THEORY AND INTERPRETATION OF NARRATIVE
JAMES PHELAN AND PETER J. RABINOWITZ, SERIES EDITORS
Narrative Means, Lyric Ends

Temporality in the Nineteenth-Century British Long Poem

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For my parents, whose love and support know no end
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In an 1844 letter to Mary Russell Mitford, Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed her goals for the poem that would eventually become *Aurora Leigh*:

People care for a story—there’s the truth! And I who care so much for stories, am not to find fault with them. And now tell me,—where is the obstacle to making as interesting a story of a poem as of a prose work . . . Conversations & events, why may they not be given as rapidly & passionately & lucidly in verse as in prose . . . I want to write a poem of a new class, in a measure—a Don Juan, without the mockery & impurity, . . . under one aspect,—& having unity, as a work of art,—& admitting of as much philosophical dreaming & digression (which is in fact a characteristic of the age) as I like to use.¹

Barrett Browning’s aspirations raise a number of important questions (besides the conundrum of what, exactly, would be left of Byron’s *Don Juan* if one were to excise the “mockery & impurity”). How can a poet satisfy the public in an age that craves both “a story” and “dreaming & digression”? Can a poem achieve artistic unity when its purposes are so multiple and divergent, and through what new aesthetic forms is that unity imposed? What poetic elements are retained in poems that imitate narrative prose? How important is rapidity when telling a story, and why, in the nineteenth century, is poetry more associated with the meandering and the atemporal?

This book attempts to answer such questions by examining the varied and complex interplay between two seemingly antithetical modes, lyric and narrative, in four canonical long poems of nineteenth-century British literature: William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, and Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*. These four poems are representative of a general trend of generic experimentation with lyric and narrative in nineteenth-century poetry, and demonstrate the range of possibilities in such experiments. I argue that each of these texts uses narrative techniques to create lyrical effects, effects that manipulate readers’ experience of time and shape their intellectual, emotional, and ethical responses. I approach the primary texts through the dual perspectives of narratology and poetic theory, two fields that rarely come into contact, yet can reinforce, complement, and critique each other. Although contemporary narrative theory has expanded the range of texts it considers, poetry remains underrepresented and the novel remains the dominant source of examples and case studies. By taking the less common approach of understanding poetry through narratology, I hope to achieve several goals. The first two chapters find strong, unusual structuring devices within two Romantic poems that have often been described as amorphous and accretive—*The Prelude* and *Don Juan*. The final two chapters address Victorian poetry from a context that emphasizes its innovation, its creation of new forms to create new rhetorical effects. More generally, the four poems central to the project serve as case studies of the boundaries and interactions between broad modes and among specific genres, changing our aesthetic and ideological assumptions about lyric and narrative. The analysis of these poems’ underlying structures also expands the domain of narrative theory, and qualifies some generalizations that often are based too exclusively on the realist novel. Finally, by connecting specific uses of local poetic features (especially simile, personification, and alliteration) to larger narrative strategies, this book
demonstrates that form at the micro and macro levels can mirror, supplement, or otherwise reinforce each other.\(^2\)

Although lyric and narrative forms abound throughout English literature, the nineteenth century is an especially rich period for the study of these modes because of the confluence of two literary-historical trends: the increasing prestige of lyric poetry, and the increasing popularity of the novel. In the Romantic and Victorian periods, writers as varied as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Mill value poetry for the emotional intensity usually associated with lyric, and view narrative as contingent and subservient. Despite the critical devaluation of narrative, poets, to a greater or lesser extent, incorporate narrative elements. In part, they were responding to the increasing popularity of a new narrative form—the novel. At the beginning of the century, the most popular poems and the most popular novels had similar sales figures. But while the market for poetry remained relatively unchanged, the sales of novels exploded as the century progressed.

The combination of lyric’s critical prestige and narrative’s popular appeal produced, as the nineteenth century progressed, a heightened sense of the tension between lyric and narrative, and varied and complex strategies for reconciling the two modes. To date, most studies of nineteenth-century poetry which address lyric versus narrative have argued that Victorian poets introduce narrative or dramatic elements to make poetry more objective, as a reaction against the seemingly excessive lyric subjectivity of Romanticism.\(^3\) I take a different approach. This study focuses on the temporal, logical, and figurative aspects of lyric and narrative, aspects that more vividly highlight the tension between the two modes. Whereas narrative requires temporal progression and

\(^2\) I thus hope to overcome the sense of opposition between two types of formalist analysis (one focused on large-scale structure, the other on local style) described by Catherine Gallagher in “Formalism and Time,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (March 2000): 229–31. Gallagher suggests that both approaches are flawed, in that “both versions of form may be said to arrest narrative flow, one by generalizing an enduring pattern toward which the moments contribute and the other by freezing a moment for analysis.” Gallagher, 231. I hope that my emphasis on dynamic reader interactions over time will partly mitigate such shortcomings.

\(^3\) For instance, one of the major premises of Carol T. Christ’s study is that “the Victorians and the Modernists find the prominence which they feel that Romanticism gives to the poet’s subjectivity burdensome and restrictive.” *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 2. Isobel Armstrong agrees that the Victorians strived to create a poetic form that is, at the same time, “not only the subject’s utterance but the object of analysis and critique.” Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12. Armstrong differs from Christ, however, in viewing the Romantics as engaged in the same struggle to make poetry less subjective, although to a lesser degree. Ibid., 6.
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 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. By concentrating on time’s progression versus timelessness, strict causality versus imaginative association, and the strategic uses of figurative language, I bring into focus the fundamental differences between narrative and lyric, and trace the historical progression of their productive tension in the nineteenth century. Early in the century, the two modes were still largely separate: Don Juan is primarily narrative, The Prelude is primarily lyrical. In mid-century, the Brownings both attempt to reconcile and balance the two modes in a long poem. Despite their varied structures, these four poems each use narrative methods to achieve lyrical effects: narrative is a means to attain lyric ends.

Western literary theory has a long tradition of distinguishing lyric and narrative, beginning with Aristotle’s influential division of genres. Aristotle discusses several criteria for dividing poetry, including the media of representation, the objects represented, and the manner of representation. The three possible manners of representation are “(a) by narrating (either (i) becoming another [person], as Homer does, or (ii) remaining the same person and not changing), or (b) by representing everyone as in action and activity.” From this springs the long lasting division of poetry into narrative, lyric, and drama. In dramatic literature, the characters are directly represented “as in action and activity,” and are themselves the source of their speech, without the poet as a visible mediator between the characters and the audience. In lyric, Aristotle’s (a, ii) category, the focus is entirely on the poet, who speaks in his own voice—he “remains the same person.” Narrative occupies an intermediate position, because

5. Ibid., 3.
the characters speak, but only through the poet who temporarily adopts their voices and "becom[es] another person."

These Aristotelian criteria are still influential in 1815, when Wordsworth uses them as the basis for his discussion of genre in the preface to his collected poems. He claims that in narrative poetry, "The distinguishing mark is, that the Narrator, however liberally his speaking agents be introduced, is himself the source from which everything primarily flows." By contrast, in dramatic poetry, "The Poet does not appear at all in his own person, and . . . action is carried on by speech and dialogue of the agents." When defining the lyric, however, Wordsworth surprisingly shifts to another Aristotelian criterion—the media of representation: the lyrical contains forms "in . . . which, for the production of their full effect, an accompaniment of music is indispensable." Here he departing from definitions based on the relationships among characters, poet, and audience, which would have led to a definition of lyric as poetry in which the poet appears exclusively in his own person.

In twentieth-century literary criticism, we can see Aristotle's influence in Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's study of narrative: "By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller. A drama is a story without a story-teller. . . . A lyric, like a drama, is a direct presentation, in which a single actor, the poet or his surrogate, sings, or muses, or speaks for us to hear or overhear. Add a second speaker . . . and we move toward drama. Let the speaker begin to tell of an event . . . and we move toward narrative." Here again, lyric is defined as univocal, drama is a direct presentation of multiple speakers, and narrative filters its presentation through one primary voice. A second set of definitions emerges from their description, however: lyric has a teller but no story, drama has a story but no teller, and narrative has both.

