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FORMS OF LIFE: EVOLUTION AND POETIC FORM IN THE BRITISH
LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation seeks to reorient the discussion of evolutionary science and literature in the British long nineteenth century towards a consideration of poetic form. Unlike critical considerations of the nineteenth-century novel, in which questions of form and evolution have long been intertwined, studies of the period's poetry have struggled to convincingly link developments and experiments in poetic form to the evolutionary milieu in which they took place. Where critics do discuss nineteenth-century poetry and evolution, it is in the context of an intellectual-historical approach that regards form as an afterthought. In recent years, although critics have moved towards regarding poetic form as enmeshed in political and economic formations, they have still ignored the ways in which poetic forms serve as indices for scientific models or theories. This dissertation attempts to fill that gap by asking questions about what happens when one adopts a reading practice equally alert to both form and scientific history.

My fundamental contention is that a willingness to think formally about poetry while remaining observant to developments in evolutionary science can unearth an alternative cultural history, in which poets serve less as direct conduits for symptomatic

evolutionary anxiety or enthusiasm, and more as active participants in scientific dialogue. This formal history illuminates the degree to which non-Darwinian models of evolutionary theory have been obscured in much poetic criticism, but also highlights the misunderstandings and confusion which characterized many poets' encounters with developmental models of natural history, a confusion that registers through formal experimentation. In other words, my study aims to shed light not only on our understanding of formal innovation in nineteenth century verse through a scientific lens, but also the history of the uneven reception of that science through an attention to poetic form.

The first chapter tracks the dynamic relationship between text and paratext in Erasmus Darwin's didactic epics, the second examines repetition and repurposing in the verse of Charlotte Smith's children's books, the third attends to perspectival experiments of Robert Browning's monologues, and the fourth is focused on the rethinking of temporality in George Meredith's sonnet sequence, *Modern Love*. Through this apparently motley assemblage of figures, I hope to track an unobserved history of evolutionary reception through form in a manner that encourages poetic readings that regard form and science as vividly and necessarily entangled.

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Introduction

“Any inquiry into the present day into the relations of modern scientific thought with literature must in great part be guided by hints, signs, and presages. The time has not yet come when it may be possible to perceive in complete outline the significance of science for the imagination and the emotions of men, but that the significance is large and deep we cannot doubt.”

—Edward Dowden, “The Scientific Movement and Literature,” 1877

Evolution is, at heart, a theory of forms, insofar as it seeks to provide answers to a number of questions about the formal qualities of the natural world. How can we account for formal difference in nature? What can we infer from those differences about creation and history? How can we explain the felicitous union of form and function in organisms, or, more puzzlingly, their occasional divergence? What are the ontological stakes of formal distinctions? And most fundamentally, to tweak the word’s grammatical sense, how do species form?

Accordingly, the work of natural historians in the long nineteenth century required formal rigor, a precise sense of forms both geologic and organic, extant and extinct. It required the mapping of formal homologies, between fossils, between living organisms, and between each other. The term “form”’s ubiquity itself testifies to its importance: varieties of “form” appear in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, to take the most obvious example, over two hundred and fifty times.

The study of poetry too (formerly, and now again increasingly so), has prompted the theorization of forms, their description, and attempts to account for their qualities and differences. Be this as it may a happy accident of semantic history, this felicitous commonality between “forms” hints at the purpose of this study, which is to reorient the discussion of evolutionary science and literature in the British long nineteenth century towards a consideration of poetic form. Unlike critical considerations of the nineteenth-

century novel, in which questions of form and evolution have been intertwined at least since the publication of Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* in 1983, studies of the period's poetry have struggled to convincingly link developments and experiments in poetic form to the evolutionary milieu in which they took place. My fundamental contention is that a willingness to think formally about poetry while remaining alert to developments in evolutionary science can unearth an alternative history, in which poets serve less as simple conduits for evolutionary anxiety or enthusiasm, and more as active, often ill-informed participants in a broad cultural conversation regarding evolution's nature and consequences.

This formal history serves to illuminate the degree to which both Darwinian and non-Darwinian models of evolutionary theory have been obscured in much poetic criticism, as well as the misunderstandings and confusion which characterized many poets' encounters with developmental models of natural history. As George Levine has noted, "Writers engage with science at second and third hand, using it selectively, without full knowledge of the complexities of its findings. They admire, or not, resist or not, unselfconsciously or self-consciously absorb, distort, simplify, imply alternatives, despair, rejoice, ignore."¹ This study aims to shed light not only on our understanding of formal innovation in nineteenth-century verse through a scientific lens, but also the convoluted, sometimes incoherent history of British writers' reception of that science through an attention to poetic form. In doing so, I'd like to participate in a general trend towards regarding form as instrumental to the responsible historical and cultural analysis of literature rather than a reactionary or ahistorical approach to criticism. While plenty of critics have made the case for treating form as an integral part of many styles of historical

¹ George Levine, *Realism, Ethics, and Secularism* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2008), 181.

reading, I hope to extend this trend to the sphere of evolutionary science, in which, as I've claimed, "form" enjoys a very special resonance.

To pin down the less specific, literary sense of form, however, is to enter deeply contested territory. Angela Leighton's *On Form*, to take one example, adopts the elusiveness of form as its very subject. For Leighton, the attempt to circumscribe "form" is definitionally doomed to failure, even as we understand that whatever it signifies is central to the creation and study of literature. "While there may be nothing in this word," she argues, "that nothing matters."² And what that "nothing" is is a mess of contradictions, oppositional emphases that wax and wane according to their historical moment. Form ranges from fixed to dynamic, from passive to active; it's eternally contested and inherently contestable. But even if we grant some kind of stability to "form" in the broadest sense, choosing to ignore a more historicized theorization of the term, a lack of consensus still seems to render the term unusable. As Stuart Curran notes, "Genre, kind, mode, and form are terms often used interchangeably as critics simply as an instrument of rhetorical variety."³ And at its least specific, Leighton argues, "form" emerges as nothing more than a stand-in for "the literary."⁴

Given form's distinctive talents at eluding definition, the last thing one wants to do given all this is offer a new, concrete definition. But I think that Curran, despite his own acknowledgement of form's instability, at least in practice, can offer some useful guidelines or starting points for thinking about what I mean by form. Curran first

² Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 3.

³ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 9.

⁴ Leighton, 19.

demarcates form as “a fixed structural principle.”⁵ This feels at first like a capacious definition, and it’s one that helps him to distinguish form from its alleged synonyms, chief among them genre. Here’s Curran’s distinction between the two: “Although obviously interconnected, [form] is an abstracted arena of logic, the other of connotative meaning.”⁶ Form, in other words, resides in a rarified, almost mathematical realm of relationships between poetic variables, while genre, if sometimes over-determined by form, involves *meaning*, the investment of these variables with particular content. If this sounds like an ultimately untenable distinction, Curran acknowledges as much, taking note of the way in which form inevitably evolves into genre, so that genre often seems “form writ large.”⁷

In other words, form invests poetry with a structural logic that predisposes it, in effect, for certain subjects, which, given enough time, constitute genres. While I will stick to the word “form,” my usage of the term will vascillate a bit between what Curran calls “form” and “genre,” as they unavoidably do. Thus, a formal discussion of late eighteenth-century didactic poetry, for instance, is not confined to the logic of its rhymed couplets, but includes a broader generic history that includes georgic, something that doesn’t neatly adhere to an abstracted “structural principle,” but entails a thematic literary tradition that’s nevertheless circumscribable, I think, as a version of “form.” Similarly, I will regard something like the dramatic monologue as a form, despite the fact that it demands no specific structural principles, as it does demand other extrasemantic attributes, like a voice that is ostensibly not that of the poet.

⁵ Curran, 9.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

Despite the term's slipperiness, or perhaps because of it, calls for the reinvigoration of formal analysis have been pervasive over the last fifteen years. Broadly speaking, this wide array of formalists and formalisms seeks to reclaim the usefulness of form for cultural and historical study. The professedly reductive narrative is that "form" became a dirty word thanks to Marxist or historicist approaches that regarded form (or more often, its non-synonym "the aesthetic") as the obfuscation of political or social reality. Two figures central to this particular turn are generally held to be Jerome McGann and Terry Eagleton, both of whom held form to be, at best, a suspicious, if inevitable conspirator in maintaining a status quo. For McGann, form, and its illusion of completion, was a way of articulating an ideological totality, while for Eagleton form is shackled to social forms in a way that renders injustice or exploitation invisible.⁸ As Susan Wolfson describes this approach, "the critique of literary form as part of an ideological totality was typically conducted at the expense of closer reading for how such form might produce local lines of resistance."⁹ Wolfson's response, then, has been to offer granular formal readings that demonstrate the way in which, say, Romantic poems frequently consider and challenge the formal unities and totalities that McGann and Eagleton see as these poems' ultimate aspirations. For Wolfson, "designs of unity" in Romantic poetry often "reflect on rather than conceal their constructedness."¹⁰ To consider an alleged formal unity as a promise of a complete ideological formation, her work suggests, is to be a lousy reader of form.

⁸ See Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1983) and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990).

⁹ Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

Wolfson's reconsideration of the way in which we regard form (and specifically senses of the term that necessarily involve harmony or coherence) is part of a broader trend in nineteenth-century criticism that sees formalism as a vital component of historical approaches, rather than a tool of ideological repression that seeks to erase history. Marjorie Levinson has called this type of work the "New Formalism," which seeks to restore formal rigor to new historicist modes of analysis rather than reclaim or shield form, in the sense of "the aesthetic," from history.¹¹ But despite the freshness implied by Levinson's moniker, as both Wolfson and Marjorie Levinson have made clear, form never really left. As Derek Attridge notes of Levinson's essay "What is New Formalism?" her claim is that "the best New Historicists have been formalists all along."¹² And so we might too say that the best formalists have been historicist all along, never turning a complete blind eye to the material conditions of textual production and ideological potency of form itself. Nevertheless, it's true that there was a mildly allergic reaction to "form" for a period, and that appeals for new formalisms mark an important shift in intellectual positioning even if it's not without significant precedent.

One of the major voices behind the revival of form has been Caroline Levine, whose specific variant of approach she calls "strategic formalism," and which she positions relative to Marxist and Foucauldian traditions. Those critics, she argues "have tended to share a conviction about the power of literary forms in the social sphere. Literary forms matter politically because they are indices of social forms, expressing or fostering dominant social and economic relationships."¹³ There's coherence to this sense

¹¹ Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?" *PMLA* 122:2 (2007), 558-569.

¹² Derek Attridge, "A Return to Form?" *Textual Practice* 22:3 (2008), 565.

¹³ Caroline Levine, "Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies," *Victorian Studies* (Summer 2006), 626.

of form, Levine implies, whether reflective or predictive of material conditions. What she proposes is a much messier conception of form, insofar as it's considered to "participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them."¹⁴ For Levine, it's the friction between the formal and the social, and the friction *between* coexisting forms in the same work, that strategic formalism illuminates, thus opening up the possibility of new social formations altogether.

Levine, then, as well as Levinson and Wolfson, all propose in various ways to rethink the ever-unstable relation between the "formal" or "aesthetic" on one hand, and the "social," "historical," or "material" on the other. In other words, what's at stake in so much of the new formalist criticism is the relationship of form to politics. It's a useful starting point, given the critiques that have been leveled against past formalisms, but it has elided other histories: for my purposes here, the history of science. If we can see economic formations refracted, according to whichever particular model of new formalism, in literary form, why can't we see the formal underpinnings of scientific theory? My contention here is that we can see, if only through a glass darkly, the history of evolutionary thinking made manifest in poetic form, but I also hope to more broadly intimate the degree to which formalist reading can illuminate other histories beyond the social, the economic, and the political.

In doing so, I want to make use of two aspects of Levine's strategic formalism as a point of departure. First, her attention to the "destabilizing" quality of form, its stubborn refusal to act as a perfect reflection, or even a fully coherent imagining, of whatever it is with which that form seems to be in dialogue. Especially with questions of the

¹⁴ Ibid.

transmission of evolutionary ideas in the nineteenth century, which itself was uneven and often partial, a willingness to accept this aspect of form is critical. Second, I take seriously her contention that strategic formalism is “less about what authors intend or what readers receive than about what forms *do*.”¹⁵ It’s true that the following chapters don’t fully adhere to that latter principle; I am interested, in certain cases, about what an author did, or didn’t know about evolutionary ideas, what ideas they were, or weren’t exposed to. But I’ve tried to do this in the service of formal reading: what does form “do” that biography can’t account for? Where does form seem to elude or frustrate the author? In what follows, I’ve attempted to integrate these two principles into a version of what Levinson refers to as “activist formalism,” a formalism that seeks to apply formalist reading methods to historical approaches to literature; only in this case, the history is scientific.¹⁶

Admittedly, there is an extensive precedent for thinking about literary form and evolution, but it’s historically taken place with the novel at its center. The originary text for such an approach is Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots*, which made two central contentions that helped make the novel the locus of so much evolutionary attention. The first is her treatment of Darwin’s *Origin* as a work of literature in its own right, which is to say, both as a work of aesthetic merit that makes substantial rhetorical and argumentative use of literary tropes, and as a book that implies certain plots or narrative trajectories, thus coming close to mirroring narratorial elements of that most popular of Victorian literary forms, the novel. Indeed, for Beer, the staging of the drama of evolutionary history required for Darwin the construction of imaginary histories, a

¹⁵ Ibid., 647.

¹⁶ Levinson, 559.

reliance on metaphor, and a certain amount of formal innovation. His was, as she writes, “a backward story told laterally.”¹⁷ While none of this is unique to the novel, of course, the degree to which evolution is a theory of narrative undoubtedly leads to a second, implicit suggestion in Beer that the novel is the literary genre most responsive and sensitive to Darwin’s dangerous idea. The novel is seen as uniquely suited for this duty, as it is the vehicle capable of managing the complex and often contradictory nature of “Darwin’s plots,” whether they are read as developmental or teleological, regressive or degenerative, arbitrary or chaotic.

George Levine’s *Darwin and the Novelists*, the other central text for the study of Darwin and Victorian literature, also positions the novel as the critically responsive genre to Darwin partly because the figures of novelist and scientist shared a common goal, that is, a representation of the “real.” In other words, it is through participation in the nineteenth-century realist enterprise, that novelists were allied to Darwin, as well as through the formal and thematic corollaries that Levine delineates: chance, abundance, the lack of design, the blurring of boundaries, among others.¹⁸ So while Beer and Levine’s work both introduced new possibilities for critical work on form and evolution, it was, perhaps, at poetry’s expense.

In addition to the way the novel has dominated the critical discourse around Darwinism, we can also attribute this comparative neglect of verse to ways of thinking about or theorizing the practice of Victorian poetry more broadly. Isobel Armstrong’s landmark *Victorian Poetry* usefully describes a tradition of thinking about its titular

¹⁷ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1983), xix.

¹⁸ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1988), 16-20.

subject matter as little more than a pit stop on the road from Romanticism to Modernism. Moreover, the narrative of Victorian poetry is often regarded as a steady retreat into a disengaged aestheticism, a mindset that's blinded us to Victorian poetry's more radical and expressly political aspects. But Armstrong argues that "The history of Victorian poetry is the gradual assent to self-reflexive art and the struggle against such an assent."¹⁹ In other words, there's no movement towards the aesthetic that doesn't entail or embed its own self-reflexive critique. Nevertheless, even recent critical works that are extremely sensitive to form, such as Angela Leighton's *On Form*, a poet like Tennyson is read in light of an emerging aestheticism, an argument that largely reproduces this predominant narrative in the study of Victorian poetry.²⁰

A corrective critical maneuver, however, has been transpiring over the past decade or so, particularly with regard to prosody. Meredith Martin's *The Rise and Fall of Meter*, for instance, provides an account of the way in which meter and metrical systems both challenged and forged English imperial national identity, and Jason David Hall's edited collection *Meter Matters* reads a variety of nineteenth-century poets with an ear towards the broader connotations of metrical decision-making.²¹ And Kirstie Blair's *Form & Faith in Victorian Poetry & Religion* argues that Victorian religious poetry was suffused with formal self-consciousness, that the very power and function of this poetry was inseparable from form.²² Formal studies of this kind with a scientific bent have been less common in nineteenth-century studies, the chief exception being Jason Rudy's

¹⁹ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

²⁰ Leighton, 55-73.

²¹ Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter : Poetry and English National Culture, 1860–1930* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012), and Jason David Hall, ed., *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2011).

²² Kirstie Blair, *Form & Faith in Victorian Poetry & Religion* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).

Electric Meters, which convincingly links metrical experimentation, on part of the Spasmodic poets and others, to developments in physiology and electrodynamics.²³

But the fact remains that evolutionary theory's relation to nineteenth-century verse has been largely ignored for a number of decades. Curiously, however, the early and mid parts of the twentieth century gave rise to a number of book-length studies concerned with this very topic. Lionel Stevenson's *Darwin Among the Poets*, Ralph Crum's *Scientific Thought in Poetry* and Georg Roppen's *Evolution and Poetic Belief*.²⁴ Despite the fact that C.P. Snow's familiar "Two Cultures" lecture wouldn't be delivered until 1959, these studies all read as preemptory rebuttals to the notion that science and literature exist in separate spheres. Rather, they are devoted to demonstrating the seriousness with which a variety of poets absorbed and wrestled with evolutionary theory, a kind of twentieth-century scholarly recapitulation of the very claims made for Tennyson by Thomas Henry Huxley and Edward Dowden among others: that is, the conviction that the former's grasp of science was "equal to that of the greatest experts."²⁵ Stevenson's *Darwin Among the Poets*, for instance, is invested in teasing out the "discussion and interpretations of [science's] pronouncements on the part of the poets."²⁶ These studies thus ask questions pertaining to the substance of the evolutionary ideas alleged to be taken up in the poetry without any engagement with the formal apparatus through which they are expressed. Nor does the only recent book to take up the issue exclusively, John Holmes's *Darwin's Bards*, which, although very helpful in the way it

²³ Jason Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2009).

²⁴ Lionel Stevenson, *Darwin Among the Poets* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1932), Ralph Crum, *Scientific Thought in Poetry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1931), and Georg Roppen, *Evolution and Poetic Belief* (Oslo: Oslo UP, 1956).

²⁵ Qtd. in Gillian Beer, *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 211.

²⁶ Stevenson 7.

expands the range of evolutionary ideas and theories under consideration beyond the narrow scope of Darwinism, remains largely mute on the subject of form, or at the very least steers clear of readings that treat form as anything that might contribute meaningfully to the evolutionary themes with which a particular poem is dealing.²⁷

The correlation between the scientific disciplines and poetic practice has perhaps a more sustained recent history in Romantic studies, most of which has been organized around three distinct nodes. The first of these, exemplified by Alan Richardson's *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* and Noel Jackson's *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry*, is the intersection of early theories of the mind and Romanticism, an inward turn that makes sense given Romantic predilections.²⁸ The second concerns itself with vitalism and theories of life; examples include Robert Mitchell's *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature* and Denise Gigante's *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism*.²⁹ And the last cluster of scholarly interest, the most germane to my purposes, has been the literary-critical interest in natural history, specifically the study of taxonomy and botany. Theresa Kelley's *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* in particular, as well as work by Amy King, have suggested new ways in which the language and structures of botany, including those that we would now recognize as evolutionary, informed literary discourse and sexual politics.³⁰

²⁷ John Holmes, *Darwin's Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009).

²⁸ Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004) and Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2008).

²⁹ Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013) and Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009). See also Sharon Ruston's *Shelley and Vitality* (2005) and Robert J. Richards's *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (2002).

