stopped together')—turns the voice of patriarchal authority ('and that's *final*') against itself, such that making an end becomes a way of beginning, and the winter of our knowing melts to reveal a land teeming with strange surprises.[89]

This would be one way of describing the terrain of 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', a work which, 'almost alone of [Browning's] poems […] depends upon, resolves about, and lives for the sake of the landscape', as William Clyde de Vane suggested in a 1925 article which has become something of a critical landmark.[90] Subsequent critics have insisted on dematerialising the landscape of the poem: Roland's 'visual and emotional experiences have no material counterpart', argues Roma King: 'the horrors he experiences, described in the poem as though they were externally real, are objective approximations of his inner life'.[91] Perhaps, but the 'inner life' which the external objects are supposed to approximate is scarcely any more 'real' than they are—not in the poststructuralist sense that fictive persons are mere effects of language, but in the quite straightforward sense that Roland's psychology remains so resolutely obscure.[92] As Browning himself admitted to a reader who consulted him about the philosopher J. T. Nettleship's elaborate allegorical interpretation of the poem thirty years after he wrote it, 'I

[89] Browning, 'My Last Duchess', l. 46, in *PWB*, 3. 188.
[90] William C. de Vane, Jr., 'The Landscape of Browning's Childe Roland', *PMLA* 40.2 (1925), 426–32: 427.
[91] Roma A. King, *The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1968), 91, 92.
[92] Critics have begun to reclaim the materiality of the poem's landscape: Allan MacDuffie, for example, argues that 'the assumption that the environment is reducible to the inner state of the protagonist has perhaps prevented us from reckoning with the ways in which the poem might express anxiety about actual degraded material environments' ('"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and the Landscapes of the Anthropocene', *Philological Quarterly* 93.3 (2014), 315–38: 316).

did not know then what I meant […] and I'm sure I don't know now.'[93] Compare the natural imagery in 'James Lee's Wife', for example, which clearly maps onto the speaker's feelings of ageing, distance, and loss with respect to her marriage. The images are practically self-glossing: 'How the vines writhe in rows, each impaled on its stake! / My heart shrivels up and my spirit shrinks curled.'[94] There is little doubting who the feminised and piteously stripped fig tree represents, while the nostalgic description of the calm sea 'olive-pale / To the leeward' rams the point home with a pun on the absent husband's name.[95] In 'Childe Roland', by contrast, neither the psychological situation nor the physical scene itself is distinctly realised. As Browning's remarks on the poem suggest, this opaqueness, far from being a problem, may even be the point—the poem is a landscape of unknowing.

In part this is an effect of the sudden, dream-like visual shifts and dissolving perspectives which characterise Roland's perception of the nightmarish landscape:

> For mark! no sooner was I fairly found
> Pledged to the plain, after a pace or two,
> Than, pausing to throw backward a last view
> O'er the safe road, 'twas gone; grey plain all round:
> Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound.[96]

Roland's safe road vanishes as soon as he steps off it, leaving him surrounded by a blank, desert-like expanse of plain, a word he enunciates three times in this short space. The plain is the traditional habitat of the knight-errant (as in the opening lines of *The Faerie Queene*) but it also suggests seeing something perfectly clearly ('Ah, did you once see Shelley plain […]?', as the speaker of 'Memorabilia' inquires) or expressing oneself with perfect

---

[93] Quoted in Lilian Whiting, *The Brownings: their Life and Art* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), 261.
[94] Browning, 'James Lee's Wife', ll. 66–67, in *CWB*, 6. 178.
[95] Ibid., ll. 56–57, in *CWB*, 6. 177. In defence of this poem's imagery, and inverting Roma King's argument, I would make the Wordsworthian point that the shape and structures of our inwardness may well be moulded *by* the perception of natural objects and the figures we make with them.
[96] Browning, 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', ll. 49–53, in *PWB*, 5. 141.

lucidity ('when your meaning's plain', as the Prior says to Fra Lippo Lippi).[97] It signifies the obvious ('plain as print') but at the same time suggests the blank or even inscrutable expression that the obvious might sometimes wear.[98] Browning's chiasmus—'grey plain all round: / Nothing but plain'— is suspended antiphonally over a line break, creating an ironic sense of echoey self-enclosure in this vast open space, a place in which opposites fade into and out of one another, where 'all' suddenly seems like 'Nothing', and being lost, cut adrift from the safe road, feels somehow like being 'found'.

By the same token, this is a landscape in which poverty unexpectedly turns plenitude. The 'land's portion' is 'penury, inertness', a place where not even weeds can find sustenance: Roland looks for the hardiest of plant life (cockle, spurge, burr) and finds mere clods of earth, before his eye becomes suddenly entangled in a Pre-Raphaelite nightmare of stubby thistles, dock, grass, and moss, and is later thrust upon 'scrubby alders', 'Drenched willows' and a 'palsied oak'.[99] This is a landscape of dearth and abundance, blankness and profusion. A river appears out of nowhere (l. 109), mountains transpire from the air:

> For, looking up, aware I somehow grew
> 'Spite of the dusk, the plain had given place
> All round to mountains—with such name to grace
> Mere ugly heights and heaps now stolen in view.
> How thus they had surprised me,—solve it, you![100]

Roland's challenge raises epistemological questions about his phantasmagoric perceptions, the peculiar causes of his new awareness of the mountains, which seems to have gradually grown upon him *and* suddenly stolen in upon him. In the 1855 proofs Browning had

---

[97] 'A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine' (Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* [1596], I. 1, ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. (London: Routledge, 2007), 31); Browning, 'Memorabilia', l. 1, in *PWB*, 5. 257; 'Fra Lippo Lippi', l. 317, in *PWB*, 5. 49.
[98] Browning, 'Christmas-Eve', l. 90, in *PWB*, 4. 334.
[99] Browning, 'Childe Roland', ll. 62, 61, 116, 117, 154, in *PWB*, 5. 142, 145, 147.
[100] Ibid., ll. 163–67, in *PWB*, 5. 148.

written ‘tell who knew’ for ‘solve it, you!’, the revision converting the aside from an airy ‘who knows?’ into a more importunate ‘can anyone tell me?’[101] Roland wishes to assert some form of authority over his perceptions and expresses this wish as a desire for knowledge, but he is helpless to satisfy this desire: appearances will not stay still, the basic law of non-contradiction keeps breaking down before his eyes.

There is something of Ruskin’s grotesque in Roland’s fluid, eddying description of the landscape. This account of the grotesque, which Ruskin put forward in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice*, united aesthetics to a theory of epistemology rather than a theory of social conditions, as he had already proposed in ‘The Nature of Gothic’ (also published in 1853). On this later account, ‘ungovernableness of imagination’ gives rise to ‘the error and wildness of the mental impressions’, which Ruskin holds responsible for both the most noble and the most ignoble examples of the grotesque:[102]

> The grotesque which comes to all men in a disturbed dream is the most intelligible example of this kind, but also the most ignoble; the imagination, in this instance, being entirely deprived of all aid from reason, and incapable of self-government. I believe, however, that the noblest forms of imaginative power are also in some sort ungovernable, and have in them something of the character of dreams; so that the vision, of whatever kind, comes uncalled, and will not submit itself to the seer[103]

Ruskin’s suspicion that the most pronounced forms of the grotesque partake of the character of dreams is suggestive given Browning’s avowal that ‘“Childe Roland” came upon me as a kind of dream.’[104] Ruskin’s line of thought in this passage is significant not only for the insistence on a measure of ungovernability as an essential condition for the strongest grotesques (which links them to dreams), but also for the way in which he aligns the ‘most intelligible’ forms of grotesque with the ‘most ignoble’. Ruskin cites the

---

[101] See note to l. 167 in *PWB*, 5. 148.
[102] Ruskin, ‘Grotesque Renaissance’, 178.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Whiting, *The Brownings*, 261.

contrasting examples of Jacob's dream and the visionary prophecies of Ezekiel as instances of the less intelligible, but pre-eminently noble, grotesque defined by the wildness of mental impressions conveyed. He notably reaches for a term drawn from the world of nature, 'wildness', to describe this epistemological condition, and when in *Modern Painters* (1856) he goes on to elaborate further upon this 'thoroughly noble' form of the grotesque, he will call it 'a most natural form of expression'.[105] This reconciliation of art and nature takes place by means of the wholly admirable 'confusion of the imagination'.[106]

In 'Childe Roland', confusion comes not only from the way in which impressions of the landscape coalesce and dissolve ungovernably but also from an acute uncertainty about what Roland is actually looking at in any single moment. This uncertainty is evinced in the minatory blots of colour, texture, and sound which Roland presents as objects of absorptive attention: the 'black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes', the vague 'blotches' and 'patches' of soil which swell into his forevision, and his hideous uncertainty about the source of the squeal elicited from thrusting his spear into an unknown body fording the river ('It may have been a water-rat I speared, / But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek').[107] Uncertainty arises, too, from the curious doubleness of Roland's impressions of natural objects, like the 'stiff blind horse', pictured threateningly 'a-stare' before the next stanza reflects that 'he might be dead for aught I know'.[108] Or the 'rankling' swathes of earth, which Roland describes as 'coloured gay and grim'.[109] In such encounters, the alluring and the menacing are 'Fused and confused, past human finding out' (as *The Ring*

[105] Ruskin, 'Of the True Ideal:—Thirdly, Grotesque', in *Modern Painters III* [1856], *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 5, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 130–48: 139, 138.
[106] Ruskin, 'Thirdly, Grotesque', 130.
[107] Browning, 'Childe Roland', ll. 114, 151, 152, 125–26, in *PWB*, 5. 145, 147, 145.
[108] Ibid., ll. 76, 79, in *PWB*, 5. 143.
[109] Ibid., l. 151, in *PWB*, 5. 147.

and the Book will describe the labyrinthine issues in Browning's Roman murder case).[110] It is precisely this recalcitrance to clear and fixed definition which leaves the spectator of the grotesque with an acute sense of his own ignorance, the feeling of being confronted with something beyond 'aught I know', which in 'Childe Roland' is realised pre-eminently in the encounter with natural objects.

The fusion of gay and grim which the landscape impresses upon Roland has been largely repressed in the large critical literature on the poem, which has tended to characterise it as uniformly horrifying and macabre. Remembering Ruskin's conception of the grotesque as a compound of 'sportive' and 'terrible' elements, it is worth observing the overlooked undertow of comedy within the hideous and frightening natural world of the poem. Consider the plain's impudently wide 'grimace', or the sunset's saucy 'Red leer', or the punished pushiness of the 'ragged thistle-stalk', whose 'head was chopped' for daring to grow taller than his peers, because 'the bents / Were jealous else'.[111] The vision of how the torture-wheel might 'reel / Men's bodies out like silk', meanwhile, is a cruelty of such extravagant, Swiftian proportions that one would need a heart of stone not to laugh.[112] Should there remain any doubt about this aspect of the poem, I would point to Roland's own comment on the blind horse—'Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe'—a statement which implies grotesqueness here is something quite other than woeful.[113]

Browning's friend Alexandra Sutherland Orr went so far as to call the poem a series of 'picturesque impressions', counting among the 'picturesque materials' that went into its composition 'the figure of a horse in the tapestry in his own drawing-room'.[114] Describing the frightful horse with its 'red gaunt and colloped neck a-strain' as picturesque

---

[110] Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, IV. 35, in *PWB*, 7. 222.
[111] Browning, 'Childe Roland', ll. 61, 48, 67, 68–69, in *PWB*, 5. 142, 141, 142.
[112] Ibid., ll. 141–42, in *PWB*, 5. 146.
[113] Ibid., l. 82, in *PWB*, 5. 143.
[114] Alexandra Sutherland Orr, *A Handbook to the Works of Browning*, 6th edn. (London: Bell, 1892), 274.

seems hardly in keeping with the agreeable scenes of gentle dilapidation and rusticity valorised by eighteenth-century theorists of the picturesque, such as William Gilpin and Uvedale Price.[115] Yet as John Macarthur notes, 'we already see in Price […] an affect of being disgusted, which is not entirely converted to pictorial charms but remains at work in visual pleasure'.[116] It was the 'delight in ruin' which Ruskin found morally questionable about the picturesque, which in its 'lower' forms encouraged the spectator to take pleasure in painful scenes of poverty and starvation for the sake of the interesting formal arrangements of colour and line which they presented: 'in a certain sense', Ruskin concluded, 'the lower picturesque ideal is eminently a *heartless* one'.[117] Browning's depiction of the gaunt horse seems in some ways to correspond to Ruskin's contrary ideal of the 'noble picturesque', which depicts

> *suffering* […] nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart. Nor only unpretending but unconscious. If there be visible pensiveness in the building, as in a ruined abbey, it becomes, or claims to become beautiful; but the picturesqueness is in the unconscious suffering[118]

Browning's horse is 'stupefied' rather than pensive, his blindness symbolising his unconsciousness of the spectacle of suffering he presents to Roland, in which there is 'no pity asked for, nor contempt feared', as Ruskin characterised it.[119] Yet if Roland's description seems at first to imply sympathy with the horse's unconscious 'woe'—'And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane' draws as tenderly close as a caress—this is vehemently rejected by the lines with which he averts his sympathetic gaze: 'I never saw a

---

[115] See Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).
[116] John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities* (London: Routledge, 2007), 102.
[117] Ruskin, 'Of the Turnerian Picturesque', in *Modern Painters IV* [1856], *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 6, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 9–26: 9, 16, 19.
[118] Ibid., 14–15.
[119] Browning, 'Childe Roland', l. 77, in *PWB*, 5. 143; Ruskin, 'Of the Turnerian Picturesque', 15.

brute I hated so; / He must be wicked to deserve such pain.'[120] Fear, pity, and contempt mingle in Roland's uncertain response, which lurches from the humour of his depiction of the horse as a superannuated stallion ('Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!'), to noble picturesque sympathy, to visceral hatred and revulsion. This volatile blend of response is detectible in some of the poem's most overtly menacing natural scenes: consider the fragile prettiness of the frothing black river, 'bespate with flakes and spumes', whose beauty is assisted by Browning's delicacy of alliteration and assonance and his choice of archaic diction; or the diaphanous gorgeousness of the sunset at the poem's close, in which Roland's peers are caught 'ranged along the hill-sides […] in a sheet of flame', 'a living frame / For one more picture!'[121] The pictorial qualities of this scene are explicitly advertised, but its frame consists, grotesquely, of burning bodies: so is this a picture of horror, fun, or beauty? Is it animated by sympathy or disgust, solidarity or separation? Perhaps the most accurate thing to be said is that, in 'Childe Roland', each of these aesthetic and affective styles attracts something of the others' colouring.

The poem's ambivalence between fascination and flinching is troublesome for any attempt to securely place the affective and aesthetic form of the poem's landscape, a critical task which Victorian writers such as George Eliot, continuing an Aristotelian tradition, firmly identified with an advance in knowledge. 'Form', Eliot wrote, 'must begin with the perception of separateness', for 'what is form but the limit of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another?'[122] Thus 'as knowledge continues to grow […] it arrives at the conception of wholes composed of parts more & more multiplied and highly differenced'.[123] Browning's grotesque encounters with the natural world deny this

[120] Browning, 'Childe Roland', ll. 82, 81, 83–84, in *PWB*, 5. 143.
[121] Ibid., ll. 114, 199, 201, in *PWB*, 5. 145, 150.
[122] George Eliot, 'Notes on Form in Art (1868)', in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 431–36: 432, 434.
[123] Ibid., 433.

process of differentiation by which knowledge advances, because the elements they are composed of cannot be firmly prised apart. As he described his late collection *Jocoseria* (1883), they are 'a collection of things gravish and gayish', that equivocal -ishness being their characteristic condition.[124]

In this respect Browning was already contending the aesthetic and affective boundary lines of his source material, the Dutch painter Gerard de Lairesse's *The Art of Painting in All its Branches* (first published as *Het groot schilderboeck* in 1710), long before he came to write the poem 'With Gerard de Lairesse' for his 1887 collection of *Parleyings*. Though Browning never admitted to this source, de Vane has demonstrated how thoroughly the painter's chapter 'Of Things Deformed and Broken, Falsely Called Painter-like' furnishes the natural imagery of 'Childe Roland': from the hoary cripple to the crowding mountains; the muddy river and crooked trees to the vermin and barren shrubs; the cleft oak to the sunset over the pathless wasteland.[125] These parallels are clinched by Browning's inscription in his own English copy of Lairesse's treatise, which he found in his father's enormous library: 'I read this book more often and with greater delight when I was a child than any other.'[126] Lairesse's overriding concern to distinguish between the 'painter-like' and the 'unpainter-like' in landscape follows from his conviction that 'the difference between the fine and the ugly, is too great not to make a distinction between them'.[127] Yet de Vane, like most subsequent critics, suggests that Browning is following Lairesse's lead in 'Childe Roland' by 'trying to create in us an

---

[124] Browning to F. J. Furnivall, 9 January 1883, in *Browning's Trumpeter: The Correspondence of Robert Browning and F. J. Furnivall, 1872–1889*, ed. William S. Peterson (Washington, DC: Decatur House Press, 1979), 63. Cf. Wordsworth's description of his youthful mind in *The Prelude*: 'Strange rendezvous my mind was at that time, / A party-colour'd show of grave and gay' (*The Prelude*, IV. 346–47, in *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1. 159).
[125] De Vane, 'Landscape', 429–32.
[126] See W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin, *The Life of Robert Browning* (London: Methuen, 1910), 9–10.
[127] Gerard de Lairesse, *The Art of Painting in All its Branches*, tr. J. F. Fritsch, 2nd edn. (London: 1778), 252. This is the edition which belonged to Browning (see Griffin and Minchin, *Life of Robert Browning*, 9).

impression of horror'.[128] As I have been arguing, the poem in fact works very hard to blur the distinctions between fine and ugly, comic and terrifying, pursuing an effect akin to one which Browning detected in a spider in his study, weaving its delicate web between two skulls: 'a picturesque bit of ghastliness'.[129] It is along this 'perplexing borderland of beauty and deformity', in the phrase of one Victorian reviewer, that Browning's compellingly grotesque evocations of nature lie.[130]

Wanting is—What?

The decline of Lairesse's prescriptive approach to art was celebrated by the critic whom Browning called his 'best interpreter', the Frenchman Joseph Milsand.[131] Praising the developments in English literary taste we have come to call Romanticism, in opposition to neoclassical strictures, he argued that 'Poets and painters, writers and critics have agreed to hold in scorn the sad science that consists of knowing what a work can be and should be'.[132] Browning's poetic instincts, he argued, led him away from such forms of knowing, which Milsand connected with an impoverishing desire for 'purity', that quality which Bagehot found so gravely lacking in Browning's work.[133] The valorisation of pure types, which require us to know what a work (or an organism) can and should be, is rejected by the long Romantic tradition which justified the abandonment of artistic rules and expectations by claiming an affinity with the wayward prodigality of nature.

Chesterton placed Browning squarely in this tradition:

---

[128] De Vane, 'Landscape', 427.
[129] Browning to Richard Hengist Horne, c. mid-June 1843, in *Correspondence*, 7. 184.
[130] F. A. Paley, 'Browning's Translation of the "Agamemnon"', in *The Athenaeum* 2609 (27 October 1877), 525–27: 527.
[131] See Edmund Gosse, *More Books on the Table* (London: Heinemann, 1923), 361.
[132] Joseph Milsand, review of *Men and Women*, *Revue Contemporaine et Athenæum Français* (15 September 1856), repr. in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, 23. 379–406: 405.
[133] Ibid.

> the element of the grotesque in art, like the element of the grotesque in nature, means, in the main, energy, the energy which takes its own forms and goes its own way. Browning's verse, in so far as it is grotesque, is not complex or artificial; it is natural and in the legitimate tradition of nature. The verse sprawls like the trees, dances like the dust; it is ragged like the thunder-cloud, it is top-heavy like the toadstool. Energy which disregards the standard of classical art is in nature as it is in Browning.[134]

Chesterton's identification of this resistance to preconceived standards as grotesque finds an ancestor in Kant, who had insisted that 'abstraction from all constraint by rules' is what 'pushes the freedom of the imagination' towards the 'grotesque', giving as an example the extravagant forms of vegetation to be found in Sumatra.[135] Ruskin, too, adduced 'natural objects' as the paradigmatic example of a freedom 'unconstrained by artistical laws'.[136] The encounter with nature called for an abandonment of such sad science: 'all the knowledge a man has must be held cheap, and neither trusted nor respected, the moment he comes face to face with Nature'.[137] Ruskin vividly illustrated the effect of this encounter in his autobiography, in which he recalls lying down on a bank in a state of depression and tracing the contours of an aspen tree:

> Languidly, but not idly, I began to draw it; and as I drew, the languor passed away: the beautiful lines insisted on being traced,—without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they 'composed' themselves, by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere.[138]

---

[134] Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, 149.
[135] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [1790], tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126.
[136] Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in *The Stones of Venice II* [1853], *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 10, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 180–269: 215.
[137] Ruskin, 'Roman Renaissance', 58.
[138] Ruskin, 'Fontainebleau', in *Praeterita* [1885–89], *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 35, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1908), 302–22: 314.

This encounter with nature shows how it unmasters existing knowledge, releasing a wonder and beauty which exceed the most intricate laws we have for understanding them.

In the 'Conclusion' to *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin identified the chief enemy of grotesque art as that 'pride of knowledge' which he perceived in the Renaissance and his own era alike, which 'not only prevented all rudeness in expression, but gradually quenched all energy which could only be rudely expressed'.[139] For Ruskin this pride of knowledge was evinced principally in the 'science of perspective' developed in the late fifteenth century, which he represented as dominating the Renaissance imagination to the exclusion of genuine perception, 'as if all the wisdom of Solomon had been compressed into a vanishing point'.[140] The grotesque, by contrast, is an art of 'distortion', which (in its noblest form) gives 'the highest sublimity even to the most trivial object', confounding all 'known rules' of what counts, and what belongs where.[141]

Browning experiments with such distortion in 'Mr Sludge, the Medium', whose speaker launches into a grotesque illustration of the significance of distorted perspectives to perception of the natural world:

> A mote of sand, you know, a blade of grass—
> What was so despicable as mere grass,
> Except perhaps the life o' the worm or fly
> Which fed there? These were 'small' and men were great.
> Well, sir, the old way's altered somewhat since,
> And the world wears another aspect now:
> Somebody turns our spyglass round, or else
> Puts a new lens in it: grass, worm, fly grow big:
> We find great things are made of little things,
> And little things go lessening till at last
> Comes God behind them. Talk of mountains now?
> We talk of mould that heaps the mountain, mites
> That throng the mould, and God that makes the mites.
> The Name comes close behind a stomach-cyst,
> The simplest of creations, just a sac

[139] Ruskin, 'Conclusion', in *The Stones of Venice III*, 196–230: 200.
[140] Ruskin, 'Roman Renaissance', 71.
[141] Ruskin, 'Grotesque Renaissance', in *The Stones of Venice III*, 135–95: 178; 'Of the True Ideal:—Thirdly, Grotesque', 133; 'The Nature of Gothic', 207.

> That's mouth, heart, legs and belly at once, yet lives
> And feels, and could do neither, we conclude,
> If simplified still further one degree:
> The small becomes the dreadful and immense
> Lightning, forsooth? No word more upon that!
> A tin-foil bottle, a strip of greasy silk,
> With a bit of wire and knob of brass, and there's
> Your dollar's-worth of lightning! But the cyst—
> The life of the least of the little things?[142]

The rhetorical function of Sludge's digression (which is to answer the objection that the divine powers he claims to channel are too lofty to stoop to mere parlour tricks) is almost forgotten in the exposition of his philosophy of the grotesque, which he describes as a way of seeing which confounds all sense of proportion. Turning one's spyglass round (or switching the lens) causes mountains and lightning to dwindle into insignificance while motes and mites swell into immensities, casting doubt on what really constitutes a distorted perspective. Sludge's spyglass calls to mind the 'Claude glasses' beloved of eighteenth-century tourists, pocket-sized convex mirrors with the aid of which the traveller could convert 'Nature's unmanageable bounty into a frameable possession', as Malcolm Andrews writes.[143] Sludge encourages just the opposite use of enhanced vision, disavowing a unified frame imposed from a lofty, lordly viewpoint in favour of an increasingly microscopic perspective, by means of which wholes turn out to be composed of proliferating parts, and every scene presented is disassembled in its turn. Even God, Sludge suggests, is to be found in the 'life of the least of the little things'—such ostentatiously unlovely creatures as mites, mould, and stomach-cysts.

Sludge's lesson is a Ruskinian one, not least in giving shape—through its bouncing rhythms and ripples of alliteration—to that 'energy which could only be rudely expressed', as though in tender imitation of nature's clumsy abundance. The passage's opening

---

[142] Browning, 'Mr Sludge, "the Medium"', ll. 1104–27, in *CWB*, 6. 333–34.
[143] Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque*, 81.

example of the blade of grass ('What was so despicable as mere grass') recalls Ruskin's four-page prose ode to the 'little pale and hollow stalk' from *Modern Painters III* (1856): 'Gather a single blade of grass', Ruskin begins,

> by no means a creditable or apparently much cared-for example of Nature's workmanship; made, as it seems, only to be trodden on to-day, and to-morrow to be cast into the oven […] And yet, think of it well, and judge whether of all the gorgeous flowers that beam in summer air […] there be any by man so deeply loved, by God so highly graced, as that narrow point of feeble green.[144]

For Sludge as for Ruskin 'what may be veiled behind' such sights 'becomes all the more awful in proportion to the insignificance or strangeness of the sign itself', a tenet stretching back into Christian antiquity, which Ruskin appropriates for his theory of the grotesque.[145] The 'sanctity and majesty' of meaning, Ruskin continues, is not undermined but rather thrown into relief by 'the utmost uncouthness of external form: nor with uncouthness merely, but even with every appearance of malignity or baseness'.[146] The stomach-cyst, affectionately if grotesquely evoked as 'a sac / That's mouth, heart, legs and belly at once', is one such uncouth creature, hiding divinity itself 'close behind' it.

For Sludge, nature is full of divine meaning just waiting to be unriddled, and in this he shares in the aim of the natural theologians, with whose project he explicitly aligns himself, at one point even parenthetically invoking their authority: 'See the Bridgewater book!'[147] His striking habit of saying 'you know' all the way through the poem (he uses the phrase eleven times in total, eight times as a separate syntactic unit) is almost a parody

---

[144] Ruskin, 'Of Mediæval Landscape:—First, the Fields', in *Modern Painters III*, 248–93: 287–88.
[145] Ruskin, 'Grotesque Renaissance', 182. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas: 'it is more fitting that divine truths should be expounded under the figure of less noble than of nobler bodies' since 'similitudes drawn from things furthest away from God form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatsoever we may say or think of Him' (*Summa Theologica*, 1.1.9, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 1. 6–7).
[146] Ruskin, 'Grotesque Renaissance', 184–85.
[147] Browning, 'Mr Sludge', l. 1140, in *CWB*, 6. 335.

of the Bridgewater authors' coercive rhetorical manner. Sludge's loving attention to the uncouth and insignificant is therefore only Ruskinian up to a point, for he does not travel all the way with the development of Ruskin's thinking about the noble grotesque, which comes to a climax in *Modern Painters III* with his ambitious intuition of 'an infinite power and meaning in the thing seen, beyond all that is apparent therein'.[148] For the acknowledgement of infinite power and meaning is also a willingness to entertain, and hold onto, an ignorance about what that power and meaning might be. Or to put this another way, truly to acknowledge an infinite power and meaning in the thing seen means rejecting the idea that nature's ultimate meaning consists in its being an embassage from, or conduit to, God (or his more or less plausible surrogates).

It is this, perhaps, which most distinguishes Browning's approach to nature from that of his Romantic forebears and Victorian peers. He is willing to dwell on the natural world, not so much for its own sake, as for the sake of something he neither knows in advance nor necessarily expects to know afterwards. It is neither instrumentalised (made subservient to a predetermined aim or feeling), nor fetishised (made into a self-justifying end in itself). The philosopher Ronald Hepburn suggests that where meaning is perceived as available but not wholly grasped (or even likely to be), objects may be apprehended with 'a mysterious sense' that they

> deeply *matter* to us, though one cannot say how: the shape of a hill, the precise placing of a stand of trees, or a solitary rock […] We seem invited to 'transcend the sheer sensible impressions': we do transcend them, but only into our state of perplexity and wonder. But no demythologizable message could be more memorable than these half-perceived, half-dreamed visionary scenes.[149]

[148] Ruskin, 'Thirdly, Grotesque', 133.
[149] Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', in *Landscapes, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 65–80: 75.

A passage from *Paracelsus* demonstrates the kind of distinction I am suggesting. The dejected philosopher, still dedicated to a life of knowing but broken down by its toll, tells his companion Festus that he has no time for the directionless contemplation of nature. 'Ay', he says, in a tone of dismissal kindling into envy, 'you would gaze on a wind-shaken tree / By the hour, nor count time lost.'[150] Yet later in the same scene, Paracelsus himself turns to the window:

> See, morn at length. The heavy darkness seems
> Diluted, grey and clear without the stars;
> The shrubs bestir and rouse themselves as if
> Some snake, that weighed them down all night, let go
> His hold; and from the East, fuller and fuller,
> Day, like a mighty river, flowing in;
> But clouded, wintry, desolate and cold.
> Yet see how that broad prickly star-shaped plant,
> Half-down in the crevice, spreads its woolly leaves
> All thick and glistering with diamond dew.[151]

This passage bears out two very different styles of attention to the natural world: one in which it ministers to emotional states or rhetorical purposes, and one in which it is freed from such responsibilities. In Browning's next long poem, *Sordello*, the poet Naddo would rebuke the court poet Eglamor for imposing his own elaborate metaphors on natural phenomena, as in his figuration of the 'buried year' as a witch who 'grew young again / To placid incantations', and the budding spring leaves as 'green smoke' from her cauldron: '"Beware", he said, / "Of setting up conceits in nature's stead!"'[152] This is a critique which anticipates, while also being wider in scope than, Ruskin's subsequent conception of the 'pathetic fallacy', which produces 'a falseness in all our impressions of external things', bending them to the subjective emotional needs of the speaker.[153]

---

[150] Browning, *Paracelsus*, III. 1004–05, in *PWB*, 1. 356.
[151] Ibid., III. 1032–41, in *PWB*, 1. 360.
[152] Browning, *Sordello*, II. 5–6, 7, 11–12, in *PWB*, 2. 246.
[153] Ruskin, 'Of the Pathetic Fallacy', in *Modern Painters III*, 201–20: 205. Ruskin also gestures to the wider kind of 'fallacy' decried by Naddo, which Ruskin calls 'the fallacy of wilful fancy' (ibid.).

In the passage from *Paracelsus*, the restorative sense of a weight lifted off and new life flowing in (reminiscent of the snowy daybreak in Shelley's 'Boat on the Serchio'), is embodied in the rhythmical springiness that reverses the steady iambic pentameter of the preceding lines, which it scatters with a rush of dactyls and trochees:[154]

/ x x / x / x x / x / x / x /
Fuller and fuller, / Day, like a mighty river, flowing in

This upsurge of rhythmical energy is then beautifully dissipated by the slow procession of adjectives in the following line: 'But clouded, wintry, desolate and cold.' Paracelsus's account of the landscape is one which seems utterly intimate with the stirrings and chillings of his own soul.

The initial evocation of dawning refreshment strongly foreshadows the conclusion to Browning's much more well-known poem 'Saul', though none of Browning's editors (nor, to my knowledge, any critic) has noticed these likenesses: not only the triple rhythms and the general conception of dawn as a time in which 'trouble had withered from earth', but the emphasis on the startling clarity and intensity of *greyness* which it brings, as well as the devilish 'serpent that slid away silent', as though his baleful spell were finally broken.[155] The significance of these parallels is that they bring out the pre- and over-determined nature of Paracelsus's vision of the natural scene. For just as in 'Saul' this vision of the dawn serves to demonstrate the 'gates of new life' opened by the coming of Christ, so in Paracelsus's speech the daybreak ministers to his belated realisation that man

[154] 'The stars burnt out in the pale blue air, / And the thin white moon lay withering there; / To tower and cavern, and rift and tree / The owl and the bat fled drowsily. / Day had kindled the dewy woods, / And the rocks above and the stream below, / And the vapours in their multitudes, / And the Appenine's shroud of summer snow, / And clothed with light of aery gold / The mists in their eastern caves uprolled.' (Shelley, 'The Boat on the Serchio', ll. 7–16, in *The Poems of Shelley*, 4 vols, ed. Geoffrey Matthews et al. (London: Longman, 1989–), 4. 357–58).

[155] See Browning, 'Saul', ll. 324, 326, 331, in *PWB*, 5. 385.

is not 'all mind'.[156] Paracelsus has discovered, too late it seems to him, that man's most estimable qualities are 'Love, hope, fear, faith', the very things he has sacrificed to his quest for knowledge.[157] The serpent in his scene, then, takes on its traditional symbolic significance as the tempter to knowledge, the loosing of whose hold is imagined to restore the intrinsic goodness of Creation. In both poems, the vision of nature is made to serve a rhetorical purpose, tangible in the very urgency of the rhythms which channel it.

By contrast, the ensuing three lines seem to belong to an entirely different rhythmical climate and rhetorical atmosphere. Their vision of nature is suddenly particular and tentative, the series 'broad prickly star-shaped' seeming to fumble towards description moment by moment as it shuffles from describing shape to texture to shape again. Falling rhythms tug against the iambic pattern, huddled stresses slowing the whole movement of thought:

/ x x / / x / / /
see how that broad prickly star-shaped plant

As in the natural imagery of 'Childe Roland', the conventionally horrible becomes the shimmeringly beautiful—a star, or a diamond—and the shimmer seems to bespeak a meaning that cannot be placed. Stopford Brooke thought the lines superfluous for precisely this reason. 'What is that *for*?' he demands indignantly, 'To give local colour or reality? It does neither', before administering the *coup de grâce*: 'Tennyson could not have done it. He knew when to stay his hand.'[158] But if Browning did *not* know when to stay his hand when it came to natural description, this unknowing might be seen as a deliberate provocation rather than an unconscious flaw. Paracelsus's lines do belong to a wider train

[156] Browning, *Paracelsus*, III. 1028, in *PWB*, 1. 358.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Brooke, *The Poetry of Robert Browning*, 98 (emphasis mine).

of thought—they begin with a 'Yet'—but rather than tempting us to invest it with a figurative meaning connected to his personal psychodrama (survival against the odds, perhaps?), this 'Yet' might also be heard as a turning *away* from the figuration of interior conflicts and exterior enterprises towards an encounter with something altogether more unfamiliar and compelling.

The alternative which Browning's own poetry extends, however, is not some abjected (and necessarily illusory) erasure of the spectator in favour of the dumbfounding otherness of the natural world, as celebrated by much contemporary ecocriticism and aesthetics. Stan Godlovitch, for example, argues that 'Nature is, for us, fundamentally inaccessible and ultimately alien' and consequently that the right attitude to adopt towards it is 'a state of appreciative incomprehension'.[159] But stupefaction is not a very eloquent, sustainable, nor especially honest response to the natural world, and Browning gives it short shrift in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*: '"O grandeur of the visible universe', ventriloquises the Prince,

> Our human littleness contrasts withal!
> O sun, O moon, ye mountains and thou sea,
> Thou emblem of immensity, thou this,
> That, and the other,—what impertinence
> In man to eat and drink and walk about
> And have his little notions of his own,
> The while some wave sheds foam upon the shore!'[160]

To adopt such an attitude is not only to neglect the fact that human beings are no more distant from 'Nature' than any other natural object, but also to indulge a pose of faux-humility, since this attitude invests nature with a string of emblematic qualities of its own: this, that, and (the literary theorist's trump card) *the Other*. Godlovitch provides an

---

[159] Stan Godlovitch, 'Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 11.1 (1994), 15–30: 19.
[160] Browning, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, ll. 517–26, in *CWB*, 10. 141.

illustrative catalogue, hailing nature as 'the aloof, the distant, the unknowable' as well as (inevitably) 'the Other'.[161]

The absolutist conception of nature's unknowability is consistently countered in Browning's poetry with the conviction enunciated by Fra Lippo Lippi, that

> This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink.[162]

Rather than bracketing nature as an abyss of unknowability, such an engagement with the natural world recognises that, as Ronald Hepburn puts it,

> I am both actor and spectator, ingredient in the landscape and lingering upon the sensations of being thus ingredient, rejoicing in their multifariousness, playing actively with nature, and letting nature, as it were, play with me and with my sense of myself.[163]

Browning's poetic evocations of nature, from the simple leaf or stone in 'Christmas-Eve' to the tectonic drama of *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, from Mr Sludge's blade of grass and stomach-cyst to the whole complex dreamscape of 'Childe Roland', are encounters in which the natural world is allowed to have its way with the speaker, who is conceived as both actor and spectator, half-creating the world of which he is himself a part.

The way Browning himself sometimes writes about trees offers a good final example of this way in which coming face to face with nature often means letting nature look back. Take this instance from *Pauline*:

> And in the dreamy water one small group
> Of two or three strange trees are got together
> Wondering at all around, as strange beasts herd

---

[161] Godlovitch, 'Icebreakers', 26.
[162] Browning, 'Fra Lippo Lippi', ll. 313–15, in *PWB*, 5. 49.
[163] Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', in *'Wonder' and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 9–35: 13.

Together far from their own land[164]

Set apart from their natural surroundings, and only indistinctly perceived (are there two or three?), these trees are both themselves strange and fascinated by the strangeness of their environment. Yet Browning dramatises not an *estrangement* but a lively, mutual relationship of wondering. This passage is what Hepburn would call an 'interiorization' of the natural world (it follows hard on the poet-speaker's avowal that 'I can live all the life of plants […] mount with the bird […] Or like a fish breathe deep the morning air / In the misty sun-warm water'); but rather than being an appropriative or exploitative gesture, here such 'interiorization' is perceived as 'half-completed in nature itself, imparting an almost mythological character to any figures such a scene contains'.[165]

It is a gesture which Browning will make again and again: 'The herded pines commune and have deep thoughts, / A secret they assemble to discuss' (*Paracelsus*); 'And still as we urged / Our way, the woods wondered, and left us' ('The Englishman in Italy'); 'the else-unconquered growth / Of pine and all that breeds and broods there, leaving loth / Man's inch of masterdom' ('Ivàn Ivànovitch').[166] Evading both the promises of masterdom and the threats of servitude which knowledge may extend, Browning's poetic encounters with the natural world involve the reader in a sense that something is missing, though one cannot quite say what. Such poems persistently encourage an awareness of a 'known unknown', to borrow Browning's own phrase from *The Ring and the Book*: something tantalisingly, if unsettlingly—but never forbiddingly—beyond the stretch of our knowing.[167] And this consciousness is modelled both by thinking, brooding, wondering nature itself and by the writhing, equivocal forms with which Browning evokes it.

---

[164] Browning, *Pauline*, ll. 756–59, in *PWB*, 1. 83.
[165] Ibid., ll. 716, 720, 724–25, in *PWB*, 1. 81; Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious', 75.
[166] Browning, *Paracelsus*, V. 724–27, in *PWB*, 1. 485; Browning, 'The Englishman in Italy', ll. 146–50, in *PWB*, 4. 47; Browning, 'Ivàn Ivànovitch', ll. 21–26, in *CWB*, 14. 233–34.
[167] Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, X. 1315, in *PWB*, 9. 158.

III

Rossetti: Feeling Vague and Seeing Double

> Dreams, works of art (some), glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important.
>
> ELIZABETH BISHOP[1]

'Surely poetry must be a progressive art in which discoveries may be made as in other branches of knowledge', wrote Thomas Hake in his review of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Poems* (1870); 'yet one ever seems to have experienced its fresh revelations beforehand.'[2] Hake's idea is a resonant one, prefigured by Johnson, Keats, and Emerson; that it was prompted by reading Rossetti, however, invites further reflection.[3] Rossetti might well have objected to Hake's characterisation of poetry as a province of knowledge; in 'The Cloud Confines', the faith in knowing professed by the refrain—'Whatever there is to know, / That shall we know one day'—comes to sound hopelessly complacent and inadequate as a response to the experiences of love, death, and war.[4] Yet far from being

---

[1] Elizabeth Bishop to Anne Stevenson, 8 January and 20 January 1964, in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz (New York, NY: Library of America, 2008), 860–61.
[2] Thomas Gordon Hake, 'Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti', in *New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 146 (London: Adams and Francis, 1870), 681–700: 699.
[3] Johnson: 'The *Church-yard* abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning "Yet even these bones," are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them' ('Gray' [1781], in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 23, ed. John H. Middendorf (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 1452–71: 1471). Keats: 'I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity—it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance' (John Keats to John Taylor, 27 February 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1. 238). Emerson: 'In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty' (Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', in *Essays: First Series* [1841], *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph Slater et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 25–52: 27).
[4] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'The Cloud Confines', ll. 11–12, in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 235 (henceforth *CPR*).

indifferent to knowledge, Rossetti's poems are often compelled by what it feels like to know, especially when that feeling seems just out of grasp—or dissolves on arrival. In this chapter I propose two lines of inquiry, united by their common interest in the temporality of knowing. First, drawing on the poet's personal library, I suggest connections between Rossetti's sonnets for pictures and the Renaissance concept of *vaghezza*, which constellates notions of beauty, mutability, and indefinability central to Rossetti's poetic technique and artistic ambitions. My reading of Rossetti's sonnet on Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre* challenges critical assumptions about this poem's place in the ekphrastic tradition, questioning the view that the poem '*knows* something […] that had been held back by the silent image', as Stephen Cheeke characterises the ekphrastic mode.[5] Rather, I argue that the poem competes with the painting's qualities of referential and expressive vagueness to create space for sensuous thoroughfares of thinking that never converge upon knowledge.

In the second and third sections of this chapter, I identify moments in Rossetti's oeuvre when known and unknown seem superimposed upon one another, blurring the boundaries between representation and reality, and exposing a gap between knowledge and the *feeling* of knowing. These phantasmal moments, I suggest, can be situated within the wider history of memory, specifically with respect to Rossetti's interest in the disorienting cognitive phenomenon of déjà vu, first treated as an object of sustained research in the late nineteenth century. Rossetti has always been closely identified with what he called the 'summoning art' of memory, but his poems often tilt away from the sense of control implicit in recollection, compelled instead towards the shock and perplexity of involuntary

[5] Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2010), 6.

recognition. Unlike in Proust, however, such recognitions come shaded by a dissonant sense of uncertainty and unfamiliarity that transforms them into sites of unknowing.[6]

In these ways, mapping what is most idiosyncratic—what is often so radiantly odd and beautiful—about how Rossetti imagines unknowing may also reveal his participation in the kind of philosophical, psychological, and scientific discourses from which his poetry has frequently been dissociated. Rossetti's brother, for example, pronounced him 'anti-scientific to the marrow', while William Holman Hunt, convinced that science was 'of the greatest poetic and pictorial importance for modern art', cast himself in explicit opposition to Rossetti, who, in Hunt's words, 'despised such inquiries'.[7] Yeats, greatly responsible for shaping Rossetti's later reception, sharply distinguished him from Victorian contemporaries such as Robert Browning by his pursuit of 'pure beauty' in preference to 'psychological curiosity'.[8] John Holmes offers the more nuanced view that Rossetti 'took little interest in science after the 1850s', tracing a movement away from the 'psychological challenge' of his early painting and poetry towards events 'transposed out of history into a mystical, dreamlike landscape'.[9] Yet, as Henri Bergson noted, the sense of 'a reality transposed into dream' is exactly how one might describe the experience of déjà vu, a condition which, during Rossetti's own lifetime, went by the name of 'dreamy state' in the neurological literature.[10]

---

[6] Rossetti, 'The Stream's Secret', l. 97, in *CPR*, 56.
[7] William Michael Rossetti, 'Preface', in *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti, 2 vols (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886), 1. xxi; William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 vols (London: Dutton, 1914), 1. 104, 105.
[8] W. B. Yeats, *The Trembling of the Veil* [1922], in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 3, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York, NY: Scribner, 1999), 109–286: 242.
[9] John Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 183, 175.
[10] Henri Bergson, 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition' [1908], in *Mind-Energy*, tr. H. Wildon Carr, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 106–48: 145. The term 'dreamy state' was coined in 1876 by John Hughlings Jackson, who associated it with incipient epilepsy. See Esther Lardreau, 'An Approach to Nineteenth-Century Medical Lexicon: The Term "Dreamy State"', in *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 20.1 (2011), 34–41: 38.