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7. Ibid., 177.
8. Ibid. Even when the presence or absence of musical accompaniment is used as the basis of Wordsworth's generic classification, narrative still falls between drama and lyric, because drama admits music "only incidentally and rarely," and narratives "neither require nor reject the accompaniment of music." Ibid.
10. Scholes and Kellogg go beyond their basis in Aristotle, however, in addressing the possible tension between the story-teller and the story: "The problem of point of view is narrative art's own problem, one that it does not share with lyric or dramatic literature. . . . The narrative situation is . . . ineluctably ironical," but irony "is utterly alien to the lyricist." Scholes and Kellogg, 240. According to Scholes and Kellogg, irony enters
the question of what constitutes a story. Scholes addresses that question when he offers an alternative definition of narrative: “A narration is the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related by time.” Saying that the elements of narrative are “related by time” makes explicit the temporal relation already implied by saying narrative represents “a sequence of events.” By overtly stating the necessity of temporal progression in a story, Scholes more precisely defines his concept of a story and exposes narrative’s most fundamental feature. Scholes and the long tradition of Aristotelian approaches to narrative have, in recent decades, been joined by theories focused on narrative structures. The one point on which all narratologists seem to agree is the essential temporality of the form: narratives depict events over time, and these representations must themselves unfold through time.

Some structural approaches only imply, but unambiguously imply, the necessity of temporal relations in narrative by focusing on events, which are themselves changes in time. For example, Seymour Chatman reiterates the Structuralist and Russian Formalist distinction between “story” and “discourse,” between the content of a narrative and the textual performance through which the content is expressed, and then contends that a story is composed of “events” and “existents” (the former being subdivided into “actions” and “happenings,” the latter into “characters” and “settings”). Other structural analyses more explicitly discuss the temporality of narrative. Gérard Genette evaluates narrative according to three broad categories: temporal relations, mood, and voice. The much greater length of analysis given to temporal relations, and their subcategorization into order, duration, and frequency, suggest the primacy of temporal aspects of narrative. Peter Brooks, in his psychoanalytic approach to narrative structure, is sensitive to plot’s development in time: “Plot as I conceive it is the design and intention of narrative. . . . We might think of plot as the logic or perhaps the syntax of a certain kind of discourse, one that develops its propositions only through temporal sequence and progression.”

narrative only when a written tradition begins, and it would not have been an important feature when literary composition was a primarily oral process. Scholes and Kellogg, 51.


also important for Meir Sternberg, who defines narrative as dominated by “the play of suspense/curiosity/surprise between represented and communicative time.”\(^{15}\) Paul Ricoeur goes even further. For him, time is not just the medium through which narrative conveys its content. Rather, time gives narrative its central meaning, and narrative makes time intelligible.\(^{16}\)

Some theorists require a stronger link than mere temporal succession in order for a group of events to qualify as a narrative, and argue that succession must be joined by causation. Narrative events do not just follow each other in time; they logically follow each other based on concepts of cause and effect. In \(S/Z\) Roland Barthes identifies five codes through which literary texts signify, and two of them require temporal progression and causality. The proairetic code is the logic of minimal sequences of actions, of one action or part of an action probably implying another based on our knowledge of “the ‘already-done’ or ‘already-read’” of experience.\(^{17}\) The hermeneutic code is composed of “all the units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution.”\(^{18}\) It gives the actions of a narrative a more resonant meaning. The proairetic and hermeneutic codes provide a narrative with an armature of cause and effect, though for Barthes, this is a negative characteristic.\(^{19}\)

Although Barthes sees a strong sense of narrative causation as something to be minimized in literary texts, many critics recognize the importance of causality but do not judge its value negatively. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, argues: “Every narrative combines two dimensions in various proportions, one chronological and the other nonchronological. The first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story

\(^{15}\) Meir Sternberg, “Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity,” \(Poetics Today\) 13.3 (Fall 1992): 529. For Sternberg, however, the interplay between the time of story and the time of discourse is even more important than temporal progression per se: “What distinguishes narrative effects as such from all others is less their play over time than their interplay between times.” Sternberg, 519.


\(^{18}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{19}\) Barthes believes “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text”; texts that invite such productivity from the reader are writerly texts, and those that foreclose it are denigrated as readerly texts. Barthes, 4. Barthes associates these two codes and their emphasis on causation with the readerly, rather than with the writerly, text. Barthes, 181–82.
as made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events.” 20 For Ricoeur, narrative texts link time with causation, which can help extract “significant wholes” and greater meaning out of “scattered events.” There are, however, dissenting voices on the necessity of causation in narrative. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes: “I would like to argue that temporal succession is sufficient as a minimal requirement for a group of events to form a story. My argument is based on: (1) the . . . suggestion that causality can often (always?) be projected onto temporality; and (2) the counter-intuitive nature of [requiring causality]. If . . . we posit causality and closure . . . as obligatory criteria, many groups of events which we intuitively recognize as stories would have to be excluded from this category.” 21 I agree that temporal succession is the only truly essential feature of narrative. Clear causal connections between events are not strictly necessary in a narrative mode. But a text has a higher degree of narrativity, and is more satisfying as a narrative, if it invites the reader to infer causal connections. 22

Just as narrative is marked by temporal succession, lyric is marked by the absence of noticeable temporal succession. Jonathan Culler offers an influential definition of lyric based on its atemporality in his essay “Apostrophe.” Culler suggests that “one [can] distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic, and . . . the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic.” 23 The importance of apostrophe,

22. James Phelan suggests the central elements of narrativity are “the introduction and complication of instabilities involving the characters and the [reader’s] judgments associated with those instabilities.” Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 225. Causation may be important for both the instabilities and the judgments, but it is not the only contributing factor to narrativity.
23. Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe,” in The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 149. Although apostrophe’s atemporality is most important for my purposes, other aspects of Culler’s analysis have inspired further critical debate. Barbara Johnson has applied Culler’s ideas to argue that the rhetoric in political debate and poetry about abortion resembles the rhetoric of apostrophe in its emphasis on (and ambiguity about) animation, and in the breakdown of a clear binary of I and thou. See “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” in A World of Difference (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987): 185–99. J. Douglas Kneale follows the tradition of classical rhetoric in defining apostrophe as a turning away from the original, proper auditor to address someone or something else; as a result, he argues that Culler discusses not apostrophe but rather address, exclamation, and prosopopoeia. Nonetheless, Kneale admits that “what Culler has to say about the temporality of apostrophe is useful.” “Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered,” ELH 58 (1991): 161.
and its resistance to narration, stem from its detachment from temporal succession:

If one puts into a poem *thou shepherd boy, ye blessed creatures, ye birds,* they are immediately associated with what might be called a timeless present but is better seen as a temporality of writing. Even if the birds were only glimpsed once in the past, to apostrophize them as ‘ye birds’ is to locate them in the time of the apostrophe—a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say ‘now.’ This is a time of discourse rather than story. So located by apostrophes, birds, creatures, boys, etc. resist being organized into events that can be narrated, for they are inserted in the poem as elements of the event which the poem is attempting to be.24

The lyric mode shares these characteristics of apostrophe. Lyric creates a timeless present, an indefinitely suspended moment, which contrasts with narrative’s past progression of events. Rather than emphasizing the time of the story and distancing the reader’s encounter with the text from the time of the events, lyric emphasizes the time of discourse, creating a sense of immediacy among the reader, text, and content. Since a lyric is composed of “the set of all moments at which writing can say ‘now,'” it de-emphasizes the passage of time required to read it and instead creates the illusion of a simultaneous apprehension of the poem’s elements and meanings. Apostrophe as a figure and lyric as a mode have another, more subtle, means of resisting narrative temporality. Culler argues that the *you* being addressed is constituted by the addressing *I* in apostrophe, so the real relationship is of the mind to itself rather than between the self and an object. This internalization within the mind of the poet resists narration, and the causality and passage of time associated with it.25 Rather than encouraging the reader to forge connections

25. Ibid., 148. This claim about apostrophe is similar to Paul de Man’s objection to the symbol. According to de Man, the sympathetic apprehension of objects in a symbol is problematic, because sympathy applies “to the relationship between subjects rather than to relationships between a subject and an object. The relationship with nature has been superseded by an intersubjective, interpersonal relationship that, in the last analysis, is a relationship of the subject toward itself.” “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed., Theory and History of Literature, vol. 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 196. The symbol is mystifactory because it creates the illusion that the speaker can borrow the temporal stability of the natural world, and that image and substance can simultaneously coincide. de Man, “Rhetoric,” 197, 207. The symbol is suspicious, then, precisely because it appears atemporal.
of cause and effect as narrative does, lyric connects its material based on the subjective mental associations of the poet.