³⁰ Theresa Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2012), Amy King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003).

But all in all, it's relatively rare to encounter literary scholars with the willingness to think seriously about pre-Darwinian evolution. While some are willing to implicitly locate evolution's birth with Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's *Philosophie Zoologique* (1809) or Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) it's far more common to encounter approaches and that assume the theory of evolution only explodes into cultural consciousness with the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859.³¹ Typically, Tennyson is seen as the vanguard of evolutionary poetry, the only literary antecedent of Darwin, and is followed only in the 1860 and subsequent decades by a flurry of other poems tackling evolutionary ideas, exemplified by the work of May Kendall, Mathilda Blind, Constance Naden, and Thomas Hardy, among others.³² In this sense, literature scholars haven't kept pace with historians of science, who over the past several decades have been troubling the scientific narrative that underwrites this literary one. Peter Bowler's *The Non-Darwinian Revolution* is exemplary in this respect, and argues that neither Darwin's precursors nor followers were particularly "Darwinian."³³ What constituted "evolution," in other words, was more often than not an idea that borrowed more from Lamarck in terms of its mechanisms and progressive character. And Robert Richards' work has demonstrated the wide variety of evolutionary precursors from which Darwin drew inspiration, including German *Naturphilosophie* and

³¹ Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* (1855), is another frequent marker.

³² Erasmus Darwin, with whom I begin my own study of evolutionary poetry, is often seen as a curiosity without direct descendants. A recent book chapter by John Holmes dismisses him outright without explanation ("Setting aside Erasmus Darwin..."). See "The Challenge of Evolution in Victorian Poetry" in Bernard Lightman, and Bennett Zon, ed., *Evolution and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 2014), 43.

³³ Peter Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988). See also Bowler's *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1984).

continental embryology.³⁴ In other words, they've demonstrated that the evolutionary landscape was far more varied in its composition than previously thought, from the latter portion of the eighteenth century to well beyond 1859.

The problem, then, is twofold: a sense that literary evolutionism is a mid-century, *Victorian*, phenomenon, and the tendency to largely ignore the formal dimension of evolutionary poetry when it *is* discussed as such. Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon, in the introduction to a recent essay collection, aim at addressing the former: "While Bowler's contribution is significant in the history of Victorian science, his and other non-Darwinian theories have never been adequately tested in the larger plurality of Victorian cultural activity."³⁵ By examining poetic form, what I hope to offer here is a look at just one sliver of cultural activity in the long nineteenth century, but it's one that offers an acutely vivid sense of evolution's own complex history of inheritance and transmission.

Towards the end of a recent essay on poetry and evolution, John Holmes makes a plea for a version of the work I'm attempting here:

Though critics have intimated as I have here that particular Victorian poetic forms were well adapted to the treatment of evolution, we do not fully understand how far evolutionary ideas were the engine of the evolution of the forms themselves. Evolution certainly led Victorian poets to use certain forms and voices, but how far did it help to create them?³⁶

Holmes's logic runs two ways: certain preexisting poetic forms were uniquely suitable for addressing evolution, but he also sees evolution as a potential driver of formal change.

It is the latter point that I find persuasive; while poets may have indeed turned to

³⁴ Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (U of Chicago Press, 2002) and *The Meaning of Evolution: The Morphological Construction and Ideological Reconstruction of Darwin's Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁵ Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon, "Introduction," in Bernard Lightman, and Bennett Zon, ed., *Evolution and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 2014), 8.

³⁶ Holmes, "The Challenge of Evolution," 60.

particular forms, they are all uniquely inflected or “evolved” in a way that never fits completely into a formal template. As Meredith Martin observes of Angela Leighton’s *On Form*, “We are subtly nudged to understand “form” as always incomplete and dynamic—a fissure, flash, or ghost rather than a complete urn, static image, or whole body.”³⁷ The question is thus not “what particular form did nineteenth-century poets find appropriate for evolutionary expression?” but “how does form manifest itself in particular instances of evolution expression?” Form is never perfectly coherent, unified, or consistent, much in the manner that no physical organism ever achieves the idealized form of which it is a specific instance.

When we read for form in this way, the full complexity of the range of responses to evolutionary theory in the long nineteenth century starts to come into a view. And like the poetic forms they assume, those responses are characterized by inconsistency or incoherence. Huxley once said of Tennyson, “He was the only modern poet, in fact I think the only poet since the time of Lucretius, who has taken the trouble to understand the work and tendency of the men of science” (in addition to being one of the “greatest experts”).³⁸ This sort of claim (examples of which have actually wormed their way into some contemporary studies) is wildly absurd when one considers how fundamentally fractured and incomplete *any* poet treatment of evolution is in the nineteenth century. Moreover, any number of poets can be seen to have internalized certain different elements from different schools of evolutionary thought if we take seriously the questions posed by their form rather than regurgitate a few eminently quotable lines about “nature

³⁷ Meredith Martin, “Review of Angela Leighton, *On Form*,” *Victorian Studies* 51:2 (2009), 388.

³⁸ Thomas Henry Huxley, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley, Volume II*, ed. Leonard Huxley (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1913), 359.

red and tooth in claw.”³⁹ By doing so, I hope to begin to trace a largely unobserved literary history of evolutionary reception through form, in a manner that encourages reading that regards form and science as vividly and necessarily entangled.

The first chapter, “Ways to Love Plants: Erasmus Darwin’s Pluralistic Natural History,” begins with the natural historical thinking that lay behind early evolutionary thinking, and tracks the dynamic relationship between text and paratext in what I call Erasmus Darwin’s scientific-didactic poetry, particularly *The Loves of the Plants* (1789). Darwin’s stated objective in the poem is to communicate the basics of Linnaean taxonomy to his readers by providing a simple figurative scheme in which elements of his personifications line up directly with botanical data allowing one to identify the class of the plant in question. But his poem also contains a vast set of prose notes that partake of a radically different vision of the natural world indebted to Buffon, and running through the interplay of verse and note is a vitalist impulse that constitutes a third way of thinking about the organizing principles of nature. My formal reading of Darwin suggests he found a formal solution to a scientific problem: he can pluralistically represent all three methods without a dogmatic commitment to any one. Erasmus Darwin’s formal ingenuity, moreover, provides a kind of formal prefiguration of his later explicitly evolutionary commitments in its willingness to navigate between dynamic and static visions of nature. His formal difficulty, however, also lies behind his critical demise, leading critics to distinguish between a “poet” that lives in the verse and the “philosopher” that resides in the notes. Thanks to the persistence of this binary mode of

³⁹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* in *Selected Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Penguin, 2007), LVI 15.

thinking, which owes something to the georgic critical tradition, the richness of Darwin's vision has largely been lost. By reading formally, in a manner that sees verse and note in complex relation, we can hope to see it anew.

In the second chapter, “‘Notorious Plagiarisms’: Charlotte Smith’s Imitative Organicism,” I turn to the poetry and children’s books of Charlotte Smith, a poet who declared Erasmus Darwin to be among her favorite writers. Smith demonstrates a formally evolutionary sense in an unlikely place: the poetry included in her numerous late-career children’s books. In Smith’s children’s books, which are largely series of dialogues designed to foster an understanding of both natural history and poetic language, she persistently equates the natural objects and organisms that the books’ interpolated poems describe with the poems themselves, suggesting continuity between the poetic and natural senses of “form.” These poems, interestingly, are littered with repetitions and repurposings of others’ poetic language – so much so that she was not infrequently charged with plagiarism. Partly, Smith’s borrowings were part of a poetic practice designed to thwart ideals of authorship that privilege singularity and genius. But through her conflation of poetic and natural forms, she also suggests that organisms themselves might be the product of accretive practices, evolving slowly through a process of repetition and variation. While it was common to think of poetic form as “organic,” this often implied a harmonious perfection of form. Smith’s alternative organicism regards poetic form as ever-evolving, ever-incomplete. It reflects natural processes on a larger scale and demonstrates that her intellectual affiliation with Darwin went far beyond a taste for extensive footnotes.

The third chapter, “A ‘Mere Pin-Point’: Robert Browning’s Evolutionary Personae,” begins to address more developed, post-Erasmus theories of evolutionary change by tracking Robert Browning’s complicated, career-long tussle with developmental theory. While critics have long identified evolutionary moments or elements in his work – specifically his *Paracelsus* and “Cleon” – but they often ignore a critical late period letter to Frederick James Furnivall in which Browning claims, in effect, to have been a (Charles) Darwinian all along, and uses specific poetic quotations from throughout his career to make this point. Only an exceedingly generous reading of the poems Browning cites, however, could bear this out – rather, he comes across as simply not knowing what Darwinism actually entails. The problem is further compounded by the obvious fact that Browning is speaking throughout his career through the characters of dramatic monologue, so that it becomes difficult to suss out just what Browning’s position is on the ideas voiced by his monologists. The key, I argue, lies in his late period poem “Francis Furini,” in which Browning expresses an objection to evolutionary theory on the grounds that its methods are empirically limited – a contention that plagued Darwin himself in the wake of the *Origin*. What “Furini” does, in effect, is suggest that the very form of dramatic monologue itself can constitute a critique of evolutionary theory given the limited purview of its speakers, the same limitations that afflict evolutionary theory and circumscribe its margins. Browning’s most sophisticated claims about evolution, then, are formal in nature.

My final chapter, “‘One Tremendous IF’: George Meredith’s Evolutionary Temporalities,” turns to Meredith’s sonnet sequence *Modern Love*. Considering the sequence as a form torn between lyrical utterance and narrative propulsion, I suggest that

the particular interplay of these modes in *Modern Love* is a function of Meredith's interest in evolution. Specifically, the speaker of the poem is beset with anxiety over the narrative implications of evolutionary progression: unpredictability, contingency, a lack of direction. Drawing from a biological tradition that regards the development of the individual, gestating organism as analogous to the development of the species, the speaker thinks of evolution's disturbing implications at the level of his own life, and thus turns to lyric as a way to stave off whatever evolutionary narrative has in store for him. Meredith himself regards this as an indefensible form of egoism, and his later lyric poetry provides a rebuke to the speaker of *Modern Love*'s attitude. This later lyricism deemphasizes the centrality of the individual voice and the tendency of the lyric to dwell in the present moment, instead articulating a poetics focused on communal voice and futurity that takes joy in subsuming the individual into a greater evolutionary story.

To conclude, I want to consider a caveat of George Levine's from *Darwin among the Novelists*, one that's worth quoting at length:

Given these complications – the innumerable possible interpretations of [Darwin's] arguments, biological and social, and the elusiveness of the science in fictions – it might well be possible to find Darwin anywhere. One of my problems, indeed, is that the argument is not, to cop a word from Popper's scientific theory, falsifiable. In a certain sense, I am free to play the game any way I like, to draw on fluctuating notions of 'Darwinian' whenever I want to argue for his presence – metaphorically, at least – in a text.⁴⁰

This is a complication that's only exacerbated when we're not thinking about Charles Darwin in particular, but evolution more broadly, in all its nineteenth-century iterations. When evolution is one of a number of competing discourses of progress and change, developing alongside political and social ones, what's to distinguish a particular formal feature as specifically evolutionary? The truth is that none of these discourses exists in a

⁴⁰ *Darwin among the Novelists*, 13.

void, and cross-pollination is unavoidable. Nevertheless, I've chosen texts that are explicitly engaging with natural history in some manner so as to avoid a formal analysis that seems to exist in a tenuous relationship to the discourse of evolution specifically, even as that analysis might share some kind of structural or formal kinship with evolutionary precepts. If there's something inescapably unfalsifiable about this project at the level of particular interpretive maneuvers, my hope is that their accretion will speak to the profound degree to which evolutionary thought permeated the long nineteenth century, even as it operated in concurrence with neighboring discourses. In "The Scientific Movement and Literature," Edward Dowden argues that the study of science's impact on literature proceeds by attending to "hints, signs, and presages." Such is the nature of science's absorption into the public mind. My hope, then, is to begin to disentangle these signs by a particular focus on form, which reveals, however sprawling, inconsistent, or undigested, the "significance" of evolutionary science on nineteenth-century poetry, which is certainly, as Dowden writes, both "large and deep."

Ways to Love Plants: Erasmus Darwin's Pluralistic Natural History

In the study of natural history, there are two equally dangerous positions: the first is to have no system at all, and the second is to try to relate everything to a restricted system.

– George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Premier Discours*, 1749

[Darwin] is ever aiming at the construction of a vast and comprehensive system, but with powers and preparation by no means equal to the task.

– *Edinburgh Review*, Review of *The Temple of Nature*, 1803

Through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Erasmus Darwin presented an irresistibly easy target for critics skeptical of grand “systems,” a particularly troublesome word in contemporary reviews of what I will call his scientific-didactic poetry. Darwin’s developing sense of teleological evolution was construed as a “system,” a governing set of laws under which all of nature, inorganic and organic, could be seen to operate, as well as serve as a dangerous precedent for “evolving” structures of governance. Similarly systematic was his interest in promoting Linnaean taxonomy, most famously illustrated in *The Loves of the Plants* (1789). But accusations of “system”-making also served as an aesthetic critique of Darwin’s anachronistic neo-classical poetics, governed by tightly-wound heroic couplets and extravagant personifications. The most infamous practitioner of a putatively anomalous genre of scientific poetry, Darwin and his poems came to be seen as object lessons in the dangers of system: both his rigidly all-encompassing scientific theories and the clunky mechanical excess of eighteenth-century poetic tropes.

The ease with which Darwin’s alleged systematizing can be seen to contravene a nascent Romantic ideology largely determined his subsequent, precipitous decline in poetic esteem. Coleridge’s comments in the *Biographia Literaria* that liken Darwin’s *Botanic Garden* (1789-1791, and of which *The Loves of the Plants* comprises one half) to

Alexander Pope's poetry are a perfect distillation of this position: "the matter and diction seem[...]...characterized...by thought *translated* into the language of poetry."⁴¹ Drawing a clear line in the sand, Coleridge distinguishes the cold, rational "thought" of Darwin from the capital-I Imagination Coleridge lays claim to elsewhere. This, among other visceral repudiations⁴² has led critics to assign to Darwin what Noel Jackson has called an "anti-aesthetic," a poetics that refuses to be treated *as* a poetics, and serves as a mere vehicle for the explication of Darwinian systems.⁴³ The popularity of George Canning's 1798 Darwinian parody "The Loves of the Triangles," appearing in the *Anti-Jacobin*, only served to further promote a similar characterization amongst Darwin's later readers: an easily parodied, antiquated poetics without inherent merits as either poetry or as a barometer for the comparative epistemological and aesthetic statuses of natural philosophy and verse.⁴⁴

Consequently, Darwin's nineteenth-century reception notoriously involves his brisk critical demise at the hands of both the Lake Poets and his political enemies at the reactionary *Anti-Jacobin*.⁴⁵ Indeed, Darwin is inseparable from aesthetic irrelevance in virtually every nineteenth-century assessment of his work, despite the acclamation with

⁴¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 19.

⁴² As early as 1796 Coleridge declared to John Thelwall that "I absolutely nauseate Darwin's poem," in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1956), 1:216. By 1827, Robert Southey ascribed Darwin's fall in popularity to a lack of "heart," and an adherence to an outmoded neoclassical poetics devoted to ornament and polish. See the *Quarterly Review* XXXV (1827), 198-200.

⁴³ Noel Jackson, "Rhyme and Reason: Erasmus Darwin's Romanticism." *MLQ* June 2009, 171-194.

⁴⁴ Canning's *Loves of the Triangles* was by no means the only poem to satirically target Darwin; see Canning's *New Morality* (1798), Thomas James Mathias's *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794) and *The Golden Age* (1794), a parody so accurate as to have been mistaken for a work of Darwin's until quite recently.

⁴⁵ This tradition persists throughout the twentieth century. J.V. Logan in *The Poetry and Aesthetics of Erasmus Darwin* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1936) claims that by the time *The Temple of Nature* was published "the leaven of *Lyrical Ballads* had begun to work," even as the *Loves of the Triangles* is seen as a "deadly blow" (18). Jenny Uglow also blames the shift in critical attitudes on *The Loves of the Triangles* in *The Lunar Men: The Friends who Made the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

which his early poems were critically received upon their initial publication. The account of Darwin in abolitionist Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck's 1858 autobiography rehearses this narrative with wistfulness: *The Botanic Garden*'s "celebrity has now passed away, and notwithstanding its beauty, it is but little read."⁴⁶ Despite her implied defense of the poem's "beauty," its lack of a readership speaks to its outmoded nature as aesthetic object. Even Erasmus's sympathetic grandson Charles Darwin is compelled to acknowledge that in 1879 that only "old men...[speak] with enthusiasm about his poetry,"⁴⁷ and in the same year Samuel Butler avers that "Considering the wide reputation enjoyed by Dr. Darwin at the beginning of this century, it is surprising how completely he has been lost sight of."⁴⁸ Whatever the mild nostalgia evinced by any of these accounts, one matter is unequivocally settled by mid-century: Darwinian poetry is dead and gone.

I say "Darwinian poetry" rather than Darwin purposefully, as so many of these assessments seem to want to say something about the outmoded nature of the poetic form for which he is made representative, what I will hereafter call scientific-didactic poetry.⁴⁹ This genre, in my loose definition, not only employs scientific imagery for the sake of effect or sublimity, but actively attempts to constitute a "scientific" readership, both by outright didacticism and enticing readers to further independent study. Given the alleged

⁴⁶ Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, *Life of Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 243.

⁴⁷ Charles Darwin, *Preliminary Notice to Ernst Krause, Erasmus Darwin*, trans. W.S. Dallas (London: John Murray, 1879), 92.

⁴⁸ Samuel Butler, *Evolution, Old and New, or, the Theories of Buffon, Dr. Erasmus Darwin, and Lamarck As Compared With That of Charles Darwin* (London: David Bogue, 1882), 195.

⁴⁹ I say "scientific-didactic" rather than "scientific" to emphasize Darwin's debt to georgic. For an account of the tradition as a whole, William Powell Jones's *The Rhetoric of Science: A Study of Scientific Ideas and Imagery in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1966) remains the most thorough.

historical idiosyncrasy of Darwin's scientific-didactic poetry,⁵⁰ the narrative of a catastrophic decline in Darwin's stock is intrinsically attractive to any post-Romantic reader, as Darwin's verse seems to conform so little to classical genre or Romantic practice.⁵¹ Darwin's most-read work, *The Loves of the Plants*, is an extensive Linnaean catalogue of personified, eroticized species of flora; *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791), comprising the other half of *The Botanic Garden*, is an encyclopedic celebration of scientific discovery and human industry, and *The Temple of Nature* (1803) is a developmental account of natural history and human development, both physiological and moral. All three are rendered in heroic couplets which persistently run the risk of being formally overwhelmed by extensive paratext in the form of prose notes often read as providing a "scientific" or "philosophical" account of Darwin's figures and allusions. In addition to these formal elements, the fundamental premise of a poetry designed with the express intention of serving both as a vehicle for the dissemination of scientific knowledge and a catalyst for further scientific experimentation runs contrary to every post-Romantic aesthetic norm, particularly for a contemporary reader operating from the historical vantage point of the professionalized sciences.

The danger of internalizing nineteenth-century narratives of Darwinian heteroclite exceptionalism is twofold. On the one hand, treating Darwin as historical aberrancy masks the tradition of descriptive British georgic that countenanced his poetic project in the first place, as well as the contemporary natural historical practices that were, as I

⁵⁰ It should be noted that Darwin's poem was, of course, by no means anomalous, despite its nineteenth-century reputation as such. Other examples of the eighteenth century include the anonymous *A Philosophic Ode on the Sun and Universe* (1750), Joseph Wise's *The System: a Poem in Five Books* (1781), and Capel Lofft's *Eudokia: or a Poem on the Universe* (1781).