Rossetti's passionate interest in states of unknowing not only parallels work by his contemporaries in the diverse fields of aesthetics, medicine, and psychology but, as I go on to show, sometimes significantly influenced their analysis. The mobility and elusiveness of *vaghezza*, and the dreamlike commingling of presence and retrospect, familiarity and unfamiliarity, in déjà vu, also modelled for Rossetti two of the effects he most keenly desired from his own poems. Pursuing these connections may therefore shed new light on Rossetti's poetic technique and suggest some ways in which prevailing conceptions of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics might be revised.

Giorgione and the 'Cult of Vagueness'

Towards the end of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's prose tale 'Hand and Soul' (1849) the narrator stands transfixed for a second day before an early medieval painting in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. A gaggle of art students hovers nearby, copying the celebrated Raphael that hangs above it. Taking the visiting Englishman for a monoglot, the students mock his interest in the older picture: '*roba mistica*', gibes one; '*'st' Inglesi son matti sul misticismo: somiglia alle nebbie di là. Li fa pensare alla patria*' ('mystic stuff; these English are mad about mysticism—it's like those fogs they have over there. It makes them think of their country').[11] The Italian student's good humour gives way to Gallic disdain: '*Je tiens que quand on ne comprend pas une chose, c'est qu'elle ne signifie rien*' ('I hold that when one can't understand a thing it's of no importance').[12] This closing dialogue to what is commonly acknowledged to be one of Rossetti's most important works—Jerome McGann calls it his 'aesthetic manifesto'—has attracted relatively little notice.[13] The

[11] Rossetti, 'Hand and Soul', in *CPR*, 309–17: 318.
[12] Ibid.
[13] See McGann's note in *CPR*, 409.

longest and most detailed examination of Rossetti's parable about sincerity and self-expression in art dispenses with this climactic passage with the terse observation that 'there are few who like' such art and 'fewer who understand it'.[14] Yet the terms of the students' dialogue rehearse one of the central motifs in the reception (both contemporary and subsequent) of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, and Rossetti's in particular.

Ford Madox Ford spoke for a generation of modernist sceptics when he accused Rossetti of 'the idea, amounting to an obsession, that Poetry is a matter of mists hiding, of glamours confusing the outlines of things', a view at one with T. E. Hulme's wider condemnation of the principle he detected underlying much late Victorian verse: the communication of 'some vague mood'.[15] One might, of course, communicate a 'vague mood' very precisely: Edgar Allan Poe believed that poetry should aspire to 'a suggestive indefinitiveness of meaning, with the view of bringing about a definitiveness of vague and therefore of spiritual *effect*'.[16] Rossetti himself criticised some of Arthur O'Shaughnessy's poems for producing 'a certain vagueness of impression' (as distinct from an impression of vagueness).[17] Conversely, John Ruskin had insisted on 'the mystery of *clearness*': as in

> an Italian twilight, when, sixty or eighty miles away, the ridge of the Western Alps rises in its dark and serrated blue against the crystalline vermilion, there is […] an unsearchableness without cloud or concealment.[18]

---

[14] John Pfordresher, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Hand and Soul": Sources and Significance', *Studies in Short Fiction* 19.2 (1982), 103–32: 131.
[15] Ford Madox Hueffer, *Rossetti: A Critical Essay on His Art* (London: Duckworth, 1902), 85; T. E. Hulme, 'A Lecture on Modern Poetry' [1908], in *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, ed. Karen Csengeri (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 49–56: 53.
[16] Edgar Allan Poe, 'Marginalia' [1844], in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 16, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: Crowell, 1902), 28–30: 28.
[17] Rossetti to Arthur O'Shaughnessy, 25 April 1874, in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William E. Fredeman, 10 vols (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002–15), 6. 443.
[18] John Ruskin, 'Of Turnerian Mystery:—Secondly, Wilful', in *Modern Painters IV* [1856], *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 6, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 88–105: 103. That mystery and clarity need not be opposites is suggested by Rossetti's naming his fictional painter 'Chiaro' ('clear').

Remarks such as these, from some of the writers who most engaged Rossetti, suggest the intricacy of the issues raised by the conclusion of 'Hand and Soul'. Situating Rossetti's poetry within the largely forgotten discourse of vagueness in nineteenth-century aesthetics is one way of connecting the various subjects raised by the students' dialogue—mysticism, mistiness, and the relation of art to knowledge and understanding—and hence of beginning to apprehend its significance. It may also show why it has been possible to characterise Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry both by its 'antagonism to all mist and deception' (in Ruskin's classic statement) and by what William Empson called 'ambiguity by vagueness, such as was used to excess by the Pre-Raphaelites'.[19] Empson's suggestion that such a resource could be used 'to excess' implies it is not in itself objectionable. Indeed, he acknowledged that, while the 'wavering and suggestive indefiniteness of nineteenth-century poetry' was 'often merely weak', it could also be the condition of 'extreme beauty'.[20] Megan Quigley therefore misrepresents his stance when she ranks him among those for whom (like Rossetti's fictional art students) vagueness can mean nothing but muddled thinking and lack of substance, flimsiness of object and slackness of execution.[21] Comparing illustrations of Dante in 1872, John Addington Symonds was careful to discriminate between different uses and degrees of artistic vagueness:

> The absence of vagueness in Blake prevents our calling his designs sublime in the highest sense: they startle our imagination, rather than dilate it. On the other hand the vagueness of Fuseli is excessive: it degenerates into feebleness.[22]

---

[19] Ruskin, 'Of Turnerian Mystery:—First, as Essential', in *Modern Painters IV*, 73–87: 75; William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2nd edn. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1947), 26.
[20] Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 190, 187. Empson himself is rather vague about what he means by vagueness, although he associates it closely with his sixth type of ambiguity (by contradiction or irrelevance). The example he gives is Thomas Nashe's 'Brightness falls from the air' (see ibid., 26).
[21] According to Quigley, vagueness for Empson represented a 'weak refusal of the concrete alternatives of ambiguity'. See Megan Quigley, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.
[22] John Addington Symonds, *An Introduction to the Study of Dante* (London: Smith, Elder, 1872), 234. Compare also Ruskin's earlier remark: 'Perfection in chiaroscuro drawing lies between these two masters, Rembrandt and Dürer. Rembrandt is often too loose and vague; and Dürer has little or no effect of mist or

I want to suggest that engaging seriously with vagueness, both as a critical term and as a particular type of affect, may allow for a kind of reading that is more, not less, theoretically sophisticated and historically alert.

Specifically, I want to propose that Rossetti's sonnet 'A Venetian Pastoral, by Giorgione; in the Louvre' (composed in the same year as 'Hand and Soul') models a way of responding to qualities of vagueness—at the various levels of subject, form, and figure—that is best understood in terms of the Renaissance art-theoretical concept of *vaghezza*, closely associated with the Venetian tradition dear to Rossetti. Rossetti's picture-poem both exemplifies a certain kind of engagement with a work of art and aspires to the same condition of unknowing to which it responds, seeking for itself the status which Rossetti attributed to another of Giorgione's canvases: 'a thing to dream before'.[23]

The collective title which Rossetti gave to his 'Sonnets for Pictures' leaves provocatively open the question of how the relation between painting and poem ought to be conceptualised. That these are sonnets 'for' pictures could mean a number of things: that they are intended as a gift (the poems presumably supplying something lacking in the paintings), a tribute (acts of homage to loftier works), and/or a substitute (sonnets *in place of* pictures, which could imply they are being offered as approximations—or alternatives). The poems have traditionally been read within the ekphrastic tradition, indeed as typifying that tradition: that is, as verbal representations of visual representations (in James Heffernan's usefully inclusive definition).[24] One of the most striking things about them, however—which passes almost wholly unremarked in the critical literature—is the lack of

uncertainty': *The Elements of Drawing* [1857], *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 15, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 1–232: 79.

[23] Rossetti to Charles Eliot Norton, July 1858, in *Correspondence*, 2. 226.

[24] See James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.

correspondence between these two fields of representation. As William Money Hardinge observed of Rossetti's sonnet for Mantegna's *Parnassus* in 1891,

> were it not for the fact that this is the only one of the three pictures by Mantegna in the Louvre to which this sonnet could possibly apply […] I should even now be scarcely convinced that they were fellows.[25]

The sonnet for Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre*, on the other hand, with its reference to waves and vessels, had the same individual combing the galleries in vain for a lagoonscape with gondolas.[26] Rossetti's own titles for these pictures tend to obscure their content by removing them to the furthest horizon of generic expectation: 'An Allegorical Dance for Women', 'A Venetian Pastoral'.[27] On their original appearance in *The Germ* they even came appended with prose descriptions of the paintings, as if in acknowledgement of their referential vagueness; that Rossetti later cut these paratexts from the published editions of his work suggests he did not regard this quality as altogether a weakness.[28]

The complex history of the valorisation of vagueness in nineteenth-century aesthetics remains to be written. Here it must suffice to note that in the realm of Victorian literary culture—in addition to the writings of Poe and Ruskin already mentioned—it emerges with particular force in the criticism of E. S. Dallas and James Sully, published as Rossetti's reputation continued to rise, and as he continued to revise his work, through the

---

[25] William Money Hardinge, 'A Note on the Louvre Sonnets of Rossetti', *Temple Bar* 91 (March 1891), 433–43: 439.
[26] Ibid., 437. The painting is now generally attributed to Titian: see Elizabeth K. Helsinger's discussion in *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 33.
[27] Rossetti equivocated about even this, referring to a 'pastoral—at least, a kind of pastoral—by Giorgione which is so intensely fine that I condescended to sit down before it and write a sonnet' (Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 8 October 1849, in *Correspondence*, 1. 114). The painting had been catalogued as a 'Pastorale' in Charles Lebrun's 1683 inventory drawn up for Louis XIV and acquired its present name in the early nineteenth century: see Francis Haskell, 'Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre* and its Admirers', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 119.5180 (1971), 543–55: 548–49.
[28] Hardinge was using the text of the 1870 *Poems*.

second half of the century.[29] For Dallas, writing in the 1860s, 'all good poetry and art' will 'set innumerable trains of thought astir in the mind, fill us with their suggestiveness, and charm us with an indefinable sense of pleasure', being imbued with that 'unknown something […] which we are in the habit of signalising as in a peculiar sense poetical'.[30] A decade later, Sully too accords a central place to the 'effect of vague suggestion', observing that

> Contemporary English art, including painting and poetry, illustrates an impulse among some of the most cultivated lovers of art to make prominent this ingredient of the vague and undefined.[31]

Dallas's and Sully's interventions enlist developments in modern psychology to lend support to Wordsworth's earlier claim, in the 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' (1815) that the imagination 'recoils from everything but the plastic, the pliant and the indefinite', echoed three years later by William Hazlitt ('The province of the imagination […] is the unknown and undefined').[32] These dicta in turn channel one of the fundamental principles of eighteenth-century aesthetics, embodied in Kant's notion of vague beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*, more commonly translated as 'free' or 'pure' beauty) as the proper object of a judgement of taste, unencumbered by pre-determined ends and desires.[33] Alternatively, one might trace an ancestor in the seventeenth-century French idea of the *je ne sais quoi*, most influentially discussed by Dominique Bouhours in 1671 in relation to what James Elkins calls 'a state of unfocus, of unresolvable meaning', or more precisely 'the pleasure

---

[29] For an illuminating discussion of links between eighteenth-century aesthetics of vagueness and English Romanticism, see Thomas H. Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially 127–48.
[30] E. S. Dallas, *The Gay Science*, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866), 1. 318, 2. 135.
[31] James Sully, 'The Undefinable in Art', *Cornhill Magazine* 38 (November 1878), 559–72: 560.
[32] William Wordsworth, 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' [1815], in *Shorter Poems, 1807–1820,* ed. Carl H. Ketcham (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 632–57: 639; William Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General', in *Lectures on the English Poets* [1818], *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, vol. 2, ed. Duncan Wu (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), 165–80: 172.
[33] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [1790], tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 114.

of such a state'.[34] Further inquiry might ultimately root these traditions in mystical-theological ideas about the way in which God transcends every attempt at positive definition.[35] Rossetti's poetics emerges out of and contributes towards this long legacy of reflection, but I want to suggest an alternative genealogy for his preoccupation with the vague which leads back not to France, Germany, or the ancient world, but to late medieval and Renaissance Italy—to Petrarch, Dante, and the Venetian artists he adored.

Rossetti's choice of Giorgione's painting as a poetic subject is particularly significant from this point of view because Giorgione's reception history is bound up with questions about reference and interpretability. The sixteenth-century critic Giorgio Vasari suggested that, in Giorgione's frescoes for the Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice, the painter

> set to work […] with no other purpose than to make figures at fancy to display his art, for I cannot discover what they mean, whether they represent some ancient or modern story, and no one has been able to tell me.[36]

In the nineteenth century this lack of narratability was increasingly revalued as the possession of a 'lyrical' quality, as for example in Anna Jameson's account of Giorgione in her *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters* (1845), a book Rossetti is known to have studied closely.[37] Jameson characterises Giorgione as 'essentially a poet, and a *subjective*

---

[34] James Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?: The Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 161. See also Richard Scholar, *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), especially 21–70 and 182–222.

[35] For an introduction to these ideas, see William Franke, 'Introduction: Historical Lineaments of Apophasis', in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. 1, ed. William Franke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 9–33.

[36] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* [1568], 4 vols, tr. A. B. Hinds, ed. William Gaunt (London: Dent, 1963), 2. 170. Vasari's comment is coloured by his broader antipathy to the Venetian tradition, which, as James Elkins observes, is widely credited with 'a fundamental possibility that Western art has had since the 1470s: to declare, however ineffectually, that a painting might fall outside of any genre, symbolization, or primary meaning' (Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?*, 128).

[37] On the particular challenge Giorgione's paintings have posed to interpretation, see ibid., 98–122. On Rossetti's use of Jameson, see David A. Ludley, 'Anna Jameson and D. G. Rossetti: His Use of Her Histories', *Woman's Art Journal*, 12.2 (1991), 29–33. On the particular valences of 'lyric' in the Victorian period, see Angela Leighton, 'Lyric and the Lyrical', in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 149–71.

poet', whose works were 'in painting what idyls and lyrics are in poetry'.[38] The 'mysterious allegorical significance' of a painting like the *Concert Champêtre* being irrecoverable, Jameson suggests that its 'particular charm' for a modern viewer arises from the vague feeling of melancholy mixed with enjoyment which it seems to express, as though vagueness of subject made possible a rich vagueness of feeling.[39] The Pre-Raphaelite critic F. G. Stephens placed Rossetti's own later paintings explicitly in the 'lyrical' tradition of Titian and Giorgione, being 'so indefinite' that 'there is nothing to suggest subject, time, or place'.[40] In the same decade, Théophile Gautier praised the *Concert Champêtre* as 'a painting which has no subject and tells no story', and ten years later, in his celebrated essay 'The School of Giorgione' (1877), Walter Pater would claim that the perfection of lyrical poetry depended upon 'a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject' epitomised in the work of the Venetian master, whose paintings could thus be said to 'belong to a sort of poetry which tells itself without an articulated story'.[41] This latter expression is more than simply a definition of lyric by what it is not (epic, drama, narrative). Though it may lack the self-conscious resonance of Pater's italicised and much discussed tag from the same essay ('*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*'), it hints at a comparably bold and tantalising idea—that a painting might be its own ekphrasis (from *ek* + *phrazein*, to tell out).[42] Vagueness, then, as the essence of eloquence.

---

[38] Anna Jameson, *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters*, 2 vols (London: Knight, 1845), 1. 212, 220.
[39] Ibid.
[40] F. G. Stephens, 'Mr Rossetti's Pictures', *Athenaeum* 1982 (21 October 1865), 545–46: 545, 546.
[41] Théophile Gautier, *The Louvre* [1867], in *The Works of Théophile Gautier*, vol. 5, tr. and ed. F. C. de Sumichrast (Boston: Brainard, 1901), 1–322: 72; Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione' [1877], in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 3rd edn. [1888], ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 102–22: 108, 117.
[42] Ibid., 106; see 'ekphrasis, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. December 2020), accessed 1 September 2021. One art historian has suggested just this of Giorgione's *Concert*, after discussing the search for a poem which the picture might be taken to illustrate: 'It seems to me to be more in the nature of the subject that the picture itself be the poem, the painter the poet.' (Philipp Fehl, 'The Hidden Genre: A Study of the *Concert Champêtre* in the Louvre', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 16.2 (1957), 153–68: 159).

This could be taken to imply that there is simply nothing to be said about the picture; that, in the paradoxical phrase of the leading nineteenth-century critic of the Renaissance Jacob Burckhardt, the 'inexpressible poetry' of such painting is 'perhaps only desecrated by words'.[43] The inadequacy of words to measure up to the image has always been a key point of debate in the *paragone* between the sister arts (as in Ruskin's famously dishonest statement about Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*: 'I will not insult this marvellous picture by an effort at a verbal account of it').[44] In Burckhardt, however, as elsewhere in nineteenth-century writing, the eclipse of the expressible is ascribed to poetry as well as painting. Their ancient rivalry thus takes on a new and unexpected twist in Victorian discourse, each medium competing to be, not the more vividly delineative (in pursuit of the traditional ideals of *enargeia* or *descriptio*), but the more profoundly vague.[45] James Sully conducted just such a comparison of the different arts 'in respect of their capability of supplying the peculiar modes of vague delight', and instances of this inverted *paragone* may be found throughout the Victorian period.[46] After visiting Rossetti's own studio, for example, Elizabeth Gaskell refused to 'define & shape my feelings & thoughts' about his

[43] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Cicerone: An Art Guide to Painting in Italy*, tr. Mrs. A. H. Clough, ed. J. A. Crowe (London: Murray, 1879), 196, 197. Titian referred to his mythological paintings as *poesie*, a term used in contradistinction to *istorie* which came to be associated with paintings lacking 'moral content'. See Patricia Emison, 'Poesia', in *Grove Art Online*, <doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T068247> (pubd. 2003), accessed 1 September 2021.
[44] Ruskin, 'Of Imagination Penetrative', in *Modern Painters II* [1846], *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 4, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), 249–88: 270.
[45] For the best history of these traditional ideals, see Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
[46] Sully, 'Undefinable', 567. Such arguments always run the risk of essentialising the potentialities of each medium. As W. J. T. Mitchell points out, while we may be tempted to think—following Lessing's famous distinction in the *Laocöon*—that 'the visual arts are inherently spatial, static, corporeal, and shapely' while supposing that 'arguments, addresses, ideas, and narratives are in some sense *proper* to verbal communication', in fact 'paintings can tell stories, make arguments, and signify abstract ideas', while 'words can describe or embody static, spatial states of affairs […] without any deformation of their "natural" vocation (whatever that may be)': W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 160.

pictures into so 'coarse' a material as 'words', while for *Middlemarch*'s Will Ladislaw, on the other hand, 'Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague'.[47]

Rossetti's sonnet seems to follow this logic to its transcendent Burckhardtian conclusion, withdrawing from its own expressiveness and pleading for silence in the name of the painting's 'solemn poetry'. If, after all, the painting itself is a poem, what further need for poetry?

> Water, for anguish of the solstice,—yea,
> Over the vessel's mouth still widening
> Listlessly dipt to let the water in
> With slow vague gurgle. Blue, and deep away,
> The heat lies silent at the brink of day.
> Now the hand trails upon the viol-string
> That sobs; and the brown faces cease to sing,
> Mournful with complete pleasure. Her eyes stray
> In distance; through her lips the pipe doth creep
> And leaves them pouting; the green shadowed grass
> Is cool against her naked flesh. Let be:
> Do not now speak unto her lest she weep,—
> Nor name this ever. Be it as it was:—
> Silence of heat, and solemn poetry.[48]

Rossetti was moved to retract this identification of the fragile mystery evoked in the poem with 'poetry' in his 1870 revision, worrying that it was 'intellectually incestuous,—poetry seeking to beget its emotional offspring on its own identity'.[49] You may call a painting poetic, Rossetti implies, but not in a poem. It is perhaps more than coincidental that the other word to disappear in this revision was 'vague' (the water's 'slow vague gurgle' becoming the wave that 'sighs in / Reluctant'), since designating something as 'vague'

---

[47] Elizabeth Gaskell to Charles Eliot Norton, 25 and 30 October 1859, in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 580; George Eliot, *Middlemarch* [1871–72], ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2019), 179.
[48] Rossetti, 'A Venetian Pastoral, by Giorgione; in the Louvre', *The Germ* 4 (April 1850), 181.
[49] Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 27 August 1869, in *Correspondence*, 4. 252–53.

tends to blunt whatever sense of vagueness it might otherwise diffuse, exchanging evocation for assertion.[50]

Existing commentary on the poem nonetheless tends to treat it as an allegory about the transcendent and autonomous nature of art. Richard Stein, for example, characterises the final triplet as 'releasing the painting from the ritual of interpretation and returning art to its own, powerful, self-contained existence'.[51] Yet only in the loosest sense could the first eleven lines be considered an 'interpretation', while the poem's one grandly interpretive gesture arrives in the very last line of the revised version ('Life touching lips with Immortality').[52] Jonathan Freedman presses the opposite view that the poem's self-silencing is a cunning proof of the power of words to master the image: even as the injunction to 'Let be' seems to rob the speaker of power, it testifies to his previously demonstrated capacity to bring the painting alive (by ushering it into the world of temporality), as well as to 'create a timeless icon in the very medium that seems bound most irrevocably to time'.[53] Both readings, however, seem out of touch with the poem's tone, which is neither cringing nor despotic. Worse, they neglect the dramatic and rhetorical context of the speaker's plea, which only a full reading of the sonnet can provide.

The speaker's defence against definition cannot be abstracted from its wider setting without losing much of the sonnet's poetic playfulness as well as what Rossetti might have called its 'fundamental brainwork'.[54] For the injunction to 'Let be' looks very different depending on what we take to be the relations between reader, speaker, and painting. The

---

[50] Rossetti, 'For a Venetian Pastoral by Giorgione (In the Louvre)', in *CPR*, 183.
[51] Richard L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation: The Fine Arts as Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 22.
[52] Rossetti, 'For a Venetian Pastoral', in *CPR*, 183.
[53] Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 19.
[54] Rossetti used the phrase in a letter to Hall Caine shortly before his death: 'Conception, my boy, FUNDAMENTAL BRAINWORK, that is what makes the difference in all art' (Rossetti to Hall Caine, March 1881, in *Correspondence*, 9. 429).

first question to be asked of the poem concerns the immediate ambiguity about who is speaking, and whether this voice comes from inside or outside the picture. On a first reading it is tempting to take the opening line as dramatic speech spoken by a figure in the painting: 'Water, for anguish of the solstice' sounds like a rather theatrical (even camp) cry of thirst, an impression only reinforced by the ensuing 'yea', which might be heard either as pleading (a plea addressed to another figure in the picture, or to the viewer?) or perhaps as nodding confirmation to a proffered draught. This illusion is all but quashed by line three, in which it transpires that 'water' is the subject of a descriptive sentence rather than an exclamation; the voice then (unless we take it to be that of a figure speaking about their own actions in the third person) seems rather to be that of a curious observer outside the picture frame, someone who appears to be puzzling out the picture's subject. 'Yea' is then a kind of 'Now I see! The water is for the anguishing heat of the solstice'. Where the reader may have thought she had access to the world depicted in the painting, she now realises that she stands at one remove, witness only to an act of witnessing.

When the speaker issues his sudden call to 'Let be', therefore, the reader is startled: unless this call is taken to be addressed to another figure in the painting, it appears that the naked woman is suddenly aware of the speech of those exterior to the picture (the observer-speaker's, or ours, depending on whom we take him to be hailing). The injunction to not *now* speak to her is especially odd since there has been no suggestion of anyone speaking to her up to this point.[55] Although ostensibly a call to back off, when situated within the wider rhythm of involvement which the poem constructs—whereby the reader is first drawn into the world of the painting, then held back from it, then abruptly drawn in once again—it emerges as a kind of salutation, an acknowledgement of the

[55] This line is less puzzling in the revised version, which opens with a direct address to a figure in the painting (albeit a different one from the seated woman).

reader's imaginative participation in the depicted scene. This dramatic fluctuation of perspective mirrors the rhythm of intimacy and distance which characterises the shifting visual field, which travels from the interior of the cup to the horizon 'deep away' back to the closeness of hands and eyes, before withdrawing again to the 'distance'. T. J. Clark has written that painting's 'deepest game' is the question of

> where the implied 'we' are finally (provisionally) placed in relation to any one of the implied points of view in the picture, and particularly in relation to *all* of them—to all the possibilities of identification, of being somewhere and someone specific.[56]

This is the painterly question which Rossetti's poem raises; while he may polemically have termed his poetry an 'art of the inner standing point', this sonnet relies for the complexity of its effect upon a continuous tussle between inner and outer perspectives.[57]

Within this play of immersion and detachment it makes little sense to speak of the poem's resistance to definition as a question of ineffability. The vagueness it wishes to preserve must be vulnerable rather than transcendent, otherwise there would be no occasion for the poem's anxiety about forestalling speech. Heffernan associates the sonnet with an entire 'ideology of transcendence' supposedly inherited from precursors such as Keats, only without the latter's dialectical edge of scepticism.[58] Yet until Rossetti introduced the idea of 'Immortality' in the final line of the revised version, the sonnet bore no suggestion of the transcendence of time, mortality, or the material world. *Pace* Rossetti's second thoughts, the vagueness which the poem's drama honours and seeks to protect is not something grandiose or unearthly but fragile, tangible, near at

---

[56] T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 134.
[57] Rossetti first used this phrase in 1869 (see the note to 'Ave' in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911), 167) and then reiterated it in his response to Robert Buchanan's attack in order to underline the fictionality of the speaker in 'Jenny' (Rossetti, 'The Stealthy School of Criticism', in *CPR*, 335–40: 337).
[58] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 140.

hand—qualities articulated in the deixis with which the poem refers to it ('Nor name *this*') and the intimate yet obscure relationship 'it' seems to bear to the reclining woman.

The question remains, then, of what to make of the poem's protective, almost apotropaic, turn. Its spirit might be compared with that of Rilke's lyric 'Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort', whose speaker is 'so afraid of the words of men'.[59] Such words proclaim that 'this is called dog and that is called house, / And here is the beginning and there is the end' ('*dieses heisst Hund und jenes heisst Haus, / und hier ist Beginn und das Ende ist dort*').[60] Like Rossetti's speaker, Rilke's seeks to 'warn and ward off' ('*warnen und wehren*') such knowing naming, concluding with his own plea to 'Let be' for the sake of a lyricism threatened by words: '*Bleibt fern. / Die Dinge singen hör ich so gern*': 'I so like to hear the singing of things'.[61] The comparison is, I hope, instructive rather than merely whimsical, since it directs attention to a different way of thinking about the invitation to listen which is etched all through Rossetti's poem: from the focus on the water's slow (originally 'low') gurgle to the repeatedly invoked silence which lends an impressive plenitude to the extinguished vibrations of viol, pipe, and song.[62] For all the poem's luxuriant sensuousness (the richness of its rhyme, for instance, or the profusion of labials which focus the production of sound at the lips, a zone towards which this poem is continually drawn), it is possible to overstate the significance of its appeal to the sensorium. As Rilke's poem suggests, there may be other kinds of listening than the purely aural: to listen to the singing of things is perhaps not merely to sharpen one's physical faculties of perception but also to engage in a rich and deliberately undirected experience of contemplation, a form of close listening to that which our impressions provoke in us.

---

[59] Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort', l. 1, in *Die frühen Gedichte* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1913), 91 (translation mine).
[60] Ibid., ll. 3–4, in *Die frühen Gedichte*, 91.
[61] Ibid., ll. 9, 10–11, in *Die frühen Gedichte*, 91.
[62] For the variation see Rossetti's letter to William Michael Rossetti, 8 October 1849, in *Correspondence*, 1. 114.

Such experience is at odds with, and hence may render taboo, any decisive act of knowing which threatens to subsume these impressions and limit their resonance.

The poem's repetitions of words and phrases ('Water' / 'water', 'The heat lies silent' / 'silence of heat'), risky in a poem so short, are illustratively redundant in respect of the painting, but give the impression of a mind haunted by the reverberations of its own thoughts and impressions, allowing them to open up new trains of association, as Sully and Dallas would suggest. Sensory stimulation is valued not merely for its own sake, therefore, but for its role in prompting new thought: note, for instance, how the shift in attention from water to sky seems to arise out of their mutual associations with the colour 'Blue', on which the syntax of these reflections pivots; and how another of blue's associations with the natural world flames out in the return of thought towards 'heat'. The way the speaker's thought then bends towards the horizon ('deep away') seems to be as much responsible for inspiring the re-setting of the scene at the 'brink of day'—rather than the late afternoon it is generally taken to represent—as Rossetti's wish to 'make the setting consistent with the general sense of expectancy in the figures'.[63]

The waywardness of such transitions of thought is further embodied in the poem in the way dependent clauses could apply backwards or forwards: absent the written punctuation, 'Blue and deep away' could refer either to the water or the sky, while 'Mournful with complete pleasure' might apply equally to the 'faces' which precede it or the straying 'eyes' which follow. The sobbing viol-strings may be what prompts the speaker to fear that the human figure who hears them may break into a tearful echo (a misgiving which lacks any narrative explanation); the 'creep[ing]' of her 'pipe', meanwhile, provides an associative rationale for the lateral move in focus towards the 'shadowed grass', the dwelling-place of creeping things. The suggestiveness of sound, too,

[63] Stein, *Ritual of Interpretation*, 21.

leads the poem's thought along paths of association unmapped by any paraphrase: the feeling for how 'The *h*eat lies' seems to beget the perception of how 'the *h*and trails', while the terminal word 'string' breaks apart phonemically into the following two end-words 'sing' and 'stray', as though the sound were midwife to the thought.

That the sonnet's volta occurs on the verb 'stray' is therefore especially significant, since the poem's method of engagement with the picture consists in just such a process of mental straying, or what Rossetti elsewhere called 'Thought-wandering'.[64] The seated woman's straying eyes are a model of what the art historian Michael Fried influentially termed 'absorption', by which he meant any image of 'engrossment, reflection, reverie'.[65] Such representations, Fried argued, offer themselves as a 'proleptic mirroring of what [the artist] trusted would be the absorption of the beholder'.[66] The specific kind of absorption suggested by Rossetti's poem, I propose, is a form of unknowing encompassed in the Renaissance concept of *vaghezza*.

Italo Calvino has reflected that

> Italian is the only language in which the word *vago* (vague) also means 'lovely, attractive'. Starting out from the original meaning of 'wandering', the word *vago* still carries an idea of movement and mutability, which in Italian is associated both with uncertainty and indefiniteness and with gracefulness and pleasure.[67]

As Calvino notes, the foremost Italian poet of the nineteenth century—Giacomo Leopardi—made *vaghezza* the cornerstone of his poetics.[68] In the posthumously published *Zibaldone* (1898), Leopardi made a distinction between different orders of vagueness that

---

[64] Rossetti, 'William Blake', in *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: Ellis and White, 1881), 314.
[65] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 45.
[66] Ibid., 51.
[67] Italo Calvino, 'Exactitude', in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), 55–80: 57.
[68] Ibid.

articulates Rossetti's sympathies with a sense of vagueness rooted in the material and sensible world, as against more transcendental and theological varieties: for 'the pleasure of variety and uncertainty', Leopardi wrote, 'is greater than that of apparent infinity and immense uniformity'.[69] A point of origin for Rossetti's attraction to this highly sensuous style of vagueness may be found in the writings of the Renaissance poet and critic Agnolo Firenzuola, whose dialogue *On the Beauty of Women* (1548) was to become the single most important source for early modern understandings of *vaghezza*, as recognised in the heavy dependence upon Firenzuola's definition in the Accademia della Crusca's *Vocabolario* of 1612.[70] Rossetti owned a copy of Firenzuola's dialogue, in which the central figure Celso draws on examples in Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio to suggest that *vaghezza*

> indicates that special beauty that has within it all those elements whereby anyone who looks upon it is obliged to become charmed (*vago*), that is, desirous; and having become desirous, his heart is always wandering to pursue it and enjoy it, his thoughts travel to her, and he becomes a vagabond in his mind.[71]

The wandering, vagabond qualities of *vaghezza* derived ultimately from Aristotelian notions of women as 'inconstant, vacillating, and unstable', as Philip Sohm points out; what Firenzuola did was to excavate the ambivalences lurking in earlier usages in order to transform these defects decisively into virtues. Hence Firenzuola exalts a beauty which is indefinable and incommensurate: beyond reason, measure, and verbal elucidation.[72] The

---

[69] Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone* [pubd. 1898], ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, tr. Kathleen Baldwin et al. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 794.
[70] See Philip Sohm, 'Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia', *Renaissance Quarterly* 48.4 (1995), 759–808: 767.
[71] The catalogue of his library compiled in 1866 by his brother lists 'Firenzuola, Agnolo / Opere—3 vol. / 1723' among its contents. See Vancouver, University of British Columbia MS RBSC-ARC-1009 ('Books belonging to Dante G. Rossetti'), f. xv. Agnolo Firenzuola, *On the Beauty of Women* [1548], tr. and ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 36.
[72] See Sohm, 'Gendered Style', 767.

subsequent adoption of *vaghezza* into the discourse of art criticism in the sixteenth century, particularly in relation to Venetian art, was made all the easier by its affiliation with the ocular verb *vagheggiare*, meaning 'to gaze fondly'—a word which harbours an erotic edge but which Dante used in the *Paradiso* to describe God's loving contemplation of creation.[73]

'For a Venetian Pastoral' energetically responds to Firenzuola's revalued conception of indefinable beauty, wandering among the painting's evocative components with the aim to 'pursue and enjoy'. The sense that the poem is pursuing something elusive comes through not only in the speaker's dramatic hostility to naming but in the sonnet's grammatical structure, the essential joints of its grammar being prepositions—'Over', 'in', 'With', 'at', 'upon', 'with', 'In', 'through', 'unto'—and co-ordinating conjunctions ('and', 'and', 'And') rather than connectors with correlative or subordinating force. In this respect, as in those other aspects of the poem's form examined above, it may be read against the grain of those who would take it as a paradigmatic example of 'ekphrastic hope', that is, 'the shaping of language into formal patterns that "still" the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array'.[74] The hope in this poem, on the contrary, is kept alive in the ongoing encounter with the speaker's own process of response to Giorgione's picture rather than in the realisation of an iconic verbal equivalent. For as Michael Baxendall points out, 'if a picture is simultaneously available in its entirety, *looking* at a picture is as temporally linear as language'.[75] An impression of vivid temporality is something which the poem both inhabits and hands on to the reader, from its

---

[73] See Stuart Lingo for an account of this adoption, in *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 126; on Dante's usage, see Piero Boitani, 'The Poetry and Poetics of the Creation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 218–35: 222.
[74] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 154. See for example Heffernan's citation of the poem as representing 'movement slowed to eternal calm' (*Museum of Words*, 140).
[75] Michael Baxendall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 3.

rhythmical unruliness (only three lines are not wrenched one way or another out of regular pentameter) to the rippling sense of movement suggested by its serpentine indentations on the page.

Rossetti himself alludes to the deep-rooted philological connections between vagueness and wandering in his poem 'Dante at Verona', written in the same period as the Giorgione sonnet, some time between 1848 and 1850. Towards the end of the poem, as Dante receives his vision of Beatrice, those surrounding the poet perceive his 'strong features bound in thought; / The vagueness gaining gait and mien'.[76] Thought here may bind Dante's features, but its vagueness ensures a bursting of mental bonds: it turns thought into vision, a face to gaze upon (*vagheggiare*), while at the same time setting it in motion (*vagare*). Vagueness thus allows thought to be something more than the guilty other of sensory perception. This is the role often accorded it in readings of another poem about a figure bent in 'fixedness of thought', Rossetti's 'For an Allegorical Dance of Women, by Andrea Mantegna (in the Louvre)'.[77] This poem forms a companion or pendant to the Giorgione sonnet in the 1870 *Poems*, appearing on the facing page. Much ink has been spilt over the meaning of 'meaning' in this poem, which 'filleth' Mantegna's painting, the consensus being that it is to be taken as altogether opposed to thought: for Jerome McGann it refers to a categorically 'nonconceptual aesthetic perception', while for Elizabeth Helsinger 'meaning' simply '*is* "sense"', that is, 'sensation and emotion'.[78] Yet if thought itself is conceived as something sensuous and mobile—that is, as *vago*—the need for such rigid oppositions disappears. As Michel Chaouli suggests, 'Just as there is no part of an artwork that is exempt from standing in *some* relation to meaning (I never come

[76] Rossetti, 'Dante at Verona', ll. 465–66, in *CPR*, 39.
[77] Rossetti, 'For an Allegorical Dance of Women, by Andrea Mantegna (In the Louvre)', l. 9, in *Poems* (London: Ellis, 1870), 261.
[78] Ibid., l. 11. Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 79; Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, 33.

face-to-face with a purely nonsignifying "presence"), there is also no meaning that I can take home with me.'[79] Such artworks might then be approached in terms similar to those which Angela Leighton has proposed for poetry, that is, as 'an invitation to a voyage of thinking', which engenders a continual process of 're-hearing' and 're-discovering'.[80] Or as Derek Attridge suggests in another context, interpretation may recede in favour of 'an experience of meaning *in process*, of "meaning" understood as a participle of the verb "to mean" rather than as a noun'.[81]

Pater is again helpful here, not least because his words in 'The School of Giorgione' draw upon Rossetti's own in the Mantegna sonnet, though the allusion has not previously been recognised. The pendant sonnet perhaps lay open on the page as Pater composed his essay in the 1870s, since it explicitly mentions the 'delightful sonnet by a poet whose own painted work often comes to mind as one ponders over these precious things'—an allusion made explicit in Pater's own footnote, which names Rossetti as the poet in question.[82] Rossetti had written (whether of Apollo, Mantegna, or the viewer himself being part of the poem's complex resonance),

> Scarcely, I think; yet it indeed *may* be
> The meaning reached him, when this music rang
> Clear through his frame, a sweet possessive pang,
> And he beheld these rocks and that ridged sea.[83]

Echoing Rossetti, Pater in turn writes that

---

[79] Michel Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 159.
[80] Angela Leighton, 'About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 33.1 (2009), 167–76: 175. Compare also Michael Hurley's incisive account of how 'The instrumental capacity of language to signify stable knowledge is, through the experience of the poem's aesthetic qualities, suspended in favor of a constantly evolving experience of knowing.' ('How Philosophers Trivialize Art: *Bleak House*, *Oedipus Rex*, "Leda and the Swan"', *Philosophy and Literature* 33.1 (2009), 107–25: 119).
[81] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2017), 58.
[82] Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', 114.
[83] Rossetti, 'For an Allegorical Dance', ll. 1–4, in *Poems*, 261.

> the very perfection of [lyrical] poetry often appears to depend, in part, on a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject, so that *the meaning reaches us* through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding.[84]

Pater's idea of meaning as something in transit, which seems always about to elude the observer's grasp even as he is possessed by the sight and sound which are its only vehicles, goes to the heart of Rossetti's attachment to *vaghezza* as structure of feeling and literary principle. Pater's 'vagueness of subject' is only the beginning of that story which I have attempted to trace here in the marrow of form, feeling, history, and theory. But his emphasis on how meaning may reach us 'through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding' contests Rossetti's fictional art student head-on: on the contrary, Pater suggests, those thoughts which slip our understanding may be of the very first importance.

Wonder and Familiarity

If Rossetti's picture sonnets elude rather than deliver on knowledge in line with ekphrastic expectations, his wider poetry is often marked by a kind of epistemic double vision, in which objects and experiences are perceived as simultaneously known and unknown. '[M]eshed with half-remembrance', these poems record and bequeath experiences of unknowing in which intimacy and estrangement, cognition and recognition, become hard to distinguish.[85] Puzzled arbitrations between familiarity and unfamiliarity recur throughout Rossetti's poetry. In 'The Soul's Sphere', the speaker considers whether the images that haunt his sleepless nights are 'Visions of golden futures: or that last / Wild pageant of the accumulated past'.[86] In 'A Dark Day', Rossetti compares thoughts with drops of water that strike the brow of the traveller, who 'knows not, darkling, if they bring

[84] Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', 108 (emphasis mine).
[85] Rossetti, 'Willowwood, II', l. 2, in *CPR*, 149.
[86] Rossetti, 'The Soul's Sphere', ll. 12–13, in *CPR*, 155.

him now / Fresh storm, or be old rain the covert bears'.[87] The brilliance of these lines is concentrated in Rossetti's placement of the inconspicuous word 'or'. Had he chosen in each case to place it at the end of the line, he would have lent it an expectancy that would have made the thought sound premeditated; had he placed it at the beginning, he would have retained the surprise of the turn, but lost the crucial unexpectedness of the pause that precedes it, making it sound more like a sudden swerve than a doubted drift. As it is, the placement of 'or' in the middle of the line introduces an unanticipated medial pause, a silence that is the darkling sound of knowing not, of hesitating without deciding. 'Or' thus comes to sound less like an instrument of binary logic than a delicate act of mental balancing, holding in tension past and future, the known and the unknown.

Similarly, in 'Jenny', the heroine's erstwhile lover becomes self-conscious and curiously precise about the familiar unfamiliarity of her old lodgings, calling them 'Something I do not know again'.[88] Not 'Something I had forgotten', or 'Something I *have* forgotten', or even 'Something I do not know *anymore*'. The very carefully articulated sense is of a reversion to (or a recovery of) a prior state of not knowing, rather than a loss of knowledge. Even so, that loss lingers in the possibility of taking 'know again' as a compound verb—something I do not *know again*, that is, something I do not remember. A paradox of this sort can often be found lurking whenever Rossetti turns his attention to forms of remembering—which is to say that they often turn out to be forms of discovery, and vice versa. 'And here the lost hours the lost hours renew', as 'Autumn Idleness' has it, compacting into a phrase the poems' divided attachment to recursion and revelation.[89] Inverted syntax jams up the line with stresses, conjuring away the metre's iambic forward motion with the incantatory force of the repetition. Throughout Rossetti's poetry, the lost

[87] Rossetti, 'A Dark Day', ll. 3–4, in *CPR*, 157.
[88] Rossetti, 'Jenny', l. 42, in *CPR*, 61.
[89] Rossetti, 'Autumn Idleness', l. 12, in *CPR*, 158.

hours are absences that continually reassert their presence; losses are not redeemed so that lostness might be.