These characteristics are rarely, perhaps never, present in a pure and absolute form, though. Even the most canonical of brief Romantic lyrics display some narrative elements, but their focus on subjective mental associations and their apostrophic atemporality give them a higher degree of lyricality than narrativity. Although Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” implies a crucial narrative event in the gap between its two stanzas—Lucy’s death—the emphasis falls not on what caused her death, but on its current emotional impact on the speaker. He has, at some point in the past, undergone a radical change in attitude and belief, but his current understanding seems lasting and timeless, even though what he understands is the inexorability of time. The three stanzas of Keats’s “To Autumn” present three views of the season, corresponding to early, mid, and late autumn, and each stanza contains actions and gestures toward temporality. The overarching tone suggests the speaker accepts the temporal change of autumn’s departure, and yet this acceptance is communicated through repeated apostrophes to autumn and closes with a vista explicitly located in the poem’s “now.”

In some sense, all poetry combines lyric and narrative elements, but the four poems discussed in the following chapters are much longer and more complex experiments in formal hybridity.

Culler is not alone in defining lyric based on its predominant atemporality. Susan Stanford Friedman makes similar claims of subjective associationism and a suspended present moment when she argues, “As a discourse of subjectivity, the lyric is said to ‘resist’ narrative. A narrative may stand implicitly behind the lyric moment, but the lyric itself exists in a timeless present, outside history.”

Peter Brooks contrasts lyric with narrative by emphasizing the former’s illusion of simultaneous discourse, and Sharon Cameron places lyric discourse outside the time of action and discusses its concern with timelessness. Rimmon-Kenan implies that lyric does not feature temporal succession when she notes that “narrative fiction differs from other literary texts, such as lyrical poetry or expository prose. Unlike the latter, narrative fiction


represents a succession of events.” I agree with this strand of criticism, identifying lyric as focused on the time of discourse, an indefinitely suspended present moment. I differ from Culler, however, in placing much less emphasis on apostrophe as a figure through which lyric atemporality is manifested.

Treating lyric as a mode rather than a genre and defining lyric based on its atemporality provide a powerful complementary category to narrative as it is defined by much current theory. Perhaps the only point on which all narrative theorists agree is the essential temporality of narrative forms, their dependence on the passing of time in both the stories they tell and the discourse through which they are told. This project’s emphasis on temporality, and its search for the peculiar narrative structure of each long poem studied, may seem to lend itself to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope—the expression in literature of a particular set of temporal (and spatial) relations. While some of the poems I study share important features with specific chronotopes described by Bakhtin (for instance, *The Prelude* shares traits with the stoic autobiography, and *Don Juan* resembles an adventure novel of ordeal), Bakhtin’s methodology and terminology have certain limitations that prevent me from adopting them. First, Bakhtin focuses on the novel rather than on narrative more generally, and he seems hostile toward lyric because he perceives it as ideologically conservative. Second, Bakhtin emphasizes the level of story and temporality as it is experienced by characters, whereas I want also to consider the level of discourse and the temporal experience of readers. Finally, I hope to show the variety of lyric-narrative interactions in a time when the traditional genres analyzed by Bakhtin are breaking down.

Because I want to apply aspects of narrative theory to texts that usually are unaddressed by or tangential to narrative theory, I pare down the idea of narrative to what I take to be its essential features. I can thus temporarily discard other common tenets of narrative theories that are based on the nineteenth-century novel, freeing me from the constraint of forcing narrative poems to fit a model potentially alien to them. To make lyric a complementary term to my definition of narrative, I pare down

29. Rimmon-Kenan, 2.

30. For instance, Bakhtin denigrates the transcendence, subjectivity, and isolation usually associated with lyric: “man’s image was distorted by his increasing participation in the mute and invisible spheres of existence,” and “the personal and detached human being . . . lost the unity and wholeness that had been a product of his public origin.” M. M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 135.
lyric to its essential simultaneity. In doing so, I treat other features commonly attributed to lyric (brevity, intensity, sincerity, subjectivity) as less essential, perhaps even unnecessary. And this could induce the objection that I am emptying traditional definitions of lyric of their meaning, or even suggesting that specific poems long taken as exemplars of the lyric do not actually fit the category.

I would like to avoid these negative consequences by maintaining a distinction between lyric as mode and lyric as genre. The lyric genre is a narrower category: for a poem to be generically lyric, it must be written primarily in the lyric mode and have at least some of the additional attributes mentioned above. Clearly, many poems in the literary tradition fit this more narrow definition of lyric. And clearly it is often useful to have even narrower definitions of lyric subgenres. There are still, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, poems that are recognizable as sonnets, odes, elegies, and songs. But there are also an increasing number of generically hybrid poems, some so hybrid as to defy generic categorization at all. As Dorothy Mermin has said, “Disdain for genre rules was common in the nineteenth century: the Victorians wrote poems in all sorts of strange and nameless forms without worrying about how to define them.” In these cases, the broader category of mode can provide a powerful framework to elucidate underlying structures that do not fit traditional generic categories; the four chapters that follow each provide an example of the modal approach’s usefulness.

Taking lyric and narrative as complementary modes based on their respective simultaneity and temporal progression has another result that may seem troubling: it eliminates drama as a third category on the same hierarchical level as the other two. Most narratologists implicitly subsume drama under narrative, seeing them both as structurally similar,
essentially temporal forms that use two different media of presentation. Although I generally agree with this classification of drama as a subspecies of narrative, I do not therefore see the specific medium of drama and its conventions of presentation as unimportant. I also recognize the possibility that some dramatic works may minimize the importance of time, and hence become more lyrical in nature.

By now, it should be clear that this project has a distinctly formalist emphasis. Since the 1990s, literary criticism, and nineteenth-century studies in particular, have experienced a resurgence of interest in the formal features of literary texts. In the roughly two decades prior to this revival, formalist approaches to literature were often subordinated to ideological considerations, and sometimes dismissed as apolitical and escapist evasions of social meanings and historical contexts. Two identifiable varieties of New Formalism have responded to this perceived neglect of form. Marjorie Levinson has suggested the label “normative formalism” for those critics who advocate “a sharp demarcation between history and art” as a “backlash” against New Historicism, and has adopted Susan Wolfson’s term “activist formalism” for “a new formalism that makes a continuum with new historicism.”

The latter responds to Herbert Tucker’s call for more critics to adopt what he termed a “Cultural Neoformalist” approach, one which would benefit from the gains of New Historicism and cultural studies but would also attend to the cultural implications of “detailed textual signifiers,” and to Caroline Levine’s call for “strategic formalism” within cultural studies. My work may not be as pervasively historicist as the activist criticism called for by Tucker and Levine, but I see the relationship of my work to more historicist approaches as complementary rather than oppositional, and for that reason I do not consider myself a “normative formalist.” Narrative Means, Lyric Ends makes the implicit argument that attention to form is


a necessary element in understanding literary texts, but that formalist approaches should not exclude other considerations. Formal analysis must be among our array of available critical techniques, because form is capable of augmenting, complicating, qualifying, or undermining a text’s more obvious surface meanings. Without an acute sensitivity to the subtleties of form, we are in danger of mistakenly extracting from a work explicit meanings or implicit ideologies which unduly distort and oversimplify the text. In some cases, texts that have been denigrated as unreflective transmitters of ideology may be shrewdly resisting their ideological content through their formal construction, and constructedness.

