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NOVEL-POETRY

The Shape of the Real & the Problem of Form

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Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

This book examines a hybrid genre, the verse-novel, to make a larger claim about the nature of genre and about formal structures for time, action, and identity that cross genres. Our goal is to suggest an alternative literary history that may appear strange at first given what we have commonly been taught about the lyric and narrative. We wish to uncover trajectories of influence that have gone unseen largely because of the way we have come to understand basic categories that structure our approach to literature. These structures impact our understanding of genre and literary history; they also affect how we shape our own lives and they do so in ways that can be hard to see because we rely on them so much to make sense of an existence full of chance, chaos, and possibility.

Novel-Poetry

Our questions: If we look at the cross-influence of novel and poetry, does either side of the novel–poetry conjunction subsequently look any different? What happens to the theory of the lyric when we take such hybrid forms as the verse-novel into account?[1] Does such hybridity challenge our understanding of form and genre? Can such cross-interrogation of poetry and the novel teach us something about the way we structure our own lived experience, influenced as we have inevitably been by the emergence in the nineteenth century of the *bildungsroman* and the expressivist lyric?

Critical neglect of these questions[2] is in part a result of what Jerome McGann terms the Romantic Ideology. The Victorians, following the Romantics, often tried

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[1] This book will address only the canonical poets who attempted the form: Lord Byron, Arthur Hugh Clough, George Meredith, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning. Stefanie Markovits's *The Victorian Verse-Novel* establishes the genre's pervasiveness in and importance to the period. See Monique Morgan's *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends* for a work that also looks carefully at the verse-novel. See Herbert F. Tucker's *Epic* for a work that examines the "British Long Poem" more broadly.

[2] The influence of poetry on the novel—or, vice-versa, of the novel on poetry—remains, to date, an understudied phenomenon. Although most nineteenth-century scholars teach both poetry and the novel, we tend to see ourselves as either poetry or novel critics. Panels at our conferences segregate poetry and novel papers; we have journals dedicated to one or the other genre; and, although there are some significant exceptions, we most often write articles and books about the genre that we have chosen as our province. We believe this is why relatively little work has been completed on one of the most

to conceive of poetry as a pure form, somehow separate from the concerns of politics, the market, and ideology, while aligning the novel with our lived experience of time and decisive action.[3] The two maneuvers are interconnected, we believe: any call for the purification of the lyric tends to be performed with a sideways glance to the increasing influence of the novel's restructuration of lived experience as quotidian cause-and-effect sequences linked to decisive actions. At the same time, even as novelists of the nineteenth century promoted this new form of thick temporality, they explored a contending realism of subjective thought and emotional transport that was in dialogue with the newly theorized expressivist lyric.

The purification of a certain kind of poetry, especially the expressivist lyric, was performed by the emergent intellectual of the nineteenth century: first the man of letters, then Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "clerisy," eventually the university professor.[4] The fetishizing move is, of course, an impossible one; the language of these critics became figurative, even excessive, whenever they addressed the question of pure and impure forms because they were working at the level of fantasmatical construction. To compensate, nineteenth-century critics often turned to categories of embodiment to characterize individual genres. The more abstract the definition of a generic form, the more the rhetoric was obliged to fill in posited content (e.g., bodily health), a tropological move aided by William Wordsworth's

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fascinating and pervasive hybrid experiments of the nineteenth century, the verse-novel. Jay Clayton's *Romantic Vision and the Novel* is one of the few critical works to give equal weight to nineteenth-century fiction's relationship to poetry and poetry's relationship to the novel. Also of note are Elisha Cohn's *Still Life*; Andrew Elfenbein's *Byron and the Victorians* and *Romantic Genius*; Stefanie Markovits' *The Crisis of Action in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*; Michael Riffaterre's *Fictional Truth*; and Donald Stone's *Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction*.

[3] See Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*. Critics have begun to turn to the market dynamics of poetry in the period, thus renewing work begun in the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties by, for example, Richard Altick in *The English Common Reader* and A. S. Collins in *Authorship in the Days of Johnson* and *The Profession of Letters*; such works have exposed the connection of supposedly "high" poets to mass forms and media. See, in particular, Lee Erickson's *The Economy of Literary Form*; Andrew Franta's *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public*; Paul Keen's *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s*; Loy D. Martin's *Browning's Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject*; Jerome McGann's *The Textual Condition*; Lucy Newlyn's *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*; William St. Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*; and Martha Woodmansee's *The Author, Art, and the Market*. Other studies examine the construction of the university intellectual, illustrating how our understanding of both "high criticism" and "high culture" are themselves constructions of the nineteenth century; see, in particular, Laurel Brake's *Subjugated Knowledges;* W. T. Heyck's *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England*; and Jon P. Klancher's *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832*.

[4] William Wordsworth's concept of the "People" as distinct from the "Public," and Coleridge's juxtaposition between, on the one hand, a "National Clerisy" comprised of "the learned of all denominations" and, on the other, landowners, merchants, and manufacturers, established the very concept of "high culture" at the beginning of the nineteenth century, an idea that would legitimate the efforts of subsequent critics—the specialists of that high culture—to imagine a separate, rarefied realm for the poetic. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, and Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, III.83–4. Subsequent references to Wordsworth's *Prose Works* will be in parentheses.

and then Coleridge's translation of the terms "culture" and "taste" from the realm of the body to that of aesthetics.[5]

We now take for granted the following sense of "culture": "the training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners" (OED); however, the OED cites Wordsworth as the earliest usage of "culture" in this way, specifically in the 1805 *Prelude* where Wordsworth imagines a barbaric situation "Where grace/ Of culture hath been utterly unknown."[6] The term at the time was more commonly connected to the now obsolete sense of "the training of the human body" (OED), a sense persisting into the Romantic period, for example in the writings of Thomas Beddoes, who posits in his *Letter to Erasmus Darwin* (1793) the ability to "suppose the organization of man equally susceptible of improvement from culture with that of various animals and vegetables."[7] Beddoes therefore entertains "hopes not only of a beneficial change in the practice of medicine, but in the constitution of human nature itself."[8]

Wordsworth and Coleridge began the process of amalgamating these two senses into the most common current definition ("the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc., of a people" [OED]) and they did so by borrowing the very metaphors offered to them by Beddoes and other doctors of the period in order to translate the heterogeneity of a new mass market into the simple abstraction of what Wordsworth in the *Prelude* calls a "universal heart" ([1805] XII.219).[9] They also equated such abstractions with aesthetic questions, thus completing the tropological alignment with another common sense of "culture" today (the "high" arts of literature, music, painting, etc.) and the related assumption that such cultural forms are directly reflective—even effective—of "Western civilization." Lyric poetry was, for them, the most important genre contributing to the purification of a higher realm of culture. Even while Wordsworth does not wish "to prevent the most inexperienced Reader from judging for himself," he nonetheless calls in his prose for "an *accurate* taste in Poetry," and even imagines that poetry can "conduce in a high degree to the improvement of our own taste" (*Prose* I.156), leading to "enjoyments, of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature" (*Prose* I.156). Aesthetic taste is thus sublimated out of pathogenetic taste. A "*taste* for Poetry," Wordsworth explains, is not "as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontiniac or Sherry" (*Prose* I.139). Wordsworth even acknowledges the tropological nature of such maneuvers, complaining that "Taste . . . is a metaphor, taken from

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[5] See Chapter One, Chapter Four, and the Coda of Felluga's *Perversity of Poetry* for an earlier examination of this tendency. For a work that explores poetry's own suspect maneuvers along these lines, see Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body*.

[6] Wordsworth, *The Prelude: A Parallel Text*, XII [1805].195–6. Subsequent references to Wordsworth's *Prelude* will be in parenthesis.

[7] Thomas Beddoes, *A Letter to Erasmus Darwin*, 60; also OED.

[8] Beddoes, *A Letter to Erasmus Darwin*, 60.

[9] We mention Beddoes in particular since he was a friend of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

a *passive* sense of the human body, and transferred to things which are in their essence *not* passive,—to intellectual *acts* and *operations*" (*Prose* III.81).

In his effort to establish criticism as the arbiter of that taste, the literary critic adopted the language of bodily health ("culture" as the training of the body) and recast his relationship to the social world as the physiological culturing of the universal heart, which allowed him, in turn, to re-imagine the mass market and the complexities of historical change as a single social body that the expert and the high-cultural poet could both address and redress.[10] The evolution of "taste" and "culture" as terms effected the abstraction of "purity" out of the impure association with bodily needs and desires ("taste" in the sense of a taste for "Frontiniac or Sherry").[11] We are here seeing the ideological translation of market consumption into cultural capital.

"Culture" like "taste" is therefore a dead metaphor par excellence; indeed, even the sense of culturing the mind and body of man is, as Beddoes makes clear in the above quotation, a metaphorical application to man of what had formerly been a term from husbandry: the tending of natural growth (plants, animals, etc.). The goal of the emergent intellectual was to sublate such dead metaphors—which expose the rhetorical and generic strategies by which Wordsworth and Coleridge legitimated their own critical projects—into a single, diagnosable social body, with the critic as administrator of the cultural good (and goods). In the subsequent collapse of the physical and the spiritual, of cause and effect, of metaphor and catachresis that is accomplished by the master-tropes of "taste," "culture," and "constitution," we can read the construction of ideology at its "purest."[12] The very emptiness of the dead metaphor facilitates the wild claim that scholars could through such terms diagnose the health of the entire English social body. And, for Wordsworth and Coleridge, genre marked one of the ways by which one effected this purification, particularly poetry and its concomitant mental power, imagination.

Wordsworth's and Coleridge's theory of the lyric and of the lyric's relation to narrative in turn set the stage for the Victorian understanding of culture (as in Matthew Arnold's work) and influences our present-day understanding of the two

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[10] This common trope has been explored by a few critics, including Mary Poovey in *Making a Social Body*; Pamela K. Gilbert in *Mapping the Victorian Social Body*; and Jon P. Klancher in *The Making of English Reading Audiences*.
[11] Raymond Williams has charted this gradual process of abstraction in *Keywords*. As Regenia Gagnier illustrates in *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, this transubstantiation from bodily concerns to abstract "taste" has an impact on economic questions of value, including, today, the role of the humanities in society. Gagnier documents how in the nineteenth century, "The labor theory of value, which had seen the human body and human labor as the ultimate determinants of price, was abandoned in favor of consumer demand" (4). As a result, scarcity was transferred from the body to the mind, "a consequence of the insatiability of human desires" (4): "thus the idea of needs, which were finite and the focus of political economy, was displaced by the idea of tastes, which were theoretically infinite" (4). See especially Chapter Three of *The Insatiability of Human Wants*.
[12] For Coleridge's use of "constitution" in this way, see especially *On the Constitution of Church and State*.

arch-forms or "architexts" of poetry and novel, or of lyric and epic, as Gérard Genette explains in *The Architext*. In their *Lyric Theory Reader*, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins take up Genette's argument. They write,

> How did the lyric become a genre? This may seem an odd question, especially to those readers who think of the lyric as the most fundamental kind of poetry, or who think of lyricism as poetry's essence. Yet the idea that lyric poetry has always been a primary form of literary—indeed, of human—expression is surprisingly modern. In the early romantic period, literature began to be divided into three large categories, culminating in Goethe's idea of the three "natural forms of poetry": lyric, epic, and drama. Those categories were then cast as ancient distinctions, but in fact (as Gérard Genette argues in his essay included in this section), while epic and drama had various theories attached to them before the seventeenth century, *lyric* was a third term added to literary description by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary criticism.[13]

In addressing the historical definition of the lyric and of poetry, we follow the call of New Formalism to pay attention to formal and generic issues even as we question (in Chapter Five) any easy distinction between genre and form. Our questioning of the lyric as architext aligns with some of the work published by the American "historical poetics" group.[14] Jackson, who is a member of the historical-poetics group, similarly sees what she terms "the lyricization of poetry" as beginning in the eighteenth century, especially toward its end.[15] As she explains, this does not mean that there were not earlier, even ancient lyrics: "It is simply to propose that the riddles, papyrae, epigrams, songs, sonnets, *blasons*, *Lieder*, elegies, dialogues, conceits, ballads, hymns and odes considered lyrical in the Western tradition before the early nineteenth century were lyric in a very different sense than was or will be the poetry that the mediating hands of editors, reviewers, critics, teachers, and poets have rendered as lyric in the last century and a half."[16] G. Gabrielle Starr makes a similar point regarding the way "lyric" constrained the genre after the Romantics: "certain of what the lyric is and should be, critics have sometimes overlooked what the lyric was—hymns as well as odes, fragments embedded in longer poems as well as sonnets, drinking songs as well as ballads."[17]

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[13] Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 11. For the history of criticism's adoption of "lyric" in genre criticism (and even criticism more broadly), see Mary Poovey's "The Model System of Contemporary Criticism."

[14] On historical poetics, see the *Modern Language Quarterly* special issue on the topic edited by V. Joshua Adams, Joel Calahan, and Michael Hansen, in which Felluga published an earlier version of Chapter Three, originally "Truth is Stranger than Fiction."

[15] Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 6. See also Jackson, "Lyric," especially 831.

[16] Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 7.

[17] Starr, *Lyric Generations*, 1. Starr's book is a useful companion to this one since it seeks to read the cross-influence of poetry and the novel in the eighteenth century. As Starr puts it, "In reading ballad against novel we may reconstruct the residue of a generic dialogue concerning readerly expectations

We will be addressing the overlooked genre of the verse-novel but there are many other poetic genres we might look at in the nineteenth century, all of which have been to some extent neglected by criticism's tendency to focus on the expressivist lyric. We can say the same about fictional realism. We too will focus on it in Part One since our goal is to explore this dominant critical paradigm about the nature of chronological time before questioning that way of thinking, but our hope is that our argument will open new conversations about the rich variety of fictional forms in the period—from miscellanies to religious fiction.[18]

In the Romantic retroactive recasting of lyric and narrative, the observation and representation of the objective world is associated with narrative, the at once subjective and eternal kairotic world with poetry, especially the lyric. As Wordsworth puts it, "Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our nature, Imagination to incite and to support the eternal" (*Prose Works*, III.37).[19] In this formulation, imagination requires both the special subjective faculties of the poet (Wordsworth is theorizing here an *expressivist* theory of the lyric) and reference to kairotic, eternal considerations, governed as it is by "a sublime consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers" (III.33). Wordsworth and Coleridge are here subscribing to an emergent theorization of lyric poetry that can be traced back to the eighteenth century.[20] We can find sometimes similar, highly abstract definitions of poetry earlier than the eighteenth century—for example Aristotle's contention that "Poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates

and generic possibility. . . . Novel and lyric would make similar matter perform different cultural work, and as I argue over the course of this book, the practitioners of each form would learn part of that work from the other" (6).

[18] For a work that explores the large variety of long poetic forms in the period, see especially Herbert F. Tucker's *Epic*. For a recent work that questions the privileging of realism in our understanding of the novel, see Elaine Freedgood's *Worlds Enough*.

[19] Wordsworth's relationship to the expressivist lyric is, of course, more complex, as the debate between Wordsworth and Coleridge regarding the definition of poetry attests. Wordsworth also actively borrowed from less lyric, even novelistic forms as explored by Starr in *Lyric Generations* and Mary Jacobus in *Tradition and Experiment in the* Lyrical Ballads. Other critics have illustrated Wordsworth's borrowings from the conventions of the gothic, for example Michael Gamer in *Romanticism and the Gothic* and Karen Swann in "Public Transport." Jay Clayton in *Romantic Vision and the Novel* usefully juxtaposes to Wordsworth's nonetheless temporal and quotidian spots of time the arguably yet more *kairotic* version of the lyric that one can find in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry.

[20] Joseph Warton's *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756) and his brother Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774–81) are particularly significant in establishing what later critics tended to theorize either as a romantic or a transhistorical theory of the expressivist lyric. Joseph Warton aligns what he terms "PURE POETRY" with the sublime and the pathetic, arguing that such poetry can be found in the work of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton but not that of Alexander Pope (iv). He also argues that "a creative and glowing Imagination" is "alone" necessary to "make a Poet" (v). The concept gains traction over the course of the eighteenth century. As Anna Letitia Barbauld puts it in her 1802 edition of William Collins' poetry, "pure Poetry. . . is necessarily obscure to a certain degree; because, having to do chiefly with ideas generated within the mind, it cannot be at all comprehended by any whose intellect has not been exercised in similar contemplations. . . . All that is properly *Lyric Poetry* is of this kind" (iv–v). She contrasts such poetry with the epic, "where a story, a series of adventures, carries the reader on through the impulse of curiosity, and loses not its interest intirely [sic] even if translated into Prose" (iii). By contrast, pure poetry, she explains, is never popular (vi).

particulars"[21]—however, the valence of "poetry," especially the "lyric," changes once we begin to think of poetry as kairotic, affective, or in some way "pure." There are significant historical and literary-historical reasons for this emergent understanding of poetry, especially the rise of the mass market in literature and the concomitant theorization of a realm of high "culture" reserved for readers with "taste." Aristotle sees no problem with the prose/verse distinction ("The difference between the historian and the poet is not that between using verse or prose") and is more concerned about what Genette terms "modal issues" like narration and narrative probability that are not limited to any one genre ("the poet should be more a maker of plots than of verses, in so far as he is a poet by virtue of mimesis, and his mimesis is of actions").[22] The concerns of the new expressivist theory of the lyric that we now understand as particularly Romantic are caught up, rather, in ideological battles particular to the second half of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth.

Despite the fact that the notion of a pure expressivist lyric was an ideological fabrication, critics still commonly accept without question the opposition between narrative and lyric that Wordsworth and Coleridge helped to establish. As Stefanie Markovits, for example, puts it in her essay on the verse-novel in *The Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*,

> the attribution of value to a kind of meaning that not only comes and goes but accrues in the process of coming and going—that adheres to plot—. . . runs counter to lyric's methods of reaching after eternal truth through the erection of what D. G. Rossetti would memorably term the "moment's monument" (in the introductory sonnet to his determinedly nonnovelistic sequence *The House of Life*, 1870–81). In contrast to lyric's *kairos*—the capture of the instant of ecstatic intensity—narrative features *chronos*, an awareness of time passing, of duration.[23]

Monique Morgan adopts a similar distinction in her analysis of the nineteenth-century British long poem:

> Whereas narrative requires temporal progression and sequentiality, lyric is a suspended moment that stops the time of narrative and focuses instead on the "now" of composition and reception. Within this moment of suspended time, the poet can give free play to thought and emotion, associating ideas and images that would not be linked by the chains of cause and effect that typically govern narrative. The lyric poet can also make use of this freedom from temporal progression to linger on the formal and figurative aspects of language, thus calling attention to it *as* language. In contrast, the interests of narrative cannot afford to dwell

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[21] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 59.
[22] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 59 and 61.
[23] Markovits, "Verse Novel," *Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*, III.1206–7.

indefinitely on the formal beauties of its language: instead, a narrative must make clear what is happening in the story, thus requiring a more straightforward use of language.[24]

We want to interrogate the assumptions about genre that underlie this commonly accepted distinction between narrative and verse, novel and poetry. To appreciate the role of genre in our understanding of a poem or novel, we need to rehearse once again how we came to think of the lyric as subjective-kairotic and narrative as objective-chronological. Our understanding of generic form has a history that cannot help but impact how we interpret any work. These developments have also impacted how we structure our quotidian lives in ways that transcend any one generic form.

chronos and *kairos*

We have all been taught this distinction between lyric and narrative, what Morgan describes as the "fundamental difference" between the two arch-forms. Such a division of the literary field veils the ways that nineteenth-century writers used generic form to make sense of concepts like truth, subjectivity, and temporality, which are not strictly tied to any one genre. Of particular concern for this nexus of terms is what we designate as "act-event." Like the hyphenated verse-novel, act-event marks for us a problem of designation: how should we understand the temporal and ontological markers that distinguish an intentional act from a transformative event that marks a radical change for everyone? How do we make sense of the intention behind a subject's actions, for example, and do our acts give us any special access to the "truth" of our subjectivity? How should we understand the cause-and-effect logic of an event, either in an individual's life or world history, or the ways an act would appear to set us on a particular course? Should we understand world- or subject-transforming events as moments outside of time (a break, a rupture, a singularity) or as the inevitable consequence of past actions? How we make sense of these questions depends on extra-generic formal considerations, especially our understanding of temporality and subjectivity. Genre has a significant role to play, however, especially given the outsized influence of both narrativization and notions of emotional or spiritual transport on our experiences in time. Indeed, we will argue that our understanding of our lives has been largely shaped by a particular version of temporality that was codified by the novel and that was subtended by a lyric understanding of rupture, transcendence, and truth. We also claim that there were alternative models on offer in the

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[24] Morgan, *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends*, 3–4.

period, ones that entail a different approach to both the notion of personal act and world-transforming event.

The idea of "lyric's *kairos*" owes its provenance to *The Sense of an Ending* where on a few occasions Frank Kermode connects *kairos* with the lyricism of, for example, Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot. As he writes, "In so far as there is an art of the timeless prison, it is poetry." However, Kermode is clear that even such kairotic poetry still "has a temporal aspect."[25] Indeed, Kermode goes further, suggesting that Wordsworth in his poetry gives to the novel a temporal model borrowed to a large extent from Saint Augustine, a model that was adopted wholesale by the *bildungsroman*. Kermode is concerned with the ways that novels, rather than poetry, make sense of the personally significant act or the world-historical moment of crisis. As he puts it, "although for us the End has perhaps lost its naive imminence, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as immanent" (6).

The concept of *kairos* in fact entails two approaches to our actions in the present. Kermode follows a theological tradition.[26] Departments of Rhetoric and Composition have drawn on a second, competing—but also obverse—tradition derived from Hesiod, Gorgias, Isocrates, and Cicero. For these critics, as James L. Kinneavy explains, *kairos* refers to "the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved," an understanding that has the potential of "carrying situational ethics to the point of complete relativism."[27] This version of *kairos* is concerned with "the principle of right timing and the principle of proper measure."[28] What matters, as Phillip Sipiora explains, is "the importance of a rhetor understanding his or her audience and the varying circumstances of the occasion"[29] to ensure success in the uncertain contingency of a situation. Eric Charles White describes *kairos* as "a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved."[30] The rhetor must seize the pragmatic moment of opportunity, what White refers to as the improvisational "*will-to-invent*."[31]

In Kermode's understanding of *kairos*, by contrast, "it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import; the whole of history, and the progress of the individual life, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent" (25). Kermode turns often to Saint Paul to make sense of this understanding of the significant moment: "in a world which may or may not have a temporal end,

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[25] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 174. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

[26] Kermode draws from Frank Herbert Brabant's *Time and Eternity in Christian Thought*; Oscar Cullman's *Christ and Time*; John Marsh's *The Fulness of Time*; and Paul Tillich's *The Courage To Be*.

[27] James L. Kinneavy, "*Kairos*," 224 and 227.

[28] Kinneavy, "*Kairos*," 225.

[29] Phillip Sipiora, "Introduction," 14.

[30] Eric Charles White, *Kaironomia*, 13.

[31] Eric Charles White, *Kaironomia*, 63.

people see themselves much as St. Paul saw the early Christians, men 'upon whom the ends of the ages are come'; and these ends bear down upon every important moment experienced by men in the middest" (26). Pauline thought also looms large in Alain Badiou's theorization of the event, which Badiou claims has a history that can be traced back through the French Revolution all the way to Saint Paul. One goal of this book is to understand the place of Lord Byron, Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning in this tradition.

Kermode's point is that, even as we move away from a literal belief in apocalypse or eschatological ends, "the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world" (28). Kermode is concerned particularly with the moment of action or crisis that turns mere chronological sequence into eternal truth: "*chronos* is 'passing time' or 'waiting time'—that which, according to Revelation, 'shall be no more'—and *kairos* is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with meaning derived from its relation to the end" (47). According to Kermode, the entire history of the novel is caught up in such concerns. Although we generally "associate 'reality' with *chronos*," he explains, "in every plot there is an escape from chronicity, and so, in some measure, a deviation from this norm of 'reality'" (50). He turns to the concept of the *aevum*, to which *kairos* is closely bound, "those moments which Augustine calls the moments of the soul's attentiveness" (71), "neither temporal nor eternal, but, as Aquinas said, participating in both the temporal and the eternal" (72). As he concludes, "*Aevum*, you might say, is the time-order of novels" (72).

By associating this understanding of *kairos* exclusively with poetry or by characterizing entire works by the logic of either *kairos* or *chronos* (as Morgan, for example, writes, "*Don Juan* is primarily narrative, *The Prelude* is primarily lyrical"),[32] we keep ourselves from making sense of the "time-order" of different literary works, of the ways novels and poems are in fact working out similar issues and influencing each other in the process, and of the ways even a secular approach to the significant or heroic act is caught up in such concerns and in ways that cannot be easily pinned to any specific genre. While much of the nineteenth-century conversation about time-order took a religious turn, such models still underlie what would appear to be the purely secular concerns of the present: Who am I? How can I be sure I am making the right decisions for my life? Will this love last? How can I live life to the fullest? How can I change the world for the better?

Our answers to such questions have been largely shaped by a redefinition of cause-and-effect sequences made popular by realist novels, novels that were in active conversation with not only classical, religious, and radical temporal models but also a variety of poetic models for the temporality of the act-event understood as rupture or transcendence or the eternal. As we go on to illustrate, there is more than one way to think about the act-event and its relation to truth, subjectivity and temporality, and these alternatives cannot be divided between the provinces

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[32] Morgan, *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends*, 4.

of narrative and poetry. Indeed, we locate in the verse-novel a counter-tradition that has been largely unseen by literary criticism.

Plan of the Book

In Part One, "The Novel-Verse and the Shape of the Real," we examine how a generic form, the novel, has affected larger formal structures that impact our understanding of time and action. We follow an opening theoretical chapter with one on Charles Dickens, who most clearly lays bare the device for the nineteenth-century novel and its understanding of history. In this section, we turn to theorists of "the event" (Badiou, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, and Slavoj Žižek) who are not commonly applied to nineteenth-century literature, to estrange common assumptions about both the novel and our quotidian understanding of subjectivity and temporality.

After establishing the now-dominant way of thinking about time and action, we begin to uncover in Part Two an alternative but occluded tradition. Byron serves as lynchpin here. He is the most popular writer of the first half of the nineteenth century, yet he has had a problematic relationship to dominant understandings of narrative and the lyric as encapsulated in the distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*. As literary history has been constructed for this period, he does not easily fit.[33] We aim in this book to help explain why. We also illustrate just how influential his alternative way of thinking about time and action really was in the nineteenth century for both the novel (Chapter Four) and poetry (Chapters Seven through Ten).

In Part Three, "The Verse-Novel and the Problem of Form," we propose that the generic doubleness of the verse-novel opens it to alternatives that we rarely find in either verse or novel alone. In readings of verse-novels from the 1850s and 1860s (Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage*, George Meredith's *Modern Love*, and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*), we trace a tradition counter both to the realist novel and to lyricism. These works articulate different ways of thinking about time, action, and subjectivity, and each of them questions the realistic plotting that makes us accept things as they are. If the story of the verse-novel itself reads as one of lost historical possibility—the truncated story of a genre that was eclipsed by the dominance of the realist novel—its radical alternatives remain alive in these under-read texts. The book's coda offers thoughts on how bringing this otherness to our academic lives can help us to address challenges facing us in the present.

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[33] The classic example is M. H. Abrams who, through Wordsworth, codifies the Romantic expressivist theory of the lyric and in *Natural Supernaturalism* mentions Byron only once, to dismiss him (M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 13).

PART I

THE NOVEL-VERSE AND THE SHAPE OF THE REAL

1

The Shape of the Real

As if conjuring life out of the void, novels create new worlds out of the stuff of this one. Novels do not make something out of nothing; they refer outside of themselves to places, people, things, structures, ideas, and facts that are already familiar to us—or if not quite familiar, then understandable, believable. The world of the novel registers with us as partly but not entirely real. The gap between the fictive and the real is the space of representation, ideology, and form, and it is the peculiar province of the literary, as scholars before us have discussed.[1] We bring it up again here, now, because it bears remembering: the literary is the realm of the counterfactual. This is information that literary critics have occasionally been accused of forgetting—sometimes by historians, but most frequently by other literary critics—in our rush to demonstrate the cultural and political applications of our work.[2] But how could we really forget? What draws us to literature is its unreality, its uncanny magic to shape reality *as if* it were other than itself.

We wish to argue for the power of the otherwise, the ability to see things as they are *not* (but could be) and to reframe reality by thickening the field of possibilities that has been thinned out on the way to the actual. What the counterfactual shows us is not how inevitable the actual is, but how fragile and dicey. As Wai Chee Dimock writes, following Wittgenstein,

[1] This gap is the focus of studies of literary realism and bedrock to studies of literary representation. For a take on how fiction establishes a claim to truth by advertising its fictionality, see Michael Riffaterre. Writing about the history of nineteenth-century realism, George Levine demonstrates that the self-referentiality that we might think of as breaking the fourth wall was in fact constituent to the set of practices we call realism (*Realistic Imagination*, 15–20). For an opposing and yet complementary account of the relationship of realism to the real, see Nancy Armstrong's *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, in which she argues that mid-Victorian literary realism worked in concert with emerging photographic technologies to invert the traditional structure of mimesis and substitute copy for original. She considers the relationship of realism to reality to be tautological: "realism is at once a text that reproduces its context and a context that produces its text. In both cases, we confront a system of representation that observes the paradoxical logic of the Möbius strip, striving at once to put its inside on the outside and to contain its outside within itself" (16).

[2] As Nicholas Dames writes of what he calls "the desire to repress the 'as if' of reading fiction," "Contextualist work on fiction often functions as our own, lapsed form of Incarnation. The work of imaginative literature is studied for the way it betrays, reflects, expresses, or encodes (cognate terms that present distinct, but overlapping, commitments) the history that speaks through it. At its simplest, contextualist work risks effacing the fictionality of fiction—its counter-factuality, its incomplete adherence to the historical real, its artifactuality—in favor of its documentary or evidentiary status" ("On Hegel, History, and Reading," 440).

Materialization is chancy, shaky, a toss-up until the last moment. It is often a matter of luck, rather than a matter of logic, that a volatile field should congeal at just this point, precipitating this outcome rather than that. Any event that solidifies is haunted by many others, not so fortunate, that once were and that might still be eligible candidates. Since this is the case, an empirical description of the world is not only fractional, but arbitrary in what it leaves out.[3]

That arbitrariness undercuts the solidity of fact, surrounds it by what Dimock calls the "teeming world of the unpurged, unsorted, and unrealized" (243), a world "resting just below the threshold of actualization" (242) that is both other than and more than the fraction of the universe occupied by the actual. Dimock tracks the counterfactual into what she calls the "syntactic underground" of the subjunctive, the shadowy grammatical realm that surrounds the indicative and helps to produce the "time-warping and world-multiplying fictiveness peculiar to the constitution of literature" (244). She writes of the subjunctive,

A still-undecided past and a still-hypothetical future are housed by this syntactic form: counterfactual, not often accredited, but available all the same as virtual sites, thinkable versions of the world. The very presence of this grammatical mood suggests that pre-histories and post-histories are more varied, more fluid, and more open-ended than the eventual outcome would reveal. It suggests that the morphology of time is anything but a single, unified clock. (244)

Indeed, Dimock claims that "What the subjunctive offers would seem to be an *alternative grammar of time*, a pre-processed latitude, not granted by empirical reality but honored by the morphology of syntax. We can think of this alternative grammar as a 'counterfactual realism,' stretching the empirical to its limits and describing the world beyond those limits" (244, emphasis ours).

While there are, appropriately, different paths to the counterfactual—and these have been taken by colleagues looking at counterfactual histories, the optative, the virtual grammar of the subjunctive, the formal signatures with which language signals the forking of possibility, and the virtual possibilities opened by the digital realm and its reordering (disordering) of data[4]—the aspect that most interests us is the time-altering property of the otherwise, a time-travel device for entering the multiple, contingent, alternative timelines around and just below our own apparently singular one, timelines that look both backwards and forward,

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[3] Dimock, "Subjunctive Time," 243. Subsequent references to this essay will be in parentheses.
[4] See Wai Chee Dimock's work on the subjunctive; Catherine Gallagher's *Telling It Like It Wasn't* on counterfactual histories; Andrew H. Miller's essays on the optative ("Lives Unled"; "'A Case of Metaphysics'") and his book, *On Not Being Someone Else*; Garrett Stewart's "The Foreign Offices of British Fiction" on the forking paths of syllepsis; Nathan Hensley's "Database and the Future Anterior" and Jerome McGann's *Radiant Textuality* on digital textuality and its restructuring of representation.

to what might have been and what might yet be. Because the fictional time of Victorian novels is bound to action (or inaction), to those events that "happen" in and through time and make up fictional plots, we experience disruptions in the standard timeline at various formal-temporal levels: the micro-grammar of such linguistic conventions as the subjunctive, the optative, and the future anterior; the cause-and-effect, subject-object syntax of plot; and the structure of subjectivity that realism constructs as accruing through time and experience.

Realist Time

We appear to be describing the workings of science fiction—time travel, alternative timelines, multiple worlds, fractional and parallel universes—but our claim is that all literature offers these counterfactual possibilities, perhaps most pressingly the realist fiction that would seem to traffic only in the actual but that in fact—in *counter-fact*—encodes unreal alternatives to itself. Let us begin, then, with realist time, which cannot help but offer up a theory of action and subjectivity. Realist time proceeds slowly, sequentially, in much the same way—indeed, in just the same way—as we believe reality itself to unfold. It moves relentlessly forward along a "chain of events," in which causes are linked to effects, which in turn create new causes, and so on. As it moves forward, realist time sheds possibilities, plucking the actual moment from the stream of potential ones, which are then canceled and invalidated. The present moment is shaped by past events—by actions and choices taken in the past—as it in turn shapes the future, transforming the malleable, amorphous material of possibility into the hard facts of the real. While it would seem, then, that the realist future is entirely open, that it is the time of possibility when anything could happen, it is already conditioned by the past to which it is irrevocably linked, its field of possibility already narrowed by the now. It is for this reason that when we consider future possibilities in real life, we often tell ourselves to "be realistic" about what can be, insofar as potential futures are tied to the real material conditions of the present, which are themselves tied—chained, even—to the past. The field of action is thus also circumscribed, as is subjectivity. In the realistic triumvirate of time-action-character, we act based on who we "are," and who we are is a product of our past actions and experiences in the world around us, which offers us a limited because pre-sorted array of realistic options.

If realist time appears to be shaped in a straight line—time's arrow, flying in only one direction and always hitting its target—it in fact requires the look back, the moment at which we can apprehend the "actual" chain of events, to create narrative out of experience. This moment is often one of closure (the end of a life, a relationship, a maturation process, a novel) and it affords us the retrospect from which to see the shape of the whole, as if viewing the arrow's trajectory from the

point of view of the target. That trajectory is never straight, of course; our favorite metaphors for the moments that give it defining shape tend toward the more geometrically complex: crossroads, junctures, pivots, curves, cruxes, and turning points. These moments of directional change are the most heavily freighted in all of realist narrative because they are the moments when things might have happened differently but did not. They are the moments at which the counterfactual becomes the factual, when the many become one. Narratively speaking, these are often moments of choice, which gives a double valence to the phrase "decisive moment."

So foundational is what we are calling realist time to the plotting of novels and to our experience of real life that examples of it are everywhere we look, from the hard choices that forge character to the traumatic events in which, as E. M. Forster says, "character tells," and from which there is no going backwards.[5] Sometimes these moments are obvious (Jane Eyre leaves/returns to Rochester, Margaret Hale stops a mob uprising, Pip saves a convict, Sydney Carton mounts the guillotine, Gwendolyn Harleth lets Grandcourt drown, Hetty Sorrel kills her baby), but they may also be discreet, visible only in hindsight as they are gathered up into narrative shape. We find moments of both kinds in every Victorian novel—and we will explore some of them in the chapters to come.

Of course, realist time is already to be felt in Romantic theories of subjectivity, particularly Wordsworth's "spots of time," in which the deep subject knits itself together in the moment of recollecting past experience. Too many others have explored the Wordsworthian construction of subjectivity to require doing so here at any length, but we should recall that the subject is laid down along two kinds of time: the slow, historical time of development and the fleeting moment of recollection or revelation that works to process past experience.[6] As Carolyn Steedman puts it,

Romantic writing in general, and in Britain the moment of thought expressed by the Wordsworthian "Romantic Child," located individuals in time and chronology by possession of their own personal past. In this kind of account, a self was formed by the laying down and accretion of bits and pieces of a personal history, and this detritus, these little portions of the past, most readily assumed the shape of a child when reverie and memory restored them to the adult.[7]

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[5] See the discussion of *A Room with a View* in our chapter on Clough (Chapter Seven). We take the novel's early turning point, when Lucy and George witness a murder in Florence's Piazza Signoria, to be a clear example of realist temporality and its forging of character through experience.

[6] Perhaps the most influential critic on this question is Geoffrey Hartman. See especially, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814*.

[7] Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, 10.

The most famous formulation of this is perhaps Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up":

> The Child is father of the Man;
> And I could wish my days to be
> Bound each to each by natural piety.[8]

The "Child is father of the Man" appears to present us with a temporality of forward progression: our childhood memories will shape the adult we will become; however, it also loops temporally backwards (the child is the father) in such a way as to fix our subjectivity in a narrative of *bildung*, binding together the days and the subject in a chain forged by time and affect. Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode" further demonstrates how the coordinates of reality are plotted when we link an objective sequence of temporal actions to a subjectivity caught up in determining the significant moments of existence, beginning with those childhood experiences that form consciousness: deep subjectivity ("the Soul's immensity," 109) fixed by significant narrative moments ("A wedding or a festival/ A mourning or a funeral," 93). In this way of thinking, "nothing can bring back the hour/ Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower" (182), for there is no going back; and yet the shape of thought (and the poem) is ultimately recursive—indeed, conservative, in the most basic sense of the term. Wordsworth's model would be highly influential for Victorian novelists, as in our book's introduction we saw Kermode arguing decades before us.

By this circular logic, the future gets locked into the actual in the present moment that sets us onto a single temporal path, thus foreclosing alternative possibilities; and it is also the vantage point from which we will understand that moment as bound to the past, the end already shaped by its beginning. This version of temporality is the one that we now take as reality, one in which we are the agents of our fate: our actions will determine the future, and we must choose well because, once we act, our future will be fixed. Kermode argues that this narrative and historical mode of thinking about temporality is of relatively recent invention, a product of the early modern period.[9] Hayden White similarly explores "The lateness of the invention of historical discourse," tracking its roots to the early modern period and observing its full bloom in the nineteenth century.[10] White argues that "the very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction presupposes a notion of reality in which

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[8] William Wordsworth, "My Heart Leaps Up," lines 7–9 (*Poetical Works*). All subsequent references to Wordsworth's poetry other than *The Prelude* will be to this edition, and line numbers will be given in parentheses.

[9] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 12–13.

[10] White, *The Content of the Form*, 3. White develops this argument fully in *Metahistory*.

'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity."[11] By contrast, a text in the medieval annals tradition operates outside the bounds of narrative: "no well-marked beginning, middle, and end, no peripeteia."[12] He writes,

> Value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries. Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see "the end" in every beginning?[13]

What feels natural to us now is a construction that would have made little sense to a pre-modern way of thinking. Indeed, realist time was not fully naturalized until the nineteenth century, when the genre of history was reshaped around it and the novel spoke through it.

Seeing "the end" in every beginning is a basic function of novelistic plotting, as is experiencing the full weight of the beginning—now understood as such—from the endpoint. In his work on narrative, Peter Brooks explores the complicated ways in which closure, no matter how clearly fictive and tenuous, saturates plot. Brooks is interested in narrative time's boundedness, the ways it "demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, orders," and he reads "plot" in the sense suggested by a grave plot: a bounded space that is intimately tied with questions of death, or at least closure. In other words, Brooks reads plot as following "the internal logic of the discourse of mortality."[14] Any forward-moving narrative, a metonymic chain of events, is both in search of and already linked to the closural burst of metaphor that will grant coherence and retrospective meaning. As Brooks puts it, "the metaphoric work of eventual totalization determines the meaning and status of the metonymic work of sequence—though it must also be claimed that the metonymies of the middle produced, gave birth to, the final metaphor. The contradiction may be in the very nature of narrative, which not only uses but *is* a double logic."[15] This is why Brooks can claim that "the end is a time before the beginning," insofar as the end is not only prepared by the beginning but also shapes it; the

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[11] White, *The Content of the Form*, 6.
[12] White, *The Content of the Form*, 6.
[13] White, *The Content of the Form*, 24.
[14] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 4, 22.
[15] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 29.

arrow finds its target because the target shapes its flight in anticipatory reverse.[16] As he writes, "Perhaps we would do best to speak of the *anticipation of retrospection* as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic."[17] There is a cultural-historical logic to this version of temporality; it is no coincidence that all Brooks' examples come from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or that his theoretical framework is derived from Sigmund Freud, who could be said to apply the logic of nineteenth-century novelistic temporality to our psyches in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[18]

   This anticipation of retrospection, the foreknowledge that we will in the future look back on the apparently random chaos of the now and see coherent pattern, is both the promise of narrative closure and the way we process personal and world history. We count on time to reveal meaning, or at least sense. As Brooks writes, "The very possibility of meaning plotted through sequence and through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending."[19] While this promise can be comforting—"one day this will all mean something"—it can also feel claustral and limiting. As Žižek writes of the historical notion of temporality, "when we are engaged in a present historical process, we perceive it as full of possibilities, and ourselves as agents free to choose among them; while, to a retrospective view, the same process appears as fully determined and necessary, with no room for alternatives."[20] Any significant act in the present, by this way of thinking, locks us into narrative. If each present-day action forecloses the freedom of other possibilities, if each cause forever after locks the past into one *bildung* leading inevitably to death, what is the point of action?[21] There is a two-fold paralysis that arises from the logic of realist time: all choices limit my freedom; and I must make the right choices and determine the right time for action, as these things will determine my fate. As our fates are already partly determined, finding the "right" time to do anything is a matter of anticipatory retrospection, and it is accompanied always by the fear of having misread one's own narrative, of misrecognizing

[16] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 103. Brooks offers a reading of Sartre's *La Nausée*, in which the protagonist, Roquentin, says of narrating a story, "In reality, you have started at the end. . . . the end is [already] there, transforming everything" (quoted in Brooks, 93).

[17] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 23. Cognitive theorist Walter Kintsch terms this type of retrospection—the endpoint that integrates neatly into the narrative what once appeared unpredictable—the *postdictable*. Both meaning and cognitive interest are determined by the state or promise of postdictability. As Kintsch writes, "weird and unpredictable statements in a text are interesting only in so far as they are well motivated within the text as a whole, at least by hindsight" (89).

[18] Nancy Armstrong makes a similar argument about Freud's relationship to psychic space and the nineteenth-century novel when she writes that in "relocating the outside on the inside, it is fair to say, Freud not only transformed the individual from a novel-made discourse into a self-perpetuating one; he also ensured that the subject's personal history would reproduce that of the novel" (*How Novels Think*, 9).

[19] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 93.

[20] Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 164.

[21] This is precisely the question asked by Arthur Hugh Clough in *Amours de Voyage*, as we explore in Chapter Seven.

the right time. Little of this anxiety is relieved by the fact that our narrative-making is not "real": although on some level we must understand that the target determines the arrow's flight *after the fact*, that effects create their own cause and not the other way around, the alternative—there is no target—is harder to accept.

We need not look far to illustrate the pervasiveness of realist temporality to contemporary ideas about self and experience. It suffuses all aspects of our lives and is reflected back to us in multiple forms. We consume it in our popular culture, from the long-form dramatic television that takes its narrative shape from the classic novel of the nineteenth century to the shape of the weekly sitcom, which divides the long metonymic chain of the series into discrete, bounded "episodes" of time, each with their own closure. Such shows are often very knowing about narrative shape: *How I Met Your Mother* turns the anticipation of retrospection into a formal framing device, recounting over nine seasons the events leading up to the titular encounter, which will mark the beginning of one life (familial life, the bourgeois order) as the close of another (single life, youth), and which looms over the sequence of represented events as both a looked-for end and coming apocalypse. The terror of making the right choice is also played for laughs in Aziz Ansari's 2013 comedy special *Buried Alive*, where in a long sequence he thinks through all the sundry events that had to happen to make possible—in the parking lot of a Bed, Bath and Beyond—the chance meeting of his friend with the woman he would go on to marry:

> What if you're missing your moment, what if I'm not supposed to be here? My friend's entire life changed because he went to Bed, Bath and Beyond one afternoon. *The most casual of decisions had the most tremendous of consequences.* (emphasis ours)

That Ansari thinks about the at once "amazing" and "terrifying" moment, as he puts it, that leads to his friend's marriage, is significant: not only does he follow the cause-and-effect logic of realist time, he also subordinates that consequential moment to what some have termed the "reproductive futurism" of both compulsory heterosexuality and anthropocene thinking.[22] The fear about missing your moment here misses the point: narratives of the consequential moment often portray change as what needs to happen so that things may stay the same, insofar as the "right" moment tends to be the one that locks us into the most traditional

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[22] We are not suggesting that Ansari gains any special critical-theoretical purchase on ideological obfuscation through his comedy routine. As Žižek states, "if there is an ideological experience at its purest, at its zero-level, then it occurs the moment we adopt an attitude of ironic distance, laughing at the follies in which we are ready to believe—it is at this moment of liberating laughter, when we look down on the absurdity of our faith, that we become pure subjects of ideology, that ideology exerts its strongest hold over us" (*Living*, 3).

story-lines of self and world (e.g., the right moment to propose, marry, have a baby, invest, start a business, rise to power, etc.).

Victorian novels are riddled with the anxiety that is born of the closed loop of narrative shape. Locked in by actions and choices, the shape of which will only become clear retroactively, characters endure the terrible burden of waiting for the right moment, which could be right now, but most likely is not. (We might think here of the anxiety attendant on the self-made man, waiting for his big "break" in the world, or the common device of the marriage proposal that is made twice—once at the wrong time and then at the right one—to structure character transformation as something that happens between two "momentous" events.[23]) Realist narrative plotting suggests that there is a right time, right place, and right person for every action, a time that might well be missed or misrecognized. Indeed, the tremendous specificity of the actual—our sense that of all the possible present moments, we are experiencing *this one* and no other—paradoxically underscores not the rightness or inevitability of the actual but its vulnerability. We marvel at the staggering odds that the universe has produced this moment and not millions of others, and we perhaps remark upon the fragility of the consequential moment: it might so easily have been otherwise.

It is critical to understand that the realist novel here presses the counterfactual into service of the actual: rather than undercutting any sense of reality, the represented existence of the counterfactual—all of those many alternatives that might have been but are not—helps support the singularity of the actual, made real by its denied alternatives. Andrew H. Miller explores this phenomenon in his work on the optative mode in realist fiction. Starting from the Kierkegaardian image of being "nailed to ourselves," Miller considers how realism constructs the solitary subject as bounded within itself, separate and unique, a product of the "peculiar contingency of modern experience."[24] The subject comes into crisp focus in comparison to others, those "defining mirror existences" (119) that represent viable alternatives to the life being led, a process that is often accompanied by the yearning for what might have been that Miller terms "optative regret" (121). Miller argues that, far from undoing the reality effects of the novel, "such counterfactual imaginings were built into the realistic novel as part of its very structure" (120), leading him to declare that "Realism is intrinsically optative" (122). He writes,

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[23] For example, John Thornton proposes to Margaret Hale on either side of her change of heart not only about Thornton but also about the ethics of factory ownership and the value of England's industrial north. Rochester's double proposal to Jane Eyre frames both his transformation and hers; and, reaching back to the Romantic novel, Darcy's first proposal inaugurates the changes that will make his second proposal to Elizabeth Bennett arrive just at the right time. Perhaps the best example along these lines is patient Dobbin, who waits the entire length of *Vanity Fair* for the right time to propose to Amelia Sedley, and then does so, twice, on either side of her transformative recognition of his worth and her dead husband's lack of it. *Aurora Leigh*, which we discuss in Chapter Six, is another example.

[24] Andrew H. Miller, "Lives Unled," 118, 119. Subsequent references to this essay will appear in parentheses.

In regularly shadowing forth lives for our characters that we do not see, realism reminds us of the singularity of those lives that we *do* see: it is this life, lived thus, and not other possible lives, formed by other choices, other chances, that the author has decided to represent. But in giving us this reminder, the fiction tests its own economy: in it, ideally, no choice or chance need be changed; all should be of a piece and that piece accepted by the reader without regret. Acknowledging counterfactual possibilities within the story, fictions aim to expel them from the discourse; in this way, the ethical economy of characters provides an ideal for the aesthetic economy of the novels they inhabit. (122)

Miller posits the writing of Henry James as "the furthest refinement of counter-factual experiments in British realism," and considers "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903) to be "an infinite representation of the optative mode" (128). We would add that the circular story of John Marcher—who spends his life in patient expectation of the catastrophic event that he is convinced lies in wait for him like the titular beast, only to find that this event is the revelation that he has missed his own life in the waiting for it—is not only the *ne plus ultra* of optative regret, as Miller argues, but also the purest example of the paralysis and terror that set in when we await the right moment. Marcher may through his delay manage to resist het-eronormative marital closure, as he does in Eve Sedgwick's famous reading of the story, but he nonetheless squanders his life waiting for a consequential moment that is "not yet."[25]

What might have been—the lives we might have led, the choices we might have made—can thus be said to prop up the remorseless singularity of the actual, which puts the "real" in realism, for all that we know fiction to be counterfactual. Indeed, the counterfact of fiction goes further, surrounding the reader's actual life with fictional others, lives we may enter more fully and imaginatively than we do the real lives of those around us, but which we may nonetheless never live. The poignancy and partiality of our curtailed knowledge of others is the topic of Jonathan Farina's exploration of realism's use of the counterfactual, where he focuses on the Victorian's favorite conditional analogy, "as if." The gateway to the subjunctive, "as if" is also the privileged grammar of the otherwise, and Farina demonstrates how realist fiction avails itself of the subjunctive to signal depths of reality outside knowledge of characters or representation.[26] As he puts it, "recurrent 'as ifs' present

[25] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 182–212. We should point out that our questioning of novel-istic temporality and exploration of alternative forms of temporality intersects nicely with recent work on queer temporality. See, for example, Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark, "Queer Moments"; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; Lee Edelman, *No Future*; Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*; Jane Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*; J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence*; E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*; and Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings*.

[26] Farina, "'Dickens's As If.'" Farina focuses on Dickens, with nods toward Gaskell and Thackeray—as well as Lyell and Tyndall, since conditional analogy was also important to scientific writing—but we

the narrative in which they occur as a conjectural history of some real story that purportedly precedes, exceeds, or otherwise eludes its narrator's perspective," thus constructing the illusion of reality—deep time and deep character—with the help of the doubly unreal (unreal in life, unreal in the fiction that purports to life).[27] This is similar to, if more pointedly Victorian than, the work of realism described by Michel Riffaterre in *Fictional Truth*, where he demonstrates how fiction gestures outside itself to establish its claim to reality, paradoxically violating its own boundaries in the setting of them. The shared point of these accounts of realism's relationship to the counterfactual is that the limitless realm of the otherwise is used to shape the limits of the fictional real. In other words, realist fiction sees the counterfactual coming and knows exactly what to do with it.

While this approach to reality and its representation now feels natural to us—not only how things are, but also how they should be—it is important to underscore the limitations of this model. Indeed, the most significant downside to realist temporality *is* limitation: it limits our ability to enact change and to better the world. However much the architects of Victorian realism might see themselves as committed to positive change (and we are particularly thinking here of Dickens and Eliot), the diegetic rules of the novel by which we now live hamstring us in several crucial ways. First, we wait for the right moment to act, knowing that timing is everything and that everything has its right time. Second, we wait for a hero, someone to save us, someone whose time and story it is. We often configure that hero as someone who has yet to be, the future child or generation who will one day change the world and on which we place the burden of our hope. Third, we lock ourselves into one cause-and-effect sequence bounded by death, a sequence that becomes ever more constricting as it moves toward the mortal closure that will retroactively impose meaning and narrative shape. Because it operates in anticipation of death and sheds options as it goes, this unidirectional sequence prematurely forecloses on the possibilities of age, which is one reason we overvalue youth and place our hopes for change on the next generation who "have their whole lives in front of them." (In fact, we all have our lives in front of us; only when conceived narratively can we say that someone's life is behind them.) On the other hand, because we assume that change is a thing that belongs to youth, we dismiss idealism as an adolescent fantasy that we must grow out of on our way to maturity. Finally, this locked sequence makes it incredibly difficult to imagine

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could also look to James, the master of unknown character recess and partial knowledge, who lifts the "as if" to a psychological peak. The Jamesian "as if" often tests the limits of emotional intelligence and theory of mind, as we see in "The Turn of the Screw": "He looked round at me now, *as if* in recognition of my understanding him" (711); "It was exactly *as if* they had both had at heart to gloss over any recent little friction" (713); "I was sitting in the glow with my thoughts. He paused a moment by the door *as if* to look at me; then—*as if* to share them—came to the other side of the hearth and sank into a chair. We sat there in absolute stillness; yet he wanted, I felt, to be with me" (723). Quotations are from Henry James, *Complete Stories, 1892–1898*, emphasis ours.

[27] Farina, "'Dickens's As If,'" 432.

a future that is radically different from the present, from the perspective of which we would be able to see the inadequacy of the present and the necessity of acting now to change it. While climate disaster can be referenced as the limit-case phenomenon that most clearly illustrates the problems of what we are calling realist thinking—we know that crisis looms but feel incapable to act to change it, waiting instead for the next generation or the next president or a technological *deus ex machina*—we might look to any of the apparently intractable problems that face us, from global-scale social injustice to personal-scale crises, and consider how we hamper our own response when we consider ourselves locked into sequential narratives and, indeed, into ourselves. Surely, there must be a more strategically effective approach to change—something less strictly realist and "factual."

Counterfactual Time

What, then, would a counterfactual temporality look like, as opposed to the realist temporality of cause-and-effect, of the singular now and its optative regrets? We suppose the best answer to be, "like more things than we could possibly imagine," given the limitless potential of the counterfactual, but we will imagine at least one, which would begin by decoupling cause and effect, allowing that causes do not line up symmetrically with effects, or at least do not have narrowly deterministic effects that we can predict and apprehend. Even in realist time, this is true, for the target draws the arrow: effects construct their own causes, creating the circumstances of their own becoming so that the end might be a time before the beginning. But this forced realist symmetry takes shape invisibly, naturalized as forward, progressive movement, not as recursive circuit. In realistic plotting, that is, effects appear to follow upon the causes which are seen in retrospect to add up to the effects, to *equal* effects. Because there is no surplus, we do not question the accounting. But what happens when effects exceed their causes, when there is a surplus that cannot be tidily explained or absorbed into the symmetry of narrative?