Hake's suggestion that Rossetti's poems produce the feeling of having experienced their 'fresh revelations beforehand' neatly catches the dissonance that characterises the experience of déjà vu: a paradoxical overlay of familiarity (something that is known beforehand) and unfamiliarity (something that appears like a fresh revelation). This doubleness is signalled immediately by the opening lines of Rossetti's 'Sudden Light', one of the songs from the 1870 *House of Life* sequence: 'I have been here before, / But when or how I cannot tell'.[90] Cognitive psychologists would distinguish this speaker's experience from false memory or confabulation by pointing to his self-consciousness about what he knows. As Chris Moulin, one of the leading modern authorities on déjà vu, succinctly puts it, 'one couldn't have an experience of déjà vu without knowing it': it is a 'metacognitive experience'.[91] 'I knew it all of yore', declares the speaker of 'Sudden Light', not in jaded weariness of the all too familiar but in astonished surprise at what he didn't know he knew.[92] His experience of déjà vu harnesses the epistemological extremities of 'unknown things' and 'things overknown', whose competing claims Rossetti weighs up elsewhere in *The House of Life*.[93] The 1881 publication of the revised and expanded sequence in Rossetti's *Ballads and Sonnets* coincided with the appearance of Théodule-Armand Ribot's ground-breaking book on memory disorders, *Les Maladies de la Mémoire*, which divided such conditions into forms of amnesia and hypermnesia.[94] As Richard Terdiman has argued, disquiet about memory in the nineteenth century 'crystallized around the perception of two principal disorders: *too little memory*, and *too*

[90] Rossetti, 'Sudden Light', ll. 1–2, in *CPR*, 174.
[91] Chris Moulin, *The Cognitive Neuropsychology of Déjà Vu* (London: Routledge, 2017), 165.
[92] Rossetti, 'Sudden Light', l. 10, in *CPR*, 174.
[93] Rossetti, 'From Dawn to Noon', l. 14, in *CPR*, 162.
[94] See Théodule-Armand Ribot, *Diseases of Memory: An Essay in the Positive Psychology*, tr. William Huntington Smith (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, 1882).

much'. Experiences like the one depicted in 'Sudden Light' weave such anxieties together, bringing to a pitch the 'memory crisis' Terdiman identifies.[95]

The now familiar term déjà vu dates from 1876, but did not acquire popular currency until the early twentieth century; until then it competed with others such as 'intellectual aura', 'dreamy state', and 'paramnesia' in the neurological and psychological literature which flourished in the century's latter decades.[96] Though Rossetti is unlikely to have been conversant with a great deal of this writing, not least because much of it postdates his death in 1882, he was able to draw on a handful of previous portrayals in nineteenth-century literature by the time he came to write 'Sudden Light', dated by his brother to 1854.[97] Déjà vu had been represented in fiction by Scott and Dickens, and had been evoked by Rossetti's favourite poet, Coleridge, as that 'Which makes the present, while the flash doth last, / Seem a mere semblance of some unknown past'.[98] Indeed, when the eminent Victorian psychiatrist Sir James Crichton-Browne presented the Cavendish Lecture on 'dreamy mental states' at the West London Medico-Chirurgical Society in 1895, he devoted a sizeable proportion of his address to the appearance of déjà vu in fiction and poetry, including 'Sudden Light'. Rossetti's poem was even being cited as a case study in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* as late as 1942.[99] 'Sudden Light',

---

[95] Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 14.

[96] See Émile Boirac, letter to *Revue Philosophique* 1 (1876), 430–31: 430. For the early history of research into déjà vu, see Alan S. Brown, *The Déjà Vu Experience* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2014) and Athena Vrettos, 'Dying Twice: Victorian Theories of *Déjà Vu*', in *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Volante (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 196–218.

[97] See *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, xxviii.

[98] See Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering* [1815], ed. P. D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 244; Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* [1850], ed. Nina Burgis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 550; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Sonnet: Composed on a Journey Homeward, the Author Having Received Intelligence of the Birth of a Son', in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 16, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 273–74: 273. In the preface to his edition of his brother's works, William Michael Rossetti confided that 'In the long run he perhaps enjoyed and revered Coleridge beyond any poet whatsoever' (see 'Preface', xv).

[99] Sir James Crichton-Browne, *The Cavendish Lecture on Dreamy Mental States* (London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox, 1895); R. W. Pickford, 'Rossetti's "Sudden Light" as an Experience of *Déjà Vu*', in *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 19.2 (1942): 192–200.

then, did not so much respond to contemporary research into anomalous memory phenomena as it helped to inform the development of such research.

This contribution is less startling than it sounds when one observes that Crichton-Browne's literary references did not merely signal his gentlemanly urbanity but also granted express weight to the close association he drew between déjà vu and 'flights of genius'.[100] For Crichton-Browne, déjà vu was a distinctly literary malaise, and he pointed out (albeit inaccurately) that Scott, Dickens, and Rossetti all died of 'brain disease'.[101] The experiences these writers described, he maintained, were 'comparatively rare amongst the unlettered, the prosaic, and the stolid masses of our people', and the 'new cerebral combinations' generated in a déjà vu were 'akin to those which take place during the activity of the imagination'.[102] His was not an eccentric view. Crichton-Browne's German contemporary Emil Kraepelin associated déjà vu with the gift of lively imagination ('*lebhafter Phantasie*'), while the French psychologist Ludovic Dugas commented on the remarkable intellect of many of those who reported it ('*d'une intelligence* […] *remarquablement douées*').[103] Writing in 1911, Havelock Ellis noted that déjà vu tended to disproportionately affect 'educated people […] who use their brains much', especially in artistic work, a finding still supported to an extent by the latest research.[104] Coleridge's word 'semblance', then, is to the point, since—as Athena Vrettos has written—déjà vu involves 'locating present feelings in the past or future, distancing the present moment from itself by making it representational'.[105] And if déjà vu is a condition in which

---

[100] Crichton-Browne, *Dreamy Mental States*, 7.
[101] Ibid., 15.
[102] Ibid., 6–7.
[103] Emil Kraepelin, 'Ueber Erinnerungfälschungen', in *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*, vol. 18, ed. L. Meyer et al. (Berlin: Verlag von August Hirschwald, 1887), 395–436: 410; Ludovic Dugas, 'Observations sur la Fausse Mémoire', in *Revue Philosophique* 37 (1894), 34–45: 41.
[104] See Havelock Ellis, 'Memory and Dreams', in *The World of Dreams* (London: Constable, 1911), 212–60: 240. Modern research points to a strong positive correlation with education, and one of the most substantial studies, by V. M. Neppe (1983), identifies reading as one of the three main triggers for déjà vu, narrowly behind place and encounter (see Brown, *Déjà Vu*, 47).
[105] Vrettos, 'Dying Twice', 206.

perception takes on the characteristics of representation, and which stresses the temporality of knowing, then poetry may be an especially apt medium for exploring it. As the American scientist Henry Fairfield Osborn put it in 1884, 'There is a vague and mysterious mental form in these impressions equally attractive to the poet and the psychologist'.[106]

'Sudden Light' explores this mysterious form with a simplicity as precise as it is disarming:

> I have been here before,
> But when or how I cannot tell:
> I know the grass beyond the door,
> The sweet keen smell,
> The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.
>
> You have been mine before,—
> How long ago I may not know:
> But just when at that swallow's soar
> Your neck turned so,
> Some veil did fall,—I knew it all of yore.
>
> Then, now,—perchance again! …
> O round mine eyes your tresses shake!
> Shall we not lie as we have lain
> Thus for Love's sake,
> And sleep, and wake, yet never break the chain?[107]

On the one hand, this speaker records a powerful feeling of knowing—powerful in both its certitude ('I knew it all of yore') and its extent (his déjà vu stretches to the *déjà senti* and the *déjà entendu*). On the other hand, however, there is a confession of ignorance, a feeling of uncertainty underscored by the stress-pattern, with its weight on the conditional: not 'how long ago I do not know', but 'how long ago I *may* not know'. Rossetti's 'may' hedges its bets between the sense that he will *never* be able to know and the sense that he

[106] Henry Fairfield Osborn, 'Illusions of Memory', in *North American Review* 138 (March 1884), 476–86: 478.
[107] Rossetti, 'Sudden Light', in *CPR*, 174.

may, or may *not*, know. It enacts in miniature the metacognitive ambiguity dramatised by these first two stanzas.

Déjà vu's alloy of knowing and unknowing receives especially careful attention from Henri Bergson in his 1908 essay 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition', a paper which handsomely acknowledges its debts to the innovative research of the previous century, citing around thirty studies reaching back to 1868. 'If I recognize the present instant', writes Bergson,

> am I not quite as surely going to recognize the coming one? So I am unceasingly, towards what is on the point of happening, in the attitude of a person who will recognize and who consequently knows. But this is only the *attitude* of knowledge, the form of it without the matter. As I cannot predict what is going to happen, I quite realize that I do not know it; but I foresee that I am going to have known it […] placing me in the strange position of a person who feels he knows what he knows he does not know.[108]

Bergson's account is recognisable in the third and final stanza of 'Sudden Light', in which the speaker reveals that the falling of the veil is not, as the metaphor seems to imply, a single event, but something that happens repeatedly *within* the experience of déjà vu and helps constitute it. Like Bergson's subject, the poem's speaker is (in this slightly more faithful than elegant translation) 'towards what is on the point of happening, in the attitude of a person who will recognize and who consequently knows', but who is unable to say what it is that will prompt this recognition. There is a difference, in other words, between knowing and what neurologists call the 'feeling of knowing', as the pioneering Victorian neurologist John Hughlings Jackson noted in 1876:

> Some healthy people occasionally have the *feeling* that they had seen something exactly like what they were then seeing, although *at the same time* they *believe* that they could not possibly have seen it before.[109]

[108] Bergson, 'Memory of the Present', 134.
[109] John Hughlings Jackson, 'Notes on Cases of Diseases of the Nervous System', *The Medical Times and Gazette* 1382 (23 December 1876), 700–702: 702.

Rossetti himself observed a similar distinction in one of his notebooks from the same decade: 'There are certain passionate phases of the soul', he wrote, 'when to know a thing true & to believe it are found 2 separate things'.[110] Rossetti had perhaps been introduced, if only at second hand, to John Henry Newman's conception of 'certitude' (as distinguished from certainty) in the matter of religious belief, as elucidated in his 1870 *Grammar of Assent*.[111] The former quality, which Stephen Maitzen crisply defines as 'subjective epistemic certainty', is a state of mind rather than an attribute of propositions.[112] Déjà vu, one might say, offers the feeling of knowing without the content of knowledge.

Like Bergson's, Rossetti's remark configures knowing as dynamic rather than static, an experience of 'phases'. Contrary to the common critical assumption that Rossetti sought from poetry 'an immortal artefact describing an eternal moment', as David Riede suggests, what this poem pursues is not the transcendence of time, but an endless reduplication of experience in time: the wish to 'sleep, and wake, yet never break the chain'—a cycle of repetitions embodied in the surfeit of rhymes in this last stanza, where the last syllable of every line is united by the same vowel sound.[113] Assonance in the final line highlights the metrical chains by which the poem itself is bound. This is writing that enjoys its temporality rather than dreaming of how to escape it. The view that Rossetti invests memory with the power to 'mitigate' the effects of time, as John R. Conners has suggested, is qualified by moments such as these, in which remembering involves being set in motion, so that 'Time itself / Is consciously beside us, and perceived'.[114] 'Sudden Light', then, encourages us to hear Rossetti's famous avowal that 'A sonnet is a moment's

---

[110] Rossetti, 'Small Notebook 3', London, British Library MS Ashley 1410 (3), 8^{v}.
[111] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [1870], ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 139.
[112] Stephen Maitzen, 'Two Views of Religious Certitude', in *Religious Studies* 28.1 (1992), 65–74: 65.
[113] Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 31. See also Stephen J. Spector, 'Rossetti's Self-Destroying "Moment's Monument": "Silent Noon"', in *Victorian Poetry* 14.1 (1976), 54–58.
[114] Rossetti, 'Antwerp to Ghent', ll. 11–12, in *CPR*, 360; John R. Conners, '"A Moment's Monument": Time in the House of Life', in *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 2.2 (1982), 20–34: 20.

monument' slightly differently.[115] What matters most to him, perhaps, is not what a monument is but what it does, which is to remind (from the Latin *monere*).[116]

Rossetti clearly distinguishes this unwilled access of memory from the voluntary activity of recollection with which his poetry has more often been linked. This latter mode of remembrance is mirrored in the logic of Victorian spiritualism and its efforts to summon the dead: as Rossetti's friend Thomas Woolner lamented to Lady Trevelyan in 1858,

> You will be sorry to hear that Gabriel Rossetti has taken up with that foolish but growing abomination, Spiritual Rapping, and declares he can make ghosts and spirits talk to him and do all he pleases.[117]

Déjà vu, by contrast, deals in a more volatile and uncontrollable form of recall ('Then, now,—perchance again! . . .'), one that nineteenth-century psychologists tended to find troubling. Henry Holland, for example, stressed the distinction between the 'recollective faculty of the will' and those dangerous and unmanageable memories that came 'unbidden and vaguely into the mind'.[118]

It is to this dangerous edge of things that Rossetti's poetry is so often drawn. The image of sleeping and waking in 'Sudden Light' figures a cycle of forgetting and remembering that lies beyond the will's control and generates a knowledge that is fresh yet uncannily familiar. Hughlings Jackson recounted how one of his own patients described the experience of déjà vu by saying that 'it was as if waking from sleep'.[119] The approach

---

[115] Rossetti, '[Sonnet on the Sonnet]', l. 1, in *CPR*, 127.
[116] See 'monument, *n.*', *OED Online* (pubd. March 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.
[117] Thomas Woolner to Lady Trevelyan, 28 February 1858, quoted in Raleigh Trevelyan, 'Thomas Woolner and Pauline Trevelyan', in *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* 2.2 (1979), 1–37: 10. On Rossetti's interest in spiritualism, see J. B. Bullen, 'Raising the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Willowwood" Sonnets', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 429–43.
[118] Henry Holland, *Chapters on Mental Physiology* (London: Longman, 1852), 155. For a discussion of how control features in nineteenth-century accounts of memory, see Sally Shuttleworth, '"The malady of thought": embodied memory in Victorian psychology and the novel', in *Memory and Memorials, 1789–1914*, ed. Matthew Campbell, Jacqueline M. Labbe and Sally Shuttleworth (London: Routledge, 2000), 46–59.
[119] Hughlings Jackson, 'On a particular variety of epilepsy ("Intellectual Aura"), one case with symptoms of organic brain disease', *Brain* 11.2 (1888), 179–206: 186.

of the dreamy state, on this account, is like waking from dream into dream. Rossetti's 'Nuptial Sleep' presses a similar suggestion:

> Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,
> […]
> Till from some wonder of new woods and streams
> He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay.[120]

Greater than the wonderland of slumber is the wonder which greets the lover's waking eyes, a compound of spontaneous revelation and remembrance: 'for there she lay' is fittingly ambiguous about its temporal reference, allowing both possible senses (there she lay *then*, and there she lay *now*) to converge, as they do in an experience of déjà vu. Indeed, it is precisely this collapsing of temporalities that distinguishes déjà vu from other instances of involuntary memory and which produces the magical quality Rossetti covets. It offers a means of realising that 'constant unison of wonder and familiarity' which, in his commentary for Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* (1863), Rossetti hailed as one of the 'inestimable prizes' of painting.[121] This unison is a prize indeed, since wonder and familiarity ('knowledge as acquaintance') were often understood as mortal enemies in the period: as John Stuart Mill argued in 1865, countering the oft-repeated claim that 'knowledge about' extinguished wonder, 'It is not understanding that destroys wonder, it is familiarity.'[122]

Rossetti's attraction to the sonnet-sequence—a term he himself coined—might be seen as a means of pursuing this seemingly fantastical unison through poetic form, with its series of repetitions that are repeated opportunities for starting anew, and whose cyclicality

---

[120] Rossetti, 'Nuptial Sleep', ll. 9, 13–14, in *CPR*, 130.
[121] Rossetti, 'Supplementary', in Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus'*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1863), 368–84: 371.
[122] John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 9, ed. John M. Robson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 489.

implicates the future in every flicker of feedback.[123] Within *The House of Life* Rossetti celebrates such a conspiracy of tenses as a crucial 'test for love': 'in every kiss sealed fast / To feel the first kiss and forbode the last'.[124] The title of his great watershed painting of 1859, *Bocca Baciata*, enshrines this conception as an artistic as well as erotic ideal: inscribed on the back of the canvas is the full quotation from Boccaccio, '*Bocca baciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna*' (The kissed mouth loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as doth the moon).[125] It is tempting, then, to read *The House of Life*'s treasured imagery of sleeping and waking as a figure for the sequence's own iterative form ('Sudden Light' itself appears at the end of the 1870 sequence, as though offering itself as a kind of commentary).

The promise of déjà vu to which Rossetti's verse form aspires is the one descried in 'Heart's Hope': a feeling 'intense / As instantaneous penetrating sense, / In Spring's birth-hour, of other Springs gone by'.[126] Unlike memory's summoning art, which ambushes all determined attempts to forget ('Didst ever say, "Lo, I forget"? / Such thought was to remember yet', as 'Soothsay' laments), the experience of knowing generated by déjà vu arrives unbidden, and so, as Walter Benjamin suggests, promises a mode of remembering that coincides with forgetting, rather than cancelling it:[127]

> Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warp, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting.

---

[123] See 'sonnet, *n.*', c2, *OED Online* (pubd. March 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.
[124] Rossetti, 'True Woman, III: Her Heaven', ll. 13–14, in *CPR*, 153.
[125] See Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882): A Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 114.
[126] Rossetti, 'Heart's Hope', ll. 12–14, in *CPR*, 129.
[127] Rossetti, 'Soothsay', ll. 92–93, in *CPR*, 233.

> However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and ornaments of forgetting.[128]

Benjamin's suggestive characterisation is silently dependent on Bergson, for whom every moment of experience simultaneously 'presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other'.[129] Bergson himself drew on work dating back to the 1860s in support of this notion that perception has two aspects.[130] Writing in 1873, for example, the distinguished English physician Edward Liveing speculated about

> that singular reduplicating action of the brain which many people momentarily experience, when they seem to have been at some indefinitely remote period under circumstances precisely similar to those at the moment in question.[131]

Bergson reasons that, ordinarily, only the 'forward-springing' track of perception attracts our attention, since 'We have no need of the memory of things whilst we hold the things themselves'.[132] In déjà vu, by contrast, the will is relaxed to such an extent that we turn our attention to that side of experience which is not immediately useful: to the backward-looking, memory-making aspect, which we mistakenly believe to be posterior to perception. Déjà vu thus brings to light the double structure of *all* our experience of the present, ordinarily concealed from us by what Benjamin dubs 'purposeful activity'. As Havelock Ellis paraphrased Bergson for an English audience, the experience of déjà vu

---

[128] Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust' [1929], in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Cape, 1970), 203–18: 204.
[129] Bergson, 'Memory of the Present', 132.
[130] Bergson cites Henri Piéron, Carl Anjel, André Lalande, François-Léon Arnaud, Ludovic Dugas, Auguste Micaël Lemaître, Théodule-Armand Ribot, and Frederic W. H. Myers ('Memory of the Present', 114–15). The German physician Julius Jensen suggested in 1868 that déjà vu could be due to the failure of co-operation between the brain's two hemispheres in perception: see Anne Harrington, *Medicine, Mind, and the Double Brain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 121.
[131] Edward Liveing, *On Megrim, Sick-Headache, and Some Allied Disorders, a Contribution to the Pathology of Nerve-Storms* (London: Churchill, 1873), 109.
[132] Bergson, 'Memory of the Present', 127, 128.

> would take place at every moment if it were not that will, ceaselessly directed towards action, prevents the present from folding in on itself by pushing it indefinitely into the future.[133]

For Bergson, therefore, 'Each moment of life is split up as and when it is posited', or rather, 'it consists in this very splitting'.[134] Bergson's insight resonates with Walter Pater's observation that, to Rossetti, 'life is a crisis at every moment'.[135] This is especially true when we remember the etymological sense of crisis as a division (from *krinō*, 'separate, put asunder').[136] Déjà vu brings this division into focus, estranging the present moment from itself, but also, paradoxically, offering a way of dwelling in and enjoying a present which Rossetti often imagines to be hopelessly evanescent. As Bergson proposes, the

> fleeting limit between the immediate past […] and the immediate future […] would be a mere abstraction were it not the moving mirror which continually reflects perception as a memory.[137]

In 'Proserpina (For a Picture)', Rossetti's speaker can think only of 'The nights that shall be' and 'the days that were', anticipation crossing seamlessly into retrospect, as if the unknown were always passing into the overknown, and knowing were always knowing too much.[138] Déjà vu, by contrast, models a way of holding together these temporal dispositions, one which Mark Currie has argued is homologous with the experience of reading a narrative: 'We might regard narrative as part of our memory of the present', he writes,

---

[133] Ellis, 'Memory in Dreams', 257.
[134] Bergson, 'Memory of the Present', 132.
[135] Walter Pater, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', in *Appreciations with an Essay on Style* [1889] (London: Macmillan, 1910), 205–18: 211.
[136] 'κρίνω', in *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 996.
[137] Bergson, 'Memory of the Present', 132.
[138] Rossetti, 'Proserpina (For a Picture)', l. 8, in *CPR*, 195.

> in the sense that it is one of the cognitive resources that we have at our disposal to anticipate what is to come, not only because we anticipate when we read, but perhaps more significantly because we anticipate in the mode of retrospect, as if we already know how to look back upon the present.[139]

Rossetti's dramatically foreshortened, lyric version of this doubled perspective keeps in play a fateful sense of the extraordinary that tacks closer to the felt experience of déjà vu. More often than not, his 'vanished hours and hours eventual' are embroiled in ways that frustrate any prospect of composure.[140]

Things We Never Knew

If Bergson's highly developed account of déjà vu builds on a synthesis of late nineteenth-century psychology, a more immediate context for Rossetti's interest in the wider phenomenon of involuntary memory can be found in the work of John Ruskin, his early patron and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's greatest advocate. In his 1851 pamphlet on 'Pre-Raphaelitism', Ruskin described how Turner's truth to nature was not simply a matter of transcribing his immediate surroundings but also a process of combining what he saw in the present with memories of things he had seen in the past; Turner's mind, he wrote, was a treasure-house of images, 'each mingling in new associations with those now visibly passing before him'.[141] Ruskin returned to this idea in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*, emphasising that the process was unwilled and common to all the 'great inventors' he had studied, from Dante to Tintoretto, 'their imagination consisting, not in a voluntary production of new images, but an *involuntary remembrance*, exactly at the right

---

[139] Mark Currie, *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 66.
[140] Rossetti, 'Life-in-Love', l. 8, in *CPR*, 143.
[141] John Ruskin, 'Pre-Raphaelitism' [1851], in *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 12, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 337–94: 360.

moment, of something they had actually seen'.[142] Déjà vu takes this spontaneous fusion of past and present to the limit, threatening what Crichton-Browne described as 'an absolute identification of the present with the past'.[143] One moment, experience takes on the hue of reminiscence—the next, it is as though memory itself were trembling into flesh. Both Ruskin's 'involuntary remembrance' and the more extreme version evoked in 'Sudden Light' stress the helplessness of the subject which so worried Victorian psychologists and which framed the view of both Hughlings Jackson and Crichton-Browne that déjà vu was essentially pathological. Yet this passivity was key to both Ruskin's and Rossetti's understanding of the creative process: while Ruskin hailed the 'passive obedience' of Turner's imagination, Rossetti was to tell William Sharp that 'I do not wrap myself up in my imaginings, it is they that envelop me from the outer world whether I will or no'.[144] These notions harmonised with the longstanding association between poetry and mania, given renewed impetus in Romantic poetics by the central role attributed to the unconscious.[145] In the Victorian period, this role had been extensively theorised by Rossetti's friend, the literary critic E. S. Dallas, and by the century's end it had been granted new authority by Ribot in the field of psychology.[146]

Rossetti's unfinished tale 'Saint Agnes of Intercession' (begun in 1850) plays with the supposed links between creativity, mental disorder, and déjà vu. In this story, Rossetti narrates a present-day artist's disturbing discovery that his lover's portrait is identical to one painted four hundred years previously. It is eventually revealed that the artist had seen (and subsequently forgotten) a print of this picture during his childhood, but this cannot

---

[142] Ruskin, 'Of Turnerian Topography', in *Modern Painters IV*, 27–47: 42 (emphasis mine).
[143] Crichton-Browne, *Dreamy Mental States*, 1.
[144] Ruskin, 'Of Turnerian Topography', 41; William Sharp, 'The Rossettis', *Fortnightly Review* 39 (March 1886), 414–29: 414.
[145] See Nicholas Rand, 'The Hidden Soul: Growth of the Unconscious in Philosophy, Psychology, Medicine, and Literature, 1750–1900', in *American Imago* 61.3 (2004), 257–89.
[146] As Dallas put it in *The Gay Science* (1866), imagination was 'but another name for […] the unknown and automatic life of the mind' (1. 251). Rossetti referred to Dallas as 'an old intimate acquaintance of mine' in a letter to Joseph Knight, 29 April 1870, in *Correspondence*, 4. 462.

explain the similarities in appearance he perceives between the picture and his own fiancée, still less his succeeding conviction, upon finding the Florentine painter's self-portrait, that he looked just like himself. These vivid impressions of the already seen induce a period of 'prolonged illness' that confines the narrator to his bed.[147] The narrator's alarmed parents prefigure the pathologising approach taken by Hughlings Jackson and Crichton-Browne when they label his illness 'brain sickness'.[148] As these figures would later suggest, déjà vu should not be taken entirely lightly because, as the painter's father puts it, such experiences 'might end […] by endangering [his] reason'.[149] For Crichton-Browne, they represented the potential 'first step in a series of changes which, extending through many degrees of mental dissolution, ends in […] obliteration of mind'.[150] Rossetti's story reads like one of the 'extreme' cases of paramnesia documented by the American psychologist William H. Burnham in the 1880s, such as the man convinced that the opinions, jokes, and even obituaries he read in the newspapers had all previously been articulated verbatim by himself.[151] The tone of Rossetti's tale, however, is uncertain, prefaced by a jaunty Shandean pastiche about tall tales but later seeming to solicit the reader's sympathy with the artist against the unbelieving world. Whether one is inclined to credit the narrator's view of events as proof of a kind of metempsychosis, or the parents' view that he is suffering from a neurological condition, the story brings into startling conjunction the ideas of creativity, uncanny recognition, and brain malfunction which would cluster around the medical and psychological discourses of déjà vu decades later.

---

[147] Rossetti, 'St Agnes of Intercession', in *CPR*, 333.
[148] Ibid., 334.
[149] Ibid., 334.
[150] Crichton-Browne, *Dreamy Mental States*, 7.
[151] William H. Burnham, 'Memory, Historically and Experimentally Considered', in *The American Journal of Psychology* 2.3 (1889), 431–64: 450.

Close affinities between uncanny recognition and the creative process are also suggested by Rossetti's 'The Portrait', in which the painting comes to commemorate less the original rendezvous in the forest than the poignant feeling of having been there before which the painter experiences after the beloved's death, an experience the poem shrouds with enchantment:

> For unawares I came upon
> Those glades where once she walked with me:
> And as I stood there suddenly,
> All wan with traversing the night,
> Upon the desolate verge of light
> Yearned loud the iron-bosomed sea.[152]

The sea's Tennysonian moan is anticipated by Rossetti's 'suddenly', which the intervening lines endow with tension like a suspended chord, their awkward rhythms and Latinate diction priming the aural appeal of the delayed resolution, which would risk sounding trite and too easily achieved without them. These metrical and lexical strayings also help to create the impression that this speaker is less leading than led, so that the reader participates in the sense of being taken 'unawares'; inverting Ruskin's 'pathetic fallacy', it is the sea's mighty yearning that prompts the speaker's own.[153] By the time this emotional denouement arrives, the poem has travelled a long way from the woman who is ostensibly its subject. What matters to this portraitist is not his sitter's physiognomy, her expression or posture, least of all her psychology (all of which are left undescribed), but rather that the setting should evoke an atmosphere of déjà vu, the kind of place you might find 'your own footsteps meeting you'.[154] Almost all Rossetti's pictures are figurative, but as in the most celebrated paintings of Giorgione, the settings are as responsible for the creation of mood

[152] Rossetti, 'The Portrait', ll. 85–90, in *CPR*, 71–72.
[153] See Ruskin, 'Of the Pathetic Fallacy', in *Modern Painters III* [1856], *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 5, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 201–20.
[154] Rossetti, 'The Portrait', l. 26, in *CPR*, 70.

as the figures. On a second reading, the Browningesque boast ‘and there she stands / As in that wood that day’ brings to mind the latter day of remembrance as much as the original event; this speaker is not so much haunted by the past as by hauntedness itself, the ‘rapt and awed’ state into which his involuntary remembrance has delivered him.[155]

It is by evoking such a state that Rossetti’s highly wrought sonnet ‘Memorial Thresholds’ brings into focus many of the complexities of metacognitive experience. In common with Bergson and Benjamin’s imagined subjects, the speaker’s detachment from the purposeful activity of the hurrying crowds which surround him licences his entrancement by an involuntary sensation of simultaneous strangeness and recognition:

> What place so strange,—though unrevealèd snow
> With unimaginable fires arise
> At the earth’s end,—what passion of surprise
> Like frost-bound fire-girt scenes of long ago?
> Lo! this is none but I this hour; and lo!
> This is the very place which to mine eyes
> Those mortal hours in vain immortalize,
> ’Mid hurrying crowds, with what alone I know.
>
> City, of thine a single simple door,
> By some new Power reduplicate, must be
> Even yet my life-porch in eternity,
> Even with one presence filled, as once of yore:
> Or mocking winds whirl round a chaff-strown floor
> Thee and thy years and these my words and me.[156]

The opening image of the frost-bound fire-girt scenes of long ago (which Rossetti’s brother suggested refers to the *aurora borealis*) provides a rhetorical measure for the strangeness and passion of surprise he feels upon revisiting this simple urban setting.[157] Yet ‘why such strangeness and surprise’, Joseph F. Vogel very pertinently asks,

---

[155] Ibid., ll. 28–29, 95, in *CPR*, 70, 72.
[156] Rossetti, ‘Memorial Thresholds’, in *CPR*, 163.
[157] See W. M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer* (London: Cassell, 1889), 244.

> at seeing a place he has never forgotten (it has been immortalized to his eyes) that he must reassure himself of the reality of the experience ('this is none but I […] This is the very place')?[158]

One answer might be that this is exactly what happens in an experience of *jamais vu*: the sense of strangeness and surprise in the face of something which one knows ought to be familiar. Like déjà vu, this alternative form of paramnesia cannot be willed into being and relies on a sense of dissonance, of being struck by the unexpected unfamiliarity ('Lo! […] and lo!'), rather than merely experiencing an absence of familiarity. It is this nexus of feelings that is articulated by the quotation from 'Jenny' referred to at the beginning of this essay: 'Something I do not know again'. Or as one of Hughlings Jackson's patients put it, it is like suddenly finding oneself 'in a strange country', a suggestion embraced by Rossetti's simile about the northern lights at 'the earth's end'.[159]

In the sestet, 'Memorial Thresholds' moves from recording an experience of *jamais vu* to imagining a future experience of déjà vu (hence the almost unmanageable proliferation of temporal planes: 'long ago', 'once of yore', 'this hour', 'eternity', future 'years'). Here as in 'Sudden Light', the duplication of experience registered is deemed insufficient, and the speaker imagines a prospect in which it will be *re*duplicated; he imagines continually finding himself at a physical threshold that, as the title suggests, is a symbol for the threshold of remembrance. Rossetti's tangled grammar supports this aspiration, for as James Richardson has astutely observed, the extensions of his syntax 'seem to be dictated moment-by-moment, each phrase surging out of the last rather than drawn forward by a visible goal'.[160] What unites this speaker's experiences of *jamais vu* and déjà vu is the same thing that unites him with the speaker of 'Sudden Light': the

---

[158] Joseph F. Vogel, 'Rossetti's Memorial Thresholds', in *The Explicator* 23.4 (1964), 54–57: 57.
[159] Hughlings Jackson, 'Notes on Cases', 702.
[160] James Richardson, *Vanishing Lives: Style and Self in Tennyson, D. G. Rossetti, Swinburne, and Yeats* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1988), 108.

coveted prospect of veils falling and knowledge dawning—even if it is only the knowledge of one's ignorance.[161]

Another point of contact between these speakers is their awareness of their astonishing experiences being limited to themselves, one of the defining aspects of a déjà vu. The feeling of recognition in 'Sudden Light' is not mutual, for the speaker has to tell his beloved 'You have been mine before', while the speaker of 'Memorial Thresholds' cuts a lonely figure among the crowd 'with what alone I know'. These speakers resemble many of the subjects of Rossetti's pictures, who, as Ford Madox Ford (then Hueffer) observed, bear a 'rapt expression peculiar to the listener to sounds inaudible to others'.[162] The central passage from 'Dante at Verona', which I have already drawn attention to, sets the pattern for this motif, foregrounding sight rather than sound as the poet is blessed with a vision of Beatrice to which no-one else is party:

> All this, being there, we had not seen.
> Seen only was the shadow wrought
> On the strong features bound in thought;
> The vagueness gaining gait and mien[163]

The most obvious way in which such vagueness gains gait and mien is by converting the vision into poetry, as Rossetti imagines Dante doing with the *Purgatorio*.

Rossetti's poems are likewise marked by a desire to make the private experience they describe shareable by turning it into art—a desire with which both the linguistic and conceptual materials of Rossetti's poetry co-operate. The highly restricted imagery of *The*

---

[161] The metaphorical sense of knowledge *dawning*, which Rossetti puns on throughout *The House of Life* (see also, for example, 'Bridal Birth' and 'Heart's Hope', in *CPR*, 128, 129), has its origins in the Victorian period, according to the *OED*, having developed from the sense of becoming visible into the more figurative 'To begin to become evident to the mind; to begin to be understood, felt, or perceived' (the first identified usage is from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852: see 'dawn, *v.*', 3b and 4, *OED Online* (pubd. March 2021), accessed 1 September 2021).
[162] Hueffer, *Rossetti*, 34.
[163] Rossetti, 'Dante at Verona', ll. 463–66, in *CPR*, 39.

House of Life cultivates a sense of familiarity which is at the same time undercut by the shifting ways in which this imagery is combined; while one might suppose that the recurrence of images like night, waves, fire, and angels would make them cosily familiar, like bits and pieces of old furniture perhaps, one never quite feels at home in this house. Pater called it a 'haunted house', and there is something persistently *unheimlich* about the experience of inhabiting it as a reader.[164] The string of complex variations the sequence plays on a relatively limited range of themes and imagery elicits a fraught sense of simultaneous continuity and discontinuity which mirrors the basic structure of a déjà vu experience. These formal biases are not in themselves, of course, sufficient to trigger an experience so specific (and so infrequent) as *déjà lu*, but they begin to account for Hake's eerie sense of discovery as recognition. Cognitive psychologists, for example, have been able to replicate the effect of 'recognition without identification' (of which déjà vu is a special type) by presenting participants at intervals with lists of semantically similar words.[165] At a broader conceptual level, too, Rossetti's poetic present is typically projected either through a medieval past (as in what he called his 'modern-antique' ballads, reclaiming Thomas Love Peacock's slur on the Lake Poets) or into an idealised time 'which might have been yet might not be', an elsewhere and elsewhen that blends fear, longing, and belonging.[166]

Freud's definition of the *unheimlich* strikes at these ambivalences:

---

[164] Pater, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', 214.

[165] Josephine A. Urquhart and Akira R. O'Connor, 'The awareness of novelty for strangely familiar words: a laboratory analogue of the déjà vu experience', in *PeerJ—The Journal of Life and Environmental Sciences* (11 November 2014), 1–20, doi:10.7717/peerj.666.

[166] Rossetti, 'Stillborn Love', l. 1, in *CPR*, 151; for Rossetti's reference to the 'modern-antique' see his letter to Allingham, 15 October 1854, in *Correspondence*, 1. 389; cf. Thomas Love Peacock, 'The Four Ages of Poetry (1820)', in *The Cambridge Edition of the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*, vol. 3, ed. Nicholas A. Joukovsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 134–57: 153. Though critics have made much of this phrase, its ironic allusion to Peacock has never been noticed. See, for instance, D. M. R. Bentley, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Absurd", Antiquarian, and "Modern-Antique" Medievalism(s): *Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, *The Bride's Prelude*, and "Stratton Water"', *Victorian Poetry* 51.1 (2013), 99–125.

> The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich* [homely], *heimisch* [native]—the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is uncanny is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar.[167]

Yet 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar'.[168] The speaker of 'Memorial Thresholds' is frightened by what is 'unrevealèd' and 'unimaginable', but he also figures his inauguration into such hiddenness as a kind of homecoming ('my life-porch in eternity'). Pursuing Freud's definition of the *unheimlich*, what is unfamiliar emerges as a form of *nostos* or return, the Greek concept from which seventeenth-century Swiss doctors developed their diagnosis of 'nostalgia'.[169] Joseph Koerner has written lucidly of how the experience of déjà vu is intertwined with this feeling of homesickness in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich: 'déjà vu excites us with an anticipated return'—as though we know for sure what will happen next—yet it 'leaves us in a state of exile; anticipation becomes finally nostalgia for a place I have never visited'.[170] Rossetti's speakers, too, hark back to a 'home' they have never yet set foot in, a place where they might see their 'exile exchanged for sanctuary', as one of Rossetti's last poems, 'Spheral Change', aspires.[171]

Yet Rossetti was experimenting with this idea as early as 'The Staff and the Scrip', first published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856.[172] At the quiet centre of this tragic ballad, between the knight's pledge to fight for Queen Blanchelys and his

---

[167] Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' [1919], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth, 1917–19), 219–56: 220.
[168] Ibid., 226.
[169] See Barbara Cassin, *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever At Home?*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 5–6.
[170] Joseph Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd edn. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 270.
[171] Rossetti, 'Spheral Change', ll. 17, 18, in *CPR*, 233. W. M. Rossetti dates 'Spheral Change' to 1881 (see Rossetti, *The Works of Rossetti*, xxx).
[172] See McGann's note in *CPR*, 378.

foredoomed death on the battlefield, stands a visual encounter akin to those Koerner identifies in Friedrich's landscapes:

> And there the sunset skies unseal'd,
> Like lands he never knew,
> Beyond to-morrow's battle-field,
> Lay open out of view
> To ride into.[173]

The aerial revelation that lies unsealed to the knight's view is saturated with a sense of destiny as the sky becomes the locus for his anticipation of life after death. Both time and space are rendered ambiguous by the curiously self-divided way in which Rossetti evokes them. The vision is 'unseal'd' and 'open', yet at the same time 'out of view'. In temporal terms, the knight's fate lies in the future, yet he frames it in terms of his past ('Like lands he never knew'). In the original 1856 printing Rossetti had 'Long' for 'Like'; the revision, made for the 1870 edition, exchanges a metaphor for a simile, replacing an assertion (he never knew the skies) with something more equivocal (it's *like* he never knew them).[174] The revision allows the knight's knowing to echo the ambivalence of his seeing, as well as suggesting a difference in kind rather than degree between land and skies that supports the wider sense that this will be his final sally: these skies are *like* lands, but they are not lands. Seen and unseen, known and unknown, they represent something strange and other, and yet also a home 'To ride into'. As in a Friedrich painting, or an experience of déjà vu, anticipation in this poem becomes nostalgia for something its subject never knew.

In 'The Birth-Bond', composed the same year as 'Sudden Light', the desire for homecoming is fulfilled in a striking experience of déjà vu:[175]

---

[173] Rossetti, 'The Staff and the Scrip', ll. 96–100, in *CPR*, 21. These lines are from the final, 1881 text as reprinted in McGann's edition.
[174] Rossetti, 'The Staff and the Scrip', *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1856), 771–75: 773.
[175] For the dating, see Rossetti, *The Works of Rossetti*, xxiv.

> Even so, when first I saw you, seemed it, love,
> That among souls allied to mine was yet
> One nearer kindred than life hinted of.
> O born with me somewhere that men forget,
> And though in years of sight and sound unmet,
> Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough![176]

The speaker's first sight of his beloved triggers a flash of recognition and nostalgia for a person he has never seen; locating the origin of his feeling of familiarity somewhere that men forget, he posits a place from which all mankind is exiled until the moment of recall supplies the knowledge they did not know they had. This poem enlists internal rhyme in Rossetti's formal repertoire of uncanny recognition effects. The whole sonnet moves towards the crowning verb in the last line, whose clinching resonance has been prepared by the long /o/ sounds throughout the sestet ('so', 'souls', 'O', 'though') with their insinuating sense of the *déjà entendu*, which is to say that they are registered as already heard in a way that differs from the repetitions of end-rhyme in being difficult to place. The knowledge which eventually arrives does so unsought and perhaps also with an air of ambiguity; 'Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough!' could be litotes, but it could also hint at a disavowal of the idea that absolute knowledge is desirable, for such knowledge risks rendering its object obsolete. In its place, Rossetti conjectures a good *enough* knowing that forestalls the threat of the 'overknown' expressed in 'From Dawn to Noon'.[177]

A similarly tempered fantasy of knowing wins the tribute of that sonnet's most arresting lines, when the speaker turns to pause upon 'the sun-smit paths, all grey / And marvellous once'.[178] Grey might typically be conceived as dim, drab, or gloomy, and associated with age, but here it is unexpectedly paired with the marvellous and connected

[176] Rossetti, 'The Birth-Bond', ll. 9–14, in *CPR*, 134.
[177] Rossetti, 'From Dawn to Noon', l. 14, in *CPR*, 162.
[178] Ibid., ll. 10–11, in *CPR*, 162.

with youth—surprises whose impact is heightened by being withheld over the line break. Rossetti's esteem for this twilight tone contrasts notably with his sister Christina's account of the soul's eagerness to ascend 'Up, up into the day, / Where twilight no more turneth grey'.[179] Holman Hunt recalled him exulting over Lizzie Siddal's 'grey eyes', and Rossetti himself described his painting 'Proserpine' as a 'graduation of greys' in which there was 'nothing dismal or gloomy', but which vibrated with a 'mystic luminous warmth'.[180] Pitched, like his painting, between the blank shadows and the 'unblenching day', Rossetti's poems pursue and invite a more grey and marvellous mode of knowing, seeking to dodge the opposing pitfalls of novelty and overfamiliarity.[181] In déjà vu Rossetti found a model of how these delicately balanced desires might be realised.

Rossetti's own famously revisionary practice put this model to work as a compositional method, for as he wrote to William Allingham, 'my sonnets are not generally finished till I see them again after forgetting them'.[182] By this logic, poems that become too readily familiar are found wanting; the ideal poem, then, might be one which, in Robert Frost's words, offered 'the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew'.[183] Such a poetics offers an intensified version of the 'lyric knowledge' recently proposed by James Longenbach: 'People who love poems', Longenbach writes, 'reread them not to acquire new knowledge but to reinhabit the enactment of what they already know'.[184] Rossetti's poems invite this sense of reinhabitation from the outset, such that we are encouraged—in Havelock Ellis's memorable description of memory in dreams—to

---

[179] Christina Rossetti, 'The Three Nuns', ll. 136–37, in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, 3 vols, ed. R. W. Crump (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979–90), 3. 191.
[180] Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, 198; Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 4 October 1873, in *Correspondence*, 6. 285.
[181] Rossetti, 'From Dawn to Noon', l. 12, in *CPR*, 162.
[182] Rossetti to Allingham, 23 July 1854, in *Correspondence*, 1. 362.
[183] Robert Frost, 'The Figure a Poem Makes' [1939], in *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 131–33: 132.
[184] James Longenbach, *How Poems Get Made* (New York, NY: Norton, 2018), 116.

'remember things we never knew'.[185] Rossetti made this very point in his advocacy of Blake:

> while any who can here find anything to love will be the poet-painter's welcome guests, still such a feast is spread first of all for those who can know at a glance that it is theirs and was meant for them; who can meet their host's eye with sympathy and recognition, even when he offers them the new strange fruits grown for himself in far-off gardens where he has dwelt alone, or pours for them the wines which he has learned to love in lands where they never travelled. [186]

The startling recognition of something entirely new, the nostalgia for lands one never travelled, the fantasy of knowing, at a glance, something strange for one's own: here is the very machinery of déjà vu turned, in Rossetti's own words, towards the issue of poetic reception. More than an abiding poetic subject, déjà vu became for Rossetti a kind of prototype of the poetic experience itself.

Excavating this poetics offers to recast the characteristic Pre-Raphaelite gesture of a present that circles back to the past: from an anxiety about belatedness into a fantasy of poetic knowing. To establish the contours of this fantasy is to sketch a more complex picture of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics than that of a 'withdrawal from the actuality of the present to a nostalgic no man's land', in Lothar Hönnighausen's representative construction.[187] William Morris offered a more sensitive gloss on Pre-Raphaelite aims when he defined romance as 'the power of making the past part of the present'.[188] While critics have been alert to the ways in which Rossetti's poetic present is impinged upon by the past, salvaging the late nineteenth-century connections between thinking about déjà vu

---

[185] Ellis, 'Memory in Dreams', 221.
[186] Rossetti, 'Supplementary', 430–31.
[187] Lothar Hönnighausen, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and Fin de Siècle*, tr. Gisela Hönnighausen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 182.
[188] William Morris, 'Address at the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 3 July 1889', in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, edited by May Morris, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1936), 146–57: 148.

and artistic creativity brings into focus a very different means of realising Morris's end: neither by questing after the past, nor by submitting to its ghosts, but by kindling an uncanny aura of pastness that blurs the lines between known and unknown, past and present, recovery and discovery.