This monograph also participates in the newly emerging critical interest in lyric-narrative hybridity. Peter Hühn, for example, has fruitfully applied to lyric poems a range of narratological concepts, including general categories of the temporal relations between story and discourse. Recently James Phelan has analyzed lyric-narrative hybridity from a rhetorical perspective using several twentieth-century texts, and Heather Dubrow and Monika Fludernik have each begun to theorize lyric-narrative interactions using Renaissance poetry. Dubrow calls for more attention to cooperation (rather than competition) between the lyric and

35. In this I agree with Wolfson that “any view of poetic artifice that perceives only its power to occlude or mystify misses . . . the capacity of poetry to strengthen critical understanding by engaging attention with its constructedness, making a reading of its forms fundamental to any reception of or quarrel with its power.” Wolfson, Formal, 4.


37. Peter Hühn, “Plotting the Lyric: Forms of Narration in Poetry,” in Theory Into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric, eds. Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 147–72. Hühn claims that poetry theory and criticism is “deficient” and “unsatisfactory” compared to the methodological achievements of narratology, yet he does not address the existing criticism on the poems he uses as examples. Hühn, 147. I disagree with Hühn’s dismissal of poetic theory, and I have benefited greatly from the sophisticated criticism available on Byron, Wordsworth, and the Brownings.

narrative modes, asking critics to recognize that “rather than attempting to impede, suppress, or supersede each other, lyric and narrative may further common agendas.” In each of the following chapters, we shall see examples of the two modes cooperating when narrative is used to further lyric agendas.

Although it is possible to apply temporal definitions of lyric and narrative productively to literature of any period, the nineteenth century is an especially rich period for the study of these modes because of lyric poetry’s rise in prestige during the Romantic period, and the novel’s rise in popularity in the Victorian era. Traditionally, lyric poetry is viewed as brief and intense, while long poems are assumed to have narrative interest to sustain their length. Wordsworth famously states, “All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” thus equating worthy poetry with the emotional intensity usually associated with the lyric. This attempt to give prestige and merit to the emotion associated with lyric is reiterated when he contrasts his poetic project to the popular (and hence, for Wordsworth, suspect) narrative poetry of the time. He comments on the Lyrical Ballads: “I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.”

The “feeling” of lyric is of greater importance than the “action” of narrative. Shelley also denigrates narrative, viewing the elements of a mere story as mechanical and arbitrary, whereas poetry expresses the

39. Dubrow, 256.
40. While poetry continues to be identified with the lyric in the Victorian period, it also becomes socially marginalized. At the same time, the novel’s literary merit and social importance is increasingly recognized. For an excellent discussion of this complex phenomenon, see Dino Franco Felluga, The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). As he argues, “What we witness in the movement from the Romantic into the Victorian period... is an important turning point in the fate of the nineteenth-century poet: whereas the novel had previously been singled out as dangerous and perverse... by 1826, thanks to the growing critical acceptance of historical and domestic novels after Scott and Austen, the rhetoric of pathology became increasingly disentangled from the novel and applied instead to poetry.” Felluga, 107.
42. Ibid., 73.
necessary and universal. He states, “There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts which have no other bond of connection than time, place, circumstance, cause, and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds.” 43 A decade later John Stuart Mill reiterates the contingent nature of narrative and the higher value of emotionally intense lyric poetry. He claims, “There is a radical distinction between the interest felt in a story as such, and the interest excited by poetry; for the one is derived from incident, the other from the representation of feeling. In one, the source of the emotion excited is the exhibition of a state or states of human sensibility; in the other, of a series of states of mere outward circumstances.” 44 To make his preference for poetry of emotion even clearer, he then goes on to locate interest in narrative with children and childish races. In 1846 Edgar Allan Poe places such value on emotional intensity in a poem, intensity that can be only briefly sustained, that he declares a long poem is an impossible contradiction in terms. 45

Despite this declaration of impossibility, many nineteenth-century writers composed long poems. And despite the preeminence given to lyric, these poets, to a greater or lesser extent, incorporated narrative elements into their long poems. Why might this be the case? One possibility is that the epic may have carried lingering prestige, that this long narrative form was still viewed as the final and highest achievement of a poet striving for greatness. A second possibility is that poets were responding to a new narrative form, one that gradually rose in popularity and prestige as the nineteenth century progressed—the novel. The century opened with the sensational popularity of Sir Walter Scott for both his narrative poetry and his historical novels. Between 1805 and 1830, The Lay of the Last Minstrel sold 44,000 copies; Marmion and The Lady of the Lake each sold 50,000 copies between their dates of publication (1808 and 1810, respectively) and 1836. 46 Sales figures for some of his novels are

roughly equivalent: from 1814 to 1836 *Waverly* sold about 57,000 copies, and from 1818 to 1836 *Rob Roy* sold over 40,000. Half a century later, Tennyson was the best selling of the now canonical Victorian poets, and his sales figures were of the same order of magnitude as Scott’s, although Tennyson’s poems may have sold more rapidly. *In Memoriam* sold 60,000 copies in the first few years after its 1850 publication, and by 1869 *Idylls of the King* had pre-publication orders amounting to 40,000 copies. These figures are impressive, but as the century progressed they were dwarfed by the sales of some novels. From 1837 to 1863, Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* sold 140,000 copies in book form alone, and by 1879 it had sold 800,000 copies. In 1871, the penny edition of *Oliver Twist* sold 150,000 copies in only three weeks. Perhaps the biggest sales sensation of the century was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which, in the year after its publication in 1852, sold one and a half million copies throughout the British empire.\(^{47}\)

Given the increasing critical prestige afforded to lyric, and the increasing popularity of the novel as the preeminent narrative form, poets felt a heightened sense of the conflict between lyric and narrative as the nineteenth century progressed. The chapters that follow examine manifestations of the tensions between lyric and narrative in some of the varied and complex poems produced from this conflict. The confluence in the nineteenth century of a strong critical preference for lyric and a strong popular interest in narrative also suggests a literary climate in which older generic hierarchies were being reevaluated, and new generic experiments were likely to occur. Indeed, nineteenth-century England saw the revival and elevation of older forms (the ballad, the sonnet), and the creation of several well-defined new genres (the conversation poem, the dramatic monologue). It also saw the creation of many hybrid forms, works which have largely defied critics’ attempts at generic classification: the four texts at the heart of this study are among the most prominent examples, but there are countless others. For this reason, I believe an examination based on the broader categories of modes, rather than more narrow definitions of genres and subgenres, is especially fruitful, providing the critical flexibility necessary when dealing with formal experimentation. By stating that nineteenth-century England is a particularly fertile period for the study of this topic, I in no

\(^{47}\) Though as Dino Felluga reminds us (citing sales figures from Altick), the 1790s witnessed sensational sales of some nonfiction prose: Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* and Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts* may have sold in the millions. Felluga, 61. Book sales were impeded, however, by paper shortages during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, spurring publishers to produce costly editions of poetry marketed to the upper ranks. Felluga, 61–62.
way mean to imply that experiments combining lyric and narrative are exclusive to this period. On the contrary, I hope to engage other scholars in a dialogue about the usefulness and applicability of a modal study of lyric and narrative in other texts and periods.