⁵¹ I borrow this notion from Joanna Stalnaker's work on French descriptive poet Jacques Delille in *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010): "If descriptive poetry has been deemed unreadable from the romantics forward, it is because it has too often been read through the lens of either classical or romantic poetics" (126).

contend, central to Darwinian poetics. On the other, viewing his work as a lamentable attempt at constructing an unholy alliance between discrete “poetic” and “scientific” elements discourages critics from treating Darwinian aesthetics on its own terms. There recent, notable exceptions to this trend, but critics nevertheless have largely insisted on equating Darwin’s “verse” with “poetry” and his “notes” with “philosophy” in such a way as to gloss over the full complexities of Darwinian poetic form.⁵² Darwin’s form does to a certain degree invite this sort of reading by its graphical appearance on the page, but to read Darwin’s work this way ignores precisely what is most interesting about his form: the way in which it enables a dynamic reading practice that refuses to discriminate between the material of the verse and the material of the prose, and indeed, relies upon this refusal for its overall effect.

But to what end, and what effect? In this chapter I will argue that Darwin’s poetic form in *The Loves of the Plants*, with generous pluralism, replicates several eighteenth-century natural historical methods that are traditionally seen as at odds with one another. While Darwin’s alleged primary interest, as his Advertisement declares, is to propagate Linnaean method, his form also necessitates an engagement with a descriptive method, more frequently associated with Buffon, that is consigned to the notes. Moreover, the personifications of the verse, taken in tandem with some of the speculations in the notes, illustrate the radical comparative relationships between organisms that undergird

⁵² This perspective is succinctly summarized by Peter Ayres in *The Aliveness of Plants: The Darwins at the Dawn of Plant Science* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008): “For Erasmus, poetry was meant to amuse while serious matters demanded prose”(30). Noel Jackson’s “Rhyme and Reason: Erasmus Darwin’s Romanticism” and Catherine Packham’s *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) are two exceptions to this approach. Jackson draws attention to the Lucretian roots of the Darwinian aesthetic, and argues that part of the backlash can be ascribed to the way in which his “poetic and philosophical aims merge under the sign of pleasure.” Packham attends usefully to Darwin’s personifications, arguing that Darwin’s poetic “animations” are an enactment of a radical vitalism that Darwin didn’t feel comfortable expressing fully in his scientific writings.

eighteenth-century experimental vitalism. Rather than demonstrating an interest in reconciling these three methods into a discrete grand system, however, Darwin makes each an unavoidable, integral formal element of *reading*. This might, of course, seem to run the risk of complete incoherence, but Darwin's form permits each approach to retain its individual integrity even as they're consolidated into a single instance of Darwinian poetics. Mirroring his career in letters in some ways (he was a translator of Linnaeus even as he was drafting his controversial, vitalist and evolutionary *Zoonomia*), Darwin's poetic form is not a single, despotic "system," but nurtures a pluralistic approach to representations of the natural world. While Darwin undoubtedly harbored the radical political, sexual, and metaphysical views for which he was taken to task by his conservative critics, the methodological pluralism that Darwinian form celebrates is, in its way, no less radical. Furthermore, such an approach to Darwin provides insight into the history of his poetry's critics, who, refusing to regard *The Loves of the Plants* as a work that relies on both verse and prose notes, accuse him of systemization, a spurious charge that the poem formally refutes.

Beyond Georgic Description

The fact that Erasmus Darwin's name functions in the critical literature as both the preeminent and terminal representative of scientific-didactic poetry tends to obscure the long eighteenth-century descriptive georgic tradition in which he is operating and to which he is responding. The *Edinburgh Review*'s 1803 ambivalent assessment of *The Temple of Nature* attempts to circumscribe a discrete "Darwinian school" in which "the general design of clothing the philosophy of natural history in the gay attire and with all

the higher graces of poetry was novel, at least in any English poet.”⁵³ The characterization of this supposed “school” as unprecedented in poetic history, however, reads like a willful suppression of the eighteenth-century georgic tradition, criticism of which loosely revived and developed the set of binary terms in which Darwin’s contemporaries were to critique his verse (“philosophy” and “poetry”), and more importantly, promoted *description*, of both agricultural practice and, later, nature itself, as a fundamental georgic strategy. As georgic broadens over the century to encompass topics of natural philosophy beyond agriculture, description emerges as both a poetics and an empirical practice that implicitly allies itself with a correspondent methodology of descriptive natural history.

The *Edinburgh Review*’s assessment of the Darwinian school, despite the latter’s purported newness, parrots Joseph Addison’s influential 1697 “An Essay on the Georgics” with remarkable fidelity. Addison’s essay, published alongside Dryden’s translation of Virgil, provides an account of georgic that relies heavily on familiar notions of *utile* and *dulci* while furnishing what would ultimately be the language for the *Review*’s critique of Darwin’s scientific-didactic poetry: “A Georgic, therefore, is some part of the science of husbandry put into a pleasing dress, and set off with all the beauties and embellishments of poetry.”⁵⁴ In addition to providing a coherent through-line to the scientific-didactic tradition, Addison introduces a crucial anxiety about georgic: the ability of the “pleasing dress” of poetry to adequately compensate for the pedestrian subject matter at hand. Kevis Goodman casts this problem as “a challenge to decorum

⁵³ Anon., “[Review of] *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin*,” *The Edinburgh Review* IV (1804), 238.

⁵⁴ Joseph Addison, “An Essay on Virgil’s *Georgics*,” *Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Addison*, Vol. I (Oxford: D.A. Talboys, 1830), 221.

and, as a result, an occasion to define the flexibility as well as the limits of ‘poetry.’”⁵⁵ In this sense, georgic is a limit case for poetic language, and accordingly, a way of thinking about the alleged division between philosophy and poetry that is so starkly confronted in a text like *The Loves of the Plants*. Addison speaks in these same binary terms when he acknowledges the fundamental risk of georgic: the overemphasis on philosophy or didacticism at the expense of poetic beauty. Such is Addison’s critique of Hesiod, whom Addison sees as being “more of the husbandman than the poet,” and whose *Works and Days*, by virtue of this imbalance, reads as “a modern almanack in verse.”⁵⁶

The pitfall of an insipid didacticism, of writing an “almanack in verse,” Addison argues, can be avoided by recourse to poetry’s unique ability to describe. Georgic conveys its agricultural information not through “precepts,” but rather by faithful descriptive representations of practice: the poet “conceals the precept in a description and represents his countryman performing the action in which he would instruct his reader.”⁵⁷ Addison describes something like a backdoor didacticism, in which lessons are disguised as more palatable poetic representations. Importantly, this “description” is designed to permit the leisured reader to easily digest the specific agricultural practices that they are not called on to perform. Georgic description thus emerges initially as an opportunity for the reader to indulge in a kind of imagined manual labor. As such, natural philosophy, whose labor consists of speculation, is explicitly excluded from georgic’s particular representational province, as it “has indeed sensible objects to work upon, but then it often puzzles the reader with the intricacy of its notions, and perplexes him with the

⁵⁵ Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 30.

⁵⁶ Addison, 225.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

multitude of its disputes.”⁵⁸ It is the abstract intellectualism of natural philosophy (a term under which Addison would have included the more particularized practices of natural history), that renders it unfit for georgic expression. As a vehicle for the conveyance of information that is local and practical, georgic marks disciplinary limits as well as representational ones (what can or cannot be expressed in verse). Despite the localized, practical knowledge to which georgic must adhere and seek to propagate, Addison theorizes an English poetry that is at once didactic and descriptive, indeed didactic *because* descriptive, even as his notion of description is limited to the representation of agricultural practice.

In a similarly influential account of didactic and georgic verse, Joseph Trapp’s “Of Didactic or Preceptive Poetry” (1742), description is still central to a brand of didacticism Trapp calls the poetry of “philosophical Speculations,” whose scope is far beyond that of Addison’s georgic. Affirming that “Nothing shines more in verse, than disquisitions of natural history,” Trapp delineates a genre enabled to perform “Speculation” through its commitment to natural description: “We then see the strictest reasoning join’d to the politest expression. Poetry and Philosophy are happily united: The latter affords abundant Matter for Description; it opens a large field for fancy, and strikes out new ideas, which the other expresses with suitable dignity.”⁵⁹ Description, as a term, expands well beyond its limited significance in Addison, as Trapp uses it to denote an articulation of the state and composition of the universe itself, that is, the object of description shifts from practice to nature itself. But the characteristic quality of description is also the weakness of this brand of poetry; the genre can *only* manage to

⁵⁸ Ibid., 220.

⁵⁹ Joseph Trapp, “Of Didactic or Preceptive Poetry,” *Lectures on Poetry* (London: C. Hitch and C. Davis, 1742), 189.

instruct and encourage by way of description, which in Trapp is distinct from more pedantically instructive “precepts.” Georgic itself is confined to this other category of didactic verse, which Trapp defines as teaching the “Benefits or Pleasures of Life.”

And yet Trapp’s own description of this genre brands it as one that is continually running away from itself, as though it can’t help but yearn to become a descriptive “philosophical poem”:

[Virgil’s poems feature] the frequent Excursions into some more noble Subject, which seem’d naturally to arise out of that the Poet is treating of. Sometimes, for Instance, he runs back into History and Antiquity, or, perhaps, the very Origine of Things...At another Time he heightens his Subject with Astronomy, and Natural Philosophy; an Instance of which I have already cited, from the Georgics.⁶⁰

This generic muddling, which he locates in Virgil himself, functions to license the ways in which georgic and other forms of didactic verse, in Trapp’s own time, are becoming more and more inflected with natural science among other specialized branches of knowledge. It also finds a classical precedent for the increased prominence of descriptive practices that seek to paint a broader, more ambitious portrait of the natural world than narrowly conceived georgic was thought to permit. The destabilization of georgic that Trapp proposes suggests its contemporary tendency to be subsumed into a genre more commodious in its concerns,⁶¹ uniting speculation, description and precepts in regard to the natural philosophy it illustrates.⁶² As the scientific-didactic poem emerges out of its

⁶⁰ Ibid., 196-7.

⁶¹ In this formulation, I’m treating georgic, as does Anthony Low in *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) as “a mode more than a genre: a mode capable of invading, modifying, and even becoming central to a variety of distinct poetic genres”(117).

⁶² Kurt Heinzelman in his “Roman Georgic in the Georgian Age: A Theory of Romantic Genre,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 33 (1991) sees georgic’s disappearance as a result of the inherent problem of referentiality, a dependence on the currency of the scientific ideas it espouses. While I agree that this can certainly be a “literary liability”(192), I also see this same referentiality as catalyzing georgic’s transformation into a more capacious genre, the scientific-didactic poem, which by its very conceptual nature can more comfortably harness a multiplicity of disciplinary concerns

georgic origins, then, description has been established as playing, at the very least, a crucial supplementary role in instruction. But can it, without accompanying “precepts,” serve as a valid didactic or philosophical tool? Can it only function instructively in certain fields of knowledge? More specifically, what is the role of description in a poetry increasingly interested in natural history beyond practical agriculture and its labor practices?

The most vociferous answer to such questions comes in John Aikin’s 1777 “Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry,” which mounts a defense of natural history as an appropriate descriptive subject for poetry. Traditional georgic labor, intent on the transformation of the natural world, is recast by Aikin as the labor of naturalist description. Labor isn’t described, so much as description becomes a kind of labor in and of itself, one central to both naturalist and poetic practice. Again, this marks a shift in the term “description” itself, as Aikin inflects it with more straightforwardly empiricist practices of observation. Neither Addison’s depictions of labor practices nor Trapp’s broad speculative outlines, Aikin’s sense of description is rooted in the faithful rendering of nature as it is empirically apprehended. In part, Aikin’s turn to natural historical description is a purely aesthetic solution to an aesthetic problem: the want of variety and precision in contemporary poetic language. By turning to natural history as a source of poetic imagery, one can remedy poetry of its “sameness” and “too cursory and general survey of objects” by attending to “minuter distinctions and mutual relations...accurate and attentive observation.”⁶³ The turn away from neoclassical precedent towards more immediately referential, empirical modes of observation solves for Aikin a crisis of

⁶³ John Aikin, *An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry* (London: J. Johnson, 1777), 10.

poetic redundancy by revealing the multifariousness of nature, its very inexhaustibility in furnishing subjects for poetic description.

To ascribe Aikin's endorsement of descriptive verse to belletristic concerns, however, would be to disregard the similitude with which he regards the methods of the poet and naturalist. The poet's imperative is to draw his images from original observations – in the field, as it were – “conducted upon somewhat of a scientific plan.” The methods of the naturalist and poet, it would seem, can coincide with regard to techniques of representation and analysis; the poetry of Virgil himself, Aikin's consummate classical model, “almost answer[s] the purpose of the naturalist.”⁶⁴ But more recently, Aikin finds that only James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730) most reflects the sensibilities of the naturalist. Noting that at least one critic has rightfully labeled Thomson “*the Naturalist's poet*,” Aikin believes Thomson's poetry emerged from a practice of empirical naturalism, “*studying* in fields and woods.” While other poets have derived their natural images from an insular process of image-recycling, Thomson insists on personal observation as the genesis of his description. Thomson has, then, a special status in Aikin's literary history, the inheritor of a lapsed tradition beginning with Theocritus, proceeding to Virgil, but disappearing as poetic imagery became divorced from direct experience. While Thomson shares this aspect of his verse with his classical predecessors, Aikin takes care to emphasize his alleged newness. Thomson's achievement is precisely that his description is free of “narrative, didactic, or moral design.”⁶⁵ He is resistant to system, and delights in the description of an unruly nature that promises a seemingly endless opportunity for further description. This is not to say,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

of course, that Aikin necessarily sees informational or instructive value in descriptive verse in the same way that someone like Trapp does, but the precision and accuracy of each description is a necessary criterion for evaluating poetic success. When Pope, to borrow Aikin's example, accidentally pairs the rose with other flowers that don't bloom concurrently, this scientific blunder also registers as an aesthetic one.

As part of Aikin's commitment to accuracy, on one hand, and resistance to systemization on the other, he remarks that the designation "naturalist" is "not confined to the adept in systems and proficient in names; it is intended to comprise every one who surveys natural objects with a searching and distinguishing eye; whether he considers them singly, or as parts of a system, whether he call them by their trivial or learned appellations."⁶⁶ Aside from the imperative of faithful description that is the result of a dedicated empiricism, then, Aikin's naturalist would seem to be no methodological dogmatist, as any commitment to system or nomenclature is irrelevant to the central project of observation and description. And yet, description, as a naturalist representational practice, does indeed constitute its own method in the eighteenth century, one that is flowering just as Aikin is theorizing his poetry of natural historical description, and runs counter to the Linnaean tradition that privileges "learned appellations." This descriptive method, most famously explicated by the Comte de Buffon, is the scientific correlative of literary Aikinism, and would find expression in Darwin's own descriptive practice.

Three Methods: Buffon, Linnaeus, and the Vitalists

As Joanna Stalnaker has recently argued, the epistemological status of "description" was a critical term for weighing the relative merits of various

⁶⁶ Ibid., 48.

methodologies of natural history in the late eighteenth century. She characterizes the debate as one concerning the proper amount of description that ought to be afforded to representation of a particular species or specimen. While thorough naturalist description is necessary to preserve the integrity of the individual specimen, too much of it risks both obscuring its distinctiveness and obfuscating its connections to other living beings, whereas too little opens the door to overly-broad and abstract schema of organization and classification.⁶⁷ Stalnaker's scholarship on the practice and priorities of eighteenth-century natural history is largely aimed at upending the epistemic model identified by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1966). The classical episteme of the eighteenth century, argued Foucault, authorized a mechanistic manner of viewing all living things as through a "grid of knowledge" constituted by linguistic categories that preceded description.⁶⁸ Natural history, according to this model, strove to strip the specimen of any singularity or idiosyncrasies, which were to be suppressed in favor of larger classificatory goals. In other words, as Stalnaker has noted, it is as though Foucault took Linnaean method as synecdochal for an era in which the methodology of natural history was by no means consistent or reducible to a coherent episteme.⁶⁹ A recent renewed and sustained attention to the roles of description in the practice of natural history, however, has revealed alternate histories of the discipline.⁷⁰ My ultimate contention with regard to Darwin is that even as these alternate histories, specifically Buffonian description and radical vitalism, both "scientifically" contradict the Linnaean system, the complex form

⁶⁷ See Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment*.

⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1970), 128.

⁶⁹ Stalnaker, 8.

⁷⁰ Even the characterization of Linnaeus that comes to us through Foucault has come under question, recently. Richard A. Richards in *The Species Problem* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010) argues that the later Linnaeus was much more open to notions of the flexibility and alterability of species than he is often given credit for.

of *The Loves of the Plants* frees Darwin to *poetically* represent their coexistence and aggregate utility as modes of encountering and understanding the natural world.

But to begin with, what constitutes the Linnaean method, the very method Darwin claims to be elucidating in *The Loves of the Plants*? Darwin's professed poetic aims in the poem are an explicit recommendation of Linnaean method. The "Advertisement" to the poem expresses a desire to introduce readers to botany according to principles laid out in "the immortal works of the celebrated Swedish Naturalist, LINNAEUS."⁷¹ These principles, most simply, dictate that the vegetable world ought to be organized into a taxonomical system with the number and arrangement of a plant's sex organs (stamens and pistils) possessing preeminent classificatory power. Darwin's personified catalog of vegetation in the poem is designed to reflect this fundamental concept, and he accordingly provides in the "Preface" a convenient reader's guide, as it were, to ensure effective transmission of Linnaean botanical knowledge. The "Preface" consists largely of a list of the individual morphological requirements for each of Linnaeus's twenty-four vegetable classes. And so as to make certain the reader won't fail to recognize the correspondence between poetic figure and taxa, Darwin gives a kind of "key" to prevent hermeneutical confusion:

In the following POEM, the name or number of the Class, or Order of each plant is printed in italics; as "*Two* brother swains." "*One* House contains them." and the word "*Secret.*" expresses the Class of Clandestine Marriage.⁷²

⁷¹ Darwin, "Advertisement," *The Loves of the Plants* (New York: Woodstock Books, 1991). Darwin's goal of propagating Linnaean taxonomy was not limited to *The Loves of the Plants*. He helped found a Linnaean Society in Lichfield, and translated and published translations of Linnaeus's *A System of Vegetables* in 1785 and *The Families of Plants* in 1787, amounting to two thousand pages. See Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 11.

⁷² Darwin, 5.

In these different cases, the persons signal the number of male and female sex organs, the “house” that they occupy tells the reader they inhabit the same flower, and the key word “secret” directs them to the “Class of Clandestine Marriage.” By simply turning to the front of the poem, the reader can match the first of these to *Diandria*, the second to *Monoecia*, and the third to *Cryptogamia*. Such an interpretive legend reins in Darwin’s personifications, providing a simple reference guide so that a reader might readily differentiate between taxonomical classes within the poem’s verse.⁷³ When a particular botanical example is introduced in the poem, frequently one needs only to spot the italicized numbers and cross-reference with the Preface to identify its appropriate class, as in the case of *Genista*:

Sweet blooms GENISTA in the myrtle shade,
And *ten* fond brothers woo the haughty maid.
Two knights before thy fragrant altar bend,
Adored MELISSA! And *two* squires attend.⁷⁴

In the first four lines, and without any recourse to the prose notes, Darwin provides all the information a reader requires to identify the classes of both *Genista* and *Melissa* using the Preface’s chart. In the first instance, the only piece of relevant information is the “*ten* fond brothers,” which indicates *Decandria*, the only class including flowers with ten stamens. The italicization of the apposite data directs the reader around the rest of Darwin’s figure, enabling ease of identification. The second case, while more figuratively complex, is no less straightforward. *Melissa* is personified as a female doted on by a pair of knights, both of whom are accompanied by a squire. The reader can readily discern that the flower contains four stamens (all four of the figured males), but this still allows

⁷³ In addition to the textual descriptions, the “Preface” contains a chart with illustrations of the basic forms of the first thirteen classes enumerated.