Four years after his death, among the 'Sentences and Notes' assembled for the first collected edition of his works, we find the most explicit evidence of Rossetti's investment in the poetics of déjà vu: 'Poetry should seem to the hearer to have been always present to his thought, but never before heard.'[189] If this posthumous tenet recalls Hake's 1870 review, it also anticipates the 1888 testimony of one of Hughlings Jackson's most articulate patients, 'Dr Z', who recorded experiencing the dreamy state when 'reading poetry aloud—the line I am reading or just going to read seems somehow familiar […] though I may never have seen or heard it before'.[190] Perhaps Dr Z had been reading Rossetti.

[189] Rossetti, 'Sentences and Notes', in *Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 1. 511.
[190] Hughlings Jackson, 'Intellectual Aura', 203. 'Dr Z' has been identified as the physician Alfred Thomas Meyers: see Macdonald Critchley and Eileen A. Critchley, *John Hughlings Jackson: Father of English Neurology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 69.

IV

What Mary Knew: Secrets and Surmise in Meynell

> Eyes long accustomed to gaze upon darkness see objects for which others would require more light.
>
> JOHN HENRY NEWMAN[1]

The title of Alice Meynell's '*Æ*nigma Christi' gestures towards St Paul's words from the First Epistle to the Corinthians, as the Latin epigraph ('*Videmus nunc in aenigmate*') underlines: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'.[2] Meynell may have chosen to quote from this passage in Latin not only because she was Catholic, but because the Vulgate text preserves both the grammar and the lexical flavour of Paul's Greek, lost in the King James Version's translation of '*en ainigmati*' as 'darkly'.[3] Paul's original construction, preserved by St Jerome, has two parts: seeing God in a mirror and seeing him *in an enigma* (i.e. in riddling language). Of course, these are figuratively run together by Paul as a particular way of *seeing*, but English translations such as 'darkly' and 'dimly' sacrifice the overt connotations of obscure *speech* present in the Greek and Latin texts. Paul himself is alluding to a passage in the Hebrew Bible where God says that he speaks to Moses 'mouth

---

[1] John Henry Newman, *The Philosophical Notebook of John Henry Newman*, 2 vols, ed. Edward Sillem (New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1970), 2. 29.

[2] Meynell, '*Æ*nigma Christi', in *The Poems of Alice Meynell*, ed. Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 195 (henceforth *PAM*); 1 Corinthians 13: 12. Meynell's subtitle is an abbreviated version of the verse from the Vulgate: *Videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte, tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum* (*The Vulgate Bible*, vol. 6: *The New Testament*, ed. Angela M. Kinney (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 916).

[3] English translations bearing the *imprimatur* of local bishops were in common circulation in the nineteenth century, but the Latin Vulgate remained the authoritative text as declared by the Council of Trent and was used in all liturgical settings and all documents produced by the Vatican. See F. F. Bruce, 'The English Bible for Roman Catholics', in *History of the Bible in English*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2002), 113–26.

to mouth, plainly' and not 'through enigmas (*di' ainigmatōn*)' as he does to the prophets.[4] 'Enigma' is not a word that occurs anywhere else in the New Testament. Writing in the fifth century, St Augustine worries that many people might find the word itself rather enigmatic, and that consequently the Apostle's meaning

> is unknown to many who are ignorant of that branch of literature in which these modes of speech are taught; they are called "tropes" by the Greeks […] to explain it briefly, an enigma is an obscure allegory.[5]

In calling her poem 'Ænigma Christi', Meynell is recovering Paul's association of imperfect knowing with a particular use of language. Throughout Meynell's poetry a persistent concern with God's resistance to being fully known is kept in touch with a sense of poetry's own refusal to yield crystallised knowledge. The analogy brings to the surface the ways in which God's hiddenness might be conceived not only—as it so often was in the nineteenth century—as a terrifying absence or brutal abandonment, but as the condition for valuable and constructive forms of unknowing, and even as a resource of faith.[6] In this chapter I show how Meynell's poetry articulates and recuperates the experience of *not* knowing God, vigilantly alert to the ways in which, as Meynell put it in an essay of 1891, we may be 'defrauded of our […] ignorance'.[7] Far from being glibly anti-intellectual, this stance is shrewdly sceptical both of attempts to compass religious mysteries with secular epistemologies *and* of religious epistemologies that dispose of the obscurities and uncertainties which Meynell (following St Paul) saw as integral to religious experience.

---

[4] Numbers 12: 8, in *The Old Testament in Greek, according to the Septuagint*, vol. 1, ed. Henry Barclay Swete (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 281.
[5] See Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15. 9, in *On the Trinity: Books 8–15*, tr. Stephen McKenna, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 183–84.
[6] See, for example, J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963).
[7] Meynell, 'Rejection', in *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays* (London: John Lane, 1896), 79–82: 80.

Meynell's approach to religious knowledge should also be distinguished from the grand theological tradition of 'apophasis', which approaches God negatively by denying that any descriptions and attributes can be positively predicated of him. This latter tradition, transmitted from Clement of Alexandria and the Cappadocian Fathers via the fifth-century writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, influenced a wide array of Western figures such as Meister Eckhart, the anonymous author of the *Cloude of Unknowyng* (who himself translated some of Dionysius's works), and St John of the Cross.[8] As the Victorian theologian Brooke Westcott wrote in 1867, for Dionysius and his heirs 'Unknowledge transcends knowledge, because it is the negation of limit.'[9] Rather than seeking to surpass the limits of knowing, Meynell's poetry seeks—and finds—the uses that might be made of them, this side of paradise. Her forms of unknowing are therefore not of the transcendental kind that produce 'unknowledge', but grounded in that twilight land of religious experience of which John Henry Newman was the century's leading cartographer: a land of 'half views and partial knowledge, of guesses, surmises, hopes and fears, of truths faintly apprehended and not understood'.[10]

Newman, the most famous of English converts and the leading intellectual force in English-speaking Catholicism through the period, was not personally admired by Meynell (herself a convert).[11] When she finished reading the proofs of her husband Wilfrid's 1907 biography of the Cardinal, she wrote bluntly to him:

---

[8] See William Franke, 'Introduction: Historical Lineaments of Apophasis', in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 9–33.

[9] Brooke F. Westcott, 'Dionysius the Areopagite', *Contemporary Review* 5 (May 1867), 1–28.

[10] Newman, 'The Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Revealed Religion' [1836], in *Essays Critical and Historical*, 2 vols (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1871), 1. 30–99: 41.

[11] Meynell converted from Anglicanism in 1868. See Julie Badeni, *The Slender Tree: A Life of Alice Meynell* (Padstow: Tabb House, 1981), 37.

> I do not love the character at all […] And I don't admire the mere literature. I disagree with George Eliot and Coventry Patmore, and you, and everybody.[12]

In spite of this marked antipathy (partly founded on her low opinion of Newman's poetry, and partly, it would seem, on some kind of post-Wildean horror at the emotional intensity of Newman's relationship with Ambrose St John), I hope to show that Newman's writing offers a searching way in to Meynell's poetic explorations of unknowing.[13] If her work shares many striking affinities with Newman's thought, however, it is also distinct in fashioning the Virgin Mary as a figure for modelling and thinking through sacred forms of unknowing. At the same time, Mary emerges as a figure for the poet and for the reader, embroiled in a parallel drama of unknowing. It is perhaps not insignificant that Francis Thompson, the opium-dependent Catholic poet whom the Meynells took into their own home in the 1880s and ushered into print, addressed Meynell (one suspects only *half*-teasingly) as 'Madonna'.[14] It was not an identification that Meynell herself ever explicitly made, but as a Catholic woman, and the mother of eight children, it was natural that Mary should have appealed to her as a role model and companion as well as an object of veneration. What is more surprising is that this identification was so closely wrapped up with Meynell's sense of her own poetic vocation and her pursuit of forms of unknowing.

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed an extraordinary transformation in the Catholic Church's understanding of the status and role of the Virgin Mary. Meynell

---

[12] Quoted in Viola Meynell, *Alice Meynell: A Memoir* (New York, NY: Scribner's, 1929), 215.
[13] 'The "beautiful" passage about Ambrose St John is to my mind a curious inversion of parody', she wrote in the same letter (ibid.). Meynell was ruthless in her verdict on Wilde's conviction: 'As *seclusion* two years are far too little,' she wrote to Wilfrid at the time. 'As punishment one wishes they might be made more tolerable. But while there is a weak omnibus horse at work or a hungry cat I am not going to spend feeling on Oscar': quoted in Badeni, *The Slender Tree*, 115. Meynell expunged all mentions of Wilde from future editions of her essays and (along with several others) threatened to withdraw her books from her publisher John Lane unless Wilde's works were immediately removed from his list. They were. See Meynell to John Lane (19 February 1896), in *The Selected Letters of Alice Meynell: Poet and Essayist*, ed. Damian Atkinson (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 90.
[14] See, for example, Francis Thompson to Meynell, summer 1894, in *The Letters of Francis Thompson*, ed. John Evangelist Walsh (New York, NY: Hawthorn, 1969), 118.

converted during the papacy of one of the most Marian pontiffs in the Church's history, Pius IX, whose 1849 encyclical *Ubi primum* laid unprecedented stress on Mary's function in the scheme of salvation and the dispensation of divine grace: 'For God has committed to Mary the treasury of all good things, in order that everyone may know that through her are obtained every hope, every grace, every salvation. For this is His will, that we obtain everything through Mary.'[15] Pope Pius used the same document to canvass support among the episcopate for official recognition of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, i.e. Mary's freedom from original sin. Although this doctrine had been explicitly rejected by Thomas Aquinas, the Church's theological lodestar, it commanded increasing support among the hierarchy and laity alike and was promulgated as a dogma with much fanfare in 1854.[16] A series of Marian apparitions—at La Salette in 1846, Lourdes in 1858, Pontmain in 1871, Knock in 1879, and Fátima in 1917—bolstered the growing clamour for Mary to be further recognised for her role in the redemption of the world.[17] Cardinal Wiseman, the Archbishop of Westminster and leader of the Catholic Church in England, described Mary in 1858 as a 'co-operator […] with God in His great work' and even as a 'priestess on the part of mankind'.[18] Leo XIII was the first Pope to acknowledge Mary by the title of 'Mediatrix' in 1895, and his successor Pius X formally reversed an eighteenth-century judgement of the Holy Office by approving the title of 'Co-Redemptrix' in 1913.[19] But

[15] Pius IX, *Ubi primum*, The Holy See (2 February 1849): <w2.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/it/documents/enciclica-ubi-primum-2-febbraio-1849.html> (accessed 1 September 2021).
[16] On Thomas's view, see Matthew Levering, 'Mary and Grace', in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 289–302: 298; on the nineteenth-century context, see Robert Fastiggi, 'Mary in the Work of Redemption', in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, 303–19: 310.
[17] See Carol Engelhardt Herringer, 'Mary as Cultural Symbol in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, 503–15.
[18] N. P. S. Wiseman, 'Sermon in the Metropolitan Church', in *The Sermons, Lectures and Speeches Delivered by His Eminence Cardinal Wiseman, Archbishop of Westminster, During His Tour in Ireland* (Dublin: Duffy, 1859), 138–62: 158.
[19] See Fastiggi, 'Mary in the Work of Redemption', 310.

even if Mary was increasingly being accorded a kind of moral and redemptive parity with Christ, she still differed from her Son in one crucial respect—she was not omniscient.[20]

Mary's lack of knowledge creates the conditions for her engagement with two recurring motifs in Meynell's religious poetry: the idea of secrecy and the practice of surmise. Mary's encounters with these themes become paradigmatic for Meynell's wider engagements with sacred knowledge, reshaping critical understanding on several fronts: the place of Mary in Victorian poetry (whose representations have often been criticised as passive and lifeless); Meynell's attitude towards the Tractarian doctrine of 'reserve'; and her intertextual relations with rival Catholic poets such as Patmore and Hopkins. Before examining the topics of secrecy and surmise in turn, I first consider in more detail the conception of sacred knowledge constructed by Meynell's poetry.

Partial Knowledge

Although 'Ænigma Christi' was written towards the end of Meynell's life, it does not look keenly forward to what St Paul calls (in the verse quoted in the poem's epigraph) *epignōsomai*, full or thorough heavenly knowing as contrasted with partial, earthly knowing (*ginōskō ek merous*). Rather, the poem's speaker is thrilled into wonder by 'the Enigma of Christ'.[21] Although Meynell's title gestures to Paul, 'Ænigma Christi' is not at

[20] Acknowledging that Christ has two natures, the Catholic Church distinguishes between the knowledge found in his divine intellect (which is 'co-extensive with God's omniscience') and that found in his human intellect (which in itself is superior to that of all other humans, both in kind and in degree). See 'Knowledge of Jesus Christ', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 16 vols, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al. (New York, NY: Appleton, 1907–14), 8. 675–77: 676. The *Encyclopedia* received the *imprimatur* of the Archbishop of New York.

[21] The poem was first published in 1920 (see *PAM*, 213); see ἐπι-γινώσκώ, 1 ('to become thoroughly acquainted with, to know thoroughly; to know accurately, know well'), in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti*, tr. Joseph Henry Thayer (New York, NY: Harper, 1889), 237.

all (as one might suppose) a traditional tag.[22] Grammatically, it could mean the enigma that is Christ's—one of the more obscure parables, perhaps—but the poem in fact coaxes Paul's suggestion of seeing Christ *in an enigma* towards the idea of Christ himself *as* an enigma, the enigma that is Christ:

> None can be like Him, none!
> In love? In grief? Nay, man's capacity,
> Rifled unto its depths, is reached, is done—
> Christ's, an unfathomed sea.
>
> None can be like Him, none;
> Not she who bore Him. Yet I saw the whole
> Eternal, infinite Christ within the one
> Small mirror of her soul.[23]

Knowing is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, but it is conspicuously at issue in the well-flagged Pauline context; 'capacity' and 'unfathomed' certainly speak the language of knowing, whose domain is expanded into an affective register to include the (in)ability to measure the depths of Christ's personal love and grief. The first line of each stanza recalls the fragile happiness expressed in Tennyson's *Maud*—'There is none like her, none'—a line whose repetitions Christopher Ricks suggests 'are those not of dismay or neurosis, but of a profound wonder'.[24] Meynell reverses the rising rhythm of Tennyson's phrase, investing it with a sense of nervous, overspilling energy that fizzes through the dactyls and trochees that populate her poem.[25] The inspired choice of 'rifled' carries this frantic energy into the poem's diction, its twin senses of 'ransack or search […] thoroughly' and 'carry

---

[22] I can only find the phrase 'Ænigma Christi' in a handful of obscure theological texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Meynell may well (quite reasonably) have thought it original to her.
[23] Meynell, 'Ænigma Christi', ll. 1–4, in *PAM*, 195.
[24] Alfred Tennyson, *Maud*, l. 600, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 2nd edn., 3 vols, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Longman, 1987), 2. 553 (henceforth *PT*); Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 243.
[25] The rhythmic pattern of Tennyson's own phrase is admittedly highly ambiguous, especially when he abbreviates it in the second instance ('None like her, none', l. 605, in *PT*, 553).

off as booty' (as well as the violence that glints in the suggestion of a firearm) combining to fashion a vision of knowing as a form of aggression and plunder.[26]

This characterisation of knowing is consonant with the way in which Newman described the motives and methods of scientific knowing in contrast to the more humble and receptive attitude proper to sacred forms of knowing. 'The aim of science', he wrote in an essay of 1858, 'is to get a hold of things, to grasp them, to handle them, to comprehend them: that is (to use the familiar term), to master them, or to be superior to them'.[27] By contrast, the monastic life cultivated a 'mode of viewing things' suitable equally to the perception of religious truths and 'poetical objects':

> It demands, as its primary condition, that we should not put ourselves above the objects in which it resides, but at their feet; that we should feel them to be above and beyond us, that we should look up to them, and that, instead of fancying that we can comprehend them, we should take for granted that we are surrounded and comprehended by them ourselves. It implies that we understand them to be vast, immeasurable, impenetrable, inscrutable, mysterious; so that at best we are only forming conjectures about them, not conclusions[28]

'Ænigma Christi' adopts a traditional image for Newman's vast, embosoming, and inscrutable mysteries in the 'unfathomable sea', but the way in which this sea is evoked is anything but lazy or conventional. Whereas Newman's prose depends upon rhetorical amplification to convey the stupendous dimensions of the objects he imagines, Meynell's poem condenses the sense of a baffled attempt at mastery in the suggestion that it is like trying to grasp water—a sea, no less. The aquatic imagery is in a sense prefigured in the mention of 'depths', yet on first sight these depths more naturally suggest those of a mine or cave, since one would not normally think of a body of water as something that could be

[26] 'rifle, *v.*', 1 and 2, *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.
[27] Newman, 'The Mission of St Benedict' [1858], in *Historical Sketches* [1872], 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1906), 2. 365–432: 386.
[28] Ibid., 386–87.

'rifled'; when the sea appears as a secondary object for this verb, therefore, the very incongruity of means and ends carries Meynell's point. But the effectiveness of this stanza also has much to do with the way these rival depths are, as it were, sounded, since the long vowel on which it eventually comes to rest wins its resonance partly from the contrast of its single syllable with the lengthy, Anglo-Latin compound which precedes it, but still more from the way it so conspicuously and appropriately exceeds the clipped sound cued by its rhyme-word ('capacity'). Man's puny capacity for knowing is soon swallowed up in this ocean of unknowing.

And yet this sea is see-able, even if it is unfathomable, in the reflection of Christ offered to the world by Mary. Mary had occasionally been referred to as a 'mirror' or *speculum* in Christian tradition, most prominently as Mirror of Justice, but very rarely as mirror of Christ (a title more commonly associated with St Francis of Assisi).[29] As with the 'enigma of Christ', the title of mirror associates Mary with a literary genre: medieval and Renaissance *speculum* literature, which comprised works offering moral or other instruction by describing paragons for imitation, but also 'compendiums of knowledge' which attempted to present the full panoply of human knowledge for contemplation, like the *Speculum Majus* of Vincent of Beauvais.[30] In 'Ænigma Christi', Mary seems to mediate the knowledge of God more successfully than the mirror Paul spoke of, reflecting the 'whole / Eternal, infinite Christ' in the small mirror of her soul. This ability, Meynell's image suggests, makes her an exemplar for imitation, but also a source—perhaps the most accessible and reliable source—for knowledge of God.

---

[29] See Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-imagery in titles and texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 79; G. K. Chesterton, *St Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), 135.
[30] See Ritamary Bradley, 'Backgrounds of the title *Speculum* in Medieval Literature', *Speculum* 29.1 (1954), 100–115.

Meynell made this latter identification explicitly in a devotional book published in 1912, *Mary the Mother of Jesus*. Noting that only 'a few days or hours out of many years' before the beginning of Christ's ministry at the age of thirty are shown in the Gospels, Meynell wrote that it is as if Mary herself were 'hidden' within these 'vacant spaces of the Biblical story'.[31] But rather than testifying to some kind of erasure, it must have been Mary herself, Meynell argues, who chose which of these stories to tell:

> Before the pens of the four greatest writers of the world had been set to their task, the New Testament lurked in one woman's memory and in her watchfulness. It was her work to choose and to reject what should be said.[32]

Prior and superior to the Evangelists themselves, Mary becomes the first mediator of Gospel knowledge. Meynell was perhaps influenced in this regard by Cardinal Wiseman. In a sermon on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Wiseman offered a challenge to Protestants inclined to 'overlook' Mary's significance: referring to the Annunciation, Wiseman argued that Mary alone was entrusted 'not only with the precious gift itself, but with the knowledge of it. No one else can have known it.'[33] How is it, Wiseman asks, that anyone can 'know that the Son of God became man', if not ultimately from Mary herself?[34] Later, in his encyclical *Adiutricem* (1895), Pope Leo XIII would quote the words of St Germanus, the eighth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, to support his ascription of the title Mediatrix to Mary: 'O Virgin most holy, none abounds in the knowledge of God except through thee'.[35]

---

[31] Meynell, *Mary the Mother of Jesus: An Essay* (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1912), 39.
[32] Ibid., 39–40.
[33] Wiseman, 'Sermon in the Metropolitan Church', 151.
[34] Ibid., 152.
[35] Leo XIII, *Adiutricem*, The Holy See (5 September 1895): <w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_05091895_adiutricem.html> (accessed 1 September 2021). Meynell herself was translating papal encyclicals for the English bishops at this time, though it is not known precisely which (see F. Elizabeth Gray, 'Alice Meynell: Production, Reproduction, and the World of Work in the 1890s', in *Victorians* 132 (2017), 148–61: 150).

Mary, then, emerges as the supreme conduit of divine knowledge in Catholic theology of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an emergence to which Meynell responds, and contributes, in her poetry. But as 'Ænigma Christi' suggests, the knowledge which she offers to the world is fundamentally imperfect and incomplete. The enigma of Christ is not dissipated, or clarified, or explained by Mary's reflecting it: she makes it visible, but she does not necessarily render it any less enigmatic. Newman was writing in a period before the Mariological developments I have been discussing came to a head. But though Mary plays little part in his epistemology, his writing nonetheless provides the crucial co-ordinates for understanding the way in which Meynell approaches sacred knowledge. Like Newman (and St Paul before him), Meynell does not place the emphasis on sacred knowledge requiring its own special, rival way of knowing, but values it specifically as a form of constrained and imperfect knowing.

Newman's thinking on this subject can be understood as a campaign fought on two fronts, neither of which betrayed him into a glib contempt for scientific inquiry. On one side, he was concerned to push back against those who reasoned that 'if Religion is just one of those subjects about which we can know nothing, what can be so absurd as to spend time upon it?'[36] On the other, he stoutly resisted what he called 'the Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Revealed Religion': that is, the attempt to confine religious knowledge within a self-sufficient intellectual system, which he regarded as an unfortunate consequence of the Reformation.[37] Sometimes, as Newman wryly remarked in one of his sermons, the same people managed to combine 'a profession of knowing every thing, with an assertion that there is nothing to know'.[38]

---

[36] Newman, *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated* [1873], ed. Ian T. Ker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 315.
[37] Newman, 'Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Revealed Religion', cited above.
[38] Newman, 'The Humiliation of the Eternal Son' [1835], in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 3 (London: Rivingtons, 1868), 156–72: 159.

Newman addressed the first of these 'errors' directly in a lecture presented at the new Catholic University of Ireland in 1854, which he later incorporated into his educational tract *The Idea of a University* (published in its final form in 1873).[39] The background for this lecture was the foundation of the non-denominational Queen's University of Ireland in 1845, a project which the Catholic Church dissociated itself from, setting up a rival institution in Dublin instead. Newman ventriloquises the argument for secular education in its boldest and baldest form: Christianity, people say, 'has been the bane of true knowledge, for it has turned the intellect away from what it can know, and occupied it in what it cannot'.[40] In an important sense Newman concedes the point, while challenging the idea that occupying the intellect with what it cannot wholly and securely know is simply a waste of time. Knowledge of God, Newman admits, can never meet the epistemic criteria insisted upon by science: it can never attain to 'the infallible certitude of the physical philosopher'.[41] But he does not use this as an opportunity to denigrate those criteria, as many other Christian apologists of the time were tempted to do.

Coventry Patmore, for example—a fellow Catholic convert and one of Meynell's most devoted personal and poetic admirers—flamboyantly dismissed the fruits of scientific inquiry as 'such knowledge as every animal with faculties a little above those of an ant or a beaver can be induced to admit'.[42] In Patmore's combative narrative, poetry and religion alike offered '*living* knowledge' in contrast to the dead letter of logical and empirical knowledge.[43] Patmore's desire to provoke is evident in his pronouncement that 'perhaps the only real use of natural science is to supply similes and parables for poets and

[39] See Ian T. Ker, 'Editor's Introduction', in Newman, *The Idea of a University*, xi.
[40] Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 316.
[41] Newman, 'Introduction of Rationalistic Principles', 38.
[42] Patmore, 'Thoughts on Knowledge, Opinion, and Inequality', in *Principle in Art*, *Etc.* (London: Bell, 1889), 202–19: 209.
[43] Ibid. (emphasis mine).

theologians'.[44] Like Newman, Meynell had little time for such smirking *braggadocio*: hailing the Catholic scientist St George Mivart as an example of how to respect both religious and scientific 'ways of thought', she praised the moral seriousness of atheists such as T. H. Huxley and Herbert Spencer (the very individuals whom Patmore castigated) and rebuked those who imagined that

> the religious difficulties suggested by astronomy, or geology, or physiology, or those which arise from the acute sensitiveness of the modern mind before the mysteries of evil and of eternal loss, are to be disposed of by a sneer at 'so-called science' or a smile at 'so-called philosophy'.[45]

If the knowledge of God and his actions could not be compassed by science or philosophy, this need not, in other words, be taken as a dishonour to either one of them. Rather than presenting sacred truths as a superior brand of knowledge, Newman continually sought to differentiate such truths from notions of perfectly clear and secure knowledge.

On the one hand, religious knowledge was not, Newman argued, 'the triumphant exhibition of a truth, completely developed, and happily adjusted, and accurately balanced on its centre, and impregnable on every side'—it was not, in other words, a 'scientific view'—and hence attempts to 'rationalise' religion, to organise it into a closed system of propositions, were doomed to failure.[46] Like Newman, Meynell rejected the dominant Victorian and Edwardian narrative of the Reformation as a project of liberation and enlightenment, criticising what she called the 'dead hand' of the Reformers, 'final, all-resolute, eager' in drawing up immutable Articles of religion.[47] Such attempts 'arrested the

---

[44] Patmore, 'Love and Poetry', in *Principle in Art*, 72–79: 74.
[45] Meynell, 'For Faith and Science', in *Merry England* 5 (September 1885), 285–93: 290, 285.
[46] Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [1870], ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 126–27.
[47] Meynell, 'Tithonus', in *Ceres' Runaway, and Other Essays* (London: Constable, 1909), 79–88: 80. See A. G. Dickens and John M. Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) and Jane Garnett, 'Protestant Histories: James Anthony Froude, Partisanship and National Identity', in *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain: Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew*, ed. Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171–91.

moving man, and inhibited the moving God', trapping its adherents in creeds more rigid and narrow than any that had come before.[48] In trying to refine the claims of Christianity, the Reformers had merely succeeded in vulgarising them, with the result that religion was too often reduced to a kind of marketable commodity, something 'plain and easy', as Newman put it, like the catchy but vacuous formulas bandied about by well-meaning liberals or enthusiastic Evangelicals.[49] On the contrary, for Newman the idea of God (and of doctrines like the Incarnation and the Atonement) was something which perpetually aroused, while consistently declining to satisfy, the wish to know:

> Religious truth requires you should be told *something*, your own imperfect nature prevents your knowing *all*; and to know *something*, and *not all*,—*partial knowledge*,—must of course perplex; doctrines imperfectly revealed must be mysterious.[50]

But if this 'partial knowledge' was not scientific knowledge or a hollow religion-by-numbers, on one side, neither was it Wescott's 'unknowledge' on the other. For it was not a question of emptying the mind of all conceptions, setting aside everything God is *not*, but of recognising the incompleteness even of *revealed* knowledge of what God is and does. This 'partial knowledge', then, cannot be exhausted by analysis, nor conveniently boiled down into a system or slogan. Instead, it preserves a space of unknowing that brings it into close connection with art and poetry.

In an essay of 1839, Newman speculated that 'the taste for poetry of a religious kind has in modern times in a certain sense taken the place of the deep contemplative spirit of the early Church', a spirit opposed to the 'businesslike habits' of mind which prevailed

---

[48] Meynell, 'Tithonus', 80. Newman defended the mobility of a living tradition in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845).
[49] Newman, 'The State of Grace' [1836], in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 4 (London: Rivingtons, 1868), 133–49: 141.
[50] Ibid.

in early Victorian England.[51] And just as each element of Christian revelation 'extends on each side […] into an unknown world', so too passages of scripture reverberate with untold frequencies of meaning: 'to be "at peace with God," to "have access into the grace in which we stand," to "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God"'—who, Newman asks, can tell the fullness of these phrases?[52]

Meynell draws a close connection between the dazzling opacities of language and revelation in her poem 'The Lord's Prayer', from the privately printed *Ten Poems 1913–15*. As the poem progresses, the familiar words of supplication are estranged line by line and word by word:

> There is a bolder way,
> There is a wilder enterprise than this
> All-human iteration day by day.
> Courage, mankind! Restore Him what is His.
>
> Out of His mouth were given
> These phrases. O replace them whence they came.
> He, only, knows our inconceivable 'Heaven',
> Our hidden 'Father', and the unspoken 'Name';
>
> Our 'trespasses', our 'bread',
> The 'will' inexorable yet implored;
> The miracle-words that are and are not said,
> Charged with the unknown purpose of their Lord.
>
> 'Forgive', 'give', 'lead us not'—
> Speak them by Him, O man the unaware,
> Speak by that dear tongue, though thou know not what,
> Shuddering through the paradox of prayer.[53]

The poem begins by emphasising that we do not know the supernatural realities which lie beyond our face-to-face experience ('He, only, knows our inconceivable "Heaven", / Our

[51] Newman, 'Prospects of the Anglican Church' [1839], in *Essays Critical and Historical*, 1. 262–306: 289.
[52] Newman, 'Introduction of Rationalistic Principles', 45; 'The State of Grace', 141.
[53] Meynell, 'The Lord's Prayer', in *PAM*, 142.

hidden "Father"'), but this claim is shaped into something stronger and stranger in asserting that only Christ knows 'the unspoken "Name"', for every reader of the Old Testament is perfectly familiar with it. The claim here is deeper than one about hidden or inaccessible knowledge: it is that we do not even know that knowledge which we have, and that this unknowing is revealed to us in a particular kind of attention to words, 'These phrases'. If we do not know 'Our "trespasses", our "bread"', this could mean that we are not the final judges of our actions, or of what is good for us, but this would be to understate the poem's challenge, which works continually to obstruct such skipping over of signs to referents: from the way in which the phrases are held apart in speech marks to the scrambling of the order in which they appear ('Heaven' / 'Father' / 'Name' / 'trespasses' / 'bread' / 'will' / 'Forgive' / 'give' / 'lead us not'—rather than 'Father' / 'Heaven' / 'Name' / 'will' / 'give' / 'bread' / 'Forgive' / 'trespasses' / 'lead us not'). In one of her uncollected periodical essays Meynell wrote that

> There should be nothing habitual in literature, as there must not be in prayer. Every movement should have a special intention, an impulse to itself, a separate thought.[54]

By breaking up the prayer, and thrusting its components unpredictably on our attention, Meynell creates room for such individual impulses and intentions. But in so doing she also draws attention to the phrases' sensual objecthood and to their role as performative utterances: 'miracle-words', like those Jesus used when he raised Jairus's daughter, or healed the deaf-mute, words preserved in their original Aramaic in Mark's gospel as though in recognition of some special and untranslatable quality in the shapes and sounds by which these miracles were effected.[55]

---

[54] Meynell, quoted in Anne Kimball Tuell, 'Meynell in the "Lost" Columns', *The Sewanee Review*, 31.2 (1923), 152–62: 154.
[55] See Mark 5: 41 and Mark 7: 34.

The Lord's Prayer is estranged in this way when recited in Latin during the mass, a practice which the poem's epigraph alludes to ('*Audemus dicere "Pater Noster".*—CANON OF THE MASS').[56] The manner of the priest's invocation ('*Audemus dicere*'—we *make bold* to say) is picked up in the poem's opening, which provocatively argues for 'a bolder way' and 'a wilder enterprise' than reliance on such dreary 'iteration'. Yet what begins by sounding like a Protestant critique of formal prayer soon turns the tables by suggesting that it may be our very pretences to know what we are saying that reduce prayer to mere iteration, the endless repetition of what we already know. By contrast, acknowledging that we 'know not what' such words may mean transforms such prayer from 'All-human iteration' into a contemplative alignment of the Christian's voice with Christ's. Rather than appropriating the words for one's own well-thumbed back-catalogue of fears, needs, and desires, the poem echoes Christ's injunction to render unto God 'what is His'.

The self-dramatising prosodic jolt administered by 'Shuddering' leaves its own unknowns hanging in the air: just what, here, is 'Shuddering' through whom? Is the subject Christ's 'dear tongue', or 'man the unaware', or the series of phrases that opens the stanza? And are *these* what come shuddering through the paradox of prayer, or do they shudder *with* or *because of* said paradox? Like the Lord's Prayer, the words do not explain themselves. Writing about George Herbert, Angela Leighton suggests that prayer is, 'like poetry, a form of thinking so deeply carried in the words that we do not easily know what it means, while still hearing that it means precisely and only what it says'.[57] It was for this reason that Newman insisted Christians 'religiously adhere to the form of words' in which sacred truths lived, moved, and had their being, 'apart from which the Revelation does not

[56] Meynell, 'The Lord's Prayer', in *PAM*, 142.
[57] Angela Leighton, 'About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33.1 (2009), 167–76: 174.

exist, there being nothing else given us by which to ascertain or enter into it'.[58] Like Meynell's emblem of Mary as a mirror, brilliantly reflecting knowledge without removing its enigma, the Lord's Prayer, 'by being revealed' (in Newman's words), has 'only got so far as to be a Mystery'.[59]

Sacred Secrets

Meynell's poetic imagination is consistently animated by the hiddenness of God, rather than motivated by a wish to remove or subdue it. 'In Portugal, 1912' imagines how Christ 'hides an unregarded head' in the rural vines and corn-lands in the wake of the 1910 Revolution, one of whose effects was to mandate the suppression of all religious orders.[60] The poem is a dream about transubstantiation, whose very mysteriousness renders the Church's enemies oblivious to its power: whatever the authorities may say and do, still 'The mill conceals the harvest's Lord' while 'The wine-press holds the unbidden Christ'.[61] Driven into a kind of hiding by revolutionary violence, the concealment of Christ's potential Eucharistic presence in the abundance of the fields and grapevines becomes living proof of the indestructibility of the faith.[62]

The secrecy of God again becomes an instrument of faith in 'The Unknown God', whose speaker addresses a prayer to Christ in the 'unknown heart' of a stranger at mass:

> One of the crowd went up,
> And knelt before the Paten and the Cup,
> Received the Lord, returned in peace, and prayed

[58] Newman, 'Introduction of Rationalistic Principles', 13.
[59] Ibid., 43.
[60] Meynell, 'In Portugal, 1912', l. 4, in *PAM*, 115. See Ronald H. Chilcote, *The Portuguese Revolution: State and Class in the Transition to Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 25–26.
[61] Meynell, 'In Portugal, 1912', ll. 11, 12, in *PAM*, 115.
[62] See also 'The Fugitive', a fiery protest at the disestablishment of the Catholic Church in France in 1905, in *PAM*, 114; on the latter, see Maurice Larkin, 'Ralliés and Dérailleurs: Catholics and Subversion', in *Politics and Preferment in France since 1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3–28.

Close to my side. Then in my heart I said:

'O Christ, in this man's life—
This stranger who is Thine—in all his strife,
All his felicity, his good and ill,
In the assaulted stronghold of his will,

'I do confess Thee here,
Alive within this life; I know Thee near
Within this lonely conscience, closed away
Within this brother's solitary day.

'Christ in his unknown heart,
His intellect unknown—this love, this art,
This battle and this peace, this destiny
That I shall never know, look upon me!

'Christ in his numbered breath,
Christ in his beating heart and in his death,
Christ in his mystery! From that secret place
And from that separate dwelling, give me grace!'[63]

Recognising Christ's life within the stranger, though she knows neither his heart, his intellect, nor his destiny, is an act of faith in which the speaker's not knowing becomes a tribute to the secret action of God, and in which God's very secrecy becomes the sign by which he is recognised. Newman, similarly, had laid great stress on the secrecy of God's operations, arguing that God's presence was 'more real and efficacious by how much it was more secret and inscrutable'.[64] 'Let us ever bear in mind this divine truth', Newman urged, that 'the more secret God's hand is, the more powerful'.[65] In one of his more well-known poems, he spoke of how 'Christ rears His throne within the secret heart', but Meynell imagines that the secret heart is not hers but someone else's, transforming it from an image of self-inspection into a recognition of God's presence in her fellow creatures, a

[63] Meynell, 'The Unknown God', in *PAM*, 112.
[64] Newman, 'Christ Manifested in Remembrance' [1837], in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 4 (London: Rivingtons, 1868), 253–66: 253.
[65] Ibid., 265.

presence which may be not only observed but petitioned.[66] The poem's procession of deictic pronouns—ten thises, two thats—brings the divine physically close without lessening its mystery, echoing the action of the mass itself. As the closing plea for grace indicates, there is a sacramental quality to this act of imaginative projection that seeks not only to contemplate but to consecrate the unknown.

Mary has been hovering in the wings of this discussion, since it is originally and paradigmatically Jesus's mother who concealed him in the 'secret place' of her womb. In *Mary the Mother of Jesus*, Meynell also directs attention to the 'cluster of august secrets' residing in Mary's heart, an allusion to the Gospel passages describing how Mary 'kept […] and pondered' the strange things told to her about her astonishing son: by the shepherds at Bethlehem, then by the prophets Simeon and Anna, and then by Jesus himself when she finds him, after much anxious searching, preaching in the Temple.[67] 'Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?' the twelve-year-old Jesus asks her.[68] It is part of Mary's narrative signature that, unlike her precociously sagacious son, she characteristically *wists not*. Yet this is not a passive condition but one fluid, wondering, and troubled, from the very moment when Gabriel appeared to her and she 'cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be'.[69] Meynell suggests the secrets which Mary kept were not so much kernels of knowledge as aids to reflection: she imagines the range of emotional tints such secrets may have taken on for Mary at different times, variously presenting themselves as 'a great exception, a surprise, an omen, a menace, and a promise'.[70] If Mary *knows* certain things that she holds tight and ponders—that, for instance, her Son is the 'Saviour, which is Christ the Lord'—this is knowledge that comes

[66] Newman, 'The Hidden Ones', l. 7, originally published in *Lyra Apostolica* [1836], reprinted in *Prayers, Verses and Devotions*, ed. Louis Bouyer (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), 484–85.
[67] Meynell, *Mary the Mother of Jesus*, 18; Luke 2: 19.
[68] Luke 2: 49.
[69] Luke 1: 29.
[70] Meynell, *Mary the Mother of Jesus*, 39.

trailing clouds of ignorance, shadow-flinging forms which allow that knowledge to be felt and imagined a hundred different ways.[71] Mary has secrets, then, but those secrets are, in large part, unknown to her. 'The mystery' which pertains to the knowledge of God, as Newman suggested, 'lies as much in what we think we know, as in what we do not know.'[72]

'The Lord's Prayer' had suggested that Christ, as that prayer's original speaker (perhaps we might even say poet?), was the only one who really knew its true meaning and significance: 'He, only, knows' what the phrases signify, 'Charged with the unknown purpose of their Lord'. And this is quite consistent with Catholic orthodoxy, for a religious mystery is not *intrinsically* so, Newman stresses, otherwise God himself could not comprehend it—and God is all-comprehending.[73] But it is precisely in this respect that the analogy of *God* as poet falters. Meynell had trialled this analogy once before in 'To a Daisy' (from her youthful 1875 collection *Preludes*), whose speaker compares the prospect of looking at the world 'From God's side' after death to the hope that 'from a poet's side' she may finally 'read his book'.[74] More often in Meynell's poetry, though, the poet is presented not as an omniscient creator but as the mediator of a knowledge not yet, or not entirely, known. 'But what thou art, / […] I would I could divine', muses the speaker of 'To One Poem in a Silent Time', addressing 'thou little song of mine'.[75] As Subha Mukherji writes in the context of early modern devotional poetry, 'the inherent contronymy' of the verb 'divine […] intimates the paradox of religious hermeneutics,

---

[71] Luke 2: 11.
[72] Newman, 'The Humiliation of the Eternal Son', 157.
[73] 'When we say that the Almighty is incomprehensible, we do not mean that incomprehensibility is, strictly speaking, an essential attribute of His nature, else He would not comprehend Himself; but we mean that, from the nature of the case, He cannot be comprehended *by any creature*': Newman, 'Questions and Answers', in *The Rambler* (May 1859), repr. in *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. 19, ed. Charles Stephen Dessain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 532.
[74] Meynell, 'To a Daisy', ll. 14, 12, in *PAM*, 56.
[75] Meynell, 'To One Poem in a Silent Time', ll. 3–4, 1, in *PAM*, 57.

carrying both the sense of guessing and of predicting, uncertain knowledge as well as hyper-knowledge'.[76] Meynell's speaker imagines her poem as something that cannot be known, only divined: pursued in hints and guesses, or fathomed by a god. Talia Schaffer throws up her arms at such a 'painfully modest' account of authorship, which she perceives as a surrender to ideals of 'Victorian femininity'.[77] But this reluctance to think outside the tramlines of ideology produces just the sort of crass and condescending treatment it professes to oppose, as though women had a duty to write in a particular way at all times: 'Here, Meynell is not the hard-working professional writer who crafted the poem, but the pleased and surprised recipient of a pretty gift. She cannot even "divine" what the poem is'.[78]

That there might be more to Meynell's thinking in this poem is suggested by her depiction of 'Pygmalion' in the same volume (presented as an allegory of 'The Poet to His Poetry'), which dramatises a male artist confronting a similar predicament. The sculptor addresses his finished work with watchful curiosity:

> Thou art to live; I am watching thee.
> I have laid my patient chisel away,
> And watch thee somewhat wearily.
> How do I know what the mouth will say?
> How do I know what the eyes will be,
>
> —What they must be? For I suppose
> The brows I made (white brows so blind),
> The lovely eyelids that I chose,
> Lending my hand to my inner mind,
> One certain colour must enclose.
>
> I know not what the voice will sing,
> I only made the quiet breast,

[76] Subha Mukherji, 'Crossroads of Knowledge: Literature and Theology', in *Literature, Belief and Knowledge in Early Modern England: Knowing Faith*, ed. Subha Mukherji and Tim Stuart-Buttle (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3–36: 11.
[77] Talia Schaffer, 'A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell', *Victorian Poetry* 38.1 (2000), 49–61: 54. On Meynell's feminism, see Beverly Ann Schlack, 'The "Poetess of Poets": Alice Meynell Rediscovered', *Women's Studies* 7.1–2 (1980), 111–26.
[78] Schaffer, 'A Tethered Angel', 54.

> And white throat with much labouring.
> I only wrought and thought my best,
> And lo, a new voice shall out-ring.[79]

Pygmalion's confession that he does not know what his statue's mouth will say is a plea of authorial ignorance; he may feel certain what colour of eyes lie behind the ivory eyelids he has carved, but he is equally aware that they may be quite other than he supposes. The first-person pronouns stress the gap between his anxious claims of ownership and his recognition that his handiwork has a life of its own. This latter recognition brings him sorrow ('Ah woe!') and even prompts a futile bid for reconquest ('I claim the unguessed mysteries / Which make this cold white figure warm. / *My* life!').[80] But if he comes to find comfort in the thought that at least 'God knows' what she is and says—and that he shall eventually come to know it 'in Him' (somewhat improbably, it must be said, in the context of a Roman myth)—elsewhere Pygmalion appears less thwarted than invigorated by his present state of unknowing.[81] 'And lo, a new voice shall out-ring' does not sound like a cry of woe, while 'This growing one / Hath her own future' sounds like an intimation of hope as well as a self-reproach against the poet's own jealous designs.[82] These could also be the words of a mother, an impression strengthened by the affirmation that the statue was brought forth in 'loyal pain' and by the speaker's mode of address: 'Child, did I not devise / In dreams thy dreams, carving thy form / —Thy secrets, when I made thine eyes?'[83] Like Mary, this poet-speaker is the deliverer of secrets beyond his knowing.