Of course, choosing a period of particular interest was not the only constraint needed to define the scope of this project. This study is further delimited based on the size of the texts to be examined: long poems—more precisely, poems of comparable length to novels and epics. These texts are of sufficient length to arouse expectations of strong narrative development to sustain the reader’s interest. Their extended duration also pushes the limits of lyric, and not only because specific lyric genres are typically very short. The author of a long work, especially one that requires many sittings to read, written in the lyric mode may find it difficult to maintain the illusion of a suspended moment of time. To write a work of this length in this period virtually requires generic experimentation and innovation, because the epic tradition faced several new challenges. Lyric had become more highly valued, the individual had become a more central focus, and modern times had encroached on the mythic past. As Herbert Tucker has convincingly shown, throughout the nineteenth century, poets continued to write epics, and to address contemporary culture through them, but they required great adaptability and creativity (and the freedom offered by poor sales) to do so.48

In the four poems under examination in this book, length is accompanied by complexity and varied modal interactions. I begin my study with Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* because it stands on one extreme of my dichotomy: it is a primarily narrative poem with little overt lyricism. But it is by no means a simple poem. *Don Juan* is seemingly exhaustive (and exhausting) in its proliferation of narrative subjects, narrative conventions, and digressions from narrative. Byron’s commitment to multiplicity even extends to plot lines and similes. The poem repeatedly describes what might have been, elaborating on plot lines it itself does not take. Byron also frequently provides many options in his similes, giving a long list of objects to which a simile’s subject could be compared. The effect of this narrative and poetic proliferation, I argue, is to highlight the arbitrariness of these events and comparisons, which then

draws attention to the author’s choice in the act of writing. Narrative conventions are used, then, to foreground the time of composition, the suspended moment of lyric. In addition, the poem’s focus on the narrator’s ennui-laden present suggests that the poem itself is a method of passing the time: *Don Juan* frantically gallops forward in a vain attempt to put as much as possible behind, to fill an insatiable present moment, and to find oblivion in the future. Byron’s poem shows that lyricism can be seemingly endless (rather than necessarily brief) and deliberately heard (rather than seemingly overheard).

A complement to *Don Juan* is provided by William Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem *The Prelude*. This book-length lyric poem, which is the focus of my second chapter, gets very little of its impetus through usual narrative means. Each of *The Prelude*’s episodes begins with a very basic narrative but is essentially a subjective lyric experience, and initial plot movement gives way to a suspension of time. The individual lyrics, in turn, are unified by a radical model of narrative underlying the poem, a model that takes to a new extreme tendencies latent in confessional literature. Wordsworth constantly directs his readers to process the text prospectively—to look forward to the endpoint as they read the poem, rather than to confer retrospective significance at the end of the reading process. This unusual narrative structure has an associative logic that unites each episode to the final goal, rather than a causal logic that would directly link each episode to the next. Prospective reading allows the series of short lyrics to function together as one long lyric, restructures the presentation of time, and creates a more equal distribution of knowledge between the author and his audience. For modern readers, *The Prelude* also serves as a striking counterexample to narrative theory that assumes narrative is essentially a retrospective mode for the reader, assumes that full and confident understanding can be conferred only by the ending.

In chapter 3 I turn to a Victorian verse-novel that strikes an even balance between lyric and narrative—Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning alternates between forwarding the plot and adding lyric delay; for every small step forward in the narrative, a lyric pause follows, creating discrete but regular motion. Barrett Browning’s incessant use of similes provides another, more subtle, method of advancing the plot while introducing elements that call attention to its status as poetry. In a simile, the tenor and vehicle, the literal and figurative elements, are kept separated by “like” or “as,” keeping them more grammatically distinct than is the case in a metaphor or symbol. A simile’s literal meaning is explicitly stated and is a discrete unit, thus leaving its
relation to the plot remarkably clear. But a figurative element is added, allowing for self-consciously poetic moments with all the formal play and virtuosity of lyric. *Aurora Leigh*’s greatest complexity, however, lies in the changing times at which Aurora composes her story, and this is the focus of much of my analysis. Because she writes her story in distinct stages, with crucial events happening between bouts of writing, Aurora takes on the varied conventions of the (typically feminine) narrator of a diaristic novel, the (typically masculine) retrospective narrator of autobiography, and the (ambivalently gendered) spontaneous lyric poet. The complex interactions of these conventions emphasize the aesthetic and ideological limitations of each, arguing for the necessity of the generic hybridity the poem embodies. Barrett Browning thus sometimes exposes narrative conventions to promote the purposes of lyric, and sometimes exposes lyric to promote narrative.

In my final chapter I examine Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*—a twelve-book poem that reveals all the key elements of the story in book 1. The same material is worked over twelve times, narrated by ten separate speakers. Lyric and narrative are given different emphases by different speakers; I choose three books as notable case studies. Nonetheless, all the dramatic monologues which comprise the text share some important features: each emphasizes the act of storytelling at least as much as the story events, and each draws the reader’s attention to the discourse which noticeably unfolds in time, presenting a gradual revelation, often implying different responses from an interlocutor at different points in time. I argue that the genre of dramatic monologue shares with lyric a focus on the time of discourse, but gives the discourse the developing temporality of narrative, rather than aspiring to the seemingly simultaneous meaning of lyric. In the case of *The Ring and the Book*, the temporal movement across monologues, from the occasion of one to that of the next, mimics on a larger scale the moving time of discourse within a single dramatic monologue. I also note the frequent and obtrusive alliteration common in all twelve books, and suggest that readers attribute it to Browning rather than to his characters, focusing their attention on the author’s poetic craft. The work as a whole creates a triple vision of time: the reader is simultaneously aware of the time of the story being narrated, the time of each character’s act of narration, and the time of Browning’s writing. The multiple retellings also create a reading experience that mimics the experience of epic myth, allowing the audience to hear a familiar story with familiar episodes, and analyze each episode for the ways in which it demonstrates a character’s exemplarity, and the ways in which it leads to (or delays) the story’s ultimate end. But
the reader of *The Ring and the Book* searches for characters’ exemplarity, not in the actions of the narrative, but rather in their motivations and thought processes—internal, subjective states which are standard topics of lyric. Browning’s success at fully incorporating narrative elements while subsuming them to more internalized, lyric interests, and his focus on the influence of the narrator, are important precursors to key aspects of the Modernist novel and point to the wider importance of Victorian poetry.
The preceding four chapters have focused on mode in order to avoid the constraints of more narrow definitions of particular genres. Each chapter has tried to reach a better understanding of the unique structure of each poem, seeing its innovations and experiments as positive attributes, rather than as impediments to fitting the poem within a pre-existing genre. In the course of this study, I have also drawn out the implications of these four poems for current critical assumptions. Using Byron as an example, I have suggested that self-reflexivity can produce lyrical effects, as well as ironic playfulness. *Aurora Leigh* shows that lyric does not always have to be brief, nor does it have to be ahistorical. Narrative is not necessarily a retrospective experience for the reader, at least not for the reader of *The Prelude*. And although the two modes are often described as antithetical, Browning’s dramatic monologues seamlessly blend lyric and narrative temporalities. Despite these varied experiments and effects, all four poems paradoxically employ temporal progression to imply the static and atemporal, and use narrative means
to achieve lyric ends. In closing this study, I want to make two final gestures. First, I reflect on the influences of these four poems on the literature that followed them. Second, I consider two nineteenth-century poems that suffer from an overabundance of lyricism, an inability to mix lyric and narrative with complete success. I will take as my examples a long poem indebted to epic and romance and a not-quite-sonnet sequence of a distinctly modern cast.

Karl Kroeber traces two strands of Romantic narrative poetry, with separate influences on subsequent literary history: Byron develops “the adventurous narrative: a story poem concerned with physical action and adventure,” while Wordsworth “developed narrative poetically” to become a “medium for the expression of personal, visionary experience.” I agree that Wordsworth lyricizes narrative poetry, and that such lyricization has an important influence on nineteenth-century poetry. I also agree that specifically narrative forms of interest, centered on plot and action, are more important in Byron’s poetry than in other Romantic poems, and that Byron influences the novel tradition. But Byron’s fixation on adventure is not his only influence on the novel. Sections of Don Juan do fit the pattern of adventure narrative (namely, the first half of canto 2, and cantos 7–8), but as we’ve seen, many other narrative patterns are incorporated into the poem. Byron is almost encyclopedic in his invocation of different narrative genres, and each is ironically undermined, calling attention to its very conventionality. Byron’s encyclopedia of narrative conventions, and his satiric attitude toward them, may have had a belated descendant in the “Oxen of the Sun” chapter of Joyce’s Ulysses—a tour de force parody of prominent styles in English literary history. And the self-reflexivity which permeates Don Juan, although it certainly had prominent predecessors like Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, later became much more commonplace in the twentieth-century novel.

Wordsworth’s Prelude was also an important influence on some prominent twentieth-century novels, through its episodic nature and its focus on the development of character. In modern literature an “episodic pattern allows for free and full character development without interference from the requirements of a tightly-knit plot.”