⁷⁴ Darwin, I. 57-60.

for ambiguity; *Melissa* might be of the class *Tetrandia* or *Didynamia*, both of which consist of four-stamen flowers. But here is where the specifics of Darwin figure become taxonomically germane. As there are two knights, and two squires, Darwin implies a disparity of size between the two pairs of stamens, which alludes clearly to *Didynamia*, in which two of the stamens are positionally lower than the others. Such a heavily mediated reading experience, of course, along with the nature of the trope of personification, can largely account for the frequent charges of “artificiality” in Darwin’s verse.⁷⁵ But these critiques ignore a glaringly obvious aspect of the very Linnaean taxonomy Darwin was attempting to elucidate: its intentionally artificial nature.

Linnaeus’s ultimate goal, it should be noted, *was* a “natural system” of classification, though such a system could not be realized, he argued, until more raw botanical data was unearthed and cataloged. A firm believer in the *real* ontological existence of both species and genera, he nevertheless acknowledged the fundamental artificiality at the heart of his own rubric for determining higher-order classifications (classes, orders). Linnaeus’s method, in the case of plants, was to classify at the level of class and order by identifying the number and relative position of male and female sexual organs, a decision licensed by the fact that reproduction constitutes a plant’s “essence”:

These (stamens and pistils) were claiming attention by their function, since the whole generation of the plants depended on them alone; in these apparently insignificant...parts lay hidden the very essence of the flower, for the flower is nothing else but the generative act of plants.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ See, for instance, Lord Byron’s comments in “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,” *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2005). He describes Darwin’s “unmeaning rhyme” as “more adorn’d than clear,” and “tinsel” shining with a “false glare”(894-5, 901-2).

⁷⁶ Linnaeus, *Classes plantarum*, Qtd. in Frans A. Stafleu, *Linnaeus and the Linnaeans* (Utrecht: International Association for Plant Taxonomy, 1971), 120.

Despite Linnaeus's appeal to reproduction as the very "essence" of plant life, however, he openly admits the contrived nature of his taxonomy: "I would not call this method Natural, nor any other either."⁷⁷ Rather than attempt the construction of a system that represented the "natural" relations between species, Linnaeus opted for convenience, limiting the number of variables to be considered for identification.⁷⁸ It's a calculative, subtractive method of classification that readily sacrifices the particularity of difference for the sake of methodological ease and accessibility. Linnaean taxonomy, as theorized in the *Systema Naturae* (1735), *Classes Plantarum* (1737), and *Philosophia Botanica* (1751), thus requires a blinkered view on the part of the natural historian, a willingness to disregard certain affinities and privilege others that happen to possess determinative, classificatory power. This methodological imperative, then, seems at odds with the descriptive, georgic mode inherited by Darwin. Indeed, as Lorraine Daston argues, Linnaeus "elevate[s] parsimony to a principle of ontological perfection." Situating his methods against those of the "Parisian botanists" (i.e. Buffon), Daston notes a principle of simplicity and verbal stinginess at the heart of the Linnaean project that she calls "description by omission."⁷⁹ Extensive description, contrastively, by introducing particularity, exception, and contingency, is precisely that which is capable of destabilizing Linnaean systematics.⁸⁰ Linnaean botany is quantitative rather than descriptive.

⁷⁷ Linnaeus, 120.

⁷⁸ As Frans Stafleu argues in *Linnaeus and the Linnaeans*, the main conflict between the descriptive botanists who sought a "natural system" and Linnaeus was between "diagnosis and description; it is the analysis along apriori established lines of thought as against biological research along more inductive lines" (126).

⁷⁹ Lorraine Daston, "Description by Omission" in *Regimes of Description: In the Archive of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John Bender and Michael Merrinan (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 12.

⁸⁰ Theresa Kelley, in her essay "Romantic Nature Bites Back" *European Romantic Review* 15:2 June 2004, 547-565 argues that Darwin's personifications themselves push back against Linnaean systematics. In her

Unsurprisingly, Linnaean taxonomy, like Darwin's verses, was frequently criticized for its baldly artificial status, as well as its corresponding descriptive excisions. The key figure for understanding the way in which description was often conceived as a counterpoint to Linnaean systematics, then, is the Comte de Buffon, whose "Premier Discours" to the *Histoire naturelle* (1749) explicitly criticizes Linnaeus for the blatant fictiveness of the sexual system of plant taxonomy.⁸¹ Forcing this scheme onto the natural world, Buffon argues, obscures "real" similarities and differences between organisms, as Linnaeus "choos[es] arbitrarily a single feature of plants as a distinguishing characteristic."⁸² Moreover, the Linnaean fixation with naming itself as a practice produces inadequate definitions: "a definition such as we can construct verbally is still no more than a very imperfect representation of the thing, and we are never able adequately to define a thing without describing it exactly."⁸³ In other words, according to Buffon, Linnaean classification reduces nature to a system of nomenclature; "definition" requires description.

While Buffon constructed his own system, and had no intention of imagining or producing a representation of nature as wholly chaotic and arbitrary, he held that description must precede simpler modes of classification that amount to misleading shortcuts. While Linnaeus justified his sexual system with an appeal to reproduction as

reading, Darwin "engenders figurative mayhem by arguing that figures, even personifications, are alive with a wayward because tropological particularity. So understood, these figures let loose the possibility of spontaneous and contingent eruptions at odds with systems and their comptrollers." Whatever the destabilizing potential of personification, however, it also allows Darwin a method of poetic representation that largely circumvents naturalist description.

⁸¹ Darwin himself was an undoubted admirer of the *Histoire*, responding directly to Buffon's ideas concerning generation in the *Zoonomia* and explicitly requesting more volumes of the *Histoire* as they were published in a 1775 letter to James Watt. In the very same letter, he requests the remainder of "Linnaei Systema Naturae." See *The Collected Letters of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. Desmond King-Hele (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 134.

⁸² Comte de Buffon, "Premier Discours," *From Natural History to the History of Nature*, ed. and trans. John Lyon and Phillip R. Sloan (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981), 103.

⁸³ Buffon, 108.

“the very essence of a flower,” Buffon operates from a position of epistemological modesty regarding the metaphysical essence of natural things:

The first causes of things will remain ever hidden from us...All that is given to us is to perceive certain particular effects, to compare these with each other, to combine them, and finally, to recognize therein more of an order appropriate to our own nature than one pertaining to the existence of the things which we are considering.⁸⁴

Buffon recognizes the anthropocentric position of any naturalist, which precludes the apprehension of nature’s “essence.” Hence, if the external attributes of natural specimens are all that can be known, rich description is the ideal vehicle for demarcating their distinguishing features.

Licensed by georgic theorists as an important component of poetic didactic practice, *and* a crucial methodological tool for Buffonian naturalists, description is addressed head-on by Darwin in the first of the three “Interludes” of *The Loves of the Plants*. These “Interludes” are prose dialogues between a Darwin surrogate called “the Poet,” and a “Bookseller” to whom Darwin attempts to justify his visual poetics. The first of these Interludes opens with the Bookseller’s charge of literary Aikinism, that “Your verses, Mr. Botanist, consist of pure description. I hope there is sense in the notes.”⁸⁵ To a certain extent the Bookseller’s use of “description” is misleading, as the Poet takes him to mean “images,” for which he mounts a vigorous defense, claiming that poetry “admits of very few words expressive of perfectly abstracted ideas,”⁸⁶ and his concrete imagery is thus simply playing to the strengths of verse itself. Moreover, as I will later argue, the notes are *precisely* the places where a Buffonian descriptive practice can be located. But what’s more broadly at stake here is the notion that description *alone*, however misplaced

⁸⁴ Ibid., 101-2.

⁸⁵ Darwin, 40.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 41.

it might be in the Bookseller's formulation, is always lacking. He hopes the notes contain "sense" because mere description isn't poetically adequate on its own. Equally importantly, neither is a botany of description entirely sufficient, as the Bookseller suggests through his use of the dismissive epithet "Mr. Botanist."

While description, as Darwin's Bookseller suggests, was at the crux of the Buffon-Linnaeus dispute, the two naturalists shared a necessary commitment to comparative modes of naturalism, if they differed greatly in the extent to which they were willing to trace particular correspondences or affinities between organisms. Linnaeus' methodology, obviously, relies on an extremely limited form of comparativism that discerns similarity and difference, as well as the relevant taxonomical designation, in the number and position of stamens and pistils, along with other specific criteria for determining genera and species. Buffon, on the other hand, argues on behalf of a more robust, inclusive comparative approach, taking into account a broader spectrum of morphological attributes. He takes a shot at Linnaeus and the myopic "nomenclaturists" in the process:

Almost all who have systematically named things have employed only a single feature, such as...the leaves or the flowers in classifying plants, rather than making use of all parts of the organism, and searching out the differences and similarities of complete individual specimens.⁸⁷

Such deliberate blindness for Buffon leads to "defective systems...founded on arbitrary principles," a barrier to achieving a wholly natural system of classification rooted in a more capacious mode of comparative reasoning. There is a limit to such reasoning, though; its abuse can lead to sloppy naturalist practice, and the forging of mistakenly

⁸⁷ Buffon, 106.

fanciful and absurd connections, namely those between plants and animals that comprise the central poetic conceit of *The Loves of the Plants*:

We persuade ourselves that nature creates and carries out everything by the same means and by similar operations. This manner of thinking causes us to invent an infinity of false connections between the things nature produces. Plants have been compared with animals, and minerals have been supposedly observed to vegetate.⁸⁸

Buffon's critique of promiscuous correspondence-making most clearly implicates not Linnaeus, but rather the habits of eighteenth-century vitalists, which Buffon characterizes as an irresponsible, almost whimsical version of his own comparative practices.

The eighteenth-century vitalists were a diverse group of thinkers united in the belief that a single vital substance is responsible for animation in nature. The political stakes of such a position were high: if life shares a single substance, that would destabilize not only natural hierarchies, but potentially social ones. And with regard to natural history, it suggests a commonality across species and individual organisms that implies a fluidity to the natural order, a fluidity that might find expression, as it did in Darwin's thinking, in a model of evolutionary history.

While the nature of this vital substance (or ether, or spirit) varies widely, as an ontological principle it authorizes a search for what the vitalists called "analogies": radical correspondences between types of organisms that would be dismissed in the more qualified comparativism of Linnaeus or Buffon and were, unlike the term in its literary sense, were meant to be genuinely, ontologically real relations.⁸⁹ Rather than confining

⁸⁸ Ibid., 101.

⁸⁹ Peter Hans Reill in *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2005) identifies the appeal of analogy to Buffon as a way to navigate between the particular and the general, as well as the empirical and imaginative (55). For more on vitalist "analogy" see Brian Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2006) and Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment*.

“analogical” strategies to particular collections of plants, animals (including humans), or minerals, vitalism strives to forge connections across these categories, a move sanctioned by the firm belief in a shared vital force. According to Peter Hans Reill, the “centrality of analogical reasoning” is one of the most commonly shared characteristics of vitalist thought, but this method can lead frequently to extreme, seemingly dubious conclusions, as in Darwin’s poem, involving the endless elision of differences between plant and animal (and, potentially, humanity).⁹⁰ As Philip Ritterbush argues, “Many eighteenth-century writers chose to dwell upon the similarities between plants and animals until the recital of analogies became an end in itself.”⁹¹

For Darwin, however, these proliferating morphological correspondences are grounded in his own scientific speculations, and are precisely what he asks his readers to take seriously in *The Loves of the Plants*, even as he draws a clear line between the “looser analogies” of poetry and the “stricter ones” of philosophy in the “Advertisement.”⁹² As Catherine Packham has suggested, the affinities between plant and animal that Darwin provocatively suggests through his personifications are precisely those that he endorses in his vitalist “philosophical” work, most notably his treatise on medicine, *Zoonomia* (1794), and his agricultural text *Phytologia* (1800).⁹³ In the former’s chapter entitled “Of Vegetable Animation” Darwin makes the scientific case for the correspondences between plants and animals that are implied by his personifications. He

⁹⁰ Reill, 195.

⁹¹ Philip Ritterbush, *Overtures to Biology: The Speculations of Eighteenth-Century Naturalists* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964), 57.

⁹² Darwin, “Advertisement.”

⁹³ Packham’s *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) argues that “Darwin’s purpose, announced as ‘restor[ing] plants to their original animality,’ can thus be seen to fulfill a scientific as much as a poetic agenda: to use poetry as a means of enabling a vitalist nature to be brought to imaginative life in a way not allowed within the stricter confines of scientific method”(156). While I think Darwin’s use of analogy and personification is not limited to vitalist methods, I am greatly indebted throughout this chapter to her work.

argues that plants are not merely motivated by “irritation,” but possess sensory faculties and even the “sensation of love,” a conclusion, of course, “supported by strongest analogy.”⁹⁴ The “stricter” analogies of philosophy one finds Darwin appealing to in *Zoonomia* make much the same case as the “looser” analogies of his verse.⁹⁵ The later *Phytologia* expands upon these ideas; Darwin claims that not only is reproduction governed by the same principle of “love” in humans and plants, but flora actually possess complete nervous systems analogous to those of humankind. As Peter Ayres describes it,

...while accepting that vegetables differ from animals in that they do not have muscles of locomotion or digestion, [Darwin] believed vegetables contain longitudinal muscles to turn their leaves to the light and to expand or close their petals or sepals. They also possess, he thought, vascular muscles to perform the absorption and circulation of their fluids, with the attendant nerves, and a brain, or a common sensorium, belonging to each seed or bud.⁹⁶

To dismiss Darwin’s personifications as mere fancy, then, is to ignore the vitalist connections that bind humanity and the animal to its vegetable counterpart. If plants are indeed “inferior forms of animal,” personification is a way to figure this vital link formally.⁹⁷

Taken together, the claims Darwin makes for the methods and aspirations of his verse within the text of *The Loves of the Plants* run the gamut of eighteenth-century natural history. He mounts a defense of “pure description,” yet wants to effectively inform his readers about and stimulate interest in Linnaean taxonomy. And the

⁹⁴ Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia* (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 106. Darwin also makes appeals to analogical reasoning in the same terms in his personal correspondence. For instance, he boosts claims concerning human physiology in a 1796 letter to Thomas Wedgwood through analogy: “Hence the existence of these circumstances is not totally gratuitous, as it is at least supported by strictest analogy” (*Letters*, 491).

⁹⁵ It’s worth noting that the *Zoonomia* makes use of *The Botanic Garden* as source material in its own footnotes, lending credence to readings of *The Loves of the Plants* that take its scientific speculations seriously.

⁹⁶ Ayres, 36.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

comparative reasoning that is common to both these methods is taken in such an extreme direction – through personification and figuration – as to indulge in the most radical vitalist speculations. Importantly, these varying methodologies, which imply such different, ostensibly irreconcilable approaches to natural history, all find formal expression in *The Loves of the Plants*. In the following section I will offer an account of the readerly experience of the poem intended to demonstrate the way in which each methodology is a component of the reader's formal navigation.

Darwin's Big Tent: Towards a Pluralistic Natural History

The Loves of the Plants, for all its claims to deliver a Linnaean education, belies its own ambitions by a constant appeal to description and analogy in the notes, which correlate to Buffonian and vitalist conceptions of the ordering and structure of the natural world. His literary practice asks his readers to partake in several conflicting natural historical discourses at once by asking the reader to navigate between these different modes. While the specific figures and personifications in the poem allude uncomplicatedly to the Linnaean taxonomical system, his extensive footnotes favor a Buffonian approach rooted in deep, dilated description. Whereas critics like Dahlia Porter and Jerome McGann both read the notes as largely extricable from the verse insofar as it exerts a “grounding” function (upon Darwin's proliferation of analogies for Porter, and poetry's “flight towards Ideal Presence” for McGann), I want to see both the notes *and* poetry working in tandem towards a pluralistic vision of natural historical method.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ See Dahlia Porter, “Scientific Analogy and Literary Taxonomy in Darwin's *Loves of the Plants*,” *European Romantic Review* 18:2 April 2007, 213-221 and Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).

Moreover, as I will argue, it is only when the verse and notes are read as mutually dependent that the third method, Darwin's vitalism, comes fully to our attention.

To illustrate the way in which all these contending modes of representation and knowing are formally integrated in Darwin's poem, I will turn to several instances of botanical reference in *The Loves of the Plants*, beginning with the genus *cupressus*.

Darwin's poetic treatment of *cupressus* (cypress) is given but a single couplet:

"Cupressus dark disdains his dusky bride, / *One* dome contains them, but *two* beds divide."⁹⁹ With Linnaean concision, Darwin pares down his personification to the point that it refuses to offer any information other than that which is relevant for one's ability to locate *cupressus* in a particular class (pistils and stamens separate, but on the same plant; *monoecia*) and the personification, as general as it is, is applicable to any number of plants within that class. These context-less quarrelling lovers provide the bare minimum of information to determine class within a single couplet. Slotted away in its appropriate taxa, and given a handy if vague image to associate with *cupressus*, the reader must proceed to the notes for anything resembling description, *or* any analogical correspondences across Linnaean categories, other than those one can imply from its class designation alone.

The notes offer a surfeit of information that individuates *cupressus* by focusing on its unique, exemplary attributes as a genus, rather than those of the class to which it belongs:

Cypress. One house. The males live in separate flowers, but on the same plants. The males of some of these plants, which are in separate flowers from the females, have an elastic membrane; which disperses their dust to a considerable distance, when the anthers bust open. This dust, on a fine day, may often be seen like a cloud hanging round the common nettle. The males and females of all the

⁹⁹ Darwin, I. 73-4.

cone bearing plants are in separate flowers, either on the same or on different plants.¹⁰⁰

Darwin first reproduces the information conveyed in his personification in translated literal terms (the dome is a single plant, the beds are specific flowers, etc.), and then provides a more detailed descriptive account of *cupressus*'s attributes that begin to reach out beyond the limits of Linnaean categorization. The information concerning the cloudy spores serves no particular classificatory purpose, but heightens the sense of unique distinctiveness that Buffonian description seeks to provide. The reader's experience to this point can be described thusly: an encounter with a personification that forces him or her into a vitalist analogical association between human relations and those of a plant, followed by a consultation with the notes that give a literal statement cataloguing the plant as a class, then a description of the genus in question that reaches beyond the scope of Linnaean identification. This description, thereupon, departs from the visual as it itemizes practical uses of the class:

...they produce resins, and many of them are supposed to supply the most durable timber, what is called Venice-turpentine is obtained from the larch by wounding the bark about two feet from the ground, and catching it as it exudes; Sandarach is procured from common juniper; and incense from a juniper with yellow fruit. The unperishable chests, which contain the Egyptian mummies, were of cypress; and the cedar, with which black-lead pencils are covered, is not liable to be eaten by worms. See Miln's Bot. Dict. art. Coniferae.¹⁰¹

Darwin's list of the human uses to which *cupressus* has historically been put initially seems beside the point, and outside the realm of Buffonian description, but Buffon regarded both "description" and "history" as essential components of natural history, the latter designating the chronicling of a number of attributes other than physical description: generation and growth, the relations between different species, the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 8-9.