When effects exceed causes, we have what philosophers term "an event." Žižek defines event as "something shocking, out of joint that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernible causes."[28] It *appears* to emerge out of nowhere, but of course it does not; an event is not a miracle. But an event seems like a miracle because of the way it reorders our reality, radically altering our frame of perception. "At its most elementary," Žižek writes, "event is not something that occurs within the world, but is a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it" (*Event*, 12). An event cleaves time into a "before" and "after": before an event, we cannot fully predict its effects; after an event, we

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[28] Žižek, *Event*, 4. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

cannot see anything but the new world it has produced. Žižek asks, "is an event a change in the way reality appears to us, or is it a shattering transformation of reality itself?" (*Event*, 7) The answer, clearly, is that an event is both: the reframing of reality that shatters and remakes it. Revolution is the classic example of an event, the sudden turmoil that overthrows the political status quo and reorients our sense of the world, allowing us to see and think things (about class relations, injustice, agency, etc.) that were unthinkable under the previous framework but come to appear obvious under the new one. Love is another example favored by philosophers of the event, in whose work love appears as its own kind of virtual time travel. "Falling in love changes the past: it is as if I *always-already* loved you, our love was destined" (Žižek, *Event*, 99). As Žižek observes, "We never fall in love in present time: after a (usually long) process of subconscious gestation, we all of a sudden become aware that we (already) *are* in love. The Fall (into love) never *happens* at a certain moment, it has *always-already happened*" (*Event*, 133). Because an event changes its own past, creates the conditions of its own becoming, it can never be seen in the present moment. It is, as Badiou writes, a "vanishing mediator."[29] Indeed, the evental *sine qua non* is nothing less than the symbolic order, the frame by which we see the world itself, but which we can never see:

> The ultimate case of a symbolic event, of something emerging all of a sudden and creating its own past, is the emergence of the symbolic order itself. The structuralist idea is that one cannot think the genesis of the symbolic (order): once it is here, this order is always-already here, one cannot step outside of it; all one can do is to tell myths about its genesis. (Žižek, *Event*, 135)

What the event changes is not the actual past but rather the virtual past, insofar as it creates its own possibility—even its own necessity.

We again have a circular structure, a circuit, in which the effect determines its own causes. As Dupuy observes, "The catastrophic event is inscribed into the future as a destiny, for sure, but also as a contingent accident: it could not have taken place. . . . It is thus the event's actualization—the fact that it takes place—which retroactively creates its necessity."[30] As much as the event appears as a machine for (virtual) time travel, then, it is also a machine for turning accident into destiny. Within the paradoxical circuit of the event "resides the dialectical reversal of contingency into necessity, i.e., the way the outcome of a contingent process is the appearance of necessity: things retroactively 'will have been' necessary" (Žižek, *Event*, 129). The temporal signature of the event, its grammar of being, is therefore the future anterior, the "will have been" that marks the peculiar time-warping effects of the event. Essentially, the event is always temporally out of

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[29] Badiou, "The Event in Deleuze," 39.
[30] Dupuy, *Petite metaphysique de Tsunami*, 19.

step with itself: when an event happens, it will appear already to have happened; it will place itself within the virtual past created by its occurrence.

We seem to have trespassed onto the territory of science fiction yet again. And, indeed, many of the purest structural examples of the event can be drawn from the pages and frames of alternative reality and time-travel narratives, for obvious reasons. In an "alt-reality" narrative, an event occurs that creates an alternative timeline, but no one in that new timeline perceives anything to be "wrong": the event has produced a new reality that appears *as though it has always existed.* While such a narrative most often works to reinstate the "right" reality, destroying the optative world in the process of recuperating the "actual," the multiverse allows these realities to persist side by side, viable optative versions of one another. The time-loop narrative, on the other hand, shuts down optative possibility altogether, turning apparent contingency into historical necessity. Let us take as our example the perfect time-loop of Chris Marker's experimental film *La jetée* (1962), in which a grand-scale apocalyptic event that has destroyed the planet and sent humans underground is leveraged by a smaller, personal event witnessed by the main character as a child, in the days before World War III and its attendant apocalypse. This event, "the violent scene which upset him," occurs on the jetty at Paris's Orly airport, where the boy sees a man's body crumple and observes the look on a woman's face. Only after the fact does the boy realize that he has seen a man die. But it is the woman's face that sticks with him: "Nothing tells memories from ordinary moments. Only afterwards do they claim remembrance on account of their scars. That face which was to be a unique image of peacetime to carry with him through the whole wartime, he often wondered if he had ever seen it. Or if he had dreamed a lovely moment to catch up with the crazy moment that came next." Because of this strong mental image, the man whom the boy becomes is later chosen for an experiment in time travel by scientists at a post-apocalyptic prison. Bound to the past by the moment that has so marked him, the prisoner is sent back to search for the woman whose face he remembers. He finds her; they fall in love over a sequence of visits, a series of moments strung out across the pre-war past. Satisfied with the success of their experiment's first phase, scientists send the prisoner to the future, where he is to deliver a message: "since humanity had survived, it could not refuse to its own past the means of its own survival." He succeeds. "This sophism was taken for Fate in disguise," and the citizens of the future return the prisoner to his own time with the resources to repower the world. His job complete, the prisoner awaits execution. But the inhabitants of the future are also time-travelers, and they offer him escape to their own time; he refuses, asking instead to return to the past, "and this woman who was perhaps waiting for him." He finds her on the jetty at Orly, where she watches as he is gunned down by the executioner who has followed him from the prison; his childhood self looks on, too, marked by the image now revealed to be the scene of his own death.

Understandably, *La jetée* has been catnip for narrative theorists, who see in its perfectly circular form and its black-and-white still photography an ur-narrative about pattern and closure, about the terminus (airport terminal/ closure/ death) that draws the story to itself and shapes it in reverse. Here, very literally, the end is a time before the beginning. The death of the prisoner, a man "marked by an image of his childhood," follows a trajectory that loops back around to its own instantiating event, which is revealed as what philosophers and theologists call an "uncaused cause," a cause that produces itself. In this perfectly closed narrative loop, the prisoner learns that "there was no way out of time," which is often the lesson in time-travel narratives that draw their power from the temporal paradox of the uncaused cause: for example, *The Terminator* (1984), in which an adult John Connor must send his father back in time to save his mother from a post-apocalyptic killing machine and to assure his own conception, or *Predestination* (2014), in which an intersex time-travel agent trying to avert future disaster travels back in time to conceive himself, becoming both of his own parents and literalizing anything Wordsworth had to say about the child fathering the man. There is a reason that looped time-travel narratives take up issues of apocalypse, love, and birth, for each is an event of a sort, a violent reframing of what has gone before that turns historical and personal contingency into necessity. The earth is always-already doomed; the child is always-already the man; the beloved is always-already loved. But *La jetée* does more than literalize the circuitry of the event; the series of still photographs that make up this film so disrupt the narratives by which we normalize events that it deliberately plays with the "sophism" of circular narrative, even as it completes the circle. The frozen frame of the photograph—thawed only for a brief moment as lap dissolves give way to film in a moment of lyric intimacy that reverses the expected construction of the transcendent, "lyrical pause"—breaks the filmic illusion of continuous sequence and replaces diachronic movement with synchronic stasis, troubling both narrative and realistic representation. When the prisoner is first sent back into the past, for example, he sees "real children," "real birds," "real cats, and "real graves," but we see fixed images of these things, the birds and cats as still as the graves, and none of them "real." Later, when the prisoner and the woman who anchors him in the past visit "a museum filled with ageless animals," they appear to be as lifeless—as timeless—as the taxidermic creatures around them. Indeed, the medial form of *La jetée* forces us to see the gap between still images—the gap our brains and our stories fill in to create the illusion of film or of life—and suggests that all moments are essentially timeless and disconnected from each other: there may in fact be a way to escape time, or at least sequence. It is this gap that most time-travel films—even those inspired by *La jetée*, such as its American remake, *12 Monkeys* (1995), or *The Terminator*—fill in both medially and by focusing on the inevitability of the closed time loop and the structural permanence of the event.

In science fiction, the event literally alters or secures the past; in realistic narrative, it reframes it. The difference is critical, but the effects are often similar, as we can see if we leave the realm of speculative narrative and return to realism and to James's "The Beast in the Jungle," which is *La jetée* pre-told as realist, psychological fiction. When Marcher realizes that the great destiny for which he has been waiting, the individuating event that will mark him out, is in fact the knowledge that nothing will ever happen to him, he becomes, in effect, a man who has seen himself die without recognizing it. He becomes "*the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened."[31] Indeed, although knowledge comes to him in a "sudden rush," it has the characteristic evental quality of *having already happened*:

> The Beast had lurked indeed, and the Beast, at its hour, had sprung; it had sprung in that twilight of the cold April when, pale, ill, wasted, but all beautiful, and perhaps even then recoverable, she had risen from her chair to stand before him and let him imaginably guess. It had sprung as he didn't guess; it had sprung as she hopelessly turned from him, and the mark, by the time he left her, had fallen where it was to fall. (540)

The event reaches into Marcher's past and reframes his waiting as wasting, just as it retroactively alters his identity in a modal shift: "he *had been* the man of his time, the man to whom nothing . . . *was to have* happened" (540, emphasis ours). But this is no closed temporal loop, and the story achieves its poignancy by pressing on the optative nerve: Marcher realizes how easily it all might have happened otherwise. He has, in effect, killed himself—and by accident. Indeed, it is the randomness of the revelation that so disturbs and offends him:

> It hadn't come to him, the knowledge, on the wings of experience; it had brushed him, jostled him, upset him, with the disrespect of chance, the insolence of accident. Now that the illumination had begun, however, it blazed to the zenith, and what he presently stood there gazing at was the sounded void of his life. (539)

Marcher retreats immediately into narrative, supplying himself with an optative storyline ("he had before him in sharper incision than ever the open page of his story. . . . and what it said to him, full in the face, was that *she* was what he had missed" [539–40]) and turning contingency into fate: "Everything fell together, confessed, explained, overwhelmed; leaving him most of all stupefied at the blindness he had cherished. The fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance" (540). While science fiction gives us a temporally closed narrative loop (it could not have happened differently), realism gives us painfully

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[31] Henry James, *Complete Stories, 1898–1910*, 540. Subsequent references to this work are in parentheses.

foreclosed optative narrative (it could have happened differently—*but it did not*). In this way, realism could be said to be more actively counterfactual than speculative fiction, insofar as it cherishes the flame of the optative so that it can extinguish it more decisively. We see both of these impulses—the fanning of the optative and its snuffing out—in Marcher's reaction to his "fate." Rather than recognize his own mistake—he was not fated, there was no right moment—Marcher doubles down on narrative destiny, assuming that he has both met his fate ("One's doom, however, was never baffled" [540]) and missed the right moment to have averted it ("The sight . . . named to him, as in letters of quick flame, something he had utterly, insanely missed" [539]; "the escape would have been to love her" [540]). Marcher completes the narrative loop by reabsorbing event into narrative, allowing the new frame to snap shut tightly into place: "So he saw it, as we say, in pale horror, while the pieces fitted and fitted" (540).

What we have here—the true event of "The Beast in the Jungle"—is closure at its ultra-point, closure taken for narrative. Indeed, the story is a parable of the track-erasing work of closure, which offers as narrative totality a realigned and invisibly reframed past. Marcher's "fate" appears to him as "the answer to all the past" (540), and in one fell swoop it turns the sudden violence of revelation into long-form personal history: Marcher's lifespan, his long years of waiting, his "vigil" alongside May. It does not appear to him *as if* the past has been changed, but as if the past has been illuminated and explained, as if it were there all along.

This is also how the event turns contingency into fate and anticipation into retrospection: by establishing a new reality. On either side of the event, a different reality holds sway, but only when viewed synchronically; diachronically, the reality brought into being by the event replaces what existed before. There are therefore two different time signatures for the event: "not yet" and "too late." John Marcher's story perfectly illustrates the invisible boundary between "not yet" and "too late" because it takes the traverse as its topic, but the same boundary can be felt structuring the realist novel throughout its course.

What, then, is at all counterfactual, radical, or contingent about the event? How can it be said to offer any temporal alternatives to realist time, since it seems to operate in the same circuitous way, retroactively constituting its own causes and erasing its own passage? Indeed, when we look at Dupuy's graphic rendering of the future anterior (Figure 1), the "will have been" of the event, it looks suspiciously like a narrative circuit in which the end is a time before the beginning.

There is no denying narrative closure's proximal relation to the event. Narratively speaking, closure is even *the* event, insofar as it presents us with the crucial frame, the enframing mechanism through which to read the entire narrative.[32] (Examples of this are everywhere, but we can find them most readily in the

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[32] This is how Nathan Hensley treats the event in his reading of George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, which famously ends in a catastrophic flood: "Before the novel freezes into this totality it is experienced not
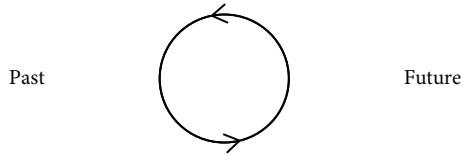
Figure 1 Jean-Pierre Dupuy's rendering of the future anterior

narratives of detection and mystery that narratologists treat as the very pattern for realist representation.[33]) But narrative closure does something very different from what theorists like Dupuy, Badiou, and Žižek hope for when they describe the radical potential of the event, for closure settles the narrative into symmetry with itself, reconciling causes and effects. Closure (for the most part) narrates away any surplus of effect and normalizes disruption; in its push for the actual, and as the necessary muscle behind that push, it forecloses on counterfactual possibilities. Victorian novels are full of such closural and peripetal events, events which are explained away and absorbed into developmental, realist narrative, their force blunted as it is amortized over long time. We might think here of revolutions and disasters—the fires, floods, and train wrecks that spin and sometimes complete Victorian plots—but we need look no further than love, which is perhaps the most important and regular event in the Victorian novel. As we have seen, love is an event in which the effects exceed the cause. Love reorders the known; *it is as if I have always loved you*. Novels call upon the mystery of love to put it into narrative, where it is freighted with the actual, bound to marriage, to children, to the production of the future, and to the symmetrical rhythms of life: love becomes another form of change so that the world can stay the same. But this normalization is only possible to the extent that event turns possibility into inevitability, which in amorous narrative usually means finding the "right" one at the "right" time and locking into the proper closure—while locking out the world of optative possibilities, which can then only be resuscitated as relief or regret. Which is to say that the radicalism of the event can quickly disappear into narrative. Insofar as it reframes reality and hides its tracks, lining up causes to explain its effects, a narrativized event takes its place within the smooth, balanced contours of developmental history, or appears as a violent and yet inevitable turning point in that history.

If narrative tames the event by encasing it in a closed loop that reinforces order and coherence, it is the real-world potential of the event to disrupt the current

as structure but as process, not as table but as line. The numerous details foreshadowing the evental overturning to come can be activated *as* information only later: downstream, as it were, in the onward tendency of human things. The characteristic temporality of this process of delayed decoding, like that of revolutionary events in Badiou, is the future anterior: the event will have been probable" (14–15).

[33] See for example, Mieke Bal, *Narratology*; Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*; Victor Shklovsky, "Sherlock Holmes and the Mystery Story"; and Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction."

order that has enthralled philosophers and political theorists. For, as we have seen, the event is not part of a closed loop: it leaps ahead of itself and gives the lie to both perfect continuity and inevitability. As Žižek puts it, "the space of an event is that which opens up the gap that separates an effect from its causes" (*Event*, 5). This gap is the space of the contingent and the otherwise, and to the extent that it can be made visible it unveils and destabilizes the symmetrical logic of realist time. Of course, reality (the symbolic order by which we make sense of the world around us) immediately rushes to restabilize itself, to strip the event of its surprise and to return itself to equilibrium. Reality abhors a gap—and so does realism, which we often judge by the extent to which it is able to achieve a symmetrical shape and a polished finish. But when that gap is wedged open, when we experience time out of joint with itself, we see reality not as a chain of events or a closed narrative loop but as a realm of radical contingency.

There Is No Right Time to Act

The difference between these two models—event as closure, event as disruption—is a matter of reframing, which is also what events themselves do. When viewed from one angle, the event reframes reality in such a seamless way as to appear as the circuit of realist plot, the closed loop that flattens itself out to look like linear development. From another angle, we can see that the loop is not closed at all and that the event constructs the past from which it appears to flow; in other words, we see the frame itself made visible. This is the radical potential of the event: to expose the *mechanism* of reality as such. What appears as the smooth flow of time and events is in fact disjointed; what appears as the singular actual is in fact rich with counterfactual possibilities that are not permanently foreclosed. From this view, not only is the future not locked into place by choices already made, but neither is the past; indeed, we can see that the past is as tenuous as the future. We can see, to recall Dimock's phrase, that "the morphology of time is anything but a single, unified clock" ("Subjunctive Time," 244).

Before we go on to suggest some of the vantage points from which we might best appreciate this radical potential—as well as some spots that most fully occlude it from view—it seems important to attend to the mechanism of the clock itself, and to be clear about how the temporality of the event distinguishes itself from "the moment." As Sue Zemka has demonstrated in her work on Victorian time, the clock became an increasingly critical device over the course of the nineteenth century, which witnessed not only the embrace of abstract time (quantifiable and standardized time) but also its acceleration, as industrial capitalism divided time into ever-smaller increments and caused the hands of the clock to whir ever more rapidly. Spurred on by new technologies—like the photographic image—that appeared to capture time in its very tracks, this process both created a new

concept of the "instant" and saturated it with hidden meaning. The ephemeral moment became supercharged, immanent, promising both rapid change and fleeting access to the transcendent, as in the moment of revelation or epiphany. We see both valences yoked together in the classical concept of *kairos*, meaning both the opportune time for action (the "right time") and eternal time ("the appointed time"). For the Victorians, the moment was both an agent of terrestrial change (tied to *momentum*) and of the divine, an instant of ecstatic truth. Belief in the power of the brief interval produced what Zemka describes as a sort of cult of the moment, a cult into which the twentieth century was born: "From the mid nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, the trope of the moment has proceeded on a largely unbroken path of ascent in Western art and critical discourse."[34]

Zemka is highly suspicious of the critical cult of the moment, and she is right to be. This way of thinking puts its emphasis on sudden rupture and violent change, misrecognizing its historical antecedents in the very forms of technological and economic power it seeks to overturn: "the rhetorical appropriation of a moment that explodes is an imaginative concession to violent technologies as enviously effective agents of social change."[35] As she puts it, "our critical investment in moments of rupture has become an epistemological failure, a retreat behind a type of mystification that in uncertain ways connects our critical practices to precisely those historical forces that are often objects of critical suspicion—technological shock, economic commodification, and sacralized violence."[36] But it is important to see that this "moment of rupture" is contradictory neither to "slow" Victorian theories of scientific or social progress, which allowed for catastrophic eruptions within a gradualist timeline, nor to the logic of what we have been calling realist time.[37] Indeed, the significant moment—the "right time"—is not only compatible with realism but essential to its cause-and-effect sequences, for it is in the decisive moment that the singular real is produced at the expense of the optative. Without the charged, symbolic moment (*kairos*), the metonymic chain of narrative (*chronos*) cannot produce its full, round meaning, to put this process in the narratological terms we have been using. Indeed, Zemka sees the Victorian novel as poised between long duration and the reification of the powerful, sudden moment, when long plots and long reads come together in a burst of recognition, change,

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[34] Zemka, *Time and the Moment*, 2.
[35] Zemka, *Time and the Moment*, 226.
[36] Zemka, *Time and the Moment*, 14.
[37] Lyell, whose *Principles of Geology* (1830–3) refuted Georges Cuvier's catastrophic theories of change, accounted for literal volcanic eruptions within a slow timeline of gradual geomorphic change, for example. As long as time moves in one, irreversible direction, it is highly absorptive of shocks. See Martin Meisel's "On the Age of the Universe" for the ways that late-nineteenth-century theories about the age of the earth affected our understanding of time.

or closure—a tension that critics have often seen as structurally and thematically essential to realism.[38]

As we have seen, one key difficulty with the overfreighted, "right" moment is that, while it seems to promise freedom and agency, it leads to paralysis: *when will my moment arrive? what if I'm missing my moment?* Zemka identifies the same problem: our overreliance on "a moment of rupture, kairos, miracle, or messianism as the vehicle of liberation from a damaged social reality or from ideological and epistemological limitations" means that "catastrophic change" is always "located somewhere in the distant future."[39] This idea of change as historical rupture is actually a variant of linear, realist time, one that imagines the flow of time as interrupted but nonetheless moving irreversibly in one direction, something like what we represent in Figure 2.

This view not only puts the emphasis on the unique moment, the kairotic "right" moment for action, but also on the heroic actor, the individual (or individuals) operating at the right time for action. That time is almost always "not now," and the individual is almost always "not me." This form of the moment is aligned with the *aevum* that Kermode calls the "time-order of novels" (72) and that we discuss in this book's Introduction.

The event works quite differently from this. While Zemka is right to say that for Badiou and others the event "recuperates the possibility of randomness in a positivist world order," it does not do so because it is either momentary or miraculous.[40] Indeed, the event draws its counterfactual power from its resistance to the cult of the "right" moment. The event is not a precise moment at all, but rather an invisible tipping point, a perspectival shift from one reality to another one. Insofar as it could be called a moment, it is one that will have passed us by before we register (which is to say, assign) its significance. Like the sorites paradox that we explore in Chapter Eight, the event can never be looked at directly. The event occurs not in a decisive present moment but, as we have seen, in the future anterior, the time-bent past of the future; it is not a momentary rupture in a unidirectional timeline,

Figure 2 The authors' rendering of change as historical rupture

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[38] For example, Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* bases his theory of plotting on the tension between metonymy (contiguity, sequence) and metaphor (coherence), while Roland Barthes in *S/Z* opposes the sequential drive of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes to the deeper, totalizing structure of the symbolic code (which itself relies upon antithesis).

[39] Zemka, *Time and the Moment*, 224–5, 224.

[40] Zemka, *Time and the Moment*, 18.

for it operates in both temporal directions. This has significant ramifications for action, for if there *is no right time to act*—and how could there be if the action itself will determine in retrospect its proper set of circumstances?—then the only acceptable option is to act right now, however blindly and riskily. As Žižek puts it, "the 'premature' attempts transform the very space/measure of temporality: the subject 'jumps ahead' and takes a risk making a move before its conditions are fully met" (*Event*, 100). Successful actions create their own possibilities—but most, undoubtedly, will fail. In fact, *it is success that is the accident*: "If—accidentally—an event takes place, it creates the preceding chain which makes it appear inevitable" (*Event*, 130).

A large-scale social event—like revolution, which is Badiou's prime example of the event and which we take up in future chapters—requires multiple actors taking risks, leaping ahead into a future that is "not yet" and knowing full well that they will likely not succeed. Revolution seems sudden and miraculous only because it appears to arrive "out of the blue" from outside the system, but it is in fact the product of many failures to jump forward in time. This is essentially different from a gradualist theory of history, in which one action leads incrementally to the next one, building bit by bit, progressively and sequentially through time—a process that gives us both a right time to act and a hero to do so. We can see both approaches to the act-event in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel we take up in the next chapter. Charles Darnay, the benevolent but ineffectual French aristocrat whose attempts to intervene heroically during the Reign of Terror go spectacularly wrong for him and his family, is a true believer in the "right time" who (naturally) misses his moment: "he had watched the times for a time of action, and . . . they had shifted and struggled until the time had gone by."[41] It is Madame Defarge, the bloodthirsty revolutionary, who articulates a position much closer to the future anterior. When her husband complains that "We shall not see the triumph," she replies that, "*We shall have helped it*" (172, emphasis ours). "Nothing that we do," she says, "is done in vain. I believe, with all my soul, that we shall see the triumph. But even if not, even if I knew certainly not, show me the neck of an aristocrat and tyrant, and still I would—" (172).[42] Dickens takes a dim view of her revolutionary violence, but we see in her fervor the call to action that accepts the probability of failure and acts nevertheless to bring about a future event.[43]

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[41] Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 232. Subsequent references to this novel will be in parentheses.

[42] The analogous example in history is Kondraty Fyodorovich Ryleyev, one of the leaders of the Decembrist revolution in Russia, who was executed as he held a book of Byron's poetry.

[43] Because revolution is the event most feared by the Victorians and most freighted in discussions of evental change, we will explore its fictional dynamics in Chapter Two when we discuss Dickens' *Tale* before turning in Part Two to Byron's understanding of revolution, which more closely approximates "event" as understood by Badiou, Dupuy, and Žižek.

The leap into the future is not rational—it is in fact idealistic and speculative. We might say that it is a way of acting counterfactually: acting *as if* the conditions for the event have already been (will have been) met; acting *as if* the future were already here, arriving along with our actions. The imperative to act as if the future has arrived closes the endlessly deferred space between the present and the future—which is also the time of delay, insofar as action is held off until an appointed time "in the future." This restructuring of time also restructures space, for it prohibits the idea that the most important events will happen somewhere else, to someone else, and that they will be sorted out by them/over there/then. It is impossible, in other words, to be in the right place at the right time.[44]

It is vital to acknowledge how anti-realist this model is; indeed, how *anti-realistic*. Literary realism operates as if time were sequential, its chronology punctuated by kairotic moments that are the exceptions that prove the chronological rule. Realism relies upon its depicted sense of specificity, of *this* character doing *this* thing in *that* place. The realistic subject is individual, singular—if not the right person for the job, at least the right one for our narrative attention. Although it can certainly resist and undercut ideas of heroism, novelistic realism is at base a heroic narrative model that sets us on a sequential track toward a closure that is, more obviously or not, destined—which is to say designed, as we will see clearly in the next chapter. Realism leaves little room for accident, for the knowledge that, as Dimock puts it, "what prevails as reality often does so haphazardly" (242).[45] To the extent that realism dives into the counterfactual, it does so to pluck the real from a stream of optative regrets. The world it portrays can be harsh and unrelenting, but it nonetheless makes sense, woven together in proper symmetry, its effects in proportion to its causes. The counterfactual model we have been pursuing does none of that. It embraces the contingent and the accidental, allowing for possibilities not available to strict sequence. Opening the gap between cause and effect, it

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[44] Philosophers of the event have made of this counterfactual futurism a proposal for action in the present that assumes the worst about impending global catastrophe. Such "enlightened doomsaying" asks us to presume the destruction of the planet, vault into the post-apocalyptic future, look back on the past, and ask ourselves, how might we have averted this disaster? Only then will we be able to act to change the future. This future-anterior approach offers us a posture in the face of catastrophe that neither ducks nor swerves, eliminating the hand-wringing that comes with awaiting the appointed time ("is there really a problem?"; "when is the right time to address it?"). The time loop is not closed; instead, the future can be changed by paradoxically imagining that it cannot be changed. While most of the scholarly work on enlightened doomsaying focuses on climate change and the death of the planet (Dupuy, Žižek), the method can be adapted to minor deaths, like the destruction of the humanities, as we argue in the coda to this book, and as Felluga and Rettenmaier argue in "Can Victorian Studies Reclaim the Means of Production?"

[45] This is not to say that the Victorians put no stock in accident. As the scholarly literature on accident shows, the period saw an increased interest in the workings of accident, from the rise of statistics and probability theory to the random mutations of evolutionary theory. As Paul Fyfe argues in *By Accident or Design*, the Victorian city was a nexus for the accidental. Our point here, which we will explore more fully in the next chapter, is that novelistic narrative easily absorbs the accidental within a pattern that it forges retrospectively, at which point the accidental takes on the aspect of a grand design.

exposes the very thing that realistic narrative veils: the true lack of symmetry or predictability in reality itself. Indeed, it allows us to see "reality itself" as one frame among many. To follow an event as it reframes reality in its wake, supplying its own past conditions and reshaping the "real" around (or behind) itself, is to see what must remain invisible for reality to function, the transparent fantasy frame that, as Žižek writes, "enables us to experience the real of our lives as a meaningful Whole" (*Event*, 24). The event gives us distance on that frame, allows us to see it *as* frame. It shows us that it is not only fiction but also reality that is counterfactual.

From which point can we achieve this disorienting view? As both a counter-factual zone and a representational method for framing experience, novelistic narrative would seem a prime perch. But, as we have already seen and will continue to see in the chapters to come, realist plotting normalizes events, supplying them with equivalent histories and chaining them to developmental, cause-and-effect sequences. We know why this is: classic novels operate largely diachronically and understand the world as sequence, which is exactly how events get smoothed out and over. But what if we pulled against the grain of time and sequence? Then we might be better placed to observe the disruptive effects of the event, their accidental quality. This is in part what we aim to do in Part Three, where we focus on the verse-novel's estranging ability to position us both within novelistic chronology and outside of it. By straddling the divide between verse and novel—a divide that is often (mistakenly) reified as one between narrative movement and lyric stasis—the verse-novel is peculiarly positioned to expose the framing assumptions of both forms, and it provides us a marvelously self-aware critique of both realistic chronology and the ecstatic, lyric "moment." We argue there for the importance to the Victorians of two different Romantic strains of thinking about the subject and its development: a Wordsworthian strain that, as we have glimpsed in this chapter, constructs the subject as historical, accrued through time and experience; and a Byronic strain that unwinds the subject, undercutting notions of truth, virtue, and realistic representation. We take this Byronic strain to be particularly influential for not only the verse-novel form but also novelistic realism, as we will illustrate in Part Two.

While the verse-novel gives us one place from which to look sidewise at the novel, we need look no further than the novel itself for an estranged view of its own temporal processes. Not only is the novel notoriously self-aware, but it also requires us to read both diachronically and synchronically—across time and outside of it. (We should be clear that all literary forms require this bifocal view, but we perhaps feel the optical strain most acutely in the novel, given its length and sequential drive.) Nathan Hensley pursues this double-timed reading in an argument that links Roland Barthes's narratology to Badiou's event. Drawing on Barthes's notion that novels must be read simultaneously as sequence and total structure, "a synchronic block (akin to a database) and a diachronic process of unfolding (or narrative)," Hensley argues that "Barthes places temporality at the

heart of the problem of reading and transforms the dialectic between synchrony and diachrony into the structuring dilemma for any act of textual analysis."[46] The event, as he sees it, punctuates and ruptures sequential chronology, acting as "a hinge between before and after . . . an atemporal zero point."[47] Hensley quotes *S/Z* on this point: the classic text "is a multivalent but incompletely reversible system."[48] Our interest in the event is precisely its ability to reverse systems, to act as a hinge not only between before and after, but also between *after* and *before*, which is a property that we can only see from outside the flow of novelistic time.

There is very little work on the event/future anterior and the realist novel—and for good reason, since realist narrative bends the event toward its own, cause-and-effect temporality. Because novels are not only sequential but also static literary artifacts—the words on the page remain the same, however much our interpretation of them may change—events represented within them prompt a rereading that is also a reframing, forcing us to go back over the text (now seen as total structure) with new eyes, new information, and to see it differently. On a second read, we are reading a different book from the first, because we are reading sequence in light of structure—it appears to be the book that was *always already in front of us*, we just did not know it yet. This is the event at its least disruptive, indistinguishable from closure—which puts it right in line with a long history of extant narrative theory. This is how Hensley, for example, is reading event: as closure that resets the narrative as we have already read it, forcing us to read dialectically for sequence and structure.

The problem here is that the narrative circuit is locked: the event in this closural loop can only show us what was destined to be. As readers, we are always already on the track for the end, which we cannot see until we arrive—at which point, there we are, right on time. The event is thus reinscribed into the time order of realism. What this familiar model misses is the speculative leap ahead into the future. The event should not be read as destiny revealed, the world laid bare, for it is really the world changed by accidental success, a leap against odds. But how, then, can we hope to read novels for the disjointing work of the event if the novel turns accident into narrative destiny? How can we see what the novel seems structurally incapable of showing us—even shaped to occlude? Failure appears built into the enterprise.

Indeed, failure is a likely place to look for traces of the event: both failures represented within novels and failures of realism itself, points at which the arithmetic of cause and effect does not quite add up. Represented failures pull most obviously on the narrative thread of the optative, and here we might consider failed

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[46] Hensley, "Database and Future Anterior," 118.
[47] Hensley, "Database and Future Anterior," 127.
[48] Barthes, *S/Z*, 3.

revolutions (such as those that fail to happen in *Redgauntlet*, *Felix Holt*, *North and South*), failed destinies (which in realism will look like misrecognized destinies, as with John Marcher, or destinies achieved by one's optative double, as with Sydney Carton), or failed visionaries, those characters whose speculative leaps fall flat. We might also look at accidents, at things that are not properly explained away or reabsorbed as destiny. Or, better, we could look at the type of accident that appears as if designed, the coincidence, which is often a moment when probabilistic realism "fails," and which we will examine in the next chapter. Other failures of the "real"—points at which narrative frames fail to meet evenly, closures that fail to bring the narrative up behind them, and closures that leave more than one option behind even after the narrative structure becomes total—could also lead the way to the contingent and counterfactual realm of the event. We are not proposing here to set out to discover something that we already know—that narrative closure is a fiction, and a partial one at that—but to press on places where the known fictional universe feels the most vulnerable to the unknown, where fact-based realistic fiction yields to counterfact.

It is important to underscore that we are not telling a new story but an old one—how the novel establishes a dominant form of subjectivity and temporality that could even be said to become coupled with reality as we know it. What we explore in this book is how this story was not the only possibility for thinking about temporality, especially when we are discussing revolutionary change: how it was established in continual dialogue with those other possibilities (we concentrate on the verse-novel but Kermode also examines the religious history of *kairos*—there are undoubtedly others); and how it limits our ability to imagine and enact change. Looking back at the Victorian novel, what interests us most are the ways the evolution of a genre eventually impacted extra-generic concerns, for example how we structure our understanding of time and action: how did this genre affect the way we think about ourselves, the future, the possibility of acting, and the ethics of action? Can we find in superseded genres like the verse-novel more productive ways to think about subjectivity and temporality? What we want to know is, does counterfactual thinking allow us to see things any differently or more productively? Does it allow us to reframe the workings of realism—or, better yet, the shape of the real?

We want to consider the Victorian novel as existing in a parallel universe to the one created by twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism, one in which it was not altogether dominant, one in which it (and we) could all have been otherwise. This universe, an alternative reality in which poetic forms and subject formations persist alongside and within novelistic ones, might be called a multiverse. We call it the novel-verse for the way that it reminds us not only that each novel builds a universe of its own—one connected to others in formal and thematic ways—but also that some of the most radical possibilities of these worlds cluster around the verse forms that the novel both cancels and preserves in altered form, as we will

explore in Part Two. The novel-verse also influences how we understand the actual universe before us, providing us with extra-generic structures for managing chaos, accident, and rupture. Before we turn to Byron and his effort to imagine a radical approach to the subject's actions in a world of radical contingency, we explore in Chapter Two the way the novel-verse addresses chance and uncertainty. Dickens is the master of the novel's now-familiar logic.

2

Charles Dickens and the Novel-Verse

In a letter to his friend Daniel Deronda, Hans Meyrick reports a shocking discovery: Anna Gascoigne, the sister of one of his students, turns out to be the cousin of Gwendolyn Harleth, who is also a special friend of Daniel's "!!!." "I put the notes of exclamation to mark the surprise that the information at first produced on my feeble understanding," he writes; "On reflection I discovered that there was not the least ground for surprise, unless I had beforehand believed that nobody could be anybody's cousin without my knowing it."[1] Given that Hans is a character in a Victorian novel, where hardly anybody is nobody's cousin, it would be more surprising if the reverse were true, and new friends were unrelated to old ones. The surprise reveal of relation is the bread and butter of the Victorian novel, and not just *Daniel Deronda*, which is only noteworthy here for how it calls out a familiar practice—indeed, a practice of familiarization—whereby apparently unlinked characters are shown to have been connected all along.[2] We can locate famous examples—Jane Eyre runs away from Rochester, almost dies on the moors, and is saved by three siblings who turn out to be her cousins; Lucy Snowe arrives in a strange town, in a strange country, and is assisted by an English gentleman, who turns out to be her godmother's son; Caroline Helstone forms a friendship with Shirley Keeldar, whose companion and former governess turns out to be Caroline's lost mother—without leaving the novels of Charlotte Brontë, not to mention leaving realism for sensation fiction, an entire genre built on the exclamatory surge of coincidence and the revelation of character. But if we allow that the relationship between sensation fiction and realism is not one of inversion but rather intensification—sensation fiction is not the opposite of realism but rather the hyper-extension of its principles, realism *in extremis*—we

[1] *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy, 577–8. Subsequent references to this novel will be in parentheses and will refer to this edition.
[2] See Cynthia Chase's "The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double-Reading *Daniel Deronda*" for a work that explores the logic of the narrative–character nexus in Eliot's novel. As she explains, "to read a sequence of events as a narrative is to expect that sequence to become intelligible. By the almost irresistible pressure of this expectation, the temporal sequence is conflated with a causal sequence; post hoc is interpreted as propter hoc" (217). She goes on to explain how *Daniel Deronda* simultaneously offers "a deconstruction of the concept of cause" (217) through Hans Meyrick's phrase, "the present causes of past effects": "far from representing the truth of the human situation, the subject's origin and destiny in a history, narrative represents with authority nothing more than its own structural operations" (220). We address Meyrick's phrase more fully later when we turn to Barrett Browning in Chapter Six.

can also see that coincidence is not incompatible with realism but rather, as we argue in this chapter, a formal device that is constituent of it.[3]

What interests us here is how realist fiction handles the time–action–character nexus, which is felt everywhere, but nowhere so obviously as in these coincidental crisis points. Indeed, "the obvious" is a privileged category when it comes to coincidence, which traffics in the evident and the observable—or the reverse. And here we have the most obvious and interesting thing about coincidence: its apparent reversibility. For "coincidence" names that which is accidental and providential at the same time, folding into itself the inherent contradiction of an event that owes its unlikelihood to the (false) appearance of causality. Coincidence is always double, both because it literally describes two things that happen at the same time and because that co-happening must appear more than accident but less than design.[4] There is something *off* about it that makes us suspicious and leaves us wanting more or better. As the poor cousin of design, coincidence spoils the illusion of causal connection its own temporal property creates. As a method of simultaneously connecting and disconnecting events, of holding in tension similarity and dissimilarity, it embeds within itself a realm of counterfactual possibility that it both cancels and preserves: these events *might (not) have been* connected.[5]

Coincidence is always in a subjunctive mood. It offers us accident *as if* it were designed. Charles Dickens, the master of Victorian coincidence, reverses this paradigm and offers us design *as if* it were accident, a move that riled up critics who found this sort of plotting obvious and unrealistic.[6] But obviousness is in fact

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[3] Most scholarly work on coincidence not only considers coincidence to pull against realism, but also defines coincidence as that which is inherently anti-realistic because nonprobabilistic. See especially Hilary Dannenberg's *Coincidence and Counterfactuality* and Marie-Laure Ryan, "Cheap Plot Tricks," for these accounts. In claiming that coincidence is productive of realistic effects, we are in company with Adam Grener, who argues that coincidence is a critical tool of realistic representation, not for its probabilistic or mimetic effects but for the way it expresses the relationship of the subject to historical conditions. See "Coincidence as Realist Technique."

[4] It is no accident that so many Dickensian coincidences happen in London, the urban density of which was not only productive of chance encounters, but also, as Paul Fyfe has shown, an important node in the century's ongoing debates in theology, mathematics, physics, evolutionary biology, and social statistics about the role of chance in human and terrestrial development. Fyfe writes, "The trouble with accidents is whether or not they happen by chance. Or, instead, whether they indicate a larger purpose of plan which we do not initially recognize" (*By Accident or Design*, 8). Liberated from strict theological models, chance gained ground after mid-century but was also reined in by the predictive modeling of the ascendant science of statistics.

[5] This is an essential point of difference between us and Dannenberg, who sees coincidence and counterfactuality as opposing forces within the novel. In her view, coincidence moves people and plots together (convergence), while counterfactuality moves them apart (divergence). She writes of an "underlying tension between the literary pressure of romance-oriented convergence and a countermovement toward plot divergence" (4), and identifies the nineteenth century, in particular, as "the site of struggle between the forces of narrative convergence and divergence" (16). We see the two as far more complementary and mutually supportive.

[6] Both Dickens's critics and his friends faulted his use of coincidence. Wilkie Collins, for example, wrote of the coincidences in *Oliver Twist* that "the one defect of this marvelous book is the helplessly bad construction of the story" (quoted in Neil Forsyth, "Wonderful Chains," 152). George Gissing is the most strident if not the first critic of Dickensian coincidence: "I have left it to this place to speak of

the point. Dickens risks ruining his own realistic effects to tutor his readers in a sort of suspicious reading—a hermeneutics of event—in which the reader is always on the hunt for both relation and causality.[7] The creaking of the wheels of plot is meant to be audible, in other words, because every time one character turns out to be the cousin, sibling, or parent of another, the novel cranks out one more reader who asks herself, how could this be "mere" coincidence?[8] But the most important work of the novel, both for characters and readers, is to turn relation into an epistemological problem—not, "how can these characters or events be related?" but "how can I not have known that these characters or events were related?" Character and relation are thereby relocated to a time anterior to plot. It is not the work of plot to connect characters but to disclose a pre-existing network of relation. This is why Hans chides himself for being surprised that Anna is related to Gwendolyn: the world is full of relations between and among things that are only waiting to become obvious. This view of the world—as a densely networked field of character and action awaiting revelation—is clearly an ideology, but it is an ideology cloaked as epistemology, a problem not of belief but of observation.[9] It is for this

the sin, most gross, most palpable, which Dickens everywhere commits in his abuse of 'coincidence.'" As he goes on, "Therein lies the worthlessness of the plot, which is held together only by the use of coincidence in its most flagrant forms" (George Gissing, *Charles Dickens*, 51). We can hear in Gissing's outrage the need to identify a more exacting, less magical form of realism over against the reigning fictional aesthetic of mid-century. Of course, fiction *is* artificial, and the demands of story do control its action—Gissing's suggestion otherwise is a tip off to the familiar move of positioning realism as the record of life, rather than its engine. For a full list of Dickensian detractors, see Forsyth, who locates Dickensian coincidence as the meeting place between the looseness of episodic, serialized narrative and the totalization of authorial design.

    [7] In an essay on Dickens, coincidence, and probability, Maurice Lee writes, "Under conditions of mass information, the potential for evidence and coincidence is everywhere, leading not only to a paranoid style of reading that characterizes the mystery and detective genres (particularly in their postmodern forms), but also encouraging probabilistic literary analysis, inconclusive though it may be" (93). Caroline Levine argues that a basic function of realism is to produce suspicious readers who can suspend judgment and test out hypotheses. The "serious pleasures" of reading are here akin to those of scientific experiment and privilege narrative doubt. While what we are describing is rather more paranoid than the scientifically rational, skeptical, and restrained reading behavior posited in Levine's account, we find the idea of novelistic realism as "epistemological training" (2) extremely productive. See her *Serious Pleasures of Suspense*.

    [8] On the cognitive power of coincidence and reader suspense, see Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, especially 89–108.

    [9] The goal of realism to establish the sense of a socially networked and ultimately knowable world runs through the canonical criticism, from Erich Auerbach's observation that "Serious realism of modern times cannot represent man otherwise than as embedded in a total reality, political, social, and economic, which is concrete and constantly evolving" (*Mimesis*, 463) to György Lukács's sense that "the essential and very complex connections between an individual and his world" is fundamental to the realist project (*Essays on Realism*, 180). Raymond Williams perhaps forwarded this idea most clearly with his concept of "knowable communities": "Most novels are in some sense knowable communities. It is part of a traditional method—an underlying stance and approach—that the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways. Much of the confidence in this method depends on a particular kind of social confidence and experience. In its simplest form this amounts to saying . . . that the most knowable and therefore known relationships compose and are part of a wholly known social structure, and that in and through the relationships the persons themselves can be wholly known" (*The English Novel*, 14–15). In Williams' view, the key to

reason that character revelation is so often accompanied by surprise—not that it should be so, but that it had gone unnoticed previously.

The flash of recognition that shows us the world as it really is—as it always has been—is both the secularization of revelation and the most potent function of novelistic realism.[10] In Chapter One we compared this function to "the event"— the sudden or shocking occurrence that appears to come out of nowhere and that reframes our understanding of the world—and argued that realistic narrative both mimics the structure and tamps down the destabilizing potential of the event by smoothing out its edges and filling in its gaps, resettling the original frame into place. Here, we want to consider coincidence as a kind of micro-event, one in which we see apparent accident turned immediately to pattern. In this transformation of contingency to necessity, we can observe a compressed and therefore exaggerated version of how realism more generally handles the random and the contingent, placing design out of its reach and in the past. What fascinates us about represented coincidence is its ability to anchor the contingency of the event to the "truth" of character, and thus to re-joint the frame that it appears at first to pull apart. What coincidence gives us is all or nothing: either an apparent failure of realism or the revelatory knowledge of the way the world really works.

Indeed, while coincidence generally produces a sense of uncanniness, the revelation of character yields a sense of rightness, of absolute knowledge: of course, this should be so.[11] Jane Eyre, so long alone in the world, accepts her new cousins with a sudden flash of "instinct" that turns coincidence into a causal chain of necessity: "Circumstances knit themselves, fitted themselves, shot into order: the chain *that had been lying hitherto a formless lump of links* was drawn out straight,—every ring was perfect, the connection complete."[12] This is the chain of plot, causality, and ideology binding itself together and binding together a family network, retroactively giving form to what had appeared to be formless experience. In Brontë's *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone discovers her mother, Mrs. Pryor, in a woman that she had already come to love as a maternal figure and whose very name suggests her

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understanding Dickens is the split between this confidence in the knowable world and the skepticism of confronting unknowable social structures.

[10] Whether or not one believes that literature can access a "real world"—and the disagreement over whether or not it can frames the split in classic realist theory between historicist accounts of the novel (Auerbach, Williams, G. Levine) and structuralist and poststructuralist accounts (Barthes, J. Hillis Miller, Chase)—it seems clear that this is what realist novels purport to do. Indeed, the novel has often been said to capture the "truth" of the world even, or especially, when it is least obviously mimetic. See footnote 1 of Chapter One on realist claims to mimesis.

[11] Dannenberg ties the power of kinship revelation to traditional Aristotelian *anagnorisis* (*Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, 98–9). She writes that, "Recognition in the traditional coincidence plot achieves the greatest cognitive and emotional impact when it involves *kinship reunion*" (94), and she identifies three key components to such a plot: previous relationship (A); coincidental encounter (B); and recognition (C). Dannenberg is most interested in the narrative dynamics at play in the space between B and C, although she allows that A "remains the *sine qua non* of the traditional coincidence plot" (94).

[12] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 343. Emphasis ours.

anteriority. As in *Jane Eyre*, Caroline's affection precedes the revelation that only confirms a connection that existed all along: "My mother—my own mother!"[13] The rightness of their relation is underscored by the lack of surprise with which Shirley, Caroline's closest friend and Mrs. Pryor's employer, greets the news that Caroline coincidentally found her long-lost mother hiding in plain sight—in Shirley's very household, in fact. Shirley admits that she "guessed long since the whole business," piecing together the truth from various sources of information and trusting her own powers of character observation.[14] She asks Mrs. Pryor, "did you think I could be daily in the habit of seeing you and your daughter together—marking your marvellous similarity in many points, observing (pardon me) your irrepressible emotions in the presence and still more in the absence of your child—and not form my own conjectures? I formed them, and they are literally correct."[15] It is worth noting that the unlikelihood of it all does nothing to blunt Shirley's readerly powers of observation and conjecture; indeed, what could be more natural than discovering that two people you love and have brought together are secretly, even closely, related? The laws of affect here trump those of probabilistic realism.[16]

The act of revelation is more complicated in *Villette*. Lucy Snowe, Brontë's most famously prickly and secretive narrator, withholds from the reader her own discovery that Dr. John is truly John Graham Bretton, the son of Lucy's godmother and her childhood crush. She first offers in place of that much larger coincidence the discovery of a smaller one, that Dr. John is the Englishman who helped her on her first dark night in Villette, a discovery she relates as a narrative of detection and observation:

> I noticed that though he spoke French well, he spoke English better; he had, too, an English complexion, eyes, and form. I noticed more. As he passed me in leaving the room, turning his face in my direction one moment—not to address me,

[13] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, 434.

[14] Brontë, *Shirley*, 452.

[15] Brontë, *Shirley*, 452–3.

[16] The Victorians produced a significant scientific discourse on probability, statistics, chance, and contingency—a discourse that held increasing sway as the century progressed. On the one hand, this discourse became the yardstick for measuring novelistic realism (is it likely?); on the other, it demonstrated how weird and random the universe could be. As Genie Babb writes, "The application of probability theory enabled scientists to determine that underlying what seemed like chance were actually recognizable and predictable patterns—but not predictable in any kind of absolute way. The factors were too numerous and variable to allow for a strict determinism" (n/a).

See also Fyfe on urban accident, Ian Hackling on chance (*The Taming of Chance*), Theodore Porter on statistics (*The Rise of Statistical Thinking*), Michael Tondre on the science of probability (*The Physics of Possibility*), and Maurice Lee on evidence ("Evidence, Coincidence, and Superabundant Information"). As Lee writes, "the question of arbitrary versus meaningful connection—of chance versus design, random versus causal relations—became increasingly pressing in the mid-nineteenth century across a range of disciplines as advances in probability theory (Pierre-Simon Laplace; Charles Babbage; John Venn) and statistics (Adolphe Quetelet) made probabilistic thinking increasingly visible in biology (Charles Darwin), physics (James Clerk Maxwell), political theory (John Stuart Mill; Herbert Spencer), philosophy (the pragmatists), and political economy" (90). See also Jonathan Sachs, "1786/1801: William Playfair, Statistical Graphics, and the Meaning of an Event."

but to speak to Madame, yet so standing, that I almost necessarily looked up at him—*a recollection which had been struggling to form in my memory, since the first moment I heard his voice, started up perfected.* This was the very gentleman to whom I had spoken at the bureau; who had helped me in the matter of the trunk; who had been my guide through the dark, wet park.[17]

Lucy "notices" the evidence, piece by piece, until she has a flash of recognition—indeed, of recollection, since it presents itself to her as something already known but not yet understood. The knowledge "start[s] up perfected," as though it were Jane Eyre's chain snapping into place, "every ring perfect, the connection complete." But there is knowledge yet to come, which Lucy keeps from the other characters as well as the reader.

In a chapter called "Auld Lang Syne," Lucy awakens after losing consciousness on the steps of a Catholic church to find herself in what appears to be not just another place but another time—the past.[18] She is surrounded by the furniture and effects she remembers from her godmother's house, which she catalogues in great observational detail and growing wonder: "Where was I? Not only in what spot of the world, but in what year of our Lord? For all these objects were of past days, and of a distant country. Ten years ago I bade them good-by; since my fourteenth year they and I had never met'" (239). There is nothing to prepare the reader for this turn of events, the most famous narratorial bait and switch of the Victorian novel. Many critics have written of the motives and narrative effects of Lucy's suppression of information, but for our purposes it is enough to point out how fully the setup engages and exceeds the revelatory pattern of Brontë's other novels.[19] By the time the reader discovers that Dr. John is Graham Bretton, the shock has been absorbed by Lucy's uncanny but now fully explicable return to her godmother's house. The moment of revelation is sunk into the narrative past—and not only the narrative past, but also the narrational past: "I first recognised him on that occasion, *noted several chapters back*, when my unguardedly-fixed attention had drawn on me the mortification of an implied rebuke" (248, emphasis ours).

What Lucy unveils to us, then, is not so much the identity of Dr. John as an infinite regress of anteriority: Lucy has already recognized that Dr. John was Graham Bretton, who was the childhood friend of her youth, who became the Englishman

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[17] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, 160–1 (emphasis ours). Subsequent references to this novel will be in parentheses.

[18] It is not a coincidence that this happens at a church, for what we are seeing here is a secularization of revelation. We thus give meaning to our lives by making revelation immanent rather than imminent. The effect is the opposite of the medieval version of revelation, though: a hubristic approach to identity and agency. Omniscience is transferred from god to narration. On this strategy, see especially Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, which we discuss in the introduction to this book.

[19] For a review of the critical literature on Lucy's first-person narration, see Anna Gibson's "Charlotte Brontë's First Person." Writing specifically about coincidence, Dannenberg compares Lucy's withholding of the moment of revelation to Jane's expression of it (*Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, 154–5).

who helped her, whom she had earlier recognized as Dr. John, who had all along been Graham Bretton, and so forth. What should be surprising is experienced as the already known. All that is left is for the reader to recollect—which is to say, retrieve—the moment of revelation, which on first reading she has passed by without realizing. Thumbing back several chapters, the reader locates the spot, which narrates Lucy's experience as effects without apparent cause: "an idea new, sudden, and startling, riveted my attention with an over-mastering strength and power of attraction" (163). Having enacted the very process by which causes are only perceivable in hindsight and character is anterior to its revelation, the reader is nonetheless put in the position of asking, how did I miss it? It was there all along.[20]

If Brontë's novels create inevitability from coincidence, locating character and relation behind the plot that works to retrieve them, they only divulge their shared kinship with the vast web of Victorian realist novels that do the same. It is the work of realism to reveal the causes behind effects, not to let it slip that effects may produce their own causes. The dream of the realist novel is to show us a world that pre-exists its representation, a world rich with accident but shaped by designs we cannot see but in hindsight, webbed by patterns and relationships that precede our recognition of them.[21] Flickering between accident and design, coincidence is the structural material of that web, and no one wove it more deftly than Charles Dickens, to whom we now turn.

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[20] Graham's resurfacing as Dr. John is not the last coincidence in *Villette*, nor the last return of Lucy's past. When, for example, Dr. John and Lucy assist a young woman caught in the stampede from a burning theater, she turns out to be not only "Little Polly," the ghostly pale girl who figured in the early Bretton chapters of the novel, but also Ginevra Fanshawe's cousin, the Countess Paulina Mary Home de Bassompierre. Again, the coincidence is managed by pushing it back from the time of narration— Polly has already recognized both Graham and Lucy before she leads Lucy to guess her identity by instructing her to "go back to Bretton" (358). When confronted with the obvious truth, Lucy says, "At last I saw it all" (358). She sees it all *at last* because the revelatory strike of knowledge that reorders observation as truth must be seen to disclose relation, not to produce it.

[21] As Audrey Jaffe has it in *The Victorian Novel Dreams of the Real*, the most palpable fantasy of novels, authors, and readers is in fact the "ordinary," which can be represented factually and objectively. "The most general articulation of Victorian realist fantasy," she writes, is "the idea of seeing things 'as they really are'" (142). This dream of the real that precedes and can be accessed by representation is the subject of a significant body of novel criticism, from the classics of the mid-twentieth century (Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Watt's *Rise of the Novel*, the work of Lukács) through to the historicist work of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. None of these critics saw novelistic representation as offering an unproblematic relationship to the real. Indeed, as Watt had it, "the issue which the novel raises more sharply than any other literary form—the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates. This is essentially an epistemological problem" (11). Novel criticism rejected any naïve notion of mimesis long before poststructuralism discovered the "fictitiousness of the fictive," in J. Hillis Miller's memorable phrase ("The Fiction of Realism," 147). Responding to the anti-mimetic position that a text can only refer to its own figural language (Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*), George Levine defines realism as "a self-conscious effort . . . to make literature *appear to be* describing directly not some other language but reality itself" (*Realistic Imagination*, 8, emphasis ours). See Lilian R. Furst, *All Is True*, 1–27, on how these two takes on realism were anticipated by realist writers themselves, who understood the limits of mimesis even as they expressed a desire for the real that she takes to be foundational to realism.

Our Mutual Friend

Our point is that the chance happenings by which Victorian novelists in general, and Charles Dickens in particular, heal their plots and suggest the workings of a more-than-accidental design return us insistently to the idea that things might have turned out differently *but did not*. Coincidence is always in a double relationship to event, a pivot between accident and design, and it points the way to how things might have been otherwise. As Andrew H. Miller has shown, Victorian novels take us down counterfactual paths by following the doubles, the shadow selves, that characters might have become but for a different set of conditions, choices, or events. The existence of these doubles—and we might pause here to think about how fully *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* are thronged with them—serves to cement characters to their actual lot. Let us pause again to consider how often characters cross counterfactual paths with their doubles, running into them strangely and uncannily. But what other way *could* they run into them? These encounters feel coincidental because we glimpse in them alternative designs and because the encounter stages a ghostly reminder of what might have been. Now, more importantly, let us consider that coincidence is not only the point at which divergent paths cross but also the point at which paths first diverge, the double moment at which both options coexist. Why is it that the most decisive moment in character formation can also be the flimsiest, a moment of "mere" accident rather than agency? When it comes to life-changing accidents, the tiniest cause seems to have the largest effects. The smaller the better, as the micro-scale allows us to marvel at the slim thread by which our own lives dangle. The more precarious our destinies seem to be, the more exclusively ours, because we realize just how easily they might not have happened. Esther contracts smallpox from a chance encounter with Jo, Lady Dedlock's eyes fall on familiar handwriting, Miss Havisham asks Mr. Pumblechook if he knows a boy who might come and play. The manacles that shackle characters to their fates are best worked from the least substantial materials.