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cally, Wordsworth’s poem on the growth of his own mind influenced later histories of an author’s artistic development. A. D. Nuttall claims, “The greatest successor of The Prelude is not a poem but a novel, and so it begins, very quietly, in prose: ‘Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure. . . .’” Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past is not the poem’s only successor, however. Herbert Lindenberger has aptly observed, “It seems no mere accident of literary history that The Prelude’s greatness was first generally recognized by the age that produced introspective fiction—deriving as it does from the double stream of poetry and the novel—of Proust, Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf.” Joyce should also be added to this list, since his Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man shares The Prelude’s introspection, lyrical association, and musing about an artist’s development.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh reacts against the confidence about future developments and the isolation of the artist from society we see in The Prelude. Instead, she places the artist, and lyric poetry, in specific social contexts, and mixes the confidence of retrospective narration with the immediacy of epistolary forms. She juxtaposes fragments of multiple literary forms in order to expose the limitations of each genre in isolation, and she overcomes the limitations of one genre with the strengths of another. Since Aurora Leigh advocates the erosion of generic boundaries and the avoidance of slavish imitation, it was unlikely to produce any recognizable literary heirs. But the poem’s aggressive juxtaposition of contradictory forms is an early precursor to modernist fragmentation. Aurora Leigh’s earnestness and didacticism, however, occlude its formal connection to twentieth-century works that do not share its faith in literature’s ability to communicate truth directly and sincerely.

In The Ring and the Book, Robert Browning unifies, rather than fragments, lyric and narrative time through his use of the dramatic monologue. Browning’s techniques, especially the primacy of point of view, had a profound influence on subsequent novelists. As Lindenberger remarks of The Ring and the Book, “Its affinities are less with any other long poem, past or present, than with the modern experimental novel, as Henry James was perhaps the first to point out.” James, in his focal-

ization of stories through the consciousness of an imperfectly aware character, adopts Browning’s use of narrative perspective as central to the text’s meaning. But whereas Browning has faith that point of view is capable of reliably, if indirectly, communicating inner motivations, James uses point of view to emphasize problems of communication. In James’s works, a particular narrative perspective is capable of not only making motives inscrutable, but also obscuring such basic information as whether or not an event actually happened. (In *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, there is significant tension about whether or not the ghosts exist outside the mind of the governess who narrates most of the tale.) Nineteenth-century long poems have had a profound and lasting influence on the novel, and we would do well to recognize that influence.

Not all experiments in mixing lyric and narrative are unqualified successes, though. Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* is surely a narrative poem, a blend of epic and romance. Yet *Idylls* employs narrative techniques in a manner that undermines their narrative interest. As we have seen, epics assume their audiences are already familiar with their basic plots, and the reader wonders “How did it happen?” rather than “What happened?” Tennyson’s audience may be familiar with other versions of Arthurian legend, most notably Malory’s. Even if they are not, Tennyson sometimes forces an epic reader response by giving away key plot events early in the text. The first book of *Idylls* describes Modred as “the same that afterward / Struck for the throne, and striking found his doom,” giving away the revolt discussed in the penultimate book and a death discussed in the final idyll. The poem not only minimizes the narrative interest of suspense; it also renders unnecessary the typical rhetorical response to narrative: judgment. Many of the characters feel uncertain, misjudge, or fall prey to deception, but the reader does not, because Tennyson judges for us. When Vivien tells Balin that she heard an eyewitness account of Guinevere declaring her love to Lancelot, Balin believes the tale is true. The reader already knows of Guinevere’s love

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for Lancelot, but the narrator is careful to expose this specific story as false: he says of Vivien, “She lied with ease” (“Balin and Balan” 517). The narrator also imposes his judgment of characters on the reader through a stylistic defect that Christopher Ricks calls “overinsistencies.” Ricks gives as an example the lines: “Eyes of pure women, wholesome stars of love; / And all about a healthful people stept / As in the presence of a gracious king.” Here the narrator piles on one descriptive adjective after another, rather than allowing the reader to infer these characteristics from the characters’ actions and speech. Villains also draw unambiguous epithets from the narrator: Vivien is described as “wily” at the beginning of her idyll, and at the end the narrator echoes Merlin in labeling her a “harlot” (“Merlin and Vivien” 5, 970).

In its large-scale temporal progression, Idylls moves roughly chronologically, opening with “The Coming of Arthur” and closing with “The Passing of Arthur.” Many of the individual books, however, seem to adopt the epic convention of opening in medias res, then backtracking to earlier events. The technique is perhaps most obvious in “Lancelot and Elaine.” The first 55 lines feature three separate movements backward in time, with the promise of a satisfactory explanation receding further into the past with each analepsis. John R. Reed makes a case for the narrative efficacy of this opening, suggesting that it arouses the reader’s interest in clues, in order for the reader to see through the fantasies of the title characters. In other books, however, the opening in medias res fails to create narrative suspense or dramatic irony. “Merlin and Vivien” starts with five lines describing Vivien at Merlin’s feet, then flashes back to a conversation which prompted Vivien to go to Arthur’s court and undermine it through gossip. The opening time frame is not developed enough to create substantial resonance, foreshadowing, or dread; no clear purpose justifies the nonchronological narration of events. Similarly, “Pelleas and Etтарre” opens with fifteen lines on Arthur knighting Pelleas, then flashes back to his meeting Etтарre “a day or twain before”

8. In the earlier-placed idyll “The Marriage of Geraint” we learn that “Guinevere lay late into the morn, / Lost in sweet dreams, and dreaming of her love / For Lancelot” (157–59).

9. Christopher Ricks, Tennyson (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 269. The emphasis is Ricks’s, and the quotation is “Gareth and Lynette,” 307–9. Ricks claims overinsistencies are especially common “in those areas of the poem where Tennyson knew he had failed to create a sense of what the Round Table was in its living vigor.” Ricks, 269.

10. John R. Reed, “Tennyson’s Narrative on Narration,” Victorian Poetry 24.2 (Summer 1986): 199. Reed also finds the anachrony that opens “The Holy Grail” fitting: “The poem begins at the very end of its action, requiring an extensive flashback, an appropriate technique for a poem in which there is no future.” Reed, 200.
The opening does not add much to the reader’s investment in the tale. In addition, there is no clear motive for the narrator’s inexactness about how much time elapsed between the two events. A different sort of temporal imprecision accompanies the analepsis in “The Marriage of Geraint.” The book shifts from Geraint’s suspicion that Enid is unfaithful, to an event at Arthur’s court that spurred the quest that led to Geraint’s meeting Enid. The narrator does not clearly mark the shift back in time, however. The only initial indication that we have entered a flashback is a reference to Arthur’s “court” just after Enid thinks about her first “coming to the court” (146, 144). We only definitively learn eighty lines later that we have moved back to a period when Geraint is unmarried (227). Tennyson’s opening anachronies, then, can push narrative explanation further and further into the past, can defy the reader’s expectation that the anachronies create narrative interest, and can blur time even as they leap across it.

*Idylls of the King* further reduces its narrative interest by sometimes summarizing heroic action in so short a space that it seems trivialized. “Pelleas and Ettarre” summarizes a tournament in three lines (161–63), and “The Coming of Arthur” concludes with this stunning narrative condensation:

And Arthur and his knighthood for a space
Were all one will, and through that strength the King
Drew in the petty princiblems under him,
Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame
The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reign’d.

(514–18)

By distilling twelve battles and the foundation of a kingdom into five lines, Tennyson indicates that action of a truly epic scope will not be the focus of the poem. Instead, many episodes feature the individual quests, digression, and repetition of romance, “a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object.” Repetition is not limited, however, to the romance plots of Gareth fighting
each of four knights, or Sir Bedivere attempting to cast Excalibur into the lake three times. Rather, John R. Reed’s comment on “Gareth and Lynette” is true for the *Idylls* generally: “Repeated lines, images, and phrases create a sense of continuity and stasis.” On occasion, Tennyson takes repetition too far, to the point of belabored redundancy, even absurdity. Lancelot competes “For the great diamond in the diamond jousts, / Which Arthur had ordained, and by that name / Had named them, since a diamond was the prize” (“Lancelot and Elaine” 31–33). Surely the first line makes clear what the prize, and why the name. To this reader, at least, the repetition falls flat, and the phrase “by that name / Had named them” seems included only for metrical reasons. To my mind, the most absurd instance of repetition appears, appropriately enough, in “Balin and Balan”: “And on the right of Balin Balin’s horse / Was fast beside an alder, on the left / Of Balan Balan’s near a poplartree” (26–28).