Meynell's conception of such secrets is thrown into relief by Patmore's very different characterisation of 'Divine secrets', which he too compares to the kind of

---

[79] Meynell, 'Pygmalion', ll. 1–15, in *PAM*, 21.
[80] Ibid., ll. 23, 26–28, in *PAM*, 21, 22.
[81] Ibid., ll. 31, 35, in *PAM*, 22.
[82] Ibid., ll. 15, 22–23, in *PAM*, 21.
[83] Meynell, 'Pygmalion', ll. 28–30, in *PAM*, 22.

knowledge provided by poetry.[84] In respect of 'knowledge of God', Patmore writes, the Church and the scriptures speak in 'enigmas which are clear to those who know, and hopelessly dark to those who do not'.[85] Like hieroglyphics, the 'true' meaning of such secrets, then, 'may be discovered by those who have the key'.[86] Whereas for Meynell the very essence of a divine secret was that its significance was uncertain and inexhaustible, Patmore asserted that the various elements of Christian imagery—from water, fire, cloud, thunder, nation, and generation to rich, poor, tree, stone, leaf, and fish—had 'fixed significances', without which 'thousands of passages of Scripture' simply 'cannot be understood'.[87] Patmore leaves little doubt that he himself is among the 'very small proportion of the human race' blessed with the necessary gift of interpretation.[88] Applying the same logic to poetry, he muses that

> neither in ancient nor in modern times has there been a poet, worthy of that sacred name, who would not have been horrified had he fancied that the full meaning of some of his sayings could be discerned by more than ten in ten thousand of his readers[89]

The 'full meaning', here, is the private property of the poet and those fit though few to grasp it. Patmore wants to claim that poetry and divine secrets have a definite quantum of meaning, accessible partly by learning particular metaphorical codes, and partly by attaining to a kind of mystical and incommunicable intimacy with the intention of their divine or earthly authors. Reviewing *Religio Poetæ* (1893), the volume of essays from which these observations are drawn, Meynell gently punctured Patmore's ideas while at the same time complimenting his poetry by suggesting that, far from illuminating his

---

[84] Patmore, 'The Language of Religion', in *Religio Poetæ*, *Etc.* (London: Bell, 1893), 18–30: 21.
[85] Ibid., 18.
[86] Ibid., 26.
[87] Ibid., 22.
[88] Patmore, '"A People of a Stammering Tongue"', in *Religio Poetæ*, 46–50: 47.
[89] Patmore, 'The Language of Religion', 27.

poems, his prose explanations of the likenesses between divine and human love did scant justice to his poetic pursuit of the same theme in *The Unknown Eros* (1878). The 'way of poetry', she wrote, 'was not the obscurer but the more radiant way', for there one touched 'the quick, tender, and spiritual meaning more closely' than when one encountered it 'less swiftly and less mysteriously in *Religio Poetæ*'.[90] *The Unknown Eros* came all the closer to spiritual meaning precisely by how much it testified to its alluring unknowns. Patmore the periodical columnist, Meynell suggests, knew exactly what he was saying; Patmore the poet, happily, did not.

Their stubborn and productive resistance to being known was what distinguished sacred secrets from what Meynell called the 'sorry mysteries and unattractive secrets' of nineteenth-century man, mere feats of artifice like the way in which modern plumbing hides channels of water 'under stress and pressure in paltry pipes' under our feet.[91] The distinction which Meynell is pressing is similar to that which Hopkins maintained in a letter to Robert Bridges, differentiating between a Catholic mystery, which he defined as an 'incomprehensible certainty', and a mere 'interesting uncertainty', the interest of which would vanish as soon as 'the trick' was 'found out':[92]

> But you know, there are some solutions to, say, chess problems so beautifully ingenious, some resolutions of suspensions so lovely in music that even the feeling of interest is keenest when they are known and over, and for some time survives the discovery. How must it then be when the very answer is the most tantalising statement of the problem and the truth you are to rest in the most pointed putting of the difficulty![93]

---

[90] Meynell, 'Religio Poetae', in *The Tablet* 82.2776 (22 July 1893), 135. The review is anonymous but can be identified as Meynell's with reference to her correspondence as quoted in Badeni, *The Slender Tree*, 102.
[91] Meynell, 'Wells', in *The Spirit of Place and Other Essays* (London: John Lane, 1899), 36–42: 36, 37.
[92] Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, 24 October 1883, in *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 187.
[93] Ibid.

The 'knowledge' which such mysteries impart, Hopkins continued, is the kind that leaves the mind 'swinging; poised, but on the quiver'.[94] This poise is not the graceful aplomb of a problem solved or a suspension resolved, but something altogether more dynamic and vertiginous, inside and outside of knowledge at once.[95]

Meynell conjures a similarly unknowing sense of sacred knowledge—something both tightly held and forever beyond one's grasp—in 'To the Mother of Christ the Son of Man', from her *Last Poems* of 1923. In this poem, Meynell also explicitly figures Mary as a type of the poet: the conception of Christ in her womb is simultaneously a figure for those secrets locked in Mary's heart which are nonetheless opaque to her, and a model for Christians who seek to 'conceive' her son in their souls and imaginations as she conceived him bodily:

> We too (one cried), we too,
> We the unready, the perplexed, the cold,
> Must shape the Eternal in our thoughts anew,
> Cherish, possess, enfold.
>
> Thou sweetly, we in strife.
> It is our passion to conceive Him thus
> In mind, in sense, within our house of life;
> That seed is locked in us.
>
> We must affirm our Son
> From the ambiguous Nature's difficult speech,
> Gather in darkness that resplendent One,
> Close as our grasp can reach.
>
> Nor shall we ever rest
> From this our task. An hour sufficed for thee,
> Thou innocent! He lingers in the breast
> Of our humanity.[96]

[94] Ibid., 188.
[95] For a discussion of this passage in the context of Hopkins's theological interests, see Martin Dubois, 'Introduction', in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Poetry of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–24.
[96] Meynell, 'To the Mother of Christ the Son of Man', in *PAM*, 179.

Anonymising and pluralising the lyric voice as though to waylay any suggestion that this speaker considers herself special, both speaker and addressee are cast in the same humble position of 'We the unready, the perplexed, the cold'—a modesty of experience, understanding, and material circumstance that progresses from a sense of lack, to an entanglement, to a feeling of fear and trembling, anatomising and universalising Mary's predicament at the Annunciation. As Christina Richieri Griffin observes, the elaborate conceit on 'conceive' belongs to a 'long tradition of analogizing physical and poetic conception'; here as elsewhere in Meynell's poetry, Griffin suggests, the figure of the womb 'operates through an intersection of corporeal encasement and subsequent opacity, as the nascent growth remains sensed yet unseen'.[97] Sensed yet unseen, integral yet opaque, such a figure is also a way of styling a sacred form of unknowing.

In aligning the poem with Meynell's other writing about motherhood, however, Griffin loses touch with the distinctively religious work the poem does. Her suggestion that the poem is voiced by 'expectant mothers' seems wide of the mark given how thoroughly Mary's motherhood is troped and universalised in the poem: from the way conception is figured as taking place in the 'mind' and its 'thoughts' to the description of its ceaselessness ('Nor shall we ever rest / From this our task. An hour sufficed for thee').[98] Griffin's insensitivity to the religious stakes of the poem is apparent in her conflation of the immaculate conception with the conception of Christ and in her dubious proposal that the subject of the poem is 'an ultimately unsatisfying maternal experience'.[99] For if this child remains opaque to the mother this does not seem to be the shattering experience Griffin assumes it to be. The abstract, almost Shelleyan language of gathering in darkness the resplendent One acquires tender overtones from the maternal context,

---

[97] Christina Richieri Griffin, 'Writing the Rhythms of the Womb: Alice Meynell's Poetics of Pregnancy', *Modern Philology* 112.1 (2014), 226–48: 237.
[98] Ibid., 240.
[99] Ibid.

suggesting the idea of gathering *up in one's arms*, an image further supported by the notion of grasping in the following line, which in turn loses its connotations of spiritual or intellectual ambition in the suggestion of a doting embrace.

The darkness also, of course, suggests the obscurity of the womb, evoking a physical intimacy that emphasises mental and spiritual distance. Yet far from being tragic, this distance is the very measure of the Son's extraordinary fascination: 'Nor shall we ever rest / From this our task' sounds not wearily resigned to fate—whatever 'strife' it may involve—but bold and buoyant, assisted perhaps by a slight echo of Blake's 'Jerusalem' ('I will not cease from Mental Fight, / Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand').[100] This unceasing attempt to shape the Eternal 'in our thoughts anew' reflects the challenge presented by the conception of sacred knowledge which animated Newman and others in the Catholic tradition. Isaac Williams, a Tractarian clergyman who did not follow Newman to Rome but shared many aspects of his theological outlook, summarised the biblical account of such knowledge as an endless path of unknowing which the Christian must tread:

> This knowledge is always spoken of as something so vast, and, as I said, infinite, that persons seem never to be addressed as if they had attained, so much as urged on to the greater attainment: it does not seem spoken in terms such as Peace and even Faith, but more like Divine Charity, and perhaps as co-existent and co-extensive with it, as a part only at best of what is boundless[101]

Congruent with this ceaseless pursuit, Meynell suggests that, by conceiving Christ anew in imitation of Mary at the Annunciation, each Christian must build in their hearts and minds, not Jerusalem, but Nazareth. It is tempting to think Meynell may have been inspired by

---

[100] William Blake, 'Preface to *Milton*', ll. 13–14, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, 2nd edn. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 95.
[101] Isaac Williams, 'On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge', in *Tracts for the Times*, vol. 4 (London: Rivington, 1840), 1–82: 39.

Hopkins's 'The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe', which rejoices in how Christ enters into Christian souls

> And makes, O marvellous!
> New Nazareths in us,
> Where she shall yet conceive
> Him, morning, noon, and eve.[102]

In 1918, five years before Meynell's own poem was published, Robert Bridges sent Meynell a copy of his inaugural edition of Hopkins's poetry, which included the lines quoted above. She confessed to being unimpressed: 'No, I cannot away with Gerard Hopkins's pranks', Meynell told him.[103] This possibly did not prevent her making away with some of them.

The poetic contexts of Meynell's poem are particularly important because if there is indeed a more specific group of people who might be imagined to voice the poem, that group is surely poets. The third stanza associates Mary's childbearing with the specific challenge of finding *speech*, playing on the biblical identification of Christ as the 'Word' of God.[104] Patmore too had envisioned Mary as a 'speaker' in this sense, addressing her in one of his poems as 'Thou Speaker of all wisdom in a word, / Thy Lord!'[105] For Cynthia Scheinberg, this trope only reinforces Mary's audible silence as a woman; in her comparative study of female Jewish and Christian poets in the Victorian period she concludes that 'As a representative of Jewish knowledge and Mosaic connection, Mary is a prophetic speaker; as the symbol of originary Christian womanhood, Mary is a silent

---

[102] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe', ll. 59–62, in *Poems*, ed. Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918), 59.
[103] Quoted in Grevel Lindop, *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 71.
[104] See, for example, the prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1: 1).
[105] Patmore, 'The Child's Purchase', ll. 36–37, in *The Poems of Coventry Patmore*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 439.

mother.'[106] But if Christian writers often represented Mary as silent because their interest in her did not extend much above her shoulders, for Meynell silence was not a marker of mental vacancy or docility. Just the opposite, in fact.

Indeed, the consistent ideal to which Meynell pledged herself throughout her essays, an ideal which to her was the very antithesis of docility, was 'not to interrupt yourself with too loud a word, not to translate your uncertainty by too pat a phrase, your moderation by a stress too emphatic'.[107] Far from being a form of internalised repression, this reticence was a weapon against acquiescing in 'ready-made' thoughts and feelings.[108] Casting Victorian society in the role of inquisitor, Meynell protested the ways in which 'We are hurried out of our reluctances' and 'forced to confess more articulately than befits our convention with ourselves'.[109] In her 1896 essay 'Solitude', she praised the secret spaces of unknowing threatened by the conditions of metropolitan life, mourning for those

> who have neither the open secret nor the close; no reserve, no need of refuge, no flight nor impulse of flight; no moods but what they may brave out in the street, no hope of news from solitary counsels.[110]

Mental torpor, on this account, belongs to those whose words rise most readily to their lips. Secrecy and reserve, therefore, are not timorous withdrawals from the lively challenge of the wide world, but ways of shaking off the dust of its numbness and narrowness. If sacred knowledge is best conceived as a secret, its dimensions are not those of 'closed corners', but of 'a sky and a horizon', in which the mind can take flight.[111] And

---

[106] Cynthia Scheinberg, *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 84.
[107] Meynell, quoted in Tuell, 'Meynell in the "Lost" Columns', 154.
[108] Ibid., 153.
[109] Meynell, 'Rejection', in *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays* (London: John Lane, 1896), 79–82: 80.
[110] Meynell, 'Solitude' (first published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*), reprinted in *The Spirit of Place and Other Essays* (London: John Lane, 1899), 16–22: 22.
[111] Ibid., 17.

here as elsewhere for Meynell, this condition is realised paradigmatically in the 'more than single solitude' of 'a woman with a child'.[112]

The Spirit of Surmise

Meynell's conception of a secret as a space in (and with) which to think boldly distinguishes her approach to sacred knowledge from one commonly attributed to other female Victorian poets. As Emma Mason and others have argued, the Tractarian doctrine of 'reserve' authorised a 'restrained and gentle mode' of theological reflection which, in its alignment with the virtues of modesty and reticence commonly associated with women in the period, enabled writers such as Charlotte Yonge, Christina Rossetti, Adelaide Procter, and Dora Greenwell to 'think and write about theology seriously' in public.[113] Most thoroughly and influentially elaborated by Isaac Williams in his two tracts 'On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge', the doctrine of reserve taught that,

> since God is ultimately incomprehensible, we can know Him only indirectly; His truth is hidden and given to us only in a manner suited to our capacities for apprehending it. Moreover, it is both unnecessary and undesirable that God and religious truth should be disclosed in their fullness at once to all regardless of the differing capacities of individuals to apprehend such things.[114]

There is nothing in G. B. Tennyson's succinct definition which conflicts with Meynell's own fashioning of religious knowledge in her poetry and prose, touching as it does on many of the issues I have been examining in this chapter through the lens of Newman's writing. This is unsurprising since, together with Williams and Keble, Newman was one of

---

[112] Ibid., 20.
[113] Emma Mason, 'Religion, the Bible, and Literature in the Victorian Age', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, ed. Juliet John (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 331–49: 337.
[114] G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 45.

the principal advocates of reserve throughout his Anglican and Catholic ministries (indeed, it was he who chose the title for Williams's tracts).[115] The difference I identify, then, is one of emphasis rather than theological commitment or confessional identity, and it is this: that whereas Christina Rossetti (for example) repeatedly stressed the pious *limits* which reserve placed on theological speculation—'I must beware of making guesses at what is withheld from me'—Meynell found in the very mysteriousness of God and his workings, promoted by the very same doctrine, a licence for bold conjectures.[116]

I do not mean to imply that this difference reflects on the value of their respective poetry: a poet can, of course, make quite as fine a poem out of forms of restraint as out of forms of licence (intellectual or otherwise). Rather, I am arguing that notions of 'reserve'—in particular the idea that, in God's 'dealings with mankind' there was 'a very remarkable holding back of sacred and important truths', as Williams put it—did not have a uniform effect on the literary production which they influenced.[117] These differences cannot be explained with reference to confessional contexts: Williams's work, as I have already suggested, provides a rich foundation for Meynell's more speculative approach, and Catholic poets more drawn to what Rossetti called 'holy intellectual self-restraint', such as Adelaide Procter, are not hard to find.[118] Nor can they simply be explained with respect to time, though doubtless the increasing freedoms available to women over the period had a significant effect: consider, however, that Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep* (from which the quotations above are drawn) was published in 1892, while Meynell's most

---

[115] See Mason, 'Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7.2 (2002), 196–219: 199, 201.
[116] Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 1892), 351. On this work, see Andrew D. Armond, 'Limited Knowledge and the Tractarian Doctrine of Reserve in Christina Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep*', *Victorian Poetry* 48.2 (2010), 219–42.
[117] Williams, 'On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge', 3.
[118] Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*, 39. See Gill Gregory, 'Adelaide Procter: A Poetics of Reserve and Passion', in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre 1830–1900*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 355–72.

theologically daring poem, which I will examine later in this section, was published in 1890.

It might seem odd to speak of Meynell's religious poetry as particularly speculative given the attitude of extreme intellectual modesty cultivated in a poem like 'The Lord's Prayer', where even the most basic terms of the faith are treated with the utmost imaginable humility and reverence. Yet the very extremity of what it is hard to avoid calling the poem's scepticism about religious knowledge (that is, not a scepticism about whether it exists, but whether it can be at all comprehended) is, one recalls, couched as a boast: 'There is a bolder way'.[119] The very tenuousness of the hold on knowledge which the poem proclaims is itself a testament to its theological boldness, questioning the sufficiency, and even the coherence, of catechetical definitions. The poem's disavowal of knowledge, then, is not simply a pious ethical gesture but one with well-evidenced epistemological force: witness the crisp, Miltonic-sounding paradox of a '"will" inexorable yet implored'.[120] There is a distinctly seventeenth-century flavour, too, in its audacious fragmentation of scriptural text into individual words and phrases on which to lavish intensely concentrated attention, as in the sermons of the High Church divine Lancelot Andrewes.[121]

Closer to Meynell's own time, Newman was scathing of those who 'have no difficulties in religion', and his own inclination to wonder about such difficulties has often been clouded by an overemphasis on the restrictiveness of his theology of reserve.[122] For if he firmly condemned 'all theorising and systematising' in relation to sacred truths, 'which is pretty much what looking into the ark was under the Law', it was the very same

[119] Meynell, 'The Lord's Prayer', l. 1, in *PAM*, 142.
[120] Ibid., l. 10.
[121] See, for example, Sophie Read, 'Lancelot Andrewes's Sacramental Wordplay', *Cambridge Quarterly* 36.1 (2007), 11–32.
[122] Newman, 'The State of Grace', 140.

antagonism to the 'rationalistic spirit' that motivated his defence of 'half views and partial knowledge, of guesses, surmises, hopes and fears, of truths faintly apprehended and not understood'.[123] As he put it in one of his sermons, the challenge was not to theorise but to 'discern' in God's mysterious revelation of himself 'hints […] sympathetic with guesses within', to keep 'looking out of ourselves, and trying to catch glimpses of God's workings'.[124]

Meynell's religious poetry embraces this attitude under the banner of one of Newman's own keywords: 'surmise'. Before looking at these surmises in action—for which Mary once again provides the model—it's worth considering how Meynell herself thinks about the potentialities of surmise in the context of both her literary and theological imagination. In her very first collection, *Preludes* (1875), she had announced herself as 'A poet of one mood in all my lays', although she declined to give that mood a name. Her sonnet ('A Poet of One Mood') offers instead a pair of evocative metaphors, the sweeping west wind and the soaring dove that is glimpsed as a 'flash of silver greys' across the fields.[125] These twin images of elusive yet powerful movement keep aerial company with the 'little trials, incredulous, that flee / Abroad on random wing' in Meynell's much later poem 'Surmise: The Track of a Human Mood', from her posthumous *Last Poems*.[126] This latter work has the appearance of a tribute, as well as a pendant, to the former, as though confirming and making explicit what the poet's 'one mood' always was:

> Not wish, nor fear, nor quite expectancy
> Is that vague spirit Surmise,
> That wanderer, that wonderer, whom we see
> Within each other's eyes;
>
> And yet not often. For she flits away,
> Fitful as infant thought,

[123] Newman, 'Introduction of Rationalistic Principles', 4, 13.
[124] Newman, 'The State of Grace', 141; 'Introduction of Rationalistic Principles', 4.
[125] Meynell, 'A Poet of One Mood', ll. 1, 8, in *PAM*, 51.
[126] Meynell, 'Surmise: The Track of a Human Mood', ll. 11–12, in *PAM*, 181.

> Visitant at a venture, hope at play,
> Unversed in facts, untaught.
>
> In 'the wide fields of possibility'
> Surmise, conjecturing,
> Makes little trials, incredulous, that flee
> Abroad on random wing.
>
> One day this inarticulate shall find speech,
> This hoverer seize our breath.
> Surmise shall close with man—with all, with each—
> In her own sovereign hour, the moments of our death.[127]

The description of surmise as a series of little trials also brings it into close connection with the literary genre for which Meynell was more well-known during her lifetime: the essay, cognate with assay, 'A trial, testing'.[128] To understand Meynell as a pilot of experimental flights, open to the chanciness and caprice of guess and surmise, is to question the dominant tendency in her critical reception which has emphasised her poetry's austere formal restraint—'no word not cut on Milton's tombstone', as Virginia Woolf quipped.[129] Yet if, as Leighton has argued, Meynell's weakness is that she sometimes 'saves herself for some too exquisite, too perfectly formalised statement', at other times her poems are interested in how that is a danger one might save oneself *from*.[130] Walter de la Mare was surely right to call Meynell one of the poets who 'actually think in verse', but his sense of her refusal 'to fall captive to caprice of mood and wandering impulse' was, I hope to show, misplaced.[131]

'Surmise' describes a mood worlds away from the 'hewn and chiselled' assurance which Newman associated with the rationalisers of religion; instead, it praises the 'vague spirit' which the poem calls 'That wanderer, that wonderer, whom we see / Within each

---

[127] Meynell, 'Surmise', in *PAM*, 181.
[128] See 'essay, *n.*', 1a, *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.
[129] Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth, 23 July 1931, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977–80), 4. 361.
[130] Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 256.
[131] Walter de la Mare, 'Not Sounds, but Silences', in *Times Literary Supplement* 594 (29 May 1913), 231.

other's eyes'.[132] The *OED* defines 'surmise' as 'An idea formed in the mind (and, often, expressed) that something may be true, but without certainty and on very slight evidence, or with no evidence; a conjecture.'[133] Surmise, then, is defined in contrast to knowledge: the dictionary cites Browning's *La Saisiaz* (1878): 'the knowledge that I am, and, since I am, can recognize / What to me is pain and pleasure: this is sure, the rest—surmise.'[134] Milton's 'Lycidas', however, associated surmise with something positively known to be false, indulged momentarily for the purposes of consolation, like the speaker's dream that the flowers will mourn his friend: 'For so to interpose a little ease, / Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.'[135] Milton's adjective 'false' could be taken either to mean that surmise is *essentially* false or as distinguishing this *particular* surmise as false. But if surmise may be conceived as an alternative, or even antithesis, to knowing it can also be thought of as a potential *substitute* for knowing, as another of the *OED*'s quotations proposes: 'Surmise has often to supply the lack of knowledge'.[136] As all these cases demonstrate, surmise flourishes in conditions where knowledge is out of reach. To surmise is to advertise one's epistemic uncertainty, though one's intentions for that might vary widely: it could signal a stance of caution and modesty, or it could be a licence for speculation, for giving free rein to one's wandering wondering. As Keats reminds us, surmise can be wild.[137]

A surmise therefore falls short of the conviction of belief, preferring to linger in the suspense that, as the *OED* has it, 'something may be true'. In his 1853 'Paper on the Certainty of Faith', Newman identified 'Surmise' as one of 'ten intellectual feelings, or

---

[132] Newman, 'Introduction of Rationalistic Principles', 14.
[133] See 'surmise, *n.*', 4a, *OED Online* (pubd. December 2020), accessed 1 September 2021.
[134] Robert Browning, 'La Saisiaz', ll. 261–62, in *Robert Browning: The Poems*, 2 vols, ed. John Pettigrew (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 2. 503–28: 514.
[135] John Milton, 'Lycidas', ll. 152–53 in *John Milton: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 43.
[136] 'Short Notices', *English Historical Review* 27.108 (October 1912), 821.
[137] John Keats, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', l. 13, in *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 34.

postures of mind' which he arranged into a kind of epistemic hierarchy.[138] As Cyril O'Regan notes, Newman's naturalist epistemology constituted the religious knower as 'dynamic, situated, unsubstitutable, and involved in his or her assent or judgement'.[139] He was therefore deeply interested in the psychological process of belief formation. Within Newman's 1853 schema, surmise features as a lower form of 'Conditional Assent' that stops short of 'Opinion', which is in turn prior to 'Belief'.[140] A surmise, then, may evolve into a belief, but of course then it would no longer be a surmise. Far from occupying the lowest rung of Newman's scale, however, surmise is argued to follow on from a 'view' or 'Presumption', which is defined as an 'inference, which follows on a possibility'.[141] The robustness of Newman's distinctions and the relations he posits between them are less important (for my purposes) than the way in which he characterises surmise as something like a halfway house in terms of assent, poised between the poles of possibility and belief.[142]

Meynell's 'Surmise' plots a remarkably similar set of co-ordinates, from its description of the 'in*credulous*' trials of surmise to its vision of them flitting across '"the wide fields of *possibility*"'.[143] In her essays, Meynell distinguished such bracing spiritual sorties both from the knowingness that exceeds surmise and the mystery-mongering that ducks it. In 'Her Serene Highness', for example, she criticised the Georgian memoirist Lady Elizabeth Craven for taking undue pride in the all-too-glaring clarity of her ideas: 'It is this clearness of ideas', Meynell remarked, 'that gives her book of prattle its

---

[138] Newman, *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*, ed. H. M. de Achaval and J. D. Holmes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 11.
[139] Cyril O'Regan, 'John Henry Newman', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 510–22: 516.
[140] Newman, *Theological Papers*, 12.
[141] Ibid., 11.
[142] It should be noted that Newman's views on assent were not constant over time, and the scheme given in the 1853 paper is in some respects different from that which he later proposed in the *Grammar of Assent.*
[143] Emphases mine.

character'.[144] On the other side, she questioned Edgar Allan Poe's 'talent for a doubtful mysteriousness':[145]

> A little mystery well presented—an intelligible mysteriousness, at any rate—may puzzle the fancy with more delight than a great mystery in the distance. And if any one should aver that the very character of mystery is to be out of reach, let him read Edgar Allan Poe, and see how satisfactory mysteriousness may be made.[146]

A great mystery, like the Atonement or the Eucharist, has little to do with Gothic thrills, Meynell implies. Rather than proposing to 'satisfy', it offers, in place of gratifications, a mode of thinking less keyed to the psychological imperatives of wishing and fearing. That it involves the forfeit of certain satisfactions is suggested by Meynell's poem's reliance on negative adjectives (from 'incredulous' and 'inarticulate' to 'Unversed' and 'untaught'), a reliance especially noteworthy in the light of her professed fondness for negative prefixes: 'the "un" that summons in order that it may banish, and keeps the living word present to hear sentence and denial'.[147] This poem's 'un–' words effect a banishment of schooled knowledge which suggests an active abandonment, rather than merely a lack, of this knowledge's trappings of authority.

'Unversed' also raises the prospect of a kind of formal abandonment. While this is a poem in regular rhyming metre, and thus unquestionably verse, it also persistently strains against the bonds of verse by which it is held. In her notebook, Meynell observed of the advocates of free verse that it was 'those who have nothing to control, nothing to hold […] who call for liberty'; 'true poets', she wrote, 'have something of the wild at heart that looks for bonds'.[148] The tension of these bonds, Meynell implies, is what keeps her spirit

---

[144] Meynell, 'Her Serene Highness' [1896], in *The Wares of Autolycus*, ed. P. M. Fraser (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 16–20: 17.
[145] Meynell, 'Edgar Allan Poe' [1897], in *The Wares of Autolycus*, 74–77: 76.
[146] Ibid., 77.
[147] Meynell, 'The Second Person Singular', in *The Second Person Singular*, 133–40: 140.
[148] Quoted in Badeni, *The Slender Tree*, 243.

wild—as though it might otherwise risk becoming enfeebled, a fate she imagines in her defiant poem 'The Laws of Verse':

> Dear laws, be wings to me!
> The feather merely floats. O be it heard
> Through weight of life—the skylark's gravity—
> That I am not a feather, but a bird.[149]

Laissez-faire versification, Meynell suggests, lacks the tension necessary for poetic flight. 'Surmise' generates this tension in the sphere of knowing by combining the bonds of verse with acoustic logic and extemporising syntax such that the poem sounds premeditated and unpredictable at once. 'Fitful' turns—the slide from wanderer to wonderer, the discovery that the 'visitant' is 'at a venture'—let sound lead sense, not merely to fill up a rhyme scheme or thicken the sonic texture but as a stimulus to thought. Similarly, with the possible exception of the final lines, the poem's syntax is improvisational rather than marmoreal: sprinkled with unpredictable pauses, qualifying reversals ('And yet not often'), and self-interruptions (', incredulous,'). The poem will not let knowledge rest, recalling Meynell's tribute to George Meredith, who 'did not pause upon his knowledge […] as though knowledge in itself were a good'.[150]

The sense of felicitous discovery, the feeling that—as the final stanza has it—one might 'find', rather than manufacture, 'speech', contributes to the epistemic atmosphere of possibility in which surmise is imagined to flourish. Meynell's own reference to '"the wide fields of possibility"' is lifted, with a slight alteration, from Samuel Johnson's *Idler*, no. 84, which describes 'the wide field of possibility' that 'lies open to invention' (from the Latin *invenire*, 'to discover') in 'romances'.[151] While Johnson is here somewhat dismissive

---

[149] Meynell, 'The Laws of Verse', ll. 5–8, in *PAM*, 173.
[150] Meynell, 'George Meredith', in *The Second Person Singular, and Other Essays*, 2nd edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), 117–21: 117.
[151] Samuel Johnson, *The Idler*, no. 84 (24 November 1759), in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 2, ed. W. J. Bate et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 261–64: 261.

of the power of invention, which he contrasts with the solid actuality of history and biography, Meynell repurposes his words as praise, broadening the sense of possibility still further by expanding 'field' into 'fields'. For Geoffrey Hartman, the function of surmise is that it converts the 'actual' into the 'potential', and thus its

> projections […] add up to more than their sum: they revive in us the capacity for the virtual, a trembling of the imagined on the brink of the real, a sustained inner freedom in the face of death, disbelief, and fact.[152]

Meynell's poem, too, makes both death and facts the enemy of this vivifyingly virtual mode of thinking, yet if her version of surmise involves a suspension of disbelief it also backs away from the insistence of belief. Rather, the conjectural energies of such surmise are 'incredulous' to the extent that, as Newman suggested, they demur from, while anticipating, assent.

Indeed, the poem's characterisation of surmise as a kind of 'venture' picks up on one of Newman's favourite ways of describing faith: as he declared in his sermon 'The Ventures of Faith', 'our duty as Christians lies in this, in making ventures for eternal life without the absolute certainty of success'.[153] Faith, according to Newman, is 'in its very essence' a matter of 'venturing' upon the 'unseen'—it is a kind of risky investment in the unknown, 'the staking present ease, happiness, or other good, upon the chance of the future'.[154] Sometimes it becomes uncomfortably apparent how much Newman's rhetoric of venturing borrows from the discourse of nineteenth-century capitalism, as in his assertion that one 'can gain nothing without a venture'.[155] The epistemic pay-off in Meynell's poem arrives with death, but rather than framing this as a consummation

---

[152] Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 11.
[153] Newman, 'The Ventures of Faith' [1836], in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 4 (London: Rivingtons, 1868), 295–306: 296.
[154] Ibid., 297.
[155] Newman, 'The Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason' [1839], in *Sermons, Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief* (London: Rivington, 1843), 194–214: 207.

devoutly to be wished, it is portrayed entirely in terms of loss: with a sudden, violent seizing of the breath, 'Surmise shall close with man'. The philosophy of this poem, it seems, is 'Lord, make me know—but not yet'.

This forestalling of knowledge is portrayed as morally and theologically productive in the extraordinary sacred surmise Meynell published in 1890, 'Veni Creator', which crafts a subtle tissue of allusions to biblical passages about unknowing. As Meynell's editor notes, the poem was first printed in the *Scots Observer* and subsequently reprinted in the Meynells' own Catholic monthly, *Merry England*, as well as being chosen to conclude Meynell's *Poems* (1893).[156] But its circulation went even wider, having also been reproduced in *The Tablet*, the leading British Catholic magazine, in 1890.[157] With its title the poem presents itself as a rewriting of the ninth-century Latin hymn traditionally sung at Pentecost (as well as during the sacred rites of confirmation, ordination, and consecration).[158] Instead of bidding God's inspiration and guidance, however, Meynell's earthly speaker invites, or rather commands, the Creator to come and receive her pardon for decreeing such a mournful world of suffering:

> So humble things Thou hast borne for us, O God,
> Left'st Thou a path of lowliness untrod?
> Yes, one, till now, another Olive-Garden.
> For we endure the tender pain of pardon,—
> One with another we forbear. Give heed,
> Look at the mournful world Thou hast decreed.
> The time has come. At last we hapless men
> Know all our haplessness all through. Come, then,
> Endure undreamed humility: Lord of Heaven,
> Come to our ignorant hearts and be forgiven.[159]

---

[156] See the note in *PAM* regarding the other printings, 211.
[157] Meynell, 'Veni, Creator', in *The Tablet* 76.2622 (9 August 1890), 211.
[158] See 'Veni Creator', in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross, 3rd edn. ed E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1686.
[159] Meynell, 'Veni Creator', ll. 4–10, in *PAM*, 76.

The opening couplet offers a tribute couched as a rhetorical question, which the following line dares to answer to God's disadvantage. The register abruptly changes from grand sermonic oratory to something quietly, tentatively conversational which seems at once to speak with more authority. This could almost be a sermon on the Agony in the Garden which sets off a rebellious interior monologue on the part of a layman in the pews. The speaker's avowal that 'we endure the tender pain of pardon,— / One with another we forbear' recalls the command in the Epistle to the Ephesians to 'be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you'.[160] But rather than emphasising, like the passage, the difficulty of forgiving, the focus is inverted in the claim that *being* forgiven is not simply a privilege but may involve its own moral struggle, its own Olive-Garden of agonies. This is one aspect of human suffering which God, being sinless, has never had to endure. We hear of what he has borne for us, and forborne with us, but to be forborne *by* others, Meynell suggests, is perhaps the one path of humility which Christ never trod.

Even though this forbearance is characterised, with biblical support, as the discovery of a new form of love which humanity can offer to God, this does little to remove the implication of blasphemy, aggravated by the accusing (if incontrovertible) observation presented in the following lines ('Give heed, / Look at the mournful world Thou hast decreed'). This, of course, is very different from the response which Satan tried to cajole out of Job, tempting him to curse God in his agony.[161] It is much worse than that: the presumption that one is in a position not simply to berate God but to judge and pardon him. What takes the sting out of this apparent blasphemy is the confession in the last line that the speaker is 'ignorant' whereof she speaks, which raises the ghost of Christ's words

[160] Ephesians 4: 32.
[161] See Job 2: 9–10.

from the cross: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do'.[162] In a sense, then, the words are taken back, for they are not finally offered as a challenge to God's mercy or love, but rather as confirmation of human ignorance. In an important sense, though, they are left standing: for this is a very different confession of ignorance to that elicited from Job: 'therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not'.[163] The surmise is perhaps not so much forsworn as *justified* by the speaker's ignorance.

This is how Meynell framed the poem's argument in unpublished lines written shortly after the death of her five-year-old son Vivian in 1887:

> We have something to forgive God for. Does that seem a blasphemy? I say that with the little knowledge He has given us and the short sight, we have something to forgive the Creator who […] prodigally overdoes and exaggerates the love in a mother's heart and then forces her to watch a child's long agony. If we saw all we should have nothing to forgive. But He makes us see so little and He must wish us to forgive Him.[164]

The problem of suffering here, as elsewhere in the Christian tradition, converges upon a problem of knowledge, but the insistence on limited knowledge is not, for Meynell, simply a way of silencing the question, nor of humbly acknowledging its gravity. It was the latter approach which Cardinal Mercier, a Belgian archbishop, took during the horrors of the German occupation in a pastoral letter which Meynell translated for an English audience in 1914. Describing the destruction of Louvain cathedral and 'the wholesale shooting of citizens, and tortures inflicted upon women and children, and upon unarmed and undefended men', Mercier declined to pretend to be able to explain such events. 'There is nothing to reply', he wrote: 'The reply remains the secret of God'.[165] Had Meynell chosen

---

[162] Luke 23: 34.
[163] Job 42: 3.
[164] Quoted in Badeni, *The Slender Tree*, 75.
[165] Cardinal Mercier, *Pastoral Letter of His Eminence Cardinal Mercier: Christmas 1914* (London: Burns and Oates, 1914), 3–4, 13. That Meynell was behind the translation is revealed in a letter to Frederick Page:

such routes, 'Veni Creator' might have turned out more like 'Messina, 1908', with its pair of sestets contrasting the 'Immediate, unintelligible hand' of the 'Destroyer' God who brought the catastrophic earthquake on the Sicilian city with the 'mediate and intelligible hand' of the God the speaker discerns in the efforts 'To feed, to bind, to clothe, […] to bless, and to anneal'.[166] Instead, the secret of God becomes a source of surmise, pondered and guessed at in the search to make sense of anguish. Meynell's prose suggests a close alignment of her experience with Mary's, the prodigal love in a mother's heart and the being forced to watch a child's long agony; through their limited human capacities, Mary and Meynell are united in a solidarity of unknowing as to the full meaning and purpose of that agony. Though Meynell's surmise far exceeds what could piously be attributed to Mary herself, it powerfully and provocatively evokes the possible moral grandeur of 'ignorant hearts', a grandeur embodied not in the all-suffering yet omniscient Christ but in the unknowing *pietà* of Mary.

'I told them not to let my name be connected with it, as it would have seemed far more official instead [of] a woman's name' (Meynell to Frederick Page, 9 January 1915, in *Selected Letters*, 364).

[166] Meynell, 'Messina, 1908', ll. 6, 5, 12, 8–9, in *PAM*, 111.

V

Hardy's Mortal Knowledge

> Why should we faint and fear to live alone,
> Since all alone, so Heaven has willed, we die,
> Nor e'en the tenderest heart, and next our own,
> Knows half the reasons why we smile and sigh?
>
> JOHN KEBLE[1]

A poet rises from the grave to discover his widow in bed with a new husband. Taking this ghostly encounter entirely in her stride, the woman volunteers an explanation that is also an accusation:

> 'He makes no quest into my thoughts,
> But a poet wants to know
> What one has felt from earliest days,
> Why one thought not in other ways,
> And one's Loves of long ago.'[2]

The new man's amiably uninquiring mind, symbolised in his heavy snoring, makes for a pointed contrast with the inquisitorial zeal the widow attributes to poets. Her portrayal of poetic curiosity as a quest makes it sound egotistical as well as invasive, as though her thoughts and feelings were merely accessories to his literary adventurism, an allegation for which the poem itself might be conscripted as evidence: here he is again, still making copy out of her in the hereafter. The poet's interrogations are presented as symptoms of an epistemic greed that threatens to make quests or even conquests out of questions.

---

[1] John Keble, 'Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Trinity', in *The Christian Year* [1827] (Oxford: James Parker, 1866), 258–60: 258. The first two lines echo in Jude Fawley's mind before he falls asleep in Christminster. See *Jude the Obscure* [1895], ed. Patricia Ingham (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2002), 76.
[2] Thomas Hardy, 'I Rose up as my Custom is', ll. 31–35, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Samuel Hynes, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983–95), 2. 95 (henceforth *PWH*).

In querying the wish to know, Hardy raises a question of Roland Barthes's which might be put to any number of his lovers, poets, and lover-poets: just 'what do I want, wanting to know the other?'[3] Further questions follow: how does knowing the other relate to knowing myself; to being known; to loving and to mourning; to reading poems? To get a purchase on these questions, we have to ask what images of knowing Hardy's poetry entertains, and what specific conditions motivate and constrain particular performances of knowing. George Levine has argued that at the basis of all Hardy's work is a 'continuing preoccupation […] with the way our power of knowing enables art and obliges us to feel for other living beings'.[4] Hardy's rhymes suggest that the feelings to which such knowing conducts are often disagreeable or malign: know chimes with 'woe' and 'low', known with 'stone' and 'moan', knew with 'blew', 'adieu', and 'withdrew'.[5] In this chapter I argue that much of what fascinates Hardy about the power of knowing is its capacity to pervert and obstruct the imagination and channels of fellow-feeling. Indeed, it is often the powerlessness of his speakers to know that lies at the root of the poetry's power.

As Matthew Bevis has observed, Hardy is 'a poet whose best writing makes much of various conditions of unknowingness'.[6] This variety is suggested in the sheer breadth of Hardy's vocabulary of ignorance: his *dramatis personae* are heedless, unheeding, impercipient, unmindful, unware, foresightless, unwitting, unweeting—a verbal affluence which testifies to his discriminating sense of the range of feelings such states may mobilise. Hardy's favourite such term, 'unknowing', is one he used as a title for an early poem and a word which attracts shifting nuances of tone and expression throughout his

---

[3] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, tr. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978), 135.
[4] George Levine, 'From Mindless Matter to the Art of the Mind', in *Reading Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 83–105: 86.
[5] See Hardy, 'Unknowing', l. 22, in *PWH*, 1. 77; 'Sacred to the Memory', l. 9, in *PWH*, 2. 453; 'If You had Known', l. 7, in *PWH*, 2. 406; 'So Various', l. 10, in *PWH*, 3. 206; 'A Singer asleep', l. 21, in *PWH*, 2. 32; 'The Noble Lady's Tale', l. 35, in *PWH*, 1. 349; 'Two Serenades', l. 44, in *PWH*, 3. 374.
[6] Matthew Bevis, 'Unknowing Lyric', *Poetry* 209.6 (March 2017), 575–89: 583.

work. It can signify blessed innocence, like the child 'unknowing who sired it', but also existential dread, like the grief-stricken tree in his allegory 'The Pine Planters', 'all unknowing / For whom or what / We set it growing'.[7] Unknowing may be insouciant like that of the 'coquetting' memorial statues in St Paul's, oblivious to the Apostle whose church they adorn; or it may be tragic like that of the 'Unknowing God', deaf to the suffering he would dearly relieve.[8] It can be grounds for self-accusation, like the lover who, failing to recognise his old sweetheart, merely 'looked on, unknowing'; or it can be a passage to unheralded possibilities, as in Hardy's discovery of Emma Gifford '[o]n my errant path unknowing'.[9] Such examples tell of a running argument in Hardy's imagination about the parameters of knowability and the emotional and moral valences of unknowing.

These aesthetic and emotional tonalities are considerably more delicate and diverse than might be inferred from those of Hardy's poems which expound '*Life's impulsion by Incognizance*': the blind, all-powerful force which Hardy reified (and sometimes deified) in such unwieldy epithets as the '*Inadvertent Mind*' or the '*Immanent Unrecking*'.[10] When brooding on the automatism of human action, or the existence of an unconscious power propelling the universe, or the ultimately inaccessible way things are in themselves, the poems' thinking is modulated by an idiom of abstraction derived from Hardy's confessedly undigested reading of leading contemporary intellectuals such as T. H. Huxley, Eduard von Hartmann, and Herbert Spencer.[11] Hardy was keen to stress the

---

[7] Hardy, 'At a Pause in a Country Dance', l. 30, in *PWH*, 3. 98; 'The Pine-Planters', ll. 57–59, in *PWH*, 1. 330.
[8] Hardy, 'In St Paul's a While Ago', l. 19, in *PWH*, 3. 24; 'The Bedridden Peasant to an Unknowing God', in *PWH*, 1. 159–60.
[9] Hardy, 'My Cicely', l. 81, in *PWH*, 1. 70; 'Ditty (E. L. G.)', l. 42, in *PWH*, 1. 22.
[10] Hardy, *The Dynasts*, 1. 6. 97, in *PWH*, 4. 58; 'After Scene', l. 17, in *PWH*, 5. 252; 7. 8. 121, in *PWH*, 5. 245.
[11] On Hardy and Huxleyan ideas of automatism, see Suzanne Keen, *Thomas Hardy's Brains: Psychology, Neurology, and Hardy's Imagination* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2014), 9; on Hardy and Hartmann, see G. Glen Wickens, *Thomas Hardy, Monism and the Carnival Tradition: The One and the Many in The Dynasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); on Hardy and Spencer, see Michael C. L. Chambers, *Unknowable Realism, 1860–1900: Realism Beyond Herbert Spencer's Limits to Knowledge* (2019), Indiana University, PhD dissertation, 127–99.

provisionality and tentativeness of the philosophical ideas broached in his poetry, complaining of reviewers that they treated his 'works of art as if they were a scientific system of philosophy':[12]

> I have repeatedly stated in prefaces and elsewhere that the views in them are *seemings*, provisional impressions only, used for artistic purposes because they represent approximately the impressions of the age, and are plausible, till somebody produces better theories of the universe.[13]

It is true that contemporary reviewers were often guilty of infringing on Hardy's artistic licence, crassly mistaking the poetic entertainment of an idea for a statement of conviction. But they were also responding to something in Hardy's tone which these subjects brought out in him. Max Beerbohm catches the way in which such turns in Hardy often tend towards a kind of hectoring inscrutability: as the Chorus of the Pities intones in Beerbohm's twinkling parody of *The Dynasts*, Hardy's cosmically ambitious Napoleonic verse-drama, 'Here and Nowhere plus / Whence and Why makes Thus'.[14] Such '*knowings of the Unknowable*', to borrow a phrase from the poem itself, live on the edge of self-refutation; as John Stuart Mill observed of Spencer's then modish doctrine, they lay claim to a 'prodigious amount of knowledge respecting the "Unknowable"'.[15]

I want to suggest, by contrast, that Hardy's poetry is at its most searching and original about unknowables when it grapples with the dynamics of knowing at its most radically particular. Characteristically, this occurs when the object of knowing is a person. In the first section, I explore Hardy's attention to methods of interpersonal knowing that

---

[12] Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), 406.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Max Beerbohm, 'A Sequelula to "The Dynasts" by Th*m*s H*rdy', ll. 14–15, in *A Christmas Garland* (London: Heinemann, 1912), 62.
[15] Hardy, *The Dynasts*, 7. 8. 139, in *PWH*, 5. 246; John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* [1865], in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 9, ed. John M. Robson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 182n.

are modelled, disastrously, on investigative forms of reading. In the second section, I suggest how the mode of reading which Hardy's own poetry invites corresponds to a form of *un*knowing modelled by his elegists. I then turn attention in the third section from methods to motivations, suggesting that Hardy tests the relations between knowing and loving to breaking point, exposing the scepticism and despair hiding inside the fantasy of perfect knowing posited by his friend, the idealist philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart. In the final section, I show how Hardy builds on a defiantly open-ended conception of the self to fashion less defensive and more creative ways of relating to persons—and to poems.