The binding of identity, experience, and plot is therefore not only essential to optative realism, which is to say, realism, but also best completed in filigree. As Andrew H. Miller argues, the realist self is presented as inherently typical (and therefore comparable to others) while utterly singular: "In having one life (rather than another) I have one life only, unlike any other (*this* one)."[22] And as with

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[22] Miller, "A Case of Metaphysics," 777. Miller's observations about the simultaneous singularity and typicality of realist character resonate with earlier accounts of the novel's construction of the "modern individual" as a unique type. The notion that the novel is a privileged site for the construction of modern individuality runs through twentieth-century novel criticism. For Lukács, the charge of realism was to maintain "the organic, indissoluble connection between man as private individual and man as a social being, as a member of a community" (*Studies in European Realism*, 8), a project at which he believed the novel increasingly failed as the century progressed. The tenuous construction of that private, modern individual is a through-line from psychoanalytic and poststructuralist novel criticism to Foucauldian treatments of the "interior" self and its representations (e.g., D. A. Miller, *The Novel*

people, so with "the" moment: discrete and nonrepeating, bound to itself and to other, similarly discrete moments on either side. Miller writes, "The optative expresses our fantasies of atomization: the event, no less than the person, is seen as separate and singular. And one effect of realistic novels is to encourage us to understand the course of a life as being defined by such forks, presenting irrevocable and exclusive alternatives."[23] It is important to see here how the optative cuts across the probabilistic slantwise: the real is not the most likely but altogether unlikely in its statistical improbability. The real is in this paradigm a statistic of one, and it bears to recall from Chapter One Wai Chee Dimock's observation that "Materialization is chancy, shaky, a toss-up until the last moment. It is often a matter of luck, rather than a matter of logic, that a volatile field should congeal at just this point, precipitating this outcome rather than that. Any event that solidifies is haunted by many others, not so fortunate."[24] Like the realist main character, the event as represented in the realist novel is one among many, special and irreplaceable. As Andrew H. Miller writes, optative realism thus "encourages the thought that experiences are themselves bounded or discrete, that time no less than persons comes in units. It foregrounds, indeed makes melodramatic, the idea of *the event*. There was one moment, one fork in the road, one 'kernel,' as narratologists would say, that made all the difference."[25] This is not Badiou's event. The realist event is not a vanishing mediator that ultimately demonstrates the malleability of time and character, but its opposite: the singular "now," enchained in line, all the more puissant for its diminutive particularity and apparent contingency.

The optimal case with which to pursue these ideas about the coincidental causes of realistic effects is that of John Harmon, who slips the manacles that bind him to life and identity when he is in the peculiar and accidental situation of observing his own death. So tenuous is his hold on his own plot that he appears in the

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and the Police, and Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body*), which explore the contradictions of a "disciplinary" individualism that is constructed from the outside in. On the social construction of supposedly autonomous, interior character, see, for example, Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character* and Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*. In *How Novels Think*, Nancy Armstrong explores the power, persistence, and vulnerability of the idea of the individual, which she calls "a cultural category and a bundle of rhetorical figures that were extremely fragile and always on the defensive yet notably flexible and ever ready to adapt" (3). In Armstrong's terms, the most basic function of the novel is also an impossible one: "universalizing the individual subject" (10). In this, Armstrong advances the argument she made in her highly influential, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987). *Desire and Domestic Fiction* came in on a wave of Foucauldian treatments of the novel that reshaped thinking about how novels operated and what they did. In studies like John Bender's *Imagining the Penitentiary*, D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police*, or Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments* and *Making a Social Body*, novels no longer mirrored or witnessed broader cultural events, but became culture-producing agents, the most important product of which was the disciplined subject.

[23] Miller, "A Case of Metaphysics," 780.

[24] Dimock, "Subjunctive Time," 243.

[25] Andrew H. Miller, "A Case of Metaphysics," 779. The equation of human and temporal units is critical to the logic of capitalism, as Miller notes. Sue Zemka further explores the "chronometrics" of the freighted, single moment in *Great Expectations*, as the fetishization of the moment feeds back into a market economy that offers anything but the freedom it would appear to promise ("Chronometrics of Love and Money").

title of the novel in which he is arguably the central character merely in relation to others—*Our Mutual Friend*. The title says it all, or most of it: Dickens' last completed novel is a *tour de force* of the interconnection that was both his lasting theme and the bedrock of his novelistic practice. The question for John Harmon is if he should take again the name and the plotline that connects him to the other characters in a network of reciprocity. He does reassume his identity, taking his place at the social and economic center of the network, but the most fascinating turn in the novel is not this reinvestiture but his divestment of self, the moment when he is cut loose from all ties. It follows from a coincidence: John Harmon, sailing home to England to claim his inheritance and marry the woman who is its sole condition, is mistaken for George Radfoot, a look-alike sailor who is also on board, also bound for London. The doubles strike up a friendship, arrive in London, and swap clothing so that Harmon can observe his future wife incognito. But Radfoot plans to murder Harmon—a plan cut short when he himself is robbed and murdered, wearing Harmon's clothes. Drugged and witnessing Radfoot's murder as if it were his own, Harmon has a dissociative episode that completely disconnects him from his own identity. As he later recounts, "I cannot possibly express it to myself without using the word I. But it was not I. There was no such thing as I, within my knowledge."[26] His body dumped in the Thames, consciousness returns like this:

> "This is John Harmon drowning! John Harmon, struggle for your life. John Harmon, call on Heaven and save yourself!" I think I cried it out aloud in a great agony, and then a heavy horrid unintelligible something vanished, and it was I who was struggling there alone in the water. (363)

This is John Harmon drowning: released momentarily from the first person, Harmon sees himself as another, experiences this distance from himself as a "heavy horrid unintelligible something" (363), before returning to himself ("It was I who was struggling there alone in the water" [363]). Days later, he sees a notice of his own death and views "his" own mutilated corpse, "with the horror of the death I had escaped, before my eyes in its most appalling shape" (365). The optative does not get much more pointed than this.

Dickens sinks this scene deep within the discursive center of the novel, but in terms of story it is the instantiating moment of the whole. The news that John Harmon has been found drowned kicks off both halves of the plot, sending Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn down to the riverside, where they meet Lizzie Hexam, and moving the Boffins from the dust-mounds to the fancy digs of Boffins' Bower, where they collect Bella Wilfer, who would have been Harmon's wife. The plot of this massive novel drives toward bringing Harmon back to life and suturing him—legally, financially, domestically—into the place that has been his all along.

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[26] *Our Mutual Friend*, 363. Subsequent references to this novel will be in parentheses.

In short, the novel spends its length transforming "The Man from Nowhere" into "the" man, not just from somewhere but from somewhere extremely specific—an address uptown, a family unit, a circle of friends. This social emplacement is the plot and the goal of many novels—indeed, every Victorian novel about an orphan—but in *Our Mutual Friend* it operates in partial secrecy until the moment of revelation, when the reader learns in first-person flashback that John Rokesmith *is* Julius Handford *is* John Harmon and when the shape and goal of plot become clear. It is critical that the scene that kills John Harmon and recounts in his own words the experience of relinquishing the self is also the scene that supplies him with not one but three identities, embedding the horror of identity's complete release deep within a narrative thick with interconnections. John Harmon may decide in this scene to bury John Harmon—to leave himself dead and abandon his name and inheritance—but he is already at this point in the narrative tied to others with ropes of affection and gratitude, and, through the telling of his "own" story, he is once again nailed to himself.

Dickens was concerned that Harmon's secret identity might be too obvious—or not obvious enough. As he writes in the novel's postscript,

> I foresaw the likelihood that a class of readers and commentators would suppose that I was at great pains to conceal exactly what I was at great pains to suggest: namely, that Mr John Harmon was not slain, and that Mr John Rokesmith was he. Pleasing myself with the idea that the supposition might in part arise out of some ingenuity in the story, and thinking it worth while, in the interests of art, to hint to an audience that an artist (of whatever denomination) may perhaps be trusted to know what he is about in his vocation, if they will concede him a little patience, I was not alarmed by the anticipation. (798)

The problem is one of design: Dickens wants his readers to know his secret, but, more than that, he *wants them to know that he wants them to know it*. It is not enough to have designed the web: he must be seen to have designed it and the reader's response to it, doling out information to a suspicious readership. He continues, in one of his most famous statements on his own practice: "it would be very unreasonable to expect that many readers, pursuing a story in portions from month to month through nineteen months, will, until they have it before them complete, perceive the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern which is always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom" (798). It would be unreasonable to expect readers to perceive pattern, but Dickens expects us to trust that it exists.

Near the end of the novel, when Harmon's identity returns publicly to him, the reader's patience is rewarded with an explosive scene of recognition, narrated in retrospect by Mrs. Boffin, who recounts how "I found him out, all in a flash as I

may say" (750) on the night after which Harmon narrated his own murder and resolved to bury his identity:

> I looked in, and saw him a sitting lonely by his fire, brooding over it. He chanced to look up with a pleased kind of smile in my company when he saw me, and then in a single moment every grain of the gunpowder that had been lying sprinkled thick about him ever since I first set eyes upon him as a man at the Bower, took fire! Too many a time had I seen him sitting lonely, when he was a poor child, to be pitied, heart and hand! Too many a time had I seen him in need of being brightened up with a comforting word! Too many and too many a time to be mistaken, when that glimpse of him come at last! No, no! I just makes out to cry, "I know you now! You're John!" (750)

He *is* John. Connected again to childhood, connected to the always-antecedent character that appears in a burst of clarity, Harmon is found, retrieved. Because we look back on this moment, revealed now as causal to so much that has happened since, we put in double regress the identity we knew would be revealed.

The End

Suspicion and faith: the twin poles around which any Dickens novel spins. We must have faith that the Inimitable will work his magic yet again, bringing together the many strands of story in a flash act of *legerdemain*. Therefore, we suspect: that multiple plots are one plot all along; that characters who do not know each other are in fact related; that every detail, no matter how small, matters. We suspect every coincidence for having been design—as, on the level of authorship, it is. Because we believe that everything will turn out in the end, we are on guard for characters who will "turn out" to be someone else, or somewhere else, completely by accident and precisely at the appointed time.[27] "Turning out" is as an important phrase for plot overall; it suggests momentary event as well as the longer *durée* of temporal and developmental sequence. As an event and a process, "turning out" reminds us of the gears of narrative, always at work cranking out relation and resolution. And if the novel is a machine for turning out certain ideological effects—both reading subjects and forms of thinking and belief—coincidence turns out to be a small but critical widget in the enterprise.

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[27] It is worth pausing a moment to accept that we are here imagining an intentional author and a traditional reader who can be counted on to respond as expected but, of course, these are fictions that Dickens himself is constructing here, using formal techniques that could be said to bring that very reader into being. Such mechanisms for conscription of the reader have been particularly well documented in Dickens thanks to the work of Garrett Stewart in *Dear Reader* and *Novel Violence*.

Self-erasing coincidence—the process by which we learn to wait for all to be revealed so that we can see the pattern whole, and so that the pattern will explain and authorize reality—is the very backbone of the Victorian novel. The pleasures of this process will be familiar to any reader, but so, for that matter, should be the dangers, given that the novel so eagerly encodes them within its pages. The process is literally everywhere we look, from the retrospective narration that spools out story from its promised endpoint to the publishing strategies that train readers in delayed gratification, but it appears in its most tragic form in characters who learn the lesson too well and fail to live in absence of an ending. *Bleak House* is full of such doomed souls, whose long wait for the great "cause" of Jarndyce and Jarndyce mimics the structure of novel reading itself. As others have written, *Bleak House* thematizes the fruitless wait for closure to distinguish its own practices from the perpetual motion machine that is the law: novels *do* end, *do* produce something more than themselves and more than the costs that eventually consume Jarndyce and Jarndyce.[28] But this argument leaves intact the real problem, which is not whether or not closure arrives but how lives are structured by its promise.

This is the problem with novelistic thinking in general: trusting the end to explain the plot enslaves us to causes yet to be revealed by effects, unable to live or act in the moment. As Richard Carstone says to Esther Summerson, "If you were living in an unfinished house, liable to have the roof put on or taken off—to be from top to bottom pulled down or built up—to-morrow, next day, next week, next month, next year—you would find it hard to rest or settle. So do I. Now? *There's no now for us suitors*" (579–80, emphasis ours). What Richard describes is life as it is really lived, unsettled and unfinished. But he cannot live it because he clings to a fictional view of the world read backward from closure.

One last look back at the author himself, who closes the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend* with mention of a terrifying accident, a literal failure of design that occurred when a train in which he was traveling from Paris to London on June 9, 1865 hit a gap in the tracks and derailed. Dickens was in the single first-class carriage that did not plunge into the ravine, and he emerged from the wreckage to attend to less fortunate passengers. When he narrates this scene of horror, he retreats almost immediately into the fictive:

> On Friday the Ninth of June in the present year, Mr and Mrs Boffin (in their manuscript dress of receiving Mr and Mrs Lammle at breakfast) were on the South Eastern Railway with me, in a terribly destructive accident. When I had done what I could to help others, I climbed back into my carriage. . . to extricate the worthy couple. They were much soiled, but otherwise unhurt. (799–800)

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[28] D. A. Miller makes this argument when he writes, "Not to be identified with Chancery, the novel contrasts the aimless suspension of the suit with the achievement of its own ending" (*The Novel and the Police*, 97).

Not only does the design of fiction blunt the terror of real violence, but Dickens also invokes for his characters the bracing optative effects of his own very real brush with death. As he writes of his mortality, now figured as fictional closure, "I remember with devout thankfulness that I can never be much nearer parting company with my readers for ever, than I was then, until there shall be written against my life, the two words with which I have this day closed this book:—THE END" (800).

Dickens in his postscript is interested not only in the "design" of fictional narrative but also in the secret pattern that governs our actual lives. When it comes to the "story-weaver at his loom" (798), we must await patiently the weft and warp that will eventually reveal the underlying pattern: "To keep for a long time unsuspected, yet always working itself out, another purpose originating in that leading incident, and turning it to a pleasant and useful account at last, was at once the most interesting and the most difficult part of my design" (798). Stepping outside of diegetic fictionality in his postscript, Dickens underscores how this logic applies just as well to our everyday lives: "There is sometimes an odd disposition in this country to dispute as improbable in fiction, what are the commonest experiences in fact" (798). We can read an echo, if not a reference, to Byron's famous lines, "'Tis strange—but true; for Truth is always strange,/ Stranger than Fiction." However, where Byron presents his formulation to question the desire of narrative to impose a clear, moralistic, cause-and-effect sequence to events, as we will see in the next chapter, Dickens insists in the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend* on narrativizing even the most traumatic of eruptions. Chaotic accident is turned into coincident narrative, with Dickens himself assuming the character of hero in an act measured against the possibilities now shut down in anticipation of its not imminent but nonetheless eventual end.

A Tale of Two Cities

Having reached the end, let us now recall this chapter briefly to life, going backward in time to the Dickens novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, that most clearly links up this chapter's discussion of narrative method to our earlier discussions about event and its alternative temporal logic. The novels of Charles Dickens play a waiting game, and they require the reader to play, too. The secret pattern that will explain everything is laid down slowly, bit by bit, until closure reveals it in its entirety and returns it to a time before the beginning of the novel.

A Tale of Two Cities (1859) is heavily weighted toward its endpoint, not because it is one of Dickens' two historical novels but because it is a novel. The historical event it famously looks back upon is the French Revolution, the shock of which represented for Dickens, as for the rest of Europe, a definitive rupture with what had been, a sharp endpoint of the "*ancien régime*." For Badiou, as we

have seen, the event is that which ruptures and reorders the world. It appears cataclysmic and miraculous, and it shears one state of being from another. It "disjoints" time—which has significant ramifications for narrative.[29] We take the cataclysmic event to be the opposite—or, at least, the alternative—to the slow time of nineteenth-century gradualism. That gradualist understanding of cause-and-effect sequencing not only gave narrative its power to shape and explain the world but also informed the explanatory narratives of science, politics, and history. The temporal signature of the event, by contrast, is the future anterior, the "will have been," which assumes not a smooth forward momentum but a jump in time, a jolt between now and then. As Badiou has it, "The event would not be the inseparable encroachment of the past on the future, or the eternally past being of the future. It is, to the contrary, a vanishing mediator, an intemporal instant which renders disjunct the previous state of an object (the site) and the state that follows."[30]

This chapter has been about accident, about effects that happen without apparent causes. Our focus has been that coincidental hiccup that threatens to disjoint a narrative line but instead loops back around to a diegetic time or an extradiegetic intention anterior to plot to smooth out the jolt, to connect the dots into the line of narrative. There are no real accidents in the nineteenth-century novel; there is only design not yet seen and character not yet fully understood. Readers call this "not yet" many things—development, plot, suspense—but by any name it is the suspended and looped time of the novel.

Coincidence would appear to have little to do with event in Badiou's sense of the term as a drastic shift that remakes reality. Coincidence, by contrast, is more of an uncanny adjustment. It does not remake as much as reshuffle, taking two things happening at the same time, without apparent connection, and reabsorbing them into the explanatory flow of narrative. Where event is a flood that sweeps away, disarticulating the past from the future and separating time from itself, coincidence conjoins separate occurrences in time, rechanneling accident into narrative. While coincidence not only yields to but demands narrativization, *event refuses to obey the laws of narrative*. Event is close to "pure" accident, to chaos, with a flavor of the marvelous and miraculous. The distinction between miracle and accident is instructive: both are without explanation, but one has "wonderous" consequences, the other has "unfortunate" ones. Yet only the miracle is attributed to divine agency; accident is attributed to "mere" chance. Both explanations ascribe cause to something definitionally without it and enact the retroactive sense-making of narrative, which exists to connect dots and fill in gaps. It is the revolutionary gap of the event, in other words, that narrative leaps in to fill.

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[29] See the next chapter for an examination of Byron's disjointing of time.
[30] Badiou, "The Event in Deleuze," 39.

A Tale of Two Cities takes the catastrophic event of the French Revolution and writes it back into narrative, making sense of its origins and creating gradualism and inevitability from disruption. It does this by translating large-scale, political revolution into the small scale of familial and interpersonal dynamics, which allows Dickens to focus on personal reform and to domesticate suffering and heroism.[31] The Dickensian French Revolution is in no way a radical break with the past but an inevitable consequence laid down slowly through time, which helps explain the recursive movement of its plot and its ever-present thematics of return.[32] Structurally, the novel is doubly backward-looking: once to the period from 1775 to 1794, when its main action takes place, and twice to 1757 to the inset and originating backstory of Dr. Manette's imprisonment without trial, which is itself only accessed through the time of its retrospective narration in 1767, ten years after his living burial in the Bastille. This novel about revolution (etymologically a "rolling back") does little to imagine the future until the proleptic vision of a gradually reformed France with which it ends.

But first, the gradual build-up. For Dickens, revolution is a slow burn, the product of human history measured and literally naturalized in the steady growth of organic things:

> It is likely enough that, rooted in the woods of France and Norway, there were growing trees, when that sufferer [the Chevalier de la Barre] was put to death, already marked by the Woodman, Fate, to come down and be sawn into boards, to make a certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in it, terrible in history. (8)

With the guillotine always already in development—"silently" and "unceasingly" (8)—and the tumbrils already on the road, the revolution is fated and, in the organic sense, cultured: "there is not in France, with its rich variety of soil and climate, a blade, a leaf, a root, a sprig, a peppercorn, which will grow to maturity under conditions more certain than those that have produced this horror" (356). When Ernest Defarge confesses to his wife the fear that they might not live to see the revolution, she counters with a vision of slow, geologic time: "'It does not take a long time,' said madame, 'for an earthquake to swallow a town. Eh well! Tell me how long it takes to prepare the earthquake?'" (171). The stress is on continuity, not catastrophe, and Mme. Defarge assures him that, "although [revolution] is a long time on the road, it is on the road and coming. I tell thee it never retreats, and never stops" (172). The mistake is made by those who misrecognize the slow growth of catastrophe, as the narrator affirms:

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[31] Dickens's privatizing of the revolution is at the core of Lukacs's well-known critique of *A Tale of Two Cities* (*The Historical Novel*, 243). The strategy is widespread throughout the century.

[32] On Dickens as both an anti-revolutionary and an anti-historian, who ultimately offers the reader an escape from history, see Barton Friedman, *Fabricating History*, 145–71.

> It was too much the way of Monseigneur under his reverses as a refugee, and it was much too much the way of native British orthodoxy, to talk of this terrible Revolution *as if it were the only harvest ever known under the skies that had not been sown*—as if nothing had ever been done, or omitted to be done, that had led to it—as if observers of the wretched millions in France, and of the misused and perverted resources that should have made them prosperous, had not seen it inevitably coming, years before. (228, emphasis ours)

Dickens frames political cataclysm not as rupture but as continuous narrative, organically grown and inscribed in the very geologic sediment.[33]

The revolution is narrated in two main registers: the vast scope and *longue durée* of natural process and natural disaster (lightning, earthquake, storm, oceanic flood); and the intimate scope of individuals caught up in the events leading up to and following 1789. This privatizing of public history is not unique to Dickens and is in fact the main way in which novels of the nineteenth-century package large-scale public events. But Dickens does it memorably in his treatment of Dr. Alexandre Manette and his family, who are shadowed by the slowly approaching and then swiftly breaking "storm" of the revolution. Shadowed *and* foreshadowed, since preparing the narrative way for subsequent events is how novels both build (as suspense) and diminish (as expectation) the power of catastrophe: *we all saw it coming*. No reader could fail to anticipate the revolution. Even so, Dickens lards the novel with reference to what is to come, from the arriving storm, to the blood that will flow like wine, to the famous footsteps that echo in the Manette's London home like "the echoes of all the footsteps that are coming by-and-bye into our lives" (98). Those echoes of the future, like the wood for the guillotine silently growing in the forest and the tumbrils already on the road for the guillotine, assure that closure resonates throughout the novel, imminent and immanent. This makes sense for a novel that will culminate in the many deaths of the Reign of Terror and in the very specific and individuated death of one character, Sydney Carton. But we can see the process at work in other Dickens novels whereby the end gives meaning and shape to the whole and draws significance from detail.

By focusing on Manette's domestic circle, the novel binds the revolutionary energy of its public plot to the private cares of a family whose story *is* the story of the revolution, or at least stands in for it. Where the reader feels the suspense of that plot, the question is never "Will the revolution happen?" but "What will the revolution do to this particular family?" By deflecting questions of historical, public

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[33] An extensive critical history links Dickens to evolutionary biology, beginning with Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* and George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists*. Geological science also plays a significant role in his thinking. See Adelene Buckland, "'The Poetry of Science,'" for the importance of geological models of change. Byron turned to evolutionary biology too but by way of Georges Cuvier's catastrophism, which informed his very different version of geological change. We discuss Byron's catastrophism in Chapter Three.

action onto a fictional, private plot, Dickens activates the dynamics of suspicion and suspense that propel all his novels. He opens wide an optative window: no matter what history may have written about the French Revolution, this family's history is free to play out otherwise.

But is it? The story of Dr. Manette and family is as foreclosed as the national history it parallels, and the first sign of this foreclosure is the parade of coincidence that furthers its development, hovering, as ever, between accident and design. Some of these coincidences are the type that spin the plot around a dense nodule of overlapping identities.[34] Others have more substantial ramifications for character, such as the revelation that Mme. Defarge is connected to the Manette family in ways that provide an original cause for her violence and explain mass public rage as individual personal secret; or that Manette's own son-in-law, Charles Darnay, is in fact the nephew of the French aristocrats who wrongly imprisoned Manette. But the coincidence we most want to discuss is the novel's central one, which brings together Darnay and Carton, a man whose uncanny resemblance to him is what allows for the novel's closural heroics. Given that the novel is replete with twins and mirrored images—it is, after all, the tale of *two* cities—the most surprising thing about Carton is that he does not turn out to be Darnay's lost twin or cousin. Their similarity to one another really is coincidental. But why? Dickens is not shy about supplying relation where it can serve his narrative purposes, and the general Dickensian rule is that physical similarity anticipates family identity. Not in Carton's case. The revelation of who Carton "is" remains encoded in the sacrificial action that end-stops his character, and his secret is not one of parentage or birthright but a matter of interior quality, of moral principle squandered but alive in his secret heart to be expressed in the death that will not only redeem his character but also retrieve the lost possibilities of his wasted life.[35] Those lost possibilities—what might have been—are limned for Carton by Darnay, his better, mirror self ("he shows you what you have fallen away from, and what you might have been!" [81]). As he says to Lucie, Manette's daughter and Darnay's wife, "I am like one who died young. All my life might have been" (144). When Lucy urges him to do better, to be better, Carton replies that "It is too late for that. I shall never be better than I am" (144).

[34] For example, Miss Pross's lost brother, Solomon, turns out to be not only John Barsad, the spy who gave false evidence against Darnay at his London trial, but also the French government spy at the Defarge wine shop *and* the "citizen" turnkey at the Concierge.

[35] Carton's inscrutability invites the novel's official statement on deep subjectivity: "A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!" (16) Here we have a crisp articulation of the enclosed self that led the ideological charge for many of the century's fictional and political projects and of which Carton is an exemplary case.

Here we have the true double-bind of the realist novel's embrace of the optative mode. In its alignment with gradualism and the sedimentary development of character, the optative represents the irreversibility of time, the impossibility of being other than yourself or of reality being different than it "is." As Dickens writes of Time, "the great magician who majestically works out the appointed order of the Creator. . . never reverses his transformations" (356). And yet, gradualism is also the logic of reform favored by the novel as both political ideology and character arc. It is always too late to be anyone other than yourself but never too late to change.[36] Carton's character shows itself in death but cannot help him live, paralyzed as he is by his sense of the premature closure of life's possibilities. As he says to Lucie, "I have had unformed ideas of striving afresh, beginning anew, shaking off sloth and sensuality, and fighting out the abandoned fight. A dream, all a dream, that ends in nothing, and leaves the sleeper where he lay down" (145). Just before he trades places on the guillotine with Darnay in the novel's most complete activation of the coincidence–optative nexus, Carton writes of the impossibility of lasting change or meaningful action: "'If it had been otherwise . . . I never should have used the longer opportunity'" (337).

For a novel in which so much happens—multiple trials, a breathless escape, the French Revolution—the main characters "do" very little. Critical action is either buried in the past or undertaken by the revolutionary mob from which the novel is eager to distance its moral center. Our heroes fail to act or simply fail. Manette cannot save his son-in-law from the revolutionary tribunal. Darnay cannot redeem the wrongs of his father and uncle. Indeed, *A Tale of Two Cities* has trouble imagining successful public action, which exists in the novel under the shadow of revolutionary violence.[37] Which is why, perhaps, Carton's sacrifice is a private one, known only to the family he saves. Carton's death is what Dickens has earlier called "the inexorable consolidation and perpetuation of the secret that was always in [his] individuality" (16), and it is the apotheosis of designed coincidence, the moment that reveals the pattern of the whole life *and* novel.[38]

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[36] We hear the duplicity of this fetishistic logic when Lucy confesses to her husband—framing one of the central questions of the novel around Carton's ability to reform—"I fear he is not to be reclaimed; there is scarcely a hope that anything in his character or fortunes is reparable now. *But*, I am sure that he is capable of good things, gentle things, even magnanimous things" (200–1, emphasis ours).

[37] In *The Crisis of Action*, Markovits argues that nineteenth-century literature struggles with action as both ethical and political force, often enacting its internalization as character transformation instead of outward action. She notes how often marriage plots and revolutionary plots go hand in hand or are conflated, and how revolutionary activity is often replaced by inward revolutions.

[38] Carton's death is an act without expectation of recompense, but the novel repays him by mining the future for its riches in a proleptic section that is also counterfactual: his famous last words ("It is a far, far better thing . . .") are not what Carton *says* as he mounts to the scaffold, but what he *would have written* at the base of the guillotine, if he had written anything. He glimpses the future only in a doubly conditional way: "If he had given any utterance to his final thoughts, and they were prophetic, they would have been these" (360). In that future, Lucie, the wife he never had, gives birth to a son he never had, who achieves the professional success he never had. Carton "sees" that son become a man

Accident or design? We name that confusion "coincidence," and we glimpse in it the threads of a larger fabric, the separate links of an unformed chain.[39] We have argued here that realism relies upon coincidence to express and consolidate character, which it places beyond the reach of narrative, both outside of and before the workings of plot. That coincidence should be at the same time the very working of plot itself is not so much a fatal contradiction as the *sine qua non* of realism, which trains us in the fetishistic logic by which something can be true and not true at the same time, real and fictional, real *because* fictional. When applied to life, the logic of realism has the mortifying effect of suspending significance, referring it to a closure that will retroactively reveal a complete design. Novelistic thinking encourages us to seek that design, to stand suspiciously outside the flow of lived experience to observe the signs of a gradually emerging pattern and to read our own lives in the living of it, which puts us both here and there at the same time, coincident to ourselves. If those novelistic coincidences bother us, if we find them strained or unrealistic, it is because they betray the narrative constructs by which we now understand reality and our own lives. What we explore in Part Two and Part Three is if reality could have been—can be—constructed differently.

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and return to France to tell the story of his sacrifice. In death, he gains what life withheld and threads himself into domestic and dynastic narrative.

[39] The public response to Mme. Defarge's accidental death occasioned Dickens most famous statement on accident: "I am not clear. . . respecting the canon of fiction which forbids the interposition of accident in such a case as Madame Defarge's death. Where accident is inseparable from the passion and action of the character; where it is strictly consistent with the entire design, and arises out of some culminated proceeding on the part of the individual which the whole story has led up to; it seems to me to become, as it were, an act of divine justice" (Letter from Charles Dickens to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, dated 5 June 1860, *Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*, 340-1). What Dickens describes is not accident but divine intervention. Such a strong misreading reveals its own truth about what Dickens considered the proximal relation of accident and design.

PART II

BYRON

3
Lord Byron and Genre

Byron's poetry, especially *Don Juan*, has had a vexed relationship with critical efforts to make sense of Romanticism and of the genres that make up this field of study. One clear reason for this poor canonical fit is because Wordsworth and Coleridge were so influential in disseminating the expressivist theory of kairotic lyric poetry that came to define not only Romanticism but also poetry itself.[1] This chapter asks: Does the history of generic form—especially of the two generic dominants of twentieth-century criticism, the lyric and the novel—look different when Byron's *Don Juan* is factored into the historical equation?

Don Juan and the verse-novels that adopted many of Byron's approaches tackle head-on the issue of genre, with a profound—if now insufficiently acknowledged—impact on both the novel and the lyric, each of which was in the process of being theorized in the nineteenth century as "ever more a perfect idea rather than an imperfect practice," as Jackson and Prins put it.[2] For Byron, referent, form, and genre are precisely what is *not* true to the poem—or, for that matter, to the self; they take us out of the poem to the ground of history beyond it, or they are what we perform on the poem by marking it as belonging to any one genre or structure. The verse-novel acknowledges and even invites generic marking, but then also resists it by returning to the idiosyncratic particularity of each chosen verse form—indeed to the surface variations of each poetic line, right down to variations in the rhythmic foot—and by calling attention to the obfuscation inherent to marking.

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[1] See, however, footnote 19 of the Introduction on how Wordsworth's kairotic lyricism is more complex than the history of criticism tends to suggest. For the classic works basing an understanding of Romanticism on Wordsworth's poetry, see M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*, especially Chapter 2; Harold Bloom's "The Internalization of Quest-Romance"; de Man's *Blindness and Insight*, especially Chapter 10, and *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, especially Chapters 3–5; Geoffrey Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry*; and Alan Liu's *Wordsworth*. Coleridge's prose has perhaps been just as influential, but particularly insofar as he provides literary criticism with the theoretical underpinnings for Wordsworth's maneuvers in his poetry, while also defining for us the very genre of literary criticism. As Andrew Franta writes, "From the perspective of much criticism of the Romantics, . . . it is not too much to say that 'Wordsworth' and 'Romanticism' are interchangeable" (*Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public*, 55). Jerome McGann makes a similar statement in *The Romantic Ideology*: "The patterns I shall be marking out are widespread in the works of the period. I shall concentrate on Wordsworth, however, because his works—like his position in the Romantic Movement—are normative, and, in every sense, exemplary" (*The Romantic Ideology*, 82). Robert J. Griffin too acknowledges, in *Wordsworth's Pope* (1995), the tendency to subsume "Romanticism under Wordsworth": "our notions of Romanticism have been influenced by Wordsworth's writings either directly, or indirectly through the critical tradition established in the nineteenth century and renewed in the academy forty years ago" (*Wordsworth's Pope*, 1).

[2] Jackson and Prins, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 3.

Don Juan first established many of these strategies not only for the verse-novel but also for the novel, which had to consider *Don Juan* as the novel's most significant precursor for mass-market success. It is important not only because of its ubiquity—William St. Clair guesses a readership of a half a million to a million and a half, concluding that "*Don Juan* was read by more people in its first twenty years than any previous work of English literature"[3]—but also because of its hyper self-reflexivity and direct critique of poetry and the novel both. In addition, Byron provided his readers with an alternative approach to subjectivity as well as an alternative temporal signature for what we designate in this book as "act-event," a hyphenated term like verse-novel that we hope can help us trouble our usual understanding of cause-and-effect sequence and personal agency. We argue here that Byron's temporal signature in his work is usefully aligned with Badiou's notion of the future anterior. Byron's approach to both subjectivity and the act-event is defined in his poetry and his journals against *both* the novel and the lyric, and this approach would serve as an important precursor for not only the verse-novels we explore in Part Three but also the novel as genre, as we explore in Chapter Four. Byron serves as lynchpin for our argument since we argue that he influenced both the novel and the verse-novel, both of which were forced to engage with his critique of genre and with his exploration of better mechanisms for revolutionary action in the present, particularly his alternative understanding of temporality and subjectivity. We will begin, then, by laying out how Byron questions both sides: verse and novel, lyric and narrative.

Don Juan and the Lyric

Byron's *Don Juan* resists lyricism's association with truth, love, transcendent sublimity, and pure subjectivity. Whereas "Hegel famously elevated the name of the lyric to one of the highest places in his *Aesthetics*, considering it the pure representation of subjectivity and therefore a form likely to further the spirit of the age,"[4] Byron returns poetry to nothing but a play of meter and rhyme in his adoption of the highly constrained ottava rima form. Through this metrical strategy, he questions not only the presuppositions of lyricism but also those of the novel, for the effect is ultimately one of denying the status of the represented object. Bill Brown's theorization of "things" can help to make sense of what is happening in Byron's poetry. As Brown explains, "We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts."[5] The goal of what would

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[3]   William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation*, 333.
[4]   Jackson and Prins, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 3.
[5]   Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," 4.

come to be called realism is similar: realism gives us seemingly direct access to a diegetic time and space, as if we were looking directly through a window to the objective world on the other side.

The novel often steps outside of itself to establish those codes of objectivity—for example through readerly address—but we are then invited to forget the material book we hold in our hands so that we can access the objectively rendered world directly. That translucent function was facilitated by the industrial production of the mass-market novel, which became ever more ephemeral and insubstantial (from quarto to duodecimo, from cotton to pulp) even as fiction promised ever more immediate, if ephemeral, access to its representation of diegetic reality. The novel invites us to be transported to another place, another time. The page that we hold asks us not to pay attention to it, not to focus on its bookiness, but, rather, to see through it to a diegetic fantasy space, as if we were looking through a window. This characterization of the novel is at once intuitively true and deceptively false, for the ultimate success of the novel, the way it safeguarded itself from the common early criticism that it destroyed readers' ability to distinguish between fiction and reality and made readers wish to live their own lives as if they were romances, was predicated on a double logic that Byron represents in *Don Juan* as fetishism: *je sais bien mais quand-même.*[6] I know very well that what I am reading is fiction but nonetheless I will pretend as if it were true.

The first part of that double-logic speaks to all the mechanisms whereby the novel in fact reminds us of its artifice, as has been explored by Michael Riffaterre, Peter Brooks, Garrett Stewart, and others.[7] The second part of the logic points to the willing suspension of disbelief that allows us to "see" the objective world of a fictional narrative. It is easy to forget that this formulation has its source in Coleridge's characterization of *Lyrical Ballads*:

[I]t was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest, and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself, as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.[8]

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[6] On this logic, see Octave Mannoni, "*Je sais bien, mais quand même . . .*"

[7] See, especially, Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*, Michael Riffaterre's *Fictional Truth*, and Garrett Stewart's *Dear Reader*.

[8] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 174–5.

Coleridge here defines the competing approaches to the "real" and to "truth" that characterize long narratives, on the one hand, and lyric poetry, on the other.

Don Juan counters both approaches, and in direct conversation with Wordsworth's and Coleridge's work, which Byron mentions in his Dedication:

> You, Gentlemen! by dint of long seclusion
> From better company have kept your own
> At Keswick, and through still continued fusion
> Of one another's minds at last have grown
> To deem as a most logical conclusion
> That Poesy has wreaths for you alone;
> There is a narrowness in such a notion
> Which makes me wish you'd change your lakes for ocean.[9]

Of course, Wordsworth and Coleridge ultimately succeeded when it came to "the question of posterity" (Dedication 56) and so well that their theorization of lyric Poesy did indeed reserve the wreaths for themselves alone. Our understanding of lyricism is still largely constrained by their founding definitions.

How does poetry look different when we approach it by way of Byron's theorization instead? Wordsworth and Coleridge define the poetic (especially lyric) imagination as tied to both subjective expressivity and kairotic, eternal concerns. We quote Wordsworth again on this understanding of the poetic imagination: "Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our nature, Imagination to incite and to support the eternal" (*Prose Works*, III.37). Byron repeatedly rejects this atemporal, kairotic understanding of verse by turning to the material, physical nature of poetry itself. In contrast to lyricism's address to "Oh Love! O Glory!" (*Don Juan* VII.1), Byron claims that, such as love and glory are,

> such my present tale is,
> A non-descript and ever varying rhyme,
> A versified Aurora Borealis,
> Which flashes o'er a waste and icy clime.
> When we know what all are, we must bewail us,
> But, ne'ertheless, I hope it is no crime
> To laugh at *all* things—for I wish to know
> *What* after *all*, are *all* things—but a *Show*? (*Don Juan* VII.2)

It is not simply that lyric love and those "Longings sublime, and aspirations high" (I.93) are in *Don Juan* continually reduced to bodily need—"If *you* think 'twas

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[9] *Don Juan*, Dedication, lines 33–40. We quote Jerome McGann's Oxford edition of Byron's collected poetry. Subsequent references to Byron's poetry will be in parentheses by canto and line number and will quote this collection of Byron's poetry.

philosophy that this did,/ I can't help thinking puberty assisted" (I.93). They are also reduced to nothing more than the rhyme and meter that constitute the surface of a poem. Although in *Childe Harold* Byron dreamt of a lyric word that could give him direct access to meaning ("Could I embody and unbosom now/ That which is most within me, . . . into *one* word,/ And that one word were Lightning, I would speak" [III.905–11]; "I do believe,/ Though I have found them not, that there may be words/ which are things,—hopes which will not deceive" [III.1059–61]), by the time he was writing *Don Juan* his connection of words and things had become quite literal:

> But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
> Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces
> That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think;
> 'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses
> Instead of speech, may form a lasting link
> Of ages; to what straits old Time reduces
> Frail man, when paper—even a rag like this,
> Survives himself, his tomb, and all that's his.
>
> And when his bones are dust, his grave a blank,
> His station, generation, even his nation,
> Become a thing, or nothing, save to rank
> In chronological commemoration,
> Some dull MS oblivion long has sank,
> Or graven stone found in a barrack's station
> In digging the foundation of a closet,
> May turn his name up, as a rare deposit. (III.793–808)

Ink, paper, and the rags from which paper was made before the introduction of pulp paper connect the word as thing and man as thing ("what all are") outside any fantasy of determinable love and glory. As we will argue, Byron does not stop at extreme skepticism here but uses this orientation to undergird a principle of justice (and love) that he posits as existing outside representation.

Byron's continual return to "things" here is designed to function in the same way that thing theory understands the difference between objects and things:

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human

subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject–object relation.[10]

Byron's poetry similarly insists on not working. It continually calls attention to the break of his line of verse in such a way as to work against syntactical meaning; it stalls in long passages of digression that vitiate narrative progression; and it reminds us of the materiality of the page that stands between us and any intended referentiality: its ink, letters, sounds, and cloth paper. Byron is also consciously reconsidering the nature of subject–object relations here, as he makes clear in the Dedication to the poem, after discussing Wordsworth and Coleridge:

> If we may judge of matter by the mind,
> Emasculated to the marrow, *It*
> Hath but two objects—how to serve, and bind,
> Deeming the chain it wears even men may fit;
> Eutropius of its many masters—blind
> To worth as freedom, wisdom as to wit—
> Fearless, because *no* feeling dwells in ice,
> Its very courage stagnates to a vice. (113–20)

Byron's principle of freedom is thus associated with a wit that renounces the referential *It* his ottava rima's rhyme makes intentionally opaque. It is poetry's breakdown of the referential chain ("*It*"/"wit") that promises a changed relation to the human subject. Byron makes clear that the object is closely bound to the subject, both serving that subject and binding it—and therefore working against the call for revolutionary change, which can occur only once we are freed from those chains.

To stay true to such a revolutionary principle, Byron seeks never to be fixed by any one code for those subject–object relations, neither genre nor ideology. As he states in Canto 15,

> I was born for opposition.

> But then 'tis mostly on the weaker side:
> So that I verily believe if they
> Who now are basking in their full-blown pride,
> Were shaken down, and 'dogs had had their day,'
> Though at the first I might perchance deride
> Their tumble, I should turn the other way,
> And wax an Ultra-royalist in loyalty,
> Because I hate even democratic royalty. (22–3)

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[10] Brown, "Thing Theory," 4.

This position is closely tied to Byron's melancholy, driven as it is by a recognition of the failure of all systems of meaning-production before what Jacques Lacan would come to call the Real.[11] It is because "Death laughs at all you weep for" (IX.85) that Byron concludes: "all is dubious which Man may attain" (IX.131) and "There's no such thing as certainty, that's plain/ As any of Mortality's Conditions" (IX.133–4). However, Byron also rejects nihilism. We think, ultimately, that he is driven by hope, however strange that statement may seem given how commonly Byron and Don Juan are represented in negative terms (an "ironic counter-voice," as M. H. Abrams, for example, states when he decides to "omit [Byron] altogether" from his *Natural Supernaturalism*).[12] In the last section of this chapter, we will propose how such hope can exist alongside the violence and catastrophism that pervades Byron's writing.

Byron's revolutionary position is, in fact, bound up with his understanding of poetry. It is easy to dismiss many of his passages as merely humorous. Their effect is to undercut his metaphysical speculations ("I quite forget this poem's merely quizzical,/ And deviate into matters rather dry" [IX.323–4]), often by turning to a play on words or by calling attention to the opacity of verse, as he does in the next lines:

> I ne'er decide what I shall say, and this I call
> Much too poetical. Men should know why
> They write, and for what end; but, note or text,
> I never know the word which will come next. (IX.325–8)

The resulting breakdown of subject–object relations is precisely Byron's point; in these moments, "text" points to no object, only the material shape and sound of words themselves through the rhyme that comes "next." The teleology of an argument or the forward momentum of a narrative (the next lines are "So on I ramble, now and then narrating,/ Now pondering:—it is time we should narrate" [9.329–30]) are both vitiated by a reminder of the materiality of things themselves.

Byron uses such language play to critique both objects and subjects, both the novel's approach to the objective world and poetry's approach to the transcendent. As he puts it when he attacks lyricism's use in the glorification of war:

> I wonder (although Mars no doubt's a God I
>   Praise) if a man's name in a *bulletin*
> May make up for a *bullet in* his body?
>   I hope this little question is no sin. (*Don Juan* VII.21)

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[11] See Felluga, *Perversity of Poetry*, Chapter 3 for an earlier argument along these lines.
[12] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 13.

Collapsing the mind/body dialectic across the slant rhyme of God I/body (like the ink/think of the "words are things" passage or the *It*/wit of the Dedication), Byron ultimately reduces the ideological and moral obfuscations of war poetry to rhyme and meter (ín a búlletín/ fór a búllet ín/ ís no sín).[13] The historical referent—the naïve empiricism of the bulletin's summary of the news—is here recast as the cadence of meter; graphic violence becomes graphic sign as the bullet pierces only the white space between "bullet" and "in"). Byron thus punctures any lyric claim to either truth or virtue.

Don Juan and the Novel

Don Juan also explores and deconstructs each of the purported components of prose fiction: referentiality, causality, characterization, motivation, narrative, and the truth claims of what later came to be called realism. It thus troubles each of the elements that are bound up with the novel's centrality to modernism and literary criticism. As Michael McKeon puts it in his introduction to *Theory of the Novel*, "the central issues become the novel's association with the modern excavation of interiority as subjectivity, of character as personality and selfhood, and of plot as the progressive development of the integral individual."[14] Byron questions each of these issues, providing a counter to the eventual establishment of realism as the highest cultural form for the nineteenth-century aesthetic. *Don Juan* thus actively enters debates about "questions of truth" that Michael McKeon has demonstrated as a driving force behind the eighteenth-century formation of the novel as form. Of course, *Don Juan* also consistently addresses "questions of virtue," the other dialectical category that McKeon explores in *The Origins of the English Novel*, and literature of the period was just as concerned with Byron's playful evisceration of bourgeois morality's answers to those questions, particularly its privileging of work, duty, domesticity, progress, and privatized subjectivity. Many major poets and novelists of the Victorian period heard Byron's challenge regarding both sets of questions and responded in the story lines and formal developments of their works, as we will see in the chapters that follow.

The common wisdom is that *Don Juan* can be characterized as a sort of verse-novel because of its similarity to novelistic form, at once pointing backward to the picaresque novels of the eighteenth century and—especially in Cantos 10–17 once Don Juan reaches England—forward to novelistic realism.[15] Anne Barton,

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[13] We thank Marshall Brown for his helpful ruminations on the God I/body slant rhyme in his editorial response to Felluga's *Modern Language Quarterly* version of this chapter.

[14] Michael McKeon, *Theory of the Novel*, xvi.

[15] On *Don Juan*'s novelistic nature, see Bakhtin's "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, where Bakhtin gives *Don Juan* as an example of the nineteenth-century novelization of poetry (5–6, 33); Karl Kroeber's *Romantic Narrative Art*; Richard Lansdown's "The Novelized Poem & the

for example, writes that "Behind the wanderings of Juan, the essentially episodic nature of the poem before it comes to rest in England, there had always lurked the picaresque adventures of heroes such as Smollett's Roderick Random and Peregrine Pickle, Swift's Gulliver, or Fielding's Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones."[16] Karl Kroeber, by contrast, looks forward:

> our position . . . is that the narrative poems of the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth operated to transform both the subject and the form of the Augustan novel, worked to enrich its contents and to enlarge the range of its techniques. *Don Juan*, we propose, belongs to that development and will be understood best if treated not as a belated contribution to the Augustan novel but as a precursor of a new kind of novel writing.[17]

James Chandler follows suit by reading in both Byron and Scott a new approach to questions of temporality and causality that would serve to set the stage for our understanding of history in the period: "*Don Juan* emerges as Byron's ambitious effort to rival Scott's campaign to modernize the writing of epic in the post-Revolution period" (357);[18] and later: "Byron's use in *Don Juan* of so many elements of the Waverley format results in a poem in which it is hard not to see the general stamp of Scott's new form of "modern epopée" (378).[19] In Chandler's account, *Don Juan* as historical novel—what he calls "Byron's Waverley Novel" (373)—thus stands alongside Scott's fiction as the important antecedent (and antagonist) to novelistic realism, which, of course, establishes *its* reputation in part by denigrating or ridiculing Scott and Byron both.[20]

Byron serves as an important middle ground between eighteenth-century fiction and Victorian realism because he directly engages the dialectical oppositions

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Poeticized Novel"; John Speirs's *Poetry Towards Novel*, 216–82; and Herbert F. Tucker, who in *Epic* argues that *Don Juan* "matured in the novelistic direction from which Pushkin was to take his cue in *Evgeny Onegin*: the later cantos' most memorable scenes take place at table or in chambers (boudoirs wherever possible); in private or domestic space, not the halls and fields of epic" (226). Note that Tucker is also attuned to the ways that "Byron pointed verse narrative away from illusionistic, representational structure toward self-conscious, presentational texture" and "At just the time when Scott, Austen and other novelists were paving the high road of bourgeois realism" (229).

[16] Anne Barton, *Byron*, 72.

[17] Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art*, 148–9.

[18] James Chandler, *England in 1819*, 357. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

[19] For a less convincing effort to align Don Juan and the "Waverley Hero," see Roderick S. Speer's *Byron and Scott*, Chapter 4.

[20] On the eclipse of Scott's reputation in the Victorian period, see Ina Ferris's *The Achievement of Literary Authority*. On Byron, see Andrew Elfenbein's *Byron and the Victorians*. It should be noted that Byron was an avid reader of Scott. As he wrote to John Murray shortly after sending him *Don Juan* 3 and 4 (March 1, 1820), "Pray send me W. Scott's new novels—what are their names and characters? I read some of his former ones at least once a day for an hour or so" (*Byron's Letters and Journals* VII.48–9). On January 5, 1821, he writes in his journal, "I have read all W. Scott's novels at least fifty times" (*Byron's Letters and Journals* VIII.13). Even assuming some exaggeration in that figure, it is clear that Byron was a fan.

that, according to McKeon, drive the development of the novel as form. For McKeon, the novel serves as an answer to both questions of truth and questions of virtue. As McKeon writes,

> "The novel" must be understood as what Marx calls a "simple abstraction," a deceptively monolithic category that encloses a complex historical process. It attains its modern, "institutional" stability and coherence at this time because of its unrivaled power both to formulate, and to explain, a set of problems that are central to early modern experience. These may be understood as problems of categorical instability, which the novel, originating to resolve, also inevitably reflects. The first sort of instability with which the novel is concerned has to do with generic categories, the second, with social categories.[21]

McKeon goes on to connect generic questions with an epistemological crisis that raises "questions of truth" and displays "a major cultural transition in attitudes toward how to tell the truth in narrative" (20). In these dialectical shifts, "romance idealism" is opposed by "naïve empiricism"—for example, the concern with the news or historical documentation or the found manuscript that frames many eighteenth-century novels—which is in turn countered by an "extreme skepticism" that questions our very ability to record empirically. The second sort of instability, concerning social categories, McKeon sees as a social and ethical crisis that raises "questions of virtue" and displays "a cultural crisis in attitudes toward how the external social order is related to the internal, moral state of its members" (20). Here an analogous dialectic to the first involves an "aristocratic ideology" that is opposed by a "progressive ideology," which is in turn countered by "conservative ideology." The novel, according to McKeon, serves in its malleability and contradictions to negotiate and interrelate questions of both truth and virtue in a way that makes possible the articulation of the middle class as simple abstraction: "In its preoccupation with questions of virtue, I will argue, the emerging novel internalizes the emergence of the middle class and the concerns that it exists to mediate. Indeed, one crucial explanatory function of the new genre is to demonstrate that questions of truth and questions of virtue become more tractable when seen as analogous versions of each other" (22).

We rehearse McKeon's argument here to demonstrate just how much Byron's *Don Juan* is engaged with aspects of the novel's development up to the Romantic period. We can point not only to its engagement with "romance idealism"—including its incorporation of various romance forms, from pastoral (Cantos 2 and 4) to oriental (Cantos 5 and 6) to heroic (Cantos 7 and 8) to courtly (Canto 9) to Gothic (Canto 16) romance—but also its and Byron's own personal engagement

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[21] Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*, 20. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

with aristocratic, progressive, and conservative ideologies, all subtended by the "extreme skepticism" that Chandler terms "Pyrrhonian" (388) after quoting Byron on the nature of fiction:

> If people contradict themselves, can I
>   Help contradicting them, and every body,
> Even my veracious self?—But that's a lie;
>   I never did so, never will—how should I?
> He who doubts all things, nothing can deny;
>   Truth's fountains may be clear—her streams are muddy,
> And cut through such canals of contradiction,
> That she must often navigate o'er fiction. (*Don Juan* XV.88)

Byron here plays with the logic that came to underpin the nineteenth-century novel's approach to questions of truth and virtue. The early novel was consistently attacked because it threatened to break down the distinction between reality and fiction, leaving the most vulnerable—women, the lower classes, adolescent men— unable to perform their real-world duties. Many novels—from *The Female Quixote* to *Northanger Abbey* to *Madame Bovary*—responded to this critique by including within their narratives represented readers who fail to make the proper distinction between reality and fiction. By way of this procedure, the novel provided an instruction manual on the proper reading of itself.[22]

Of course, Byron contradicts this hedge on contradiction. "True *because* untrue"—the fetishistic logic of fiction—becomes in Byron "can I/ Help contradicting . . ./ My veracious self?—But that's a lie." But which is the lie? Is the lie that he is veracious or that he could contradict a veracity that is itself indistinguishable from fiction, which amounts to the same thing, a lie that cannot be distinguished from the truth: "Truth's fountains may be clear—her streams are muddy,/ And cut through such canals of contradiction,/ That she must often navigate o'er fiction"? Byron too claims his answers to questions of truth but always by underscoring the impossibility of distinguishing between truth and lie. For proof that "this story's actually true" (I.202), for example, he turns to the naively empirical evidence of "history, tradition, and to facts,/ To newspapers, whose truth all know and feel" (I.203), but then bathetically undercuts his list by adding that he turns also "To plays in five, and operas in three acts" (I.203). His final proof is personal testimony, but of that which is beyond reportability, "that myself, and several now in Seville,/ *Saw* Juan's last elopement with the devil" (I.203), a fact that is, in truth, a mere device from the stage, as the first stanza of the poem makes clear: "We all have seen him in the pantomime,/ Sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time" (I.1).

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22 On the pervasiveness and logic of this technique, see, in particular, Garrett Stewart's *Dear Reader*.

Byron immediately follows the passage in which he claims his "story's actually true" by also claiming that his poem answers to questions of virtue. To those who would

> cry that they "the moral cannot find,"
>   I tell him, if a clergyman, he lies;
> Should captains the remark or critics make,
> They also lie too—under a mistake. (I.208)

For Byron, truth and virtue are just as intertwined as they are for the novel, except that he recognizes and undercuts their connection, subordinating both under the lie that is ideology, which makes it indeed possible to lie "under a mistake."[23] Byron does this with full knowledge that he is engaging the novel at its own game, the truth (and virtue) claims of fiction:

> 'Tis strange—but true; for Truth is always strange,
>   Stranger than Fiction: if it could be told,
> How much would novels gain by the exchange!
>   How differently the world would men behold!
> How oft would vice and virtue places change!
>   The new world would be nothing to the old,
> If some Columbus of the moral seas
> Would show mankind their souls' Antipodes.
>
> What 'Antres vast and deserts idle' then
>   Would be discover'd in the human soul!
> What Icebergs in the hearts of mighty men,
>   With Self-love in the centre as their Pole!
> What Anthropophagi in nine of ten
>   Of those who hold the kingdoms in control!
> Were things but only call'd by their right name,
> Caesar himself would be ashamed of Fame. (XIV.101–2)

Collapsing questions of truth and questions of virtue, Byron presents *Don Juan* as directly in opposition to the novel. As Byron suggests here, the novel lays claim to a verisimilitude always subordinated to a moral compass pointing to those values of the emergent middle class that Byron delights in skewering throughout the poem.