Tennyson’s decisions to reduce the poem’s narrative interest, blur some of its temporal shifts, and create a sense of stasis through repetition are in keeping with Arthur’s (and Tennyson’s) war against time. Nowhere is this allegorical battle against time clearer than in Gareth’s quest to defeat four knights who insist on being called Morning-Star, Noon-Sun, Evening-Star, and Night or Death (“Gareth and Lynette” 619–23). When Gareth approaches Camelot he sees the city’s gates depicting “...Arthur’s wars in weird devices done, / New things and old co-twisted, as if Time / Were nothing” (“Gareth and Lynette” 221–23). Time is made nothing not only on the city gates, but also in the city’s making. Merlin tells Gareth:

For an ye heard a music, like enow  
They are building still, seeing the city is built  
To music, therefore never built at all,  
And therefore built for ever.  

(“Gareth and Lynette” 271–74)

It would seem Camelot, like *The Prelude*, is “something evermore about to be.” It will never be complete, for it is an eternally dilated process. In this, and in its accompaniment by music, the city resembles lyric poetry. While the *Idylls* valorize Arthur’s lyric agenda of overcoming time, they condemn other character’s narrative projects. Mark is described as “cra-

ven—a man of plots, / Craft, poisonous counsels, wayside ambushings,”

13. Reed, 194.
suggesting the alignment of narrative “plots” with villainous schemes (“Gareth and Lynette” 423–24). And after Vivien slanders Lancelot and Guinevere, Balin then “cursed the tale, / The told-of, and the teller” (“Balin and Balan” 534–35).

Arthur eventually falls prey to plots and gossip (that is, to storytelling), and succumbs to time and death. Tennyson’s war against time also fails. Seven months before publishing the first group of *Idylls*, Tennyson wrote to his American publisher that he was not writing “an Epic of King Arthur. I should be crazed to attempt such a thing in the heart of the 19th Century.” Obviously, Tennyson did make the attempt, and tried to bridge the temporal gulf between Arthurian legend and the nineteenth century. The dedication to Prince Albert portrays him as a reincarnation of Arthurian virtues, drawing a contemporary resonance for the tale. Conversely, Tennyson depicts Arthurian society as suffering from the nostalgia and sense of belatedness that afflicted the Victorians. Bedivere’s lament, “For now I see the true old times are dead,” might also express Tennyson’s fear (“The Passing of Arthur” 397).

In his attempts to recapture the true old times, Tennyson diminishes the poem’s narrative interest and creates an elegiac tone and lyric sense of stasis. In one respect, Tennyson may push the poem’s lyricism too far. Christopher Ricks complains that in the *Idylls*, Tennyson “has not creatively solved the problem of accommodating his style (what Arnold called his ‘curious elaborateness of expression’) to the simple exigencies of narrative, of the humble essential which would permit his story to move.” Certainly Tennyson’s heavy repetitions qualify as a curiously elaborate style. Tennyson’s most notable stylistic device is the epic simile. As we have seen, similes carefully divide the tenor and vehicle, and can allow for lyric elaboration that is distinct from yet tied to a narrative element. Tennyson is even more careful than Barrett Browning in dividing the literal from metaphoric, and the narrative from the lyric. He most often begins a simile with “as,” offers an elaborate vehicle, and

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15. Quoted in Ricks, 264.

16. My reading is decidedly less optimistic than John R. Reed’s. He claims, “Narrative itself becomes a genuine means of solving the problem of dissolution and decay” since past deeds are recorded in words that may inspire future deeds. Reed, 193.

then uses “so” to announce the tenor. Yet Christopher Ricks is right to say the similes “seldom relate intimately to the poem’s real concerns.”18 Their lyric elaboration overpowers the narrative drive.

In another sense, however, Tennyson does not push the lyricism far enough, does not create sufficient lyrical interest to fill the void left by the diminishment of narrative interest. The poem sometimes focuses on lyrical subject matter by depicting the mental states of characters. But occasionally the narrator oddly externalizes these lyric musings by casting them as muttered dialogue partly overheard by another character. In “The Marriage of Geraint” this device creates irony and drives later events, but in “Merlin and Vivien” it seems mostly extraneous. The narrator does not focus at all on his own mental state, the subject that, in very different ways, proved so fruitful for Wordsworth and Byron. On several occasions, the narrator indirectly intrudes himself in the third person as “he that tells the tale.” Twice he intrudes to clarify that a choice about an idyll’s outcome was his. He notes his departure from Malory by saying, “And he that told the tale in older times / Says that Sir Gareth wedded Lyonors, / But he, that told it later, says Lynette” (“Gareth and Lynette” 1392–94). He later says of Ettarre, “he that tells the tale / Says that her ever-veering fancy turn’d / To Pelleas” though in vain (“Pelleas and Ettarre” 482–84). In both cases, he notes a deviation from or elaboration on earlier legend. Because the admissions are overt and infrequent, he builds trust in the reader that the rest of his story is faithful to earlier sources. While the changes reflect the narrator’s tastes about fit endings for love stories, they primarily focus attention on the reliability of the story, not on the personality of the narrator. In two other cases, “he that tells the tale” intrudes to claim he saw an event used as a simile’s vehicle, and to assert his agency in crafting a simile (“Geraint and Enid” 161–66, “The Last Tournament” 226–27). While this may draw attention to the level of discourse, it does so for no discernable purpose, and the narrator remains a hollow figure.

As a final example of the complex interactions of lyric and narrative in nineteenth-century poetry, I turn to George Meredith’s Modern Love. The poem clearly participates in the tradition of the sonnet sequence, yet its departures from that tradition are striking. The narrative content differs. Meredith’s speaker does not suffer the trials of courtly love and

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18. Ricks, 274.
its unrequited adoration. Rather, his mistress “yields” to him (39.1), and he considers the possibility that the “familiar sight” of his wife may be “[m]ore keenly tempting than new loveliness” (5.8–9) even as his marriage disintegrates in suspicion, jealousy, and pain. Meredith also departs from traditional sonnet form, writing iambic pentameter poems of 16 lines, rather than 14. The greater length allows both more intricate narrative developments and a longer lyric dilation of time. The rhyme scheme (abbacddceffeghhg) itself can create a lyric sense of static repetition, constantly circling back rather than moving forward. In addition, the rhyme scheme gives no indication of where the volta would fall, and dulls the expectation of a clear narrative turn within an individual sonnet. These further lyricizations of the sonnet structure aptly convey the speaker’s anguished obsession as he is unable fully to understand his situation or to break free of it. Of what use is narrative to the speaker when he claims his wife’s suspected infidelity has destroyed the future, flattened the present, and worst of all tarnished the past (12.1–16)? And yet *Modern Love* features a more strongly developed narrative line, and more fully realized narrative settings, than most sonnet sequences.

I have been referring to the husband as the “speaker” of the sonnets, but Meredith’s poem alternates between first person and third person reporting, sometimes within a single sonnet. It also alternates between the present tense and the past tense, and while the use of the present tense often correlates with the use of the first person, they do not always correspond. Sonnet 6 offers an especially complex example of these alternations:

> It chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool.  
> She had no blush, but slanted down her eye.  
> Shamed nature, then, confesses love can die:  
> And most she punishes the tender fool  
> Who will believe what honours her the most!  
> Dead! is it dead? She has a pulse, and flow  
> Of tears, the price of blood-drops, as I know,  
> For whom the midnight sobs around Love’s ghost,

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20. Arline Golden discusses at length the poem’s departure from courtly love, and mentions the stanza’s lack of a turn and more open-ended form. Arline Golden, “‘The Game of Sentiment’: Tradition and Innovation in Meredith’s *Modern Love*,” *ELH* 40.2 (Summer 1973): 265, 266.
Since then I heard her, and so will sob on.
The love is here; it has but changed its aim.
O bitter barren woman! what’s the name?
The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?
Behold me striking the world’s coward stroke!
That will I not do, though the sting is dire.
—Beneath the surface this, while by the fire
They sat, she laughing at a quiet joke.