“differences among animals in their style of life, their actions and their habits, their places of habitation,” as well as the practical uses of both plants and animals.¹⁰² Buffon makes Aristotle and Pliny his model natural *historians* in this respect, though they “appear to have consciously neglected the description of each thing.”¹⁰³

“History” and “description” are both necessary components of thorough natural history, a directive Darwin’s notes take to heart, as while the information conveyed is various and wide-ranging, it nevertheless largely adheres to this Buffonian model. While each note begins with the Linnaean taxa to which the specimen is consigned, each proceeds to an account of the plant that quickly exfoliates into descriptive details of color, structure, medicinal properties, environment, and peculiar habits. The richness of descriptive language in the notes takes clear precedence over the classificatory imperative of Linnaean systematics. Often the visual description of the notes offers a set of images that compete with the highly visual, if highly imprecise images of the verse. Thus,

Carlina’s seeds

have much the appearance of a Shuttlecock, as they fly. The wings are of different construction, some being like a divergent tuft of hairs, others are branched like feathers, some are elevated from the crown of the seed by a slender-soot-stalk, which gives them a very elegant appearance, others sit immediately on the crown of the feed.¹⁰⁴

While the notes are not divested of figuration, they don’t animate the represented specimens through personification, but metaphorically describe by means of familiar non-human structures (the shuttlecock, feathers) that possess greater descriptive precision by actually giving the reader a vivid conception of what the species of the genus under consideration “look like.” Moreover, the notes pay ample attention to the variation

¹⁰² Buffon, 119-20.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 120.

¹⁰⁴ Darwin, 52.

amongst species that is elided or lost in the larger categories of Linnaean taxonomy.

Given the freedom to describe, Darwin can discriminate between varieties of *Carlina* through their different seed wing formations.

But Buffonian natural history, as I've noted, is as committed to "history" as it is to description. So often Darwin also provides accounts of vegetable growth, maturation and reproduction. His note for *Helleborus*, for instance, describes the "curious metamorphose of the corol," in which "the nectaries drop off, but the white corol remains and gradually becomes quite green."¹⁰⁵ The static conception of the specimen one gets from Linnaeus, or even a *purely* descriptive natural history, is transformed into a narrative of organic growth. Other notes make proto-ecological gestures towards the wider environment in which the plant is naturally found, the aspect of natural history for which Buffon most readily praised Aristotle and Pliny. The note on *Viscum*, for instance, narrates the way in which its berries tend to take up root in the tree in which *Viscum* grows, or are transported to other trees by birds.¹⁰⁶ Darwin's discussion of *Lonicera* considers the "perfectly contrived" way in which the proboscis of the unicorn moth is able to navigate the plant's narrow anther.¹⁰⁷

To ignore the Buffonian thrust of the meticulously composed notes is to engage in a vastly different, and far more Linnaean, reading experience of the poem as an almost clinical inventory of images. This is the experience Darwin seems to gesture at in his "Proem" when he describes his poem as "diverse little pictures suspended over the chimney of a Lady's dressing-room, *connected only by a slight festoon of ribbons.*"¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 22-3.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., vi.

Often separated by stanza breaks, the images frequently bear little relation to their adjacent floral “pictures.”¹⁰⁹ The “slight festoon of ribbons” linking them is nothing other than the poet’s commitment to logging their Linnaean sorting information by attending to the italicized numbers of stamens and pistils. What binds his images together, in other words, is mostly the ease with which they might be named and classified according to the Linnaean scheme.

The common denominator of Darwin’s images is sexual relationships, as his erotic evocation of a “Lady’s dressing-room” provocatively suggests; his poetic universe is governed by a permeating, Lucretian “love.”¹¹⁰ This governing principle for Darwin’s images is thus the same one that structures Linnaean classification, in that modes and structures of sexual reproduction are precisely what slots a specimen in a particular taxa. Even the highly artificial nature of the trope of personification itself is profoundly Linnaean: it foregrounds the sense in which these distinctions are in no way intended to represent the “natural” order of things, but are a deliberate and useful construct.

Of course, to read in *either* of these ways by heeding exclusively the verse or the notes – or reading like a Linnaean or Buffonian – is to neglect the radical vitalist correspondences at the heart of the poem’s formal structure. While Darwin traces certain morphological likenesses across taxa in the notes, he initially seems to stop short of directly articulating the vitalist conjectures he would express in *Zoonomia* – indeed there’s a voiced commitment to the rigidity of Linnaean taxonomy. Catherine Packham

¹⁰⁹ In the later books of the poem, Darwin sometimes groups plants according to a non-taxonomical principle, like poisonous flora. These associations, where they are made, don’t attempt to trace any specific scientific principle of categorizations.

¹¹⁰ Though the centrality of sexual relationships and the erotic nature of his personifications were a major point of outrage among Darwin’s conservative critics, more recent work suggests that by locating the source of both plant and human love in physiology, and ridding his images of jealousy, marital discord, and violence, he endorses an idealized conservative notion of “companionate marriage.” See Janet Browne’s “Botany for Gentlemen: Erasmus Darwin and the *Loves of the Plants*.” *Isis* 80:4 (1989): 593-621.

has claimed that Darwin's personifications figuratively yoke humanity to the vegetable world in a way that mirrors Darwin's later, more literal speculations regarding the affinities between the two. And yet, to attend to Darwin's personifications alone is, as I've argued, to privilege Linnaean taxonomy in a way that the accompanying notes resist.¹¹¹ Moreover, Darwin himself cautions against any reading of his personifications that see them as anything other than inert, "diverse little pictures." Ever conscious of the radical, and potentially heretical, implications of vitalism, namely the eradication of long-standing "natural" hierarchies, Darwin insists throughout *The Loves of the Plants* that his personifications or "images" are to be taken as pleasant ornament. He situates his own project as a response to Ovidian metamorphosis, as he has "undertaken by similar art to restore some of [the trees and flowers] to their original animality, after having remained prisoners so long in their respective vegetable mansions."¹¹² Personification, it seems, is all about self-conscious artifice, a playful reimagining of a classical precedent. He then goes out of his way in the second *Interlude* to deny any scientific content to his personifications at all. Indeed, the very essence of pleasurable and proper poetic figuration depends on its components avoiding too precise of a resemblance. Else, Darwin argues, "it would then become a philosophical analogy, it would be ratiocination instead of poetry."¹¹³ Despite the way in which they serve as Linnaean shorthand, it's hard to see Darwin's personifications alone as much more than the pictures in the dressing room he claims them to be. Certainly, if we take him at his word, they fall short of treating vitalist correspondences across the human and vegetable worlds as

¹¹¹ See Packham's *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism*.

¹¹² Darwin, vi.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 84.

scientifically rigorous, or anything less than the sportive fancies of the poetic imagination.

Yet when the personifications are taken into account in conjunction with the notes, it becomes much more difficult to distinguish between what Darwin calls the “loose analogies” of poetry and the “strict analogies” of philosophy. What the notes provide, and the verse cannot, is a “philosophical” account of plant behavior that strongly hints at notions of plant agency, variations of the speculations of the *Zoonomia*. The notes, in other words, ask the reader not to *imagine* plants as human, but posit that they very well might be *like* humans in the sense of actual shared vital energy rather than a relation of simile or literary comparison. A note on *Hibiscus trionum*, for instance, describes the sexual behavior of its flowers, which only bloom for an hour: “The courtship between the males and females [sic] in these flowers might be easily watched; the males are said to approach and recede from the females alternately.” What’s remarkable about this passage is that it refuses the elaborate, personified language of the verse even as it asserts the empirical veracity of the flowers’ “courtship,” the same terms in which Darwin poetically describes so many of the flora cataloged in the poem. Finding this formulation in the notes, gives credence to the notion of plant intentionality that is absent in the verse. Only when we establish that plants behave in the same manner as humans, however, do the personifications of the verse take on a different aspect; having humans enact the behavior of plants no longer seems like a purely ornamental decision. Specifically, the personification becomes also its inverse; it’s not just that plants are imagined fancifully as humans, but we are asked to regard the human or mythological figures in the poem as plant-like, co-participants in the vitalist ritual of “courtship.” This

two-way correspondence refuses to remain confined to the aesthetic, as well – it is the “scientific” content of the notes from which the intentionality of plants emerges, in however subtle terms. We have, then, in the notes, a reason to take the personifications of the verse quite seriously. But as I will argue in the following section, the dynamic nature of Darwin’s form was often lost on his early readers, who insisted on maintaining a clear distinction between the work of “poetry” and “philosophy” in his work. It is this initial mistake of reading that precipitates his ultimate critical downfall.

Darwin’s Two Readers

Darwin, I’ve argued, erects a formal aesthetic in *The Loves of the Plants* that mirrors the methods underlying several conflicting models of natural history, and by so doing, fosters a pluralistic attitude towards those competing models. His sympathies for Linnaean classification, vitalist analogy, and Buffonian description are formally represented through the complex negotiations the reader must make between notes, poem, and other paratext. Beyond providing a more comprehensive sense of his thinking with regard to the ordering of nature, however, heeding the nuances of Darwin’s form can provide explanation for the critical backlash he experienced at the turn of the century. Specifically, it is the failure of critics to attend to the interplay of verse and notes that lead them to posit two readers whose identities replicate the critical binary of georgic criticism: the fanciful, pleasurable poet of the verse, and the instructive, natural philosopher of the notes. The isolation of the role of the natural philosopher, moreover, opened Darwin up to charges of “systemization” by the time *The Temple of Nature* was published in 1803, an accusation that was then backread into his earlier career, blinding readers to the rich instability at the core of something like *The Loves of the Plants*.

The nineteenth-century afterlife of *The Botanic Garden*, as I've argued, has obscured the approbation that largely characterized the poem's initial reception. Indeed, the *Critical Review* was perfectly content to reword one of Darwin's own programmatic statements in its celebration of the poem. Whereas one of the claims of the "Advertisement" is that "[the pages'] particular design is to induce the ingenious to cultivate the knowledge of BOTANY; by introducing them to the vestibule of that delightful science," the *Critical Review* echoingly affirms that "What first began in amusement, may terminate in scientific acquisition."¹¹⁴ But in addition to its success as an impetus to further botanical research, the poem was hailed as a triumphant georgic synthesis of instructive and aesthetic aims, a product of an individual whose poetic instincts do not compromise his scientific rigor. These favorable reviewers, however, took care to distinguish between Darwin's two alleged roles, failing to appreciate the way in which Darwin's formal practice renders the two inseparable; his two authorly capacities exist, if comfortably, in separate roles. The *Monthly Review*, for instance, praises Darwin's commitment to both the "Muses" and "Minerva," the "science" of the "philosopher" and the "classic taste" of the "poet."¹¹⁵ Importantly, these two selves have direct formal corollaries; assessments more often that not relied on the relegation of "philosophy" to the paratextual apparatus of the poem and "poetry" to the verse. Thus, the *Analytical Review* effectively postulates two distinct readers: "all who delight in verse" and "all philosophical inquirers."¹¹⁶ And the *English Review*, as if relieved, encouragingly assures its readers that "there is poetry enough left unmixed with

¹¹⁴ Darwin, "Advertisement"; Anon., "[Review of] *The Botanic Garden*," *The Critical Review* LXVIII (1789), 376.

¹¹⁵ Anon., "[Review of] *The Botanic Garden*," *The Monthly Review* (April 1789), 338, 343.

¹¹⁶ Anon., "[Review of] *The Botanic Garden*," *The Analytical Review* XV (March 1793), 287.

philosophy for the most indolent temper, or the most positive fancy.”¹¹⁷ The impulse to draw distinctions between the “scientific” and “poetic” aspects of the poem are, of course, a holdover from the georgic tradition in which didacticism and poetic pleasure could be aesthetically united. This very tradition is, in a sense, precisely what makes Darwin so difficult to read, as he *seems* to portion out georgic’s constituent elements formally: the notes are where we can find hard “science,” and the verse is where we look for “poetry.” Darwin’s poem doesn’t look like an “Almanack in verse” so much as an almanack *and* verse.

As if a corrective to the early response to *The Loves of the Plants* that insisted on his dual roles, Darwin appended a series of introductory poems by contemporary poets to the first complete edition of the *Botanic Garden*. The poems constitute a preemptive defense against readings that assume two distinct authorial roles by offering a guide to approaching Darwin’s work that is at variance with the frivolous décor he adopts as his metaphor in the proem. Rather, the poems seem to operate under the notion that Darwin’s work is a work of total unity; the poems don’t thematize a distinction between verse and notes or their correlative authorial identities. The vocabulary of natural philosophy permeates these poems; they constitute, as it were, an ideal of aesthetic unity between the bifurcated selves the critics so often insist on. Thus, W.B. Stephens’ contribution collapses the two by representing poetic flight as taking place upon “metaphysic wings” as Darwin the philosopher “scan[s] the approachless Cause of Good / And weigh[s] with steadfast hand the sum of things.”¹¹⁸ Darwin appears at such moments, not as the feminized hanger of “diverse little pictures,” but as a true man of science, whose

¹¹⁷ Anon., “[Review of] *The Botanic Garden*,” *The English Review* XX (September 1792).

¹¹⁸ W.B. Stephens, “To the Author of the *Loves of the Plants*,” in Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden* (London: Jones & Company, 1824), 10-12.

philosophical prowess emerges as an actual merit of his verse. Even a personified Science herself is astonished by her own revealed beauty upon encountering Darwin's "radiant lays" in W. Hayley's short lyric.¹¹⁹ Not only do these poems refuse to pay homage to the playful frivolity with which Darwin occasionally treats his own work, they insist on science's intimate relation to the verse, which comprises his chief virtue as a *poet*. "Trust it, dear Darwin," writes Hayley, "on the word / Of Cowper and of Hayley!"¹²⁰

Importantly, these entreaties come from poets, rather than scientists, as what Darwin must avoid is the further characterization of his verse as lacking scientific seriousness, the assumption that his "décor" is devoid of substance, which in turn enables distinct readings of his poems.

What's apparent, however, is that most reviewers did *not* trust Cowper and Hayley when it came to the interdependent parts of Darwin's project, failing to address the poem as a work in which the scientific and philosophical material is inseparable from its form. But ironically, it is the critics' refusal to address the poem in this manner that leads to its initial appreciation: it has something for every reader, amateur or expert, woman or man, scientist or aesthete. It also manages, conveniently, to avoid the thorny questions that Darwin asks about the nature of classification and vital connections. The poetry can be considered as "fancy," while the science and description can be considered apart (if we want to consider it at all) from the troublesome personifications, and their corresponding relationships to classificatory systems, that emerge from a dynamic reading practice.

¹¹⁹ W. Hayley, "To Dr. Darwin," in *The Botanic Garden*, 4.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

Even if the critical response to *The Botanic Garden* insists on defining Darwin's project as a two-headed one, it nevertheless celebrates the poem's natural philosophical breadth and ambition, as well as the contemporaneousness of its scientific observations, as if it were the newest textbook. The *Critical Review* declares that "The philosophical student will not only learn the state of science on each of these subjects, but will meet with hints and facts, which he will in vain look for in other works."¹²¹ But praise of the scientific content, of course, relies on the same fundamentally ersatz binary; what the *Monthly Review* called the "whole system of the universe" cannot and should not be considered outside the "whole system" of the poem, notes, verse and all.¹²² Darwin's poetic system, moreover, is one interested in accommodating methods rather than cataloguing information (though of course, that is its own methodology). *The Loves of the Plants*, I mean to say, is a poem that is less about the facts of nature, and more about ways of seeing and representing it. This sense of a methodological pluralism is precisely what is lost when one insists on distinct readerships interested exclusively in verse or note.

Further troubling a comprehensive model of Darwinian reading is the fact that his posthumous poem *The Temple of Nature* (also replete with notes) contains a full-throated endorsement of a materialistic model of biological and moral development that was, undeniably, a certain kind of totalizing "system" of the sort one doesn't find in *The Botanic Garden*, and certainly not *The Loves of the Plants* in particular. The poem explains the origin of species diversity, sexual reproduction, and the complexity of the human mind and human experience by virtue of his particular version of development,

¹²¹ Anon., "[Review of] *The Botanic Garden*," *The Critical Review* VI (1792), 162.

¹²² Anon., "[Review of] *The Botanic Garden*," *The Monthly Review* XI (1793), 186.

which often seems dangerously absent of a divine hand. Given that his references to a creator in the poem are seemingly perfunctory, and often take a backseat to Darwin's aforementioned vitalism, "System" becomes a kind of dirty word in critiques of *The Temple of Nature*, euphemistically standing in for "materialism" or "atheism." The *Anti-Jacobin*'s claims that Darwin has become a "fanciful system-monger" who has "deviated from common sense and philosophy" are a fairly transparent attack on the consequences of his ambiguously materialist ideas concerning the transmutation of species and the moral development of mankind, given the reactionary ideological commitments of the journal.¹²³

But the politically and religiously motivated critical attacks on this particular "system" are, interestingly, read *back* into Darwin's earlier poetic career, i.e. *The Botanic Garden*, so that it's assumed to be exemplary of the very kind of systemization it formally resists. Darwin becomes, retroactively, a kind of self-plagiarizer, repeatedly committing to verse the radical agenda he formulates in his final poem. The *Monthly Review* in 1804 announces that "his peculiar system was applied by him to all subjects, with such industry, that his later works seem in many places to be repetitions of the earlier."¹²⁴ The universality of his developmental system, which Darwin so readily extends beyond biology to human consciousness and historical progress in *The Temple of Nature* is, following his death in 1802, backread into *The Botanic Garden*. The *Critical Review*'s 1803 review makes a similar assessment, claiming that "[Darwin's] system...and hence all his publications possess such an extraordinary monotony and

¹²³ Anon., "[Review of] *The Temple of Nature*," *The Anti-Jacobin* XVI (1804), 171.

¹²⁴ Anon., "[Review of] *The Temple of Nature*," *The Monthly Review* XLIII (1804), 127.

sameness, that he who read the one reads the whole.”¹²⁵ While Darwin was no stranger to the accusations of stylistic “monotony and sameness” when it came to *The Botanic Garden*, it is now his “system” that seems repetitive. *The Loves of the Plants*, it is suggested, is nothing more than another manifestation of Darwin’s evolutionary radicalism. Moreover, this entire claim can take hold precisely because Darwin the systematizing “philosopher” has already been distinguished from the “poet.”

The way in which Darwin’s form appears on the page, alongside his later work’s commitment to “system” and his reputation as an evolutionary precursor to his grandson, have exerted considerable force over the history of Darwin’s reception. What critics have been unable to see is the rich plurality at the heart of Darwinian natural history, only available when one takes seriously the epistemological claims of both the verse and the notes, as well as the dynamism that bonds them inextricably together. Darwin, the supposed purveyor of systems, offers simultaneously through form several naturalist methods that are customarily thought of as antagonistic. While the nascent scientific community and their increasing demands for consistent method might necessarily lead one down the road to a systemization that implies exclusion, Darwin finds a way to express in his poetic form what would be methodologically incoherent in science. At the same time, it was the practical exercise of all three of these methodologies that led Darwin to evolution: the classificatory impulse of Linnaeus allied to the descriptive thoroughness of Buffon and the analogic reasoning of vitalism. In the form of *The Loves of the Plants*, we can glimpse the origins of early evolutionary thought.