If Byron merely represented the profligate counter to the novel's morality, he would be easy to dismiss. Byron's persistence as a problem that the novel (and the

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[23] As Herbert F. Tucker puts it in *Epic*, "Cant rises into an epic theme . . . once it is seen to pollute the public sphere by clouding the issues and obscuring the general discernment; when it circulates so generally that, whether actually believed or not, habitual usage makes it functionally equivalent to the truth. *Don Juan* is the epic for an age of bullshit" (231).

verse-novel) had to negotiate lies not only in the amorphous figure of the Byronic hero he popularized and that popped up as a condemned or ridiculed character throughout the novels and poetry of the Victorian period. His challenge is directed, rather, to the ground of realism and idealism both. His challenge lies, that is, in his highly popular and influential answers to the same questions of truth and of virtue raised by the novel and eventually resolved by it in the aesthetic strategy of realism and in the ideological stance of bourgeois domesticity.

The crisis represented by *Don Juan* for truth and virtue is established in the first line of the poem: "I want a hero" (I.1). Self-reflexively laying bare the process of composition, a tactic *Don Juan* adopts as running joke, the opening raises the issue of truth and virtue together in the figure of character, which of course the novel used to tie together narrative (*Bildung*), morality (one's character), and verisimilitude (staying true to a character's logical actions and motivations not to mention his or her socio-ideological and idiolectical purview).[24] Byron, by contrast, does not so much want (desire) as want (lack) a hero. Don Juan, as many have commented, serves as a mere stick figure, a pretext for Byron's digressions. It may seem that in Canto I Byron chooses the path of what would come to be called the *Bildungsroman* over that of a traditional epic: Whereas "Most epic poets plunge 'in medias res'" (I.6), Byron explains,

> My way is to begin with the beginning;
> The regularity of my design
>   Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,
> And therefore I shall open with a line
>   (Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
> Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father,
>   And also of his mother, if you'd rather. (I.7)

It may seem as if we are given a traditional, novelistic narrative of *Bildung*, a cause for all the narrative effects to follow, where "The Child is father of the Man," as Wordsworth has it. But in *Don Juan* narrative does not follow the cause-and-effect logic that is the result of a novel's concretization of space and time, not to mention the fact that wandering can, in fact, best describe Byron's methodology: literally, across the touristic space of Europe; narrationally, in a pervasive digressiveness that vitiates temporal progression; metaleptically, in "a line" of verse that cannot help but call attention to itself—"it cost me half an hour in spinning"—in such a way as to break, literally across the enjambment, any mimetic referentiality (a genealogical "line" rather than a poetic line, in this case).[25]

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[24] On the novel's engagement with this double meaning of "character," see Deidre Shauna Lynch's *The Economy of Character*.

[25] On digression and its relation to Byron's particular understanding of historicity, see especially Jane Stabler's *Byron, Poetics and History*.

Because it rejects the narrative logic of what would eventually become the real-ist novel, *Don Juan* can just as easily be read as following the conventions of eighteenth-century picaresque novels or, for that matter, of Greek romance. Like the temporality that Mikhail Bakhtin analyzes in "Greek romance-time," there is no particular logic to the order of events in Don Juan's life, and little sense that Don Juan develops as a character. *Don Juan* would thus seem to subscribe to the generic parameters of epic *romance* rather than those of the *Bildungsroman*, and, indeed, the poem is rife with romance conventions. And yet, the poem's contemporaneity and engagement with the historical specificity of the present would seem to contradict those parameters. As Bakhtin explains,

> All of the action in a Greek romance, all the events and adventures that fill it, constitute time-sequences that are neither historical, quotidian, biographical, nor even biological and maturational. Actions lie outside these sequences, beyond the reach of that force, inherent in these sequences, that generates rules and defines the measure of a man. In this kind of time, nothing changes: the world remains as it was, the biographical life of the heroes does not change, their feelings do not change, people do not even age. This empty time leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing.[26]

We quote this passage at length to underscore how much it at once applies and *does not* apply to Byron's poem, for *Don Juan* is, of course, deeply historical, quotidian, biographical, even biological, given the carnivalesque nature of the poem's humor.[27]

In fact, one reason Don Juan does not change is that he serves as a loose reflection of Byron's *biographical* self, so much so that the presentation of Don Juan's early family and childhood in Canto I is a loose amalgam of Byron's experiences with his mother and his wife, presented in details that any contemporary reader would recognize, given the infamy of his recent divorce:

> For Inez call'd some druggists and physicians,
>   And tried to prove her loving lord was *mad*,
> But as he had some lucid intermissions,
>   She next decided he was only *bad*. (I.27)

Byron—"mad, bad, and dangerous to know," in Lady Caroline Lamb's well-known phrase—refuses the distinction between author and character that is at the heart of

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[26] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 91.

[27] The true "cause" of the Man for Byron is not the events he experienced in childhood ("Child is Father of the Man") but simply, and biologically, the *cunnus*—"Oh, thou 'teterrima Causa' of all 'belli'" [*Don Juan* IX.55]). The original in Horace is "*Nam fuit ante Helenam cunnus teterrima belli/ Causa*" (36). See Chandler for an extended reading of this passage in terms of Byron's "cause" (*England in 1819*, 383–8).

the novelistic project and the basis of its Victorian self-defense as fictional real*ism*. He models his characters on himself and, just as significantly, modeled his life, however failingly, on those principles that drive his unchanging characters, thus making fiction the spur to revolutionary action.

Here lies Byron's challenge to a generic form—the novel—that through the Victorian logic of realism and the critical reception of that form dissociated the fictional from the real even as it sought to lay claim to the truth. Rather than create a character perfectly bound in the narrative logic of fiction, and thus clearly distinguishable from the author of the tale, Byron instead dramatically, theatrically modeled his life and those of his characters on a principle that he presents as an unchanging, unshakeable demand to fight on behalf of the oppressed. In other words, Byron's influence on the period resulted not only from his responses to questions of truth but also from his very different and highly influential responses to questions of virtue. Byron's greatest threat to bourgeois ideology lies in the direct call to his readers to follow him into revolutionary action. Byron here also sets the stage for his performative assumption of the role of hero in Greece, even if that role was never fully realized. Byron attempted to emulate in his life what is, of course, a fictional construction, further breaking down distinctions between author and character, reality and fiction.

Byron embraces such breakdowns throughout *Don Juan*, even questioning any claim to know the difference: "I hope it is no crime/ To laugh at *all* things—for I wish to know/ *What* after *all*, are *all* things—but a *Show*?" (VII.2). While his melancholy questions all laws and ideologies of extant government, however, it also serves as his principle of justice: he refuses to let the murdered dead lie; he rejects all mourning in favor of a melancholy return to the site of trauma and ruin.[28] Italy, Ireland, and Greece call him to action—Italy's "clanking chain, and Erin's yet green wounds,/ Have voices—tongues to cry aloud for me" (Dedication 16)—and, whatever his "actually true" activities in Italy and Greece, his death on the way to fight for the Greeks became a powerful model for many at the cusp of the Victorian period.

As we will see in Chapter Four, the Victorian novel recast Byronic revolutionary principle as adolescent fantasy that must be overcome in the turn to adulthood. The call to act became instead an impulse of youth that saner heads needed to dismiss in the turn to the real business of everyday life: duty, family, and the rule of law. Narrative *Bildung*, in other words, is both a structural principle for the Victorian novel and a counter to Byron's ontological position: progress for the individual meant growing out of the melancholic temperament embodied in Byron; progress for the nation meant choosing reform over revolution.

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[28] In *The Perversity of Poetry*, especially Chapter 3, Felluga makes a fuller argument about the relation of melancholy to Byron's understanding of justice.

Don Juan may not change, nor even age, but only insofar as he is yet one more articulation of a figure, the Byronic hero, that persists. Either such characters, like their tales, attain no narrative closure or—if like Manfred or the Don Juan of contemporary pantomime, they do—they nonetheless continue their intransigence even into the afterlife, like the Miltonic Satan who inspired them. What persists is a principle of justice, of hope, even of faith that rejects the inevitability of temporal progression, whether that temporality be understood as a subject's development or history's forward momentum, whether *Bildung* or progress. And, of course, the nineteenth-century novel and its bourgeois reader, not to mention twentieth-century critical theory, were heavily invested in both.

Future Anterior and the Act-Event

We have explored how the novel implements a particular way of thinking about history and the real. This cause-and-effect version of temporality works quite differently from the version of temporality we find in Byron, which is also to say that novelistic temporality was not the only option available to people in the period. Byron was arguably the most influential writer offering an alternative that directly and self-consciously challenged the novel's insistence on narrative temporality as the logic of the subject's agency in time. What's more, he resisted lyricism's tendency to claim in death or the eternal some access to an ideal truth, opting instead for the "abyss/ Of thought" as a trigger to revolutionary action. The verse-novelists that followed Byron continued this critique of the structural logic of both the novel and the lyric, as we will see in Part Three.

Byron's understanding of truth and the "abyss/ Of thought" resonates with Badiou's notion that "A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order."[29] According to Badiou, we can never determine a truth from the mere facts of historical unfolding; he uses the term "event" to designate a rupture that produces such truths, for example the rupture that was the French Revolution, which of course greatly influenced Byron. In such moments, we step out of present structures in order to imagine something better, something that could be said to apply to all humanity in its confrontation with the abyss of existence.[30] As Dupuy puts it, "only those who dare to look into the abyss of meaninglessness are capable of true compassion."[31] If the novel's project follows the ideological logic of *je sais bien mais quand-même*, Byron's might be characterized as *je ne sais rien et alors*: I know nothing for certain—none of us

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[29] Badiou, *Being and Event*, xii. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

[30] We could be said thus to step out of time understood as strict cause-and-effect temporality— and, indeed, we might recall here that France adopted a French revolutionary calendar that restarted calendrical chronology.

[31] Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis*, 29.

do—and, *therefore*, I act to stay true to what brings us together in pain and suffering but also love.

For this reason, Byron continues to push Don Juan into limit-case situations (slavery, war, cannibalism) so that he can consider what distinguishes the human from the animal. Byron questions any claim to know anything, including religion ("There's nought, no doubt, so much the spirit calms/ As rum and true religion" [II.34]). However, he also asks us continually to interrogate if we can posit a "spirit" outside of temporal sequentiality that arises from our confrontation with "great nature's or our own abyss."

Badiou's work on evil can perhaps help us to make sense of such passages in Byron. Badiou argues that "the human animal, 'in itself,' implies no value judgement"; it is "*beneath* Good and Evil," concerned as it is with mere survival and satisfaction.[32] It is only through the confrontation with what Badiou characterizes as an "infinite" truth, a truth that goes beyond mere opinion, beyond received knowledge, that the human animal is confronted with a different possibility. Badiou turns to the Lacanian Real: "the moment the real is identified as event, making way for the division of the subject, the figures of distinction in discourse are terminated, because the position of the real instituted by them is revealed, through the retroaction of the event, to be illusory."[33] To put this in clearer, Byronic terms, once "we know what all are," mere dust, with death and chaos surrounding us, we can ask, "*What* after *all*, are *all* things—but a *Show*?" Both Badiou and Byron start from this conviction to think through the limit-case definition of what it is to be human, as Byron does in the cannibalism sequence of *Don Juan*, Book II. According to Byron, "flesh is formed of fiery dust," which is to say that we can, despite everything, imagine a greater truth that is "Platonic, universal, wonderful" (II.212). Or, as Don Juan puts, "'T is true that death awaits both you and me,/ But let us die like men, not sink below/ Like brutes" (II.36). For Byron, if there is such a thing as the good, it arises from the human struggle to posit a greater truth when we confront the chaos of existence.

If Byron avoids the charge of egotism here—we might recall Mary Shelley's implicit critique in the figure of Victor Frankenstein exhorting Walton's men to "Be men, or be more than men!"—it is because he is concerned not with grand heroic acts (being more than men) but with the limit-case of the human. The true heroism of the cannibalism sequence lies with the "weaklier child" who "with a mild/ And patient spirit held aloof his fate" and smiled,

> As if to win a part from off the weight
> He saw increasing on his father's heart,
> With the deep deadly thought, that they must part. (II.88)

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[32] Badiou, *Ethics*, 59. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.
[33] Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 57. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

If there is heroism in the military adventures of Don Juan, it is only in his decision at the end of Canto 8 to save a Moslem orphan from the devastation of Alexandr Vasilievitch Suvaroff's attack on Ismael in 1790: "Juan wept,/ And made a vow to shield here, which he kept" (VIII.1128). Juan shields her for reasons that transcend the brutishness of man, the selfish considerations of sect or race.[34]

It is the "character" of the hero that Byron sees as particularly problematic even as he wishes to motivate his readers to act. He discusses "character" in Book 14, after writing "I know nought" (XIV.17) and claiming that "my Muse by no means deals in fiction" (XIV.97). There is, he argues,

> A sort of varnish over every fault;
>   A kind of common-place, even in their crimes;
> Factitious passions, wit without much salt,
>   A want of that true nature which sublimes
> Whate'er it shows with truth; a smooth monotony
> Of character, in those at least who have got any.
>
> Sometimes, indeed, like soldiers off parade,
>   They break their ranks and gladly leave the drill;
> But then the roll-call draws them back afraid,
>   And they must be or seem what they were: still
> Doubtless it is a brilliant masquerade. (XIV.123–33)

Byron's goal is to break with the "drill" of the current order, with the "masquerade" of "character," and to resist the cause-and-effect narrativization of the heroic act: "This narrative is not meant for narration" (XIV.54). As he writes a little later, "To trace all actions to their secret springs/ Would make indeed some melancholy mirth;/ But this is not at present my concern" (XIV.469–71).

When Byron turns to history, he resists the desire to trace all actions to their source, acknowledging that any retroactive narrativization entails the suspect morality of the always-imposed artificial temporal construct, which goes hand in hand with the moral judgment entailed in character:

> Firmness yclept in heroes, kings, and seamen,
>   That is, when they succeed; but greatly blamed
> As obstinacy, both in men and women,
>   Whene'er their triumph pales, or star is tamed:—

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[34] Byron is not free from the critique that he is using the female, Islamic Other as a tool for the redemption of the European male hero. But it is worth pointing out that the "Moslem orphan" is not just a throw-away foil for Don Juan here. Byron returns to her again and again in the following cantos, giving her a name, Leila, and illustrating the various material ways that Don Juan keeps his promise to shield her, both at the court of Catherine the Great and, later, in Britain, where he finds for her a trustworthy guardian in Lady Pinchbeck.

And 't will perplex the casuist in morality
To fix the due bounds of this dangerous quality.

Had Buonaparte won at Waterloo,
    It had been firmness; now 't is pertinacity:
Must the event decide between the two?
    I leave it to your people of sagacity
To draw the line between the false and true. (XIV.707–17)

Byron's approach to temporality and the act-event provided authors of the nine-teenth century with an alternative way to consider our actions in the present, particularly any action that "speaks to all men and all times," that therefore breaks with current systems of morality. To act in fidelity to "truth" is always to return to the abyss of both nature and subjectivity: for Byron, the only certainty is death and chaos ("what know you,/ Except perhaps that you were born to die?"). This acknowledgment serves as the principle of his approach to collective action.

Byron articulates his approach to collective action in the following journal entry:

But, *onward*!—it is now the time to act, and what signifies *self*, if a single spark of that which would be worthy of the past can be bequeathed unquenchably to the future? It is not one man, nor a million, but the *spirit* of liberty which must be spread. . . . [W]hatever the sacrifice of individuals, the great cause will gather strength, sweep down what is rugged, and fertilise . . . what is cultivable. And so, the mere selfish calculation ought never to be made on such occasions; and, at present, it shall not be computed by me. I was never a good arithmetician of chances, and shall not commence now. (*Letters* VIII.20)

The self here is constructed without "selfish calculation" or ideological position ("being of no party,/ I shall offend all parties," as Byron puts it in *Don Juan* [IX.201–2]). What Byron posits here resembles, rather, Badiou's "wholly disinter-ested subjectivity"[35] fighting for "the rights of the infinite and the immortal against the calculation of interests" (*Metapolitics* 104). Byron is driven to act not by the interests of one man or even a million but by a universal principle, the "*spirit* of liberty." We act because we must after confrontation with a truth that is "Platonic, universal, wonderful" yet beyond custom and calculation, even as we have no idea of the cause-and-effect temporality or eventuality of that act. As Byron puts it, he is not "a good arithmetician of chances." What's more, Byron is true to his word: he acted. That he failed by dying on the way to the battlefield in support of Greek independence does not matter—in fact, it would be less significant for us if he had somehow managed to succeed in playing the role of military hero. What matters

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[35] Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 100. Subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses.

is that he acted in fidelity to a universal (in this case, cosmopolitan) principle that broke with the current system.

For Byron, the time is always "'out of joint'" (IX.322), a fact that applies to all ideological positions, including his own. As he states of his own writing, expanding his point to the *longue durée* of geological time,

> But let it go:—it will one day be found
> With other relics of "a former world,"
> When this world shall be *former*, underground,
> Thrown topsy-turvy, twisted, crisped, and curled,
> Baked, fried, or burnt, turned inside-out, or drowned,
> Like all the worlds before, which have been hurled
> First out of and then back again to Chaos,
> The Superstratum which will overlay us. (IX.289–96)

This position leads Byron not to Pyrrhonian extreme skepticism ("It is a pleasant voyage perhaps to float,/ Like Pyrrho, on a sea of speculation;/ But what if carrying sail capsize the boat?" [IX.137–9]) nor to misanthropy ("Why do they call me misanthrope? Because/ *They hate me, not I them*" [IX.167–8]). In fact, the narrative spur for Byron's metaphysical reflections ("I am apt to grow too metaphysical:/ 'The time is out of joint,'—and so am I" [IX.321–2]), is an act of love: Don Juan's decision to save the Moslem orphan. Byron's understanding of what Lacan would eventually call the Real drives a radical political position that resembles both Badiou's understanding of event and Dupuy's notion of "enlightened doomsaying."[36]

The "*spirit* of liberty" binds both the future and the past through me in this act now, which is also how Dupuy understands his "temporal metaphysics, which takes the form of a circle linking the future to the past and the past to the future."[37] Walter Benjamin had something similar in mind when he wrote that "we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim."[38] Like Dupuy (or Byron, inspired by Georges Cuvier's geological catastrophism), Benjamin approaches the problems of the present through catastrophe. He famously pictures the "angel of history" with its face turned toward the past:

> Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future

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[36] See Dupuy's *A Short Treatise* and *The Mark of the Sacred*.
[37] Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, 210.
[38] Walter Benjamin, "Theses," 254. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.
This storm is what we call progress. (257–8)

By contrast to this rather desperate figuration, Byron and Dupuy after him transport themselves to the future where they witness the inevitable catastrophe *and then return* so that they can decry the problems with the current system and begin the hard work of effecting change.

Byron figures his version of enlightened doomsaying in *Don Juan* when he imagines a time "When this World shall be *former*" (IX.291) and men are "but maggots of some huge Earth's burial" (IX.312). The "great relics" of civilization begin to "Look like the monsters of a new Museum!" (IX.319–20), Byron writes: "Think if then George the Fourth should be dug up!" (IX.305). The goal of such a future-anterior approach for Byron is the disjointing of the present—"'The time is out of joint'" (IX.322), as Byron puts it after these passages, a phrase from *Hamlet* that Žižek repeats many times throughout his own work on the event.[39] The full quotation is: "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!"[40] Although melancholy is a part of this strategy, despair and inaction are not the effect. Instead, Byron looks for an eternal principle, the "*spirit* of liberty," that will impel action in the present against the current system. When he asks "august Athena" (II.10), for example, "Where are thy men of might? thy grand in soul?" (*Childe Harold* II.11), the response is not rhetorical as the following lines might suggest ("Gone—glimmering through the dream of things that were"). We soon come to realize that the question is also a literal one:

> Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth,
> And long accustom'd bondage uncreate?
> Not such thy sons who whilome did await,
> The hopeless warriors of a willing doom,
> In bleak Thermopylae's sepulchral strait—
> Oh! who that gallant spirit shall resume,
> Leap from Eurotas' banks, and call thee from the tomb? (II.695–701)

When Byron represents the past as heroic, he does so largely as a motivating critique of the present, to "shame [Greece's] now degenerate horde" into action (II.791). As Byron states a few lines later, "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow" (II.721). Instead of waiting for a hero to appear, we must act now to change the system. Byron acts in full acceptance that any single act will be insufficient ("the mere selfish calculation ought never to be made on such occasions").

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[39] See, for example, Žižek, *Event*, 4; *In Defense*, 29; *Living in the End Times*, 393; and *The Parallax View*, 8.
[40] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.v.188–9.

We are called to the act-event immediately—"it is now time to act"—because of a principle that "signifies self" not as "mere selfish calculation" but as an eternal "spark" that links the past and the future: "that which would be worthy of the past can be bequeathed unquenchably to the future" by an unselfish act.

Within a narrativized logic, I might act because I believe this is the path that will lead to the best of all possible worlds—perhaps a recovered lost one, perhaps a resolution of present-day troubles. I *calculate* a successful future outcome. What Byron proposes is something much darker. We are all going to die, life is chaos—and that is why we can love and act now. We have no other choice. We are not working for our children (reproductive futurism) or for the future of the species (Michel Foucault's bio-power) or because we want to be the winners (zero-sum agonism). We act without "selfish calculation" precisely because we are not "good arithmetician[s] of chances" and could never be. We act because we must, even as we have no idea of the cause-and-effect eventuality of that act. The future anterior is a gamble that the future could be better for everyone but only if we act now.

We can read in the verse-novels of the nineteenth century the continuation of this disjointing of the present, sometimes as critique (Clough, Meredith), sometimes as a call to action through a future-anterior logic that resembles Byron's formal approach (Barrett Browning, Robert Browning). Before we get there, we want to explore how novels negotiated Byron's radical nineteenth-century legacy on their way to establishing their own version of temporality and the act-event, the novel-verse that we believe still largely structures the universe of the present.

4

Lord Byron and the Novel

We argued in Chapter Three that Byron's radical politics and poetics offered a future-anterior model that is profoundly antirealist in its disruption of the time–action–character nexus. Byron challenged the notion of deep subjectivity by effacing the line between author and character, exposed the narrative seams between cause and effect, and championed the jagged time of revolutionary event. Here, we want to look at a collection of realist novels that treat Byron thematically to address how they handle that treatment formally, at the level of narrative structure and realist technique.[1] Our argument is not that *only* novels about Byron operate in these ways. Rather, these novels operate in such standard ways as to present baseline examples for how realist novels work to weld together time, action, and character. That some of the most influential novelists of the period spent entire novels working through the formal challenge of Byron reveals the possibility that Byron directly influenced the rise of the novel in ways that have not been fully appreciated. The books we examine in this chapter are, therefore, not the only novels one might examine to read Byron's impact on the form, and we hope that others will continue this work by producing new readings of other novelists from the period.[2] Our goal in this chapter is to be productive, not exhaustive, in our exploration of Byron's influence on the genre of the novel. We address several novels briefly so that we can illustrate in a single chapter just how pervasive the novel's engagement with Byron really was across the nineteenth century. By prying open the gap between structure and content, we aim here to demonstrate how a particular antirealist legacy is written into and over by Victorian realism in ways that fit what would become in hindsight the predominant novelistic mold. We have already explored some of this in Dickens; here we consider Byron's place in this shift.

While the novels we address in this chapter are not isolated examples of the formal processes that interest us, the choice of Byron is not a random one. Indeed, our work on this book began with a question for which we did not have a satisfactory answer: why did Victorian novels for decades after his death make Byron, a Romantic poet who died in 1824, the central figure of their plots? It seemed to us

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[1] *Sartor Resartus*, although not a characteristic novel by any means, does adopt a novelistic conversion narrative and could therefore be considered a sort of *bildungsroman* in its own right, as explored in this chapter.

[2] One can think of some obvious examples: William Makepeace Thackeray and Thomas Hardy, for example, followed by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

that we were not just dealing with a fascination with the Byronic hero. Past studies have addressed this persistence of Byron in thematic terms, a loose amalgam of traits that forms the figure of the Byronic/Satanic hero and that we can pinpoint in a variety of media across time.[3] We felt that there had to be more at work in these novels' treatment of Byron's political and formal legacy—and we think there is.

Our argument attempts to avoid the language of threat, challenge, reaction, subversion and containment that would have our story follow the agonistic, cause-and-effect logic of the novel's own temporal signature—a *Bildungsroman* about the *roman*—as if the novel were itself a fictional character responding to the threat of poetry, now helpfully reduced to a single, quasi-heroic figure, Byron himself. We do sometimes represent the relationship between novel and poetry as a struggle, and authors certainly adopt agonistic language in thinking about the relationship of one genre to another, but our goal is always to return to the problem of genre and of form, the ways different works structure our understanding of time–action–character.

Once we turned to such generic rather than merely thematic issues, we could read in novels that have nothing to do with Byron the calcification of the dominant approach that still shapes our own understanding of reality: a formal approach to temporality and subjectivity that transcends any one genre. Here, in this chapter, we think it useful to examine a series of Victorian novels that function as thought experiments about the Byronic legacy, exploring the extent to which the novel engaged his revolutionary charge on a formal level. From the perspective of the novel's eventual dominance, it can be hard to recognize the multiple ways that novels interrogated the formal alternatives found in poetry—and we do not mean just the expressivist lyric. Indeed, we cannot understand the complexity of the novel's engagement with poetry if we accept that poetry and the novel are mutually exclusive categories. Byronic heroes are everywhere in nineteenth-century novels, but what concerns us are the structural mechanisms employed by writers to deal with the formal alternatives to the novel (*and* to the expressivist lyric) that we will argue in Part Three the verse-novel offered readers.

Byron was significant for the novel in multiple ways. At the simplest level, he represented a diseased figure that worked as a foil to the healthiest tendencies of realist fiction. The Byronic poet's dreamy idealism, sexual perversity, narcissistic self-involvement, and theatricalized breakdown of the distinction between the private and the public self were seen as the constituent opposites to the novel's

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[3] See, for example, Samuel C. Chew, *Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame*; Deborah Lutz, *The Dangerous Lover;* Atara Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*; and Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*. As Thorslev puts it, encapsulating the reduction we are referring to, Byron "is the one poet in the Romantic Movement whose hero was his poetry, or whose poetry existed for his hero" (4).

realistic narratives of disciplined desire, privatized individuality, and civic responsibility. Novelists represented this opposition in their stories, as we will see, and this narrative of subversion and containment was a tool that delegitimized alternative ways of thinking about the real and our relationship to it. However, the complexity of the novel's characterization of Byron is evidenced by the fact that up to the Romantic period it was novel reading itself that was represented as autoerotic and dangerously isolating. In other words, the Romantic poet, and particularly Byron, came to embody the most feared aspects of the novel itself, a fear legible throughout the nineteenth century as various novelistic subgenres (sensation fiction, the French novel, pornographic narratives) captured and offended the imaginations of middle-class arbiters of taste.[4] Even at its simplest, then, Byron's relationship to the novel was never one of pure "opposition," no matter how frequently he was cast into an oppositional role. Byron was, more properly, a figure to be cured rather than cast away, for the positive aspects of Byron's legacy (idealism, engagement, feeling, and cosmopolitanism) constitute the heart of the novel's aesthetic and ideological project. We believe that cure took formal shape as well as thematic charge, and we offer a series of short readings to illustrate the nature and persistence of the Victorian novel's engagement with the Byronic.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Before we get to the Victorians, let us offer a quick preview by way of the Romantic period's most famous Byronic novel, *Frankenstein*. In Mary Shelley's 1818 science-fiction landmark, begun at Byron's rented Swiss villa and boasting three Byronic heroes, a series of framed narrations are nested around what can be termed an event: the reanimation of life and the creation of a new species.[5] Victor Frankenstein imagines himself as a revolutionary who will usher in a new world without death, and, indeed, his discovery of life's secrets plays out as a revelatory leap into the future, a "sudden light" that illuminates a truth so simple and evident that he is surprised to be the first to see it. But this scientific event, a jolt that promises to reorder the world beyond the narrative closure of death, is layered over many times by the narrative frames that contain it with all the force of optative regret. We encounter Victor, not as a young revolutionary, but as a broken and regretful man driven by remorse ("You have hope, and the world before you, and have no cause for despair. But I—I have lost everything and cannot begin life anew" [36–7]) who offers his story to Walton as a cautionary tale: "I do not know that the relation of my disasters will be useful to you; yet, when I reflect that you are pursuing the

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[4] For the story of how Byronic poetry became associated with autoeroticism, see Felluga, *The Perversity of Poetry*.
[5] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in parentheses.

same course, exposing yourself to the same dangers which have rendered me what I am, I imagine that you may deduce an apt moral from my tale" (38). By dividing the Byronic figure among three characters—Victor, Walton, and the creature, who mirror each other in ways too familiar to require our detailing them here— *Frankenstein* offers a story of radical ambition that repeats across narrative frames and cures itself of its own revolutionary energies.

Much of this curative work is handled by the narrative retrospect that settles the story into a pattern of inevitable cause and effect. Victor, for example, comes to believe that "nothing can alter my destiny" and exhorts Walton, "listen to my history, and you will perceive how irrevocably it is determined" (39). Because the irrevocable is more profound for having once been contingent, Victor focuses on moments when things might have been different:

> Thus strangely are our souls constructed, and by such slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity or ruin. When I look back, it seems to me as if this almost miraculous change of inclination and will was the immediate suggestion of the guardian angel of my life—the last effort made by the spirit of preservation to avert the storm that was even then hanging in the stars and ready to envelop me. (55–6)

Victor's narration becomes one long look back at a series of decisive moments and failures to act (e.g., his refusal of the creature, his refusal to understand the meaning of "I shall be with you on your wedding-night" [236], and his refusal to create the creature's mate). As the bodies pile up, the narrative becomes a literal chase to the death after the consequences of actions that cannot be undone.

The creature is perhaps the novel's most interesting figure for fizzled revolution, for his very creation is an event that is then normalized through educational narrative (the scientific path taken by his creator) and personal *bildung* (the narrative of origins modeled on and refracted through the creature's reading). The creature's identification with Milton's Satan saturates him with optative longing for the life denied him ("I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel" [137]), but does not set him on a revolutionary path.[6] Indeed, the creature sees himself in realist terms as locked into both narrative and subjectivity by a series of actions that follow a strict cause-and-effect logic ("In [Victor's] murder my crimes are consummated; the miserable series of my being is wound to its close!" [310–11]). Although his creation occludes death, he considers death as both the only and the desired *telos* for his story: "the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them for ever" (317).

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[6] Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* famously makes the case for the Creature as both Satanic figure and stand-in for the female author.

It is left to Walton—the narrator, inset reader, and last man standing—to understand and act on the tale he has heard. While Victor never lets go of what the novel portrays as his misguided heroism and narcissistic self-regard ("You were hereafter to be hailed as the benefactors of your species; your names adored, as belonging to brave men who encountered death for honour, and the benefit of mankind. . . . Oh! Be men, or be more than men" [304]), Walton appears to understand the full realistic import of Victor's narrative: he turns his ice-locked boat around, heads away from glory and toward safe domestic harbor, and saves his crew just in time. What seems most interesting here is how the narrative frames that disjoint the time and place of the story, exposing narrative as such, also produce the effect of continuity by staging the narrative's reception as both action and consequence. Indeed, *Frankenstein* offers an inset tutorial on how to read—realistically, developmentally, and for character.

Framed narration also teaches us how *not* to read. In *Frankenstein*, as in many of the novels that explored the dangers of reading or emulating Byron (*Glenarvon, Headlong Hall, Persuasion, Pelham, Vivian Grey, Venetia, Sartor Resartus, Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, The Doctor's Wife, Felix Holt*—the list goes on and on), we are taught how reading fiction can lead us astray unless we can accept it *as* fiction, however "true" (*je sais bien mais quand-même*, I know but nevertheless). Victor Frankenstein and the creature are both poor readers. When Victor turns to "Natural philosophy" (67), he does so with the sort of credulity previously feared in readers of Gothic novels: "The raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors, the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought" (69). The creature is similarly credulous in reading the poetry of Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "I read it," the creature states, "as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history" (157). Byron invited readers, by his own example, to break down the separation between fiction and reality with the goal of changing the parameters of reality itself. Mary Shelley teaches us to read the Byronic figure with suspicion so as to preserve fiction as separate from reality, even as fiction teaches us lessons about how that reality is structured. It is not a coincidence that the best examples of framed narration in the nineteenth century (*Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Heart of Darkness*) are novels that engage with the legacy of the Byronic hero.

If we understand Walton as Victor 2.0, we can see that the generational plot enables a do-over narrative in which one generation lives out and recoups the "might have been" of another, learning from past mistakes and dissolving revolutionary energies. This is a structural solution to a radical problem in which the present redeems the past, and it is necessarily backward looking as it settles the past into place and creates continuous narrative. This splitting technique works through time and across generations, laterally (siblings and doubles that trigger the optative of lives not led), and structurally in nested tales that allow echoes of

plot and character to reverberate across narrative frames. We will see it reverberate across the century in the Victorian examples to come.

Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*

When critics discuss Romantic ideology in Victorian novels, they often reduce Romanticism either to those characteristics that are tied to the expressivist lyric or to a single character, the Byronic/Satanic hero. Both moves obscure the influence of Romantic poetry on the structural make-up of the novel as genre. As we saw in this book's introduction, critical habit has divided the field of experience to read lyric and narrative as incommensurate, with lyric poetry represented as subjective-kairotic-ideal and narrative as objective-chronological-real. Because Byron lost the battle for literary hegemony and was instead turned into a stick figure—a set of Romantic characteristics divorced from the structural and generic problems Byron raised for both the novel and the lyric at the start of the nineteenth century—his influence can be hard to see.

When it comes to visionary experience, transcendence supposedly disrupts narrative through "lyric's *kairos*—the capture of the instant of ecstatic intensity."[7] But narratives easily accommodate, even require, such moments of transcendence, which Kermode terms the *aevum* and calls "the time-order of novels" (72). Kermode makes it clear that what we see here is a reformulation of Augustinian conversion narrative for the purpose of narrative and personal biography. In the Victorian period, the more common version of this narrative has us return from the moment of revelation or simply of intense personal feeling to a yet greater commitment to action in this world, a conversion narrative perhaps most influentially instantiated for the Victorians, not by a novel, but by Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, and in exact opposition to Byron: "Close thy *Byron*; open thy *Goethe*,"[8] Carlyle exhorts. As he continues,

> The Situation that has not its Duty, its Ideal, was never yet occupied by man. Yes here, in this poor, miserable, hampered, despicable Actual, wherein thou even now standest, here or nowhere is thy Ideal: work it out therefrom; and working, believe, live, be free. (260)

What is significant is the temporal signature of Carlyle's negotiation with the eternal, which perfectly exemplifies the subordination of Augustinian conversion to a single cause-and-effect narrative of the self, with Byron as the excluded middle,

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[7] Markovits, "Verse Novel," which we quoted in this book's introduction.
[8] Quotations from *Sartor Resartus* will be drawn from *A Carlyle Reader*, edited by G. B. Tennyson. Subsequent references to *Sartor Resartus* will be given in parentheses. This quotation is from page 257.

what the subject must get over. What remains is a subdued call simply to do your duty.[9]

Carlyle thus influentially counters a Byronic approach to the act-event, substituting, especially in the Augustinian conversion narrative of *Sartor Resartus*, a Wordsworthian for a Byronic approach to vision and action.[10] Jay Clayton, in *Romantic Vision and the Novel*, helpfully lays out the narrative logic of Wordsworth's approach to visionary experience:[11]

> Wordsworth's method of writing about visionary experience, then, inevitably results in a dialectic of narrative and vision. A first order (of events, of external images) comes to seem alien or other; it is interrupted, during a visionary moment, by an assertion of the poet's self; after this interruption, a new, "higher" narrative is begun, one which represents a synthesis of self and other, the first story and the power that disrupted it. As a textual event, this process appears as a threshold, for only the first and the last stages make their way into words. The middle term, the actual moment of transcendence, is unrepresentable. It appears as the liminal barrier itself, the gap between the two narrative orders, and its existence is discovered only in the crossing. Psychologically, this movement may be viewed as a form of sublimation; philosophically, as a version of humanism. (17–18)[12]

We can see why this Wordsworthian conversion narrative would be attractive to Carlyle since it allows him to contain Byron's trenchant critique of the present,

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[9] We concentrate on Carlyle's casting out of Byron here, given the concern in this chapter with Victorian literature's response to Byron's *Don Juan*, which, we argue, proposes a model of temporality that was particularly influential on Barrett Browning and, through Barrett Browning, Robert Browning. We should make clear, though, that other aspects of Carlyle's writing did influence Barrett Browning, giving her (and other Victorian writers) alternative temporal models to counter the novel's cause-and-effect notion of temporality. For Carlyle, "Narrative is, by its nature, of only one dimension; only travels forward towards one, or towards successive points." As he adds, "Alas for our 'chains,' or chainlets, of 'causes and effect.'" By contrast, according to Carlyle, events in history are "simultaneous": "every single event is the offspring not of one, but of all other events prior or contemporaneous, and will in its turn combine with all others to give birth to new: it is an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements" (Carlyle, "On History," in *A Carlyle Reader*, edited by G. B. Tennyson, page 29). For a critical work that thinks through Carlyle's influence on Barrett Browning, with special attention to temporal structures, see Mary Mullen's "Two Clocks."

[10] Another influential model is John Stuart Mill, who famously stated in his autobiography that, after contemplating suicide, he was able to return to his life's work by reading Wordsworth.

[11] See Sue Zemka's *Time and the Moment* 134–46 for an investigation of the relationship between a Wordsworthian spot of time and the novel's form of temporality, especially as developed by George Eliot: "Eliot imparts a proleptic quality to the 'moment's stroke' of a 'baptism of fire' in the same way that Wordsworth does to 'spots of time.' She either relates the shocking event so as to indicate that her character will remember it long after, or she relates her character remembering the event as decisive for the person they have become" (137). Like Andrew H. Miller, Zemka aligns with Kierkegaard this new way of thinking about temporality and the subject (see especially 145–6).

[12] Jay Clayton, *Romantic Vision and the Novel*, 17–18. This same mechanism is explored by Thomas Weiskel in *The Romantic Sublime* and by Geoffrey Hartman in the "Via Naturaliter Negativa" chapter of *Wordsworth's Poetry* (31–69).

which in *Sartor Resartus* becomes the occluded visionary moment recast as dark night of the soul. Carlyle can thus reject Byron's insistence on a revolutionary relation to the present in favor of an ideology of work and duty.

Byron's call to break with the current order in pursuit of militant, revolutionary action becomes in Carlyle dutiful and habitual action in the present, a position that has its political analogue in reform vs. revolution. Edward Bulwer-Lytton puts it well, writing in 1833 at almost the same time Carlyle was serializing *Sartor Resartus* in *Fraser's Magazine* (November 1833–August 1834):

> we awoke from the morbid, the passionate, the dreaming, "the moonlight and the dimness of the mind," and by a natural reaction addressed ourselves to the active and daily objects which lay before us. . . . Hence that strong attachment to the Practical, which became so visible a little time after the death of Byron, and which continues (unabated, or rather increased) to characterize the temper of the time. Insensibly acted upon by the doctrine of the Utilitarians, we desired to see Utility in every branch of intellectual labour. . . . Politics thus gradually and commonly absorbed our attention, and we grew to identify ourselves, our feelings, and our cause, with statesmen and economists, instead of with poets and refiners. . . . [A]nd the interest usually devoted to the imaginative, was transferred to the real.[13]

Like so many Victorians after him, Bulwer-Lytton connects Byron's poetic sensibility with adolescence here, thus subordinating Byron's temporal stance of the future anterior to the *bildungsroman* of a single life. Mentioning that Byron's melancholic "habit of mind, so unfortunate to the possessor, is not unfavourable to poetry," Bulwer-Lytton explains that "after a certain age we grow out of it; the soul becomes accustomed to the mill, and follows the track mechanically, which it commenced in disgust."[14]

Benjamin Disraeli's *Venetia*

Benjamin Disraeli, along with his good friend Bulwer-Lytton, fell under the potent spell of Byron, and nowhere more so than in their respective novels, where, as Andrew Elfenbein has shown, both authors work through their fascination with Byronic Romanticism to arrive at something characterized as a more "mature" (less queer) Victorianism.[15] While Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton clearly work to reform the sexual dangers perceived in the Byronic legacy, their transformation of Byron's political legacy had equally important—if not unconnected—effects. For

[13] Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, II.72–3.
[14] Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, I.109.
[15] Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, Chapter Six.

Victorian authors who wished to enter Parliament and influence public opinion, as both Bulwer-Lytton and Disraeli went on to do, Byromania was a potentially dangerous preoccupation, particularly after the radical unrest in England from 1816 to 1820.[16] Yet both authors turned to Byron in their novels to formulate their own understanding of political agency and historical change. Both salvage from Byronism its political momentum and press it into the service of the Victorian novel and state in a way that quells the radical potential of the revolutionary event we theorized in Chapter Three.

When Victorian novels address Byron, usually by way of some analog in a novel's roster of characters, the de rigueur representation of sexuality and perversity is often the obverse of a discussion about politics and class. Indeed, bodily or mental perversity serves as an easy way to dismiss what is represented in the novels themselves as the threat of Byron's radical ideology. Elfenbein has argued that, for both Bulwer-Lytton and Disraeli, suspicions about queerness "functioned as a cover, only not for their 'true' sexuality. Rather, reproducing the open secret of Byronism allowed them to keep in the closet not fascinating sexual secrets but the more banal ones of their social positions";[17] that is, Bulwer-Lytton was poor and Disraeli a Jew. We do not disagree, but we wonder if the pose of the laughable coxcomb which, for example, Pelham adopts to hide his real political ambitions, does not also deflect a much less banal fear—the fear of radical unrest that was behind the impetus for and restraints placed on the Reform Bill of 1832.

We can make this argument about *Pelham*, but we will concentrate here on Disraeli's *Venetia* (1837), which, in its tale of Romantic geniuses and the women that love them offers a blueprint for the domestication of Byron's transnational energies, the "fixing" of his radicalism and mobility as and by domestic service. The plot does much of the work: Venetia Herbert is raised in seclusion by her mother, Lady Annabel Herbert, who has separated from Venetia's father—the poet, libertine, and radical Member of Parliament, Marmion Herbert. Marmion, who is named by Disraeli as Percy Shelley but is even more clearly a figure for Byron, follows his political convictions to America, where he backs the rebels and becomes a traitor to England, and from which he returns to melancholic exile in various European countries. Venetia falls in love with another Byronic figure, Lord Plantagenet Cadurcis, who himself becomes a famous poet, libertine, radical Member of Parliament, and melancholic exile. (He also owns an exotic menagerie, popularizes orientalism, receives cross-dressed visits from aristocratic female fans, and is praised for his dark beauty.) The four meet in Italy, where Annabel and Marmion Herbert are reunited, Venetia and Lord Cadurcis renew their love, and the two poets die together while sailing an open boat in a freak Mediterranean storm,

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[16] On the significance of this period for radical unrest, see, for example, James Chandler's *England in 1819*.

[17] Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, 217.

which leaves Venetia free to marry the next Lord Cadurcis, Plantagenet's cousin and reformist Member of Parliament, George.

Essentially, *Venetia* is a novel about the dangers of loving Byron. The heroine, who adores her Byronic father and only learns to adore her Byronic lover *after* he models himself on her father, spends much of the novel's four hundred pages in a brain fever. Both Byrons also suffer from excessive feeling. Their melancholic worldliness—figured by sarcasm, radical politics, and relentless travel—is not the egotistical cynicism it appears to be but the wounded response of exquisite sensibility to the pains of romantic and political rejection. Raw English nerves masked as disdainful cosmopolitans, these Byrons travel the world but ultimately seek only to rest on English soil and in English arms. *They care too much* and, like both Romantic geniuses and Victorian heroines, must learn to discipline their passion or die trying. The book's third Byronic figure—George, Lord Cadurcis—is short on Romantic genius but long on Victorian discipline. A man of the world, he has the open liberality of one who has traveled widely, but he replaces the high-strung sympathies of his cousin with good English common sense. He is well liked, effective if not spectacular in Parliament, and a proponent not of revolution but reform.

Disraeli claims in his opening dedication to Lord Lyndhurst that he has in his novel "attempted to shadow forth, though as 'in a glass darkly,' two of the most renowned and refined spirits that have adorned these our latter days."[18] He means Byron (Lord Plantagenet Cadurcis) and Shelley (who appears to be shadowed forth in the character of Marmion Herbert). However, what we are given is the splitting of Byron into two characters, a common strategy when novelists address Byron's political legacy. Why the split? Plantagenet Cadurcis embodies the Byron represented in the period either as a coxcomb or an invalid, driven to perversity by the "constitutional principle of melancholy" (80) that inspires and is intimately associated with his poetry. ("How melancholy! Quite the poet" [217].) In response to a principle of melancholy that in Byron is structurally connected to both his ethics and radicalism, such a representation reduces him to "the spoiled child of society; a forward and petted darling" (223–4). The philosophy in Cadurcis' poetry, which is repeatedly associated in *Venetia* with the danger of revolution, is dismissed as either insincere, borrowed from Marmion without proper understanding, or a product of his "absorbing egotism" (195). Marmion Herbert, on the other hand, represents those aspects of Byron's character that were properly inspiring and revolutionary. The number of deflections required to represent this side of Byron's character attests to the delicacy of the political subject matter, even in 1837. First, Disraeli names this side of Byron's legacy Shelley, even though the most important details of Marmion Herbert's life work through the most incendiary aspects of Byron's career—unlike Byron, Shelley did not himself

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[18] Disraeli, *Venetia*. Subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses.

join a revolutionary fight.[19] Second, he relocates Byron temporally and spatially to the period of the American Revolution, where he raises a regiment for the American republic and is hailed as a hero. Third, Disraeli represents this Byron as growing old and weary of his political struggles, turning away from poetry and philosophy and returning to Lady Byron. His "illusions had all vanished," Disraeli writes, "and the result of all his profound study, lofty aspirations, and great conduct was, that he sighed for rest" (302). Plantagenet Cadurcis similarly rejects his earlier idealism and trades politics for the love of Venetia before he heads off with his doppelgänger in an open boat.

Disraeli is thus able to leave both Parliament and Venetia to George, a proper Tory who, "without a single advantage save those that nature had conferred upon him" (281), manages to succeed at the House of Commons whereas Plantagenet failed at the House of Lords: "Of all the members of the House of Commons he was perhaps the only one that everybody praised, and his success in the world of fashion had been as remarkable as in his profession" (281). We are presented with the triumph of conservative, masculine, heterosexual, Tory-led reform that enacts allegorically Disraeli's own need to reform the radical Whig tradition that preceded him.

The generational and romantic allegory in which two dangerously Byronic figures who turn their backs on England are replaced by a third who returns home to run and reform it suggests how *Venetia* wants the reader to feel about Byronic cosmopolitanism and political action. The unrooted version, tied to aristocratic privilege and passionate excess, is no model at all, for it is never properly selfless or detached; its apparent disinterest is truly ungoverned interest, patriotic and idealist fervor gone bad and transcontinental. The cured version, on the other hand, brings home a sympathy forged by contact with others and in which bitterness and selfish interest take no part. George Cadurcis is a self-made man who accepts his title and lands only after having sailed the world in service to the crown and making his name as a popular Tory politician in the House of Commons, a man of the people much more fully than his radical cousin ever was. As proof of this, it is George who saves Plantagenet from an angry English mob that tries to tear him limb from limb.

It is worth taking a moment to unpack this remarkable scene, where Disraeli works out on the level of plot the victory of Tory reform over both the lower-class mob and any upper-class radical who has pretensions to lead them to revolution.

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[19] In *Venetia*, Marmion Herbert marries Annabel Sidney just as Byron married Annabel Milbanke; he falls out of love during her pregnancy; and Annabel declares that "circumstances had occurred which rendered it quite impossible that she could live with Mr. Herbert any longer" (187). The reason for the separation remains a "mystery" (187) in the novel, as it did in Byron's divorce proceedings, though it nonetheless serves to convince the world that Herbert is "the most depraved of men" (187). Marmion Herbert leaves England for Switzerland, leaving behind his daughter Venetia just as Byron left behind Ada Byron, the "child of love, though born in bitterness" that Disraeli directly points to in the two epigraphs from Byron that start his novel.

Like Marmion Herbert, Cadurcis is forced to leave England, though the reason in his case is a duel fought because of Lady Monteagle, a thinly veiled analog for Lady Caroline Lamb. The public has a "fit of morality" (267) and turns against him outside the House of Lords. Cadurcis rides alone into the crowd and is attacked. While the members of the House of Lords look on helplessly, awaiting the military, Captain George Cadurcis and fellow members of the House of Commons save Cadurcis:

> they mounted their horses and charged the nearly-triumphant populace, dealing such vigorous blows that their efforts soon made a visible diversion in Lord Cadurcis' favor. It is difficult, indeed, to convey an idea of the exertions and achievements of Captain Cadurcis; no Paladin of chivalry ever executed such marvels on a swarm of Paynim slaves; and many a bloody coxcomb and broken limb bore witness in Petty France that night to his achievements. (270–1)

Once the Horse Guards arrive, "everybody ran away, and in a few minutes all Palace-yard was as still as if the genius of the place rendered a riot impossible" (271).

Instead of the revolutionary mob that the periodical reviews of the 1820s imagined Byron leading, we have instead the mob turning against a vain, ineffectual Byron. Instead of an overturning of the British parliament, we have Byron saved by the chivalrous members of the House of Commons exerting violence on the rebelling lower and middle classes not of France but the "Petty France" of Westminster. Instead of the commanding genius of Byron instilling revolution, we have the "genius of the place" rendering revolution "impossible." As he confesses to Venetia before his marriage proposal, George is neither a genius nor a great man. But he is a steady one, and through him the novel recasts the threat of disruptive revolutionary action as gradual, developmental reform from within the current order. This swap is clearly thematic, but it is also formal, enacting a familiar narrative of generational substitution and slow change precipitated by heroic action taken at the "defining moment."

George's heroic act brings him a different sort of fame from the cult of celebrity surrounding his genius cousin, the pet of society and finally its exiled pariah. The revolutionary politics of Plantagenet Cadurcis and Marmion Herbert put them beyond the pale of national action. They come home to England in urns, while Lord George comes home to a title, an abbey, a wife, a seat in Parliament, and the love of the nation. If *Venetia*, like other novels, is an answer, then the question is: how can Whiggish—even revolutionary—politics be put into service of the conservative state? How can global politics and people be brought home to England? On its way to something like Arnoldian liberalism, the early Victorian novel salvages from Romantic poets and poetry the sweetness and light of Continental experience without the taint of European revolution. The point is to learn to appreciate,

in fact to love, what is presented to the reader as a new status quo: not the wild Romantic genius of the revolutionary exile, but the dispassionate judgment of the Victorian reformer, schooled in the world but wedded to the domestic scene—a love that allows the conversion narrative to play out at a national scale.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

Perhaps the most famous example of the Victorian Byronic novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) repeats many of the strategies we have already seen for harnessing the radical energies of the Byronic figure—but it also gives rein to these energies in ways that explain why Brontë's novel has so often been considered an anomaly of sorts: "Romantic" instead of properly Victorian and more "poetic" than other novels.[20] What critics generally mean by this is that the treatment of "lyrical transcendence" and "visionary experience" in *Wuthering Heights* troubles their idea of the novelistic as defined against these things.[21] We have argued that transcendence is not only compatible with but also constituent for novelistic narrative, as for example in its guise as revelation, catastrophe, or closure. In this section, we want to think about how the desire for something beyond both propels narrative and exceeds its bounds, and we want to link this double action to the melancholic Byronic hero.

Byron's famous melancholy was not the toothless ennui that it was often portrayed as being (then and since), but a political stance that, as we saw in Chapter Three, pursues a principle of justice that eschews the limitations of chronological time, thus challenging two key tenets of novelistic time: developmental narrative (change over time/slow reform) and the cult of the "right moment." It is no coincidence that the models for the Byronic hero (Satan, Cain, Prometheus, the Wandering Jew, the vampire) are figures that cannot die and therefore appear to us without the anticipation of retrospection, the wait for a closure that will trace and cement a record of contingent narrative made inevitable by its ending. By offering a death plot for Byron, the novel commonly substituted a developmental narrative of Victorian mourning for the revolutionary persistence of a Byronic melancholy that refuses to let go of its lost object.

Heathcliff, of course, is the very model of the melancholic subject.[22] He suffers from "monomania" (277), as Lockwood puts it, because he cannot let go of his lost object of affection, Catherine. As Heathcliff tells Nelly Dean,

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[20] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*. Subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses.
[21] For example, Jay Clayton's *Romantic Vision and the Novel* takes up the issue of transcendence and romanticism in *Wuthering Heights*.
[22] He is also among the most well-known Byronic heroes in Victorian fiction. See especially Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, Chapter Four; E. B. Pinion, "Byron and *Wuthering Heights*"; and Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero*.

what is not connected with her to me? and what does not recall her? I cannot look down to this floor but her features are shaped on the flags! In every cloud, in every tree—filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object by day—I am surrounded with her image! The most ordinary faces of men, and women—my own features mock me with a resemblance. The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her! (277)

Heathcliff's obsessive love dwells in even as it occults loss, for it refuses the realistic movement of time that sheds possibilities: Catherine is still with him. This persistence of love after death is literalized in the novel's Gothic plot, which we will get to in a moment, but first it is essential to note how Heathcliff's melancholic attachment delinks the chronological chain of past–present–future: he has always loved her, loves her, will always love her. This is what is so "romantic" about his famously undying love—in all senses of romantic, including "anti-realistic," because it is never end-stopped by closure. Here is a moment for which it is never too late.

Indeed, if there is an "event" in the novel in the way we have been employing the idea as an effect that exceeds its cause, it is love. We might argue that Heathcliff himself is a human event—he emerges suddenly from outside the small world of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange with neither last name nor necessitating backstory, and reorders that world beyond recognition—but it would be better to say that the love between Heathcliff and Catherine is the "uncaused cause" of the story. To read *Wuthering Heights* as a transcendent love story, we must accept that their love simply *is*. Their love has no developmental narrative, dissolves both time ("My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath" [72]) and individual subjectivity ("I *am* Heathcliff" [72]; "it is unutterable! I *can not* live without my life! I *can not* live without my soul!" [146]) and takes the idea of the "right one" to its ontological breaking point. There are decisive moments in their shared story, which it should be noted are all tied to Catherine who, it could be argued, does develop after her earlier expressions of transcendent love—she leaves the Heights for the Grange, marries Edgar Linton, and dies—but these things that have such dramatic narrative effect do not alter what *Wuthering Heights* offers to the reader as the unshakeable bond of a love unbounded by subjectivity or death.

Heathcliff's melancholic attachment is felt in the novel as a generic tension between Gothic and realist elements. Long after the second generation of inhabitants at Wuthering Heights has begun an optative reboot, which ushers in the familiar narrative cure of Byronic disruption by way of moral and domestic reform, Heathcliff is still seeing ghosts. The Gothic aspects of *Wuthering Heights* need no rehearsal here, but we would well remember that past critics have connected the novel's ghosts with visionary Romanticism and sublime transcendence.[23] It is easy

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[23] See especially Clayton, *Romantic Vision and the Novel* on the novel's treatment of sublimity. On tensions between the Gothic and domestic registers of the novel and its framed tales, see Emily Rena-Dozier, who argues that this tension troubled the novel's place in nineteenth-century literary histories

to see how the Gothic both drives plot (whose ghost is at the window? why is Heathcliff so broody?) and resists it. The two streams meet at the end of the novel, when Heathcliff's revenge plot—a recursive drive that propels the second half of the narrative—grinds down before it can reach closure, stilled by the "unearthly vision" of Catherine and the promise of their reunion. As Heathcliff himself offers by way of narrative critique,

> "It is a poor conclusion, is it not? . . . [A]n absurd termination to my violent exer-tions? I get levers and mattocks to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be capable of working like Hercules, and when everything is ready and in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished! My old enemies have not beaten me; now would be the precise time to revenge myself on their representatives: I could do it; and none could hinder me. But where is the use? I don't care for striking: I can't take the trouble to raise my hand!" (276)

Heathcliff makes clear that he has not changed or reformed; but here at the "precise time," he cannot be bothered to act. Another chronology beckons, one without a "right time" because without definite closure. He describes his approach to Cather-ine as the long slow down before an unreachable event horizon: "It was a strange way of killing, not by inches, but by fractions of hairbreadths" (249). As Heathcliff tells it, Catherine is his "universal idea," his goal, and personal vanishing point: "I have a single wish, and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it. They have yearned towards it so long, and so unwaveringly, that I'm convinced it will be reached—and soon—because it has devoured my existence: I am swallowed up in the anticipation of its fulfilment" (278). Here, death is figured precisely as narrative closure.