Reading You Like a Book

The dream of knowing another person is staged as a macabre kind of wish-fulfilment in 'His Heart', from Hardy's collection *Moments of Vision* (1917). Introduced as 'A Woman's Dream', the poem records a mental autopsy performed by the dead man's wife:

> At midnight, in the room where he lay dead
> Whom in his life I had never clearly read,
> I thought if I could peer into that citadel
> His heart, I should at last know full and well
>
> What hereto had been known to him alone[16]

The threading out of syntax across the stanza break, extremely unusual in Hardy, mimes the speaker's sense of momentous anticipation while encouraging us to linger on her telling choice of vocabulary: knowing 'full and well' is rather an odd turn of phrase, but not a million miles away from the much more familiar one of knowing *full well*. The speaker's slip of the tongue suggests the faux naïveté of her rhetorical posture, suggesting

[16] Hardy, 'His Heart: A Woman's Dream', ll. 1–5, in *PWH*, 2. 198.

that the longed-for moment of truth might be a mere cover story for the ratification of something she has known, full well, all along. And what is it she so dearly desires to make legible, or rather to secure conclusive evidence for? Not the record of his 'daily deeds', or 'his simple singlemindedness', which she greets with fond familiarity, but rather the truth of what he thought of *her*:[17]

> There were regrets, at instances wherein he swerved
> (As he conceived) from cherishings I had deserved.
>
> There were old hours all figured down as bliss—
> Those spent with me—(how little had I thought this!)
> There those when, at my absence, whether he slept or waked,
> (Though I knew not 'twas so!) his spirit ached.[18]

The speaker's parenthetical interjections suggest how keen she is to depict these revelations about her husband's attitude towards her as startling, 'unguessed' discoveries, completely at odds with her prior assumptions.[19] But they begin to sound like desperate attempts to reassure herself against the suspicion of self-deceit; the reader knows that the whole set-up is a fantasy of her own making, that her boast of how little she had thought 'this' shows that this is precisely what she had been thinking.

The first point I wish to make about the poem, then—because it is the ground bass which plays throughout Hardy's poetic consideration of knowing other people—is that it takes on the appearance of a deflected self-reflection. It is as though, if the speaker could imagine this description of how cherishable she is coming from an external source, she could 'at last' (a phrase she reaches for more than once) allow herself to believe it. A prior anxiety about what she really deserved might well be supposed from the way in which, 'eyes opened', she is at length awakened to absolute certainty about the matter: to the

---

[17] Ibid., ll. 21, 19, in *PWH*, 2. 199.
[18] Ibid., ll. 23–28, in *PWH*, 2. 199.
[19] Ibid., l. 12, in *PWH*, 2. 199.

clairvoyance of knowing full and well, to seeing things 'clearly and ruddily'.[20] If part of what this speaker brings triumphantly to light are 'arguments and battlings in defence of me', the forces against which such battles were won would seem to include herself.[21] By the end of the poem, she has arrived less at a knowledge of 'His Heart' than a consolatory, and correspondingly exaggerated, confidence in the knowledge of her own. Stanley Cavell suggests that 'Wanting to know another's existence by knowing what the other knows is evidently a route for knowing whether your own existence is known'.[22] Roland Barthes puts it slightly differently: '"I can't get to know you"', he suggests, 'means "I shall never know what you really think of me"'.[23] Like Barthes, Hardy's speaker is convinced that she cannot decipher her lover because she does not know how he deciphered her, but like Cavell, the poem also suggests that the wish to decipher the other may minister to a prior, perhaps more urgent, desire to crack the code of the self.

The second point I wish to make concerns the *methods* of knowing employed in the poem, for the rhetoric of decryption comes from the poem itself, with its description of the 'quaint vermiculations' engraved on the man's heart.[24] These squiggles (the 'tortuous boring or marking made by, or resembling the track of, a worm', as the *OED* suggests) make this heart sound rather like a brain, and they are figured as a complicated form of script that would seem to call for brainpower rather than sympathy to understand: they are 'written' and for 'reading', the poem informs us, 'inscribed […] close and clear' like the writing on an ancient artefact.[25] The poem goes on to offer another metaphor for this knowledge when it describes the man's hours and deeds 'all figured down' as in a

---

[20] Ibid., ll. 17, 32, in *PWH*, 2. 199.
[21] Ibid., l. 31, in *PWH*, 2. 199.
[22] Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Drama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 20.
[23] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 134.
[24] Hardy, 'His Heart', l. 14, in *PWH*, 2. 199.
[25] 'vermiculation, *n.*', 3a, *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021), accessed 1 September 2021; Hardy, 'His Heart', ll. 12, 16, 13–14.

statistical table.[26] The model of thought-reading fashioned in this poem, then, is not magical or spooky but scientific or scholarly: it renders the process of knowing a person as an intellectual investigation. As Malcolm Bowie observed of Proust, 'the lover may become an honorary scientist or scholar by virtue of his jealous calculations and hypotheses'.[27] If Proust's narrator is variously figured throughout *À la récherche du temps perdu* as chemist, philologist, grammarian, astronomer, and countless other such figures, within the short space of 'His Heart' the would-be knower is imagined as physiologist, linguist, and mathematician.

The excitement attached to the female speaker's reading of these various kinds of runes echoes that of Diggory Venn in *The Return of the Native* (1878). Holding up an oil lamp to Thomasin's face, Venn discovers with exhilaration how

> her several thoughts and fractions of thoughts, as signalled by the changes on her face, were exhibited by the light to the utmost nicety. An ingenuous, transparent life was disclosed; as if the flow of her existence could be seen passing within her.[28]

Since Thomas Reid in the eighteenth century, opponents of Cartesian scepticism had argued that 'features of the face, gestures of the body, and modulations of the voice' could be taken as reliable indicators of others' thoughts and dispositions; it was these physiological forms of mediation that, in the 1880s, the biologist George Romanes would label 'ambassadors' of the mind.[29] One way to push back against the mounting claims being made for 'mind-reading' in the late nineteenth century—performances of which had 'taken by storm the general public and daily press', as Romanes complained in the pages

---

[26] Hardy, 'His Heart', l. 25, in *PWH*, 2. 199.
[27] Malcolm Bowie, 'Proust, Jealousy, Knowledge', in *Freud, Proust, Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 45–66: 50.
[28] Hardy, *The Return of the Native* [1878], ed. Tony Slade (London: Penguin, 1999), 41.
[29] Thomas Reid, 'On Seeing', in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* [1818], ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 77–202: 190; George Romanes, *Animal Intelligence* [1882] (New York, NY: Appleton, 1884), 1.

of *Nature*—was to attribute the success of such feats to 'indications unconsciously given through the muscles'.[30]

If the account of thought-reading provided by 'His Heart' is fantastical, it is a fantasy that (as in *Return of the Native*) is nonetheless rendered in physiological terms. Both the poem and the novel resist the explanatory allure of telepathy, defined by the Society for Psychical Research in 1883 as the 'communication of any impressions of any kind from one mind to another, independently of the recognised channels of sense'.[31] Hardy is dealing instead in a form of natural supernaturalism whereby the subtlest filaments of thought are detectible with the ordinary faculties of perception. But if Thomasina's thoughts are 'exhibited' to Venn's sight with the assistance of his lamp, the narrator of *The Woodlanders* (1887) suggests that, as in 'His Heart', the secrets inscribed in human tissue require linguistic mediation:

> The infinitesimal movement of muscle, curve, hair, and wrinkle, which when accompanied by a voice goes unregarded, is watched and translated in the lack of it, till virtually the whole surrounding circle of familiars is charged with the reserved one's moods and meanings.[32]

Here, the subject's moods and meanings only become apparent after having been 'translated' by a skilful interpreter.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Angel Clare looks upon Hardy's heroine in much the same way: 'Clare regarded her attentively, conned the characters of her face as if

---

[30] Romanes, 'Thought-Reading', *Nature* 24.608 (23 June 1881), 171–72: 171, 172. See also W. F. Barrett, 'Mind-Reading versus Muscle-Reading', *Nature* 24.610 (1881), 212. For an account of this dispute, see Shannon Delorme, 'Physiology or psychic powers? William Carpenter and the debate over spiritualism in Victorian Britain', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 48 (2014): 57–66. For a wider account of the Victorian vogue for mind-reading, see Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[31] W. F. Barrett, Edmund Gurney, and Frederic W. H. Myers, 'First Report on Thought-Reading', *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1 (1882–83), 13–34: 30.

[32] Hardy, *The Woodlanders* [1887], ed. Dale Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 98.

they had been hieroglyphics.'[33] Hardy's choice of the verb 'con' (to say nothing of the ensuing narrative of *Tess*) flags what may go wrong when knowing a person becomes an object of deliberate study: 'conned' suggests less the investigative rigours of 'His Heart' than the schoolboy labours one might expend upon a textbook, as though Tess's thoughts were comparable to Greek declensions ('For weary freshmen's eyes to con') or algebraic equations (like when the infant Hardy 'Conned the grand Rule-of-Three / With the bent of a bee').[34] Derived from the Anglo-Saxon verb *cunnan*, to know, the *OED* defines 'con' as 'to study or learn, *esp*. by repetition' and hence in a wider sense 'to pore over, peruse […] to inspect, scan, examine'.[35] To con a person, in this sense, involves pretending that they are an object with clear and fixed properties as well as asserting (or at least attempting) a kind of mastery over them. And if its etymological cousins 'canny' and 'cunning' imply a certain skill and deviousness on the part of this kind of knower, the more overt pun—*con*fidence trick—suggest these qualities may be delusive. Hardy uses this verb of a person in his poem 'Looking at a Picture on an Anniversary', which again involves a man looking at his lover: in this case a photograph of his dead wife. Conning the woman's face, in this poem, involves the tender projection of her 'Consciousness living on', but this echo (from the last stanza) gently mocks at the speaker's dream as these closing lines confront the possibility that she does not hear, or recognise, or smile at him as he had fondly hoped.[36] Conning the picture does not take him any closer to knowing the person it depicts; however much it is pored over, this text remains mute: unmoving and 'Unmoved'.[37]

---

[33] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* [1891], ed. Simon Gatrell and Juliet Grindle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 192.
[34] Hardy, 'Liddell and Scott: On the Completion of their Lexicon', l. 27, in *PWH*, 3. 177; 'He revisits his First School', ll. 20–21, in *PWH*, 2. 259.
[35] 'con, *v.*', 3a, *OED Online* (pubd. December 2020), accessed 1 September 2021.
[36] Hardy, 'Looking at a Picture on an Anniversary', ll. 25, 27, in *PWH*, 2. 284.
[37] Ibid., l. 9, in *PWH*, 2. 284.

As Samuel Hynes notes, the date appended to the poem in manuscript (March 1913) may suggest that Hardy had in mind the anniversary of his initial meeting with his first wife, Emma Gifford, the subject of his celebrated sequence of elegies, *Poems 1912–13*.[38] His much earlier poem about Emma, 'Ditty (E. L. G.)', was written in the exultant first flush of their courtship in 1870 but is flecked with eerie premonitions of their later estrangement and Emma's sudden, unexpected death. It may be to tyrannise the poem with biographical hindsight, but it is no less uncanny, to observe that the opening of the poem's final sentence—'I but found her in that, going'—offers 'a startlingly succinct resumé of the paradoxical project of the *Poems of 1912–13*', as Jane Thomas arrestingly observes.[39] This reading requires that the line be read as a unit of meaning detached from the wider syntax in which it is implicated, but no such proviso attaches to the same speaker's description of Emma as one 'I know by rote'.[40] In the joyful context of the poem, this is obviously intended to sound affectionate: he knows her so well—knows her, as it were, by heart. The specific choice of diction, however, suggests that this knowing might not be an unqualified good. Hardy stages a dramatic contrast between the self before she was known to him and the self that knows her now:

> Should I lapse to what I was
> In days by—
> (Such cannot be, but because
> Some loves die
> Let me feign it)—none would notice
> That where she I know by rote is
> Spread a strange and withering change,
> Like a drying of the wells
> Where she dwells.[41]

[38] See *PWH*, 2. 284.
[39] Hardy, 'Ditty (E. L. G.)', l. 41, in *PWH*, 1. 22; Jane Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire: Conceptions of the Self* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 182.
[40] Hardy, 'Ditty (E. L. G.)', l. 24, in *PWH*, 1. 22.
[41] Ibid., ll. 19–27, in 1. 21–22.

Hardy was to amend 'In days by […] Some loves die' to the less menacing 'Ere we met […] Some forget' for the second edition of *Wessex Poems* in 1903, but if the original wording explicitly allies unknowing with the death of love, there is something not altogether lovely about this knowing, 'by rote' suggesting something done 'in a mechanical or repetitious manner', or even knowledge 'acquired […] without proper understanding or reflection', as the *OED* notes.[42] The lexicographers classify the more neutral meaning 'with precision, by heart' as obsolete, and no instance they record since 1624 is other than derogatory; even if taken as one of Hardy's archaising flourishes, then, it is hard to shake off the implication that there is something troublingly perfunctory or even mindless about this way of knowing Emma.[43]

An illuminating parallel might be drawn with Hardy's fictionalization of the Emma courtship, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), in which architect's assistant Stephen Smith gives away his former attachment to Elfride Swancourt through his sketches of female figures resembling her: 'The hand, like the tongue', observes the narrator, 'easily acquires the trick of repetition by rote, without calling in the mind to assist at all'.[44] Again, this is partly intended as a testament to the depth of Smith's attachment: so deeply has the image of Elfride impressed itself upon his imagination that he is no longer even aware of it. But this is also to admit that his knowing her is a form of inattention, a trick of repetition. The same ambivalence haunts Hardy's lyric 'The Year's Awakening', which is at once deeply impressed by nature's unreflective way of knowing ('O crocus root, how do you know, / How do you know?' it ponders) and at the same time willing to dismiss it as functioning by 'merest rote'.[45] If there is something superhuman about such knowing, then, this may be another way of saying that it is *less* than human—the kind of knowing that might

[42] See *PWH*, 1. 22; 'rote, *n.*', 1a, *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* [1873], ed. Alan Manford (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2005), 332.
[45] Hardy, 'The Year's Awakening', ll. 19–20, 17, in *PWH*, 2. 44.

belong to a god, or an automaton (for Hardy, of course, those are not necessarily different things).

Hardy pointed up the word's associations with the idea of going through the motions in 'At Castle Boterel', from the *1912–13* sequence, which speaks of the 'mindless rote' of 'Time's unflinching rigour' (which has taken Emma from him).[46] 'In Hardy's false etymological pun', suggests Matthew Campbell, 'a "rote" is a mechanical wheel-like movement, from the Latin *rota*'.[47] But it also suggests a kind of writing, not just through the homophony with 'wrote' but by suggesting how one might commit a piece of writing (a poem, perhaps) to memory. The method of knowing 'by rote' thus keeps textual company with the other methods of knowing other people I have been tracing in Hardy—conning, translating, deciphering—each of which is revealed to be illusory. 'The Marble Tablet', written in 1916 on a visit to Emma's memorial stone in St Juliot, poignantly sums up the illusions of this textual vocabulary of knowing with its reference to 'her thoughts, that you read like a book'.[48] Hardy had, eventually, read her thoughts *in* a book: the aggrieved and critical journal belonging to Emma which he discovered after her death, entitled 'What I think of my husband' (an event possibly glanced at in the way in which 'read', here, allows for the possibility of being voiced as either past or present tense).[49] To Hardy's dismay, these written thoughts showed up his failure to read Emma's thoughts like a book when she was alive. But if Hardy likens these failed methods of knowing to methods of *reading*, they are ones which his own poetry conspicuously sabotages. Knowing a poem by these means is likely to be no more successful than knowing a person

[46] Hardy, 'At Castle Boterel', ll. 27, 26, in *PWH*, 2. 64.
[47] Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 221.
[48] Hardy, 'The Marble Tablet', l. 5, in *PWH*, 2. 433.
[49] See J. O. Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 24–25.

by them: they are simply not objects that can be known in these ways (which perhaps is to say, they are not really 'objects' at all).

Wistful, Wistless

Critics from the first have observed, in varying tones of admiration and reproach, the way in which Hardy's novels eschew the psychological intimacy and depth characteristic of the nineteenth-century realist tradition. Such was Hardy's 'sense of the isolation of the individual', suggested Havelock Ellis in a penetrating review-essay of 1883, that he declined in his novels to 'use the subjective method or to deal directly with mental phenomena'.[50] In a similar vein, John Bayley argued that the distinction, and distinctiveness, of Hardy's novelistic achievement lay in his interest in the 'kinds of consciousness to whom author and reader have no inner access'.[51] Hardy consistently declined the use of the first person in his fiction, and even in his autobiography, notoriously composed in the third person and published under his wife's name. But if the poems, by contrast, deploy the first person extensively, this is not to afford such 'inner access' as is denied by the prose, but rather to construct a manner of speech at once confidential and elusive. Norman Page observes that no fewer than one-sixth of the more than one thousand poems begin with the pronoun 'I' and suggests that Hardy may have a higher proportion of such 'pronoun openings' than any other major English poet.[52] Yet far from promoting a 'sense of intimacy, of closeness to both reader and subject', as Page

[50] Havelock Ellis, 'Thomas Hardy's Novels', *Westminster Review* 119 (April 1883), 334–64: 359. Hardy read this review with appreciation: see Hardy to Havelock Ellis, 29 April 1883, in *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–88), 7 vols, 3. 118–19.
[51] John Bayley, *An Essay on Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 84.
[52] Norman Page, 'Opening Time: Hardy's Poetic Thresholds', in *Thomas Hardy Reappraised: Essays in Honour of Michael Millgate*, ed. Keith Wilson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 262–69: 266.

suggests, the effect is to invite the reader into inhabiting a voice whose history and context are only minimally and obliquely disclosed, so that one is left both inside and outside of the speaker's knowing.[53] The brevity and ghostly sonority of lyric, in contrast to the disquisitive expansiveness of the novel, enhances the reader's sense of being encompassed by unknowns. Unlike in Hardy's third person fictions, the reader must lend personal expression to an experience of which the motives, circumstances, and frequently even the content remain obscure. Thom Gunn recognised an affinity with the ballad tradition in this aspect of Hardy's poetics, which relies on 'omission of narrative incident, and omission of motive and character'.[54] Such omissions, Gunn writes, 'result in an atmosphere charged with mystery: we are given bare situations, but of such intensity that their implications are very wide'.[55]

As well as being a dominant mode of Hardy's poetry, this caginess sometimes also provides the subject for a poem, as in 'Not Only I', from Hardy's penultimate collection *Human Shows* (1925). The poem is spoken by a buried corpse, 'doomed awhile to lie / In this close bin with earthen sides', but the poem is about the inhumation of more than just bones:[56]

> Compressed here in six feet by two,
> In secrecy
> To lie with me
> Till the Call shall be,
> Are all these things I knew,
> Which cannot be handed on;
> Strange happenings quite unrecorded,
> Lost to the world and disregarded,
> That only thinks: 'Here moulders till Doom's-dawn
> A woman's skeleton.'[57]

---

[53] Ibid., 267.
[54] Thom Gunn, 'Hardy and the Ballads', in *The Occasions of Poetry: Essays in Criticism and Autobiography*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Faber, 1982), 77–105: 84–85.
[55] Ibid., 85.
[56] Hardy, 'Not Only I', ll. 2–3, in *PWH*, 3. 101.
[57] Ibid., ll. 21–30, in *PWH*, 3. 102.

The poem's three stanzas stage a kind of funeral for knowledge, here configured as the idiosyncratic tissue of memories and awareness which constitute 'all these things I knew': everything from the 'things I thought' to the 'hopes I had', 'Things left undone; things left unsaid', and the remains of so many 'springs and summers' past.[58] The speaker presents the content of his knowing as variously comprised of mental clutter and vital knowledge. There is, on one side, a sense of being weighed down by a heap of postcards from the past in the brisk references to 'my plans and appearances; drives and rides', the poem's 'And […] And […] And […]' structure itself partaking of the breathless, factual style of a rather tedious diary.[59] One could well imagine such items of information being catalogued and 'conned' in an archive, but it would seem less than catastrophic should such trivia be 'Lost to the world', as the speaker rather grandiloquently puts it. What makes this loss count for the speaker, and justifies his oratory, has to do with the distinction between 'art' and 'merely mechanical reporting' which Hardy reflected on repeatedly in his own notebooks.[60] As he expressed this distinction as early as 1865, 'The poetry of a scene varies with the minds of the perceivers. Indeed, it does not lie in the scene at all.'[61] The poetry of this speaker's lost knowledge is concentrated in his perceptions, which are gestured towards without being elucidated: what were those 'Strange happenings' he mentions? What was 'left unsaid', and why? What was it he 'discerned' in the 'far-off views', and why did 'nobody else' do so? What were the 'visions' that 'daily upbore' him?[62] The poem continually stimulates the desire to know while resolutely keeping its counsel: the forms of knowing it works hardest to arouse are those which it refuses to

[58] Ibid., ll. 4, 5, 19, 11, 15–17, in *PWH*, 3. 101.
[59] Ibid., ll. 13, 11–13, in *PWH*, 3. 101.
[60] This quotation comes from a jotting made in June 1877 as recorded in Hardy, *Life and Work*, 118; cf. the distinction between 'Art', which involves 'a disproportioning', and that which is 'merely copied or reported inventorily', which dates from August 1890 (ibid., 239).
[61] Ibid., 52.
[62] Hardy, 'Not Only I', ll. 27, 19, 17, 16, 17, 9, 10, in *PWH*, 3. 101–2.

gratify. In this sense Hardy's poems themselves often embody the difficulties of knowing played out between the people inside them.

The poetry often presses a sense of imbalance or disproportion between the person who knows and the person being known. One of the most distinctive features of Hardy's elegies is their preoccupation with the thought that the dead have become 'Powerless to know' in return.[63] This is a theme which recurs at important moments throughout his writing: the final paragraph of *Tess*, for instance, chillingly observes how 'the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing'.[64] That Hardy's elegies dwell so insistently upon the fact that the lost lover is 'Ignorant' and 'shall not know'—that now she 'nor knows nor cares'—suggests how much it belatedly matters to his elegists that they are no longer able to make themselves known to the lost one.[65] In an interview he gave in 1901, Hardy regretted the fact he had never seen a ghost, borrowing Macbeth's words to describe how, in the absence of such 'visitants from beyond the grave', 'human life is so miserably bounded, circumscribed, cabin'd, cribb'd, confined'—a tricolon which suggests the living are no less imprisoned than the coffined dead.[66] Like Jude the Obscure, then, Hardy's poetic speakers are frequently

> impressed with the isolation of [their] own personality, as with a self-spectre, the sensations being that of one who walked but could not make himself seen or heard.[67]

---

[63] Hardy, 'Lament', l. 21, in *PWH*, 2. 54.
[64] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 420.
[65] Hardy, 'After a Journey', l. 25, in *PWH*, 2. 60; 'Your Last Drive', l. 19, in *PWH*, 2. 49; 'Beeny Cliff', l. 15, in *PWH*, 2. 63.
[66] The interview, with William Archer, was first published in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1901 and reprinted in 'With Mr Thomas Hardy', in *Real Conversations Recorded by William Archer* (London: Heinemann, 1904), 29–50: 45.
[67] Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 73.

The epigraph to ‘In Tenebris II’, taken from Psalm 141, encapsulates this typical sense of forlornness: ‘I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me’.[68]

When a living speaker finds himself in such a position, it is as though he belongs to the walking dead. The speaker of ‘In a Former Resort after Many Years’ questions whether his companions of long ago will recognise him any longer, now that he has changed as dramatically on the inside as they have on the outside:

> Do they know me, whose former mind
> Was like an open plain where no foot falls,
> But now is as a gallery portrait-lined,
> And scored with necrologic scrawls,
> Where feeble voices rise, once full-defined,
> From underground in curious calls?[69]

Hardy’s speaker seems to possess a shaky hold on his memories of others and worries that in turn he may not be recognised by those he is going back to find. His knowledge of the dead is presented as having faded painfully from the ‘full-defined’ to mere scrawls and muffled cries, and the worry that others will not know him seems to be connected to a worry that he may no longer know himself. His decayed knowledge of the friends who have died is compounded by the fact that the people in the former resort never knew them. Absent God, this speaker finds no-one to companion his knowing, or to know him as much as he would like to be known.

The speaker’s sense of being out of place in the former resort is also an intimation of mortality, a suspicion that he is out of place in life altogether, as suggested paradigmatically in the book of Job: ‘he that goeth down to the grave shall come up no

---

[68] This translation is taken from the King James Version. Hardy quotes from the Vulgate in Latin: ‘*Considerabam ad dexteram, et videbam; et non erat qui cognosceret me*’. See Hardy, ‘In Tenebris II’, in *PWH*, 1. 207–8.

[69] Hardy, ‘In a Former Resort after Many Years’, ll. 7–12, in *PWH*, 3. 8.

more. He shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more' (Job 7: 10). This feeling of being rejected, because no longer recognised, by a place appears repeatedly in Hardy's elegies, as in 'The Figure in the Scene' ('the place now knows her no more') and 'The Marble-Streeted Town':[70]

> The place seems not to mind
> That she—of old
> The brightest of its native souls—
> Left it behind![71]

In such instances the sense of isolation passes into a sense of superfluousness. In 'In a Former Resort', the Gothic chamber of the speaker's mind swarms with ghostly remembrances, but his fretful question ('Do they know me […]') voices the fear that he may no longer haunt the minds of others. His initial query ('Do I know these […]') boomerangs, and the terrible force of that reversal is audible in the emphasis which the well-established iambic pattern throws onto his words ('Do they know *me* […]')

Elsewhere, however, Hardy's speakers find something to treasure in their apparent unknowability to others. Condensed into an epigram, this feeling finds expression in a line from the Greek poet Agathias which Hardy came across in his much-thumbed copy of J. W. Mackail's *Greek Anthology*, which he echoed in the opening line of his last published poem, 'He Resolves to Say No More': 'O my heart, leave the rest unknown'.[72] Declaring that henceforth 'none shall gather what I hide!', Hardy's farewell to poetry is a show of defiance in which he steels himself against the assaults of would-be knowers: 'O my soul, keep the rest unknown!' he prays, promising that 'What I have learnt no man shall know'.[73] But Hardy does not leave it until his last poem to give voice to this resistance to

---

[70] Hardy, 'The Figure in the Scene', l. 17, in *PWH*, 2. 217.
[71] Hardy, 'The Marble-Streeted Town', ll. 12–15, in *PWH*, 2. 465.
[72] J. W. Mackail (ed.), *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* [1890] (London: Longmans, Green, 1911), 218.
[73] Hardy, 'He Resolves to Say No More', ll. 5, 1, 15, in *PWH*, 3. 274.

being known. The speaker of 'Sacred to the Memory', for example, reflects on the way in which a conventional tombstone inscription is incommensurable with the 'full script' of the mourner's mind:

> They know not and will never know
> That my full script is not confined
> To that stone space, but stands deep lined
> Upon the landscape high and low
> Wherein she made such worthy show.[74]

Though the furrows of memory exceed his powers of transcription, this does not appear to be exclusively a source of woe. There is a hint of defiance in the assertion that 'They know not *and will never know*', as though he is going to make pretty sure of the fact. The poem is framed as a reply ('That "Sacred to the Memory" / Is clearly carven there I own') and the speaker's tone may suggest he has been piqued by the probings of an over-inquiring listener.[75] There is perhaps some consolation (as well as wretchedness) to be found in the fact that others will never truly know what this woman meant, and means, to him.

Hardy coined a word for the condition of unknowing in 'The Voice', with its famous opening apostrophe to Emma ('Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me').[76] 'Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness', wonders the poet,

> Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
> You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
> Heard no more again far or near?[77]

Seamus Perry echoes F. R. Leavis's preference for Hardy's initial choice of 'existlessness' over what Perry calls 'the more decorous "wan wistlessness"', but this perhaps underrates

[74] Hardy, 'Sacred to the Memory', ll. 6–10, in *PWH*, 2. 453.
[75] Ibid., ll. 1–2, in *PWH*, 2. 452.
[76] Hardy, 'The Voice', l. 1, in *PWH*, 2. 56.
[77] Ibid., ll. 9–12, in *PWH*, 2. 56.

the resonance of Hardy's neologism.[78] Ostensibly the antonym of 'wistfulness', 'wistlessness' suggests that the woman occupies a state opposite to that of the elegist: one vacant of desire, longing, and expectation. But this erotic divide is also mapped onto a landscape of knowing, 'wist' being the past tense of the archaic verb 'to wit' (to know).[79] Hardy alludes to this latent meaning in the poem which follows immediately on from the *1912–13* sequence in his collection *Satires of Circumstance*, 'The Wistful Lady'. The speaker's wife tells how she was visited by a strange apparition who 'weighed me with a wearing wistfulness / As if she knew me well'.[80] As if: the wife has her suspicions, because *she* does not seem to know *her* at all, and perhaps only a ghost or a god could know someone well without being known in return. The strange lady's wistfulness is unnerving—but the husband suddenly remembers

> how my dead Love used to say,
> With a small smile, when she
> Was waning wan, that she would hover round
> And show herself after her passing day
> To any newer Love I might have found,
> But show her not to me.[81]

It is strange that this poem should not have attracted any commentary linking it to 'The Voice', for it is almost a reverse image of the earlier poem. Here again we have the ghost of a 'wan' dead wife, but whereas in 'The Voice' she speaks but does not appear (merely 'calling'), here she appears but does not speak (merely 'beckoning'); there she was wistless, here she is wistful; there she seemed so crucially not to hear, here she is pictured 'lending ear / To my light outdoor words, and pondering each' with care.[82] 'Ah, but she

---

[78] Seamus Perry, 'Hardy's Imperfections', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 536–48: 544; cf. F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), 60.
[79] 'wist, *v.*', in *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.
[80] Hardy, 'The Wistful Lady', ll. 5–6, in *PWH*, 2. 71.
[81] Ibid., ll. 25–30, in *PWH*, 2. 72.
[82] Hardy, 'The Voice', l. 16, in *PWH*, 2. 57; 'The Wistful Lady', ll. 19, 14–15, in *PWH*, 2. 71.

knew me', insists the wife against her husband's doubts; 'yes, as I knew you then', insisted Hardy, against his own.[83]

Common to both is a ringing ambivalence about knowing and unknowing. For both the wistfulness and the wistlessness of these respective haunters equivocate finely between pity and blame: the wistful lady seems on the one hand a rather helpless figure, a 'plaintive lady', 'fain' to 'close with me in speech' yet who somehow cannot do so, but equally she is clearly a threatening presence, one who 'laid her eyes upon me critically'.[84] In 'The Voice', meanwhile, a kinship is suggested between Emma's ignorance and the attitude described by the rhyme-word, 'listlessness', insinuating that her power of knowing is enervated and hence revivable, rather than extinguished. This sense is bolstered by the modifier 'wan' and by the possibility that her dissolution might still be in process: 'being ever dissolved' could mean forever *having been* dissolved, but it also allows for the sense of forever *being dissolved*. On the other hand, the affinity with the existing term 'wistless' (from the Middle English 'wystly', 'With close attention; intently') implies a certain umbrage on the part of the speaker in 'The Voice', a resentment that he is not being attended to as he ought.[85]

I want to make a slightly extravagant suggestion about these two poems, but one which I hope, in the context of what I have been arguing about Hardy's experimentation with the dynamics of knowing in poetry, and his fascination with states of imbalance between persons knowing and known, will not seem *merely* extravagant. I want to suggest that the woman in 'The Voice' might be read as a figure for the poem, which calls out to the reader, leaving the listening and the knowing to him. If the poem is not entirely unknowing, it is always tending that way, *being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness*, as

---

[83] Ibid., l. 13, in *PWH*, 2. 71; 'The Voice', l. 7, in *PWH*, 2. 56.
[84] Hardy, 'The Wistful Lady', ll. 3, 17, 4, in *PWH*, 2. 71.
[85] See 'wistless, *adj.*', in *OED Online* (pubd. Sep 2021), accessed 1 September 2021; and 'wistly, *adv.*', in ibid. (pubd. Dec 2020), accessed 1 September 2021.

though complete wistlessness were the condition to which it aspired, but never quite attained. Reading, then, would become a kind of 'faltering forward', a form of close listening through the wind to a voice that seems at once to be saying something urgent, direct, and personal, but also threatened by a suspicion that it is 'only the breeze'.[86] As John Bayley wrote of Hardy, his 'words and sentences give the impression of continuing instability: while reading we are waiting for something unexpected, good or bad, to happen to them'.[87] How, for example, is the last line to be stressed?

> Thus I; faltering forward,
> Leaves around me falling,
> Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward
> And the woman calling.

This final stanza has already flung the dactylic metre to the oozing winds, but is this a 'halting expression of utter loss', as Peter Sacks suggests, or an affirmation of imaginative constancy, the speaker defending his right to have things both ways?[88]

Sacks argues that the poem's metre moves 'further and further away from the songlike quality of its opening', as though the last line had a prosaic lilt, perhaps the only stress being on the first syllable of 'woman', with perhaps a secondary stress on the first syllable of 'calling'.[89] Possibly because of the long line which precedes it, which seems to establish a new, longer metrical interval in which to voice the following line (on the principle of isochrony), I also hear a pause between 'woman' and 'calling': a pause which rescues the phrase from Sacks's sense of resignation by framing that 'calling' as something finally undeniable, the ultimate evidence he is left with, a sort of *e pur si muove*. Alternatively, Herbert Tucker reads the line as a trochaic trimeter in line with the

---

[86] Hardy, 'The Voice', ll. 13, 9, in *PWH*, 2. 57, 56.
[87] Bayley, *An Essay on Hardy*, 2.
[88] Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 248.
[89] Ibid.

new pattern of falling rhythms established by the rest of the stanza: consequently, he hears a stress on *And* as though in defiant 'embrace' of the contradiction: 'Not *either/or*, says the imagination, but *both/and*.'[90] The point is not to adjudicate which of these readings is 'correct', but rather to suggest, as Eric Griffiths argued, that such 'dilemmas of voice […] keep us alive to the fact that, because we don't know exactly how he sounds, we can't know exactly how he feels'.[91] This unknowing is productive since, in their written silence, poems allow for the

> depiction of the simultaneous multiplicity of a moment's regret, say, with its combination of resentment that one should be grieved, shame at one's own resentment, remorse, self-exculpation, a longing to be comforted and a determination to cling to grief as to one's own identity.[92]

The reader of a Hardy poem, like the speaker in 'The Voice', never quite knows what he has heard. The solution to this uncertainty which 'The Voice' reaches towards is the traditionally epistemologically stronger sense of sight: 'Let me view you, then'.[93] Peter Sacks suggests this is a conventional move for the elegist:

> the mourner seeks that forbidden physical closeness with the dead, the unmediated apprehension of actual sight. Since Orpheus this has been a topos in many scenarios of mourning.[94]

But 'The Wistful Lady' suggests the privilege of sight may be no more revealing. Whether the poem is imagined to know only a little—less and less—or to know with preternatural insight, it will not abide my questions and cannot say more than it does. Word and image, in this sense, are equally mute, as Socrates suggests in the *Phaedrus*:

---

[90] Herbert F. Tucker, 'At the Bottom Line: How Hardy Tries Conclusions', *The Hardy Review* 14.2 (2012), 19–32: 31.
[91] Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 217.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Hardy, 'The Voice', l. 5, in *PWH*, 2. 56.
[94] Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 249.

> You know, Phaedrus, that's the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever.[95]

But Orpheus's desire runs deep in Hardy's poems, whose speakers often desire a transparency of knowledge wildly at odds with what is possible with a person or a poem.

This is the wish enunciated by the title-poem of Hardy's 1917 collection *Moments of Vision*, which craves the kind of insight that would reveal the self in a hitherto unsuspected light, showing us 'tincts we never see ourselves once take'.[96] And yet this disclosure is constructed as a source of anxiety: it is like being stripped 'breast-bare', or being penetrated by a 'dart'; it makes the speaker 'start' and 'ache'.[97] What makes this new way of seeing himself so full of terror is the sense of finality and totality which accompanies his framing of it as 'That mirror / Which makes of men a transparency'—as though such an image would speak the ultimate and unanswerable truth about him.[98] This sought-for magic mirror enacts a kind of Last Judgement on his character, which is both intensely desired and as passionately feared. The mirror has the ability to 'catch his last thoughts, whole life foul or fair'.[99] It offers, in other words, what no human being ever could: knowledge that is certain and complete, which reassures, even in its condemnations, that the self is something real, because knowable. It is this picture of knowing which holds so many of Hardy's speakers captive, and to which I now turn.

---

[95] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275.e, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, tr. R. Hackforth, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 475–525: 521.
[96] Hardy, 'Moments of Vision', l. 14, in *PWH*, 2. 159.
[97] Ibid., ll. 4, 7, 10, 12, in *PWH*, 2. 159.
[98] Ibid., ll. 1–2, in *PWH*, 2. 159.
[99] Ibid., l. 19, in *PWH*, 2. 159.

Romancing Knowledge

'Not knowing matters so much for Hardy,' writes Seamus Perry, 'that he strove to invent verbs that portrayed ignorance as though it somehow possessed all the qualities of an act, instead of being merely a gap in awareness.'[100] A significant early example of this is in Hardy's sonnet 'To an Actress', where the speaker rues the days 'when you were strange to me'.[101] In the sestet, the word 'unknowing' appears suspended between its participial and adjectival roles:

> Could *that* man be this I, unknowing you,
> When now the knowing you is all of me,
> And the old world of then is now a new,
> And purpose no more what it used to be—
> A thing of formal journeywork, but due
> To springs that then were sealed up utterly?[102]

'I, unknowing you' could describe a passive state of unawareness, but it might also suggest something more substantial than mere absence. James Richardson has proposed that Hardy's many inventive negatives ('unbe', 'unvision', 'unsight', 'uncare') 'constitute the boundary between two states of awareness, two perspectives', expressing his sense of a 'dialectical or antinomian relationship' between them, and consequently between 'two possible selves'.[103] 'To an Actress' clearly differentiates between two selves, each of which gives meaning to the other: the knowing self, pictured as latent within the unknowing like a coiled spring, and the unknowing self, whose dearth lends a glory to the springtime of knowing. What is remarkable about the poem is the way in which these interdependent states are pushed to the limit: now 'the knowing you is *all* of me', then the

---

[100] Perry, 'Hardy's Imperfections', 543.
[101] Hardy, 'To an Actress', l. 1, in *PWH*, 1. 286.
[102] Ibid., ll. 9–14, in *PWH*, 1. 287.
[103] James Richardson, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Necessity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 104.

springs were 'sealed up *utterly*'. As Joseph Brodsky observed of Hardy, 'whenever faced with a choice between a moving or a drastic utterance, he normally goes for the latter'.[104] Here, such extremity serves to root the speaker's whole identity in his knowing, because it leaves no room for anything else: he is primarily and essentially a knower. But it also raises puzzling questions about the boundaries of the self, about where the knower ends and the known begins.

These questions were of central interest to the Cambridge philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart, whom Hardy befriended in 1906 after coming to admire his work.[105] McTaggart, an idealist in the British Hegelian tradition, argued that absolute reality (concealed by the illusions of time and matter) consisted in an eternal society of souls united to one another in perfect mutual perception and love. While this quasi-religious vision was grounded in a confessedly mystical intuition, McTaggart sought to defend it on exclusively rational grounds in a substantial body of work culminating in his systematic magnum opus, *The Nature of Existence* (1927). McTaggart's thought prizes the harmony which is supposed to issue from the ability 'to completely know a person and to be known by him', as he put it in a foundational early essay.[106] Indeed, as Avrom Fleishman suggests, 'In answer to the question, what do selves do?, McTaggart might have answered simply, they know each other'.[107] For McTaggart, contrary to more orthodox interpreters of Hegel, the Absolute was not that which transcended individual selves; rather, as Hardy jotted down in his notebook, the 'universal Mind' was for McTaggart only another name for 'the organized society of individual minds', which he took as the ultimate constituents

---

[104] Joseph Brodsky, 'Wooing the Inanimate: Four Poems by Thomas Hardy', in *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 312–75: 362.
[105] After reading *Some Dogmas of Religion* (1906), Hardy took the uncharacteristic step of writing to the author, praising the 'clearness, acuteness and vigour' of McTaggart's thinking. See Hardy to McTaggart, 23 May 1906, in *Collected Letters*, 3. 207.
[106] J. M. E. McTaggart, 'The Further Determination of the Absolute' [1893], repr. in *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901), 224.
[107] Avrom Fleishman, 'Woolf and McTaggart', *English Literary History* 36.4 (1969), 719–38: 727.

of reality.[108] At the same time, McTaggart insisted that the content of these selves was nothing other than the objects of which they were conscious. In consequence, he was forced to admit that his concept of the self was at the very least 'paradoxical', since

> In proportion as I know a thing more completely, I may, from one point of view, be said to have it more completely in myself. But it is equally true to say that, as I more thoroughly understand its nature, it takes more and more the form of a completely and clearly distinct object, and, in proportion as it does this, becomes more emphatically not myself.[109]

Philip Davis's account of Hardy's own philosophical bind as a writer resonates with the way in which McTaggart's metaphysics seem to destabilise the boundary between the self and other selves, the knowing subject and the object of knowledge:

> that the consciousness of what was internal, what external to him was still, for all that, a naggingly internal consciousness of his own; that this consciousness still suffered from knowing inside what remained denyingly outside for all that[110]

Yet to call this 'Hardy's torture' is both too one-sided (as 'To an Actress' attests, it is not always experienced as suffering) and too hasty in ascribing its effects to the author himself, condescending to diagnose what the poetry often offers to dramatise.

In 'To an Actress', 'the knowing you is all of me' could suggest two contradictory things: that the subject has been colonised by the object, or the object by the subject (although these are possibilities by which the speaker is beguiled rather than terrorised).

---

[108] Hardy, *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, 2 vols, ed. Lennart A. Björk (London: Macmillan, 1985), 2. 167. Hardy cribbed this passage from a review in *Mind* of Richard Haldane's 1904 Gifford lectures, *The Pathway to Reality*.

[109] McTaggart, 'Human Immortality', in *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, 4–54: 22. McTaggart's critics faulted his ontology as incoherent: 'To get the selves outside one another enough to leave them individual and yet inside one another enough to provide each with its complement of universe', wrote R. R. Marett, 'proves a ticklish business' (review of McTaggart, *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, *Mind* 11.43 (1902), 389–93: 391).