Buffon’s wariness of system, as my epigraph suggests, extended in two directions. On the one hand, he feared the over-systemization he saw in Linnaeus, the submission of

¹²⁵ Anon., “[Review of] *The Temple of Nature*,” *The Critical Review* XXXVIII (1803), 362.

nature's plenitude and multifariousness to a rigid classificatory system. On the other, some form of system was necessary; after all, there did seem to be a natural order to things, and the naturalist's job was to unearth and articulate that order. Darwin's contribution to this debate, coming in the form of *The Loves of the Plants*, provided a novel answer to Buffon's system dilemma: in the absence of verifiably accurate "natural system," nature ought to be apprehended according to a multiplicity of approaches, even when their systems seem to contravene one another, or are provisional and blatantly "artificial." Heeding the nuances of Darwinian form, in addition to helping us rethink our assumptions about scientific-didactic poetry and Darwin's personal decline in esteem, can help us reevaluate the history of natural history itself, by providing an example of a prominent scientific thinker who refused to ally himself exclusively with Buffonian describers, Linnaean nomenclaturists, or experimental vitalists – indeed, perhaps it was this very refusal to think in this way that led him towards evolution. If the supposed great erector of systems, Erasmus Darwin, refuses to commit to one particular method, how much more fluid, messy, and pluralistic might the natural historical landscape have been? Perhaps critics of Foucault have not gone nearly far enough in mapping the confusing contours of natural history in the late eighteenth-century.

“Notorious Plagiarisms”: Imitative Organicism in Charlotte Smith

[Mines and mountains]...must therefore have been formed progressively from small beginnings. There are likewise some apparently useless or incomplete appendages to plants and animals, which seem to show they have gradually undergone changes from their original state...Perhaps all the supposed monstrous births of Nature are remains of their habits of production in their former less perfect state, or attempts towards greater perfection.

- Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden*, 1791

Come, read to me Cowper's translation of Vincent Bourne's verses 'To the Cricket,' in which – though it is something like sacrilege to change a word of his – you will see I have made a few alterations.

- Charlotte Smith, *Conversations Introducing Poetry*, 1804

In Charlotte Smith's 1804 collection of fictional dialogues, *Conversations Introducing Poetry: Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History for the Use of Children and Young Persons*, two of the characters share a conversation regarding the merits of Darwin's *Botanic Garden*. In doing so, they reproduce the dichotomy between prose science and verse fancy that I have argued characterizes Darwin's posthumous reception. Smith's surrogate in *Conversations*, Mrs. Talbot, explains her sons' varying reactions to Darwin's poem:

The splendour and beauty of the verse makes it delightful to George, who has an admirable ear for poetry; while Edward has been attracted by the variety of information conveyed in the notes; and became interested in experiments and facts, which probably would not, if offered to him in any other way, have excited his curiosity.¹²⁶

George and Edward are, in effect, the two Darwinian readers I have previously posited. George delights in the upper half of the page, and its seductively pleasurable verse, while Edward relishes the bottom half's catalogs of natural historical information. But while both boys harbor a passion for certain discrete, formal aspects of Darwin's poem, Mrs. Talbot herself proves the true devotee: throughout *Conversations*, she like Darwin reveals

¹²⁶ Charlotte Smith, *Conversations Introducing Poetry: Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History* (Edinburgh: T. Nelson and Sons, 1863), 244.

a complex, intertwined fascination with both the verse and the natural historical information it conveys.

Mrs. Talbot's affinities with Darwin extend to her declamations about the purposes of her own verses: they are not exclusively didactic but instead aim to "excite curiosity," much in the same way that Darwin intends his poem to "inlist Imagination under the banner of Science." In this way, her ambition isn't limited to the metrical expression of scientific opinion; rather, she mobilizes poetic form in order to invite scientific speculations. At the same time, her poetry does seek to serve as an accessible, cumulative index of natural historical knowledge, a kind of field guide for children. In fact, the characters in *Conversations* and Smith's other children's books rhetorically conflate the poems with the natural specimens they seek to describe – Smith is writing both a collection of poems and constructing a kind of accessible menagerie. The poems themselves, while aimed at children, are formally interesting for their reliance on poetic borrowings and minor textual changes, which some contemporaries uncharitably characterized as plagiaristic. But Smith draws explicit attention to these poems as the product of a history of transmission and change. Smith's practice of borrowing, taken alongside her fusing of poetic and natural specimens, suggests, like many adherents of the organicist tradition, that the organisms her poems describe might develop like the poems themselves. Smith's organicism, however, owes more to Darwin's evolutionary theorizing than to German metaphysics. Smith's children's books advance a vision of poetic creation that is developmental, evolving through a gradual historical process of variation. Her refusal to embrace the myth of spontaneous, individualistic poetic origins

thus masks an even more radical stance: that organisms themselves are subject to change over time, and nature's categories are anything but stable.

Smith's aesthetic penchant for extensive scientific prose notes, as well as elaborate botanical personifications, has often been connected to Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*.¹²⁷ But in intimating this link between poetic and biological forms of generation and reproduction, I aim partly to emphasize an even deeper intellectual affinity between Smith and Erasmus Darwin than has previously been granted, specifically with regard to his burgeoning theory of species development. Smith's admiration for Darwin as both a poet and scientific resource, broadly speaking, is incontrovertible. As to his poetry, a letter of Smith's from 1799 attests to *The Botanic Garden*'s status as "one of [her] favorite books," and her characters in *Conversations* have nothing but unreserved praise for this same text.¹²⁸ But Darwin also looms over her career as a scientific authority whose approval she seeks through a commitment to natural historical accuracy. Smith's letters, for instance, relate an embarrassing incident in which Darwin factually amended one of her poems, in which she was confessedly "deficient in correctness of Natural History."¹²⁹ In response, she vows to take pains to ensure the scientific exactitude of her upcoming poetic volume. Elsewhere there is evidence that Smith made practical use of *The Botanic Garden* as a general encyclopedia of scientific knowledge. It seems that when searching for relief from the symptoms of dropsy, Smith turned to Darwin's notes

¹²⁷ See, for instance, Dahlia Porter, "From Nosegay to Specimen Cabinet: Charlotte Smith and the Labour of Collecting," in *Charlotte Smith in British Romanticism*, ed. Jacqueline Labbe (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 29-44, Amy King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), and Stuart Curran, "Charlotte Smith and British Romanticism," *South Central Review* 11:2 (1994): 66-78.

¹²⁸ Charlotte Smith to Benjamin Smith, July 4, 1799, *The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Judith Phillips Stanton (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003), 332.

¹²⁹ Charlotte Smith to Thomas Cadell Jr. and William Davies, March 5, 1797, *The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*, 25flet5.

on foxglove. She writes to her publishers Thomas Cadell, Jr. and William Davies, “I observe in a note [to *The Botanic Garden*] that pamphlet calld [sic] “Experiments on Musilagenous and purulent matter” their [sic] is an account of the virtues of Digitalis in dropsics...I shall be very much oblig’d to you to send it me...”¹³⁰ *The Botanic Garden* is both poetic pleasure and a valuable scientific reference text. It both catalogs useful information in its own right and leads Smith to other valuable contemporary sources.

The form of reading that Smith’s letter describes, then, suggests that Smith’s perusal of her “favorite book” would have led her to the several notes in *The Botanic Garden* voicing early evolutionary speculations. Take, for instance, this chapter’s epigraph from *The Economy of Vegetation*, which proposes an analogous, gradual, accretive development between species and geological forms. The local variations in individual species might be, in fact, indicators of broader patterns of change that characterize the earth’s progression as a whole. Elsewhere, in *The Loves of the Plants*, Darwin is even more specific:

Perhaps all the productions of nature are in their progress to greater perfection! an idea countenanced by the modern discoveries and deductions concerning the progressive formation of the solid parts of the terraqueous globe, and consonant to the dignity of the Creator of all things.¹³¹

The germs of the more mature theory of evolution that Darwin would later advocate in *The Temple of Nature* are expressed in the very notes that Smith evidently read with great interest. Specifically, Darwin’s notion of any organism as fundamentally incomplete, and subject to gradual, progressive change would be key to the developmental poetics Smith theorizes in *Conversations*. Like Darwin’s plants and animals, Smith’s poems in *Conversations* are the result of slow, accretive practices of reproduction and change. In

¹³⁰ Charlotte Smith to Thomas Cadell Jr. and William Davies, August 27, 1799, *ibid.*, 332.

¹³¹ *The Loves of the Plants*, 8.

this sense she forges an evolutionary poetics distinct from Darwin's; rather than a formal engagement with development through the interplay of verse and notes, she relies on practices of poetic borrowing.

The contention that Smith's poetics are in any way reflective of evolutionary thinking, however, would seem to butt up against the arguments of Smith's best-known work, "Beachy Head." That poem voices suspicion, even hostility, as to the claims of geological science and the deep time it was beginning to uncover at the turn of the century, claims that critically undergird Darwin's evolutionary conjectures. What looks like a distaste for geology's methods and findings, however, winds up to be an objection to the kind of catastrophic vision of natural change that Darwin was pushing back against. Moreover, "Beachy Head," to which I will now turn, provides an explanation as to why Smith found botany and zoology such attractive sciences in her other work, both for the education of young persons and as a locus for her particular poetic and natural historical imagination.

The Geology of "Beachy Head," or, The Problem with Elephants

Critics seeking to rehabilitate Smith in recent years have leaned heavily on the idea that her work presents a vision of the natural world averse to the traditional narrative of British Romanticism. The consensus on Smith's sense of nature involves two distinct but related ideas. The first is that nature in Smith's work is fundamentally Other; it accordingly refuses to be a site of transcendental fusion or access for the individual. In his important essay on Smith, Stuart Curran notes that even though nature is "the only reality worth having...human beings, though tragically able to recognize its validity, can

never share in it without a sense of inadequacy.”¹³² For Curran, part of Smith’s pervasive sense of loss can be attributed to the draw she feels towards the natural world even as she recognizes its inaccessible alterity.¹³³

Smith’s second tendency is, despite this “tragic” recognition, a scrupulous attentiveness to the particularity and minutiae of natural things. In one sense, this presents another alternative to the sublime aesthetics of masculine Romanticism.¹³⁴ But it’s also a way of seeing and describing that testifies to both Smith’s interest in classificatory modes of knowledge and her commitment to recognizing the materiality of natural specimens. As Amy King has argued, “Nature for Smith is not a transcendent category, but a material reality observed with a scientific, as well as poetic, eye.”¹³⁵ More specifically, Theresa Kelley claims that the very particularity of her poetic vision serves to undermine the ostensible project of natural history itself, that is to say, the goal of mapping all species into discrete classificatory slots. For Kelley, Smith subverts this paradigm by demonstrating the ways in which attentiveness to particularity elides the constructed taxonomical boundaries and categories that the practice of natural history relies on.¹³⁶

Many such readings of Smith take as one of their exemplary texts the unfinished, late-period “Beachy Head” (pub. 1807), a poem that clearly exemplifies the modes of seeing and encountering nature that these critics have ascribed to Smith. But the poem’s

¹³² Curran, 75.

¹³³ See also Donelle Ruwe’s “Charlotte Smith’s Sublime: Feminine Poetics, Botany, and *Beachy Head*,” *Prism(s)* 7 (1999): 117-132.

¹³⁴ See Jacqueline M. Labbe, *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003) and Judith Pascoe, “Female Botanists and the Poetry of Charlotte Smith,” in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776-1837*, eds. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 193-209.

¹³⁵ Amy King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 63. See also Porter, “From Nosegay to Specimen Cabinet.”

¹³⁶ Theresa Kelley, “Romantic Histories, Charlotte Smith, and Beachy Head,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 59:3 (2004): 281-314. Kelley’s *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins UP, 2012) makes a similar claim, though here her focus is on the way in which Smith’s exfoliating botanical figures do the work of muddying taxonomical categories.

centrality, combined with its frequently cited dismissal of geology, obscures the sense of mutable nature Smith advances in *Conversations*. I want to suggest that we can locate in Smith's aversion to geology a reason why she might have been led to embrace the very gradual, Darwinian modes of natural change that find expression in her less familiar children's books.

"Beachy Head" itself might best be described as a variant on the eighteenth-century prospect poem, one with lengthy forays into local legend, botany, contemporary politics, zoology and geology. The poem's densely packed allusive material is often accompanied by extensive notes in an echo of the form and authoritative voice of *The Botanic Garden*. A footnote on a "social bird" yields the following explanation:

The Yellow Wagtail. *Motacilla flava*. It frequents the banks of rivulets in winter, making its nest in meadows and corn-fields. But after the breeding season is over, it haunts downs and sheepwalks, and is seen constantly among the flocks, probably for the sake of the insects it picks up.¹³⁷

Smith, like Darwin, authorizes herself by listing both common and Latinate names, as well as providing detail pertaining to habits and habitat. But while Smith's annotations concerning botanical or zoological information are confident in their demonstration of taxonomical accuracy and learning, focusing only on her precision might blind us to her attitudes concerning the work of another branch of natural history: geology. "Beachy Head" voices outright hostility towards the ambitions of the geologic branch of scientific inquiry:

Ah! very vain is Science' proudest boast,
And but a little light its flame yet lends
To its most ardent votaries; since from whence
These fossil forms are seen, is but conjecture...¹³⁸(390-393)

¹³⁷ Charlotte Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 237. Hereafter verse from this volume will be cited by line number and notes will be cited by page number.

¹³⁸ "Beachy Head," 390-393.

How might one account for the poem's pleasure in botanical and zoological study alongside this assessment of geology? As Anne Wallace has pointed out, the labor of geology in the early nineteenth century was remarkably similar to that of botany. Both relied largely on local accounts and required attention to particular differences and precision in cataloguing.¹³⁹ The practice of these two sciences, then, might seem to reflect what is commonly seen as Smith's aesthetic more generally. But whereas she delights in botanical and zoological expertise, and scrupulously draws attention to her ignorance where appropriate, she refuses to regard geology as anything more than "conjecture."

The distinction is that the geological record forces Smith to disturbingly confront the natural world's potential capacity for both human and natural catastrophe. This is a sense of natural history that runs counter to the gentle, productive gradualism that characterizes Smith's poetic practice in *Conversations*. In other words, we shouldn't assume that Smith's hostility to geology constitutes a rejection of deep time (and therefore an evolutionary model of natural history) altogether. Rather, geology's associations with violent human history and distant catastrophic events motivate her rhetorical resistance to geological inquiry.

Smith's remembrance of finding sea-shells upon the heights of Beachy Head itself, a chalk cliff in Dover, first prompts her ostensible rejection of geological certitude. In a note, she mentions once having located fossilized shells far from the sea, a discovery that "excited my surprise, though I then knew nothing of natural history."¹⁴⁰ She also affirms that "I have never read any of the late theories of the earth, nor was I ever

¹³⁹ Anne D. Wallace, "Picturesque Fossils, Sublime Geology? The Crisis of Authority in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*," *European Romantic Review* 13 (2002): 77-93.

¹⁴⁰ "Beachy Head," 232.

satisfied with the attempts to explain many of the phenomena which call forth conjecture in those books I happened to have had access to on this subject.”¹⁴¹ Smith’s concomitant profession of ignorance and empirical dissatisfaction testifies to the deep ambivalence of this passage. For it’s obvious she has considered some of the “late theories of the earth”; in fact, the poem itself suggests three distinct, incompatible possibilities as to how the fossilized shells got so far from the sea, as Noah Heringman has helpfully pointed out.¹⁴² Either the ocean once reached the heights of the cliffs, the fossilized shells are the fanciful creations of Nature’s “wanton mood,” or the cliff itself has been gradually “heaved” out of the water by means of geological processes.¹⁴³ But no sooner does Smith agnostically present these possibilities than she launches into her accusation of geology’s vanity. The “herdsman of the hill,” Smith argues, scarcely concerns himself about such geological investigations.¹⁴⁴ She seems to imply that geology is a luxury pursuit, insufficiently inattentive to the present moment or daily cares. As Smith turns to a classic georgic trope, however, we learn that the herdsman too is surrounded by a kind of embedded history, albeit a human one: the archaeological record of human conquest in Britain. An antiquary, Smith writes,

...perhaps may trace,
Or fancy he can trace, the oblong square
Where the mail’d legions, under Claudius, rear’d
The rampire, or excavated fossé delved;
What time the huge unwieldy Elephant
Auxiliary reluctant, hither led,
From Afric’s forest glooms and tawny sands,
First felt the Northern blast, and his vast frame

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Noah Heringman, “‘Very vain is Science’ proudest boast’: The resistance to geological theory in early nineteenth-century England,” *The Revolution in Geology from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Gary D. Rosenberg (Boulder: Geological Society of America, 2009), 252.

¹⁴³ “Beachy Head,” 373-389.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 399.

Sunk useless; whence in after ages found,
 The wondering hinds, on those enormous bones,
 Gaz'd,¹⁴⁵

With characteristic hedging (“Or fancy he can trace”), Smith’s imaginative reconstruction of the scene seems to largely confirm the antiquary’s find. While the evidence of elephants brought by the Romans from Africa is a striking example of species importation, its presence in the fossil records attests to a history of colonial violence and invasion rather than apolitical, prehistorical migrations or extinctions.¹⁴⁶ At least, this is its effect on Smith; she notes that “the peasants believe that the large bones sometimes found belonged to giants, who formerly lived on the hills.”¹⁴⁷ Her self-positioning as relative expert in the matter again contravenes her professed geological ignorance elsewhere. Her real concern, it emerges, is “Ambition,” a term that is initially associated with the figure of the geologist, but comes to signify the history of violence literally beneath her feet:

Hither, Ambition come!
 Come and behold the nothingness of all
 For which you carry thro’ the oppressed Earth,
 War, and its train of horrors – see where tread
 The innumerable hoofs of flocks above the works
 By which the warrior sought to register
 His glory, and immortalize his name.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 408-418.

¹⁴⁶ Smith’s note to this passage deserves some brief attention. She claims to have seen “in what is now called the National Museum at Paris, the very large bones of an elephant, which were found in North America: though it is certain that this enormous animal is never seen in its natural state, but in the countries under the torrid zone of the old world (234). I suspect that this is the same specimen Georges Cuvier would later identify as a mastodon and make the subject of his 1798 paper proposing mass extinction. The dates, however, don’t line up adequately, so while it’s tempting to read much into Smith’s reference to this particular find at this particular moment, it seems probable that she would not have associated extinction or catastrophism with it. See Martin S. Rudwick, *Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹⁴⁷ “Beachy Head,” 234.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 419-425.

Smith's mock-epic invocation seems designed to skewer Ambition's expectations in a familiar, Ozymandian way. But the archaeological presence of humanity that she's already outlined betrays her critique. Even if Ambition's record ought to be thoroughly purged from memory, even trod upon by ignorant sheep, the fact remains that it doesn't. The elephantine bones and ruined human fortifications vindicate, if anything, the warrior seeking to "register / His glory," and the geological and archaeological records are the very means by which he finds his name immortalized.