The most interesting thing about Heathcliff's story, however, is that death is not the end of it. After he dies, the main narrative of *Wuthering Heights* shifts gears to dynamic character reform on its way to realistic, marital closure. The second generation of characters, Hareton Earnshaw (Heathcliff's replacement and "son") and Cathy Linton Heathcliff (Catherine's daughter) are creatures of time—they change and grow. The generational story thus engages the counterfactual, as what might have been between Heathcliff and Catherine is played out in more realistic and Victorian terms by their children, who fall in love during scenes of tutored reading that will be familiar to any reader of Victorian novels as the sign of moral re-education and domesticated eros.[24] But the Gothic plot of eternal love persists in their parents, and Catherine and Heathcliff are said by the locals to walk the earth as undying spirits. The novel thus gives us two generic and temporal options for how to read it: Gothic (infinity without development or closure) and realistic

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because it disrupted critical narratives about the opposition of the two genres and the domesticating projects that opposition undergirded ("Gothic Criticisms").

[24] See Garrett Stewart's *Dear Reader* and *The Look of Reading* on how the "scene of reading" both depicts and enacts the tutoring of subjectivity.

(development through time marked and ensured by closure). The reader's choice is conditioned by the novel's formal technique, in which framed narratives teach us to be vigilant about the act of narration. Lockwood, the narrator of the outer frame who relays the inset tale told to him by Nelly, is a notoriously bad reader who is unable to interpret the events before him properly and blunders his way through the novel. Nelly is biased and self-interested. Indeed, the entire narrational structure of *Wuthering Heights* warns us off uncritical reading.

To the extent that the novel tutors us on how to read both realism and its own ending—over and against the "idle tales" of the villagers who see the undying Heathcliff and Catherine roaming the moors—it also invites us to read against Lockwood, who has never understood any part of the story and completes the novel standing at the shared gravesite of Catherine and Heathcliff and wondering "how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth" (288). Since virtually everyone who has ever read *Wuthering Heights* can imagine such a thing, which has been key to the novel's enduring romantic appeal, Lockwood's final lines leave the door open to restless infinity. The narrative frames thus allow for the flickering of generic aspect that we will tie to larger problems of form in Part Three. For now, it is enough to register that the verse-novel is not the only genre that makes use of its own hybridity for narrative effect.

Our point here is not to reinscribe the separation of lyric transcendence and narrative momentum or to suggest that *Wuthering Heights* is a Romantic or poetic novel because it contains moments of transcendence. Novels do contain moments of transcendence. Our claim is that the melancholy of its Byronic hero takes formal as well as psychological shape—or, rather, that it structures a version of time–action–character that pulls against the developmental momentum and dynamic character of realist time. What feels remarkable about *Wuthering Heights* is that it does not fully reintegrate event into narrative. Heathcliff may not be a revolutionary on the Byronic model, and his melancholic dissatisfaction may not produce systemic change—indeed, he dismantles the novel's patriarchal system only to re-establish it with himself as head—but he presents us with a surplus that closure does not fully erase.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864)

We have argued that the narratively significant closural moment of death is crucial for the novel's structural approach to the triumvirate of time–action–character, which invites us to read backward from the moment of death to a narrative laid out as inevitably arising from choices that both express and cement character. Byron approached death (and catastrophe) quite differently, offering a formally different understanding of the act-event in which we leap forward into the future instead

of looking back at the past. We think it significant, then, that so many Victorian novels stage Byron's death over and over.

These novels treat Byron and Byronic politics as lost Romantic objects—lost, so they can be mourned and retrieved in altered form. This mourning-work transforms the insistent melancholy that drives the revolutionary potential of Byron's future-anterior approach. Byronism lingers for Victorians in significant ways: politically as the globalism or radicalism of the Whig cosmopolitan who threatens revolution; ontologically as a theatrical, Satanic hero who resists narrative development and breaks down the separation between fiction and reality; and formally as poetic drive released from the dictates of closure. In staging the funeral of fictional Byrons, novels reform Byronism as middle-class moral engagement, naturalized bourgeois subjectivity, and realistic, often domestic, narrative—some more successfully than others. The ideal Victorian Byron is therefore both dead and alive, ready to be killed in iterations repeated across the century. Byron lends himself to this treatment because of his own peculiar relationship to death and to the dead, a melancholy unwillingness to let go of the lost object that is closely bound to his understanding of revolution.

What did Victorian readers get out of experiencing Byron's death? What perspectives would the dead and undying form of Byron open for the reader? Our test case in this section is an 1864 novel by Mary Elizabeth Braddon about a novel reader obsessed with the death of Byron that offers an extended engagement with the lost Romantic object and extracts from that engagement a refined Victorian subjectivity and a clarified domestic realism. A testimony to the power of fiction and the transformative potential of fictionalized death, the novel reframes Byron's loss as the reader's gain. *The Doctor's Wife* is paradigmatic in that it does not just happen to kill Byron; it is driven to it by its own fictional and political investments. Killing Byron activates the potential of his figure for the Victorian novel and makes him immortal—but only in the instant of his own death[25] and only insofar as it allows the reader to close her Byron once and for all.

Braddon's heroine, Isabel Gilbert, closes her Byron only after total enthrallment to it. Isabel, the titular doctor's wife and a consumptive reader of both Romantic

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[25] Byron thus anticipates the impossibly doubled perspective of Maurice Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death*: "'I am alive. No, you are dead.'" Blanchot recounts the experience of almost being executed that gave him "a feeling of extraordinary lightness, a sort of beatitude (nothing happy, however)—sovereign elation? The encounter of death with death?" (5). As he describes it in third person, inserting a first-person narrator between himself and his own experience, "In his place, I will not try to analyze. He was perhaps suddenly invincible. Dead—immortal. Perhaps ecstasy. Rather the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity, the happiness of not being immortal or eternal" (5). Derrida ties this passage to Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, where Blanchot refers to "an Impossible necessary death" as the "unexperienced experience" (Blanchot, *Instant* 47). As Derrida writes of this phrase, "Whoever does not try to think and read the part of fiction and thus of literature in such a phrase *in even the most authentic testimony* will not have begun to read or hear Blanchot" (Blanchot, *Instant* 47). Reading fiction is a way of having the unexperienced experience, but a problem arises when we cannot distinguish between authentic and false testimony, truth and lying, or reality and fiction—which, according to Derrida, on a basic, structural level, we cannot.

poetry and Victorian novels, nurses a fantasy of being with Byron at his deathbed, living in the imagined moment of his imminent loss: "She carried her ideal world wherever she went, and was tending delirious Byron at Missolonghi . . . while the shop-man slapped the butter on the scale."[26] Isabel's Byron is always on the brink of death, and when she meets a writer of Byronic verses, Roland Landsell, she naturally expects him to die. Roland is a "splendid Byronic creature" (138), "Byron alive again" (139), who exhibits "ennui" (127) and "morbid melancholy" (144), and who "suffered from a milder form of that disease in a wild paroxysm of which [. . .] Byron horrified society with *Don Juan*" (150). At the start of the novel, Lansdell travels in the wrong direction and returns from Greece, where he has been "upon a Byronic kind of tour" to ease or indulge the symptoms of a "noxious disease of our time, the fatal cynicism that transforms youth into a malady for which age is the only cure" (85).

From Isabel's adoring perspective, Roland is "A real poet, a real, living, breathing poet, who only wanted to lame himself and turn his collars down to become a Byron" (136). He (almost) seduces Isabel away from her husband, ruins her reputation, and fills her every thought: "She knew nothing, she thought nothing, except that a modern Lord Byron was walking by her side" (139). Roland intends to die early and imagines that death will come as a relief from his ennui, failed radical political career, self-imposed exile, and disaffected Byronic poetry, which the novel quotes at some length. "I do *not* consider long life to be an advantage," he says, "unless one can be warm and young forever" (176). This makes sense to Isabel: "Of course he would die young; Beings always have so died, and always must. [. . .] It would be almost better that he should break a blood vessel, or catch a fever, or commit suicide, than that he should ever live to have grey hair, or wear spectacles and double-soled boots" (176).

First, though, the novel must dispatch Isabel's husband so the heroine's education can happen in the space between two deaths and as a function of their difference. George Gilbert dies slowly, of typhoid. Isabel thus gets her wish to attend the deathbed of a George who loves her. But she is repulsed by George's death, the reality of which she cannot grasp: "She needed the doctor's solemn assurance that her husband was really dead before she could bring herself to believe that the white swoon, the chill heaviness of the passive hand, did indeed mean death" (369). Death presents Isabel with a representational crisis, and she imagines the preferable experience of second-hand death buffered by text:

> [I]t was so horrible to her to know that he was there—near her—what he was. She thought that it would have been much easier for her to bear this calamity if her husband had gone away, far away from her, and only a letter had come to tell her

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[26] Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*, 29. Subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses.

he was dead. She fancied herself receiving the letter, and wondering at its black-edged border. The shock would have been very dreadful; but not so horrible as the knowledge that George Gilbert was in that house, and yet there was no George Gilbert. (369)

George's real body turns inside out the equation of death and immortality; his is not an absent presence but a present absence—a *what*, not a who—and Isabel experiences it as abjection.

Isabel turns from George's deathbed to Roland's, and the scene is much more literary. Roland has a deathbed conversion away from Byronism and toward Carlyle, Tennyson, and Christ, leaving his Romanticism for what the novel portrays as adult Victorianism. Between lines of *In Memoriam*, Roland begs Isabel's forgiveness and asks her to "remember my wasted life" if ever "you should find yourself with the means of doing great good, of being useful to your fellow creatures" (391). Isabel leaves to pray for Roland's recovery, and when she returns hears a "low, convulsive sobbing" and sees a woman's form prostrate at the foot of a bed that is otherwise screened from view (395). Isabel begs to see Roland but is told "never upon this earth anymore! You must think of him as something infinitely better and brighter than you ever knew him here" (395). This, Isabel understands: "She had no need of plainer words to tell her he was dead. She felt the ground reel suddenly beneath her feet, and saw the gradual rising of a misty darkness that shut out the world, and closed about her like the silent waters through which a drowning man goes down to death" (395).

Isabel experiences Roland's death as her own because she has a fictional relationship to it. She hears another's sobs, sees another's grief, and misses altogether the moment of death and the view of the body. She can, in other words, experience this death more fully—and more productively—because vicariously. This is how Romantic poets are supposed to die, supposed always already to have died, and Isabel can draw from this unexperienced experience the elixir of a compensatory Victorianism. She takes Roland's money and place as local patron, and she becomes the reformed Romantic that Roland might have been, had he lived. Which is to say that Roland's deathbed conversion happens *to her*, its witness, and as optative recovery narrative. Where once Isabel "sighed to sit at the feet of a Byron, grand and gloomy and discontented, baring his white brow to the midnight blast, and raving against the baseness and ingratitude of mankind" (72), she now builds model cottages on Roland's ancestral land and becomes herself a model of charitable engagement and engaged, compassionate subjectivity: "Isabel's foolish youth is separated from her wise womanhood by a barrier that is formed by two graves." The novel poses what feels like its thesis as a question: "Is it strange, then, that the chastening influence of sorrow has transformed a sentimental girl into a good and noble woman—a woman in whom sentiment takes the higher form of universal sympathy and tenderness?" (402–3).

Much more simply and completely than in *Wuthering Heights*, *The Doctor's Wife* substitutes a developmental narrative of Victorian mourning for the revolutionary persistence of a Byronic melancholy that refuses to let go of its lost object. Isabel Gilbert believes for much of the novel that she is doomed to die young, but she is in fact called to life, adulthood, and philanthropic, rather than revolutionary, action by the death of her modern Byron. She closes her books, accepts her duty, and gets to work.

The frequently rehearsed death of Byron in the Victorian novel performs a formal sublation that makes possible *bildung* itself. Byron thus occupies an inflection point that allows the novel to imagine interiority and the development of the self beyond what is characterized as an adolescent Romanticism. Victorian writers laid claim to the positive aspects of Byron's politics—his belief in values beyond self or class interest; his cosmopolitan willingness to condemn nationalism and imperialism; his melancholic fixation over the site of trauma and ruination—in a way that supported a narrative of *bildung*: the self-made bourgeois subject overcoming and moving beyond the dark night of the soul on the personal level; progress and reform overcoming class antagonism on the national level. The problem with the heroic Byron who pursues a melancholy, future-anterior concept of justice outside of the novel's form of temporality is not only that he did not follow a developmental narrative but also that he appeared a figure who could not die. In imagining Byron's death, the Victorians counter the undead principle of justice and revolution that in Byron's poetry resists narrative, history, progress, evolution, closure, and bourgeois subjectivity.

George Eliot's *Felix Holt*

We will finish by addressing a last novel about revolutionary Romanticism—this one centered on a working-class riot and written by the master of Victorian realism. Published in 1866, the year before the passage of the Second Reform Bill, and set in 1832–3, immediately following the passage of the first one, George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* can be read as an extended essay on Byron and his revolutionary legacy for the Victorian novel. Once again, Byron is split into two: the idealism of his poetry, which the heroine Esther Lyon must learn to reject to become a responsible citizen, wife, and mother; and the skepticism of his politics, which is represented by the thinly veiled analog for Byron, would-be Radical member of parliament, Harold Transome, whom Esther must also reject. As in other novels about Byron, this one is structured around a marital choice that swaps out a radical with a reformer and that maps onto its love plot a narrative of personal and national development. But what interests us most is the way Eliot links fictional technique to a politics of slow reform as it directs our duty to the present and an inevitable future reached through a tight sequence of cause and effect.

Eliot's ideology of duty—linked always to her theorization of sympathy as the path toward an ethical and communal life—legitimizes bourgeois ideology while disposing of both the radicalism of the lower classes and the chivalric pretensions of the aristocracy.[27] The figure of Byron bolsters the middle because he represents at once the aristocratic/upper and the radical/lower class in a way that outlines the boundary on either side. Harold is the key character for this aspect of the Byronic legacy. A Hookah-smoking, "Oriental" aristocrat, he has recently returned from a long stay in Greece to enter politics on the radical side, thus fulfilling Byron's promise that, if ever the Radical side organized itself, he would come back to England to lead the opposition.[28] As with much of the rhetoric directed at Byron before and after his death, Harold represents the ineptitude of aristocratic claims to radical politics.[29] Through him, Eliot not only illustrates the dual attraction and threat that the public and newspapers perceived in Byron and the other "Liberal aristocrats" (291) he imitated and then inspired but also advertises the ability of fiction to issue less biased, more accurate judgment: "Harold Transome was neither the dissolute cosmopolitan so vigorously sketched by the Tory *Herald*, nor the intellectual giant and moral lobster suggested by the liberal imagination of the *Watchman*" (109). The narrator describes Harold as a character who

> was a clever, frank, good-natured egoist; not stringently consistent, but without any disposition to falsity; proud, but with a pride that was moulded in an individual rather than an hereditary form; unspeculative, unsentimental, unsympathetic; fond of sensual pleasures, but disinclined to all vice, and attached as a healthy, clear-sighted person, to all conventional morality, construed with a certain freedom, like doctrinal articles to which the public order may require subscription. (109)

To counter the exaggerated and simplistic claims from both sides of the political spectrum, Eliot paints her Harold in the detailed, discriminating, and measured

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[27] Discussions of sympathy and its relation to ethics run through Eliot criticism. We have found Rae Greiner's work, *Sympathetic Realism*, to be especially helpful.

[28] Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 108. Subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses. Harold is also compared to Sir Francis Burdett, one of Byron's only friends and supporters during his brief time in the House of Lords (on pages 18 and 291).

[29] In an unsigned review of *Childe Harold III*, for example, Scott stated of Byron's politics, "The frenzy which makes individuals of birth and education hold a language as if they could be willing to risk the destruction of their native country, and all the horrors of a civil war, is not so easily accounted for. To believe that these persons would accelerate a desolation in which they themselves directly, or through their nearest and dearest connections, must widely share, merely to remove an obnoxious minister, would be to form a hasty and perhaps a false judgment of them. The truth seems to be, that the English, even those from whom better things might be expected, are born to be the dupes of jugglers and mountebanks in all professions" (Reiman, *Romantics Reviewed*, V.2056). This recasting of Byron's radical beliefs as the result of whim or perverse influence remained common throughout the nineteenth century, as we saw in Disraeli.

strokes of fictional realism, which Eliot portrays as having special purchase on the truth and its representation.[30]

Much has been written about how Eliot's particular strain of novelistic realism secures its reality effects by allowing for, even emphasizing, its fictionality.[31] *Felix Holt* is no exception, but the political efficacy of the approach is perhaps best illustrated by taking a leap forward, out of the novel and into its future, when, in January 1868, Eliot would publish as the leading article of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* a piece called "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt." Eliot wrote it at the request of John Blackwood, who so admired Byromaniac-turned-politician Benjamin Disraeli's speech vindicating the 1867 passage of the Second Reform Bill that he asked Eliot to help educate working men on their new political responsibilities. The earnestness of the piece is striking, and we can read it as her answer to Byron: not truth is stranger than fiction, but fiction is truer than mere fact.

"Felix" begins the address by calling attention to his own plain speaking and by rejecting the complimentary puffery of political speech: he will not tell working-class men that they are better or wiser than the ruling classes. He asks them to consider themselves truthfully, for "If we have the beginning of wisdom, which is, to know a little truth about ourselves, we know that as a body we are neither very wise nor very virtuous."[32] This conflation of wisdom (truthful representation) and virtue (ethical action) is key to this address—and to Eliot's fictional method overall.[33] Referring directly to the plot of *Felix Holt*, Eliot has Felix proceed from that "experience" to a *universal* truth claim about politics: "After the Reform Bill of 1832 I was in an election riot, which showed me clearly, on a small scale, what public disorder *must always be*" (6; emphasis ours). Fictional events, even as they are acknowledged as fictional, teach us about reality and the path to ethical action. This slide is what allows Eliot to begin with fiction and end with an appeal to put "power in the hands of the wisest, which means to get our life regulated according to the truest principles mankind is in possession of" (11).

In tutoring working-class men in the "heavy responsibility" (2) of wielding political power, Eliot/Felix emphasizes how easy and disastrous it is to choose wrongly,

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[30] The fine grain of Eliot's description is one of her signature formal techniques. See, for example, James Buzard, "How George Eliot Works" on how fine, local description meets generalizable principles in the tight weave of her realism.

[31] For a classic work on Eliot's realism effects and their connection to politics, see Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, which discusses *Felix Holt* alongside other nineteenth-century industrial novels. As Gallagher writes of these novels, "Even as they probe the contested assumptions of their medium, they try to insist that their fictions are unmediated presentations of social reality" (xii). On *Felix Holt*, see especially 137–52. Eliot, along with other novelists, seeks to claim truth for fiction itself precisely by highlighting fiction's fictionality: "The strategy of insisting on the mere representationalism of the work is to some degree always a strategy of asserting relative autonomy. It is a way of advertising the work as epiphenomenon in order to refocus on the phenomenon of representation itself" (249).

[32] Eliot, "Address to Working Men," 1. Subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses.

[33] It is also key to the novel's success as a narrative method for linking aesthetic and ideological registers, as Michael McKeon has argued and as we discuss in Chapter Three.

and how important it is to move slowly. As Felix explains, "I am a Radical; and, what is more, I am not a Radical with a title, or a French cook, or even an entrance into fine society. I expect great changes, and I desire them. But I don't expect them to come in a hurry" (7). Prosperity and well-being must be developed in a "well-judged patient process" not a "hurried snatching," and Felix puts the emphasis on procedure: "Can [working-class leaders] argue in favor of a particular change by showing us pretty closely how the change is likely to work?" (2). Essentially, Felix asks his fellow working men to *be realistic* about revolution, and it is hard to miss how he conflates aesthetic form (plain-speaking, truth-telling) with forms of political change, which are either "wise" and slow or "foolish" and abrupt. While the suffering of the working classes is "A mighty fact, physical and moral, which must enter into and shape the thoughts and actions of mankind" (10), it must be remedied through historical process and in light of the past and its structures, the "Supreme unalterable nature of things" (10).[34]

We are thus offered the particular form of cause-and-effect temporality that we have associated with the novel, one that insists upon order and sequence: "If the claims of the unendowed multitude of working men hold within them principles which must shape the future, it is not less true that the endowed classes, in their inheritance from the past, hold the precious material without which no worthy, noble future can be moulded" (10). As Eliot goes on, always in the voice of Felix, "Here again we have to submit ourselves to the law of inheritance" (10). The desire for militant action is recast as childish ignorance, which we must grow out of: "To discern between the evils that energy can remove and the evils that patience must bear, makes the difference between manliness and childishness, between good sense and folly" (11). Because all present choices condition the future of the nation and its children, "with all their tremendous possibilities," a full consideration of the optative pathways opened and constrained by our decisions is necessary. Felix warns: "Do anything which will throw the classes who hold the treasures of knowledge. . . . into the background, cause them to withdraw from public affairs, . . . and you do something as short-sighted as the acts of France and Spain" and "injure your own inheritance and the inheritance of your children" (8). The only wise and safe way forward is "not by any attempt to do away directly with actually existing class distinctions and advantages . . . but by the turning of Class Interests into Class Functions or duties" (5). That is, each to their own work in service of the common good. This sort of incremental reform that leaves basic systems in place is represented as organic national growth—"the wonderful, slow-growing system of things" (5)—and its assumption that "The nature of things in this world has

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[34] See John Kucich on how Eliot "modernizes" traditional organic ideology by allowing for an upward social mobility that leaves traditional social hierarchies in place. Kucich addresses both *Felix Holt* and Felix's *Blackwood's* address in "The 'Organic Appeal' in *Felix Holt*."

been determined for us beforehand" (6) clearly has a familiar narrative stamp: the end is a time before the beginning.

Eliot's "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt" applies narrative principles to political change—indeed, draws from fictional principles the very "unalterable nature of things." It also pulls "mighty fact" from what is both obviously and intentionally a fictional set up. In speaking through the fictional character of Felix, Eliot underlines not just the suspension of our disbelief but also our recognition that we only ever *temporarily* suspend our disbelief. We are invited, in other words, to perform the classic maneuver of psychoanalytical fetishism: I know very well that Felix is not real but nevertheless I will act as if a real Radical were speaking to me. In fact, we cannot help but be struck by the *separation* between the real Eliot and the fictional Felix, for when Eliot writes to working-class men about their political enfranchisement in the voice of her spokesman for the working class, she is neither working-class, male, nor able to vote. And yet, it is the very fact of Felix's fictionality that here allows Eliot to speak with all the force of conviction and truth. Aesthetic realism thus finds truth in the rhetorical power of fiction itself.

We should remind ourselves how very different this is from Byron's own procedure, which, as we saw in Chapter Three, drew its power from his conflation of real and fictional selves, its disruption of slow time building from past causes to necessary future effects, and its refusal of realism's triumvirate of time–action–character. It will come as no surprise, then, that when we return to *Felix Holt* from its own future, we see that its working-class hero and model for political engagement reclaims Byronic ideals (radicalism, deep feeling, and selfless sacrifice for others), while rejecting the accompanying revolutionary politics (extreme skepticism in all worldly forms of government, self-consciously stylized performativity, and melancholy dedication to justice). Felix has renounced wealth and dedicated himself to work for social justice; he feels the misery of the masses "like a splinter" in his mind. He declares, "I care for the people who live now and will not be living when the long-run comes. As it is, I prefer going shares with the unlucky." His care for them, however, takes the long-run course, and he urges his fellow workingmen to have patience:

> I hope we, or the children that come after us, will get plenty of political power some time. I tell everybody plainly, I hope there will be great changes, and that some time, whether we live to see it or not, men will have come to be ashamed of things they're proud of now. But I should like to convince you that votes would never give you political power worth having while things are as they are now, and that if you go the right way to work you may get power sooner without votes.

That "right way" is not to wield the "ignorant" and "wicked" power of revolution but to sway the public through moral behavior ("the greatest power under heaven is public opinion—the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honorable and what is shameful"). This is what Felix himself

tries to do when a drunken riot breaks out on election day and he attempts to lead the "dangerous mass" away from violent action and toward their better selves. He fails and is charged and convicted of manslaughter, but the reader pardons him even before the courts do because realistic narration gives us truer evidence of his ethical purpose, deep feeling, and selfless action than can be offered in a court of law.

Felix, then, is no Byron—so that he can be a better sort of political idealist. While Felix must allow that he is sometimes melancholy over the injustices of the world, he is careful to distinguish himself from the self-dramatizing Byronic version of the same:

> I don't think myself a fine fellow because I'm melancholy. I don't measure my force by the negations in me, and think my soul must be a mighty one because it is more given to idle suffering than to beneficent activity. That's what your favourite gentlemen do, of the Byronic-bilious style. (257)

Felix similarly sets himself apart from "gentlemen like your Rénés, who have no particular talent for the finite, but a general sense that the infinite is the right thing for them" (258). Rather than pine after the ideal and transcendent, which, despite the reference here to Chateaubriand, is in *Felix Holt* strongly associated with Byronic poetry, Felix vows "Not to waste energy, to apply force where it would tell, to do small work close at hand, not waiting for speculative chances of hero-ism, but preparing for them" (287). He describes his own personal development toward the goal of serving others and working for justice without thought of per-sonal gain as being responsive to the historical present. He tells Esther that, "My course was a very simple one. It was pointed out to me by conditions that I saw as clearly as I see the bars of this stile" (258). There may be a pun here, for what Eliot offers instead of revolutionary idealism is the *style* of the realist novel, which seeks to represent the full force of the historical conditions directing us on a par-ticular future course. Eliot conflates the aesthetics of realism with the ethics of the real, while acknowledging the tactic as at once a suspension of disbelief (we do not, in fact, see a turnstile before us) and an acknowledgment of fictionality itself as "truth." That truth turns out to be the ideology of collective duty represented by the not-so-Radical Felix Holt and spoken by the Reverend Rufus Lyon: "True liberty can be nought but the transfer of obedience from the will of one or of a few men to that will which is the norm or rule for all men. . . . [S]o will it be in that crowning time of the millennial reign, when our daily prayer will be fulfilled, and one law shall be written on all hearts, and be the very structure of all thought, and be the principle of all action" (151).

Our point here is not that Felix—or Eliot for that matter—misses the mark by not being Byron. We do not mean to judge the novel and its political invest-ments by a Byronic yardstick. But we are interested in how often Byron is invoked to be discarded as a model at once foolish and reckless. And when considered

from the long, historical view of novelistic sequence—realist time—the revolutionary leap into the future does seem reckless, blind, and capable of producing the "fatal shock . . . to this society of ours" (Eliot, "Address to Working Men," 6) that Eliot/Felix warned against and Byron in fact desired. The closest we get in Eliot to that reckless leap comes at the end of, not *Felix Holt*, but *Daniel Deronda*, another novel in which the heroine learns deep subjectivity and the promise of reform ("it shall be better" [882]) around the inflection point of a Byronic hero.[35] But while Gwendolyn Harleth develops character through an acceptance of the irreversibility of time and action ("It can never be altered" [762]), Deronda, the character she might have loved in the counterfactual world closed off by actual choices, actions, and events, exits England and the novel to lead a political revolution in the "East." In its transcendent vision of messianic Zionism—problematic in many ways and still connected strongly to the historical, ancestral past—we have something that approaches a future-anterior call to action in the present:

> I hold the joy of another's future within me: a future which these eyes will not see, and which my spirit may not then recognize as mine. I recognize it now, and love it so, that I can lay down this poor life upon its altar and say: "Burn, burn indiscernibly into that which shall be, which is my love and not me." (802)

This vision of/from the future belongs to Mordecai, Daniel's dying brother-in-law and soulmate, whose theories of metempsychosis challenge the very notion of discrete character, and whose theories of transcendent nationalism put him somewhere beyond the fringe of reform politics.[36] More than Daniel, the character specifically associated with Byron, Mordecai is the novel's Romantic and its champion of lost causes: "Shall he say, 'That way events are wending, I will not resist?' His very soul is resistance, and is as a seed of fire that may enkindle the souls of multitudes, and make a new pathway for events" (585-6). This half of the novel's double-plot structure has sometimes been seen as less successful and well-made than the novel's more recognizably Victorian plot, with its remorseless embrace of the "Actual" (430).[37] As Daniel puts it to himself, echoing Gwendolyn's words and encapsulating the logic of what we have been calling novel time, "'It can never be altered—it remains unaltered, to alter other things'" (762).

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[35] On Deronda as Byronic figure, see for example Edward Dramin, "'A New Unfolding of Life,'" and Millstein, "Lord Byron and George Eliot."

[36] Amanda Anderson takes up the representation of Jewish nationalism in "George Eliot and the Jewish Question," which she further pursues in *The Powers of Distance*. On the "strange formal mutations" associated with the shift toward the future in the novel's temporal registers, see Ian Duncan's "George Eliot's Science Fiction."

[37] F. R. Leavis infamously suggested removing Deronda's half of the novel to create a better book called "Gwendolyn Harleth." See *The Great Tradition*. This sense of the comparative quality of the two halves has often been reversed in twenty-first-century criticism, which finds in Deronda's politics and cosmopolitanism something more compelling.

THE VERSE-NOVEL AND THE PROBLEM OF FORM

5

The Problem of Form

We have so far told a story about paradigm and counter-paradigm but, as we saw in Chapter Four, multiple strategies establish realist time against Byron's provocations, and occasional moments work against what we have termed the novel-verse. There is no such thing as a uniform entity, "the" novel, however tempting it is to discuss the novel as a uniform protagonist. Despite that fact, we have discussed the "novel" in this book as if it were something we can easily designate and readily point to—*by necessity*, as we explain in this chapter. Our goal has been to lay out the most common strategies of the novel-verse; however, as we have seen, the situation is much more complex than the common *chronos/kairos* or narrative/lyric opposition would suggest.

We will have more to say about the complexity of genre and why genre cannot be separated from cross-generic formal issues like temporality but let us begin by making clear that "the" verse-novel is just as much an enabling fiction as "the" novel. What is so fascinating about the genre is that it lays bare so fully the problem of form we have been exploring since the verse-novel engages, overlaps, or appropriates a wildly heterogenous set of other poetic subgenres, including the sonnet sequence (George Meredith's sixteen-line version of the form in *Modern Love*), the dramatic monologue (Robert Browning's *Ring and the Book*) and the epic romance (Alfred Lord Tennyson's blank-verse novelization of the metrical romance in *Idylls of the King*).[1] The verse-novel is, even in terms of versification, a form without a form, encompassing as it does the ottava rima of *Don Juan*, the blank verse of Elizabeth Barrett's *Aurora Leigh* and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, the strict 16-line iambic pentameter of George Meredith's *Modern Love*, and the dactylic hexameter epistolary verse-novel of Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage*. What precisely is the status of genre when we are discussing such a varied set of metrical and stanzaic forms?

Each work raises this very question because of the verse-novel's inherent hybridity. How should we understand the relation of "verse" and "novel" in the designation "verse-novel"? The question raises larger issues about what is knowable and what can be designated in a set—for example, the set that constitutes "verse," which we have tended to understand as distinct from the set that constitutes "novel."

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[1] Herbert F. Tucker in "Trials of Fiction" argues, for example, that Alfred Tennyson's hugely popular *Idylls of the King* subscribes to or, at the very least, engages novelistic conventions (and Felluga makes a similar argument in his article, "Tennyson's *Idylls*, Pure Poetry, and the Market").

Genre has historically been understood as something that can be named and designated by a certain number of distinguishable features. In such an encyclopedic taxonomy of genre, we can delineate a set of features that can help us to identify a work as "verse" or "novel." To force the two sets together in the category "verse-novel" therefore creates a problem of naming and identification. One solution is to see the two sets as mutually exclusive, an example of a gestalt shift, like the famous duck-rabbit examined by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (Figure 3).

As Wittgenstein writes, "I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience 'noticing an aspect.'"[2] He gives the duck-rabbit as an example, explaining that the "*causes*" of this experience "are of interest to psychologists" (193): in the duck-rabbit, "I must distinguish between the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect and the 'dawning' of an aspect" (194). After all, it may be that I have never "seen anything but a rabbit in it" (194); only later, does the possibility of a duck "dawn" upon me.

We hyphenate "verse-novel" as we do *Novel-Poetry* in the same way that Wittgenstein hyphenates "duck-rabbit," so we need to clarify this point: what precisely is the status of that hyphen? One reason for avoiding the unhyphenated "verse novel" throughout this book is that "verse novel" subordinates the modifier "verse" to the substantive "novel," suggesting that we are discussing a novel that just happens to be written in verse, a versified novel. Verse-novel would appear instead to function more like Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit and, indeed, "verse" and "novel" were, in the nineteenth century, increasingly understood as competing "aspects" for viewing the world and understanding the self, and much in the same way that Wittgenstein describes the gestalt experience of "duck-rabbit." As John
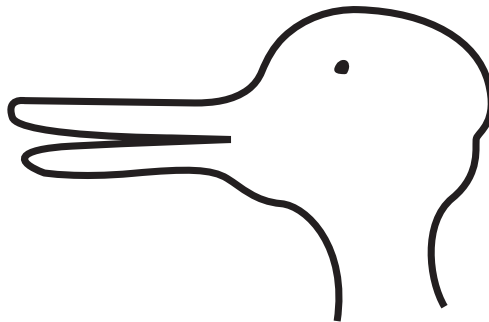
Figure 3 Ludwig Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit

[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 193. The gestalt image is on page 194. Subsequent references to this book will appear in parentheses.

Stuart Mill puts it in 1833, "story" and "poetry" represent "two distinct, and . . . *mutually exclusive*, characters of mind" (emphasis ours).[3]

The issue is a psychological one, as Wittgenstein acknowledges in the quotation above. To what extent is knowledge directed and limited by the experience and understanding of the reader, or the poet? How does what we know impact what we "see" when we approach a text—or the world, for that matter, as Mill argues? (One psychological study of the duck-rabbit, for example, illustrates that both children and adults are more likely to see a duck in October and a rabbit on Easter.)[4] To put this in yet other Wittgensteinian terms, the "language games" determining each genre, novel and poetry, actively change what we are able to "see" or who is doing the seeing when we read by one and then the other rubric. As we argued in the Introduction to this book, the rules that determine whether/how we see novel or poetry were established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and continue to shape literary scholarship today. For example, the taxonomic separation of the literary field among Goethe's, then Wordsworth and Coleridge's, then later G. W. F. Hegel's privileged concepts of the epic, the lyric, and the dramatic, contributed significantly to our difficulty in understanding the mutual influences of these arch-forms or, as Genette calls them, "architexts."[5]

A larger problem of knowledge is entailed in such distinctions, a problem that has been raised in the scholarly turn to New Formalism. "Verse" and "novel" constitute sets that aim to determine the parameters of each term, "verse" and "novel." They entail definitions that demarcate an encyclopedic approach to knowledge. As Badiou puts it,

> Knowledge is what names a situation's subsets. The language of the situation has the precise function of gathering, under a predicative trait, the elements of the situation, and thereby of constituting a concept's extensional correlate. A subset, such as, for example, one in a perceptual situation of dogs or cats, or in an analytic situation of traits and hysterical or obsessional symptoms, is captured in concepts of language, on the basis of indices of recognition attributable to all the terms or elements that fall under the concept. I call this nominal and conceptual swarming of forms of knowledge the encyclopedia of the situation. The encyclopedia is a classifier of subsets.[6]

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[3] John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," 345. Subsequent references to this essay will be in parentheses. Mill writes that, for individuals with the proper "constitution," which he aligns with "intense sensibility," "Whatever be the thing which they are contemplating, if it be capable of connecting itself with their emotions, the aspect under which it first and most naturally paints itself to them, is its poetic aspect. The poet of culture sees his object in prose, and describes it in poetry; the poet of nature actually sees it in poetry" (356).

[4] Peter Brugger and Susanne Brugger, "The Easter Bunny in October."

[5] See Genette's *The Architext*. Our first books began an exploration of such mutual generic influences. See Allen's *Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* and Felluga's *The Perversity of Poetry*.

[6] Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, 133.

The genres of "verse" and "novel" are subsets of literature that gather the extensional correlates conforming to the predicative traits delimiting or marking "verse" and "novel." They function as the "pre-established codes of decision" (*Prose Works* I.116), to put it in Wordsworth's terms.

But what if both sets and their subsets were ultimately undecidable, unknowable? When Paul Cohen proved the impossibility of determining the number of points in a line—what in mathematics is called the continuum hypothesis—he opened up a notion of truth (*what is*) that is distinct from knowledge (*what we can apprehend*). Here is Badiou on Cohen:

> Gödel had already provided a rigorous definition of the idea that a subset is named in knowledge. Such subsets are sets whose elements validate a fixed formula of the language. Gödel called them *constructible* subsets. Cohen's generic subsets, by contrast, are precisely non-constructible sets. They are too indeterminate to correspond to or to be totalized by, a unique predicative expression.[7]

If we use Cohen to circle back to the hyphen between "novel" and "poetry" that forms the title of this book, we are faced with an apparently simple question to which there is no answer: how many points are there on the line of our hyphen?

Our question is: how might the indeterminacy between "novel" and "poetry" modify our understanding of literary form? For one, rather than see "novel" and "poetry" as stable, "mutually exclusive" categories, as in Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit, we can explore the non-constructible gradations between fixed formulas of language, as in the predicates that determine the genres of novel and poetry, or even prose and verse, to recall Wordsworth's own questioning of any easy distinction. The indeterminate nature of such linguistic distinctions is what leads to the *sorites* paradox that we explore in Chapter Eight. That paradox (at what point does the removal of a single grain of sand change a heap of sand into not-a-heap?) could be said to apply to all language and, by extension, all knowledge, as Bertrand Russell for example argues in "Vagueness." The problem in language is that meaning is "one-many" rather than one-to-one, as Russell explains: "there is not only one object that a word means, and not only one possible fact that will verify a proposition. The fact that meaning is a one-many relation is the precise statement of the fact that all language is more or less vague."[8]

In genre theory, we can juxtapose two senses of the "generic": (1) the common definition of "generic" as the extensional correlates conforming to subsets of literature like "verse" and "novel"; and (2) Cohen's sense of "generic" as the infinite, undefinable, non-constructible sets that cannot be determinable by concepts of language like "verse" and "novel." We aim throughout this book to think

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[7] Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, 135.
[8] Bertrand Russell, "Vagueness," 90.

through this distinction. Rather than "fix" verse and novel by merely listing the "indices of recognition" that fall under the concepts, the logic by which the psychological duck-rabbit gestalt functions, we explore the ways that such distinctions are at once necessary to the act of interpretation and ultimately impossible, which is what allows literature to remain infinitely open to new, transformative readings.

Our goal is to use the occasion of the verse-novel to explore alternative ways of thinking about form and genre, particularly the unfixed nature of the infinite, undecidable set. By examining both poetry and the novel, we aim to explore the complexity of that hyphen as it applies to literary history more generally. According to Mill, the objective world "out there" and the subjective world "in here" experience gestalt shifts when approached first from the aspect of "novel" and then that of "poetry," or vice-versa. We could argue that the gestalt shift is most clear in a hybrid form like the verse-novel—and yet, when we examine novels alongside verse-novels, it becomes clear that such gestalt shifts function in any verse or novel form. Even the most subjective poem cannot help but invoke sequentiality, dialogism, and representation, if only to deny them, for these are some of the basic mechanisms by which we construct meaning in language. Any novel—ostensibly the more objective of the two forms—will make use of the metaphors and phonotextual language play that we align with poetry for, again, these are some of the basic mechanisms by which we construct meaning in language.[9] Novels will also include kairotic moments that cannot be put into words (emotion, pain, epiphany, the traumatic and extra-linguistic Real), or evocations of the internal subjective musings of individual characters. Indeed, we can read in the rise of nineteenth-century "realism" a developing tension between two obverse forms of verisimilitude: the realistic representation of the objective world, which came to be strongly associated with the novel, and the realistic representation of the subjective world of individual characters, which was associated in the Romantic and Victorian periods with poetry and would eventually achieve its extreme novelistic version in those modernist and postmodern experiments that critics characterize as particularly "poetic" (*To the Lighthouse*, *Finnegan's Wake*, *Pale Fire*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*).[10]

[9] On the novel's employment of metaphor, see especially Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* and Michael Riffaterre's *Fictional Truth*. On the phonotext, see Garrett Stewart's *Reading Voices*. Of course, Roman Jakobson makes this case and in turn influenced each of these theorists. In his 1956 work, *Fundamentals of Language*, which was written with Morris Halle, he makes a case for two poles of human understanding, the metaphoric and metonymic poles. Except in the case of people suffering from aphasia, the two poles work in concert, even if one is more dominant than the other in a personality or work of art. As he explains about poetry in "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," for example, "In poetry, where similarity is superinduced upon contiguity, any metonymy is slightly metaphoric and any metaphor has a metonymic tint" (370).

[10] As explored by G. Gabrielle Starr in *Lyric Generations*, this literary history is further complicated by the ways late-eighteenth-century and Romantic poetry borrowed from the novel to represent the subjective world of individual characters ("The new novel . . . carried with it much of what became the

Each aspect/genre, novel and poetry, was understood in the nineteenth century as presenting the world to our psychological perception in markedly different ways, and the ideological valences behind such distinctions go far beyond whether we are considering a prose sentence or line of blank verse. Indeed, we limit our potential understanding of a literary work and its ideological affiliations if we subscribe to only one genre's "pre-established codes of decision" when we interpret it. We wish to remain aware of the ways that "generic" form was actively defined and redefined in the period, how it served as a literary and cultural battleground. If we take for granted our presumptions about genre, we risk blindly repeating what were in earlier periods ideologically motivated definitions, and therefore foreclose alternative, rich possibilities for interpretative analysis. While it is clearly true that "Poetic narrative does not spring from quite the same sources or use the same techniques and tropes as prose narrative," as Margaret Doody writes, is it really the case that they therefore "serve different gods"?[11] That perception is a result of literary history and the constructions of past critics. If anything, Doody's work illustrates how much both poetic and prose narratives can trace their provenance to shared ancient precursors that adopt both verse and prose forms, particularly in the romance and epic tradition.[12]

Such a consideration of the ancient precursors for contemporary genres has been associated with one definition of "historical poetics" derived from the work of Aleksandr Veselovsky (his term is *Istoricheskaia Poetika*), which in turn influenced the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. The subtitle of Bakhtin's influential essay, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," is, in fact, "Notes toward a Historical

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new lyricism" [Starr, 198]) or the ways the eighteenth-century novel implemented strategies for representing subjective emotion that were borrowed from Renaissance lyric forms. See also Elisa Cohn's *Still Life*, which explores the way intense moments of "dreamy asociality that dimly lights the borderlands of subjectivity" (19) introduce lyric techniques into the novel as form.

[11] Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, 16. Doody writes only that they "*seem* to serve different gods" (emphasis ours).

[12] See also Wai Chee Dimock's "Genre as World System" and *Through Other Continents*, as well as Lauren Goodlad's recent work, for example "Bigger Love." One of the interesting aspects of Menippus' satires is precisely that they mixed elements of prose and verse in their overturning of what Bakhtin might call monological, centripetal, authoritarian discourse. There are other candidates. One critic has claimed that William Chamberlayne's obscure 1659 *Pharonnida* is "our first, and perhaps still our best novel in verse" (W. M. Dixon, *English Epic and Heroic Poetry*, 234). Other scholars have identified examples ranging from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to Vikram Seth's 1986 *Golden Gate* and Anne Carson's 1998 *Autobiography of Red*, both of which are subtitled *A Novel in Verse*. Well before the rise of the Victorian verse-novel, John Stuart Mill observed that "Many of the finest poems are in the form of novels, and in almost all good novels there is true poetry" (*Essays on Poetry*, 6). Certainly, we can point to those poetical works that toward the end of the eighteenth century began to be termed "poetical novels." One popular work, *Louisa: A Poetical Novel in Four Epistles* (1784) by Anna Seward, had enough influence on Wordsworth that in his "Preface of 1815" he cites the "metrical novel" as one example among many of narrative poetry, "including the Epopœia, the Historic Poem, the Tale, the Romance, [and] the Mock-heroic" (*Prose Works*, III.27). Critics like Franco Moretti and Wai Chee Dimock have complicated this genealogy further by exploring influences across not only "deep time" but also "world systems," particularly through the epic as genre, which could be said to have as much an impact on poetry as it does on the novel. On the continuing importance of the epic in nineteenth-century poetry, see especially Herbert F. Tucker's *Epic*.

Poetics."[13] As we discussed in this book's introduction, a more recent American group has designated itself as undertaking "historical poetics," and our approach here is in sympathy with the members of that group who question the habit of reading the architexts of narrative and lyric as unproblematic, transhistorical categories. As Yopie Prins writes, "we cannot separate the practice of reading a poem from the histories and theories of reading that mediate our ideas about poetry."[14]

It is critical to remember that any verse form (say, the tetrameter/trimeter iambic pentameter of the traditional ballad) is always in direct tension with the actual poem before us. Any genre, even when we are talking about something as clearly determined as a stanzaic and meter structure, is never true to the poem at hand because the nature of great poetry is continually to be "out of true" with the prescribed meter and rhyme scheme, opening up instead to a multivalence that invites continual rereading. As Garrett Stewart puts it, "only if multivalence prevails from word to word is the poem being true to its own *possibilities* for reading."[15] In the rare instance when a poet actually follows the verse form with almost no variation, as in, for example, Wordsworth's "A slumber did my spirit seal," we are struck, rather, by how such a decision in fact *departs* from what is the usual nature of poetry, which "normally" makes use of deviations from the norm for specific effects (e.g., meter variation, slant rhyme, added syllables, an overabundance of monosyllabic words, enjambments, irregular caesuras, and so on). What becomes significant in a poem like "A slumber" is precisely its surprising because unexpected regularity, which we can then interpret in light of what the poem actually says about the regularity of planetary motion—"rolled *round* in *earth's* di*ur*nal *course*"—with nature imagined as a balanced circuit of perfect equilibrium.

Nature as perfect circuit and lyric poetry as pure form are, in fact, equally fantasy constructions. As Žižek writes of the former,

> The image of nature as a balanced circuit is nothing but a retroactive projection of man. Herein lies the lesson of recent theories of chaos: "nature" is already, in itself, turbulent, imbalanced; its rule is not a well-balanced oscillation around some constant point of attraction, but a chaotic dispersion within the limits of what the theory of chaos calls the "strange attractor," a regularity directing chaos itself.[16]

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[13] See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses. In *The Dialogic Imagination* and *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin proposes that the novel can trace its emergence through the carnivalesque Rabelaisian satires of *Pantagruel* (1532) and *Gargantua* (1534) all the way back to the Menippean satires of ancient Greece. One problem with discussing the question of the "verse-novel" is that poetry had for centuries before the rise of the novel valued various forms of fictional narrative, from the epic and the romance to the pastoral and the ballad. However, with the significant exception of Byron's *Don Juan*, it was not until the 1850s and 1860s that the "verse-novel" really came into its own as a distinct hybrid between two arch-generic forms that, especially at that point in literary history, were considered as irreconcilable and even antagonistic.

[14] Prins, "'What Is Historical Poetics?'" 14.

[15] Stewart, *The Deed of Reading*, 69.

[16] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 38. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

The relation of language to form follows a similar chaotic logic, which can equally well be aligned with the theory of strange attractors and fractal geometry, as Wai Chee Dimock argues in "Genre as World System."[17] "Fractal geometry," she writes, is "the lost twin of literary history, especially the study of genre":

> what this geometry allows us to see is a tangle of relations, one that counts as a "system" precisely because its aberrations are system-wide, because pits and bumps come with many loops and layers of filiation. Even literary forms that look quite different at first sight turn out to have these quirks in common. That family resemblance runs through them even as their trajectories diverge. And, depending on context, this family resemblance can be extended, modified, and recombined in any number of ways. The process is ongoing, and will never be complete, since there is no end to such irregularities, no end to the second and third and fourth cousins coiled within each ball of deviance.[18]

Any generic form we might apply to a work of literature is only ever a retroactive projection onto the chaotic and therefore generative possibilities of language, which is necessarily caught up in the full complexity of human speech, with all its multiform sounds, dialects, intertextuality, polyglossia, and heteroglossia, as well as the former uses of words or combination of words in the structured chaos that is generic and linguistic evolution. It is through such complexity that we can find not only the pleasure but also the ethical impetus of reading literature.

The fractal relation between genre and language exists on the most basic level of linguistic use. As Bakhtin puts it in his theory of dialogism, which also influences Dimock, "The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance" (*Dialogic* 272).[19] On the one hand, "language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given bodily form" (*Dialogic* 291). On the other hand, any use of language cannot help but invoke certain "speech genres" that momentarily fix the play of signification: "All words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour" (*Dialogic* 293).[20] In the act of reading, "consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must

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[17] McGann makes a similar argument in *Radiant Textuality*: "Relativity, quantum mechanics, and non-Euclidean geometries all realize a world marked by the same kind of ambiguities, transformations, and incommensurable features that we take for granted in Ovid and Lucretius, Dante and Petrarch, Blake and Byron" (228).

[18] Dimock, "Genre as World System," 89.

[19] See Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 216 n39, where she reads Bakhtin's interest in the "utterance" as exemplary of the "smaller-scale analysis" characteristic of fractal geometry.

[20] Bakhtin elaborates upon his theory of speech genres in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*.

move in and occupy a position for itself within it, it chooses, in other words, a 'language'" (*Dialogic* 295).[21] Such a position can only ever be provisional, a citation of a convention (a genre, a meter, an ideological fantasy) that performs its "consciousness" retroactively and often by foreclosing other counterfactual possibilities—as in Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit.

This dynamic is at play both at the level of psychoanalytical fantasy ("*objet a* is a pure form," Žižek writes, "it is the form of an attractor drawing us into chaotic oscillation" [*Looking Awry* 38]), and at the level of genre, as Dimock argues:

> The spinning of threads is an especially apt metaphor for the twists and turns that run from one genre to another, a family whose tensile strength lies in just this sinuousness. These interconnections have little to do with linear descent. What they exemplify instead is a nonlinear system, with structural entanglements at various angles and various distances, a complex geometry.[22]

To a more limited extent, the same complexity works even at the level of meter. Poets rely on the reader's recognition of the structure to mark their foot-by-foot, sound-by-sound deviations from it, which call attention to the chaotic complexity of the language behind any poem. This is as much the case in a poem self-consciously seeking to break with tradition (say, John Keats' "If by dull rhymes our English must chained") as it is in a poem seeking to value the orderly structure of verse (as in the eighteenth-century heroic couplet).

We must resist limiting our understanding of a genre or verse form to a predetermined set of expectations, even as we acknowledge that we cannot make sense of any work without invoking generic expectations. Genette enacts this contradictory situation in the dialogue he has with himself in the final section of *The Architext*. In response to the question, "what is the novel?" Genette answers:

> "A useless question. What counts is *this* novel, and don't forget that the demonstrative spares us the need for definition. Let's focus on what exists—that is, single works. Let's do criticism; criticism gets along very nicely without universals."

However, Genette also then counters himself:

> "It gets along poorly, since it resorts to them without being aware of it and without recognizing them and at the very moment when it claims to be doing without them: you said 'this *novel.*'"[23]

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[21] Bakhtin skips over the dialogism and heteroglossia of Victorian poetry (e.g., the dramatic monologue and the verse-novel), arguing that "not until the twentieth century is there a drastic 'prosification' of the lyric" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 200).

[22] Dimock, "Genre as World System," 87.

[23] Genette, *The Architext*, 81.

The challenge is to stay attuned to the singular poem or novel at hand—which is always at odds with generic expectations—while paying attention to the ways that genre both forecloses and enables interpretation. Ideological obfuscation occurs at the point when we turn the complex historical emergence of our terms into a simple abstraction.

Poetry per Form

Can we understand generic form in such a way as to facilitate cross-generic analysis as well as ideological critique while remaining open to the fractal complexity of language? We would suggest, first of all, that generic terms do not unproblematically refer to pre-existing objects (for example: romances, novels, or lyrics).[24] We therefore question a descriptivist approach to generic form, which presupposes a certain textual *genetics* to which, as the etymology might suggest, *genre* designations refer. In fact, genres do not *refer* at all. They are, after all, so unstable as to be unable fully to describe what they name; the very number and variety of previous genre classifications, the uncertain boundaries between "genres," "modes," and "types," and the proliferation of subgenres and mixed forms all seem to attest to this fact. And yet genre designations are indispensable. Indeed, one thing on which all genre theorists and even genre theory's detractors can agree is that a text must belong to at least one genre for it to be understood by the reading public.[25] At their most elemental level, genres enable the reading process by gathering together various conventions that mark out and constrain the reader's interpretive decisions and allow the reader to perceive the object to which a genre supposedly refers.[26] In other words, genres are performative in Judith Butler's sense of the term: they constitute that to which they appear merely to refer. As Butler explains, "To the extent that a term is performative, it does not merely refer, but acts in some way to constitute that which it enunciates. The 'referent' of a performative is a kind of *action* which the performative itself calls for and participates in."[27]

Literary criticism provides us with those constitutive gestures that in the designation of literary categories retroactively posit those categories as originary (i.e., pre-existing) and rigid (i.e., unalterable) identities. However, the performative

[24] We agree with Ina Ferris that "'genre' . . . is as unstable and fissured as 'gender,' and [that] both terms may perhaps be understood most usefully as empty (but not meaningless) signifiers, marking out a particular position in a discourse or social formation" (Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority*, 6).

[25] For some examples among many, see Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 20; Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 79; Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, 13–15; and even Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 65.

[26] The perfect example may be Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw," since the reader's decision about that work's generic form (ghost story or psychological realism) determines the events of the story (demonic possession or manic projection).

[27] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 217.

nature of this gesture—which must be repeated among a community of readers to ensure the continuity of generic identity—uncovers the contingent and, ultimately, unstable (if indispensable) status of generic distinctions. Genre should, we suggest, be understood as an unstable field of possibilities affected as much by critical perception and debate as by specific structural features. We would go further: there is no such thing as a reference to literary writing that is not itself a performative ordering of that text's textuality, that does not in itself conform to and enact generic conventions.