(6.1–16)

This sonnet obviously begins in the third person and the past tense. But while the verb tense shifts to the present in line 3, the point of view changes later when the first person appears in line 7. The last two lines reintroduce the past tense and third person. Although they do not form a rhyming pair, the last two lines act as a closing couplet following a volta: they reframe the preceding lines, placing the present-tense emotional eruption in a sedate past-tense context. The closing frame reveals that the husband’s demand to know her lover’s name was thought but never spoken aloud, justifying Isobel Armstrong’s description of Modern Love’s sonnets as “internal monologues.”

Taken as a whole, the rapid shifts in tense and point of view both within and between sonnets generate productive tension and deep ambiguity. Armstrong claims that “bringing together the ‘now’ of immediate perception and analysis with the ‘then’ of retrospect . . . lead[s] to a form of narrative in which the speaker is ambiguously ‘inside’ experiences and events and yet external to them, never fully in possession of an analysis yet always seeking the detachment which would enable him to ‘know that he knows.’” The reader likely shares this mixed sense of immersion and detachment, aligning Modern Love with the combined subjective expression and objective critique of Armstrong’s double poems, and the combined sympathy and judgment of Langbaum’s dramatic monologues or Phelan’s lyric-narrative hybrids. If the husband is taken as the source of the sonnets, the narrator of events, then the frequent shifts in temporal perspective raise the question of when the husband writes the poems, before or after his wife’s suicide. If his narration runs nearly concurrent with events and most of the sonnets are written before her death, then how does he know to drop hints of her

22. Ibid., 444.
suicide? If all the sonnets are written retrospectively after the last of the story events, then why does he invite his (now dead) wife to read one of the sonnets? In sonnet 33 after recording words he spoke to his mistress, the husband writes, “If the spy you play, / My wife, read this! Strange love talk, is it not?” (33.15–16) If he writes this after her death, the words are not only a moot invitation but also remarkably callous. Some readers may be tempted to treat *Modern Love* as an example of the nonmimetic technique of simultaneous present-tense narration. Two features interfere with this interpretation: the intermittent use of the past tense, and more importantly, the husband’s explicit comments on composing the poems. Not only does he invite his wife to read one of his compositions, but he also labels another as a sonnet when he addresses his mistress: “Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes” (30.16).

The ambiguous temporal relation between discourse and story in *Modern Love* may be better understood as a mixture of lyric and narrative conventions rather than as a purely narrative conundrum. In this respect, Meredith’s poem bears some similarities to the last two books of *Aurora Leigh*. In sections written in the past tense the narrator may withhold key information to create a sense of immersion in the experience, and this sense of immersion is heightened in sections using the present tense. Sonnet 15 demonstrates this sense of present experience, as well as its tensions with the poem’s narrative material:

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I think she sleeps: it must be sleep, when low
Hangs that abandoned arm toward the floor;
The face turned with it. Now make fast the door.
Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe.
The Poet’s black stage-lion of wronged love,
Frights not our modern dames:—well if he did!
Now will I pour new light upon that lid,
Full-sloping like the breasts beneath. ‘Sweet dove,
Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb.
I do not? good!’ Her waking infant-stare
Grows woman to the burden my hands bear:
Her own handwriting to me when no curb
Was left on Passion’s tongue. She trembles through;
A woman’s tremble—the whole instrument:—
I show another letter lately sent.
The words are very like: the name is new.
(15.1–16)
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The use of the first person and the present tense creates a lyric sense that the experience and the discourse are simultaneous. Yet this sonnet contains narrative material and clear changes over time: the husband wakes his wife to show her two love letters, and she both changes from sleeping to waking, and from incomprehension to understanding as she recognizes the import of the letters. The narrator has knowledge of the letters before the sonnet starts and deliberately, vindictively plans their use against her. The reader learns the letters’ significance only at the end, however, and experiences a revelation similar to the wife’s. The closer alignment of our knowledge with the wife’s, combined with our likely condemnation of the husband’s cruelty, may cause us to shift our sympathetic identification from the husband to the wife in this sonnet, going against the sequence’s usual procedure of aligning us closely with the husband’s perception.

The dominant alignment with the husband’s perception has raised questions for some of Meredith’s readers. George Stevenson asked Meredith to explain whether or not the husband’s suspicions of his wife’s infidelity were accurate, and Meredith replied, “As to the Lady in ‘Modern Love,’ her husband never accurately knew; therefore we ought not to inquire.” While some readers may inquire anyway, irritably reaching after the facts of the case, the indeterminacy of the answer does produce some positive aesthetic effects. The husband’s uncertainty heightens the psychological realism of his portrait, and the possibility that the wife was less guilty than she seemed heightens the pathos of her death. For this reader, however, the wife’s suicide is less ably rendered. The event is not indeterminate, but it is partially occluded, and at the poem’s close its lyricism interferes with the narrative’s clarity and closure.

The suicide is revealed at the end of the penultimate sonnet: “Lethe had passed those lips, and he knew all” (49.16). Isobel Armstrong claims, “The shock of the wife’s suicide after a seeming reconciliation is registered with tragic pathos.” For some readers the suicide does not register at all; when I have taught Modern Love, some students overlook or misinterpret this crucial event. The line’s lyrical qualities—its mytho-

23. Phyllis Bartlett quotes Meredith’s letter to Stevenson in her introductory note to Modern Love in The Poems of George Meredith.


25. Armstrong, Victorian Poetry, 446.
logical allusion, lilting rhythm, and brevity of the disclosure—belie its staggering narrative content. The language sounds as if the wife has broken the opening interdiction of Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy,” rather than having died in Meredith’s distinctly modern setting. Naomi Levine suggests the language is not only obscure but also ambiguous: “The elegiac quality of the last several sonnets suggests a parting, but the language is too ambiguous to make suicide the definitive cause.” Instead, she proposes the possibility that the death is a metaphoric repetition of the traumatic loss of love, a loss frequently figured in Modern Love through the language of death.

Even if we agree that the suicide is a literal event, not a metaphor, the event is curiously both too abrupt and too strongly foreshadowed. After the suicide is disclosed at the end of sonnet 49, readers have only one sonnet left to help them process its significance. Sonnet 50 gestures towards closure and objective distance, but the personified “Love” may feel too aloof (50.1). The contrast of “our life” with the reference to the spouses as “they” suddenly opens a gap between the third-person narrator and the husband, further confusing the already vexed issue of point of view, and dampening the emotional impact of the death on the husband (50.12, 6). Yet if we have too little time to process the death after it is revealed, we may also have too many hints of her death before its disclosure. The poem strongly foreshadows her death at least as early as sonnet 35. After describing his wife’s secret suffering, the speaker warns, “O have a care of natures that are mute! / They punish you in acts: their steps are brief” (35.7–8). He even foreshadows an overdose as her cause of death: “She is not one / Long to endure this torpidly, and shun / The drugs that crowd about a woman’s hand” (35.10–12). When sonnet 49 opens with, “He found her by the ocean’s moaning verge, / Nor any wicked change in her discerned,” the reader might assume he finds her corpse but does not immediately register her sinful death by suicide (49.1–2). This temptation is especially strong because the previous sonnet describes “honest speech” as a “fatal draught” (48.7,8), and the ocean’s shore has been described as “a fitting spot to dig Love’s grave; / Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike” (43.3–4). Yet the husband discovers her suicide not on the beach at the start of sonnet 49, but rather in her bed at the sonnet’s end. This phantom death and the difficulty of reconstructing the chronology of events in the last ten sonnets blur the temporal location of her actual death. Modern Love

is a powerful poem, and largely successful in its experiments with lyric and narrative. But in its handling of this crucial event it diminishes its narrative resonance, and the lyrical language and dislocation from time veil, rather than highlight, the event. In this case, lyrical means interfere with narrative ends.


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