The antidote to such ambition, and the place to which "Beachy Head" then pivots, is botany, "a more attractive study."¹⁴⁹ While geology disturbs by virtue of "human crimes suggested,"¹⁵⁰ botany invites a placid pastoralism that contravenes the violent georgic mode of the previous stanzas, displacing catalogues of combative incidents with catalogues of flora and their attendant scientific notes:

... While in the breeze
 That wafts the thistle's plumed seed along,
 Blue bells wave tremulous. The mountain thyme
 Purples the hassock of the heaving mole,
 And the short turf is gay with tormentil,
 And bird's foot trefoil, and the lesser tribes
 Of hawkweed; spangling it with fringed stars.¹⁵¹

Smith's personifications propose a different relation between botany and the human world than she considers with regard to geology. A close observation of the botanical world yields a harmonious scene devoid of apparent conflict; the "tribes" Smith had imagined warring across the British landscape are transformed into benign floral species adding decorative variety to the landscape. For Smith, the key principle revealed by

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 441.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 440.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 449-455.

botanical observation is thus “fellowship” between plant, animal, and shepherd, rather than conflict.¹⁵²

Smith’s abrupt pivoting of scientific interest in “Beachy Head” suggests why botany and zoology, rather than geology, would be the main preoccupations of her children’s books. While geology metonymically gestures towards human and natural catastrophe, a model of change that is sudden and violent, the study of botany and zoology promotes a sense of “fellowship” that forms the ethical core of the children’s literature. Smith’s rejection of geology, then, does not necessarily constitute an ontological rejection of deep time or the mutability of nature more broadly, but acknowledges the disturbing suggestions about human nature that geological inquiry can provoke. Turning from such considerations in the children’s books, Smith frees herself to both locate an ethical model in botanical and zoological study, as well as posit a model of historical natural variation, that, if less dramatic than geology, is no less Ambitious.

Smith’s Poetic Pedagogy

Over the course of her career, Charlotte Smith produced six children’s books: *Rural Walks* (1795), *Rambles Farther* (1796), *Minor Morals* (1798), *Conversations* (1804), *A History of England* (1806) and *The Natural History of Birds* (1807). The first four of these in particular are broadly representative of what Alan Richardson has called the “fictionalized ‘object lesson,’” in which young readers are expected to acquire moral understanding and knowledge through the vicarious actions of characters, rather than the direct experience stressed by alternative Rousseauian models

¹⁵² Ibid., 469.

of education.¹⁵³ Smith's books are each constructed as a series of dialogues between a maternal figure and her children. This figure (Mrs. Woodfield in *Rural Walks* and *Rambles Farther*, Mrs. Belmour in *Minor Morals*, and Mrs. Talbot in *Conversations*) leads children on a series of outdoor excursions, in search of picturesque views and morally edifying encounters with impoverished rural villagers. Other trips are opportunities for more disciplined natural historical investigation – the observation of local fauna and the classification of botanical specimens. These “rural walks,” despite the apparent diversity of their aims, collaborate in the service of the children's moral education and the expansion of their sympathetic imaginations. This sympathy extends itself both to the suffering laboring classes Smith's characters repeatedly encounter, and also to the natural world, perennially threatened by impetuous nest-thieves and callous hunters.

In their narrative structure, Smith's children's books don't significantly depart from popular contemporary models of the genre. Sarah Trimmer's *An Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature* (1780) and Priscilla Wakefield's *Mental Improvement: Or, the Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art* (1794), for instance, both utilize dialogues between mothers and children as their fundamental instructional form and promote a working knowledge of natural history as morally useful. Examples of the genre from Anna Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft bear similarly sympathetic attitudes towards “‘progressive issues,’ such as kindness to animals, the anti-slavery cause, charity towards beggars and other unfortunates, respect for hard-working laborers...the Sunday School

¹⁵³ Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 132.

movement, and toleration of those who are physically different from oneself.”¹⁵⁴ What distinguishes Smith’s pedagogical project from those of her contemporaries is her reliance on poetry as an instructional medium. Rousseau famously abjured the use of books as part of an educational program in *Emile* (1762); many contemporary writers of children’s literature were no less vocal in their opposition to children’s exposure to poetry.¹⁵⁵ Anna Barbauld’s *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781) defends its titular mode by alleging that poetry’s characteristic “elevation in thought and style about the common standard” would be lost on a child reader. Maria Edgeworth, in her *Practical Education* (1798), sounded a similar critique: “Children, who are taught at seven or eight years old to repeat poetry, frequently get beautiful lines by rote, and speak them fluently, without in the least understanding the meaning of the lines.”¹⁵⁶ Edgeworth’s complaint is here less grounded in the nature of poetry than the inflated expectations of educators who misdiagnose the child’s level of linguistic comprehension. Yet it is still the particular processes by which we come to interpret poetry that renders it unfit for a child’s mind. Poetry relies on allusion and metaphor to achieve meaning, argues Edgeworth, which in turn require the reader to navigate a chain of associations to obtain understanding. Children, in her estimation, have only a capacity for a mode of reading that is literal, or “obvious.”¹⁵⁷ In this respect she targets poetry specifically as a genre endemically hostile

¹⁵⁴ Richardson, 127.

¹⁵⁵ See Andrew O’Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children’s Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and Mary V. Jackson, *Engines of Instruction, Mischief, and Magic: Children’s Literature in England from Its Beginnings to 1839* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1989).

¹⁵⁶ Maria Edgeworth, *Practical Education in Works Vol. I* (Boston: Samuel H Parker, 1825), 240.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

to the forthright communication of information: “Knowledge cannot be detailed, or accurately explained, in poetry.”¹⁵⁸

By contrast, Smith not only makes poetry an instrumental part of her pedagogy in the children’s books, but explicitly grants it the explanatory, communicative status Edgeworth rejects. Beginning with *Rural Walks*, Smith combines moral development, aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, and the desire for concrete natural historical knowledge with the appropriate esteem for the poetic tradition regarding that same subject. She suggests that the exposure to verse inculcates a wide range of knowledge that can’t be assimilated through other means. A telling instance with regard to moral conduct is the introduction of Caroline Cecil in *Rural Walks*. Mrs. Woodfield’s niece Caroline has been raised in London society but is forced into the care of her aunt in the countryside following her mother’s death. As Caroline unpacks her belongings upon arrival, Mrs. Woodfield points out the shelves upon which she can store her books, to which Caroline responds, “‘I have but very few, Madam.’” This in turn hardens Mrs. Woodfield’s pedagogical resolve: “‘Well, my love,’ replied her aunt, ‘perhaps I shall find means to increase your collection.’”¹⁵⁹ Caroline’s apparent lack of interest in “books” marks a lack of moral cultivation or sensibility just as much as it indicates her ignorance of the more tangible knowledge that those absent books might contain. When she shortly reveals herself to be haughty and dismissive towards her newfound rural environs and those who populate it, the reader is implicitly enjoined to draw a connection between Caroline’s want of literary taste and her condescending, citified disposition. Mrs. Woodfield’s resolution to “increase [her] collection,” points at a program of reading

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ *Rural Walks: In Dialogues, Intended for the Use of Young Persons Vol. 1* (London: T Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1800), 8-9.

inseparable from broader moral refinement. This program, in all of the children's books, consists almost exclusively of poetry. Thus one of Mrs. Woodfield's earliest lessons to Caroline involves transcribing "a few lines from Thomson, on the subject of the thoughtlessness of the affluent and fortunate."¹⁶⁰ The road to human sympathy is requisitely routed through sympathy's poetic expression. As one Smith biographer has noted, in the children's books "Sensibility is developed not only through sympathy with suffering but by reading and memorising poetry."¹⁶¹ But Smith goes even further than that: the "sympathy with suffering" that leads to sensibility is itself a product of poetic education.

The same principle holds true for the ethical treatment of animals. When Mrs. Woodfield's sons Edward and Harry pilfer a nightingale's nest so as to raise the nestlings themselves, she begins with a straightforward lecture that draws a parallel between herself and the mother nightingale upon returning to her nest's prior location: "Harry! How do you think *I* should feel, if, on my return from a journey...I found my house vacant; and that some tyrant, whom I could not pursue or punish, had taken [my children] from me, and condemned them to imprisonment or death?"¹⁶² Despite eliciting a shamed acknowledgment from Harry that Mrs. Woodfield would indeed be unhappy under the circumstances, Mrs. Woodfield's imaginative exercise in sympathy does not conclude her reproach. In fact, she refuses to temper her rebuke until she has assigned a task to each: Harry must copy out a passage from *The Seasons* that describes a nightingale's grief over the loss of her nestlings, and Edward must do the same for a section of *The Task* in which

¹⁶⁰ *Rural Walks*, Vol. 1, 18.

¹⁶¹ Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 232.

¹⁶² *Rural Walks*, Vol. 1, 97-8.

Cowper demands the application of the golden rule to non-human life forms.¹⁶³ If the object lesson of eighteenth-century children's literature is traditionally internalized by the vicarious experience of its representation in prose, Smith's books instruct by both offering the representation of a character's internalization of a lesson through poetic recitation, and encouraging the reader to mimic the same strategy of memorization and repetition.

Poetry, then, occupies a preeminent position in the learning process; it fosters sympathy with man and nature and nurtures a sense of the beautiful in landscapes and art. But despite Maria Edgeworth's protestations to the contrary, another advantage offered by the poetical instruction of *Rural Walks* is a basic functioning knowledge of English botany. Throughout *Rural Walks*, Smith associates an ignorance of botany with both an unfamiliarity with poetry and actual moral shortcomings. It is Caroline, unsurprisingly, who early on confesses an ignorance of the beauties of wild English flora, affirming a preference for plants cultivated in hothouses, available for purchase so as to provide decoration for a drawing room: "the delightful roses, lilies, and I know not how many charming flowers, for I always forget their names, which one used to have from that delightful man in Bond-street."¹⁶⁴ Her insensitivity to nomenclature and taste for *cultivated* plants testify again to her sense of class privilege, as well as an ignorance of the poetical tradition that Mrs. Woodfield will marshal as pedagogical devices (Darwin, Cowper, Thomson). Mrs. Woodfield's lessons on England's flora and fauna turn repeatedly to eighteenth-century poetry as the relevant instructional medium by seizing on particular poetic catalogues of species for her pupils to memorize. Elizabeth is asked

¹⁶³ The relevant passages are Thomson's "Spring" (714-19) and Cowper's *The Task* (VI. 581-589).

¹⁶⁴ *Rural Walks Vol 1*, 30.

to recite Thomson's "pretty catalogue of flowers" from "Spring" of *The Seasons*.¹⁶⁵ And Henrietta soon thereafter provides Cowper's "catalogue of shrubs" from *The Task* per her mother's request.¹⁶⁶ These lines from Cowper are broadly representative:

The lilac, various in array, now white,
Now sanguine, and her beauteous head now set
With purple spikes pyramidal, as if
Studious of ornament, yet unresolved
Which hue she most approved, she chose them all.¹⁶⁷

For Mrs. Woodfield's purposes, Cowper's decontextualized catalogue offers a memorizable guide to the morphology of common British plants; here Cowper imparts the colors of *syringa vulgaris*'s varieties, as well as the structure of its floral array, all couched in a language of playful personification. The passage from Thomson functions similarly, offering the common names of a litany of native species, along with brief descriptions specifying coloration, habitat, and other identificatory markers. If poetry elsewhere in *Rural Walks* inculcates moral habits and behavior, it also provides efficient means for the acquisition of basic botanical facts. The book thus commits itself to promoting poetry as the quintessential device by which children might internalize a wide assortment of behavioral habits, lessons, and information.

The title of Smith's 1804 children's book, *Conversations Introducing Poetry: Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History for the Use of Children and Young Persons*, seemingly announces a rearrangement of these priorities. While the earlier children's books enlisted poetry as a means to natural historical knowledge (as well as moral understanding), *Conversations* is ostensibly more interested in employing those same compelling subjects from nature and using them as the basis for a more rigorous

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 125. The relevant passage is Thomson's "Spring" (527-544).

¹⁶⁶ *Rural Walks*, Vol. I, 138. The relevant passage is Cowper's *The Task* (VI. 149-176).

¹⁶⁷ William Cowper, *The Task* (VI. 157-161).

examination of poetics. Indeed, the volume appears geared towards a slightly more sophisticated audience, and contains lengthier and more substantial inquiries into rhyme, meter, and figuration. To this end, Paula Backscheider has argued that *Conversations*, while the subject of its poetry remains natural history, can be considered as “one of the first attempts in the language to teach the reading of poetry and give inside glimpses of the decisions working poets make.”¹⁶⁸ In giving an account of the ways in which Mrs. Talbot has come to acquire or compose the poems on natural history that she recites, *Conversations* reflects on the process of composition even as the children’s interest in the natural world seems to govern the subject matter of these compositions. As I will argue, however, the work of poetic form in *Conversations* is wholly inextricable from the content of the lessons it purveys. While poetic form is the way natural history is made legible and familiar to the student of science, it more provocatively becomes the implicit site of Smith’s considerations respecting the slipperiness and contingency of species categories. In this sense, the ambitions of *Conversations* go beyond the earlier children’s books; whereas they were invested in poetry as an efficient means of knowledge acquisition, *Conversations* describes a broader natural historical position through poetic form itself.

Conversations, echoing its forerunners, is structured as a dramatic dialogue between a scientifically literate mother, Mrs. Talbot, and her two children, Emily and George. According to the book’s “Preface,” Smith has designed her book for “the use of a child of five years old, who, on her arrival in England, could speak no English, but was

¹⁶⁸ Paula Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 356.

a lover of birds, flowers and insects.”¹⁶⁹ She frames *Conversations* partly as a language acquisition tool, one that harnesses and makes use of this particular student’s preexisting fascination with natural history. Poetry, then, is not only the vehicle of instruction for deepening one’s understanding of natural history, as it is in *Rural Walks*, but a way to gain facility with the English language. To this end the diction and verse forms of *Conversations* grow increasingly complex as the book proceeds. Early poetic specimens in the book are largely variations on a simple rhyming iambic tetrameter, but Smith protracts her lines gradually into pentameter, and even ventures into blank verse by the book’s finish.

The reproducibility and memorizability of these poems make them ideal for internalizing the rhythms of English speech *and* the facts of nature. In other words, poetry’s educational utility for Smith resides partly in the ease with which it is reproduced, in a variety of formats and contexts, both aural and visual. Most obviously, the verse in *Conversations*, like that of *Rural Walks*, is designed to be internalized by the reader through memorization. This practice is diagetically enacted by Emily and George, who both copy down verses their mother recites or introduces, and recite previously memorized verse back to her. Smith, moreover, provides the text of these verses on the page, so that readers might imitate Mrs. Talbot’s children by memorizing it themselves. Smith’s children’s books thus serve as a supplemental material repository for natural historical knowledge that they nevertheless encourage their readers to internalize. Emily, in this respect, proudly asserts that her “present collection” resides “both in my book and in my memory.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ *Conversations*, vi.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

Emily's employment of the term "collection" to refer to her easily accessible, memorized poetic stockpile performs an important double duty in *Conversations* insofar as it signifies the product of both natural historical observation and poetic memorization. The collection that Emily acquires consists of two types of specimen: organisms and the poems that describe them. For instance, upon being introduced to one of Mrs. Talbot's poems, "The Wheat-Ear," Emily rejoices that she "shall at last have birds in [her] collection"(161). Emily's collection of poems about birds rhetorically evolves into a collection of birds. Mrs. Talbot elides the senses of "collection" similarly. After explaining the difficulties of preserving a living hummingbird specimen through a transatlantic voyage, and relating an anecdote about a particular hummingbird expiring immediately upon arrival, she offers Emily a "very elegant little poem" from her aunt in its stead. This little poem, in the absence of an actual observable hummingbird, will be a "contribution to Emily's collection of birds"(173). As Dahlia Porter has rightly observed, this linguistic slippage hints at an "overlap between poetic and scientific collections."¹⁷¹ Emily's stockpile of memorized poetry, in tandem with its material manifestation in the pages of her book, turns out to be a good substitute for an actual assemblage of physical specimens.

Plagiarism and Revisionary Romantic Authorship

What then, can Smith's conflation of natural and poetic specimens tell us about both her poetics and her sense of the organisms they seek to describe? This is a question that becomes particularly provocative when considering the fact that the literary collection in *Conversations* is far from stable. The poetry Mrs. Talbot relates is the product of a process of reproducing, editing, and borrowing, a principle of transmission

¹⁷¹ Porter, 36.

that disturbs a notion of poetic creation as a product of novelty, genius, or originality as well as questions the virtues and utility of accurate or precise reproducibility. We can read the poetics of *Conversations* as a refusal to fetishize originality for purposes that are both literary and natural historical, a rejection of singular, creative authorship and a description of a natural world characterized by gradual flux and variation.

This argument follows a line of critical thinking that has questioned the long-standing notion that the “Romantic ideology” implies a valorization of God-like creative powers. This tradition found its most prominent and influential advocate in M.H. Abrams, who identifies an early Romantic celebration of the “expressive theory,” which defines the work of art as the result of “a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet’s perceptions, thoughts and feelings.” He thus locates “the displacement of the mimetic and pragmatic by the expressive view of art in English criticism” at the dawn of the nineteenth century.¹⁷² Such assessments led Jerome McGann, for instance, to attack the prevalence of the Romantic ideology and the way it had underwritten much of the criticism on the Romantic period.¹⁷³ The purity or coherence of this ideology has been subject to numerous critiques in more recent years with independent genius as their collective target. Jack Stillinger and Zachary Leader, for instance, have both provided accounts of the complex lattice of writing practices, revision, and social influences that shaped many of the Romantic texts that have become most intractable in terms of the “expressive view”’s persistence.¹⁷⁴ Even if one concedes that many canonical Romantic writers give much rhetorical lip service to

¹⁷² M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953), 22.

¹⁷³ Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1983).

¹⁷⁴ Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996).

independent genius, it remains true, according to such accounts, that genius doesn't manifest itself in practice. Robert Macfarlane, has moreover located an under-recognized ambivalence concerning the powers of genius in figures such as Coleridge and Shelley, typically cited as spokespeople for originality or "expression," claiming that "They did associate genius with originality, but they also perceived creativity as a function of description, assimilation, and arrangement."¹⁷⁵ As a counterweight to the myth of genius, Macfarlane offers the term *inventio* to designate "a more pragmatic account of creation as rearrangement."¹⁷⁶ Tilar Mazzeo has also provided an historicized account of Romantic plagiarism, contending that Georgian literary culture tolerated, and even encouraged the production of texts "that demonstrated mastery over a range of sources." Furthermore, "writers were given broad license to borrow from the works of other authors so long as those appropriations satisfied particular aesthetic objectives and norms."¹⁷⁷ In this respect, the interpolated poems of *Conversations* offer a particularly fertile case study for McFarland and Mazzeo's claims. But Smith's self-consciously imitative poetics, as we shall see, don't merely describe an orientation towards questions of authorship, but manifest a sense of the natural world that is fluid, historically developmental, and hostile to strict definition.

One of the most startling and defamiliarizing aspects of Mrs. Talbot's reflections on poetry for students of Romanticism is the modesty of her claims concerning novelty. For Mrs. Talbot, the extemporaneous nature of composition is no guarantee of true innovation; rather, verse is doomed (or liberated, as the case may be) to rearticulate and

¹⁷⁵ Robert Macfarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 29.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷⁷ Tilar J. Mazzeo, *Plagiarism and Literary Property in the Romantic Period* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 5.

recycle tropes, figures, and even more precise instances of linguistic description. This repetition, according to Smith, is perhaps even more pervasive and inevitable when natural history is taken up as a subject. Before having George read aloud a poem from his aunt concerning a “favourite robin,” Mrs. Talbot explains, not quite apologetically, that “There have been so many verses written about this bird, which used to be held sacred to the household gods, that it was not very easy to give these any novelty; but the subject of them was highly interesting.”¹⁷⁸ If an unadulterated novelty of description is impossible, Mrs. Talbot finds redeeming value in the choice of an “interesting” poetic subject whose characterization might only deviate marginally from its historically prior representations. Roughly two decades earlier, John Aikin had lamented the “real want of variety in poetical imagery, proceeding from a scarcity of original observations of nature.”¹⁷⁹ Smith provides, in effect, a fascinating gloss on Aikin’s complaint: variety is a function of subject matter, and observation yields, more or less, minute variations at best. Rather than constituting an *ex nihilo* utterance, verse is cumulative, indebted to a past history of representations. *Variation* is the central principle of Smith’s poetics of transmission.