The simple abstraction of "poetry" hides the complex historical process behind it by simplifying genre into an iterable and hence identifiable interpretive code that both ensures inclusion within the code and opens that code to parodic *disidentification*. As Jacques Derrida has it, "at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins."[28] Unlike Derrida, however, who therefore questions the utility of genre theory, we would underscore the utility of genre's degenerescence, for this instability marks the site of historical and cultural change.[29] It also marks the moment at which genres are perceived not only as belonging to a particular regimen but also as regimented against other genres (poetry vs. the novel, for example). As Ralph Cohen suggests, "A genre . . . is to be understood in relation to other genres, so that its aims and purposes at a particular time are defined by its interrelation with and differentiation from others."[30] This differentiation works not only between individual texts but within a given work as it identifies with a particular generic construct and, at the same time, dis-identifies with itself through a dialectical and performative self-positing, a stepping out of itself to mark itself as belonging to a particular code. Every literary work has moments where it steps outside of itself, so to speak, to mark itself as belonging to particular formal structures (as in the *mise-en-abyme* moment when a character in a novel reads).[31] We might call these two simultaneous operations "identification" and "self-estrangement"—the act of identifying and the performance that is that act. There is no reference to a generic construct, then, that is not already caught up in a certain struggle for legitimation. The self-conscious re-marking of genre within a text ensures not only the interpretability of texts but also the performative instability of generic form as iterable act.[32] Jerome McGann puts it well in *Radiant Textuality*: "it is the operation of marking that divides the text from itself."[33]

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[28] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 66.
[29] Ralph Cohen makes a similar argument against Derrida in "History and Genre."
[30] Cohen, "History and Genre," 207.
[31] The pervasiveness of this maneuver is made clear by Garrett Stewart in *Dear Reader*, for example.
[32] For an elaboration of Derrida's theories along these lines, see Emily Allen, "Re-Marking Territory." E. Warwick Slinn has previously applied the concept of performativity to the study of poetic genres in "Poetry and Culture."
[33] McGann, *Radiant Textuality*, 206.

If all texts by necessity subscribe to this performative loop, what is so fascinating about poetry is how self-conscious it is about its self-referential gestures, which can make it an especially unsettling (and sometimes unsuspecting) critic of the process of ideological obfuscation—much more so, in certain cases, than those novels that appear to address the socio-historical world directly.[34] This is one reason we want to examine the ways that poetry speaks to the dominant ideologies of the Victorian period by intersecting with the dominant genre of the day: the realist novel. The verse-novel is an obvious area of inquiry since it can be seen to question ideology on the level of both content and form. The dialogic and even polyphonic tendencies of the dramatic monologue offer another area of inquiry, one that has been insufficiently tied to the influence of the novel and of other market-driven narrative forms.[35] All Victorian poems could be read more fully for their access to and self-conscious questioning of the performative nature of Victorian ideology, especially as that ideology gets formally instantiated in the genre of the realist novel through specific temporal and stylistic signatures.

Even what the Victorians designated as "pure poetry" should be understood in relation to the "novel" pressures marginalizing the poetic enterprise. In other words, criticism's habit of seeing poetry as autotelic is itself the result of the influence of both the market and the novel: the creation of the very notion of high "culture" (in our modern sense) is, as Raymond Williams has for example illustrated, itself caught up in the market dynamics of the period.[36] By positioning poetry as high culture, ideal, and kairotic, Victorianist critics could be said to confer onto poetry's marginalization a certain necessity, even desirability.[37] Positing poetry as somehow pure was a part of this argument, especially when it came to the newly theorized genre of the lyric. But the genre of the lyric cannot be understood outside the performative acts by which we continue retroactively to re-enact poetry's imagined rarefication. If the nineteenth-century effort to establish a pure poetry was itself a reaction to the market and to the novel, however, we should be better able to reconstruct the interaction between poetry and the novel even in those poems that appear dialectically opposed to narrative and the dialogic. There was never such a thing as pure poetry, and there is no such thing as a poetry that does not engage the fractal complexity of historical, cultural, and technological change over time. There is no duck without its rabbit, and the relationship

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[34] As Slinn points out, cultural critics have given little attention to "the potential for cultural critique engendered by referential aberration, by that suspension of normative referential logic which is frequently an effect of poetic utterance, accompanying the foregrounding of complex, often conflicting, discursive codes" ("Poetry and Culture," 57–8). See also Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry* and Matthew Reynolds' *Realms of Verse, 1830–1870*.

[35] A notable exception is Loy D. Martin's *Browning's Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject*. Also of note are Linda K. Hughes' *The Manyfaced Glass*; W. David Shaw's *Origins of the Monologue*; and Tucker's *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, especially Part Two.

[36] See Williams, *Culture and Society*.

[37] Felluga makes this argument in "Tennyson's *Idylls*, Pure Poetry and the Market," especially on page 797.

between them is not a simple or mutually exclusive switch. The verse-novels that we examine in the following chapters are very much aware of this fact.

Perhaps the best that we can do is to identify formal structures that transcend any one generic instance, while staying conscious of the ways that such structures place boundaries on the infinite, non-constructible possibilities of the aesthetic work. Because these structures are in fact *shared* by poetry and the novel, they provide us with the main ways that specific poetic and novelistic genres engaged both each other and society at large: narrative, for example, or narrational presentation (first person, omniscient, free indirect discourse); dialogism and the various strategies for representing a subjective purview; the degree of concretization in the representation of time and space that Bakhtin terms chronotopes;[38] focalization and the posited relationships among authorial voice, character, and reader; the way a work's fiction is constructed in relation to the reader's reality, which is often caught up in ideological questions about truth and virtue; levels of diegesis and moments of extradiegetic self-reflexivity; or the dominant temporal signatures that are often affected by grammatical tense, voice, and mood.

The Form of the Problem

Our goal in examining formal matters is to underscore how attention to meter and form facilitates our understanding of ideological change. In this, we could be said to follow in the footsteps of recent New Formalist critics who press form into the service of ideological critique.[39] Although we approach "form" and "genre" somewhat differently than does Caroline Levine, we agree that ideological fantasy and aesthetic form are performed through similar mechanisms and always against a certain nonlinear and chaotic complexity: "The world is much more chaotic and contingent, formally speaking, than Foucault imagined, and therefore much more interesting—and just a little bit more hopeful as well."[40]

However, we disagree with Levine's suggestion that we can easily distinguish between form and genre. According to Levine, "Genre involves acts of classifying texts. . . . Thus any attempt to recognize a work's genre is a historically specific and interpretative act" (*Forms* 13). By contrast,

[38] See Bakhtin's essay, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination.*

[39] Susan Wolfson for example calls for "an historically informed formalist criticism" (*Formal Charges* 1), borrowing a phrase from James Breslin. According to Garrett Stewart in *Reading Voices*, "Among the foreseeable gains to be made by reconceiving the purposes of so-called stylistic study in light of poststructuralist linguistics would not be to recover the shibboleth of 'style' and the methodologies of its specification from writer to writer but rather to retrieve the fact of writing itself—and precisely in its inseparability from reading—from amid the welter of cultural 'inscriptions' now under scrutiny" (18). See also Lauren Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*, and Caroline Levine, *Forms* and "Revaluing Repetition." For a useful overview of nineteenth- and twentieth-century understandings of "form," see Angela Leighton's *On Form.*

[40] Levine, *Forms*, xiii. Subsequent references to this book will be in parentheses.

> Forms, defined as patternings, shapes, and arrangements, have a different relation to context: they can organize both social and literary objects, and they can remain stable over time. One has to agree to read for shapes and patterns, of course, and this is itself a conventional approach. But as Frances Ferguson argues, once we recognize the organizing principles of different literary forms—such as syntax, free indirect speech, and the sonnet—they are themselves no longer matters of interpretative debate: "Even if you failed to notice that the sonnet that Romeo and Juliet speak between them was a sonnet the first time you read Shakespeare's play, you would be able to recognize it as such from the moment that someone pointed it out to you. . . . It could be regularly found, pointed out, or returned to, and the sense of its availability would not rest on agreements about its meaning." Similarly, it is difficult not to agree on the shape of the classroom or the schedule of the prisoner's day, the hierarchy of a bureaucratic organization or the structure of a kinship system. There is certainly some abstraction entailed here, but once we have agreed to look for principles of organization, we will probably not spend much time disputing the idea that racial apartheid organizes social life into a hierarchical binary, or that nation-states enforce territorial boundaries. More stable than genre, configurations and arrangements organize materials in distinct and iterable ways no matter what their context or audience. (*Forms* 13)

We argue against an understanding of genre that is merely taxonomic ("acts of classifying texts"). It is true that this way of thinking *about* genre is "historically specific," but genre itself as structural category need not be limited to this way of thinking. We can argue just as well that Levine's understanding of form is reliant on generic, "conventional" presuppositions, as she herself admits ("One has to agree to read for shapes and patterns, of course and this is itself a conventional approach"; "There is certainly some abstraction here").

We understand genre as the active implementation of those structures that allow something to be "seen" at any moment, which of course requires a certain iterability over time as well as a certain degree of instability before the complexity of language. This principle applies as well to genre as it does to our understanding of territorial boundaries, which is in fact precisely the example given by Benoit Mandelbrot in the chapter from *Fractals* titled "How Long is the Coast of Britain?" Your choice of convention and abstraction—whether you are observing the coastline from the air or on foot in inches or from the scale of a snail—determines what you can measure: as the scale "is made smaller and smaller, every one of the approximate lengths tends to become larger and larger without bound. Insofar as one can tell, each seems to tend toward infinity."[41] Russell makes a similar point in his

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[41] Benoit Mandelbrot, *Fractals*, 29. Since we try to stay attuned to ancient precursors for some of the forms we discuss, it is perhaps worth noting that, for a short time, Plato and Zeno existed in the universe at the same time.

essay on vagueness: "A small-scale map is usually vaguer than a large-scale map, because it does not show all the turns and twists of the roads, rivers, etc., so that various slightly different courses are compatible with the representation that it gives. Vagueness, clearly, is a matter of degree."[42] In other words, "context" and "audience" certainly do matter when we are talking about "principles of organization." To put it in the terms of our book's title, *how can we measure the shape of the real?* Your choice of measure in context determines what you can see and how precisely you measure, and this is as much the case when we are talking about the "measure" of a metrical form. As Ferguson's example of the sonnet in *Romeo and Juliet* illustrates, how we perform our understanding of form determines what exactly we see in the act, which is in fact precisely how Wittgenstein sees his duck-rabbit applied to aesthetics: "Here it occurs to me that in conversation on aesthetic matters we use the words: 'You have to see it like *this*, this is how it is meant'; 'When you see it like *this*, you see where it goes wrong'" (202). Whether we see a sonnet in Shakespeare's play requires both an iterable structure and our active measuring of that structure in the act of reading.

We should also distinguish our approach from what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus term "surface reading." They present their method as opposed to what they characterize as the "symptomatic" approach found in much criticism of the last thirty years. In particular, they align Marxism and psychoanalysis as providing the basic methodology of a variety of theoretical approaches, including New Historicism, cultural criticism, queer studies, and postcolonial studies: "The nineteenth-century roots of symptomatic reading lie with Marx's interest in ideology and the commodity and Freud's in the unconscious and dreams."[43] As they go on, "This hermeneutics of suspicion became a general property of literary criticism even for those who did not adhere strictly to psychoanalysis" (5). Best and Marcus offer Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* as exemplary: such symptomatic reading considers

> that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses, and that, as Fredric Jameson argued, interpretation should therefore seek "a latent meaning behind a manifest one". . . . The interpreter "rewrite[s] the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code" . . . and reveals truths that "remain unrealized in the surface of the text." (3)

Carolyn Lesjak puts it well: in the surface reading proposed by Best and Marcus, "a hermeneutics of suspicion is replaced by a suspicion of hermeneutics."[44]

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[42] Russell, "Vagueness," 89–90.
[43] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading," 4. Subsequent references to this essay will be in parentheses.
[44] Carolyn Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," 244.

To make sense of their method, Best and Marcus turn to geometry: "we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*" (9). But literature is not a one-dimensional geometrical shape; the difficulty of determining the number of points in a line, as explored by Cohen and Badiou, or the length of the coast of England, as explored by Mandelbrot, illustrates the problem with the assumptions behind a Euclidian approach. By the same token, "being looked *at*" is not as straightforward as Best and Marcus suggest, though it is certainly true that the way of seeing they propose can lead them to new insights, the revelation of new aspects of a literary work. What they reveal, however, is not a "surface" but a new way of seeing what was always there for everyone to see, as in the duck-rabbit with which we began.

That is the case in *any* strong reading, however. Cannon Schmitt makes this point after determining that "surface reading is impossible," for, as he points out, Best and Marcus often turn to the same oppositions as the symptomatic reading they contest: "the need to promise revelations of what had been hidden (even if in plain sight) while simultaneously refusing the search for the absent or latent; the use of metaphors of immersion while insisting that surfaces, not depths, are our appropriate concern." As Schmitt goes on, "the imperative to attend to the surface" thus "seems more a shift in how we describe what we do than in our activity itself." In such formulations, "The surface is the new depth—which is to say not only that surface reading asks us to relocate our interpretive activity from the depth to the surface but also and more significantly that surface reading understands the surface as promising what depths used to promise: the surprise attendant on an unveiling."[45]

We agree with Best and Marcus that we should take care in making claims about revealing some truth that was hidden by the text. They quote Theodor Adorno at one point on what they term "an immersive mode of reading that does not need to assert its distance and difference from its object" (14). As Adorno writes, "Thought acquires its depth from penetrating deeply into a matter, not referring it back to something else."[46] Certainly. But we do not believe that the alternative is to think of literature as a one-dimensional surface that can somehow be described or measured unproblematically, as if our relation to the literary text were as straightforward as the Euclidian geometry Best and Marcus choose as their trope. Any strong reading of a literary work functions as an unveiling, the revelation of a previously unthought interpretative structure that helps us to "see" the work differently than we did before—the more the reading is able to reveal itself in what was always

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[45] Cannon Schmitt, "Tidal Conrad," 15.
[46] Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 159.

there before us in the text, the more the interpretation succeeds in changing how we "see" the work, the more it seems a revelation. The words on the surface of the blank page do not change—although the medium certainly can—but we cannot begin to measure those words without the imposition of some guiding (and, in the best criticism, revelatory) interpretative form, regardless of our approach.[47]

That is as much the case in a strong surface reading as in a strong Marxist or New Historicist reading. As in the examples we have already given, the words remain the same, but we "see" them differently, which is to say that "truth" lies not behind the text nor on its surface. It is not just genre but also interpretation that is never "true" to the text because "truth" exists in the fact that the text will always exceed any one measure of its complexity, just as no fantasy of natural order can exhaust the fractal complexity of the real. The verse-novel helps us to make this point.

The Verse-Novel

The following chapters aim to estrange our traditional understanding of the verse-novel while engaging the larger issues explored so far in this book: the nature of temporality, contending ways of understanding the act-event, and the problem of form. Here is the story of the verse-novel as it has been told by previous critics: in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the height of the Victorian period, a peculiar and perverse genre arose in England only to disappear again by the 1870s. By the late 1860s, the form had achieved enough cohesion and visibility to be parodied in Edmund C. Nugent's *Anderleigh Hall: A Novel in Verse* (1866), a sure sign of a genre's ossification and imminent obsolescence. The verse-novel took rather different forms in the two decades of its emergence, from the straightforward plot of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856, dated 1857) to the epistolary fiction of Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage* (1858), from the sonnet sequence of George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862) to the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning's *Ring and the Book* (1868–9).[48] Nonetheless, each work could be said to respond to the increasing marginalization of poetry that occurred after the collapse of the poetry market in the 1820s. As Lee Erickson has argued, whereas the publishers of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron enjoyed huge profits because of conditions that supported a luxury market for poetry in the Romantic period, by

[47] Marcus acknowledges in *Between Women* that any reading of a text entails some degree of interpretation: as she writes, her approach "recognizes that interpretation is inevitable: even when attending to the givens of a text, we are always only—or just—constructing a meaning"; she also rejects the "inevitably disingenuous claim to transparently reproduce a text's unitary meaning" (75).

[48] Stephanie Markovits provides other examples from the same period: "countless takes on the verse novel emerged in the second half of the century, both remembered (Clough's *Amours de Voyage*; Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, 1854–61; Meredith's *Modern Love*; George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*, 1868; William Morris's *The Lovers of Gudrun*, 1870) and now largely forgotten (like Owen Meredith's *Lucile*, 1860—which, astonishingly, appeared in hundreds of American editions)" ("Verse Novel," 1208). See also Catherine Addison's "The Verse Novel as Genre," especially 540.

1825 conditions were in place for the emergence of a mass market that oriented itself to the middle classes and their preference for novelistic forms and periodical reviews.[49] After this date, and perhaps even more clearly after the bank panic and financial crisis of 1826, publishers simply stopped publishing first editions of poetry, until by the thirties and forties Edward Moxon was virtually the only publisher in England of new collections of poetry by individual writers; and his firm survived because he required poets to underwrite part of the costs of publishing.[50]

Because of these conditions, poetry was forced into one of two apparently incompatible positions. It could embrace its marginalization as a virtue and explore increasingly rarefied forms that self-consciously rejected the dictates of the market: "A poet may write poetry with the intention of publishing it," John Stuart Mill wrote in 1833, "he may write it even for the express purpose of being paid for it; that it should be poetry, being written under any such influences, is far less probable."[51] Or, it could attempt to play to that market as best it could by exploring those characteristics that made the novel such a popular success (narrative sequentiality, realistic description, historical referentiality, believable characters, dramatic situations, fully realized dialogism and, above all, the domestic marriage plot). As the conventional wisdom goes, each of the verse-novels we explore in this book followed the accommodating route to varying degrees and yielded to the emergent mass market, which eagerly bought up domestic novels but for the most part shunned the previously dominant form of the lyric poem.

We tell a different story in this book, a counterfactual story that does not look back to the Victorian period from the perspective of the present, where the novel's ascendent version of temporality structures our understanding of the world and ourselves. We attempt, rather, to hear in the verse-novel a real and perfectly viable alternative, not only to the novel, but also to the expressivist lyric that was associated in the period with the ideal, the subjective, and the kairotic. We should make clear at the outset that, although we refer to "the" verse-novel and pinpoint similar maneuvers by different authors turning to the genre, each of the verse-novels we examine engages in a critique of the novel and the lyric in different ways. Our goal in this book is not to delineate the taxonomic features of the genre, verse-novel, but rather to pinpoint cross-generic formal structures tied to temporality and subjectivity that verse-novels may have been particularly well positioned to explore precisely because of their hybrid, cross-generic nature. These formal structures offered to Victorian readers a different way to see their own lives. We propose, however counterintuitively, that these verse-novels may offer us now in the present day a different way forward as well.

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[49] See Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form*.

[50] Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form*, 36. On the 1825–1826 bank panic, see Alexander J. Dick, "On the Financial Crisis, 1825–26."

[51] John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Poetry*, 12–13. For other examples of this maneuver, see the Coda to Felluga's *The Perversity of Poetry*, 143–61.

6

Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Love

The narrative trajectory of *Aurora Leigh* appears, on the surface, to conform most closely of all the verse-novels to the traditional plot of the domestic novel; indeed, it is the only work we examine in this section that ends in a marriage. Even so, Elizabeth Barrett Browning explains that the verse-novel must engage the novel at the level not only of content but also of form. As she writes to Robert Browning on March 20, 1845, "I am inclined to think we want new *forms* . . . as well as thoughts— The old gods are dethroned. Why should we go back to the antique moulds."[1] She also recognizes that generic choices impact what we perceive, and she understands the relation of genre to ideology. Although Barrett Browning rejects the self-reflexive play of Byron's *ottava rima* in favor of a more propulsive blank verse that keeps her narrative moving consistently forward, she is just as critical as Byron of the novel's approach to questions of truth and questions of virtue. In her letters, she characterizes *Aurora Leigh* as "a poem of a new class, in a measure—a Don Juan without the mockery & impurity."[2] In thinking about genre and form, Barrett Browning asks us to interrogate how our perception of the real world is structured by pre-established codes. Rather than succumb to skepticism about the value of action in the present, however, Barrett Browning follows Byron's lead in subscribing to love and faith as the more radical position.[3]

Critics have insufficiently appreciated the force of Barrett Browning's approach to form, which, we think, drives not only her most obviously radical poetry ("Cry of the Children"; "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"; *Poems before Congress*) but also the trenchant critique of bourgeois ideology that is *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning has too often been dismissed. As the argument goes, even if she does critique certain aspects of domestic ideology, she is ultimately a conservative voice repeating Victorian commonplaces about love, class, and religion.[4] We wish to

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[1] *The Brownings' Correspondence*, X, 132–5.

[2] *The Brownings' Correspondence*, IX, 305.

[3] Barrett Browning saw Byron as her most formative influence; see especially Jane Stabler's "Romantic and Victorian Conversations." As Barrett Browning writes to her mentor Hugh Stuart Boyd in 1842, "Take out my heart, look at it . . . & tell me if I do not love & admire Byron more warmly than you" (*The Brownings' Correspondence*, VI.192). Our approach challenges the tendency to see Barrett Browning as "growing out" of her "adolescent fervor for Byron" (37), as Helen Cooper, for example, argues. See also Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 63, and Marjorie Stone, *Women Writers: Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 53.

[4] For an essay that examines Barrett Browning's religion in *Aurora Leigh*, see Ranen Omer, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Apocalypse." As he argues, according to literary criticism, "It is as if there were two Elizabeth Barrett Brownings, neatly divided from each other; the pious invalid of the religious

look again at those passages so that we can reconsider her understanding of genre and the ideological effect of Barrett Browning's formal choices.[5]

On the level of plot, *Aurora Leigh* is highly novelistic. The story follows Aurora Leigh's growth as an author, including her youth, her initial rejection of her cousin Romney Leigh's proposal of marriage, her career in London, and then her entanglement in a sensationalist plot involving Romney's new choice of bride, the lower-class Marian Erle. Through the machinations of the aristocratic Lady Waldemar, who wants Romney for herself, Marian is taken to France on the eve of her marriage to Romney, drugged and then raped, leading to the birth of an illegitimate child. Seeing Marian by chance in Paris, Aurora decides to help her; they move to Florence, where Romney Leigh, now blind because of a workers' revolt at his estate, comes to propose once again to Marian, who rejects him. Once Aurora realizes that Romney is blind, she confesses her love for him and they decide to marry.

Despite the sensationalistic twists, the main plotline follows a trajectory similar to that of the courtship or domestic novel. Only after an ideological rapprochement can Aurora and Romney be united in a transcendent vision of heavenly domestic perfection. As Romney puts it:

> "First, God's love."
> "And next," he smiled, "the love of wedded souls,
> Which still presents that mystery's counterpart."[6]

How might we make sense of these lines in a way that allows us to reconcile *Aurora Leigh*'s conclusion with its consistent questioning of middle-class culture's indoctrination of women into the ideology of domesticity? We are not simply asking how the thematic concerns of love and religion impact our understanding of genre. We ask, rather, how does Barrett Browning's formal understanding of temporality change the nature of love and religion in *Aurora Leigh*?

Two figures, Aurora's aunt and Romney Leigh, represent the period's dominant hegemonic views about gender. The passages that describe Aurora's education at the hands of her aunt are a striking example of poetic satire and utterly undercut the Victorian image of the "angel in the house":

sonnets and the daring poet of *Aurora Leigh*. The criticism of the past two decades tends to ignore her Christianity almost entirely" (99). We disagree with Omer's suggestion that Barrett Browning's religion can only ever entail a conservative stance that "refuses Romney's secular means of renovating the world, creating a rupture in the very notion of reconciling the imagination with political activism" (99).

[5] A similar approach is taken by Caroline Levine in her reading of Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children." As she writes, "rather than asking whether Barrett Browning herself was really a radical or really a conservative—a debate that has been raging about her for quite some time—a strategic formalist would ask, instead, whether the specific formal tactics she uses might be particularly effective in political situations where powerful figures are failing to live up to professed principles of justice, fairness, equality, and freedom" ("Strategic," 647).

[6] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh *and Other Poems*, IX.881–83. Subsequent references to *Aurora Leigh* will refer to this edition and will appear in parentheses, including Book and line number.

> I read a score of books on womanhood
> To prove, if women do not think at all,
> They may teach thinking (to a maiden aunt
> Or else the author),—books that boldly assert
> Their right of comprehending husband's talk
> When not too deep, and even of answering
> With pretty "may it please you," or "so it is,"—
> Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,
> Particular worth and general missionariness,
> As long as they keep quiet by the fire
> And never say "no" when the world says "ay,"
> For that is fatal,—their angelic reach
> Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,
> And fatten household sinners,—their, in brief,
> Potential faculty in everything
> Of abdicating power in it. (I.427–46)

Even as she writes in a form that invokes the genre of the domestic novel, Barrett Browning questions the thematic elements that we find in that genre.

Romney, following this same logic of the angel in the house, questions the ability of women to be great authors, pointing out, for example, how periodical reviews are only able to praise a woman author in condescending terms:

> "You never can be satisfied with praise
> Which men give women when they judge a book
> Not as mere work but as mere woman's work,
> Expressing the comparative respect
> Which means the absolute scorn." (II.232–6)

At the start of the plot, Romney himself subscribes to this view of woman's poetry, arguing, in much the same terms as Aurora's aunt, that women—because of their natural tendency to feel rather than reason—are only capable of succeeding in the domestic sphere:

> "Women as you are,
> Mere women, personal and passionate,
> You give us doating mothers, and perfect wives,
> Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
> We get no Christ from you,—and verily
> We shall not get a poet, in my mind." (II.220–5)

Having established domestic duties as the only option for a woman, Romney, a few lines later, proposes—and Aurora just as quickly declines, refusing to be "the complement of [man's] sex merely" (II.435–6). Claiming that "I too have my vocation"

(II.455), Aurora instead pursues her art and soon finds herself in a melodramatic tale of sensationalist plot twists that lead to Italy, where she establishes an all-woman commune of sorts with Marian and her child. Deliberately confusing the angel/whore dichotomy of middle-class domestic ideology, Marian and Aurora for a time become the child's "two mothers" (VII.124) in a matriarchal domestic idyll, in which, Aurora writes, "I should certainly be glad, / Except, god help me, that I'm sorrowful / Because of Romney" (VII.925–6).

The tale would then seem to end conventionally enough in a heterosexual marital union, except that, as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, we are presented with a blind and beaten male protagonist, who must rely on the strength and vision (in both senses) of his mate. As our mention of *Jane Eyre* makes clear, the novel, as a genre, is by no means incapable of similarly questioning the ideology of middle-class domesticity.[7] What fascinates us about *Aurora Leigh* is that it questions domestic ideology, not just at the level of content, or even of the form of the content, but also at the level of what Hayden White, following Louis Hjelmslev, has dubbed "the content of the form"—the ideologies that are inextricably connected to form.[8] Barrett Browning brings to the fore this issue by superimposing a generic struggle onto the traditional domestic marriage plot. In so doing, Barrett Browning seeks to work out that most pervasive of Victorian dialectics, the real vs. the ideal, associating Romney with the real, the prosaic, the objective, and the immanent while aligning Aurora Leigh with the ideal, the poetic, the subjective, and the transcendent.[9] As Aurora puts it:

> We were not lovers, nor even friends well-matched:
> Say rather, scholars upon different tracks,
> And thinkers disagreed: he, overfull
> Of what is, and I, haply, overbold
> For what might be. (I.1106–19)

In her marriage of verse and the novel, of the ideal and the real, of Aurora and Romney, Barrett Browning seeks to have it both ways:

> Without the spiritual, observe,
> The natural is impossible—no form,
> No motion: without sensuous, spiritual
> Is inappreciable,—no beauty or power. (VII.773–6)

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[7] See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, for the classic version of this argument.

[8] See White, *The Content of the Form*.

[9] One can see the surprising pervasiveness of the real/ideal opposition by reading Isobel Armstrong's collection, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830–1870*.

This formulation highlights at once the complex generic hybridity of *Aurora Leigh* and the desire for a perfect reconciliation that ultimately leads Barrett Browning into an arguably suspicious ideological maneuver at the end of *Aurora Leigh*: Romney's transcendent vision of a New Jerusalem in the final lines.

Before we get there, we need to unpack more fully Barrett Browning's understanding of form's relation to reality. She addresses the problem from the start by interrogating the photo-realist pretentions of portraiture, a primary figure of Book I. She thus asks us to consider the difference between the objective representation of the real world and the realistic representation of subjecthood:

> Of writing many books there is no end;
> And I who have written much in prose and verse
> For others' uses, will write now for mine,—
> Will write my story for my better self,
> As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
> Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
> Long after he has ceased to love you, just
> To hold together what he was and is. (I.1–8).

Story and portrait are, of course, most easily associated with narrative and realistic description, respectively; however, Barrett Browning asks us here to think of story and portrait as mechanisms for subjectivity ("my better self"; "what he was and is"), and connects them both, rather, with love.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism has generally followed the modernists in dismissing Barrett Browning's religious understanding of love. We might recall here the last words of Aurora's father, "'Love'/ 'Love, my child, love, love!'—(then he had done with grief)/ 'Love, my child'" (I.211–13). We think, however, that it is worth looking more carefully at such passages to understand how Barrett Browning formulates her own radical position, one that calls upon love while critiquing the bourgeois version of the same (keeping "quiet by the fire"; never saying "'no' when the world says 'ay'"). Although she is clearly influenced by the commonplaces of Wordsworthian Romanticism ("That murmur of the outer Infinite/ Which unweaned babies smile at in their sleep" [I.12–13]), Barrett Browning is just as critical of lyric poetry's understanding of love, as we will see. In melding lyricism and novelistic realism, Barrett Browning is making a case, rather, for love as a radical force in the present.

Aurora herself critiques her father's deathbed proclamation of love. Like the quietist version of love she eviscerates in her rejection of the angel in the house—her father's version lacks love's radical dimension, which Barrett Browning explores over the course of *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora's father does receive "his sacramental gift/ With eucharistic meanings; for he loved" (I.91–2); indeed, love succeeds in providing him a certain degree of freedom: "through love," he "had suddenly/ Thrown

off the old conventions, broken loose/ From chin-bands of the soul, like Lazarus"
(I.176–8). Where Barrett Browning finds fault is in any love that is not accompa-
nied by action in the present. It is this Pauline call to action that is the main impetus
behind her continual turn to religion. As we noted in this book's introduction,
Saint Paul's understanding of the time–action–character nexus is an influential one
for making sense of event, whether we are discussing the secularization of eschatol-
ogy posited by Kermode as the "time-order of novels" or the radical dimension of
"event" theorized by Badiou. Barrett Browning's version of *kairos* is not the "mak-
ing immanent" of an Augustinian conversion narrative, which we have aligned
with the *bildungsroman*. Neither is it teleological, oriented to an anagogic realm
unconnected to this world or the time of the present. Barrett Browning's version of
the time–action–character nexus comes closer to Badiou's understanding of Saint
Paul, which is oriented to action in the present. Barrett Browning critiques the love
that drives Aurora's father—but not to just action in the present. Aurora's father

> had reached to freedom, *not to action*, lived,
> But lived as one entranced, with thoughts, not aims,—
> Whom love had unmade from a common man,
> But not completed to an uncommon man. (I.181–4; emphasis
> ours)

The same implicit critique applies as much to Romney as to Aurora Leigh. What
is required, Barrett Browning argues, is not only love with action (Aurora's lesson)
but also action with love (Romney's).

   Aurora's father, by contrast, remains stuck in skepticism, freedom from conven-
tion, but with no impetus to change things for the better:

> He taught me all the ignorance of men,
> And how God laughs in heaven when any man
> Says "Here I'm learned; this I understand;
> In that, I am never caught at fault or doubt."
> He sent the schools to school, demonstrating
> A fool will pass for such through one mistake,
> While a philosopher will pass for such,
> Through said mistakes being ventured in the gross
> And heaped up to a system. (I.190–8)

He does not move beyond the extreme skepticism of Ecclesiastes, in other words,
which, of course, is where *Aurora Leigh* begins: "of making many books *there is*
no end; and much study *is* a weariness of the flesh" (Ecc. XII.12). In the first line
of Barrett Browning's poem, "Of writing many books there is no end," we find
ourselves faced with the Old Testament exhortation against action in the present:

"I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit. *That which* is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered" (Ecc. I.14–15). The final movement of the poem toward Romney's vision of a New Jerusalem can best be understood in light of Barrett Browning's Pauline response: love.

That position is itself caught up in formal and generic concerns: poetry and the novel both make a claim to represent love, an important element of domestic, bourgeois ideology. There are different ways to think about love in terms of time, action, and character, however. Is love bound to a developmental narrative with marriage as closural endpoint, a particularly common structure for the nineteenth-century novel?[10] Is love understood as kairotic, outside of time and space, as much nineteenth-century lyric poetry understands it? There is nothing inherently novelistic about the former nor anything inherently poetic about the latter. Just as with religion and eschatology, there is more than one way to structure love's relation to the time–action–character nexus and to what we have been calling "the shape of the real."

Barrett Browning, for her part, is quite conscious of these concerns. The section of Book I on the love of Aurora's father for his wife ("unmade from a common man,/ But not completed to an uncommon man") directly follows a section about the effect of thought and emotion on our ability to see what is plainly before us in the scene where Aurora contemplates her dead mother's portrait. Aurora, "half in terror, half/ In adoration" (I.137–8), responding to "Assunta's awe" (I.143) and her "poor father's melancholy eyes" (I.144), cannot help but let her "thoughts" wander "beyond sight" (I.145–6) as she looks at her mother's portrait:

> And as I grew
> In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously,
> Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
> Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
> Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,
> With still that face . . . which did not therefore change,
> But kept the mystic level of all forms,
> Hates, fears, and admirations, was by turns
> Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,
> A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
> A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
> A still Medusa with mild milky brows
> All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
> Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon
> Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords

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[10] See, for example, D. A. Miller's *Narrative and Its Discontents.*

> Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first
> Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked
> And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;
> Or my own mother, leaving her last smile
> In her last kiss upon the baby-mouth
> My father pushed down on the bed for that,—
> Or my dead mother, without smile or kiss,
> Buried at Florence. (I.146–68)

The face does not change but it cannot help but be tinged by desire and the generic matrices—some lyric, some narrative—that give form to that desire: classical, Romantic, pastoral, Gothic, melodramatic, liturgical, fairytale, all of which affect what is perceived. All such generic images "glassed themselves/ Before my meditative childhood" (I.169–70) as Aurora's gaze "Concentrated on the picture" (I.169), each necessarily distorting the thing perceived.

This passage anticipates Barrett Browning's dismissal of various generic possibilities in Book V of *Aurora Leigh*. Although she at times mouths Romantic commonplaces—"Trust the spirit,/As Sovran nature does, to make the form" (V.224–5)—she ends up adopting by Book VI a proto-Lacanian understanding of all symbolic form as ideological fantasy construction:

> O world, O world,
> O jurists, rhymers, dreamers, what you please,
> We play a weary game of hide-and-seek!
> We shape a figure of our fantasy,
> Call nothing something, and run after it
> And lose it, lose ourselves too in the search,
> Till clash against us comes a somebody
> Who also has lost something and is lost,
> Philosopher against philanthropist,
> Academician against poet, man
> Against woman, against the living the dead,—
> Then home, with a bad headache and worse jest! (VI.282–93)

Not only is Barrett Browning here showing her consciousness of and frustration with the various dialectical oppositions of the Victorian period, but she seems also aware that either side of any dialectic is shaping world systems out of nothing—shaping "a figure of our fantasy" and calling "nothing something," with alliteration and the repetition of "thing" serving to give the lie to philosophy's or the novel's assumption of direct, unmediated representation. The return to a straight iambic pentameter has meter itself taking the place of the imposition of meaning, here turned into but the beat of form:

> We shápe a fígure óf our fántasy´,
> Call nóthing sómething, ánd run áfter ít
> And lóse it, lóse oursélves tóo in the séarch

The loss of that search and of the iambic foot in the tension between meter and syntax ("lóse oursélves tóo") underscores the relation of the search for meaning and language, which poetry continually interrogates. (As we will see in Chapter Seven on *Amours de Voyage*, Clough heartily and Claude half-heartedly embrace this questioning of our desire for fantasies of representation—calling nothing something—as well as of our structural mechanisms for achieving these effects— shaping a figure of our fantasy.) In other words, Barrett Browning exposes the fantastical and ultimately groundless nature of ideological positions. She acknowledges that the philosopher-poet and the prosaic philanthropist ultimately betray the fact that they are both reliant on ideological mystification to proceed.

As in Byron, this insight in no way impedes Barrett Browning's embrace of a radical principle of justice. To make sense of this position, let us return to that portrait of Aurora's mother, in which the face itself, drawn "after she was dead" (I.128), is expressed as pure materiality, "my dead mother, without smile or kiss." It is the Real that serves as "the mystic level of all forms" here—*das Ding*, the "incoherencies of change and death" (I.171) or the lesson of Ecclesiastes: "For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all *is* vanity" (Eccles. III.19).[11] Rather than read all signification as equally futile (Clough's position, as we will see), or posit a truer, Kantian, inaccessible sublime reality beyond the veil of this world (the common Romantic position), Barrett Browning reads the Real *into* signification as the "mystic level of all forms," a position that then drives her radicalism. Feeling "a mother-want about the world" (I.40) because of her loss, Aurora must move beyond her father's extreme skepticism, beyond Ecclesiastes, and beyond Romanticism's version of the anagogic toward a theorization of "Love's holy earnest" (I.55) that, by the end of her tale, she is able to represent as a fight for justice in the present: "Women know/ The way to rear up children (*to be just*)" (I.47–8; emphasis ours). Rejecting Romney's effort to impose upon her the same constraining forms Aurora reads into her dead mother's portrait ("doating mothers"; "perfect wives"; "Sublime Madonnas"; "enduring saints"), Aurora insists instead on being Christ, and a poet (II.220–5).[12]

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[11] To put this in Lacanian terms, "the excess of the Real, the terrifying abyss of what is in the image beyond the image" (Žižek, *Puppet*, 62). The unsymbolizable Real is not outside signification in this view, it is "the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted" (Žižek, *Puppet*, 75).

[12] For a reading in sympathy with our approach here, see Corinne Davies' "Aurora, the Morning Star." As Davies puts it, "The revelation or vision of Book 9 is not a traditional Christian cop-out; it is the end of the soul-making and soul-saving process of this poem by the female Christ-poet" (59).

The novel's approach to the anagogic is quite different from what Barrett Browning proposes here. The novel connects the thick cause-and-effect temporality of narrative with the optative choices of a given life, particularly those that bind us to another through marriage. Each choice we make ensures our having been more fully bound. In this way of thinking, "time is the ultimate prison ('no one can jump outside of his/her time')," so that, as Žižek puts it in discussing this nineteenth-century paradigm, "the whole of philosophy and religion circulates around one aim: to break out of this prison-house of time into eternity" (*Puppet*, 13). Romantic lyricism's representation of love similarly proceeds from the particular to the universal: "the old Platonic *topos* of love as Eros . . . gradually elevates itself from love for a particular individual, through love for the beauty of a human body in general and the love of the beautiful form as such, to love for the supreme Good beyond all forms" (Žižek, *Puppet*, 13). Barrett Browning clearly rejects this model throughout her writing, presenting eternity as what Žižek would later call "the ultimate prison, a suffocating closure" (*Puppet*, 14). "Let us stay/ Rather on earth, Belovèd," she puts it succinctly in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* #22.[13] This is also the Pauline interpretation of Christ, as understood by Badiou and Žižek: "true love is . . . *forsaking the promise of Eternity itself for an imperfect individual*" (Žižek, *Puppet*, 13).

Understanding this helps us to see what is at stake in Barrett Browning's formal choices, which she explores most extensively and self-reflexively in Book V, the center of her nine-book novel-poem. In debating what form her work should take ("What form is best for poems?" [V.223]), Aurora resists the lure of fame and its promised eternity. As Barrett Browning puts it,

> Fame, indeed, 't was said,
> Means simply love. It was a man said that:
> And then, there's love and love: the love of all
> (To risk in turn a woman's paradox)
> Is but a small thing to the love of one. (V.477–81)

Such passages have been dismissed as simply sentimental, but Barrett Browning has a larger argument to make about love and its relation to just action. As we see in Book V, Aurora chooses the verse-novel as her vehicle to avoid the pitfalls she reads in the other generic forms she names: the "rapid" temporality of the ballad (V.84–6); the static and "dynastic" sonnet (V.86–9); the photorealism of the descriptive

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[13] Barrett Browning is clear that such a call is tied to formal concerns, which is one reason she chooses the Petrarchan form in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* while rejecting the hard *volta* that normally follows the opening octet, as in Sonnet #22: "The angels would press on us and aspire/ To drop some golden orb of perfect song/ Into our deep, dear silence" (lines 8–10, precisely at the volta). Any talk of soul ("When our two souls stand up erect and strong") is instead tied to physical materiality, including sexuality, as it is in these lines or the next: "Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher/ Until the lengthening wings break into fire."

poem (V.90–5); the "surface-pictures" (V.131) of the pastoral; the epic's limitation to see "No character or glory in his times" (V.190); the drama's adoption of "the standard of the public taste" (V.270).

The verse-novel, by contrast, allows Aurora (and Barrett Browning) to adopt the Pauline position, and in terms that understand both that position and her formal choice as radical. Unlike the pagan Greeks and their "babble of gods" (V.99), "we are called to mark/ A still more intimate humanity/ *In this inferior nature, or ourselves*" (V.99–101; emphasis ours). Her terms are close to those of Žižek when he interprets Saint Paul's writings:

> for Christianity, the Fall is not really a Fall at all, but "in itself" its very opposite, the emergence of freedom. There is no place from which we have fallen; what came before was just the stupid natural existence. The task is thus not to return to a previous "higher" existence, but to transform our lives in *this* world. (*Puppet*, 86)

Aurora's turn from Ecclesiastes to Saint Paul similarly includes a rejection of any previous higher existence:

> Earth (shut up
> By Adam, like a fakir in a box
> Left too long buried) remained stiff and dry,
> A mere dumb corpse, till Christ the Lord came down,
> Unlocked the doors, forced open the blank eyes,
> And used his kingly chrism to straighten out
> The leathery tongue turned back into the throat;
> Since when, she lives, remembers, palpitates
> In every limb, aspires in every breath,
> Embraces infinite relations. (V.103–12)

It would be wrong to dismiss such lines as parroting quietist religious doctrine. Barrett Browning's goal is to inspire action in the present through a love understood not as idealized (epic), inexpressible (lyric), or merely domestic (novelistic). She applies the same logic not only to quotidian, human existence ("we are called to mark/ A still more intimate humanity/ In this inferior nature, or ourselves") but also to our understanding of nature ("infinite relations" exist in the here and now, Earth "palpitates/ In every limb"). Following her critique of the love of Aurora's father for his wife ("unmade from a common man,/ But not completed to an uncommon man"), Barrett Browning's objective is ultimately revolutionary, oriented toward change in the here and now: "All actual heroes are essential men,/ And all men possible heroes" (V.151–2).

We can now perhaps better understand the plot choices Barrett Browning makes in *Aurora Leigh* and the relationship of this poem to Byron's *Don Juan*. We have in *Aurora Leigh* Barrett Browning's own version of event and the future-anterior call to action in the present, which is to say that Barrett Browning adopts a radical position that existed as a formal possibility post-Byron. Barrett Browning's goal appears to be to trouble the status quo by directing the "very heart of passionate womanhood" (*Aurora Leigh*, V.443) toward a critique of the present: that is, she offers love and compassion as radical politics. As Barrett Browning puts it in "Curse for a Nation" (the conclusion of *Poems before Congress*), in response to "an angel" exhorting her to write,

> "To curse, choose men.
> For I, a woman, have only known
> How the heart melts and the tears run down."[14]

The angel responds in the next line that "Therefore," *for that very reason*, "shalt thou write/. . . A curse from the depths of womanhood" (41, 47). In Barrett Browning's formulation, love is precisely what drives critique: "'From the summits of love a curse is driven,/ As lightning is from the tops of heaven'" (15). That this exhortation comes from an angel underscores the Pauline impetus behind that curse, a curse given "For love of freedom" (25). For Christ to "avenge his elect/ And deliver the earth," we must listen for the spirit versus the letter of the law, not "virtue starved to vice on/ Self-praise, self-interest, and suspicion" (27–8) or the use of "feudal law/ To strangle the weak" (86–7), but the willingness to count "the sin for a sin" (88) before "God's witnessing Universe" (117).

Talk of religion in Barrett Browning is not *ipso facto* suspect. To make sense of the ideological import of such passages, we need to understand the structural logic of her use of religion and how that logic differs from the use of religion in other formal structures. In particular, we want to make sense of the different temporal signatures of religious thinking: Barrett Browning's differs both from eschatological approaches oriented to the end times and from Augustinian conversion narratives that tie religion to the trajectory of a single life ("imminent" versus "immanent" versions of *kairos*, as Kermode puts it). We believe that we can identify in Byron and Barrett Browning a tradition that runs counter to both of these forms of temporality, a tradition that is supported by and articulated through the hybrid nature of the verse-novel as form. Most nineteenth-century novels subscribe to a notion of temporality whereby historical process appears full of possibility until it

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[14] In *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, lines 38–40. Subsequent references to this poem will appear in parentheses and give line numbers.

is disclosed, in retrospect, to leave no alternatives.[15] This version of temporality is akin to what George Eliot famously terms "the present causes of past effects" (704), which Hans Meyrick in *Daniel Deronda* jokingly applies to "the world's affairs generally" (704).[16] However much Eliot shows herself to be fully capable of self-consciously bearing the novel's own devices in such passages, the term perfectly describes the thick cause-and-effect temporality of Eliot's own novels. By contrast, Byron and Barrett Browning are concerned with *the present effects of future causes*. Barrett Browning puts it well in *Casa Guidi Windows*: we must "plant the great Hereafter in this Now" (I.299). As we saw in Chapter Five, it is this future-anterior demand for action in the present that best exemplifies Byron's radical position. As Byron has it in Canto V of *Don Juan*:

> For I will teach, if possible, the stones
> To rise against Earth's tyrants. Never let it
> Be said that we still truckle unto thrones;—
> But ye—our children's children! Think how we
> Showed *what things were* before the World was free!

From the perspective of the future, we can begin to imagine other possibilities in our own present. As Žižek puts it, "retrospectively, from the standpoint of later observation, we can discern alternatives in the past, possibilities of events taking a different path" (*Puppet*, 164).

   We have used the term "future anterior" to distinguish the logic of this strategy from a future perfect still subordinated to momentous causes. A statement like "I will have arrived" could be read as at once narrative-driven and will-driven: we project onto the future the realized success of our agency. Once the kairotic moment of opportune action arrives, I will have become the hero I was always meant to be. Or, once the world meets my probabilistic projections, it will have realized my plans for it. This is how Romney initially understands heroism and radicalism. But Barrett Browning's approach to the act-event is quite different. As Romney learns, we humans "have no prescience" (IX.865) and, so, cannot calculate change by systems and programs: "Fewer systems, we who are held and do not hold/ Less mapping out of masses to be saved,/ By nations or by sexes" (IX.866–8). We must be, rather, driven by principles not bound by the generic and formal constraints of the present, principles that arrive from the future as a demand for us to act now: a Hereafter that demands to be planted in this Now through actions

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[15] Mary Mullen also makes an argument about Barrett Browning's alternative form of temporality in *Aurora Leigh*: "by representing multiple, overlapping timescapes, *Aurora Leigh* questions the dominance of linear, progressive time" (64). She also points out the "multiplicity of historical time" (65) opened by *Aurora Leigh*'s generic hybridity.

[16] Cynthia Chase famously reads this phrase as deconstructive of the novel form because it unveils sequence as necessary fiction; we take this unveiling as constructive of novelistic effects. See "The Decomposition of Elephants."

motivated by love without calculation. Such an act of love has no direct goal and does not lead to marriage as narrative endpoint, nor to the reproductive futurism that is such an important aspect of domestic realism, nor to the bio-power of nationalist rhetoric ("Less mapping out of masses to be saved,/ By nations or by sexes").

Let us return now to the new Jerusalem heralded at the end of *Aurora Leigh*: "The first foundations of that new, near Day/ Which should be builded out of heaven to God" (IX.956–7). The poem ends here, a fact that invites us to collapse narrative closure and eschatological teleology. However, Barrett Browning makes it clear that she sees such a destiny as impetus for action in the present. As she writes in her letters, she "expect[ed] . . . a great development of Christianity *in opposition to the churches*, and of humanity generally *in opposition to the nations*."[17] Her version of religion is therefore not dissimilar from Badiou's understanding of event. As Badiou writes, "Pure event is detached from every objectivist assignation to the particular laws of a world or society yet concretely destined to become inscribed within a world and within a society" (*Saint Paul*, 107–8).

A new understanding of event is precisely what Romney must learn over the course of the narrative. Here is the rest of the passage quoted earlier:

> "Fewer programmes, we who have no prescience,
> Fewer systems, we who are held and do not hold.
> Less mapping out of masses to be saved,
> By nations or by sexes. Fourier's void,
> And Comte absurd,—and Cabet puerile.
> Subsist no rules of life outside of life,
> No perfect manners without Christian souls:
> The Christ Himself had been no Lawgiver
> Unless He had given the life, too, with the law." (IX.865–73)

In this understanding of religion, the "stringent soul . . ./ Obeys the old law of development"; however, there also exists "The Spirit ever witnessing in ours,/ And Love, the soul of soul, within the soul,/ Evolving it sublimely" (IX.877–81). For Barrett Browning, the name for that principle is love. We can now return to Romney's statement about love, which directly follows:

> "First, God's love."
>
> "And next," he smiled, "the love of wedded souls,
> Which still presents that mystery's counterpart" (IX.881–2)

As with her understanding of religion, Barrett Browning's version of love is quite distinct from the marital closure of the nineteenth-century novel, which is why

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[17] *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, II.194, emphasis ours.

Aurora must reject Romney before returning to him, not as the desired endpoint of a narrative trajectory, but as a new beginning: "New churches, new oeconomies, new laws,/ Admitting freedom, new societies/ Excluding falsehood: He shall make all new" (IX.947–9).

We can read in the trajectory from Byron to Barrett Browning a counter-tradition that existed as an option in the period—a highly visible one, in fact, given the popularity of both poets. Our difficulty in recognizing the counter-tradition of Byron and Barrett Browning is in part a result of twentieth-century criticism's disappearance of both poets from literary history. Although Byron and Barrett Browning have been increasingly reintroduced into critical discussions, "In the first seventy years of the twentieth century," Marjorie Stone explains, "*Aurora Leigh*—along with most of the other works that made Barrett Browning the most internationally recognized English woman poet of the nineteenth century—was largely erased from literary history, and she was chiefly identified as the author of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*" ("The 'Advent'").[18] This exclusion is compounded by our persistence in reading poetry and novel as distinct, mutually exclusive architexts. Examining them together allows us to identify transgeneric formal mechanisms—including counter-hegemonic alternatives—for structuring time, history, identity, and action. We can thus also begin to enter the neglected form of the verse-novel back into our understanding of literary history.

[18] For a truer and fuller understanding of the impact of *Aurora Leigh*, we recommend Marjorie Stone's essay, the full title of which is "The 'Advent' of *Aurora Leigh*: Critical Myths and Periodical Debates." We are greatly indebted to Stone for invaluable feedback on an early draft of this chapter.

7

Arthur Hugh Clough and the Non-Event

The hybrid nature of the verse-novel puts it at a critical distance from the generic and ideological forms it sits unevenly across. That distance can lead to productive skepticism, as we have seen, but it can also lead to paralysis. This chapter examines what happens when the ability to see the play of forms creates an inability to form belief or act on it. Unlike Barrett Browning's revolutionary call from a Hereafter demanding to be planted in this Now, Arthur Clough asks us to consider the *impossibility* of event, be it personal act or historical occurrence, love or revolution. In *Amours de Voyage*, his main character, Claude, is so fearful of being duped by something "factitious" that he ends up not able to do much of anything. "Factitious," which is to say artificial and contrived, is Claude's favorite term, repeated five times in later versions of the poem and directed at all ideological and generic conventions, whether lyric or novelistic. In fact, *Amours de Voyage* offers up an overdetermination of generic markers—epic, novel, lyric, and Byronic romance—while undoing the reader's expectations for each. Genres in this poem are placed in juxtaposition, another favorite term of Clough's, and in service of a radical skepticism that functions quite differently from the version we saw in Byron and Barrett Browning. Like Byron and Barrett Browning, Clough challenges the dominant ways for making sense of temporality and the subject in the nineteenth century, both on the side of the novel and on the side of the lyric, but he does so without adopting the future-anterior temporality we explored in Chapters Five and Six. Examining a verse-novel that rejects the radical possibilities we read in Byron and Barrett Browning should help us to understand better what is required for the structural logic of the revolutionary act-event to be implemented in a literary work.

  We will begin with those juxtaposed generic markers before turning to the act-event. Although the four opening epigraphs already work to some extent against epic elevation ("*solvitur ambulando*," for example), we begin the poem with the meter (catalectic blank dactylic hexameters), paratactic sentence structure, and grand gestures of an epic poem:

> Over the great windy waters, and over the clear-crested summits,
>   Unto the sun and the sky, and unto the perfecter earth,

> Come, let us go,—to a land wherein gods of the old time wandered,
>   Where every breath even now changes to ether divine.[1]

In the very next line, however, Clough immediately undercuts all epic pretensions, deflating the search for epic markers by situating the poem within a tourist industry seeking a lost past—and a lost fantasy of action—in the ruins of Rome:

> Come, let us go; though withal a voice whisper, "The world that we live in,
>   Whithersoever we turn, still is the same narrow crib;
> 'Tis but to prove limitation, and measure a cord, that we travel;
>   Let who would 'scape and be free go to his chamber and think;
> 'Tis but to change idle fancies for memories wilfully falser;
>   'Tis but to go and have been."—Come, little bark! let us go!
>   (I.5–10)

Any promise of epic action is recast as a question of ideology ("'Tis but to change idle fancies for memories wilfully falser"). Clough is here in direct opposition to his friend Matthew Arnold: "What are the eternal objects of Poetry, among all nations and at all times? They are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the Poet."[2] Whereas Arnold asks us to adopt the "*grand style*" (489) of the epic, Clough questions the extent to which any action can be deemed significant or transformative, let alone heroic ("'Tis but to go and have been"). *Amours de Voyage* suggests that all acts, not just travel, serve to constrain us as subjects: "'Tis but to prove limitation, and measure a cord." The only hope for freedom is in radical skepticism and, arguably, *inaction* ("Let who would 'scape and be free go to his chamber and think").

Amours de Voyage further undercuts the generic expectations of the epic through the utterly unheroic inactions of our anti-hero Claude:

>   And what's the
> Roman Republic to me, or I to the Roman Republic?
>   Why not fight?—In the first place, I haven't so much as a musket.
> In the next, if I had, I shouldn't know how I should use it.
> In the third, just at present I'm studying ancient marbles.
> In the fourth, I consider I owe my life to my country.
> In the fifth,—I forget; but four good reasons are ample. (III.66–72)

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[1] Clough, *Amours de Voyage*, COVE Critical Edition, I.1–4. Unlike past editions of the poem, this one reproduces the text of the original 1858 publication in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses and will include Canto and line numbers.

[2] Arnold, "Preface" to *Poems*, 488. Subsequent references to this essay will appear in parentheses.

If not the epic, so bathetically undone here, surely the novel offers us the promise of generic intelligibility and expectation. Clough even invites the accommodation of novelistic concerns by poetry in his 1853 review, "Recent English Poetry," which he published after writing *Amours de Voyage* and in which he quotes his own poem:

> there is no question, it is plain and patent enough, that people much prefer "Vanity Fair" and "Bleak House." Why so? Is it simply because we have grown prudent and prosaic, and should not welcome, as our fathers did, the Marmions and the Rokebys, the Childe Harolds and the Corsairs? Or is it, that to be widely popular, to gain the ear of multitudes, to shake the heart of men, poetry should deal, more than at present it usually does, with general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of human nature? Could it not attempt to convert into beauty and thankfulness, or at least into some form and shape, some feeling, at any rate, of content—the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned.[3]

Amours de Voyage is long narrative fiction, after all, and presents us with a central amorous plot that would seem to promise the marital closure of nineteenth-century domestic fiction. However, here again, any narrative expectation that we might bring to the story because of its similarity to so many Victorian novels is resisted and even overturned: the generically expected plotline ultimately fizzles without resolution or any satisfying closure.