[110] Philip Davis, *Memory and Writing from Wordsworth to Lawrence* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1983), 401.

Jocelyn Pierston is similarly bewitched observing the second Avice in *The Well-Beloved* (1892):

> How incomparably the immaterial dream dwarfed the grandest of substantial things, when here, between those three sublimities—the sky, the rock, and the ocean—the minute personality of this washer-girl filled his consciousness to its extremest boundary, and the stupendous inanimate scene shrank to a corner therein.[111]

The narrator describes a Wonderland scene of surreal disproportions in which the grand, sublime, and stupendous are dwarfed by the minute, the material displaced by the immaterial. The scene anticipates McTaggart's perfectionist account of knowing under the conditions of absolute reality: for 'when knowledge is perfect', he maintained, 'we must see nothing but Spirit everywhere. We must have seen through matter till it disappears.'[112] Such knowledge coincides with 'a powerful and endless state of love', in which 'we shall know nothing but our beloved, and those they love, and ourselves as loving them'.[113] Following Hegel, McTaggart thinks of love as 'an emotion which springs from a sense of union with another self', and he conceives of knowledge as a method of 'endeavouring to obtain that unity'.[114] Many of the people in Hardy's poems share these assumptions, but they are also faced with the challenge that to understand knowledge in this way is (as McTaggart concedes) to imagine a state of perfection which, under the conditions of present experience, it 'can never reach'.[115] As 'To an Actress' shows, even this wished-for consummation is a fantasy which finds itself caught between the annexation of the known

---

[111] Hardy, *The Well-Beloved* [1892], ed. Tom Hetherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 102.
[112] McTaggart, 'Further Determination', 219.
[113] Ibid., 224. McTaggart's philosophical investment in love was highly distinctive among British idealists, who had little to say on the subject. See Joe Saunders, 'Taking love seriously: McTaggart, absolute reality and chemistry', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26.4 (2018), 719–37: 719.
[114] McTaggart, 'Emotion', in *The Nature of Existence*, ed. C. D. Broad, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 2. 144–69: 151; 'Further Determination', 17.
[115] Ibid., 18.

and the extinction of the knower, a knowing whose imperial ambitions are at the same time a tacit form of dependence.

This dependence is suggested by McTaggart's formulation above: when we come to know nothing but our beloved, we have reached a point at which the only way we can know the self is to know 'ourselves as loving them'. In such a scenario it is as though knowledge of the other were what rendered the self knowable to itself. This picture of intersubjectivity is one which invests the other with awesome power even as it exerts a demonic will to possession; such possessiveness may indeed be a form of defence against the fearful intuition of such power. 'O cruelty, the insight barred me then!' exclaims the actress's admirer, reflecting on the days when her name meant nothing to him:[116]

> Why did I not possess me with its sound,
> And in its cadence catch and catch again
> Your nature's essence floating therearound?[117]

By being assigned to her name, the actress's supposed essence is made into something catchable—that is, as his verb suggests, possessable, but also manipulable, something he can catch *and catch again*. This speaker's romance, then, appears to be more with his knowing than with its object (about whom we learn nothing besides her profession). He cannot bear the thought of being parted from his 'insight', because as the sestet unfolds, such a loss would amount to losing the self. The wish to possess 'Your nature's essence', therefore, is perhaps first of all a wish to endow himself with such an essence.

Knowledge serves a similar purpose in 'The Sigh', a poem equally invested in a perfectionist model of interpersonal knowing. Reminiscing about a kiss, the speaker

---

[116] Hardy, 'To an Actress', l. 5, in *PWH*, 1. 287.
[117] Ibid., ll. 6–8, in *PWH*, 1. 287.

regrets how the moment was tainted for him by a sigh whose meaning he was never able to penetrate through the course of a long and close marriage:

> That there mingled with her feeling
> Some sad thought she was concealing
> It implied.[118]

It seems to him that he caught the mood but missed the meaning, and his subsequent attempts to reassure himself about that meaning protest a little too much, as if hastily retreating from his own logic:

> —Not that she had ceased to love me,
> None on earth she set above me;
> But she sighed.
>
> She could not disguise a passion,
> Dread, or doubt, in weakest fashion
> If she tried:
> Nothing seemed to hold us sundered,
> Hearts were victors; so I wondered
> Why she sighed.
>
> Afterwards I knew her throughly,
> And she loved me staunchly, truly,
> Till she died;
> But she never made confession
> Why, at that first sweet concession,
> She had sighed.[119]

The truncated grammar and introductory dash make the first mitigation sound hurried ('—Not that she had ceased to love me') while the second is both pressingly assertive and ludicrously pitter-patter ('She could not disguise a passion, / Dread, or doubt, in weakest fashion / If she tried'). The proud declaration which follows—'Afterwards I knew her *throughly*'—has a more ambiguous tone, not least because of Hardy's curious

[118] Hardy, 'The Sigh', ll. 7–9, in *PWH*, 1. 278.
[119] Ibid., ll. 10–24, in *PWH*, 1. 278.

Elizabethanism. The *prima facie* meaning of 'throughly' as 'thoroughly' is sufficiently strange as a description of how one might know someone: it lends a personal relationship an oddly businesslike air, as if to know a person were in some obscure sense to have done one's duty. The antiquated terminology adds the suggestion of seeing *through* someone, with its imputation of deceit, and for a church-going readership (and author) may have called to mind the still more alarming subtext of Psalm 51, recited monthly at evensong and set to music in popular anthems by Handel and S. S. Wesley: 'Wash me throughly from my wickedness' (Psalm 51: 2).[120] Knowing in this poem, then, is styled as an act of judgement and even of redemption, the knower casting himself in a position not far from that of God. This apotheosis of the knower also entails an assumption of omniscience: to know throughly is to have no need of asking any questions, and hence to run no risk of disagreeable answers. In this way, knowing in 'The Sigh' is figured as a refuge against uncertainty as well as a means of control. Like the man in 'The Shadow on the Stone' who imagines his lost wife standing behind him, its speaker will not 'turn my head to discover / That there was nothing in my belief'.[121] The point being, not that there *is* nothing in it (a cheap and gloating irony on which many of Hardy's less convincing poems rely) but that this speaker refuses to abide a possibility of which he is so restlessly conscious.[122]

If this dynamic is often ironised within Hardy's poetry, sometimes (as in 'Moments of Vision') the poems are genuinely beguiled by it. Whenever Hardy's speakers recoil from the penumbras of uncertainty that surround the beloved, however—whenever they give in to a fantasy of transparent and comprehensive insight—their attitude towards the

---

[120] G. F. Handel, 'Wash me throughly', 3rd movmt. of Chandos Anthem No. 3 (HWV 248) and S. S. Wesley, 'Wash me throughly' (1840). See Benjamin St J. B. Boule, *A Collection of Words to which Music has been Composed or Adapted for use in the Choral Service of the United Church of England and Ireland as Anthems* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts: 1859), 43, 297.
[121] Hardy, 'The Shadow on the Stone', ll. 15–16, in *PWH*, 2. 280.
[122] Hardy himself came to regret the note of caustic irony common to many of the poems in *Satires of Circumstance*: 'Some, even many, of the pieces in the volume do not precisely express my attitude to certain matters nowadays', he wrote to Edmund Gosse: 'they seem to myself harsh beside the others' (Hardy to Edmund Gosse, 1 December 1914, in *Collected Letters*, 5. 65–66: 66).

other is at its least imaginative. 'The poems oscillate wildly between ironic self-questioning and desperate self-comforting', suggests Jahan Ramazani of *Poems 1912–13*, offering the shrewd conjecture that 'this turbulence may be the key to their aesthetic power'.[123] I would add, though, that some of the fiercest self-comforting occurs in the self-questioning: in 'The Spell of the Rose' for example, where contrition becomes a medium of self-congratulation, based as it is on a clairvoyant over-assurance about seeing the beloved as she 'really' was. As Matthew Bevis suggests, knowing in such cases may be mustered as a 'means to tame and triumph over loss, or longing, or both'.[124] Like 'His Heart', 'The Spell of the Rose' conjures a belated recognition as a solvent and solace for tragic mis-vision. The deceased female speaker tells of a relationship that had soured, leaving two 'souls in severance', and she locates the cause of this rupture in misunderstanding: 'misconceits raised horrid shows, / And agonies came thereof.'[125] While the fifth stanza ends wondering tenderly and uncertainly whether the surviving lover 'Gave me his heart anew', the following stanza pushes this delicate wish into a foregone conclusion, 'Perhaps' shading rapidly into 'Ay':

> Perhaps now blooms that queen of trees
> I set but saw not grow,
> And he, beside its glow—
> Eyes couched of the mis-vision that blurred me—
> Ay, there beside that queen of trees
> He sees me as I was, though sees
> Too late to tell me so![126]

There is a whiff of revenge in these lines' vision of corrective surgery, the verb 'couched' referring to an operation to remove cataracts 'by inserting a needle through the coats of the

---

[123] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 51.
[124] Bevis, 'Unknowing Lyric', 581.
[125] Hardy, 'The Spell of the Rose', ll. 25, 20–21, in *PWH*, 2. 67.
[126] Ibid., ll. 36–42, in *PWH*, 2. 67–68.

eye'.[127] The stanza also fundamentally alters the nature of the spell of the rose, converting it from a love spell into a knowledge spell: for the man makes his love conditional on his seeing the speaker as she (supposedly) *really* was.

The *donnée* of both of these poems doubtless owes something to Hardy's discovery of his wife's journal, which was one of the original spurs to the whole penitential project of *Poems 1912–13*. 'The Spell of the Rose' suggests how the commitment to a regime of penance and atonement depends first of all upon knowledge of what is to be atoned for and how. Yet without underrating the devastating effect of what 'The Spell of the Rose' calls 'misconceits', one can believe in the terrible force of misconstructions and still query whether the 'right' construction is out there waiting to be discovered. Where 'The Spell of the Rose' places its faith in the dream of atoning knowledge, 'His Heart' questions the idea that perfect understanding—the ideal of knowing each other 'throughly', knowing 'full and well'—would have saved these lovers, or can save them retrospectively.

Knowledge offers a pledge of happiness in Hardy's poem 'Before Knowledge', whose speaker casts a melancholy eye on 'When I walked roseless tracks and wide, / Ere dawned your date for meeting me':[128]

> O why did you not cry Halloo
> Across the stretch between, and say:
>
> 'We move, while years as yet divide,
> On closing lines which—though it be
> You know me not nor I know you—
> Will intersect and join some day!'[129]

Had he been armed with the knowledge of their future meeting, the speaker believes he could well have 'borne / Each scraping thorn', being able to look forward to a time when

[127] 'couch, *v.*', 9a, *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.
[128] Hardy, 'Before Knowledge', ll. 1–2, in *PWH*, 2. 180.
[129] Ibid., ll. 3–8, in *PWH*, 2. 180.

'You know me' and 'I know you'.[130] For McTaggart, too, knowledge is both the redeemer and the reward, such that 'to completely know a person and to be known by him' is the very basis of ultimate 'harmony'.[131] 'No doubt knowledge does not always have this result in every-day life', he concedes.

> But that is incomplete knowledge, under lower categories and subject to unremoved contingencies, which, from its incompleteness, must leave the mind unsatisfied. Perfect knowledge would be different. "*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*"—even the world knows that.[132]

McTaggart's gospel situates itself both in and loftily above a literary tradition that runs from Goethe through de Staël and Tolstoy, raising their psychological argument to metaphysical heights.[133] A similar logic applies across the entire subgenre of poems Hardy dedicated to the unknowing God, for whom '*Not to Mend* / […] could mean but *Not to Know*'.[134] But knowing is not necessarily mending: it may even be part of the problem.

The speaker in one of Hardy's earliest poems, 'She, to Him II' (composed in 1866), addresses the lover she has lost to a rival, speculating that perhaps in the distant future some chance occurrence will suddenly remind him of her:

> Perhaps, long hence, when I have passed away,
> Some other's feature, accent, thought like mine,
> Will carry you back to what I used to say,
> And bring some memory of your love's decline.
>
> Then you may pause awhile and think, 'Poor jade!'
> And yield a sigh to me—as ample due,
> Not as the tittle of a debt unpaid
> To one who could resign her all to you—
>
> And thus reflecting, you will never see
> That your thin thought, in two small words conveyed,

[130] Ibid., ll. 9–10, in *PWH*, 2. 180.
[131] McTaggart, 'Further Determination', 224.
[132] Ibid.
[133] For a critical history of this proverb, see Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1996), 151–59.
[134] Hardy, 'God-Forgotten', ll. 41–42, in *PWH*, 1. 159.

> Was no such fleeting phantom-thought to me,
> But the Whole Life wherein my part was played;
> And you amid its fitful masquerade
> A Thought—as I in your life seem to be![135]

The lamentable disproportion between the pair's love for each other, between her 'all' and his 'tittle', is echoed in the disproportion between his 'thin thought' and the experience of her 'Whole Life', but the latter does not seem to be something that might have been remedied either by greater love or greater knowledge: even though the speaker 'could resign her all to you' the man remains no more than 'A Thought' to her. A thought is doubtless felt here as superior to a thin thought or a phantom-thought (and a Thought even more so), but these differences are ultimately trivial in respect of the gap which yawns between the thought and the life. If the sestet begins by protesting the flimsiness of this *particular* man's thought it ends by confronting the thinness of thought itself. By the end of her speech, the woman seems uncertain how to weigh the comparative merits of Thought and Life: is the latter the solid, breathing counterweight to the pale spectrality of the former, or is it just a masquerade, the mere painted shell of the real, as an idealist might say?

For twelve lines the poem seems to side with the first of these options, before collapsing, with something like despair, into a rejection of both. This trajectory may be followed more tellingly in the poem's form than in its rhetoric. Although laid out like a Petrarchan sonnet, the drift of the poem's thinking as well as its rhyme scheme have more in common with the Shakespearean form; the sestet could be divided into two unconventional tercets (ECE CCE) but it might more willingly be heard to carry on the forward march of the previous quatrains before turning against itself in a couplet (ECEC CE). The poem is, however, much more echoic than either traditional form, the sestet

[135] Hardy, 'She, to Him II', in *PWH*, 1. 19.

lacing in the earlier C rhyme rather than supplying a new sound, and the C rhyme itself being an outgrowth of the A rhyme (from 'away' / 'say' to 'jade' / 'paid'), whose vowel-music thus makes itself heard throughout the entire sonnet. It is the D-rhyme, however—'you'—that is heard more than any other in this poem, striking no fewer than fifteen times in fourteen lines, though only twice in the terminal position. Acoustically, then, this is a poem that keeps looking back even as it claims to imagine the future, in which the compulsive recursions of thought do nothing to bring back its object. The speaker's vaulting expectations of knowing are disappointed and she is brought to a sceptical impasse.

In the manuscript of the poem Hardy added the note "prosed in 'Desperate Remedies'", and the relevant passage from his first published novel makes explicit the poem's tacit descent into scepticism:[136]

> they will not feel that what to them is but a thought, easily held in these two words of pity, 'Poor girl!' was a whole life to me; as full of hours, minutes, and peculiar minutes, of hopes and dreads, smiles, whisperings, tears, as theirs: that it was my world, what is to them their world, and they in that life of mine, however much I cared for them, only as the thought I seem to them to be. Nobody can enter into another's nature truly, that's what is so grievous.[137]

For Cytherea, knowing is never enough: it always discloses its own inadequacy and can never achieve what she desires from it: to enter into another's nature truly, or rather, that others may enter into her nature truly. This is the ambition treasured in Shelley's essay 'On Love': 'the meeting with […] an imagination which should enter into' the other's inwardness.[138] Cytherea's epistemological ambition harbours an ontological objective, but

---

[136] See *PWH*, 1. 19.
[137] Hardy, *Desperate Remedies* [1871], ed. Mary Rimmer (London: Penguin, 1998), 251–52. See also the description of Tess as a 'passing thought' in others' minds in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 104.
[138] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'On Love' [pubd. 1840], in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York, NY: Norton, 2002), 503–4: 504.

as in ‘She, to Him II’ the attempt to know the other merely ends up demonstrating the impassable boundary between persons. As Shelley concedes, his ideal is merely the ‘unattainable point to which Love tends’.[139] Like McTaggart’s, then, Shelley’s idealisation of knowing risks being a set-up for failure because it predestines anything less to a state of insufficiency. As Cavell writes, such a picture of knowing suffers from a ‘sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge’, expressing the desire for a more-than-human bonding, a melding of identities, as though one’s jealousy were ‘directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him’.[140]

The linking of the desire for knowledge with a dream of intimacy is tested in ‘She, to Him IV’:

> This love puts all humanity from me;
> I can but maledict her, pray her dead,
> For giving love and getting love of thee—
> Feeding a heart that else mine own had fed!
>
> How much I love I know not, life not known,
> Save as one unit I would add love by;
> But this I know, my being is but thine own—
> Fused from its separateness by ecstasy.
>
> And thus I grasp thy amplitudes, of her
> Ungrasped, though helped by nigh-regarding eyes;
> Canst thou then hate me as an envier
> Who see unrecked what I so dearly prize?
> Believe me, Lost One, Love is lovelier
> The more it shapes its moan in selfish-wise.[141]

The ‘She, to Him’ sequence has often been likened to Browning, but a closer parallel might be found in Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose *Early Italian Poets* (1861) had been

---

[139] Ibid.
[140] Cavell, ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy’, in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44–72: 61; Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 9.
[141] Hardy, ‘She, to Him IV’, in *PWH*, 1. 20–21.

published to great acclaim a few years earlier.[142] The form of the sonnet, with its intricate aural patterning, archaic grammar and syntax, and quaint hyphenations ('nigh-regarding', 'selfish-wise'), as well as the topos of the lover's jealousy and abjection, give it the air of one of Rossetti's translations from the *trecento*, except of course that the speaker here is female rather than male. The sonnet weaves together several of the threads entangled in the longing to know and be known by others. The speaker's boast that he can 'grasp thy amplitudes, of her / Ungrasped', for example, echoes the terms of Shelley's essay 'On Love', which posits

> an imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret; with a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres, strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own[143]

Hardy's description of the beloved's 'amplitudes' belongs to the same musical frame of reference as Shelley's metaphor of correspondent vibrations. At the same time, the poem's language of grasping echoes Shelley's account of love as a seizing upon one imagination by another, language which mediates between physical and spiritual forms of possession. As elsewhere in Hardy's poetry, the difficulty expressed by such imagery is in finding where attunement slides into imprisonment; there may be more of heist than of homage in the speaker's avowal that 'my being is but thine own'.

G. H. Lewes wrote in 1879 that the sceptic's conviction that 'each individual is absolutely incapable of knowing any feeling but his own' rests on a 'very restricted definition of knowledge', on which 'we must declare that man is incapable of knowing anything except his present feelings'.[144] By confessing that her lover leads a 'life not

---

[142] Each poem in the sequence is dated 1866: see *PWH*, 1. 18–21.
[143] Shelley, 'On Love', 504.
[144] G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind: Third Series*, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Houghton, Osgood, 1879), 70.

known', yet insisting on their ecstatic union of 'being', Hardy's speaker is left with nothing to know him by except her present feelings; only by looking inside of herself can she find him and love him, hence the justification of her love as the more ardent, because the more selfish, than her rival's.

The reciprocal giving and getting of love pictured in the poem's first quatrain, though initially envied, is revealed as merely a pale reflection of the love which the spurned lover imagines blossoming from their mystical fusion. This is the picture of love to which McTaggart, following Hegel, was committed: 'an emotion which springs from a sense of union with another self'.[145] But this metaphysical sense of union comes at the cost of denuding the beloved of those time-bound, matter-bound qualities which made him loveable in the first place: 'All too unlike the fond and fragile creature / Then known to me', as Hardy describes another Lost One in 'He prefers her Earthly'.[146] McTaggart's fantasy of perfect love rests on the tacit assumption that 'Nothing but perfection could really deserve love', as he proudly affirms.[147] Another of Hardy's synonyms for unknowing suggests how this quest for perfection might end: 'unrecked' may mean 'unnoticed, unheeded', but it also punningly implies that recking might be a kind of wrecking. The poem hints at lethal intent with the speaker's admission that she prays her rival dead, but by the end of the poem it transpires that her ambition to know with absolute and inalienable force has all but killed the thing she loves.

[145] McTaggart, 'Emotion', 2. 151.
[146] Hardy, 'He prefers her Earthly', ll. 11–12, in *PWH*, 2. 241.
[147] McTaggart, 'Further Determination', 2. 225.

Darklier Understood

A way out of the scepticism and despair created by the fantasy of transparent insight is found in those places where unknowing is allowed to flourish. Hardy's ode 'To Shakespeare', composed for the three hundredth anniversary of the poet's death in 1916, juxtaposes the unawareness and indifference of Shakespeare's Stratford contemporaries—'Yes, a worthy man and well-to-do; / Though, as for me, / I knew him but by just a neighbour's nod'—with posterity's reverence for his literary 'harmonies that cow Oblivion'.[148] At first, then, the unknowing of these simple citizens is offered up as a form of self-indictment: 'We did not know him', says another, while still another confesses 'I'faith, few knew him much here'.[149] Yet the poem discovers a pleasant poignancy in the implication that the speaker, with all his appreciation and knowledge of the poet's 'discourse', is no closer to knowing him than were those contemporaries whose ignorance he professes to be shocked by.[150] Shakespeare remains the 'Bright baffling Soul' of the poem's opening invocation: the 'least capturable of themes'.[151]

Hovering behind this theme is the presence of the most famous Victorian ode to Shakespeare, Matthew Arnold's sonnet of 1844 (published in 1849), with its image of the serenely unknowable artist, 'Out-topping knowledge'.[152] Arnold's Shakespeare, too, 'tread on earth unguessed at' and still eludes the 'foiled searching of mortality'.[153] Hardy's poem makes the even stronger claim that the poet will 'remain at heart unread eternally', despite the reading lavished on his works.[154] What seems like a misfortune (not least for a poet) is

---

[148] Hardy, 'To Shakespeare', ll. 22–24, 9, in *PWH*, 2. 174, 173.
[149] Ibid., ll. 30, 25, in *PWH*, 2. 174.
[150] Ibid., l. 7, in *PWH*, 2. 173.
[151] Ibid., l. 1, in *PWH*, 2. 173.
[152] Matthew Arnold, 'Shakespeare', l. 3, in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott, revd. Miriam Farris Allott (London: Longman, 1979), 39 (henceforth *PMA*).
[153] Ibid., ll. 11, 8, in *PMA*, 40.
[154] Hardy, 'To Shakespeare', l. 6, in *PWH*, 2. 173.

converted into a mark of the self's fierce irreducibility. And if, in this poem, such irreducibility testifies to Shakespeare's exceptional genius, elsewhere Hardy suggests it is a human prerogative.

The speaker of 'In the Seventies' is no Shakespeare, but he too imagines himself eluding the comprehension of his peers. Describing how he kept his thoughts 'Penned tight' during his youth, the speaker's word choice suggests not only the sense of keeping his thoughts firmly out of view but also the idea of protecting them from danger (it is after all living things—cattle or poultry—that one pens).[155] The word also punningly associates this inwardness with writing, and perhaps especially with poetry; the 1870s were years of prolific literary output for Hardy, encompassing the publication of six novels (including *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *The Return of the Native*) as well as a number of short stories, but the poetry he wrote during this decade largely did not see the light of day until his first collection, *Wessex Poems*, was published in 1898. The speaker describes his 'neighbours', and 'even my friend', as ignorant of his closely-guarded inner light, whose 'starry thoughts […] threw a magic light' on all his hours of work and rest.[156] There is a psalmodic quality to the speaker's repeated affirmation that 'those who met me did not know / Of the vision', 'yea, those nodders did not know / Of the vision'.[157] But this solemnity is undercut by the playfully alliterative description of his neighbours as 'nodders'—those who know him well enough to give him the friendly salutation of a nod in the street, but who are also implicitly accused of being dozily imperceptive.[158] The vision within nonetheless 'immuned' him from the 'damps' and 'chillings' of their 'misprision' and is itself impervious to the contingencies of material existence, as the last stanza suggests:

---

[155] Hardy, 'In the Seventies', l. 2 and l. 6, in *PWH*, 2. 196.
[156] Ibid., ll. 7, 3, in *PWH*, 2. 196.
[157] Ibid., ll. 13–14, 17–18, in *PWH*, 2. 196.
[158] See 'nod, *v.*', 1a and 2a, *OED Online* (pubd. June 2021), accessed 1 September 2021.

> In the seventies nought could darken or destroy it,
> Locked in me,
> Though as delicate as lamp-worm's lucency;
> Neither mist nor murk could weaken or alloy it
> In the seventies!—could not darken or destroy it,
> Locked in me.[159]

Locked within him, the radiance of his vision is safe from the depredations that menace matter. The faint echo here of the Sermon on the Mount is confirmed by Hardy's manuscript draft, which shows that he originally had 'moth nor rust' for 'mist nor murk', paralleling Christ's injunction to 'lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt'.[160] The muffled allusion contributes to the poem's characterisation of this soul-treasure as indestructible and inexhaustible. One might, then, hear a further biblical allusion in the speaker's words, the prologue to the Gospel of John: 'And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not'.[161]

The poem declines to illuminate this secret vision for the benefit of the reader and prompts the thought that perhaps the speaker himself has no clearer idea. But I do not mean to suggest that this would expose him as playing some sort of trick (on the reader, or on himself). Might it be that the lucency he cherishes is an emblem of his own otherness to, and within, himself? A name for the way in which he remains opaque to himself? He presents himself as holding on tightly and steadfastly to something in the face of his neighbours' advice that he 'mend' his ideas: but perhaps what he is holding onto is precisely a refusal to capitulate to their demands for self-definition.[162] At issue, then, would be not so much the content of this vision as the starry sense of possibility it holds out against the deadly compliance modelled by society's 'nodders'.

---

[159] Hardy, 'In the Seventies', ll. 19–24, in *PWH*, 2. 196–97.
[160] See *PWH*, 2. 197; Matthew 6: 20.
[161] John 1: 5.
[162] Hardy, 'In the Seventies', l. 10, in *PWH*, 2. 196.

A sense of the self as attractively unknowable to itself is universalised in 'So Various', a poem which unrolls in twelve stanzas like a zodiac of character traits, offering a series of descriptions of highly disparate characters who are at length revealed to be one and the same man. The stanzas are divided into pairings which evince this person's contradictory qualities: he is lit up by inner fires yet cold as a stone, totally trustworthy yet wildly capricious, learned yet a dunce, jovial yet despondent. The mistake which the interpreter makes each time is to extrapolate immutable characteristics from a transitory impression: to set the man down as one who '*never* had known / Of mirth or moan', or one so evidently cheerful that he '*never* could conceive him sad'.[163] The poem concludes with an admission of how surprising it is that these wildly discordant behaviours, 'So various in their pith and plan', should all belong to the same individual.[164] But Hardy had long been persuaded of this view of character; in a note of 1890, he confided that 'I am more than ever convinced that persons are successively various persons, according as each special strand of their characters is brought uppermost by circumstances'.[165] Trying to *know* such a person, in the sense of pinning them down, would be a fool's errand.

This conviction is echoed and applied to the idea of a poetic collection in Hardy's 'Apology' for his *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1922), in which he warns readers to be on their guard for 'the chance little shocks that may be caused over a book of various character like the present and its predecessors by the juxtaposition of unrelated, even discordant, effusions'.[166] The subtitle of the later collection from which 'So Various' is drawn gestures back to this defence of the right to vary: *Winter Words, in Various Moods and Metres*. The protean, episodic nature of the self which Hardy defends in the poem stands foursquare against what the philosopher Galen Strawson calls the 'narrativist thesis' of selfhood,

[163] Hardy, 'So Various', ll. 9–10, 37, in *PWH*, 3. 206, 207.
[164] Ibid., l. 62, in *PWH*, 3. 208.
[165] Hardy, *Life and Work*, 241.
[166] Hardy, 'Apology', in *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, 2. 321–22.

which he crisply defines as the claim that 'we have some sense of the unity of our life, and ought to'.[167] 'The unity is there, no doubt', argues Strawson, 'but it's not something one needs to be aware of. To think about it, to try to nurture it, is to risk fantasy and self-deception.'[168] This, arguably, is the perception towards which poems like 'So Various', 'Moments of Vision', and 'In a Former Resort' move in regard to the self, and which poems like 'To an Actress', 'The Sigh', 'His Heart', and 'She, to Him IV' develop in regard to other selves—even as every one of them registers the unremitting pull which idealised forms of knowing exercise over the human imagination.

By contrast, 'After a Journey'—the most forward-looking of the *1912–13* elegies—aspires towards a condition of unknowing in which the liveliness of relationship is measured not by the degree of mutual knowledge but by each party's receptiveness to the perpetual motion of 'whim':

> Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost;
> Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?
> Up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost,
> And the unseen waters' ejaculations awe me.
> Where you will next be there's no knowing,
> Facing round about me everywhere,
> With your nut-coloured hair,
> And gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going.
>
> Yes: I have re-entered your olden haunts at last;
> Through the years, through the dead scenes I have tracked you;
> What have you now found to say of our past—
> Scanned across the dark space wherein I have lacked you?
> Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division?
> Things were not lastly as firstly well
> With us twain, you tell?
> But all's closed now, despite Time's derision.
>
> I see what you are doing: you are leading me on
> To the spots we knew when we haunted here together,
> The waterfall, above which the mist-bow shone

[167] Galen Strawson, 'The Unstoried Life', in *On Life-Writing*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 284–301: 295.
[168] Ibid.

> At the then fair hour in the then fair weather,
> And the cave just under, with a voice still so hollow
> That it seems to call out to me from forty years ago,
> When you were all aglow,
> And not the thin ghost that I now frailly follow!
>
> Ignorant of what there is flitting here to see,
> The waked birds preen and the seals flop lazily
> Soon you will have, Dear, to vanish from me,
> For the stars close their shutters and the dawn whitens hazily.
> Trust me, I mind not, though Life lours,
> The bringing me here; nay, bring me here again!
> I am just the same as when
> Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers.[169]

As the speaker is drawn desirously on by the sprightly elusions of the beloved, one moment 'lost' out of sight, the next facing him 'everywhere', his passion is fired rather than frustrated by his inability ever to catch up with her. '[Y]ou are leading me on', he tells her, and in this forward-faring there is also the glint of a shared joke: he is playing along with her game. The poem plays a game of its own in withholding the fact that this scene is taking place under the darkness of night until five lines from the end, a ruse which goes strangely unremarked in all the criticism of the poem I have encountered. For only then do we discover why the waters' ejaculations are 'unseen', or that the 'dark space' of memory has a physical counterpart which literalises the figure, or why the speaker has to cleave so close to the woman and seems constantly in danger of losing sight of her. By keeping us in the dark about the night-time setting, Hardy encourages us to see something more in all these features than meets the eye.

Ramazani's claim, therefore, that 'by fixing her in the landscape and form she once inhabited, Hardy traps her in an image that he can control' seems misguided: on the contrary, Hardy's speaker is besotted with the idea of renouncing that control which he is

[169] Hardy, 'After a Journey', in *PWH*, 2. 59–60.

so forcefully bound to (and by) elsewhere in the sequence.[170] 'The Spell of the Rose' presented a prime example of such epistemic despotism, founded as it is on a notion of perfect, final insight. As William Morgan notes, with this poem the lovers' 'reconciliation is complete'—but it is just this completeness which brings their relationship to a close.[171] Whether pursued through mechanical processes of rote-reading or magical spells of transparent insight, the quest for knowledge which beguiles so many of Hardy's speakers risks becoming a fight for custody of the other's mind.

'Is not this *incompleteness*', Hardy once challenged an interlocutor, 'a characteristic of all phenomena, of the universe at large?'[172] To abolish the incompleteness of the lovers' mutual knowing would be to call time on their liaison. 'After a Journey' seems to teeter on this brink at the phrase 'But all's closed now'. Yet as Peter Sacks observes, unlike in 'The Going', where 'All's past amend' brings the poem towards its close, this momentary resignation 'marks only the halfway point of "After a Journey"', seeming to clear the way for a 'continuing and shared entry into the happier days of courtship'.[173] In putting aside the clamorous wish to know, Hardy's poem discovers another of 'Life's Little Ironies', only this one comes at the expense of those of his speakers inclined to gloat over others' unknowing. As Tennyson expressed it in the elegy which casts its long and availing shadow over Hardy's contribution to the genre, this is the irony that the loved one is 'Loved deeplier, darklier understood'.[174] Death teaches this lesson, but if for Tennyson it arrives as a consolation, for Hardy it shows what might have been as well as what might be.

---

[170] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 58.
[171] William W. Morgan, 'Form, Tradition, and Consolation in Hardy's "Poems of 1912–13"', *PMLA* 89.3 (1974), 496–505: 504.
[172] Archer, 'With Mr Thomas Hardy', 45 (emphasis mine).
[173] Hardy, 'The Going', l. 36, in *PWH*, 2. 48; Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 254.
[174] Alfred Tennyson, 'In Memoriam A. H. H.', CXXIX. 10, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 2nd edn., 3 vols, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Longman, 1987), 2. 449.

For the kinds of questions which 'After a Journey' poses are radically different from the peremptory 'Why, why was it so?' of the detective-poet in 'In the Vaulted Way'.[175] Hardy's elegy models a mode of engagement, and a style of reading, in which (as Michel Chaouli has proposed) would-be knowers seek 'not to control their objects but to be affected by them in ways that are not always predictable'.[176] In contrast to the anxious and repetitive importunings of 'In the Vaulted Way', 'After a Journey' raises a query that is both more open and more imaginative: 'What have you now found to say of our past'? Only through such unknowing inquiry can these lovers give their past a future. 'Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division?' 'Things were not lastly as firstly well / With us twain, you tell?' Here is the kind of reading as intelligent guesswork, a fluid experiment in redescription and recreation—in which the reader's own interests are not simply given but always at stake—which the poets in this thesis promote over thinner, more suspicious and end-directed approaches to reading poetry (and the world).

While there may, then (as Eric Griffiths suggests), be something 'vexed' about the speaker's tone in this poem, it is a very different strain of vexation from that which afflicts Hardy's more needling knowers.[177] 'Where you will next be there's no knowing' speaks with a savour and a zest quite unsuspected by those hungry for knowledge. In this thesis I have argued that Victorian poetry explores the deadly appeasements such an appetite may exact; and I have tried to show how poets persistently reimagine the 'dark space' of unknowing as a world rich in possibility and promise. If I refrain from a more expansive conclusion than this, it is because such a gesture seems incongruous with those poetic and critical qualities which I have throughout been keenest to celebrate. What Leavis most admired about 'After a Journey' was its 'absence of clinching effect, or of any suggestion

[175] Hardy, 'In the Vaulted Way', l. 12, in *PWH*, 1. 276.
[176] Michel Chaouli, 'Criticism and Style', *New Literary History* 44.3 (2013), 323–44: 342.
[177] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, 219.

of a sum worked out'.[178] What makes this absence more than an abstention is the momentum it gives rein to: for unlike the preening birds and the flopping seals, whose ignorance is a sign of their self-absorption, the faith that 'there's no knowing' is a profession of trust in how much may still be 'flitting here to see'.

[178] Leavis, 'Reality and Sincerity', in *A Selection from Scrutiny*, ed. F. R. Leavis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 248–57: 255.

Bibliography

Manuscripts

Clough, Arthur Hugh. ‘Inventory’. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. misc. c. 359 ff. 152–59.

———. ‘Letter to Blanche Smith, 21 January 1852’. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Lett. e. 77 ff. 64–66.

———. ‘Letter of Parepidemus, A’. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. misc. d. 512 ff. 49–62.

Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. ‘Books belonging to Dante G. Rossetti’. Vancouver, University of British Columbia, MS RBSC-ARC-1009 f. xv.

———. ‘Small Notebook 3’. London, British Library, MS Ashley 1410 (3).

Primary Sources

For poetry, novels, plays, letters, journals, and notebooks, references to complete scholarly editions are given. For essays and other non-fiction prose, I give the volume in which such works were collected where the collection was supervised by the author; where these works were only subsequently collected by editors they are cited individually.

Archer, William. *Real Conversations Recorded by William Archer*. London: Heinemann, 1904.

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. *Aristotle: The Basic Works*. Tr. W. D. Ross. Ed. Richard McKeon. New York, NY: Random House, 2001. 689–934.

———. *On the Generation of Animals*. Tr. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Arnold, Matthew. ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ [1864]. *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Vol. 3. Ed. R. H. Super. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1962. 258–85.

———. *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*. Ed. Cecil Y. Lang. 6 vols. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996.

———. ‘Literature and Science’ [1882]. *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Vol. 10. Ed. R. H. Super. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1974. 53–73.

———. *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*. Ed. Kenneth Allott. Revd. Miriam Farris Allott. London: Longman, 1979.

———. ‘Preface to First Edition of *Poems* (1853)’. *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Vol. 1. Ed. R. H. Super. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960. 1–15.

———. ‘The Study of Poetry’ [1880]. *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Vol. 9. Ed. R. H. Super. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1973. 161–88.

Augustine. *On the Trinity: Books 8–15*. Tr. Stephen McKenna. Ed. Gareth B. Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Bagehot, Walter. ‘Mr Clough’s Poems’. *National Review* 13 (October 1862): 310–26.

———. ‘Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry’. *National Review* 19 (November 1864): 27–67.

Bailey, Samuel. *Essays on the Pursuit of Truth*. London: Hunter, 1829.

Barrett, W. F. ‘Mind-Reading versus Muscle-Reading’. *Nature* 24.610 (1881): 212.

Barrett, W. F., Edmund Gurney, and Frederic W. H. Myers. ‘First Report on Thought-Reading’. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1 (1882–83): 13–34.

Beerbohm, Max. *A Christmas Garland*. London: Heinemann, 1912.

Bentham, Jeremy. ‘The Rationale of Reward’ [1825]. *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*. Vol. 2. Ed. John Bowring. Edinburgh: Tait, 1843. 189–266.

Bergson, Henri. ‘Memory of the Present and False Recognition’ [1908]. *Mind-Energy*. Tr. H. Wildon Carr. Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 106–48.

Bishop, Elizabeth. *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters*. Ed. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz. New York, NY: Library of America, 2008.

Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. 2nd edn. Ed. David V. Erdman. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982.

Boirac, Émile. Letter to *Revue Philosophique* 1 (1876): 430–31.

Boule, Benjamin St J. B. *A Collection of Words to which Music has been Composed or Adapted for use in the Choral Service of the United Church of England and Ireland as Anthems*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1859.

Bradley, A. C. *Poetry for Poetry's Sake*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901.

Brooke, Stopford A. *The Poetry of Robert Browning*. London: Webster, 1902.

Brougham, Henry. 'Inaugural Address' [1825]. *Inaugural Addresses by Lord Rectors of the University of Glasgow*. Glasgow: Robertson, 1839. 41–70.

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Ed. Sandra Donaldson. 5 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010.

Browning, Robert. *The Brownings' Correspondence*. 27 vols. Ed. Philip Kelley et al. Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1984–.

———. *Browning's Trumpeter: The Correspondence of Robert Browning and F. J. Furnivall, 1872–1889*. Ed. William S. Peterson. Washington, DC: Decatur House Press, 1979.

———. *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*. 17 vols. Ed. Jack W. Herring. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1969–.

———. *Learned Lady: Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs. Thomas Fitzgerald, 1876–1889*. Ed. Edward C. McAleer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966.

———. *The Poems of Browning*. 4 vols. Ed. Daniel Karlin et al. London: Longman, 2014–.

———. *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. 15 vols. Ed. Michael Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–.

———. *Robert Browning: The Poems*. 2 vols. Ed. John Pettigrew. London: Penguin, 1981.

Buckland, William. *Geology and Mineralogy, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*. 2 vols. London: Pickering, 1836.

Burnham, William H. 'Memory, Historically and Experimentally Considered'. *The American Journal of Psychology* 2.3 (1889): 431–64.

Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Cicerone: An Art Guide to Painting in Italy*. Tr. Mrs. A. H. Clough. Ed. J. A. Crowe. London: Murray, 1879.

Byron, George Gordon. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*. 8 vols. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980–93.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* [1838–39]. 5 vols. Ed. H. D. Traill. London: Chapman and Hall, 1899.

———. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* [1841]. Ed. H. D. Traill. London: Chapman and Hall, 1897.

———. *Latter-Day Pamphlets* [1850]. Ed. H. D. Traill. London: Chapman and Hall, 1899.

———. *Sartor Resartus* [1836]. Ed. H. D. Traill. London: Chapman and Hall, 1896.

———. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels* [1839]. 2 vols. Ed. H. D. Traill. London: Chapman and Hall, 1899.

———. 'Wotton Reinfred' [written 1826–27]. *The Last Words of Thomas Carlyle*. New York, NY: Appleton, 1892. 1–150.

Chesterton, G. K. *Robert Browning*. London: Macmillan, 1903.

———. *St Francis of Assisi*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923.

Clough, Arthur Hugh. *Clough: Selected Poems*. Ed. J. P. Phelan. London: Longman, 1995.

———. *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*. 2 vols. Ed. F. H. Mulhauser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957.

———. *Letters and Remains of Arthur Hugh Clough*. London: Spottiswoode, 1865.

———. *The Oxford Diaries of Arthur Hugh Clough*. 2nd edn. Ed. Anthony Kenny, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

———. 'Paper on Religion' [c. 1850]. *Selected Prose Works of Arthur Hugh Clough*. Ed. Buckner B. Trawick. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1964. 287–89.

———. *The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*. Ed. F. L. Mulhauser. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

———. 'Recent English Poetry'. *North American Review* 77 (July 1853): 1–30.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Anima Poetae: From the Unpublished Note-Books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. London: Heinemann, 1895.

———. *Biographia Literaria* [1817]. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Vol. 7. 2 vols. Ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

———. 'Lectures on the Principles of Judgement, Culture, and European Literature: Lecture 9' [1818]. *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Vol. 5. 2 vols. Ed. R. A Foakes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987. 2: 167–82.

———. 'Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton in Illustration of the Principles of Poetry: Lecture 1' [1811]. *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Vol. 5. 2 vols. Ed. R. A. Foakes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987. 1: 181–200.

———. *Poetical Works I. The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Vol. 16. 2 vols. Ed. J. C. C. Mays. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Craik, George Lillie. *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties*. London: Knight, 1830.

Crichton-Browne, James. *The Cavendish Lecture on Dreamy Mental States*. London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox, 1895.

Dallas, E. S. *The Gay Science*. 2 vols. London: Chapman and Hall, 1866.

De la Mare, Walter. 'Not Sounds, but Silences'. *Times Literary Supplement* 594 (29 May 1913): 231.

De Quincey, Thomas. 'Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected, No. III' [1823]. *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*. Vol. 3. Ed. Frederick Burwick. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000. 59–74.

———. 'The Works of Alexander Pope, Esquire' [1848]. *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*. Vol. 16. Ed. Robert Morrison. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003. 332–64.

Dick, Thomas. *On the Improvement of Society by the Diffusion of Knowledge*. New York, NY: Harper, 1833.

Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield* [1850]. Ed. Nina Burgis. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008.

———. *Oliver Twist* [1838]. Ed. Kathleen Tillotson. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

Dugas, Ludovic. 'Observations sur la Fausse Mémoire'. *Revue Philosophique* 37 (1894): 34–45.

Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda*. Ed. Terence Cave. London: Penguin, 1995.

———. *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954–79.

———. 'The Lifted Veil' [1859]. *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*. Ed. Helen Small. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009. 1–44.

———. 'Mackay's *Progress of the Intellect*'. *Westminster Review* 45 (January 1851): 353–68.

———. *Middlemarch* [1872]. Ed. David Carroll. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2019.

———. ‘Notes on Form in Art (1868)’. *Essays of George Eliot*. Ed. Thomas Pinney. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963. 431–36.

Ellis, Havelock. ‘Thomas Hardy’s Novels’. *Westminster Review* 119 (April 1883): 334–64.

———. *The World of Dreams.* London: Constable, 1911.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays: First Series* [1841]. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 2. Ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979.

———. *Essays: Second Series* [1844]. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 3. Ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983.

———. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 16 vols. Ed. William H. Gilman et al. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1960–82.