The concretization of space and time that characterizes the novel as form is continually undercut as well, aided by the belatedness of Clough's generic choice: an epistolary-novel form that, certainly in February to May 1858 when the poem was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, was as superseded as the epic was when Henry Fielding in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews* argued, "when any kind of writing contains all it's [sic] other parts, such as fable, action, characters, sentiments, and diction, and is deficient in metre only; it seems, I think, reasonable to refer it to the epic."[4] Samuel Richardson's turn to the epistolary allowed the novel to explore the subjective musings of individual characters in a form (the letter) that logically can only ever reflect on events that have already occurred. The epistolary novel thus provided literary history with a counter to the picaresque (largely empty) temporality of Fielding's novels. In Fielding's picaresque version of the novel, things happen suddenly with little cause-and-effect concretization—there may be causes and effects, but they do not appear to us with the same ineluctable inevitability we see in the Victorian novel. In Richardson's epistolary novels, actions matter deeply for the people involved, but in a way that is always secondary to the sensibility of

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[3] "Recent English Poetry," 396. Subsequent references to this essay will appear in parentheses.
[4] Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*, I.ii.

the characters themselves.[5] In invoking this pre-history of the novel as form, as we will see, Clough interrogates the Victorian novel's dominant understanding of subjectivity in time.

Even as Clough's verse-novel invites comparison with different narrative genres, each canto's opening and ending offer us reflection in a monologic lyric vein, separate from the subjective viewpoints of any of the characters in the cantos themselves. Each of these lyric moments is connected to travel and the lyric transport one seeks from such experiences—the inviolability of the soul's contemplation of the eternal, for example: "Yet may we, thinking on these things, exclude what is meaner around us;/ . . . Yet may we think, and forget, and possess our souls in resistance" (III.5–7). At other times, we are given the orientalism and classicism of Byron and Arnold, respectively, what in "Recent English Poetry" Clough dismisses as "all the imitations and *quasi*-translations which help to bring together in a single focus the scattered rays of human intelligence; poems after classical models, poems from Oriental sources, and the like" (396) or, as he puts it in *Amours de Voyage*, "Alba, thou findest me still, and, Alba, thou findest me ever" (I.266). Clough references the aura of the ruin made popular by Byron's *Childe Harold*: "Does there a spirit we know not, though seek, though we find, comprehend not/ Here to entice and confuse, tempt and evade us, abide?" (II.3–4). He pines for the wonders and comforts of the natural world—"Ah, that I were, far away from the crowd and the streets of the city,/ Under the vine-trellis laid, O my beloved, with thee!" (III.15–16)—and, yes, for lyric love as well: "I wander, and ask as I wander,/ Weary, yet eager and sure, Where shall I come to my love?" (IV.1–2). Even within these sections, however, Clough maintains an abiding skepticism regarding all such generic expectations, asking, as he does throughout the poem, "Is it illusion?" (II.1).

Another important generic precursor for *Amours de Voyage* is Byron's idiosyncratic take on the metrical romance, especially *Don Juan*. The similarities between the two poems are striking. A long poem that engages both novelistic and lyric conventions, *Amours* follows Claude's touristic progress across Europe in a way that draws from Clough's own travels and personal letters or journal; it is a fictional tale of amorous connections that occurs alongside actual historical events and figures; the main character witnesses military conflict but encounters it from a marginal position from which it appears chaotic; the poem digresses continually into discussions of metaphysical concerns; and the tone is one of unrelenting cynicism. Indeed, Clough's second epigraph, "*il doutait de tout, même de l'amour*," echoes Byron's "He who doubts all things, nothing can deny" (*Don Juan*, XV.701).

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[5] On this literary history and the influence of the eighteenth-century novel on the lyric, see especially Starr, *Lyric Generations*.

Just as it rejects the expectations of the genres of novel, epic, and lyric, *Amours* resists the strategy that made Byron's poetry such a mass-market poetic phenomenon. Like *Childe Harold*, which, as Claude declares to Eustace, "I hate" (I.205), Clough employs a breakdown of the separation between author and fictional character, addresses to Roman ruins, a real historical backdrop, an amorous plot, philosophical digressions, a travel narrative—all without the Byronic hero's bravura. As in Byron's work, we are given a fiction that is lifted, sometimes verbatim, from Clough's personal letters and journal, thus offering the same breakdown of the distinction between fiction and reality found throughout Byron's oeuvre, but in a way that serves not to exalt the author, only ever to undercut him. What achieves an ineffable aura in Byron's ruins—"the place/ Became religion, and the heart ran o'er/ With silent worship of the great of old!" (*Manfred*), "there is a power/ And magic in the ruined battlement" (*Childe Harold* IV), "in this magic circle raise the dead" (*Childe Harold* IV)—in Clough becomes "Rome disappoints me much; I hardly as yet understand, but/ *Rubbishy* seems the word that most exactly would suit it" (I.19–20). What gives a heroic stature to Childe Harold and Don Juan—their connection to military and amorous conquest, a prospect Claude can imagine but not act upon ("Dreamt of a sword at my side and a battle-horse underneath me" [II.62])—becomes ultimately in *Amours de Voyage* a declaration of mere inefficacy: "I am a coward, and know it" (V.84). Indeed, we can point to few characters in nineteenth-century literature who are more fully the opposite of the Byronic hero than is Clough's protagonist. An anti-hero, "more a coward than ever,/ Chicken-hearted" (V.117–18), Claude questions the motivations driving Byron's heroic and sexual plots. What Clough offers instead is a "character," Claude, who makes us question the depth psychology first articulated for the novel by Richardson, theorized by the Romantic poets in the expressivist lyric, and eventually adopted by the Victorian novel in its evolution from the picaresque to full-blown psychological realism.

Act-Event

To make sense of what Clough does here, we should recall the differences among how Byron, the novel, and the lyric understand the act-event. Each approaches the nature of the subject and the nature of the subject's acts (both personal and political) in formally different ways. We cannot fully understand the struggle for the ideological soul of the bourgeois subject without accounting for these differences. Generic, formal markers transform how we can make sense of any subject's act and the relation (or non-relation) of any act to other acts in time.

We have argued that Byron's notion of event comes close to Badiou's understanding of the term, which Badiou reads into a philosophical tradition stretching

back well before the nineteenth century. Spurred by the French Revolution, what Byron proposes is a broken temporality and subjectivity ("'The time is out of joint,'—and so am I" [IX.321–2]). This approach to the present helps him to see all extant conventions, ideologies, and laws as necessarily lacking: extend your temporal view to a long enough *durée* and all present forms of mastery are proven suspect. His response to this situation is not despair or misanthropy but hope, which is also how Badiou understands event, tracing this way of thinking about time and action all the way back to the writings of Saint Paul: "The share of suffering is inevitable; such is the law of the world. But hope, wagered by the event and the subject who binds himself to it, distributes consolation as that suffering's only real, here and now" (*Saint Paul*, 66–7). Byron shares Saint Paul's understanding of the subject as tied to the militant act that fights for freedom—and, of course, for Byron we can say that literally, given his decision to fight for Greek liberation. What matters for our understanding of the lyric and the novel is the temporal logic of Byron's subject in time. Its revolutionary force lies in a double gesture: a questioning of all present forms of law and an insistent, obstinate militancy oriented toward a future-anterior call for revolutionary action. Accepting the worst in the present, one fights—obstinately, on the side of hope and of a collective being outside any nation or group—toward an indeterminable future. This position proved to be one that the increasingly dominant way of thinking about the novel and the lyric—and of thinking also about political reform—counteracted.

Let us recall the logic of the optative that we explored in the first part of this book. Whereas the temporality of Byron's understanding of event and the subject is the future anterior, the temporality of the novel's understanding of the same is the optative, a grammatical mood rather than a tense. If the future anterior issues an insistent call to action in the present, the novel's understanding of the subject is determined, rather, by actions *not* taken: the might-have-been of the unchosen path. By adopting this mechanism, as we saw in Chapter Three, even novels about Byronic heroes were able to bury, metaphorically and literally, both Byron and his call to action.

The optative underscores the kairotic significance of the one critical moment in time such that all other possibilities are shut down in the moment of decision. By at once considering and dismissing these counterfactual possibilities, we determine how we came to be who and what we are. Stefanie Markovits echoes this logic in *The Crisis of Action*, where Clough figures prominently: "My claim is that on some level, in literature at least, if not in life, we are who we are, not by virtue of what we do, but by what we have failed to do."[6] Andrew H. Miller aligns this way of thinking with both realism and bourgeois subjectivity: "Such economies encourage us to understand our lives as determinate, bounded (as by a body), separate from others; at the same time, they encourage us to abstract from that

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[6] Markovits, *The Crisis of Action*, 6.

separateness, to treat lives as comparable, perhaps in some sense exchangeable" ("Lives Unled," 123). Indeed, marriage, that most important closural mechanism for the Victorian novel, is read by Miller as particularly significant for the optative: "Consequential and irrevocable—irrevocable at least in an era when divorce was generally unavailable—marriage invites the optative in part simply because it is exclusive and the result of a decision that rules out alternatives" ("Lives Unled," 124). The bourgeois family is an important part of this structural mechanism, according to Miller: "Children can present to us—with whatever truth—the hope that our futures might be different from our pasts, that indeed we might become new people, reborn, living beyond our deaths" ("Lives Unled," 124); however, such a redemption *from* can only be achieved *through* "the condition of being nailed to oneself" ("Lives Unled," 124).

Each of the verse-novels we examine questions the logic, not only of bourgeois domesticity as ideology, but also the mechanisms by which the bourgeois subject is constituted and justifies itself through its generic and structural procedures, the ways that we as subjects are nailed down. We cannot understand fully what the novel is doing without considering the ways it engages with poetry in thinking through these mechanisms. At the same time, we are not suggesting that genre by itself offers any sort of solution. To put this another way, the verse-novel does not automatically entail the future anterior, which is a formal and not strictly generic way of thinking about the time–action–character nexus that has been our concern throughout this book. *Amours de Voyage* helps us to see how the alternative temporality proposed by Byron and Barrett Browning is a formal approach to action that is not bound by the genre of the verse-novel, however much the hybridity of the verse-novel may have helped those poets think through new possibilities for the subject in time. At the same time, as we will see, the optative is not the sole province of fiction, and Claude will prove to be just as much a captive of its temporal logic.[7]

Amours/Voyage

Clough tackles these issues by tethering generic and gendered abstract principles to his two main protagonists: the prosaic, feminine, objective real on the one hand (Mary Trevellyn) and the philosophico-poetic, male, subjective ideal on the other (Claude). Seeming to play out a separate-spheres argument, Claude argues that women are not capable of achieving his ideal of perfection: "Ah, but the women,— God bless them! they don't think at all about it./Yet we must eat and drink, as you say. And as limited beings/Scarcely can hope to attain upon earth to an Actual

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[7] Andrew H. Miller says much the same about the logic of the optative in his book, *On Not Being Someone Else*: "Fiction may be the natural home for the people we are not, but as Frost's inescapable poem suggests, they also flourish in poetry—something that *It's a Wonderful Life* suggests for film as well" (xvi).

Abstract' (III.130–2). What possibly saves Clough from his own sexism is the fact that Claude is a superb early example of the modernist anti-hero, not to mention the decadent *flâneur*: feckless, selfish, "discontented," as Claude himself admits, "with things in particular, idle,/Sickly, complaining."[8] Indeed, in the end Claude doubts the value of his own search for the ideal, which is again discussed in terms of his relationship with Mary:

> Utterly vain is, alas, this attempt at the Absolute, wholly!—
> I, who believed not in her, because I would fain believe nothing,
> Have to believe as I may, with a wilful, unmeaning acceptance.
> I, who refused to enfasten the roots of my floating existence
> In the rich earth, cling now to the hard, naked rock that is left
> me.—
> Ah! she was worthy, Eustace,—and that, indeed, is my comfort,—
> Worthy a nobler heart than a fool such as I could have given.
> (V.63–9)

Playing the clod that is Claude's homonym and refusing to lay down roots into the rich earth of the real, of the body, and of the objective world, Clough's protagonist cannot but be read with a healthy degree of critical distance even while we cannot help but acknowledge that he speaks many of Clough's own personal beliefs.

Clough in the end refuses to believe in anything but incommensurability between ideological positions and, in so doing, could also be said to come to an understanding of the ideological nature of all formal choices. As Claude writes in response to a letter from his friend, Eustace,

> Juxtaposition is great,—but, you tell me, affinity greater.
> Ah, my friend, there are many affinities, greater and lesser,
> Stronger and weaker; and each, by the favour of juxtaposition,
> Potent, efficient, in force,—for a time; but none, let me tell you,
> Save by the law of the land and the ruinous force of the will, ah,
> None, I fear me, at last quite sure to be final and perfect.
> (III.151–6)

Resonating with the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who are writing at just this time, Clough makes a case for the ephemerality of all ideas and laws. According to Clough, everything changes with time because of the great law of juxtaposition, or, to put it in Marxist terms, because of the dialectic. We see here a self-consciousness about the contingency of all values—an anticipation that all beliefs will someday be replaced by new ones—which is an understanding

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[8] These lines were added to Canto II in a later edition of the poem.

that goes along with the rising new disciplines of history, palaeontology, and archaeology. Whereas many in the eighteenth century believed that reason would lead men to ultimate truths, thinkers of the nineteenth century began to reinterpret "truth" as "ideology," as but the belief of the moment.

Through its juxtaposition of opposing generic conventions and expectations, the verse-novel helped to foreground the contingency of all values and the ideological nature of all formal choices. In *Amours de Voyage*, the search for transcendent truth in philosophical rumination—"What with trusting myself and seeking support from within me/ Almost I could believe I had gained a religious assurance,/ Found in my own poor soul a great moral basis to rest on"—is revealed ultimately as "factitious entirely":

> I refuse, reject, and put it utterly from me;
> I will look straight out, see things, not try to evade them;
> Fact shall be fact for me, and the Truth the Truth as ever,
> Flexible, changeable, vague, and multiform, and doubtful.[9]

In every instance, be it novelistic or lyric, epic or romance, genre for Clough is ultimately that which takes us away from what we can never have, the thing itself, which Clough associates not with sublime Romantic Nature but with a nature that comes closer to Immanuel Kant's *Ding an sich*, an animalistic and vegetative nature that precedes human cognition:

> I am the ox in the dray, the ass with the garden-stuff panniers;
> I am the dog in the doorway, the kitten that plays in the window,
> Here on the stones of the ruin the furtive and fugitive lizard,
> Swallow above me that twitters, and fly that is buzzing about me;
> Yea, and detect, as I go, by a faint, but a faithful assurance,
> E'en from the stones of the street, as from rocks or trees of the forest,
> Something of kindred, a common, though latent vitality, greet me,
> And, to escape from our strivings, mistakings, misgrowths, and perversions,
> Fain could demand to return to that perfect and primitive silence,
> Fain be enfolded and fixed, as of old, in their rigid embraces.
> (III.163–72)

Even as he expresses this wish, Claude recognizes the impossibility of such a fantasy: as he states a few lines later, "could we eliminate only/ This vile hungering impulse, this demon within us of craving,/ Life were beatitude, living a perfect

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[9] These lines were all added to Canto V in a later edition of the poem.

divine satisfaction" (III.179–81). He may express the wish, "Let me, contented and mute, with the beasts of the field, my brothers,/ Tranquilly, happily lie" (III.212–13), but recognizes, in properly Lacanian fashion, that such a state is beyond the scope of the human. Indeed, he is careful throughout the appropriately titled *Amours* to distinguish natural reproduction and generation from human desire and all its "strivings, mistakings, misgrowths, and perversions":

> Tell me, my friend, do you think that the grain would sprout in the furrow,
> Did it not truly accept as its *summum et ultimum bonum*
> That mere common and may-be indifferent soil it is set in?
> Would it have force to develop and open its young cotyledons,
> Could it compare, and reflect, and examine one thing with another?
> Would it endure to accomplish the round of its natural functions,
> Were it endowed with a sense of the general scheme of existence?
> (III.40–6)

The problem we humans face is that we are continually searching for the general scheme, be it generic or ideological, by which to make sense of our actions in the present.

   When Claude does attempt to determine a specific fact—coming, indeed, as close as he ever does to the real of history in Epistle 7 of Canto II—the result is neither novelistic realism nor lyric transport nor history, which he ultimately deems that "Rumor of Rumors, I leave it to thee to determine!" (II.209):

> So, I have seen a man killed! An experience that, among others!
> Yes, I suppose I have; although I can hardly be certain,
> And in a court of justice could never declare I had seen it.
> But a man was killed, I am told, in a place where I saw
> Something; a man was killed, I am told, and I saw something.
> (II.162–6)

Ultimately, the referent of this episode exists there in that line break that is also a strangled final dactylic foot and enjambement, "I saw/ Something," a metrical disruption that is then repeated again but this time midway through the line—in case we missed it the first time—in a metric hiccup that—starting in the penultimate foot of the line—serves only to call our attention to the here absent fact of metrical verse itself: "I sáw/ Sómething; a mán was kílled, I am tóld, and I sáw sómething." The point here is not that the verse does or does not follow the exigencies of Homeric meter—a point much discussed by Victorian critics of the

poem.[10] Rather, we remain most true to the poem itself precisely in those instances where that "general scheme" is abrogated, as it is here. Referent, form, and genre are precisely what is not true to the poem, according to Clough. It is this act of marking that Clough acknowledges, even invites, but also resists by returning us continually to disruptions in his chosen verse form.

Like Byron, Clough uses poetic strategy to undermine poetry's referential function and to critique the truth claims of both history and the novel. However, unlike Byron, Clough proceeds from this strategy to question all action. At times he sounds like the neo-Marxist Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses": "*Action will furnish belief*,—but will that belief be the true one?" (*Amours de Voyage*, V.20). Claude fears that any action on his part, be it epic, heroic, or amatory, cannot help but be false because tied to some generic expectation—even as he makes fun of his cowardice in thinking this:

> I do not like being moved: for the will is excited; and action
> Is a most dangerous thing; I tremble for something factitious,
> Some malpractice of heart and illegitimate process;
> We are so prone to these things, with our terrible notions of
> duty.[11]

In addition to questioning Carlyle's doctrine of duty ("Moral blank, and moral void" he calls it in "Duty—That's to Say Complying"), *Amours* thus takes aim at the structuring mechanisms of the novel: the ways cause-and-effect sequences—the paths taken and the many paths therefore not taken—bind us to ourselves, or, as Claude puts it, "All the *assujettissement* of having been what one has been,/ What one thinks one is, or thinks that others suppose one" (I.30–1).

The twin structuring poles of that *assujettisement* for the novel were, of course, marriage and death.[12] Clough in *Amours* not only rejects such closural mechanisms, but also explores the logic of their interconnection for the subject in time. He uses travel (*Voyage*) as his primary metaphor for temporal movement over space:

> Look you, we travel along in the railway-carriage, or steamer,
> And, *pour passer le temps*, till the tedious journey be ended,
> Lay aside paper or book, to talk with the girl that is next one;
> And, *pour passer le temps*, with the terminus all but in prospect,
> Talk of eternal ties and marriages made in heaven. (III.108–12)

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[10] For an excellent recent examination of the logic behind Clough's choice of meter, see Erik Gray's "Clough and His Discontents."

[11] These lines were added to Canto II in a later edition of the poem.

[12] See, for example, Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*; D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents*; Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences*.

Talk of "eternal ties" is here bound to narrative, which steals us away from the present in such a way as to effectuate one's being-made-subject, one's *assujettisement*. The "terminus" is precisely the point as it takes us away from a recognition of the present real before us: "did we really accept with a perfect heart the illusion!/ Ah, did we really believe that the Present indeed is the Only!" (III.113–14). Rather, the decision to act is always circumscribed by an optative mode bound up with our anticipated death, by a desire also to live "beyond our deaths" ("Lives Unled," 124) through our children, as Miller argues. As Claude puts it,

> But for his funeral train which the bridegroom sees in the distance,
> Would he so joyfully, think you, fall in with the marriage-procession?
> But for that final discharge, would he dare to enlist in that service?
> But for that certain release, ever sign to that perilous contract?
> But for that exit secure, ever bend to that treacherous doorway?
> (III.117–21)

The mechanism that nails us to ourselves is one whereby anticipation or acknowledgement of the eternal binds us to our deeds and to our unions; only because of a belief in the eternal do we "submit to live and move as we do here" (III.129). Claude asks, "But for the steady fore-sense of a freer and larger existence,/ Think you that man could consent to be circumscribed here into action?" (III.123–4).

To understand how Clough's approach differs from the novel, even as Claude does not ultimately escape optative regret, we can contrast a prototypical novelistic example of travel in Italy: E. M. Forster's 1908 *A Room with a View*. Published nearly sixty years after *Amours de Voyage*, Forster's novel illustrates the persistence of the Romantic and Byronic tropes of lyric transport through travel that *Amours* engages, and allows us to contrast our discussion of the verse-novel to our earlier discussion of the novel-verse.[13] In *A Room with a View*, involvement with

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[13] Novels about travel owe a debt to Byron, as James Buzard has illustrated. It was Byron who first gave tourists and novels about them the possibility of experiencing the authentic because *anti-touristic* transport of engagement with the foreign other. Buzard writes, "Byron offered tourists a means of imagining and dramatizing their saving difference from the crowd of other tourists around them. Byronic emulation constituted a salient case of what Erving Goffman called *role distance*, the technique of establishing a 'pointed separateness between the individual and his putative role' by denying the image of the self that is 'implied in the role for all accepting performers'" (*Beaten Track*, 121). Even if mockery of Byron had itself "become a new form of role-distancing" by the middle of the nineteenth century (Buzard, *Beaten Track*, 129), the search for lyric transport or special prestige persisted as the aspiration for characters in any number of realist novels as they made their way through Venice, Florence, Rome, or the Tuscan countryside. Buzard sees *A Room with a View* as exemplary of this tradition. For an examination of how this touristic logic impacts Clough's *Amours de Voyage* (in light of Buzard's work), see especially Richard Cronin's "Byron, Clough, and the Grounding of Victorian Poetry." On Clough's representation of travel and the tourist, see also Christopher M. Kierstead's "Where 'Byron Used to Ride.'"

the sublime and abject other that is Italy allows characters to step outside of their identities long enough to lock them in tightly and to ensure the marriage that will bring the novel to its close in the promise of lyric love. The paradigmatic scene is the one where Lucy Honeychurch sees a man killed in Florence's Piazza Signoria. Afterward, "The whole world seemed pale and void of its original meaning," as if "she, as well as the dying man, had crossed some spiritual boundary."[14] The event forces Lucy out of her touristic complacency ("she entered the Piazza Signoria and looked nonchalantly at its marvels, now fairly familiar to her" [69]) and instead gives meaning and passion to life, forcing her out of her conventional identity and forcing narrative not only into action ("'Nothing ever happens to me,' she reflected, as she entered the Piazza Signoria" [69]) but also into a realm beyond photographic realism:

> She had been in his arms, and he remembered it, just as he remembered the blood on the photographs that she had bought in Alinari's shop. It was not exactly that a man had died; something had happened to the living: they had come to a situation where character tells, and where childhood enters upon the branching paths of Youth.
>
> "Well, thank you so much," she repeated, "How quickly these accidents do happen, and then one returns to the old life!"
>
> "I don't."
>
> Anxiety moved her to question him.
>
> His answer was puzzling: "I shall probably want to live."
>
> "But why, Mr. Emerson? What do you mean?"
>
> "I shall want to live, I say."
>
> Leaning her elbows on the parapet, she contemplated the River Arno, whose roar was suggesting some unexpected melody to her ears. (75–6)

As do most nineteenth-century novels, *A Room with a View* seeks to teach us that realism is *fictional* and that we must maintain a distinction between the fictional narratives we read and the real world we traverse.[15] And yet, *Room with a View* simultaneously applies the logic of fantasy to our negotiation with a world turned wondrous and sublime because it serves as mirror to our own deep character; in other words, it is not the photographable or photorealist *view* that truly matters.

Lucy's freighted moment by the Arno borrows the mechanisms of atemporal, affective lyricism (the "unexpected melody" of the river) to drive narrative and

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[14] E. M. Forster, *Room with a View*, 71. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in parentheses.

[15] This lesson is largely carried by a novel-within-a-novel, the florid romance by silly lady novelist Miss Lavish that novelizes the scene in the hills above Florence, where Lucy is first embraced by George. But even this inset lesson works both ways, as Cecil's dramatic reading of the scene provokes another romantic encounter between Lucy and George, the dissolution of Cecil's engagement to Lucy, and Lucy's eventual marriage to George. Which is to say that the distance between fiction and reality opens and closes.

character development. As Forster puts it, "something had happened to the living: they had come to a situation where character tells, and where childhood enters upon the branching paths of Youth." It is at this moment that the path is set that leads directly to marriage and three children (as we learn in the 1958 appendix). That this trajectory begins with "a man had died" is significant since we know that those branching paths will lead to that same terminus for these characters as well. Here is a "situation where character tells": event and subjectivity are intertwined in a fixed cause-and-effect temporality anchored in a concretized space narrated through the perspective of specific characters. We are given a "situation" (event) "where" (referential space, the Arno) "character" (subjectivity, identity) "tells" (narrational, perspectival torsion).

Clough's version of a very similar scene is quite different—an experience stripped of both lyricism and realism (I saw/ something). The event occurs as Claude is "returning home from St. Peter's" (II.167), with "Murray," his tour guide, "as usual,/ Under my arm" (II.167–8), but this murder offers no religious meaning or "spiritual boundary" to the tourist or "to the living," reveals nothing about Claude's inner character, and brings to Claude's ears from the river under the "St. Angelo bridge" (II.168) no "unexpected melody," no "ancient lyrical cadence" (III.215), as Claude later writes of the "Tibur and Anio's tide" (III.216).[16] Indeed, Claude reveals himself to be deaf to all such lyricizing. Even as he imagines ancient pastoral romances that saw in such landscapes "Faunus, the Nymphs, and the Graces" (III.226), he writes:

nor seeing, nor hearing,
Neither by waterfall lulled, nor folded in sylvan embraces,
Neither by cell of the Sibyl, nor stepping the Monte Gennaro,
Seated on Anio's bank, nor sipping Bandusian waters,
But on Montorio's height, looking down on the tile-clad streets, the
Cupolas, crosses, and domes, the bushes and kitchen-gardens,
Which, by the grace of the Tiber, proclaim themselves Rome of the Romans,—
But on Montorio's height, looking forth to the vapory mountains,
Cheating prisoner Hope with illusions of vision and fancy,—
But on Montorio's height, with these weary soldiers by me,
Waiting till Oudinot enter, to reinstate Pope and Tourist. (III.229–39)

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[16] Byron similarly rejects all such lyricism in the death of the commandant in Canto 5, stanzas 39–40 of *Don Juan*: "I gazed (as oft I have gazed the same)/ To try if I could wrench aught out of death/ Which should confirm, or shake, or make a faith// But it was all a mystery."

Pope and Tourist are here coupled not only because they represent for Claude the status quo and the suppression of the revolution, but also because of the Tourist's desire to suffuse the world with a spiritual meaning that cheats "the prisoner Hope with illusions of vision and fancy."

Claude and Clough refuse such tactics even as Claude imagines himself on a search for the "Absolute":

> What with trusting myself and seeking support from within me,
> Almost I could believe I had gained a religious assurance,
> Found in my own poor soul a great moral basis to rest on.
> Ah, but indeed I see, I feel it factitious entirely. . .
> Off, and depart to the void, thou subtle, fanatical tempter![17]

For Claude, and we think for Clough, the "factitious" moment undermines all fact, regardless of whether we start with the abstract Absolute ("Utterly vain is, alas, this attempt at the Absolute,—wholly!" [V.63]) or the praxis of a specific act. Claude is just as wary of lyric transport, even as he makes fun of his failure as a potential lover:

> But that face, those eyes,—ah, no, never anything like them;
> Only, try as I will, a sort of featureless outline,
> And a pale blank orb, which no recollection will add to.
> After all, perhaps there was something factitious about it;
> I have had pain, it is true: I have wept; and so have the actors.[18]

And, so, *Amours de Voyage* finishes with neither the *amours* of the Victorian novel's closure nor the lyric transport of *voyage*.

What we do finish with is suspension: neither one nor the other. Claude remains suspicious of all action, exhorting (we quote again), "Let who would 'scape and be free go to his chamber and think" (I.8).[19] But even *inaction* proves to be inadequate in *Amours de Voyage*—it may even be impossible. As Claude writes to Eustace,

> All my old strengths are gone. And yet I shall have to do something.
> Ah, the key of our life, that passes all wards, opens all locks,

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[17] These lines were added to Canto V in later versions of the poem.

[18] These lines were added to Canto V in later versions of the poem.

[19] Clough makes similar statements in other poems: "wait it out, O Man!" he states in "The New Sinai." In another poem, describing man's ability to see only "a space/ of some few yards before his face" and the world's tendency to take "its truth from each new day," Clough suggests that a better path is to "quit," so that, as the title of the poem states, we can "Consider It Again." Consider all possible interpretations sufficiently and it becomes difficult to "consent to be circumscribed here into action." But, then, Clough also questions this position, as he does in "Thesis and Antithesis": "'Tis worst unwisdom to be overwise,/ And not to use, but still correct one's eyes" (41–2).

> Is not *I will*, but *I must*. I must,—I must,—and I do it. (V.126–8)

Claude thus proves himself to be no less circumscribed, but not to anything like productive action: needing to do something, anything, he merely decides to keep traveling.

Claude's inaction is much too unheroic, pitiful, and benighted to serve as model. He can neither embrace the narrative drive of a plotted "fate" ("I believe in Providence partly") nor free himself from the optative ghosts of what might have been ("should we meet, I could not be certain;/ All might be changed, you know. Or perhaps there was nothing to be changed" [V.132–3]), which leaves him functionally paralysed.[20] He writes to Eustace,

> What is ordained is right, and all that happens is ordered.
> Ah, no, that isn't it. But yet I retain my conclusion:
> I will go where I am led, and will not dictate to the chances.
> (V.140–2)

Mary Trevellyn, the wiser of the two characters, is given the last word, which she utters in the subjunctive to imagine how easily defeated Claude would be by renewed possibility:

> Oh, and you see I know so exactly how he would take it:
> Finding the chances prevail against meeting again, he would banish
> Forthwith every thought of the poor little possible hope, which
> I myself could not help, perhaps, thinking only too much of;
> He would resign himself, and go. I see it exactly.
> So I also submit, although in a different manner. (V.173–8)

What Clough refuses in closure he gives us by way of exploration of the generic and formal constraints that, by definition, are factitious, never fact. Heroic action, deep feeling, even the search for knowledge, are all empty forms in *Amours de Voyage*. And while there is clearly ironic distance between character and poet, Clough shares enough of Claude's sensibility to be wary of the abstraction of genre. That wariness of—or at least self-consciousness about—genre is clearly a hallmark of the verse-novel, but it can take very different shapes and have very different effects, as we have now seen in Byron, Barrett Browning, and Clough. It can offer us a revolutionary call to action in the present or a skeptical version of optative regret. For another take on what genre means for *amours*, we turn in the next chapter to Meredith's *Modern Love*.

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[20] In this way, Clough anticipates the inaction and optative regret of James' "Beast in the Jungle," which we explored in Chapter One.

8

George Meredith and Knowledge

The sorites paradox—the paradox of the heap—presents us with a problem of definition. It works like this: if you have a heap of sand and remove only a single grain, do you still have a heap? Clearly. Two grains? Yes. Three? And so forth, until only a grain remains. Is it a heap? Logically, yes—but, functionally, clearly not. We can run the argument in the opposite direction, where a single grain of sand is not a heap, nor will it be if you add a single grain to it. Two grains plus one is not a heap, ad infinitum, until a million grains are not a heap. The paradox, then, is that no amount of grains are a heap and any number of grains are a heap.

The sorites paradox is less a problem of calculation than one of logic and language, and it sat largely undisturbed since the classical era until late Victorian philosophers became interested in vagueness. The vague predicate of the term "heap" arises from the imprecision of natural language. We know what a heap is— a large pile of things, a mound—but we cannot say exactly when a pile of things starts or stops being a heap. Other imprecise terms, most of them adjectives, lend themselves to the sorites paradox—"tall," "bald," "old"—but for our purposes "blue" is an interesting case. In this example, we are not adding or subtracting grains (or centimeters, hairs, or days) but looking at gradations of things that are alike but not identical. If we look at a series of shades along a color spectrum from blue to green, moving ever closer to green, can we pinpoint the exact shade at which blue ceases to be blue and becomes green? We cannot, which appears to mean that either something is wrong with logic itself (blue does not exist/only blue exists) or with the fuzziness of the terms we use to describe "blue."

In her groundbreaking essay on such vagueness, "Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness," Delia Graff offers a new way to think about the sorites paradox and, by extension, the fuzzy boundaries of hybridity. Graff interests herself in both the epistemology and the psychology of vagueness, and she wants to know "*why* vague predicates seem tolerant to us, even though sorites reasoning shows us that they cannot be."[1] Her proposal is that "the truth conditions of utterances containing vague expressions are both context dependent and relative to our interests" (77). How much effort we expend locating boundaries depends on how significant those boundaries are for our immediate purposes and whether the "cost of discriminating outweighs the benefits" (68). Depending on our interests, operative norms shift, and because knowledge and desire—our very interests

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[1] Delia Graff, "Shifting Sands," 54. Subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses.

themselves—are on the move, "costs" fluctuate constantly. In most cases, we tolerate vagueness because it is too much trouble to do otherwise. We proceed as though sharp boundaries exist, although we cannot locate them. As Graff writes, "We cannot find the boundary of the extension of a vague predicate in a sorites series for that predicate, *because the boundary can never be found where we are looking*" (59, emphasis ours). She continues: "the boundary between the possessors and the lackers in a sorites series is not sharp in the sense that we can never bring it into focus; any attempt to bring it into focus causes it to shift somewhere else" (75).

We can see how this applies to a discussion of a hybrid genre like the verse-novel.[2] If you take a poem and add novelistic features, at what point does it cease to be a poem and become a novel, or the other way around? Is there a tipping point between poem and novel, and at what point on either end of the spectrum can one or both genres be said to be "pure"? Pure enough *for what*? If our purposes are to read a new poem, the costs of discriminating probably outweighs the benefits, but if, say, we are writing a scholarly book about genre, the perceived benefits increase. Reading a verse-novel, we know that a poetic boundary exists somewhere, but it is never on the page in front of us. As we try to focus on it, it skitters away. We can also see how the difficulties of the sorites series apply to narrative and the nature of the event. How do we locate the moment that cleaves time into a before and after? That is, how do we know an event when we see it?

In this chapter, we want to consider the costs and benefits of thinking about genre and events. Our test case is George Meredith's 1862 *Modern Love*, a verse-novel so far on the poetic side of the boundary as to make us imagine distinctions might be sharp and costs low. That is not so. As with the other verse-novels we have read, *Modern Love* highlights issues of form and legibility, and, like them, its prickly self-awareness promotes critical distance. But *Modern Love* is engaged in the doomed project of calculating distance—between lovers, present and past selves, subjects and objects—and in exploring the interest-relative shifts and costs of operating in a realm without stable boundaries. In the fifty, sixteen-line sonnets that track the failure of a marriage, the speaker searches for the elusive point at which love turns into something else and that point is never where he is looking.

Boundary Trouble

Modern Love was written in a universe dominated by the gravitational pull of the three-volume novel. What makes *Modern Love* exceptional is in part its relationship to "triple-decker" novels that by the 1860s had taken over the publishing

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[2] We do not mean to suggest that the verse-novel has a lock on the vague. For an exploration of fuzzy logic in the most precise of realists, see Daniel Wright's "George Eliot's Vagueness."

market, circulating widely in lending libraries and influencing the moral and emotional life of Victorian England. For their popularity, novels could thank their wide availability, accessibility, and burnished reputation. Domestic realist novels were seen as educational and polite. Novels offered a guide to modern life and became a locus for collective experience in a rapidly changing and expanding world that—especially in serialized form and read in installments over a multiyear period—helped forge a common, cultural life and underscored the basic ideologies of Victorian life: progress, stability, family, etc. The best example of these ideologies in action may be the marriage plot, which knits together narrative and society in a final image of commitment.

Verse-novels were places of risk and experimentation, far less indebted to the literary and cultural scripts that dominated longer prose works. They treat time and event in different ways from triple-decker novels and generally lack the multiple plotlines and long character arcs that come together in a burst of ideological closure. Meredith was no stranger to bold experiment, and he was never a darling of the lending library or its censors. Nor was he a stranger to scandal. Anyone reading *Modern Love* when it was first published would know that its plot of adultery and disunion closely follows the unhappy story of Meredith's own marriage to the former Mary Ellen Peacock, daughter of the writer Thomas Love Peacock. In 1858, Mary Ellen left him for the painter Henry Wallis, with whom she had been having an affair. Meredith was humiliated. In 1859, he published *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, a novelistic account of betrayal, adultery, and divorce that was banned from the lending libraries for its "low moral tone."[3] In 1861, Mary Ellen died, and in 1862, Meredith returned to the painful topic of his marriage, this time in verse.

Modern Love is more than a personal and professional retread, however. It is an attempt to rethink genre, wedding lyric poetry to narrative momentum. Meredith does this with two seemingly antithetical forms: the sonnet (*the* traditional lyric form of love poetry) and the sprawling form of the Victorian novel. His point, we think, is that the verse-novel can do what the novel does—but better.[4] *Modern Love* is realistic and quotidian, but it is also condensed and allusive, interior and psychological, and it creates its intense emotional effects in language more finely wrought than even Meredith's prose fiction. It similarly goes places lyric poetry does not, places that look much like the domestic interiors of the realist novel, made strange through verse and stripped of their usual furnishings.

[3] For Emily Allen's reading of this novel, see "A Shock to the System."

[4] Andrew Elfenbein makes a similar point: "Meredith proves that poetry could explore the dark side of love more deeply than novels ever could" ("Modern Men and Women," 426). Elfenbein's essay is useful to read since it illustrates just how different Meredith's method is from Browning's.

Meredith makes his claim for realism midway through *Modern Love*: "life, some think, is worthy of the Muse."[5] The nameless speaker proposes to tell us the truth of his marriage. But what that truth *is* remains hard to say. Here is the "plot": a wife (probably) takes a lover; her husband cannot forgive her; he takes a lover to spite her; attempts at reconciliation fail; she poisons herself and dies. In place of the novel's cast of thousands, we have only two main characters—an unnamed husband and wife—and their unnamed romantic partners. While there is a narrative, it is not a clear or continuous one. The speaker is not sure if his wife's affair is emotional or physical, and it is unclear who knows what when. Perhaps most unclear to the speaker are his own feelings about his wife, about whom he expresses a rich spectrum of contradictory emotions. While the sonnets are arranged in vaguely chronological order, from the breakdown of the speaker's marriage to his wife's death, they range back and forth in time as his mind casts itself over the couple's history together.

The speaker seeks signs and explanations. Here, for example, is the couple in sonnet XVI, not yet unhappy, very much in love, and huddled together before the fire:

> Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay
> With us, and of it was our talk. "Ah, yes!
> Love dies!" I said; I never thought it less.
> She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.
> Then when the fire domed blackening, I found
> Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift
> Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift—
> Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound.

The speaker locates a moment when things might have happened differently, when he might have interpreted the evidence of her tears, and when the act of pronouncing the mortality of love perhaps began to kill it. The speaker's position—that the ephemerality of love does nothing to lessen its value—undercuts the literary trope of eternal love, familiar from both poems and novels. It is given to us in one of the sequence's few instances of quoted dialogue—or at least quoted language. We never get her side of their "talk," here or elsewhere, and no reader would mistake the sonnets for novelistic dialogue. But the impulse to locate the turning point at which this reality separated itself from other possible ones feels inherently realist.

The speaker sifts through past moments, trying to identify a kind of "event zero." The fleeting moment by the fireplace ("There was an hour") is not the boundary

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[5] Sonnet XXV, the dead center of this fifty-sonnet sequence. All quotations are from *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads*, ed. Rebecca N. Mitchell and Criscillia Benford. Subsequent references will be to individual sonnet and, occasionally, sonnet and line numbers.

itself, but a spot in time before the boundary, which is why it haunts the speaker with its promise of an alternative history. Indeed, the many ghosts of this verse-novel are creatures of the optative mood: phantoms from alternative lives and plot lines that support Andrew H. Miller's argument that realist fiction spreads out in "lateral prodigality" to explore counterfactual plots and possibilities. In this, we find Meredith more on the side of the novel's version of temporality than Byron's.[6] Meredith's take on realism both bears out Miller's claims about the optative and bares the device by which the novel develops the illusion of individual subjectivity. The speaker obsessively explores optative possibilities and structures the sonnet sequence around two mirrored pairs: his wife ("Madam") and her lover, and himself and his own ("My Lady"). But rather than bringing character and situation into sharp, realistic focus, these contingencies muddy things further. It remains difficult to tell the characters and the pairs immediately apart in any given sonnet. No one has a proper name, and sonnets must often be searched for telling details that will distinguish one character from another: the women have different hair colors, for example. Even the speaker, whose suffering consciousness is the verse-novel's main focus, moves from discussing himself in the first person to the third, which sometimes obscures the difference between the speaker and "the man" who he believes has usurped his life.[7] If one of the characteristic actions of the optative mode is comparison, as Miller claims, then the speaker spends much of *Modern Love* in an optative funk, weighing himself against both his romantic rival and his younger self, weighing his feelings for his wife against those for his mistress, and counting the grains of love and shades of blue between himself and his former happiness.

That scene at the fireplace is followed immediately in the sonnet sequence by another moment, the action of which takes place long after sonnet XVI and on the other side of a boundary not yet seen:

> At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.
> Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
> The Topic over intellectual deeps
> In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.
> With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:
> It is in truth a most contagious game:
> HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name.

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[6] We might add that Byron offers no optative regret for his own famously failed marriage.

[7] On the pronoun shifts in *Modern Love*, see Adela Pinch, "Love Thinking." As she writes, "One of the peculiarities of *Modern Love* is its shifts in pronouns and point of view. About one-tenth of the sonnets—clustered at the beginning and end of the sequence—describe both husband and wife in the third person, while the rest are narrated by the husband himself. In this way, it might seem, the poem's concern with how the two protagonists know or think about each other is embedded in its narrative structure, enmeshed with questions about the nature of self-knowledge, omniscience, and the tragic privacy of thought" (388).

> Such play as this the devils might appal!
> But here's the greater wonder; in that we,
> Enamoured of an acting nought can tire,
> Each other, like true hypocrites, admire;
> Warm-lighted looks, Love's ephemerioe,
> Shoot gaily o'er the dishes and the wine.
> We waken envy of our happy lot.
> Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.
> Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine.

In sonnet XVII, the tense shifts from the nostalgic past to the brittle present. Gone is the melancholy of optative regret as we observe our actors performing the role of happy couple for their dinner guests. The speaker, bitter and sarcastic, admires his wife's acting ability, and the firelight of sonnet XVI has become the "corpse-light" of XVII. Happiness and marriage are a sham performance, what he elsewhere calls "this wedded lie" (XXXV).

The boundary between love and its dissolution falls somewhere in between sonnets XVI and XVII, although we (he) cannot say where. That boundary hides in the interstices, always just beyond the reach of the speaker's eyes and consciousness. The speaker is haunted not only by his loss, but by the fact that he never saw it coming. As he writes in sonnet III, "I know too well/ I claim a star whose light is overcast:/I claim a phantom-woman in the Past./ The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!" The speaker is caught in a ruminative cycle, going back over moments that might have been different, yielding to the tug of the optative mood. Here he is in sonnet V, sometime after he suspects his wife's infidelity, but before she knows of his suspicions; their old love flashes up for a moment, and the poet feels he has recaptured something lost: "The 'What has been' a moment seem'd his own." His impulse is to embrace her, but he hesitates, and the moment is gone. He writes,

> —In that restraining start,
> Eyes nurtured to be look'd at, scarce could see
> A wave of the great waves of Destiny
> Convulsed at the check'd impulse of the heart.

"Destiny" can only be seen in retrospect because we place it there as the past cause of present effects. Here, it happens over the slack beat of a caesura: "—in that restraining start."

In sonnet VII, the speaker poses *Modern Love's* animating question: "Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?" (VII.4). At times, he blames himself, if not for his wife's infidelity then for his reaction to it. At others, he casts himself as helpless victim. He asks in sonnet 10, "But where began the change; and

what's my crime?" He continues, "The wretch condemn'd, who has not been arraign'd,/Chafes at his sentence." We might view *Modern Love* as an extended arraignment, composed in lines if not sentences. But the record refuses to stay straight or still. The events of the past move even as the speaker regards them, reconsidering them in light of new evidence and new interests. As he writes in sonnet XII,

> Methinks with all this loss I were content,
> If the mad Past, on which my foot is based,
> Were firm, or might be blotted.

It is no surprise that his metaphor for erasing his memory of the past is a literary one. As he faces his "sentence," he would "blot" out the past, but cannot: "All the past is mixed." The ground under him shifts, because neither the past nor his interest in it remain firm.

Our final example of the optative comes from sonnet XLIV, as the speaker laments his angry and resentful response to his wife's suspected infidelity:

> If in those early days unkind,
> Thy power to sting had been but power to grieve,
> We now might with an equal spirit meet,
> And not be match'd like innocence and vice.

Here is regret: a desire to return to a lost past, but to return with a difference. Later, regret becomes remorse, the sense not of desire for the past but of despair in the face of irretrievable loss. Yet even that remorse is phrased as a failed optative: "If I the death of Love had deeply planned,/ I never could have made it half so sure,/As by the unblessed kisses which upbraid /The full-waked senses; or failing that, degrade!" The speaker's sense that he has ruined his life and marriage more successfully than if he had set out to do it both pins him to fate ("'Tis morning; but no morning can restore/ What we have forfeited") and allows that he might have acted otherwise. Ultimately, he accepts measured accountability for his actions. In sonnet XLIII, he allows, "I see no sin;/ The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,/ No villain need be! Passions spin the plot;/ We are betrayed by what is false within." The recognition that each has betrayed both self and other is what the poem offers us in place of a clear-cut morality tale—or even a clear-cut tale. We don't "know" exactly what happened and cannot know. Neither, ultimately, can the speaker. As Adela Pinch writes, "Knowing in *Modern Love* is never the attainment of some kind of truth but is rather a claim-making about another person."[8]

One of the things that keeps the speaker from "moving on" is his sense that closure is no more definite than beginnings. Marital closure is not the end of anything here, as it exists at some time before the beginning of *Modern Love*'s plot.

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[8] Pinch, "Love Thinking," 388.

Even the wife's suicide both finishes and occasions the sonnet sequence, sending the speaker circling back through their past together. The laxity of chronology, what we have seen as the inability to locate the boundary between "before" and "after," is mapped onto a lack of emotional clarity. The speaker's feelings about his wife are mixed and continually changing. Here, for example, is the speaker, torn after beginning his own affair, thinking back on his wife in what he takes to be her lost innocence:

> She breathed the violet breath of maidenhood
> Against my kisses once! but I say, No!
> The thing is mocked at! Helplessly afloat,
> I know not what I do, whereto I strive,
> The dread that my old love may be alive,
> Has seized my nursling new love by the throat. (XL)

The shuttling between time frames (then and now) and emotional states that characterizes both the verse-novel and the speaker in this sonnet turns romantic confusion into dread. He cannot give up the past nor return to it.

The Body of Truth

Modern Love and its tortured speaker are plagued by uncertainty. With vague predicates all around, the speaker attempts to ground his search for truth in the apparent facticity of the body, reading bodily evidence over and against the many fictions of emotional life. These attempts, we think, tell us something about the differences between how novels and poems use evidence to create realistic effects.

Bodies seldom tell a lie in Victorian novels. Indeed, it is a cornerstone of the realist novel, particularly domestic realism, that bodies are the only texts that reliably tell the truth. Whereas lips say this and that, and writing prevaricates, bodies blush, tremble, and shudder their way into revelation to provide the evidentiary proof that seals marital deals and novelistic narratives. We have argued that *Modern Love* takes apart the romantic plot that was the mainstay of the Victorian publishing market while showing that poetry might go darker and more realistic places than prose fiction. What interests us in this section is the status of the body in *Modern Love*, which tampers with the novel's favorite kind of evidence. The poem opens on a scene of evidentiary analysis:

> By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
> That, at his hand's light quiver by her head
> The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
> Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
> And strangely mute, like little gasping snakes,
> Dreadfully venomous to him. (I)

Here, our two lovers lie awake beside each other feigning sleep, reading each other's physical movement as emotional index. They will lie to and torment one another throughout the verse-novel, each struggling to read the proof of the other's love and (in)fidelity. At stake in their weighing of evidence is a formal struggle over truth and representation: does domestic realism have a lock on the "real," and does its proof hold up under Meredith's verse examination?

Our claim in previous chapters has been that the hybrid mode of the verse-novel exhibits as performative the very operations by which other genres construct truth. Meredith, we believe, follows the novel's evidentiary claims for the body but in ways that undercut the narrative and temporal markers of fiction, and often in ways that underscore the performative, generic markers of fiction and poetry both. As we explored in Chapter Two, fiction works its evidentiary magic by placing a kernel of physical evidence in a narrative matrix, where that kernel will, under the pressure and through the flow of narrative, become an *explanation* through a process of narrative retrospection or rereading. The author drops a critical piece of evidence in the stream of narrative, which then takes both readers and characters to a place from which they can look back and understand what that evidence means—and, indeed, has always meant. Essentially, fictional narrative is the process through which individual facts accrue meaning to become part of a larger, explanatory narrative. It is also the process by which *things disappear* to become instead symptoms, revelations, and explanations. The opaque reality of things thus gives way to the translucence of realism.

Realistic narratives represent the body as a legible text and then benefit from a logistical inversion whereby texts can be trusted to tell the truth about the body and so much else. The happiest marriage in the Victorian novel is perhaps between narrative and the evidence that requires narration to be believable and that makes the narrative believable in turn. Readers should consult the evidence of their experience on this point. Think of the Victorian narratives in which closure is achieved by rereading a key bit of evidence either textual (a letter, will, or word) or bodily (a gesture, blush, or tear) that in retrospect offers explanation of past misunderstanding and promise of future harmony. These revelatory moments are both the pay-off and the product of long novels in which sustained and sequential narrative yields the illusion of real life and the benefits of ideological closure.

Modern Love does something very different. The examples of thick bodily description that Meredith offers in *Modern Love* freeze narrative progression, which occurs not in the sonnets themselves but in the interstices between them. Instead of a triumphant narrative reveal in which physical evidence yields transcendent meaning, we can infer truth only by way of small gestures unmoored from narrative explanation—a mouth's "nervous twitch" (Sonnet XXII), "A woman's tremble" (Sonnet XV), the "steel-mirror" of a smile (Sonnet XV), or "the coverlid's quick beat" (XXIII). We have an abundance of evidence but are hard pressed to know what it means or if we can trust it. The speaker often doubts his ability to interpret correctly. In XV, he creeps into his wife's room to read her letters while she sleeps, but he cannot tell if she is awake: "I think she sleeps: it must be

sleep, when low/Hangs that abandon'd arm towards the floor:/The head turn'd with it." He does not trust himself to read her "looks"—both her beauty and her glances—as evidence of her fidelity to or preference for him because he knows that his interest in her biases him. "And yet I doubt/ But I am duped," he writes, the convoluted double negative getting to the circulation of his thoughts.

From image to image, the sonnets operate as discrete units, each presenting a single moment. When we read them as a series, sequential but not perfectly chronological, we must fill in the "gaps" and form the narrative ourselves. What this verse-novel does, then, is to make visible something that we also do in the reading of novels, since no novel moves forward in real time. To use another medium as analogy: reading *Modern Love* is like looking through a series of photographs and positing the life that occurred in between them, or like looking through a film reel without a projector. Novel reading is more like watching that film as it plays; the space between images disappears to give the illusion of continuous movement, or life. Indeed, film's realism effects work to make the medium itself disappear, much as the novel invites us to transcend the page in an act of immersive reading.[9]

Structurally, then, Meredith violates the most cherished illusion of novelistic realism: that life is made up of a series of moments, strung together seamlessly and contingently, which not only make narrative sense but also can be captured by representation. He does this both by rejecting the illusion of seamlessness and continuity and, perhaps more damagingly, by taking the narrative logic of the novel to its extension. For what the novel really does is to replace the fuzzy logic of life's narrative stream—a sorites series in which one moment more or less does not tip the balance—with the sharp edges of narrative retrospection. In this view, the series gives up its meaning eagerly, and we can identify and dilate upon the moment or moments that "matter." In the sorites series, the boundary is never to be found where we are looking; in the novel, the boundary is *exactly where we are looking*. The novel allows us to stare at it, examine it, and weigh it for consequence. We might say that we read to identify the boundary, the "event" itself. Examples of this include moments of novelistic revelation, decision, and peripety: Pip saves a convict; Jane decides to return to Rochester; Gwendolyn lets Grandcourt drown; Basil paints Dorian at a moment of youthful epiphany. So important is this moment to the workings of the novel that it is often enshrined as a scene of reading: Anne reads Wentworth's proposal in a hastily scribbled letter; Lady Dedlock reads her life story in Esther's face; Dorian reads his history of transgression in his portrait. In *Modern Love*, these heightened moments are shorn of the context that might string them together into the illusion of narrative coherence. The novel cherry-picks its moments, too, but it puts them together with enough context to obscure the practice. Meredith makes us look at the practice itself, taking as his structural principle the attempt to pull out boundary events from the series of moments that make up a life and a marriage. What we see is not the boundary but our desire for it and its evasion of our direct gaze.

[9] For comparison, see our reading of *La jetée* in Chapter One.

As we have discussed in previous chapters, there is more to how the novel creates the illusion of realism, which depends upon medial self-referentiality. The realist novel makes opaque its relationship to the real by underscoring the artificial mechanism of representation and in so doing achieves a higher realism. As we saw in Part Two, this maneuver was the opposite of (and, to some extent, a response to) Byron's direct invocation to the reader to act. The novel's claim to represent truth is established upon a double logic that we have compared to Mannoni's understanding of fetishism, *je sais bien mais quand-même* (I know very well but nevertheless), a double logic engaged by both novels and poems even as they work toward different effects. Meredith illustrates how the two supposedly competing genres in fact implement similar structural dynamics. A good example in the first sonnet is the metaphor of the snake, dropped here as a throw-away simile: those sobs are compared to "little gasping snakes,/ Dreadfully venomous to him." Over the course of the sonnet sequence, such serpents accrue like the subtext of the realist novels Michael Riffaterre examines: they make sense as a description of the diegetic scene but taken together across the *longue durée* of a narrative they function as a "specular" text (Riffaterre's term) that reflects, not any diegetic real, but the structural dynamic of the text itself.[10] The snake/ venom metaphor returns in sonnets II, III, VII, IX, XXVI, XXXII, XXXIII, and XXXIV as a subtextual, purely metaphorical sequence that facilitates the feeling that the final act (her suicide by poison in sonnet XLIX) fits, is right. Narrative act and fact succeed best when subtended by metaphor, regardless of whether we think about poetry or the novel.

In *Modern Love*, there is no forgetting the artificiality of the reality presented to us, both because it draws attention to itself and because of the structural discontinuity that questions the nature of novelistic narrative and the integrity of represented character: can a story be told "from start to finish?" Can we ever know "what happened" or "who" a character is? How do we tell our own stories back to ourselves? Let us return to that first sonnet, which begins, as we have already seen, *in medias res*:

> By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
> That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
> The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
> Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
> And strangely mute, like little gasping snakes,
> Dreadfully venomous to him.

Here is a complex he-knows-she-knows-he-knows series of subjective interpretation: his bodily quiver triggers her to silence her sobs, which prove to him that

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[10] Cathy Comstock also explores the logic (and instability) of this subtextual play of metaphor in "'Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth.'" As she states regarding the snake/venom metaphor, "The snake imagery also deconstructs the metaphysical aspirations of the image by framing its assertion of symbolic truth within an awareness of its own rhetorical manipulations" (132).

she is awake—and not crying in her sleep—because a) she is aware of him; and b) she doesn't want him to know she is crying. He reads her intake of breath as surprise (she thought he was asleep) and, possibly, as proof that she is crying over him. We could go further. But let us go back: "By this he knew." Sonnet 1 opens with a striking deictic gesture: the bare offer of evidence ("this").[11] *By this, he knew that.* If we play *Modern Love*'s own counterfactual game, we can imagine an opening in which the hand moves, the breath is indrawn, and the sobs are silenced—all of which would provide narrative hook (Who are these people? Why is she crying?), set up, and tone: this is an unhappy couple. But that alternative beginning would not emphasize the (f)act of analysis, the process by which the character comes to know what he thinks he knows. From its opening, then, *Modern Love* displays the evidentiary device that should remain clothed in narrative to work in a naturalized way. It also displays a deep suspicion about the value of evidence. As Pinch writes of this opening section and the poem it inaugurates, "*Modern Love* is fundamentally skeptical about the value that psychological insight into or understanding of another person may have in an intimate relationship."[12]

Despite the gesture of referentiality in its first foot ("By this he knew"), Sonnet 1 makes opaque the page before us, our analog for the "blank wall" of line 13:

> Then, as midnight makes
> Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
> Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
> Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
> Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
> By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.

Poetry, more insistently so than the novel, calls attention to itself: every beat and break matters which draws us away from any represented reality to the page before us. Here, two contending forms of realistic representation, both temporal extension in the objective world as recollected by a character ("Memory" with a capital M) and the atemporal subjectivity of a character's view of that world ("Tears" with a capital T) are personified into abstraction and grafted onto the "beat" of poetry's "feet," the "heavy measure" of the verse scrawled over the blank wall of the page. The narrative freezes in such moments (they are "moveless"; she lies "Stone-still")

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[11] Alicia Williams makes a similar point in "The Search for a Good Cause in Meredith's *Modern Love*": "Though these deictic first lines serve as transition points, they also compromise narrative progress within each sonnet by obliging further explanation at the cost of narrating action through causal sequence" (218).

[12] Pinch, "Love Thinking," 387. Elisha Cohn makes a similar point: "As the speaker of *Modern Love* tries to come to know both his wife and his own mind, he wavers between hyper-vigilance and inattention, calling into doubt the value of intellectual assertion, and demonstrating, in this shift between modes, despair at the possibility of sustained sense-making" (*Still Life*, 114).

even as it presents us with the endpoint of the traditional Victorian novel: death or marriage, collapsed in the figure of "marriage-tomb":

> Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
> Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
> Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

Meredith begins where novels end to illustrate the artificiality of the novel's own claims to realistic presentation.

The speaker asks in Sonnet 25, surely referencing the alternative realist tradition of naturalism, "You like not that French novel? Tell me why./ You think it quite unnatural. Let us see." As he continues, "Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:/ And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse." However much this may appear to claim a yet greater realism than that of the novel, the punning play on the generic form of "naturalism" brings us back to the artificial ways we create reality through the performative iteration of generic markers. All the better that these lines appear in the final two lines of Meredith's sixteen-line *sonetto caudato* or tailed sonnet, since the tail here could be said to wag the dog. Outside the usual fourteen lines of a regular sonnet, these trailing, tailing lines illustrate how "reality" is determined by formal constructs.[13]

Others have explored Meredith's critique of the performative nature of bourgeois morality, particularly in the dinner-party sequence of Sonnet XVII examined earlier: "With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:/ It is in truth a most contagious game;/HIDING THE SKELETON shall be its name."[14] What we think worth underscoring is that when Meredith questions aspects of the social world, or of "nature" and the "real," he does so in a way that simultaneously unveils our reliance on generic markers. The speaker spends the poem unveiling the skeleton, the structure, that lies behind each element of narrative realism, be it character, motivation, referentiality, cause-and-effect sequentiality, dialogism, or fiction itself, given the uncomfortable closeness of *Modern Love* to Meredith's own failed marriage. Far from being a purified lyric form separate from the dictates of the real, poetry here engages in debate with the novel over the very nature of representation. In this, Meredith continues Byron's deconstruction of each of the formal elements of the novel.

As do the other verse-novels we have examined, *Modern Love* engages in just as trenchant a critique of the procedures by which *poetry* claims to achieve truth or virtue. Meredith, for example, repeats Wordsworthian claims that poetry can achieve a truer connection to the natural truths of peasant life. As the speaker recalls in Sonnet XVIII, "I have known rustic revels in my youth:/The May-fly

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[13] On the *sonetto caudato*, see especially Ken Crowell, "*Modern Love* and the *Sonetto Caudato*."
[14] See, for example, Dorothy Mermin's "Poetry as Fiction," especially page 109.

pleasures of a mind at ease," and he writes that the peasant characters he knew in his youth "must, I think, be wiser than I am," for to "Nature they seem near." The sonnet's final *caudato* lines, however, step out of the pastoral genre in a bathetic deflation: "They have the secret of the bull and lamb./ 'Tis true that when we trace its source, 'tis beer." The lyric tradition of the sonnet sequence itself is no less fodder for critique, most dramatically in Sonnet XXX:

> What are we first? First, animals; and next
> Intelligences at a leap; on whom
> Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
> And all that draweth on the tomb for text.
> Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:
> Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.
> We are the lords of life, and life is warm.
> Intelligence and instinct now are one.
> But nature says: 'My children most they seem
> When they least know me: therefore I decree
> That they shall suffer.' Swift doth young Love flee,
> And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.
> Then if we study Nature we are wise.
> Thus do the few who live but with the day:
> The scientific animals are they—
> Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes.

Like a proto-Lacanian, the speaker claims that all we know runs aground on the impossible and unsymbolizable Real, which we confront through the sheer materiality of our own or animal bodies. Symbolization rests uneasily and temporarily over materiality, whether we consider the Victorian understanding of Nature (the sarcasm of "Then if we study Nature we are wise"), positivist scientific study ("The scientific animals"), or poetry itself ("Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes"). The blazon tradition that idealizes the object of desire by screening an actual body behind a litany of similes unveils the mechanism by which representation, all "that draweth on the tomb for text," serves as a screen behind which there is no thing, or perhaps only *das Ding*, an unrepresentable Real. "Love" is "the crowning sun:/ Beneath whose light the shadow [of death] loses form" but, truly, what *Modern Love* underscores is that all we ever have are forms.

Verse-novels all have moments when they step outside of themselves to remark upon and question their own generic status (Book V of *Aurora Leigh*, Books I and XII of the *Ring and the Book*, the openings to each canto of *Amours de Voyage*, almost every stanza of Byron's *Don Juan*). In fact, this maneuver occurs in *every* text we read, as a necessary precondition of understanding, as we argue in Chapter Five. What marks the verse-novel as unique is that, by inhabiting a space

between genres—not just between poetry and the novel but among a host of lyric and novelistic subgenres—it lays bare the tactics by which other genres lay claim to truth or virtue. The verse-novel teaches us, instead, "what a dusty answer gets the soul/ When hot for certainties in this our life!"

We want to take a page from Meredith's book and return in closing to the opening of this chapter. It should be clear by now that we see the sorites paradox not as a problem but as an opportunity to think about the vagueness that we take to be constituent to all genres. The verse-novel gives us a way to focus on the form of the problem itself—which is to say the problem of form—without requiring a solution. To "solve" the problem of generic form—to say that one form starts exactly here and ends there, where another begins—is to falsify the nature and the history of genre in the name of truth. This is not to say that generic distinctions are not necessary or useful; we must, by necessity, refer to "the novel" and "the lyric" in the same way that we must use imprecise terms like "bald" and "blue." But if we allow that generic distinctions exist, we must also allow that they are never directly in front of our eyes. Our claim throughout this book has been that genre is something that *occurs*, rather than something that merely *is*. Genre is not a transhistorical law but an ephemeral, performative act specific to the time of writing and reading. The act of reading—which carries with it its own historical and personal contingencies— is for the verse-novel almost always a self-conscious one in which we are invited to see the work of literature imperfectly nailed to its specific actualization, and surrounded not by ghosts but by viable generic alternatives. The illusion of particularity and singularity—which nails us to ourselves as readers in what must be one of the most important ideological effects of reading anything—is presented as no more than an illusion. It seems no coincidence to us that the main events of the verse-novels that we address in these last few chapters are all represented as not fully knowable. That was the case in *Amours de Voyage*, and it will be the case in *The Ring in the Book*, to which we turn in the next and last chapter, Chapter Nine, of the book.

9

Robert Browning and the Virtuous Act

Whereas Elizabeth Barrett's poetry offers the radical nature of love and religion as provocation to revolutionary event, Robert Browning's poetic career explores the ways these things can turn on themselves. How do we distinguish a transformative act in the service of a just ideal from one that imposes the will of a single person or group onto others? The question anticipates an influential trajectory of critical theory and Western politics over the last fifty years, which is motivated by the fear that, as Badiou puts it, "every revolutionary project stigmatized as 'utopian' turns . . . into totalitarian nightmare" (*Ethics*, 13). Like Barrett Browning, and well before he met her, Browning interrogates religion and love, for example linking the two in what he dubbed "Madhouse Cells," the conjoined poems later titled "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover," first published in 1836 in the *Monthly Repository* and then collected alongside "My Last Duchess" in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). Those early poems showcase Browning's attention to the ideological valences of form, which is what we explore in this chapter by turning to *The Ring and the Book*, a series of twelve dramatic monologues that each retell a single, sensational narrative of murder and betrayal. What interests us is how Browning fits into and perpetuates a formal alternative in nineteenth-century literary history that subscribes to neither lyricism nor narrative as those terms are generally understood by contemporary scholarship. This aesthetic offered nineteenth-century readers a distinctive, alternative morality from that found in either the realist novel or lyricism.

Like Herbert F. Tucker in *Browning's Beginnings*, we resist here the desire "To exalt either form or content, either morals or aesthetics, at the expense of the other."[1] By examining the two together, we can better understand the competing models for action and subjectivity available both to the Victorians and to us as critics today. We agree with Tucker that "any aesthetic, deeply considered, will disclose a moral position," and "no morality is without its aesthetic side" (7). For that reason, we need to think through the logic of Browning's approach to temporality, so we can consider how his choice of genre (the verse-novel) impacts larger cross-generic structures, like narrative and what we have termed the act-event. In particular, we would like to take some time to disentangle Browning's approach to the subject's temporality from Wordsworth's—and also from Tucker's, whom we find to be spot-on in all but his alignment of Browning's temporal structure with

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[1] Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings*, 6. Subsequent references to this book will appear in parentheses.

that of *The Prelude*. To be more precise, we need to distinguish between Browning's relationship to Wordsworth at the start of his career—*Browning's Beginnings* stops at the 1855 *Men and Women*—from what Browning does with temporality and subjectivity after the 1856 publication of *Aurora Leigh*.[2]

Tucker's opening chapter, "Browning and the Future," aims to make sense of the poet's engagement with the infinite, pinpointing a phrase that he draws from a letter from Browning to Ruskin: "All poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite."[3] As Tucker goes on, "One seizes on this absolute phrase as the nearest thing in Browning to a commitment that might serve as the foundation for a general poetics" (11). We agree. Where we part ways with Tucker is in his association of this temporality with the following lines from the Simplon Pass episode of *The Prelude*:

> Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
> Is with infinitude, and only there,
> With hope it is, hope that can never die,
> Effort, and expectation, and desire,
> And something evermore about to be. (VI.604–8)

Tucker argues, "Wordsworth's lines enact precisely the revision of 'infinitude' from a spatial to a temporal concept that is required by Browning's letter to Ruskin" (14). He goes on to explain:

> It is not with a sense of spatial transcendence or immanence but with a sense of temporal imminence, of "something evermore about to be," that greatness makes abode for Wordsworth. And there it also abides for Browning, whose "infinite" describes not some eternal realm above mutability, but the conviction of endlessness or processionality to which the careful imperfections of his art of disclosure give poetic currency. (14)

Given the significance of Wordsworth's temporal model, not only for the history of lyric poetry, but also for the novel, as we have argued, this is no small point. Our argument here, as it was in our discussion of *Aurora Leigh*, is that we have in Browning less a temporality of the future than a temporality of the future anterior, albeit with even greater suspicion than we find in Barrett Browning of the call of that infinite on our present-day actions.

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[2] Tucker comes quite close to what we discuss here in his "Epiphany and Browning," particularly his exploration of the underlying logic of the New Testament and the ways Browning explores that logic in his poetry: "the epiphanic manifestation of God in man, the revelation of Jesus as the Christ, the messiah who fulfills prophecy to the letter, *yet enlarges its national spirit to global and transhistorical proportions*" (1213; emphasis ours). Browning's approach to absolute ideals in his dramatic monologue, according to Tucker here, "recapitulates, and subjects to critique, structures of lyrical autonomy that we find in the age of Wordsworth" (1214).

[3] Quoted in Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings*, 11.

We should make clear that, whereas Barrett Browning herself characterized *Aurora Leigh* as "a Don Juan without the mockery & impurity," thus seeing her verse-novel as in line with the formal innovations of Byron's work, Robert Browning's *Ring and the Book* looks and works quite differently than either previous work. We think it worthwhile, though, to tease out the influence of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* on Browning's approach to temporality, which we feel eschews "realist time" in favor of a temporality that more closely resembles the future anterior we have been exploring in this book. We are not claiming that such a temporality is a taxonomic feature of the verse-novel—and, as we saw in Chapters Seven and Eight, it often is not—but we wish to illustrate that there was a formal alternative in the period, however strange such a temporal structure may appear to us following the hegemonic success of the novel and our tendency to adopt the novel's form of temporality in understanding our own lives.

We need, then, to understand the structural logic of *kairos* in Browning's work. Tucker quotes Browning's 1855 "Transcendentalism" after seeing in Browning an example of Wordsworth's "strength/ Of usurpation": "at its moments of greatness the protestant poetry of Browning also involves a 'usurpation' or transgression of given limits" (15). This lining up of Wordsworth and Browning is to some extent undercut in the poem itself, however, whether we read "Transcendentalism" as a critique of Browning's own previous poetry, as Richard Altick argues,[4] or as a direct critique of the poetry of Wordsworth, the speaker arguably an impersonated (and disowned) Wordsworthian poet. After all, the full title, "Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books," could not help but call to mind the recently published 1850 *Prelude* in fourteen books. Reacting to the charge of obscurity in his own poetry, to Carlyle's exhortation to both Browning and Barrett Browning that they should begin writing instead in prose, and to Wordsworth's aim to adapt poetry to "the real language used by men," Browning responds to the demand to "Speak prose and hollo it till Europe hears":[5]

> But here's your fault; grown men want thought, you think;
> Thought's what they mean by verse, and seek in verse.
> Boys seek for images and melody,
> Men must have reason—so, you aim at men. (15–18)

The goal should not be to explain to men in prose or prosaic poetry the transcendental wonder of the world, Browning claims in the poem, but, through verse, to break open an infinity that lies hidden behind the world of referential objects: "in

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[4] See Altick's "Browning's 'Transcendentalism,'" which also reads the poem as in conversation with Carlyle.

[5] "Transcendentalism," line 11, from *Browning: Poetical Works, 1833–64*, ed. Ian Jack. Subsequent references to Browning's poetry will be in parentheses and taken from this edition, with the exception of quotations from *The Ring and the Book*.

there breaks the sudden rose herself,/ Over us, under, round us every side,/ Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs/ And musty volumes" (40–3). In the first half of the 1850s, Browning still thought, like Wordsworth, about the connection of this experience with a Romanticized understanding of nature and the innocence of childhood: "Objects throng our youth, 't is true;/ We see and hear and do not wonder much" (19–20). Poetry, in this way of thinking, resuscitates the wonder of childhood; it "Buries us with a glory, young once more,/ Pouring heaven into this shut house of life" (44–5). At this stage of his career, Browning approached the experience of eternity as a revival of lost spots of time and thought of childhood as an innocent good lost in our acceptance of life's prosaic conventions:

> The best of all you showed before, believe,
> Was your own boy-face o'er the finer chords
> Bent, following the cherub at the top
> That points to God with his paired half-moon wings. (48–51)

The Ring and the Book, published in 1868 and surely influenced by the 1856 publication of *Aurora Leigh*, not to mention the other verse-novels we have examined, recasts its temporality along different lines, albeit always in a way that remains skeptical of any immanent (or even imminent) claim to truth.

Before 1856, Browning occasionally connects the good with lost innocence, for example the simple idealism of Pippa in the 1841 poem, "Pippa Passes":

> *The year's at the spring*
> *And day's at the morn;*
> *Morning's at seven;*
> *The hill-side's dew-pearled;*
> *The lark's on the wing;*
> *The snail's on the thorn:*
> *God's in his heaven—*
> *All's right with the world.* (I.222–9)

In this way of thinking about moral action, we need not move beyond the simple acts of quotidian existence, provided we begin with a "love for all men" (Introduction, 185), which Browning, like the Romantics, here appears to associate with the innocence of youth, before adulthood makes us face a variety of moral quandaries. As Pippa sings,

> *All service ranks the same with God:*
> *If now, as formerly he trod*
> *Paradise, his presence fills*
> *Our earth, each only as God wills*

> *Can work—God's puppets, best and worst,*
> *Are we; there is no last nor first.*
>
> *Say not "a small event!" Why "small"?*
> *Costs it more pain that this, ye call*
> *A "great event," should come to pass,*
> *Than that? Untwine me from the mass*
> *Of deeds which make up life, one deed*
> *Power shall fall short in or exceed.* (Introduction, 190–201)

Pippa's surprising impact on the people she passes in her town of Asolo over the course of the poem is unintended, an effect of her innocent faith rather than the result of any moral struggle on her part—though there is certainly profound struggle in those who are guilty of moral crimes as they react to that innocent faith when they hear it in her song. Temporality in Pippa's life is reduced to the "fitful sunshine-minutes, coming, going" (Introduction, 23) of the present moment: "Thou art my single day, God lends to leaven/ What were all earth else, with a feel of heaven" (Introduction, 39–40). Extra poignancy as well as perhaps some degree of irony imbues these lines, given that Pippa is a female weaver at the bottom of the social order and Browning published the poem in 1841 shortly after the rise of the Chartist movement and the People's Charter of 1838.

In the 1855 *Men and Women*, some poems, like "Transcendentalism," repeat the conflation of truth with childhood innocence. Others, though, begin to formulate the idea of a long and sometimes painful search for universal truth that transcends the constraints of the present. Browning places his most succinct statement of his moral and aesthetic principle ("a man's reach should exceed his grasp,/ Or what's a heaven for" ["Andrea del Sarto," 97–8]) in the mouth of a figure who fails to achieve it. What leads us to condemn Andrea del Sarto is the fact that he understands art's aspiration after what Browning characterizes as universal truths—as he says of a work by Raphael, "its soul is right,/ He means right—that, a child may understand" (113–14)—yet he refuses to engage in the struggle himself. The temporality of this search after universal truth is quite different than that of "Transcendentalism" or "Pippa Passes." The goal is not to recover a lost innocence or to glory in the splendor of nature but to struggle after truths that transcend custom, a struggle that subsequently places the individual in a position "out of joint" with the present. That struggle is presented in a form that resembles the future-anterior mechanism we explored in Byron and Barrett Browning:

> Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
> Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
> Enter and take their place there sure enough,
> Though they come back and cannot tell the world. (83–6)

As in Plato's allegory of the cave, the discovery of a universal truth is coupled with the difficulty of expressing that truth to those who are still chained, observing only shadows.

In "Andrea del Sarto" and his later work, Browning rejects the Wordsworthian temporality of lost innocence in favor of wisdom achieved through struggle. For Wordsworth, the "best philosopher" is a child who has visionary access to the truths of the natural world. But when Browning writes, "its soul is right,/ He means right—that, a child may understand" (113–14), he does not give the child any special access to the truth; quite the opposite, for even the ignorant can recognize such a truth when it erupts in the world. The good will be found not in innocence but struggle: "In this world, who can do a thing, will not;/ And who would do it, cannot" (137–8). We judge Andrea del Sarto, in other words, for his unwillingness to pursue in the present moment the ideal truths that he is capable of recognizing, including unselfish love. He chooses instead self-interest: "it is true/ I took his coin, was tempted and complied" (247–8). Immorality, for Browning, is knowledge of the good accompanied by the unwillingness to act in its name now, in the present. "I regret little, I would change still less" (245), Andrea del Sarto ultimately confesses, and he imagines himself acting instead in a fantasized time after death:

> This must suffice me here. What would one have?
> In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance—
> Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
> Meted on each side by the angel's reed,
> For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me
> To cover—the three first without a wife,
> While I have mine! So—still they overcome
> Because there's still Lucrezia,—as I choose. (259–66)

We can see clearly how the figuration of a "New Jerusalem" can be either a fantasy of endless deferral, as it is for Andrea del Sarto, or a revolutionary call to action in the present on behalf of the common good, as it is for Aurora Leigh. Teleology is not itself the problem. What matters is how the figuration is structured temporally and how it bears on our actions in the present.

In Browning's Platonic model, the ignorant child or animal is neither good nor evil, caught as either is in pure self-interest, as is Caliban, for example, in *Dramatis Personae* (1864). In this and other poems of his later career, Browning moves away from Wordsworth, who sees adulthood as a falling-away-from-the-good, and comes closer to Badiou's (and Saint Paul's) understanding of evil. We can compare what Browning is doing in such poems with the cannibal sequence we examined in Byron. Both Byron and Browning (in poems like "Caliban upon Setebos") are thinking through the limit-case of the human. We return to Badiou to help us see what is at stake here. According to Badiou, "the human animal, 'in itself,' implies no

value judgement"; it is "*beneath* Good and Evil" (*Ethics*, 59) and concerned merely with survival. Only through confrontation with what Badiou characterizes as an "infinite" truth—a truth that goes beyond opinion and received knowledge—does the human animal recognize a different possibility:

> [T]he routines of survival are indifferent to any Good you might care to mention. Every pursuit of an interest has success as its only source of legitimacy. On the other hand, if I 'fall in love' (the word 'fall' indicates disorganization in the walk of life), or if I am seized by the sleepless fury of a thought [*pensée*], or if some radical political engagement proves incompatible with every immediate principle of interest—then I find myself compelled to measure life, my life as a socialized human animal, against something other than itself. (*Ethics*, 60)

Evil in this way of thinking is by no means ignorance of the Good; "it arises," rather, "as the *(possible) effect of the Good itself*" (*Ethics*, 61). As we will explore in the next two sections, Browning's approach to questions of truth and questions of virtue places him squarely in a tradition that we have argued extends from Byron to Barrett Browning, and in direct opposition to the answers to those questions proffered by the novel, sometimes, as we saw in Chapter Four, in direct response to Byron.

Questions of Truth: The Ring and the Book

We can now understand more clearly the relation of morality and aesthetic form in *The Ring and the Book* and why Browning spends so much time in this work exploring questions of ethics, justice, evil, custom, and "truth." As we discussed in Chapter Three in relation to Byron, Michael McKeon has demonstrated that questions of virtue and questions of truth were crucial to the development of both the novel and the bourgeois subject as formal constructs. Each of the verse-novels we have examined has approached these same questions in highly self-conscious ways that engage both the novel's own approach and the Romantic, post-Wordsworthian understanding of the lyric and of human subjectivity. *The Ring and the Book* is no different. Indeed, it is, arguably, the most self-conscious of the lot. As its very title suggests, Browning's verse-novel is about both things and forms, but what is so remarkable is the extent to which it troubles the relationship between the two. Engaging the Victorian novel's own fascination with realistically rendered things and referents, *The Ring and the Book* asks us to interrogate the novel's claim to present us with a window onto the world of things. We will begin with such questions of truth in this section—the understanding of content and form, tenor and vehicle, referent and representation—before returning to the work's closely connected questions of virtue in the next section.

Browning's poem in fact begins with a referential gesture, "Do you see this Ring?"[6] The reader is thus thrown into this epic-length work quite literally *in medias res*, into the middle of things, in such a way that we cannot help but recognize that, in fact, we cannot literally see the object-things—this "ring-thing" (I.17), as he puts it—that a mimetically referential tale proffers for our world-making. Lyric poetry works in opposition to the "facts" of realism because it asks us not only to see the things described but also to recognize the metaphoric equivalences that take us away from temporal contiguity to the promise of an atemporal, synchronic lyric time that figures the possibility of transcendence out of this world of things, which is how Browning indeed finishes the first book of his poem in his address to "lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird" (I.1391): "Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn/ For all hope, all sustainment, all reward/ Their utmost up and on" (I.1411–13).

The verse-novels of the 1850s and 60s that experimented with the temporal and spatial expansiveness of the novel ask us to see a depicted world, thus engaging in the fictional strategy of realism, yet they also emphasize the formal nature of poetry and make opaque the page that might tease us with transport to the diegetic world of things signified. The very line breaks matter as much as any matter referenced—form thus trumping any ring-thing, as that very phrase suggests, alluding as it does to the formal structure of rhyme (ring/thing) within Browning's blank verse poem. Even as the poem's canvas paints for us a world, in other words—"pure crude fact/ Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard" (I.35–6)—it thus reflects not the referent but itself, the sounds of the very words we hear rather than see.[7] The iambic meter (when héarts beat hárd) that returns in this line after the insistent spondee of that "púre crúde fáct" helps us to remember the poetic form that sets itself between us and the thing signified, especially since we can hear in it a syncopated echo of another earlier spondee (héarts béat hárd). In such ways, poetry calls attention to the "beat" of meter, not to mention the sound of rhyme and alliteration or the warp and woof of caesura, enjambment, endstop, break, all of which call the reader's attention to the fabric of words outside of their representational function.

Browning questions the substantiality of that "ring-thing," first by calling attention to the music of the poetic line, giving us, despite the blank verse of the form, not one but two internal rhymes in the line: Ere/wear, ring/thing. He also reminds us of the fact of meter, offering an awkward spondee in the middle of line 17, "Ére

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[6] Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick. Subsequent references to *The Ring and the Book* will refer to this edition and will appear in parentheses, including Book and line number.

[7] The fact that we are "hearing" such intonations in writing rather than out loud further opens up alternative interpretative possibilities, as explored, for example, by Eric Griffiths in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*: "The intonational ambiguity of a written text may create a mute polyphony through which we see rather than hear alternatively possible voicings, and are led by such vision to reflect on the inter-resonance of those voicings" (66). An excellent example of how we can use such multiple voicings for the purpose of ideological critique is Herbert F. Tucker's "The Fix of Form."

the stúff grow a ríng-thíng ríght to wear," then repeating the phrase to right the meter ("the thíng a ríng")—all the while discussing, in lines full of alliteration, the artifice that gives to things their form:

> That trick is, the artificer melts up wax
> With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold
> With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,
> Effects a manageable mass, then works,
> But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
> Oh, there's repristination! Just a spirt
> O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
> And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;
> While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
> The rondure brave, the lilied loveliness,
> Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore:
> Prime nature with an added artistry. (I.18–29)

Indeed, he follows these lines by giving the lie to his opening referential gesture, clarifying that the ring is, in fact, "a figure, a symbol, say;/ A thing's sign: now for the thing signified" (I.31–2), only to repeat the gesture yet again, "Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss/ I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about/ By the crumpled vellum covers,—pure crude fact" (I.33–5). In this case, though he refers to the book that precisely gives us the "thing's sign," we can acknowledge that we do have a material analog for this referential gesture: not the things signified by reading the book, but the very book, in all its thingness, that we hold in our hands.[8]

We cannot but raise questions of form when discussing the verse-novel since one of the remarkable things about it is precisely its formlessness. However pervasive the form in the period, there are no *taxonomic* features that define it as a genre: no single meter or stanzaic structure or rhyme scheme. Not only do the forms of novel and poetry collide in the verse-novel but the very possibility of genre is also exploded in these works in favor of those form/things that step outside of genre altogether. We have discussed a number of similar maneuvers in the verse-novels that preceded *Ring and the Book*: Byron's "words are things," for example, or his similar use of rhyme to trouble referentiality: "ink"/"think";

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[8] We have here the same logic of "Form Things" that Stefanie Markovits explores. She argues that diamonds are exemplary instances of "things," as understood by thing theory, and she quotes John Plotz on the problem of things: "'Thing' is the term of choice for the extreme cases when nouns otherwise fail us: witness the thingamagummy and the thingamabob. Thing theory is at its best, therefore, when it focuses on this sense of failure, or partial failure, to name or to classify" (Plotz 110, Markovits 592). Markovits claims that diamonds, at once material objects and octahedron forms, materially existent things and lyrically transcendent figures or symbols, are perfect instances of this limit case, arguing that "These gems form where genres collide" ("Form Things," 611). See Chapter Three for a discussion of Thing Theory and Byron's poetry.

"*It*"/"wit"; "text"/"next"; "God I"/"body"; "bulletin"/"bullet in"; Clough's calling attention to his meter's omissions: "I sáw/ Sómething"; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's alignment of our search for truth with the very meter of her iambic line and the tropes/alliteration of poetry: "We shápe a fígure óf our fántasy´,/ Call nóthing sómething, ánd run áfter ít"; Meredith's breakdown of the distinction between referent and form: "Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes."

Each of these works interrogates the nature of both lyricism and fictionality. Since our goal is to understand better the structural mechanisms by which poetry and the novel make sense of representation generally—including the competing understandings of "referentiality" itself since an objective, descriptive representation of the external world could be said to work in tension with a realistic representation of internal thought processes—we want to press further on Browning's ring-and-the-book metaphor, which illustrates how self-conscious he was about the issues involved and about engaging the novel. Although the ring would seem to be a referential object, it functions also as a form-thing, a non-referential "figure, a symbol . . ./ A thing's sign." The book itself, which we would normally open to seek "the thing signified," turns into a referential object: "Small-quarto size, part print part manuscript:/ A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact" (I.85–6). In the logic of this metaphor, gold stands for truth (pure, crude fact) and the ring for artifice, the form that brings facts to life. As Browning states, "Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged,/ Lay gold, (beseech you, hold that figure fast!)/ So, in this book lay absolutely truth,/ Fanciless fact" (I.141–4). He then repeats this figure a little later: "This is the bookful; thus far take the truth,/ The untempered gold, the fact untampered with,/ The mere ring-metal ere the ring be made!" (I.364–6). In between those two explanations of his figure, Browning gives us the basic facts of an actual 1698 murder case, a synopsis of the events that we will read about again and again from different perspectives in each of the books that follow. Even this, however, is little more than an expansion of the long, paratextual title of a real book Browning found in a Florentine marketplace, which he translates for us at lines 120–31, thus giving *in nuce* the narrative plot of historical events. As he concludes wryly, "That, was this old square yellow book about" (I.140).

To complicate his figure yet further, in "Pompilia," Browning makes a "real" ring an element of the plot itself. Pompilia—who along with her parents is murdered by her jealous husband, Count Guido Franceschini—is particularly concerned with questions of truth. (And so is Browning, who for all his proto-postmodern maneuvers does still clearly side with Pompilia's version of events.)[9] As Pompilia claims, "what was all I said but truth,/ Even when I found that such as are untrue/ Could

[9] On the complexities and contradictions of Browning's understanding of the truth, see especially Patricia Diane Rigg's *Robert Browning's Dramatic Irony in* The Ring and the Book. As Rigg puts it, "Browning seems ironically content both that he has presented a complete truth and that the complete truth cannot be presented. This paradoxical treatment of truth in *The Ring and the Book* is what makes Browning a Romantic ironist" (19–20).

only take the truth in through a lie?/ Now—I am speaking truth to the Truth's self " (VII.1195–8). Yet that declaration of truth is troubled by the very figure, the "ring-thing," that Browning adopts to frame his own tale. According to Pompilia, her maid Margherita is working for her husband, who is sending Pompilia forged letters to entrap her by asking for a "A ring to show for token" (VII.1092) as proof of her intent to commit adultery. Pompilia's maid importunes,

> "Just hear the pretty verse he made to-day!
> A sonnet from Mirtillo. '*Peerless fair . . .*'
> All poetry is difficult to read,
> —The sense of it is, anyhow, he seeks
> Leave to contrive you an escape from hell,
> And for that purpose asks an interview. (VII.1152–7)

The formal complexity of this *mise-en-abyme* moment is breathtaking: Robert Browning speaks in the voice of Pompilia, who is addressed by Margherita, who quotes a poem by "Mirtillo," a fictional avatar evoking pastoral conventions, who pens a poem that Margherita claims to be from Caponsacchi, although the letter and the poem are in fact both forged by Guido. In the middle of this hall of mirrors, Browning includes a nod to lyric, transcendent address ("'*Peerless fair . . .*'"), recast now as narrative device: a trap set by Guido to catch Pompilia in the act. Lyric poetry becomes the bait, and a golden ring becomes the token of faithlessness.

Browning concludes Pompilia's monologue by rejecting both the marital ring and the gold that makes it: "Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,/ Mere imitation of the inimitable:/ In heaven we have the real and true and sure" (VII.1824–6). Browning completes this book, that is, by returning to his opening metaphor of gold only to reject the ring altogether: "Marriage-making for the earth,/ With gold so much,—birth, power, repute so much,/ Or beauty, youth so much, in lack of these!/ Be as the angels rather, who, apart,/ Know themselves into one, are found at length/ Married, but marry never, no, nor give/ In marriage" (VII.1830–6). Browning does not avoid the numinous here so much as present it as that which no earthly thing or form can ever grasp. Browning provides "a plot of lyricism resisted"[10]—which is how Herbert F. Tucker understands Browning's dramatic monologues in general—but also a plot of *realism* resisted, leaving us with the artifice of form to give us something "beyond the facts/ Suffice the eye and save the soul beside" (XII.862–3). According to Browning, art alone can save us from false belief, regardless of whether we talk about religion, ideology, or representation, and it does so by teaching one thing: "This lesson, that our human speech is naught,/ Our human testimony false, our fame/ And human estimation words and wind" (XII.834–6).

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[10] Herbert F. Tucker, "The Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," 231.

Questions of Virtue: The Book and the Ring

How is it that art can "save the soul" while moving "beyond the facts," as Browning suggests in his verse-novel's last book, "The Book and the Ring"? If "our human speech is naught,/ Our human testimony false," how can we act ethically in the present? Is Browning not merely deferring action to some fantasized eschatological future ("Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn/ For all hope, all sustainment, all reward," as he has it in Book I)? What is the temporality of event in Browning and how does it compare to other versions we have explored in this book?

Once again, Wordsworth's engagement with "infinitude" provides a useful counter-model of formal temporality ("Our destiny, our being's heart and home,/ Is with infinitude, and only there"). The danger of Wordsworth's "something ever-more about to be" is that it can defer endlessly the confrontation with infinite truths that point to a common good outside of custom and that demand action in the present. Wordsworth's spots of time also subordinate the experience of the infinite into a *bildungsroman* of self-narrativization, the autobiography that is *The Prelude*, with the child now father of the man.[11] Barrett Browning's version of the New Jerusalem in *Aurora Leigh* is quite different, as we have seen. Opposing the novel's logic of present causes of past effects, Barrett Browning (and Byron before her) offer us *the present effects of future causes.* As Barrett Browning puts it in *Casa Guidi Windows*: we must "plant the great Hereafter in this Now" (I.299), which is usefully compared to Browning's own articulation, quoted earlier: "All poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite."

Byron and Barrett Browning think outside of a novelistic or historical version of temporality. In this model, we do not work for our children, or for the future of the species, or for our own self-realization, or even because we want our version of truth to succeed. Byron so clearly articulates the principle that we quote the passage once more here:

> But, *onward*!—it is now the time to act, and what signifies *self*, if a single spark of that which would be worthy of the past can be bequeathed unquenchably to the future? It is not one man, nor a million, but the *spirit* of liberty which must be spread. . . . [W]hatever the sacrifice of individuals, the great cause will gather strength, sweep down what is rugged, and fertilise . . . what is cultivable. And so, the mere selfish calculation ought never to be made on such occasions; and, at present, it shall not be computed by me. I was never a good arithmetician of chances, and shall not commence now. (*Letters* VIII.20)

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[11] We explore this logic in Chapter One.

We are driven to act by a universal principle, the "*spirit* of liberty." That universality in fact works *against* the church, according to Saint Paul, which is why Barrett Browning writes in her letters that she "expect[ed] . . . a great development of Christianity in opposition to the churches, and of humanity generally in opposition to the nations." In such an act, there is no "selfish calculation" of either the self or the group, however large. We act because we must after confrontation with truths that unveil ethical imperatives, even as we have no idea of the cause-and-effect temporality or eventuality of that action. As Byron puts it, he is not "a good arithmetician of chances." Criticism has largely dismissed such passages as ideological smoke screen, but that dismissal has obscured how Byron and Barrett Browning offer us a different formal approach to the infinite, unlike what we find in either the novel or Romantic lyricism. All these genres are, in fact, concerned with the infinite, as is our secular understanding (and fetishization) of the heroic or significant act. However, there are distinct structural ways we can address such a concept, including the purely mathematical one—explored by Paul Cohen and Badiou—by which we make sense of the non-constructible set. Without some articulation of an "infinite" that exceeds the calculation of selfish interests or the constraints of custom, we cannot properly make sense of the good or understand how to effect positive change.

Locating Browning in the counter-tradition we have identified in Byron and Barrett Browning helps us better understand the need for the Pope's dramatic monologue near the end of *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69). Browning addresses Barrett Browning's Pauline formulation in that book: Christianity in opposition to the churches, humanity in opposition to the nations. He even begins, as does Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, with Ecclesiastes: "I will begin," he writes, "and read a History" since "of the making books there is no end" (X.2–9). Like Barrett Browning, Browning begins with extreme skepticism, which he then applies to the church itself. In "The Pope," Browning questions the church's version of the truth by addressing examples where Papal decrees were overturned—a section made even more pertinent because of the 1869–70 First Ecumenical Council of the Vatican that led to the declaration of papal infallibility. "Which of the Judgments was infallible?" (X.151), the Pope wryly asks. Fully half of *The Ring and the Book* (all of Books II, III, IV, VIII, IX, and XII, in fact) could similarly be said to present us with the futility of human knowledge.

As we have argued, Clough and Meredith do not move much past such skepticism, directing their critique at both the novelistic and lyric conceptions of truth and virtue. What makes love *modern* in Meredith (or in Clough, for that matter) is precisely the loss of its Pauline dimension, followed by the paralytic inability to act in love's name. We are presented with a similar kind of extreme skepticism in Browning, extending all the way back to his Madhouse Cells, and, as in Ecclesiastes, we could say that the ultimate lesson in *The Ring and the Book* is that all is vanity, "human estimation words and wind" (XII.834–6). And yet, influenced

surely by the example of Barrett Browning, Browning in *Ring and the Book* insists on the at once anti-novelistic and anti-lyric understanding of truth and event that we have seen exemplified as a counter-tradition in Byron and Barrett Browning. For Browning, moral issues are clearly tied up with aesthetic ones, especially narrative's understanding of cause-and-effect temporality, which we saw resisted throughout the opening book. The murder at the heart of *Ring and Book* is not only the inaccessible event behind its highly refracted narrative, but also a product of Guido's selfish scheming, his narrative ends. As the Pope ventriloquizes Guido in his dramatic monologue, "'I live for greed, ambition, lust, revenge;/ Attain these ends by force, guile'" (X.1937–8). As he goes on, "'hypocrite,/ Today, perchance to-morrow recognized/ The rational man, the type of common sense'" (X.1938–40). The Pope responds by underscoring the implied alignment of form and content in the preceding passages: "And, first effect of the new cause of things" (X.1948) is the crime itself, the three bodies that are the effect of that premeditating cause. In opposition to this act in the service of ends, the Pope offers a Pauline logic of act instead: "my last act, as my first,/ I owe the scene, and Him who armed me thus/ With Paul's sword" (X.1955–7).

Here, the Pope's act is his judgment of Guido, in hope that Guido will at the last see a truth beyond his self-interest: "may the truth be flashed out by one blow,/ And Guido see, one instant, and be saved" (X.2126–7). How should we understand the temporality of that "one instant"? For Browning, as for Byron, the most important aspect of the eruption of infinite truths in the present is that such truths must never be subordinated to selfish calculation, which means that each person must resist the temptation to become an arithmetician of chances. The logic here is, rather, that of the future anterior. For man to "make/ A fairer moral world than this he finds,/ Guess now what shall be known hereafter" (X.1416–18). This "guess" about the future is speculative, but not in the sense that it calculates ends or chances of success. The process of making "a fairer moral world" must always entail action in the present, according to Browning: "Grapple with danger whereby souls grow strong" (X.1301); "The moral sense grows but by exercise" (X.1414). The precipitating drive, as for Barrett Browning, is love in the Pauline sense, which Browning argues must be understood in terms of an infinity that cannot be constrained, truth that lies "outside this our sphere/ Where things are classed and counted small or great" (X.1343–4). Once we class or count, we "subordinate/ The future to the present" (X.1432–3). Browning counters that cause-and-effect logic with an alternative temporality of event:

> Life is probation and this earth no goal
> But starting-point of man: compel him strive,
> Which means, in man, as good as reach the goal. (X.1435–8)

But how should we understand the temporality of such an act?

To make sense of an act that resists narrative cause-and-effect logic, Browning turns to a radical militancy of event inspired by Saint Paul, which is how the Pope interprets Caponsacchi's decision to protect Pompilia:

> For see this priest, this Caponsacchi, stung
> At the first summons,—"Help for honour's sake,
> Play the man, pity the oppressed!—no pause,
> How does he lay about him in the midst,
> Strike any foe, right wrong at any risk,
> All blindness, bravery and obedience!—blind?
> Ay, as a man would be inside the sun,
> Delirious with the plenitude of light
> Should interfuse him to the finer-ends—
> Let him rush straight, and how shall he go wrong?
> Where are the Christians in their panoply?
> The loins we girt about with truth, the breasts
> Righteousness plated round, the shield of faith,
> The helmet of salvation, and that sword
> O' the Spirit, even the word of God,—where these? (X.1555–69)

Caponsacchi acts without regard for himself and "for honour's sake" on the side of the oppressed. The Pope considers this righteous action, and so, we think, does Browning.

Browning is not presenting a Christian apology here—nor are we. Rather, our hope is to determine what is essentially *and formally* radical about the Pauline position, so that we can distinguish this approach to temporality and morality from others. For Browning, as for Barrett Browning and Byron, the *institutionalization* of Christianity is its problem. For this reason, Browning includes a long section where he ventriloquizes Euripedes (X.1669–89) and makes the case for a classical precedent to Saint Paul: "Five hundred years ere Paul spoke, Felix heard" (X.1717); then again: "How nearly did I guess at that Paul knew?" (X.1723). After the establishment of Christianity, the "Christian act" (X.1831) becomes more difficult, ironically, since it initiates a cause-and-effect sequence in which actions expect rewards in heaven (such that we then "bargain for his love" [59], as Browning puts it in "Johannes Agricola in Meditation"). As the Pope describes this false Christian stance, it "Will clearly make you in the end returns" (X.1835); "Waste not a spike,—the richlier you will reap" (X.1843). The act-event that Browning calls for in "The Pope" is, rather, outside such systems of reward.

We think this imperative to move beyond a closure-dominated system of cause-and-effect helps explain Browning's fascination with the Molinists, who are mentioned over thirty times in *Ring and the Book*. The writings of Juan de Molina are mischaracterized (and confused with those of Miguel de Molinos) throughout

the poem, where they are condemned as heresy. But, in fact, the Molinist effort to reconcile free will (action) with predetermination (end/goal) comes closest to Browning's position.[12] It is the Pope who is most sympathetic to Molinist claims:

> . . . do they, these Molinists,
> At peril of their body and their soul, —
> Recognized truths, obedient to some truth
> Unrecognized yet, but perceptible? (X.1868–71)

As he states in the lines that directly precede this mention of the Molinists,

> As we broke up that old faith of the world,
> Have we, next age, to break up this the new—
> Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report—
> Whence need to bravely disbelieve report
> Through increased faith in thing reports belie? (X.1863–7)

The Molinist argument is essentially counterfactual: God knew all possible future options before the creation of the world—all formulations with the structure, "if x were the case, then y would happen"—but the actualization of the current world is nonetheless instantiated by human acts of free will in the present moment. For Browning in "The Pope," too, all possible counterfactuals exist simultaneously in the mind of God, which yields pure multiplicity outside any constraining set, outside our sphere where "things are classed and counted small or great" [X.1344]); however, only our acts instantiate God's grace, his fragile absolute, in the present: "Choice of the world, choice of the thing I am,/ Both emanate alike from the dread play/ Of operation outside this our sphere" (X.1341—-3). In Browning's model, there can be no selfish calculation of chances since the impetus for action is the result of an "operation outside this our sphere." There is not even the reproductive futurism that dominates novelistic thinking about our actions:

> . . . the act renouncing earth,
> Lands, houses, husbands, wives and children here, —
> Begin that other act which finds all, lost,
> Regained, in this time even, a hundredfold,
> And, in the next time, feels the finite love
> Blent and embalmed with its eternal life. (X.1802–7)

The act-event is, rather, the realization of an "eternal" truth enacted in the present.

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[12] For a cogent explanation of the different theological positions represented in Browning's poem, see Rita Maria Verbrugge, "'Fact with Fancy.'"

By pinpointing an identifiable future-anterior structure in nineteenth-century literary history, we can better understand how aesthetic form is related to ethical acts; and by examining the verse-novel, we can better understand what it is that the Victorian novel and Wordsworthian lyricism were doing differently—and what we might do differently yet again. We might even begin to ask ourselves if we can imagine new ways of approaching the task of literary criticism. Is there value in approaching our work by way of this counter-tradition? At the very least, we might begin to question, as Dimock puts it, "The stark antithesis" between "what is now called 'otherwise'" and "the real thing." If such a distinction is only a "semantic distinction, indeed a fluke," why should we insist on it? "It is a happenstance," Dimock writes, "a tightening of the causal net in one direction rather than another, one that, often for no good reason, drastically thins out the range of available options, reducing a multitudinous world to a few hard facts" ("Subjunctive," 242). We have tried in these pages to loosen the net, to open ourselves to new possibilities by exploring those opened by the verse-novel. Our hope has been to find new, counterfactual ways to think about the nineteenth century and perhaps to locate new ways to think and act in this one.

Coda
Crisis, Collectivism, and Change

We can easily point to proof that future-anterior thinking works, though we must look in what may seem a strange place: late capitalism. Investment capital works by way of the future anterior—but a version that has been stripped of the universal and the collective. The most successful business pitch is one that convinces "angel" investors that the product being proposed belongs to a future where it is accepted as a regular part of our reality. Such "angels" never look backward to determine significant moments of change or to understand how we became who we are in the present; they wish only to be shown the future so that they can help bring it into being through massive investment. They are not interested in the merits of individual actors but in the "vision." They also fully understand that, to bring that future into being, one must accept multiple failures; it is the heroic success that is the accident. That applies both to the pitch and to the one-out-of-ten successful investments, because even the most successful ventures must make it through what in business is termed "the valley of death," a period of "negative cash flow" on the way to the imagined future finally made manifest, at which point the product provides a massive return on the investment—a different but not unconnected version of what Browning critiques in *The Ring and the Book*: It "[w]ill clearly make you in the end returns" (X.1835). It took Facebook roughly five years before it could report its first profit; Amazon ten; Tesla thirteen.

The strategy has transformed the world in all sorts of ways; the problem is that the changes have largely not been salutary since the goal is usually not to make the world a better place but to make profit. The current late-capitalist system is set up not to usher in a new liberatory symbolic order but to undergird the status quo by keeping the rich as rich as they can possibly be. You invest in the future (even, literally, "futures") to ensure the leaders of the late capitalist system remain in control. The investment system is not designed to disrupt the current order or to make the world a better place for all; it supports what needs to happen so that things may stay the same.[1]

Universities are currently among the few places that are in position to fight back against a late-capitalist system set up to quash the efforts of collectivist initiatives. The situation is becoming ever more difficult for the humanities, however, as these

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[1] When these capitalists apply future-anterior thinking to philanthropical ventures that do attempt to fight for a collectivist future, they can be quite effective at making the world a better place. The Gates Foundation is perhaps the most well-known example.

same universities seek increasingly to model themselves on late-capitalist, neo-liberal models rather than collectivist ones. It is old news that the humanities find themselves in a "crisis." Indeed, the humanities have been in an increasing state of institutional crisis for decades, as our perceived value, share of incoming students, and budgets have slowly been redistributed to the STEM disciplines. What characterizes the popular representation of the STEM disciplines as well as economic theory is the claim, not only that they are more useful, but also that they provide us with a truer representation of the underlying structures of both reality and society. This view has a history, one that can best be revealed through a historically situated exploration of those structural forms—including the history of the notion of structure itself—that predispose us to see reality in this way.[2] Approaching such presuppositions and accepted paradigms from a *longue durée* perspective clarifies how such ways of seeing have a material history, how they foreclose other, arguably better mechanisms for making sense of the world, how they in fact necessarily fail before the full, chaotic complexity of both material reality and materialist social relations. In fact, it is the humanities—history, political science, communications, critical theory, philosophy, sociology, anthropology—that are in the best position to account for the production and naturalization of the very presuppositions that may well have brought us to the brink of global destruction.

But is it enough simply to account for things? Surely the historical province of literary criticism to describe, analyze, and appreciate intricacies of language that open for us the very stuff of what it means to be human has been and remains a noble enterprise, and we would never argue otherwise. And, just as surely, the application of our skills outward from the strictly defined literary text to the larger world and its structures of power and representation has also been a worthy enterprise and one that continues to produce valuable insights. But we must wonder, is revealing "a more complete view of reality" (19), as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus put it, sufficient when that reality is as dire as so many of us believe it currently to be?[3] As is evident from any examination of political debates about

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[2] On the evolution of this way of thinking, see especially Regenia Gagnier's *The Insatiability of Human Wants.*

[3] Best and Marcus are part of a movement in criticism that has questioned the politics and overweening ambitions of cultural historicism. Best and Marcus, in their manifesto, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," set out to reorient the critic's view from the underground of the "political unconscious" (in the Jamesonian terms that so often come under fire in New Formalist work) to the surface, which they define as "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding" (18). See our discussion of Best and Marcus in Chapter Five. Other New Formalist critics follow suit, for example Rita Felski in "Context Stinks!" and Heather Love in "Close but not Deep." We have attempted, rather, to follow those New Formalists who attempt historically inflected formalism and the historicization of form, for example historical poetics and Caroline Levine's "strategic formalism." As Levine says her "strategic formalist" approach, "On the one hand, it relies on historicist work in the field to understand the ways that literary forms have force in the social world and are capable of shaping political arrangements. On the other hand, it extends formalist insights to make the case that social hierarchies and institutions can themselves be understood as *forms*" ("Strategic Formalism," 626).

the grave issues facing our world, we are surrounded and led not by people who prize reality or truth but by those who indulge the classic fetishistic mechanism: I know very well that I am/he is speaking a lie (and everyone else does too) but nonetheless I will act as if I believed it.[4] Such fetishism makes it difficult to effect real change even after "a more complete view of reality" is presented.

We do not delude ourselves that writing about nineteenth-century verse-novels will avert global catastrophe or that critical theory is a magic bullet for the intractable problems of the twenty-first-century world. Indeed, we think the point to be made is that there is no magic bullet: all disciplines and all people must contribute to the solution of the "wicked problems" of the contemporary world. So, we ask ourselves, what do we have to contribute? And our answer, however surprisingly, routes us through the verse-novels that took as one of their main topics form itself. The supreme self-consciousness and ironic distance of the verse-novel might be the very last place that most people would look for a prescription for living—not to mention any solution to world problems big or small—but we believe we have found there a tradition that precisely because of its critical distance on literary and ideological forms provides an alternative mode not only for viewing the world but also for revolutionary action within it. That this mode did not stick, did not become the dominant way of thinking about human subjects and their actions, does not invalidate it as a counterfactual possibility—counterfactual in two ways: it was never naturalized as the representative pattern for "the way things are," and it asks us to adopt a counterfactual relationship to the world as we know it.

As we have illustrated, one can chart a future-anterior radical tradition across the nineteenth century, one that begins with the iconoclastic work of Lord Byron and continues through the verse-novels of Barrett Browning and Robert Browning. That tradition adopts a revolutionary approach to action in the present that disjoints time to imagine and enact possibilities that draw their power from counterfacticity. The closest contemporary analogues to this tradition may be the work of Badiou and Dupuy, who have each developed counterfactual strategies for responding to global crisis. Here is Žižek on Dupuy, Badiou, and a way forward, which we quote in full:

> This, then, is how Dupuy proposes to confront the forthcoming catastrophe: we should first perceive it as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourself into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities ("If we had done this and that, the

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[4] As we have argued, fetishism is a critical mechanism for the constitution of Victorian realism in the nineteenth century. In *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek builds on the double logic of fetishism ("I know/nevertheless") to theorize the nature of ideology, which, according to him, follows a similar contradictory logic. Comic Stephen Colbert called this fetishistic disavowal of the truth "truthiness," which became the Merriam-Webster word of the year in 2006, the same year that Colbert, who for a time inhabited the persona of a conservative pundit on *The Colbert Report*, was invited to address top members of government, including US President George W. Bush, at the Correspondents' Dinner.

catastrophe we are in now would not have occurred!") upon which we then act today. Therein resides Dupuy's paradoxical formula: we have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, that the catastrophe will take place, it is our destiny—and, then, against the background of this acceptance, we should mobilize ourselves to perform the act which will change destiny itself and thereby insert a new possibility into the past. For Badiou, the time of the fidelity to an event is the *futur antérieur*: overtaking oneself toward the future, one acts now as if the future one wants to bring about is already here. The same circular strategy of the *futur antérieur* is also the only truly effective one in the face of a calamity (say, of an ecological disaster): instead of saying "the future is still open, we still have the time to act and prevent the worst," one should accept the catastrophe as inevitable, and then act to retroactively undo what is already "written in the stars" as our destiny. (*In Defense*, 459–60).

We propose that we adopt the same strategy in addressing not the fate of humanity but, rather, the fate of the humanities.

If you think that these two considerations are incommensurable because we are talking about dramatically different orders of scale, we remind you that at least on the political stage both Republican and Democratic US governments have leveraged economic theory and science in a bipartisan dismissal of the humanities. Apparently, this is one thing on which Republicans and Democrats can agree. Of course, one can see the same trends in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Politicians have argued that the STEM disciplines are not only the more useful career path for the next generation but also on some level a truer representation of reality. To our mind, this is a strange claim since economics and technology have brought us to the brink of global catastrophe through the promotion of models and mechanisms that now threaten global destruction because of war and the devastation of the environment. Thinking that the humanities do not deserve to be a part of these conversations, in other words, is precisely what has led to our current situation. By refusing to acknowledge the ethical limitations, global implications, and historical emergence of our presumptions, which the various disciplines of the humanities are in the best position to provide, we may be dooming ourselves to the worst possible fate.

For these reasons, we think that it is fair to apply Dupuy's global-warming strategy to the crisis of the humanities as well. What if we accepted that there is no going back, that the humanities as we have known them are gone? Accepting this, we can begin to posit a completely different system of collective knowledge production and dissemination that retroactively opens up a radically new possibility for humanities scholarship and academic involvement in the public sphere, one that, in an act of time travel back from the moment of humanities' apocalyptic destruction, breaks with the current order. We can thus also ensure that the perspective and methods of humanities scholars remain readily available to the public

in a way that ensures that our values (investigation, debate, difficulty, and a non-profit, *collectivist* vision for the future) are affirmed rather than undermined. To do so, we must be willing to step outside the current order to imagine new collectivist ways of acting to bring a better order to fruition in the present. We wish to traverse what separates us and travel back in time to a present where we act to save ourselves—together, now.

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Index

For the benefit of digital users, indexed terms that span two pages (e.g., 52–53) may, on occasion, appear on only one of those pages.