———. *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* [1849]. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 1. Ed. Robert E. Spiller. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

———. *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* [1850]. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 4. Ed. Wallace E. Williams and Douglas Emory Wilson. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.

———. *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Joel Myerson. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Ferrier, James Frederick. *Institutes of Metaphysic: The Theory of Knowing and Being*. Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1854.

Firenzuola, Agnolo. *On the Beauty of Women* [1548]. Tr. and ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

Freud, Sigmund. ‘The “Uncanny”’ [1919]. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 17. Ed. James Strachey et al. London: Hogarth, 1917–19. 219–56.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*. Ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.

Gautier, Théophile. *The Louvre* [1867]. *The Works of Théophile Gautier*. Vol. 5. Ed. and tr. F. C. de Sumichrast. Boston, MA: Brainard, 1901. 1–322.

Gray, Thomas. *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray: English, Latin and Greek*. Ed. H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.

Griffin, W. Hall and Harry Christopher Minchin. *The Life of Robert Browning*. London: Methuen, 1910.

Grote, John. *Exploratio Philosophica: Rough Notes on Modern Intellectual Science*. Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, 1865.

Hake, Thomas Gordon. 'Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti'. *New Monthly Magazine*. Vol. 146. London: Adams and Francis, 1870. 681–700.

Hallam, Arthur. 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson'. *Englishman's Magazine* 1.5 (August 1831): 616–28.

Hamilton, William. *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature, Education and University Reform*. 2nd edn. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans: 1853.

Hardinge, William Money. 'A Note on the Louvre Sonnets of Rossetti'. *Temple Bar* 91 (March 1891): 433–43.

Hardy, Thomas. *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*. 7 vols. Ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–88.

———. *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*. 5 vols. Ed. Samuel Hynes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983–95.

———. *Desperate Remedies* [1871]. Ed. Mary Rimmer. London: Penguin, 1998.

———. *Jude the Obscure* [1895]. Ed. Patricia Ingham. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2002.

———. *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* [pubd. as *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840–1891* [1928] and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892–1928* [1930]]. Ed. Michael Millgate. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984.

———. *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*. 2 vols. Ed. Lennart A. Björk. London: Macmillan, 1985.

———. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* [1873]. Ed. Alan Manford. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2005.

———. *The Return of the Native* [1878]. Ed. Tony Slade. London: Penguin, 1999.

———. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* [1891]. Ed. Simon Gatrell and Juliet Grindle. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

———. *The Well-Beloved* [1892]. Ed. Tom Hetherington. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

———. *The Woodlanders* [1887]. Ed. Dale Kramer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Haydon, Benjamin. *The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Haydon*. 2 vols. [pubd. as *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, Historical Painter* [1853]]. Ed. Aldous Huxley. London: Davies, 1926.

Hazlitt, William. *The Plain Speaker* [1826]. *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*. Vol. 8. Ed. Duncan Wu. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998.

———. *Lectures on the English Poets* [1818]. *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*. Vol. 2. Ed. Duncan Wu. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998.

Holland, Henry. *Chapters on Mental Physiology*. London: Longman, 1852.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*. Ed. Claude Colleer Abbott. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955.

———. *Poems*. Ed. Robert Bridges. London: Humphrey Milford, 1918.

Hueffer, Ford Madox. *Rossetti: A Critical Essay on His Art*. London: Duckworth, 1902.

Hughlings Jackson, John. 'Notes on Cases of Diseases of the Nervous System'. *The Medical Times and Gazette* 1382 (23 December 1876): 700–702.

———. 'On a particular variety of epilepsy ("Intellectual Aura"), one case with symptoms of organic brain disease'. *Brain* 11.2 (1888): 179–206.

Hugo, Victor. 'From *Cromwell*: Preface' [1827]. *The Essential Victor Hugo*. Ed. E. H. Blackmore and A. M. Blackmore. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2004. 16–52.

Hulme, T. E. 'A Lecture on Modern Poetry' [1908]. *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*. Ed. Karen Csengeri. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. 49–56.

Hunt, Leigh. *Imagination and Fancy*. New York, NY: Putnam, 1845.

Hunt, William Holman. *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. 2 vols. London: Dutton, 1914.

Hutton, R. H. *Essays Theological and Literary*. 2 vols. London: Strahan, 1871.

Huxley, T. H. *Hume*. London: Macmillan, 1879.

———. *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*. 3 vols. Ed. Leonard Huxley. London: Macmillan, 1908.

James, Henry. '*Correspondance de* Gustave Flaubert (1893)'. *Literary Criticism*. Vol. 2. Ed. Leon Edel. New York, NY: Library of America, 1984. 295–313.

———. '*Nana* (1880)'. *Literary Criticism*. Vol. 2. Ed. Leon Edel. New York, NY: Library of America, 1984. 864–70.

———. ‘The Novel in *The Ring and the Book* (1912)’. *Literary Criticism*. Vol. 2. Ed. Leon Edel. New York, NY: Library of America, 1984. 791–811.

———. *The Princess Casamassima* [1886]. Ed. Adrian Poole. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Jameson, Anna. *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters*. 2 vols. London: Knight, 1845.

Johnson, Samuel. ‘Gray’ [1781]. *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*. Vol. 23. Ed. John H. Middendorf. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. 1452–71.

———. *The Idler*, no. 84 (24 November 1759). *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*. Vol. 2. Ed. W. J. Bate et al. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963. 261–64.

Jones, Henry. *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*. Glasgow: Maclehose, 1891.

Jowett, Benjamin. *Letters of Benjamin Jowett*. Ed. Evelyn Abbott and Lewis Campbell. London: Murray, 1899.

Kant, Immanuel. ‘An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?’ [1784]. *Practical Philosophy*. Tr. and ed. Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 11–22.

———. *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [1790]. Tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Ed. Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Keats, John. *John Keats: Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982.

———. *Keats’s Paradise Lost*. Ed. Beth Lau. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998.

———. *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*. 2 vols. Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.

Keble, John. *The Christian Year* [1827]. Oxford: James Parker, 1866.

Ker, W. P. *Collected Essays of W. P. Ker*. 2 vols. Ed. Charles Whibley. London: Macmillan, 1925. 234–71.

Klein, Melanie. ‘Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict’ [1928]. *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell. New York, NY: Free Press, 1986. 69–83.

Kraepelin, Emil. ‘Ueber Erinnerungfälschungen’. *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*. Vol. 18. Ed. L. Meyer et al. Berlin: Verlag von August Hirschwald, 1887. 395–436.

Lairesse, Gerard de. *The Art of Painting in All its Branches*. 2nd edn. Tr. J. F. Fritsch. London: 1778.

Lane, Edward William. *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. 2 vols. London: Knight, 1836.

Lawrence, D. H. *Studies in Classic American Literature* [1923]. Ed. Ezra Greenspan et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Leo XIII. *Adiutricem.* The Holy See (5 September 1895). <w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_05091895_adiutricem.html>. Accessed 1 September 2021.

Leopardi, Giacomo. *Zibaldone* [pubd. 1898]. Ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino. Tr. Kathleen Baldwin et al. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013.

Lewes, G. H. *Problems of Life and Mind: Third Series*. Vol. 1. Boston, MA: Houghton, Osgood, 1879.

Liveing, Edward. *On Megrim, Sick-Headache, and Some Allied Disorders, a Contribution to the Pathology of Nerve-Storms*. London: Churchill, 1873.

Lives of Eminent Persons. London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1833.

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*. Tr. W. H. D. Rouse. Revd. Martin F. Smith. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Macaulay, Thomas Babington. *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*. 3 vols. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1843.

Mackail, J. W., ed. *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* [1890]. London: Longmans, Green, 1911.

Mackay, Robert William. *The Progress of the Intellect*. 2 vols. London: Chapman, 1850.

Manning, Henry Edward. *The Internal Mission of the Holy Ghost*. London: Burns and Oates, 1875.

Mansel, Henry Longueville. *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined in Eight Lectures* [1859]. London: Murray, 1867.

Marett, R. R. Review of J. M. E. McTaggart, *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*. *Mind* 11.43 (1902): 389–93.

Maxwell, James Clerk. 'The Kinetic Theory of Gases', *Nature* 16.404 (26 July 1877): 242–46.

McTaggart, J. M. E. *The Nature of Existence*. Ed. C. D. Broad. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927.

———. *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901.

Mercier, Cardinal. *Pastoral Letter of His Eminence Cardinal Mercier: Christmas 1914*. London: Burns and Oates, 1914.

Meredith, George. *The Poems of George Meredith*. 2 vols. Ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978.

Meynell, Alice. *Ceres' Runaway, and Other Essays*. London: Constable, 1909.

———. 'Edgar Allan Poe' [1897]. *The Wares of Autolycus*. Ed. P. M. Fraser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965. 74–77.

———. 'For Faith and Science'. *Merry England* 5 (September 1885): 285–93.

———. 'Her Serene Highness' [1896]. *The Wares of Autolycus*. Ed. P. M. Fraser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965. 16–20.

———. *Mary the Mother of Jesus: An Essay*. London: Philip Lee Warner, 1912.

———. *The Poems of Alice Meynell*. Ed. Frederick Page. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.

———. 'Religio Poetae'. *The Tablet* 82.2776 (22 July 1893): 135.

———. *The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays*. London: John Lane, 1896.

———. *The Second Person Singular, and Other Essays*. 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922.

———. *The Selected Letters of Alice Meynell: Poet and Essayist*. Ed. Damian Atkinson. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013.

———. *The Spirit of Place and Other Essays*. London: John Lane, 1899.

———. 'Veni, Creator'. *The Tablet* 76.2622 (9 August 1890): 211.

Meynell, Viola. *Alice Meynell: A Memoir*. New York, NY: Scribner's, 1929.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill: 1812–1848*. Vol. 1. Ed. Francis E. Mineka. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963.

———. *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* [1865]. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Vol. 9. Ed. John M. Robson. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

———. 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties' [1833]. *Autobiography and Literary Essays*. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Vol. 1. Ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. 342–66.

Milton, John. *John Milton: The Major Works*. Ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2003.

Morris, William. 'Address at the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 3 July 1889'. *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*. Ed. May Morris. Vol. 1. Oxford: Blackwell, 1936. 146–57.

Newman, John Henry. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* [1864]. Ed. Ian T. Ker. London: Penguin, 1994.

———. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [1870]. Ed. Ian T. Ker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

———. *Essays Critical and Historical*. 2 vols. London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1871.

———. *Historical Sketches* [1872]. 2 vols. London: Longmans, 1906.

———. *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated* [1873]. Ed. Ian T. Ker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

———. *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*. Vol. 19. Ed. Charles Stephen Dessain. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

———. *Parochial and Plain Sermons* [1834–43]. 8 vols. London: Rivingtons, 1868.

———. *The Philosophical Notebook of John Henry Newman*. 2 vols. Ed. Edward Sillem New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1970.

———. *Prayers, Verses and Devotions*. Ed. Louis Bouyer. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000.

———. *Sermons, Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief*. London: Rivington, 1843.

———. *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*. Ed. H. M. de Achaval and J. D. Holmes. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science* [1882]. Tr. Josefine Nauckhoff. Ed. Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

The Old Testament in Greek, according to the Septuagint. Vol. 1. Ed. Henry Barclay Swete. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904.

'On the March of Intellect, and Universal Education'. *Fraser's Magazine* 2 (September 1830): 161–70.

Osborn, Henry Fairfield. 'Illusions of Memory'. *North American Review* 138 (March 1884): 476–86.

'Our Music Halls'. *Tinsley's Magazine* 4 (April 1869): 216–23.

Paley, F. A. ‘Browning’s Translation of the “Agamemnon”’. *The Athenaeum* 2609 (27 October 1877): 525–27.

Pater, Walter. *Appreciations with an Essay on Style* [1889]. London: Macmillan, 1910.

———. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* [3rd edn. 1888]. Ed. Donald L. Hill. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980.

Patmore, Coventry. ‘Arthur Hugh Clough’. *St James’s Gazette* 7 (August 1888). Repr. *Arthur Hugh Clough: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Michael Thorpe. London: Routledge, 1972. 335–39.

———. *The Poems of Coventry Patmore*. Ed. Frederick Page. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949.

———. *Principle in Art*, *Etc.* London: Bell, 1889.

———. *Religio Poetæ*, *Etc.* London: Bell, 1893.

Peacock, Thomas Love. *Crotchet Castle* [1831]. *The Cambridge Edition of the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*. Vol. 6. Ed. Freya Johnston and Matthew Bevis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

———. ‘The Four Ages of Poetry (1820)’. *The Cambridge Edition of the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*. Vol. 3. Ed. Nicholas A. Joukovsky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 134–57.

Pearson, Howard S. ‘Browning as a Landscape Painter’. *The Browning Society’s Papers, 1886–7*, Part VIII. London: Trübner, 1886. 103–18.

Peel, Robert. *Sir Robert Peel’s Address on the Establishment of a Library and Reading-Room at Tamworth*. London: Hooper, 1841.

Pius IX. *Ubi primum*. The Holy See (2 February 1849). <w2.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/it/documents/enciclica-ubi-primum-2-febbraio-1849.html>. Accessed 1 September 2021.

Plato. *Phaedrus*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*. Tr. R. Hackforth. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980. 475–525.

———. *Republic*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*. 3rd edn. Vol. 3. Tr. Benjamin Jowett. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892. 1–338.

———. *Theaetetus*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*. 3rd edn. Vol. 4. Tr. Benjamin Jowett. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892. 107–280.

Poe, Edgar Allan. ‘Marginalia’ [1844]. *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. Vol. 16. Ed. J. A. Harrison. New York: Crowell, 1902. 28–30.

———. ‘The Poetic Principle’ [1850]. *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. Vol. 14. Ed. J. A. Harrison. New York: Crowell, 1902. 266–92.

Prout, William. *Chemistry, Meteorology, and the Function of Digestion, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*. London: Pickering, 1834.

Reid, Thomas. *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (1818). Ed. Derek R. Brookes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

Rennie, James. *The Domestic Habits of Birds*. London: Knight, 1833.

Review of *Ambarvalia* and *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*. *The Guardian* 4 (March 1849). Repr. *Arthur Hugh Clough: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Michael Thorpe. London: Routledge, 1972. 78–84.

Ribot, Théodule-Armand. *Diseases of Memory: An Essay in the Positive Psychology*. Tr. William Huntington Smith. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, 1882.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Die frühen Gedichte*. Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1913.

Roget, Peter Mark. *Animal and Vegetable Physiology, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*. 2 vols. London: Pickering, 1834.

Romanes, George J. *Animal Intelligence* [1882]. New York, NY: Appleton, 1884.

———. ‘Thought-Reading’. *Nature* 24.608 (23 June 1881): 171–72.

Rossetti, Christina. *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*. 3 vols. Ed. R. W. Crump. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979–90.

———. *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse*. London: SPCK, 1892.

Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. 2 vols. Ed. William Michael Rossetti. London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886.

———. *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. 10 vols. Ed. William E. Fredeman. Cambridge: Brewer, 2002–15.

———. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jerome McGann. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

———. *Poems*. London: Ellis, 1870.

———. ‘The Staff and the Scrip’. *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. London: Bell and Daldy, 1856. 771–75.

———. ‘Supplementary’. Alexander Gilchrist. *Life of William Blake, ‘Pictor Ignotus’*. Vol. 1. London: Macmillan, 1863. 368–84.

———. ‘A Venetian Pastoral, by Giorgione; in the Louvre’. *The Germ* 4 (April 1850). 181.

———. ‘William Blake’. *Ballads and Sonnets*. London: Ellis and White, 1881.

———. *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed. William Michael Rossetti. London: Ellis, 1911.

Rossetti, W. M. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*. London: Cassell, 1889.

Ruskin, John. *The Diaries of John Ruskin*. Ed. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.

———. *The Eagle’s Nest* [1872]. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 22. Ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1906.

———. *The Elements of Drawing* [1857]. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 15. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1904.

———. *Modern Painters II* [1846]. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 4. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1903.

———. *Modern Painters III* [1856]. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 5. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1904.

———. *Modern Painters IV* [1856]. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 6. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1904.

———. *Praeterita* [1885–89]. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 35. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1908.

———. ‘Pre-Raphaelitism’ [1851]. *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 12. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1904. 337–94.

———. *The Stones of Venice II* [1853]. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 10. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1904.

———. *The Stones of Venice III* [1853]. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Vol. 11. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1904.

Scott, Walter. *Guy Mannering* [1815]. Ed. P. D. Garside. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

Scott, William Bell. *The Year of the World: A Philosophical Poem*. Edinburgh: Tait, 1846.

Sellar, W. P. Review of *Poems by Arthur Hugh Clough*. *North British Review* 37 (November 1862). Repr. *Arthur Hugh Clough: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Michael Thorpe. London: Routledge, 1972. 175–94.

Shairp, John Campbell. *Aspects of Poetry: Being Lectures Delivered at Oxford*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1881.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

———. *King Lear*. Ed. R. A. Foakes. London: Bloomsbury, 1997.

Sharp, William. 'The Rossettis'. *Fortnightly Review* 39 (March 1886): 414–29.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 'A Defence of Poetry' [pubd. 1840]. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York, NY: Norton, 2002. 509–35.

———. 'On Life' [pubd. 1840]. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York, NY: Norton, 2002. 505–9.

———. 'On Love' [pubd. 1840]. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York, NY: Norton, 2002. 503–4.

———. *The Poems of Shelley*. 4 vols. Ed. Geoffrey Matthews et al. London: Longman, 1989–.

'Short Notices'. *English Historical Review* 27.108 (October 1912): 821.

Sidney, Philip. 'The Defence of Poetry' [1595]. *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*. Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973. 73–121.

Smith, Alexander. 'The Philosophy of Poetry'. *Blackwood's* 39.242 (December 1835): 827–39.

Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene* [1596]. Ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. London: Routledge, 2007.

Stephens, F. G. 'Mr Rossetti's Pictures'. *Athenaeum* 1982 (21 October 1865): 545–46.

Strachey, Lytton. *Eminent Victorians* [1918]. Ed. John Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2003.

Sully, James. 'The Undefinable in Art'. *Cornhill Magazine* 38 (November 1878): 559–72.

Sutherland Orr, Alexandra. *A Handbook to the Works of Browning*. 6th edn. London: Bell, 1892.

Swinburne, Algernon Charles. *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. 20 vols. Ed. Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise. London: Heinemann, 1925–27.

Symonds, John Addington. 'Arthur Hugh Clough'. *Fortnightly Review* 24 (December 1868): 589–617.

———. ‘Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque’. *Littell’s Living Age* 177 (Apr–Jun 1888): 344–49.

———. *An Introduction to the Study of Dante*. London: Smith, Elder, 1872.

Symons, Arthur. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. London: Heinemann, 1899.

Tennyson, Alfred. *The Poems of Tennyson*. 2nd edn. 3 vols. Ed. Christopher Ricks. Harlow: Longman, 1987.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *The History of Pendennis* [1849–50]. Ed. John Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1994.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. 5 vols. Tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981.

Thompson, Francis. *The Letters of Francis Thompson*. Ed. John Evangelist Walsh. New York, NY: Hawthorn, 1969.

Thoreau, Henry David. ‘Walking’ [1862]. *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Vol. 5. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin, 1906. 205–48.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America* [1835–40]. Tr. Arthur Goldhammer. New York, NY: Library of America, 2004.

Traubel, Horace. *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Vol. 8. Ed. Jeanne Chapman and Robert MacIsaac. Oregon House, CA: Bentley, 1996.

Vasari, Giorgio. *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* [1568]. 4 vols. Tr. A. B. Hinds. Ed. William Gaunt. London: Dent, 1963.

The Vulgate Bible. Vol. 6: *The New Testament*. Ed. Angela M. Kinney. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Walters, Frank. *Studies of Some of Robert Browning’s Poems*. London: Sunday School Association, 1893.

Warton, Thomas. *History of English Poetry* [1774–81]. 4 vols. Ed. W. Carew Hazlitt. London: Reeves and Turner, 1871.

Westcott, Brooke F. ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’. *Contemporary Review* 5 (May 1867): 1–28.

Whewell, William. *Astronomy and General Physics, Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*. London: Pickering, 1833.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. 10 vols. Ed. Ian Small. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–.

Williams, Isaac. ‘On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge’. *Tracts for the Times*. Vol. 4. London: Rivington, 1840. 1–82.

Wiseman, N. P. S. ‘Sermon in the Metropolitan Church’. *The Sermons, Lectures and Speeches Delivered by His Eminence Cardinal Wiseman, Archbishop of Westminster, During His Tour in Ireland*. Dublin: Duffy, 1859. 138–62.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. 6 vols. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977–80.

Wordsworth, William. ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’ [1815]. *Shorter Poems, 1807–1820*. Ed. Carl H. Ketcham. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989. 632–57.

———. *Poems, in two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*. Ed. Jared Curtis. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.

———. ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802’. *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*. Ed. James Butler and Karen Green. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992. 740–60.

———. *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*. Ed. Mark L. Reed. 2 vols. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Wright, Thomas. *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1875.

Yeats, W. B. *The Trembling of the Veil* [1922]. *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*. Vol. 3. Ed. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald. New York, NY: Scribner, 1999. 109–286.

Secondary Sources

Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953.

———. *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York, NY: Norton, 1973.

Alfano, Veronica. *The Lyric in Victorian Memory: Poetic Remembering and Forgetting from Tennyson to Housman*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Andrews, Malcolm. *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Anger, Suzy, ed. *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Anger, Suzy. ‘Naturalizing the Mind in the Victorian Novel’. *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*. Ed. Lisa Rodensky. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 483–506.

Armond, Andrew D. ‘Limited Knowledge and the Tractarian Doctrine of Reserve in Christina Rossetti’s *The Face of the Deep*’. *Victorian Poetry* 48.2 (2010): 219–42.

Armstrong, Isobel. *Arthur Hugh Clough*. London: British Council, 1962.

———. ‘Browning and the “Grotesque” Style’. *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*. London: Routledge, 1969. 125–51.

———. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Assoun, Paul-Laurent. *Freud and Nietzsche*. Tr. Richard L. Collier. London: Continuum, 2000.

Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2017.

———. *The Work of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Badeni, Julie. *The Slender Tree: A Life of Alice Meynell*. Padstow: Tabb House, 1981.

Bailey, J. O. *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1970.

Bailey, Peter. ‘Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture’. *Past & Present* 144 (1994): 138–70.

Barthes, Roland. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Tr. Richard Howard. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978.

Barton, Anna. *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Liberal Thought*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Baxendall, Michael. *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985.

Bayley, John. *An Essay on Hardy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Benjamin, Walter. ‘The Image of Proust’ [1929]. *Illuminations*. Tr. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. London: Cape, 1970. 203–18.

Bennett, Andrew. *Ignorance: Literature and Agnoiology*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.

Bentley, D. M. R. ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Absurd”, Antiquarian, and “Modern-Antique” Medievalism(s): *Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, *The Bride’s Prelude*, and “Stratton Water”’, *Victorian Poetry* 51.1 (2013): 99–125.

Bevis, Matthew. ‘Unknowing Lyric’. *Poetry* 209.6 (March 2017): 575–89.

Boitani, Piero. ‘The Poetry and Poetics of the Creation’. *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. Ed. Rachel Jacoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 218–35.

Bowie, Malcolm. *Freud, Proust, Lacan: Theory as Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Bradley, Ritamary. 'Backgrounds of the title *Speculum* in Medieval Literature'. *Speculum* 29.1 (1954): 100–115.

Brodsky, Joseph. *On Grief and Reason: Essays*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995.

Brown, Alan S. *The Déjà Vu Experience*. New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2014.

Bruce, F. F. *History of the Bible in English*. 3rd edn. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2002.

Bullen, J. B. 'Raising the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Willowwood" Sonnets'. *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 429–43.

Burke, Peter. *A Social History of Knowledge*. Vol. 2: *From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

Butler, Marilyn. *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in his Context*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

Buurma, Rachel Sagner. 'Critical Histories of Omniscience'. *New Directions in the History of the Novel*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder, Andrew Nash, and Nicola Wilson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 121–33.

Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. London: Cape, 1992.

Campbell, Matthew. *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Cassin, Barbara. *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever At Home?* Tr. Pascale-Anne Brault. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016.

The Catholic Encyclopedia. 16 vols. Ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al. New York, NY: Appleton, 1907–14.

Cavell, Stanley. *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Drama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

———. *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

———. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Cetina, Karin Knorr. *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Chambers, Michael C. L. *Unknowable Realism, 1860–1900: Realism Beyond Herbert Spencer's Limits to Knowledge*. 2019. Indiana University, PhD dissertation.

Chaouli, Michel. 'Criticism and Style'. *New Literary History* 44.3 (2013): 323–44.

———. *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Cheeke, Stephen. *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2010.

Chilcote, Ronald H. *The Portuguese Revolution: State and Class in the Transition to Democracy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010.

Chorley, Katharine. *Arthur Hugh Clough: The Uncommitted Mind*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

Christ, Carol. *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975.

Christiansen, Rupert. *The Voice of Victorian Sex: Arthur H. Clough*. London: Short Books, 2001.

Clark, T. J. *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006.

Cockshut, A. O. J. *The Unbelievers: English Agnostic Thought, 1840–1890*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 1966.

Cohen, Simona. *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

Collins Robert French Dictionary, 9th edn. Glasgow: Collins, 2010.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. 3rd edn. Ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Connelly, Frances S. *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Conners, John R. '"A Moment's Monument": Time in the House of Life'. *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 2.2 (1982): 20–34.

Connor, Steven. *The Madness of Knowledge: On Wisdom, Ignorance and Fantasies of Knowing*. London: Reaktion, 2019.

Coombs, David Sweeney. *Reading with the Senses in Victorian Literature and Science*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019.

Cousins, A. D. *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Narrative Poems*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Critchley, Macdonald and Eileen A. Critchley. *John Hughlings Jackson: Father of English Neurology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Currie, Mark. *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Daston, Lorraine and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Daunton, Martin, ed. *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Davis, Philip. *Memory and Writing from Wordsworth to Lawrence*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1983.

———. *The Oxford English Literary History*. Vol. 8: *The Victorians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

De Bolla, Peter. *Art Matters*. 2nd edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

DeLaura, David J. 'Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-Five Unpublished Letters'. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 54.2 (1972): 314–56.

Delorme, Shannon. 'Physiology or psychic powers? William Carpenter and the debate over spiritualism in Victorian Britain'. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 48 (2014): 57–66.

DeNicola, Daniel R. *Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017.

Destrée, Pierre and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann. *Plato and the Poets*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

De Vane, William C., Jr. 'The Landscape of Browning's Childe Roland'. *PMLA* 40.2 (1925): 426–32.

Dickens, A. G. and John M. Tonkin. *The Reformation in Historical Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Dictionnaire Universel des Synonymes de la Langue Française. 3rd edn. 2 vols. Paris: Locquin, 1839.

Dubois, Martin. *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Poetry of Religious Experience.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Eaglestone, Robert. 'Critical Knowledge, Scientific Knowledge and the Truth of Literature'. *The New Aestheticism*. Ed. John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. 151–66.

Elkins, James. *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?: The Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1999.

Emison, Patricia. ‘Poesia’. *Grove Art Online*. <doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T068247>. Pubd. 2003. Accessed 1 September 2021.

Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2nd edn. London: Chatto and Windus, 1947.

Fairer, David. *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790–1798*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Fastiggi, Robert. ‘Mary in the Work of Redemption’. *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*. Ed. Chris Maunder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 303–19.

Fehl, Philipp. ‘The Hidden Genre: A Study of the *Concert Champêtre* in the Louvre’. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16.2 (1957): 153–68.

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

Fleishman, Avrom. ‘Woolf and McTaggart’. *English Literary History* 36.4 (1969): 719–38.

Ford, Thomas H. *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Franke, William. *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*. 2 vols. Ed. William Franke. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

———. ‘Involved Knowing: On the Poetic Epistemology of the Humanities’. *Humanities* 4.4 (2015): 600–22.

Fredeman, William H. ‘Rossetti’s “In Memoriam”: An Elegiac Reading of *The House of Life*’. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 47 (1965): 298–341.

Freedman, Jonathan. *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980.

Frost, Robert. ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’. *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*. Ed. Mark Richardson. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. 131–33.

Fry, Paul. *A Defense of Poetry*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Gallacher, Patrick J. ‘Introduction’. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Ed. Patrick J. Gallacher. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997. 1–14.

Garnett, Jane. ‘Protestant Histories: James Anthony Froude, Partisanship and National Identity’. *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain: Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew*. Ed. Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 171–91.

Garratt, Peter. *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer and George Eliot*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010.

Geuss, Raymond. *Outside Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Giles, Paul. *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Godlovitch, Stan. ‘Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics’. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 11.1 (1994): 15–30.

Golden, Mason. ‘Emerson-Exemplar: Friedrich Nietzsche’s Emerson Marginalia’. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 44.3 (2013): 398–431.

Goldhill, Simon. ‘On Knowingness’. *Critical Inquiry* 32.4 (2006): 708–23.

Gosse, Edmund, *Books on the Table*. London: Heinemann, 1921.

———. *More Books on the Table*. London: Heinemann, 1923.

Grabes, Herbert. *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Gray, F. Elizabeth. ‘Alice Meynell: Production, Reproduction, and the World of Work in the 1890s’. *Victorians* 132 (2017): 148–61.

A Greek-English Lexicon. 9th edn. Ed. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.

A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, being Grimm’s Wilke’s Clavis Novi Testamenti. Tr. Joseph Henry Thayer. New York, NY: Harper, 1889.

Greenberger, Evelyn. *Arthur Hugh Clough: The Growth of a Poet’s Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.

Gregory, Gill. ‘Adelaide Procter: A Poetics of Reserve and Passion’. *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre 1830–1900*. Ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999. 355–72.

Griffin, Christina Richieri. ‘Writing the Rhythms of the Womb: Alice Meynell’s Poetics of Pregnancy’. *Modern Philology* 112.1 (2014): 226–48.

Griffiths, Eric. *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Gross, Matthias. *Ignorance and Surprise: Science, Society, and Ecological Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.

Gross, Matthias and Linsey McGoey, eds. *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Gunn, Thom. *The Occasions of Poetry: Essays in Criticism and Autobiography*. Ed. Clive Wilmer. London: Faber, 1982.

Habib, M. A. R., ed. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Vol. 6: *The Nineteenth Century, c. 1830–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Hall, Edith. 'The Aesopic in Aristophanes'. *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of the Genres*. Ed. Emmanuela Bakola et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 277–97.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982.

Harrington, Anne. *Medicine, Mind, and the Double Brain*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Hartman, Geoffrey. *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971.

Haskell, Francis. 'Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre* and its Admirers'. *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 119.5180 (1971): 543–55.

Heffernan, James. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.

Helsinger, Elizabeth K. *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

Hepburn, Ronald W. 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature'. *Landscapes, Natural Beauty and the Arts*. Ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 65–80.

———. *'Wonder' and Other Essays*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984.

Herringer, Carol Engelhardt. 'Mary as Cultural Symbol in the Nineteenth Century'. *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*. Ed. Chris Maunder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 503–15.

Hertwig, Ralph, and Christoph Engel, eds. *Deliberate Ignorance: Choosing Not to Know*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020.

Hillis Miller, J. *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963.

———. *The Form of Victorian Fiction*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.

Hilton, Boyd. *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?: England 1783–1846*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.

Hollis, Patricia. *Class and Conflict in Nineteenth Century England: 1815–1850*. London: Routledge, 1973.

Holmes, John. *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018.

Holmes, Richard. *The Age of Wonder*. London: Vintage, 2010.

Hönnighausen, Lothar. *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and Fin de Siècle*. Tr. Gisela Hönnighausen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Hurley, Michael. *Faith in Poetry: Verse Style as a Mode of Religious Belief*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

———. 'How Philosophers Trivialize Art: *Bleak House*, *Oedipus Rex*, "Leda and the Swan"'. *Philosophy and Literature* 33.1 (2009): 107–25.

Jenkins, Alice. *Space and the 'March of Mind': Literature and the Physical Sciences in Britain, 1815–1850*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Jenkins, Nicholas. 'Poetry as Knowledge'. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. 4th edn. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012. 771–73.

Jessop, Ralph. *Carlyle and Scottish Thought*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997.

Johnson, Barbara. *A World of Difference*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Tr. Ulrich Weisstein. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1981.

Keen, Suzanne. *Thomas Hardy's Brains: Psychology, Neurology, and Hardy's Imagination*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2014.

Kenny, Anthony. *Arthur Hugh Clough: A Poet's Life*. London: Continuum, 2005.

King, Roma A. *The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1968.

Kirchhof, Frederick. ‘A Science against Sciences: Ruskin’s Floral Mythology’. *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*. Ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher and G. B. Tennyson. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977. 246–58.

Koerner, Joseph. *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*. 2nd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Koerner, Lisbet. ‘Carl Linnaeus in his Time and Place’. *The Cultures of Natural History*. Ed. N. Jardine et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 145–62.

Kogan, Herman. *The Great EB: The Story of the Encyclopedia Britannica*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Kourany, Janet and Martin Carrier. *Science and the Production of Ignorance: When the Quest for Knowledge is Thwarted*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020.

Kramnick, Jonathan. ‘The Interdisciplinary Fallacy’. *Representations* 140.1 (2017): 67–83.

Krieger, Murray. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

LaPorte, Charles. *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011.

Lardreau, Esther. ‘An Approach to Nineteenth-Century Medical Lexicon: The Term “Dreamy State”’. *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 20.1 (2011): 34–41.

Larkin, Maurice. *Politics and Preferment in France since 1890*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Lear, Jonathan. *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

———. *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Leavis, F. R. *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1932.

———. ‘Reality and Sincerity’. *A Selection from Scrutiny*. Ed. F. R. Leavis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968. 248–57.

Lee, Maurice. *Overwhelmed: Literature, Aesthetics, and the Nineteenth-Century Information Revolution*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

———. *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Leighton, Angela. ‘About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase’. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33.1 (2009): 167–76.

———. *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018.

———. ‘Lyric and the Lyrical’. *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*. Ed. Kate Flint. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 149–71.

———. ‘Poetry’s Knowing: So What Do We Know?’ *The Philosophy of Poetry*. Ed. John Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 162–82.

———. *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

Levering, Matthew. ‘Mary and Grace’. *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*. Ed. Chris Maunder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 289–302.

Levetine, George. ‘Some Emblematic Sources of Goya’. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 22.1/2 (1959): 106–31.

Levine, Caroline. *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

Levine, George. *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

———. *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

———. *Reading Thomas Hardy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Lightman, Bernard. *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Lindop, Grevel. *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Lingo, Stuart. *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

Long, Kathleen. ‘Montaigne on Monsters and Monstrosity’. *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*. Ed. Philippe Desan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 715–31.

Longenbach, James. *How Poems Get Made*. New York, NY: Norton, 2018.

———. *The Resistance to Poetry*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Lubenow, William C. *‘Only Connect’: Learned Societies in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015.

Luckhurst, Roger. *The Invention of Telepathy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Ludley, David A. 'Anna Jameson and D. G. Rossetti: His Use of Her Histories'. *Woman's Art Journal* 12.2 (1991): 29–33.

Macarthur, John. *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Macduffie, Allan. '"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and the Landscapes of the Anthropocene'. *Philological Quarterly* 93.3 (2014): 315–38.

Maitzen, Stephen. 'Two Views of Religious Certitude'. *Religious Studies* 28.1 (1992): 65–74.

Mander, W. J. *The Unknowable: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Mason, Emma. 'Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve'. *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7.2 (2002): 196–219.

———. 'Religion, the Bible, and Literature in the Victorian Age'. *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*. Ed. Juliet John. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 331–49.

Mastroianni, Dominic. *Politics and Skepticism in Antebellum American Literature.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Maynard, John. *Browning's Youth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.

McCusker, Jane A. 'Browning's "Aristophanes' Apology" and Matthew Arnold'. *The Modern Language Review* 79.4 (1984): 783–96.

McGann, Jerome. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.

McGhee, Fergus. 'Clough, Emerson, and Knowingness'. *Review of English Studies* 71.300 (2020): 413–32.

———. 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Déjà Vu'. *Victorian Studies* 62.1 (2019): 61–84.

———. 'Rossetti's Giorgione and the Victorian "Cult of Vagueness"'. *Cambridge Quarterly* 50.3 (2021): 279–95.

McGoey, Linsey. *The Unknowers: How Strategic Ignorance Rules the World*. London: Zed Books, 2019.

Miller, Andrew. *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Miller, D. A. *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988.

Milnes, Tim. *The Truth About Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Mitchell, W. J. T. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Moretti, Franco. *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Tr. Susan Fischer et al. London: Verso, 1983.

Morgan, William W. 'Form, Tradition, and Consolation in Hardy's "Poems of 1912–13"'. *PMLA* 89.3 (1974): 496–505.

Moulin, Chris. *The Cognitive Neuropsychology of Déjà Vu*. London: Routledge, 2017.

Mukherji, Subha. 'Crossroads of Knowledge: Literature and Theology'. Subha Mukherji and Tim Stuart-Buttle, eds. *Literature, Belief and Knowledge in Early Modern England: Knowing Faith*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 3–36.

Nagel, Thomas. 'What is it like to be a bat?'. *Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974): 435–50.

OED Online. Accessed 1 September 2021.

O'Regan, Cyril. 'John Henry Newman'. *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology of Theology*. Ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 510–22.

Page, Norman. 'Opening Time: Hardy's Poetic Thresholds'. *Thomas Hardy Reappraised: Essays in Honour of Michael Millgate*. Ed. Keith Wilson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 262–69.

Perry, Seamus. 'Hardy's Imperfections'. *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 536–48.

Pfordresher, John. 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Hand and Soul": Sources and Significance'. *Studies in Short Fiction* 19.2 (1982): 103–32.

Phelan, J. P. 'The Textual Evolution of Clough's *Dipsychus and the Spirit*'. *Review of English Studies* 46.182 (1995): 230–39.

Phillips, Adam. 'Arthur Hugh Clough: The Reception and Conception of *Amours de Voyage*'. *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 385–99.

———. *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*. London: Penguin, 2013.

Pickford, R. W. 'Rossetti's "Sudden Light" as an Experience of *Déjà Vu*'. *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 19.2 (1942): 192–200.

Poirier, Richard. *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Proctor, Robert N. *Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know about Cancer*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995.

Proctor, Robert N. and Londa Schiebinger, eds. *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Quigley, Megan. *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Rand, Nicholas. 'The Hidden Soul: Growth of the Unconscious in Philosophy, Psychology, Medicine, and Literature, 1750–1900'. *American Imago* 61.3 (2004): 257–89.

Rauch, Alan. *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

Read, Sophie. 'Lancelot Andrewes's Sacramental Wordplay'. *Cambridge Quarterly* 36.1 (2007): 11–32.

Rescher, Nicholas. *Ignorance: On the Wider Implications of Deficient Knowledge*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.

Richards, I. A. *Poetries and Sciences*. New York, NY: Norton, 1970.

Richardson, James. *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Necessity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

———. *Vanishing Lives: Style and Self in Tennyson, D. G. Rossetti, Swinburne, and Yeats*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1988.

Ricks, Christopher. *Tennyson*. 2nd edn. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989.

Riede, David. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.

Rist, John M. *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Robson, John M. 'The Fiat and Finger of God: The Bridgewater Treatises'. *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*. Ed. Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990. 71–125.

The Rossetti Archive. <www.rossettiarchive.org>. Accessed 1 September 2021.

Ryals, Clyde de L. Review of *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. Vol. 1. Ed. Ian Jack and Margaret Smith, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 84.4 (1985): 562–67.

Ryan, Vanessa L. *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2012.

Sacks, Peter M. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Saintsbury, George. *A History of Nineteenth-Century Literature 1780–1900*. London: Macmillan, 1908.

Salecl, Renata. *A Passion for Ignorance: What We Choose Not to Know and Why*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Saunders, Joe. 'Taking love seriously: McTaggart, absolute reality and chemistry'. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26.4 (2018): 719–37.

Schaffer, Talia. 'A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell'. *Victorian Poetry* 38.1 (2000): 49–61.

Scheinberg, Cynthia. *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Schlack, Beverly Ann. 'The "Poetess of Poets": Alice Meynell Rediscovered'. *Women's Studies* 7.1–2 (1980): 111–26.

Scholar, Richard. *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Secord, James A. *Visions of Science: Books and Readers at the Dawn of the Victorian Age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Shattuck, Roger. *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*. New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1996.

Shaw, W. David. *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Era*. London: Athlone Press, 1987.

———. *Victorians and Mystery: Crises of Representation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Shuttleworth, Sally. '"The malady of thought": embodied memory in Victorian psychology and the novel'. *Memory and Memorials, 1789–1914*. Ed. Matthew Campbell, Jacqueline M. Labbe and Sally Shuttleworth. London: Routledge, 2000. 46–59.

Small, Ian. *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Smalley, Donald. ‘A Parleying with Aristophanes’. *PMLA* 55.3 (1940): 823–38.

Smith, Jonathan. *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Sohm, Philip. ‘Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia’. *Renaissance Quarterly* 48.4 (1995): 759–808.

Sparrow, John. *Mark Pattison and the Idea of a University*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

Spector, Stephen J. ‘Rossetti’s Self-Destroying “Moment’s Monument”: “Silent Noon”’. *Victorian Poetry* 14.1 (1976): 54–58.

Speight, Allen. ‘Philosophy of Literature in the Nineteenth Century’. *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*. Ed. Noël Carroll and John Gibson. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. 30–39.

Stein, Richard L. *The Ritual of Interpretation: The Fine Arts as Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Stephens, W. B. *Education in Britain, 1750–1914*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988.

Storey, Mark. *Poetry and Humour from Cowper to Clough*. London: Macmillan, 1979.

Strawson, Galen. ‘The Unstoried Life’. *On Life-Writing*. Ed. Zachary Leader. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 284–301.

Sullivan, Shannon and Nancy Tuana, eds. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007.

Surtees, Virginia. *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882): A Catalogue Raisonné*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

Tate, Gregory. *The Poet’s Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830–1870*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

Tennyson, G. B. *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Terdiman, Richard. *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Thomas, Jane. *Thomas Hardy and Desire: Conceptions of the Self*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Tillotson, Geoffrey. ‘Clough’s Bothie’. *Mid-Victorian Studies*. Ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Kathleen Tillotson. London: Athlone Press, 1965. 118–44.

Trevelyan, Raleigh. ‘Thomas Woolner and Pauline Trevelyan’. *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* 2.2 (1979): 1–37.

Trodd, Colin, Paul Barlow, and David Amigoni, eds. *Victorian Culture and the Idea of the Grotesque*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Tucker, Herbert F. ‘At the Bottom Line: How Hardy Tries Conclusions’. *The Hardy Review* 14.2 (2012): 19–32.

———. *Browning’s Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1980.

Tuell, Anne Kimball. ‘Meynell in the “Lost” Columns’. *The Sewanee Review* 31.2 (1923): 152–62.

Urquhart, Josephine A. and Akira R. O’Connor. ‘The awareness of novelty for strangely familiar words: a laboratory analogue of the déjà vu experience’. *PeerJ—The Journal of Life and Environmental Sciences* (11 November 2014): 1–20. doi:10.7717/peerj.666.

Verburgt, Lukas M. ‘The History of Knowledge and the Future History of Ignorance’. *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 4.1 (2020): 1–24.

Vitek, Bill and Wes Jackson, eds. *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

Vogel, Joseph F. ‘Rossetti’s Memorial Thresholds’. *The Explicator* 23.4 (1964): 54–57.

Vrettos, Athena. ‘Dying Twice: Victorian Theories of *Déjà Vu*’. *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle*. Ed. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Volante. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002. 196–218.

Welsh, Alexander. *George Eliot and Blackmail*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Whiting, Lilian. *The Brownings: their Life and Art*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911.

Wickens, G. Glen. *Thomas Hardy, Monism and the Carnival Tradition: The One and the Many in The Dynasts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

Williams, Michael. *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Wood, Michael. *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Woolford, John. *Browning the Revisionary*. London: Macmillan, 1988.

———. *Robert Browning*. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2007.

Ziolkowski, Theodore. *The Sin of Knowledge: Ancient Themes and Modern Variations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Zwierlein, Cornel, ed. *The Dark Side of Knowledge: Histories of Ignorance, 1400 to 1800*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.