The question of novelty was of particular importance to Smith throughout her literary career due to accusations of plagiarism that hounded her from the first publication of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), most infamously from Anna Seward. Ostensibly alert to the possibility of such a charge, Smith concludes the initial preface of the first edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* with an acknowledgment of her writerly practices: “The readers of poetry will meet with some lines borrowed from the most popular authors, which I have used only as quotations. Where such acknowledgment is omitted, I am unconscious of the

¹⁷⁸ *Conversations*, 121.

¹⁷⁹ Aikin, 9.

theft.”¹⁸⁰ Although Smith clearly identifies her poetry as at least partly a product of textual collation, Seward was quick to denounce her as a vulgar copyist. Seward pillories the *Elegiac Sonnets* as “pretty tuneful centos from our various poets, without anything original.”¹⁸¹ In response to critical feedback from the first and second editions of *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith added a preface to the third edition (1786) that promises to demarcate quotations and provide attribution wherever she can. Such concessions did not satisfy Seward, however, who only ramped up her accusations. An oft-quoted letter of 1788 proclaims the volume to be “full of notorious plagiarisms, barren of original ideas and poetical imagery,” and later a collection of “hackneyed scraps of dismality, with which her memory furnished her from our various poets.”¹⁸² For Seward, Smith lacked a formative imaginative power; her critique anticipates Coleridge’s notion of “fancy,” the mere “aggregating faculty of the mind.”¹⁸³ Seward casts Smith’s work as aggregating pastiche that tries to pull the wool over eyes of the reader.¹⁸⁴

The poet William Hayley, one of Seward’s correspondents, dismissed her criticisms as petty jealousy, but charges of plagiarism dogged Smith’s novelistic output as well.¹⁸⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft in particular leveled charges of copying at Smith in the pages of the *Analytical Review*. Her review of *Celestina* (1791) argues that Smith

¹⁸⁰ *Poems*, “Preface to the First Edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*,” 3.

¹⁸¹ Anna Seward to Miss Weston, July 20, 1786, *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807 Vol. I* (London: George Ramsay & Co., 1811), 163.

¹⁸² Anna Seward to Rev. Berwick, October 6, 1788, *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807 Vol. II* (London: George Ramsay & Co., 1811), 162; Anna Seward to Theophilus Swift, July 9, 1789, *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807 Vol. II* (London: George Ramsay & Co., 1811), 287.

¹⁸³ Anna Seward to William Hayley, January 29, 1789, *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807 Vol. I* (London: George Ramsay & Co., 1811), 224; Samuel Taylor Coleridge to William Sotheby, September 10, 1802, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge Vol. II* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1956), 866.

¹⁸⁴ Claudia Thomas Kairoff makes a convincing case that Seward’s accusations were at least partly motivated by a commitment to Miltonic sonnet form in *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2012), 158-178.

¹⁸⁵ Teresa Barnard, *Anna Seward: A Constructed Life* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 125.

“copies, we can scarcely say imitates” the boilerplate incidents of popular fiction.¹⁸⁶ As Melissa Sodeman observes, “Mary Wollstonecraft...sees Smith ‘fettered’ by the shop-worn conventions of popular novels and condemns her as a copyist, not of nature, but of the tawdry fiction of her day.”¹⁸⁷ By distinguishing Smith’s “copying” from an art that seeks to imitate nature, Wollstonecraft largely echoes Seward’s view of Smith’s work as devalued by virtue of its apparent reliance on other texts. Such writers can at best, to borrow a phrase from Wollstonecraft’s earlier review of *Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle* (1788), “catch the subordinate beauties of the authors they *labour* to imitate.”¹⁸⁸ Repetition, according to such an account of literary production, is tantamount to devolution.

The cross-genre portrayal of Smith as plagiarizer, or at the very least “imitator,” along with Smith’s prophalactically edited “Prefaces,” have produced a defensive criticism that seeks both to downplay Smith’s “borrowings” and to see them as part of a complex wrestling with a masculine poetic heritage. For many, Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* are an examination of English literary tradition itself as well as an attempt to fashion a distinct poetic voice from its scraps. Adela Pinch, for instance, contends that “Smith’s sonnets are like echo chambers, in which reverberate direct quotations, ideas, and tropes from English poetry.”¹⁸⁹ Daniel Robinson and Judith Howley both argue that the act of incorporating her sonneteering predecessors, Smith seeks to make a claim of her own on

¹⁸⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, Review of *Celestina*, *Analytical Review* X (May-August 1791): 409.

¹⁸⁷ Melissa Sodeman, “Charlotte Smith’s Literary Exile,” *ELH* 76 (2009): 131.

¹⁸⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, Review of *Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle*, *Analytic Review* I, (May-August 1788): 329.

¹⁸⁹ Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion from Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 60.

that particular literary tradition.¹⁹⁰ For most of these commentators, however, the question of Smith's appropriations is a strictly literary one; that is to say, they are preoccupied with questions of formal indebtedness, authorial voice, and intertextuality.¹⁹¹

But what if we bring Smith's sense of natural history to bear on her alleged plagiarism? Her views concerning literary production and her views about the history of organisms both involve variation and progress. And *Conversations Introducing Poetry*, a text almost always ignored in considerations of Smith's "plagiarism," reflects specifically on questions of literary borrowing and the transmission of texts. A reading of *Conversations* suggests that Smith's theory of literary production presents an alternative vision of organic form and demonstrates her receptiveness to some of the more radical ideas surrounding the mutability of organisms themselves.

The presentation of borrowed material in *Conversations* differs fundamentally from comparable instances in Smith's collections of verse, novels, and earlier children's books. Smith included quotation marks and proper attribution only when pressured in her *Elegiac Sonnets*, but Mrs. Talbot refuses to obfuscate her poetic source material. Interpolated poetry in *Rural Walks* and *Rambles Farther* is also always attributed; Mrs. Woodfield, almost without exception, provides the provenance of the lines to be recited or memorized. But little of the poetry in these earlier volumes is written by Smith. These poems tend to be more anthological in their presentation, with Smith, or Mrs. Woodfield, functioning as a responsible compiler. Mrs. Talbot in *Conversations*, however, often

¹⁹⁰ Daniel Robinson, "Reviving the Sonnet: Women Romantic Poets and the Sonnet Claim," *European Romantic Review* 6 (1995): 98-127, Judith Hawley, "Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*: Losses and Gains," in *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730-1820*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 184-198.

¹⁹¹ Susan Wolfson's "Charlotte Smith's 'Emigrants': Forging Connections at the Borders of a Female Tradition," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 63:4 (2000): 509-546, is a significant exception, treating Smith's literary allusiveness in "The Emigrants" as a self-conscious reflection on political as well as literary tradition.

liberally edits the memorized passages assigned to her students, refusing to honor the formal integrity of the poems and drawing the reader's attention to the very fact of these alterations. In *Conversations*, the history of poetic production is a history of transmission and variation.

To this end, Mrs. Talbot is forthright in acknowledging the inevitable trans-historical recurrence of particular descriptive tropes or tendencies, a kind of ineluctable figural plagiarism. The pervasiveness and accuracy of certain entrenched metaphors linking the human, animal, and vegetable worlds is a necessary consequence of earlier texts being the engine whereby new poetry is generated. In a natural world that seems relatively stable and distinguished by repetition in the form of reproduction, such recurrence is unavoidable. Prior to George's dictation of Mrs. Talbot's poem on moths, Emily recalls the tenacity with which several moths hurtled themselves into her candle a week earlier. She makes an metaphorical link between their action and a fundamental attribute of humankind: "I remember thinking then," she says, "that [the moths] were like silly people who will not take advice, for many of them, even after they were singed, flew back into the candle."¹⁹² Mrs. Talbot praises Emily for her observational acumen even as she acknowledges the fact that the moth as a metaphor for human blindness in the face of excessive passion or desire is virtually a colloquialism:

The comparison is obvious, my dear little girl, yet it is not every little girl who would have made it. The obstinacy with which the moth perseveres in fluttering around the flame that inevitably destroys it, has been the subject of many comparisons. Like verses on the butterfly, any attempt on the subject of the moth may, perhaps, be trite...¹⁹³

¹⁹² *Conversations*, 46.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

Emily demonstrates both the precocious empiricism that underwrites natural history *and* a poetic imagination that accurately yokes observation to human action. But Smith suggests that the poetic imagination is necessarily delimited by the variety of observations upon which they are based. A certain degree of “triteness” is the risk one necessarily runs by committing oneself to a faithful recording of the natural world and the moral lessons it imparts. Importantly, however, “triteness” doesn’t necessarily indicate the wholesale replication of language; rather, the fidelity of observation simply limits one to small-scale poetic variations on a theme. The tendencies of moths, in other words, circumscribe the boundaries of their metaphorical flexibility.

This redundancy and its attendant aesthetic difficulties manifest themselves not just at the level of figuration, however, but redound to the level of language and syntax. At one point Emily suspiciously points out the similarities between several lines of Burns and Mrs. Talbot’s poem on a hedgehog. Mrs. Talbot mounts a defense:

I assure you I did not [think of Burns’ lines]; nor do I recollect having read these verses of Burns, at least these five years. But nothing is more usual, than for the same train of thought to produce in poetry lines greatly resembling each other, of which I could give you many instances of more importance than my little unintentional plagiarism. I am very well pleased, however, to see this instance of observation. It encourages me to continue our poetical attempts.¹⁹⁴

Despite Mrs. Talbot’s defensiveness regarding Emily’s implicit accusation, she seems to regard this specific “unintentional plagiarism” as a feature of poetry writ large (“many instances of more importance”). It is, in essence, a more strongly worded defense of alleged plagiarism than she ever mustered in the continually amended “Preface” to *Elegiac Sonnets*. But Mrs. Talbot’s defense demands a significant revision of her earlier

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 199. Confronted with her own accusations of plagiarism, Seward frames her borrowings in ironically similar terms in a letter to Thomas Park; they are “involuntary plagiarisms.” See Anna Seward to Thomas Park, January 30, 1800, *Letters*, 273.

claim that Burns is a poet whose work is “so truly the production of original genius.”

Burns’ “original genius” is undoubtedly called into question by the fact that Mrs. Talbot might, without any kind of subconscious assimilation, produce lines so strikingly similar to his.¹⁹⁵ In other words, despite her reliance on the rhetoric of originality, Burns, at best, represents a kind of originality that is in all likelihood itself the product of a certain amount of borrowing. And the very fact that Mrs. Talbot seems heartened by this breakthrough, and “encourage[d] to continue our poetical attempts” suggests that she sees such repetition as a critical feature of poetic production rather than an exception.¹⁹⁶ I suspect it’s no coincidence that Burns, a figure who actively appropriated and standardized a Scottish folk tradition is the figure of “genius” that Mrs. Talbot takes up.

Smith’s repudiation of authorial autonomy accounts for the proliferation of intertextual material throughout *Conversations*. If, as she contends, a certain amount of poetic recurrence is inescapable, then there’s no barrier to incorporating lines of another poet into a work that is ostensibly otherwise yours, or using another’s poem as a template and emending it only slightly. These are indeed both forms that Mrs. Talbot’s poetry takes in *Conversations*; the collection of poems the text catalogs is ultimately a farrago of a wide diversity of adaptations, translations, and variants. For instance, Mrs. Talbot doesn’t hesitate to conclude her poem on “The Early Butterfly” with lines from Thomas Gray. Reflecting on the brevity of the butterfly’s lifespan, the poem concludes by meditating on the same aspect of human life:

Thus unexperienced rashness will presume
On the fair promise of life’s opening day,
Nor dreams how soon the adverse storms may come,

¹⁹⁵ *Conversations*, 197.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

“That hushed in grim repose, expect their evening prey.”¹⁹⁷

Mrs. Talbot both marks off the lines with quotation marks and acts as though she expects her audience to recognize the borrowing (“That last line, you know, is from Gray”).¹⁹⁸ Contextually, the line serves more or less the same function that it does in the source material, Gray’s “The Bard: A Pindaric Ode.” That poem also uses the metaphor of an encroaching storm (in his poem, the “sweeping whirlwind”) to demonstrate the unthinking passivity with which humanity refuses to recognize its own mortality.¹⁹⁹ The line might, then, be simply a more literalized instance of having that “same train of thought,” as Mrs. Talbot experienced with Burns. But the particular poem from which she borrows is significant in this particular instance; “The Bard: A Pindaric Ode,” in Gray’s words, “is founded on a Tradition current in Wales, that EDWARD the First, when he compleated the conquest of that country, ordered all the Bards, that fell into his hands, to be put to death.”²⁰⁰ The very lines that Mrs. Talbot interpolates into “The Early Butterfly” thus concern the memorialization of a poetic figure whose practice relies on historical transmission. So while Mrs. Talbot and Gray share a moment of imaginative concurrence, Smith also makes a sly claim about the nature of poetic production by alluding to a poem mourning the loss of bards.

Elsewhere, the recited compositions of *Conversations* frequently involve the more wholesale appropriation of poems. In these cases Mrs. Talbot characterizes the compositions as “adaptations” that she’s modified to more precisely suit her moralizing purposes, as well as to make them more easily memorizable. Thus in the case of “To the

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Gray, “The Bard,” in *The Works of Thomas Gray* (London: J.F. Dove, 1827), 385.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 383.

Snowdrop,” which Emily is given to recite, Mrs. Talbot informs us that “some of the lines are entirely taken from a little poem, I believe, written by Mr. Gifford, and I adapted them to my purpose, which was for your sister to learn.”²⁰¹ Mrs. Talbot refuse to take credit for the composition itself, but she doesn’t seem entirely willing to grant it to Mr. Gifford, either (“I believe”). Again, the question of authorship is made to seem nebulous and ultimately inconsequential, as Smith also stresses by presenting other poetic fragments that are the product of several stages of historical and linguistic transmission, adding increasing complexity to the cumulative process of composition. “The Grasshopper,” for instance, is a poem that Mrs. Talbot has “altered...a little”(86) from Cowley, who in turn had translated it from Anacreon’s Greek. The chain of transmission tends to stretch farther and farther back into history.

But perhaps the most convoluted instance of poetic transmission and variation occurs when Emily is asked to recite a poem on the subject of a rose. Following her successful recitation, George asks Mrs. Talbot about the provenance of the lines: “You did not make those lines yourself, mamma?” Mrs. Talbot responds by admitting she “found them in some collection of poems, and changed a few of the words, and, I believe, omitted some of the stanzas.”²⁰² The fact of her borrowing without proper attribution seems to be of little or no consequence to Mrs. Talbot. Her offhanded aside, “I believe...” again testifies to this lack of concern about the text’s derivation. The voice that frets about authorship is the voice of the naïve student. Mrs. Talbot readily concedes thereafter that another poem, one intended for George’s memorization, was a work of Cowper’s:

²⁰¹ *Conversations*, 72-3.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 17-8.

You may remember that I mentioned it was written by the author of ‘The Task;’ or rather, he translated it from the Latin of Vincent Bourne, many others of whose small poems he has also translated.²⁰³

Mrs. Talbot shrewdly implicates a poet of Cowper’s stature in a broader history of textual transmission that casts doubt on claims to originality. Acknowledging that the immediate source of her poem is Cowper’s “The Snail,” she frames this appropriation as but one link in a chain of linguistic arrogation. But whereas Cowper’s modification to Bourne’s text is a trans-linguistic process of translation, her subsequent edits replace the final two stanzas of the poem with lines written by Smith. Cowper’s final two stanzas are as follows:

Thus hermit-like, his life he leads,
Nor partner of his banquet needs,
And if he meets one only feeds
The faster.
Who seeks him must be worse than blind,
(He and his house are so combined,)
If, finding it, he fails to find
Its master.²⁰⁴

The snail here is a grotesque figure of rapacious isolation, one defined equally by a sense of entitlement and a resistance to forms of sociality. Ironically confined to his shell as its “master,” the snail nevertheless strikes one as almost frightening insofar as the very presence of others only encourages his desire for gluttonous self-satisfaction. The rhymes “faster” and “master” make this association: his status as “master” feeds his sense of panicked “faster” consumption upon sensing the presence of another. Absent any plainly stated moral, Mrs. Talbot explains her emendations to the text as a way of providing this missing element, making the snail a “less selfish and epicurean animal than he appears in Vincent Bourne” (note again the slippage – it is not Cowper’s poem, but Bourne’s). And

²⁰³ Ibid., 18.

²⁰⁴ William Cowper, “The Snail,” *The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper* (London: Milner and Sowerby, 1870), 475.

indeed, Mrs. Talbot's snail is a model of modest self-sufficiency. Here are the last two stanzas of the snail poem in Mrs. Talbot's iteration:

Thus hermit-like his life he leads
 Alone, on simple viands feeds,
 Nor at his humble banquet needs
 Attendant.
 And though without society,
 He finds 'tis pleasant to be free,
 And that he's blest who need not be
 Dependent.²⁰⁵

Rather than refuse company at his "banquet," Mrs. Talbot's snail merely doesn't require an "attendant." Celebrating solitude as an indication of the snail's "free" nature, the poem teaches the value of a form of independence that needn't devolve into an attitude of "mastery" that's anathema to sociality, precisely the kind of middle-of-the-road, liberal lesson that the genre of late eighteenth-century children's literature demands.

As this poem is an early member in *Conversations*'s collection, its natural historical instruction is geared to a very young child. After all, only a few facts emerge: a snail can adhere to various surfaces, moves about with his own habitation, and will shrink into this abode if touched. Unlike later poems, whose forms grow in complexity of both verse and information, here the facts concerning the snail are attached to the poem through Mrs. Talbot's subsequent conversation. She provides the children an array of information pertaining to the snail in the style of the ancient natural philosophers:

In some parts of Italy they are used as an article of food... They are also prescribed by certain physicians of Switzerland as a remedy for consumptions. But in a garden they are very obnoxious; and if great pains were not taken by gardeners and farmers to destroy these, as well as slugs – an insect of the same species, but without a shell – the labours, not only of the gardener, but often those of the farmer, would be rendered vain.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ *Conversations*, 19.

²⁰⁶ *Conversations*, 19-20.

Mrs. Talbot goes on to enumerate more predators, such the various birds that feed on snails. If not at the same level of detail as some of Darwin's more periphrastic commentary on his poetic subjects, her conversation nevertheless provides for more natural historical detail than her heavily figured, formally simple poetic depiction of the snail allows. A child reader gets a sense of the snail's utility, threat, and even its place on the food chain, but here much of this information is conveyed through attached prose.

The snail is just one of many examples of floral and faunal specimens that appear in *Conversations* both as a collectible object of natural historical study and a collectible fragment of poetic description. And as the poetic forms grow in complexity, so do the natural historical descriptions. The blank verse of "The Heath," for instance, enables Mrs. Talbot to incorporate into the the verse much of the natural history related through prose conversation elsewhere. The poem describes the dominant flora of the heath (furze, Erica) and catalogues the various birds that often populate these particular landscapes (chats, linnets, heath-thrushes). It only makes the turn to moralize in its final lines, in which the poem sees an analog in a particularly resilient parasitic vine (dodder) for the vanities that cling to even those "Towards whom Nature as a step-dame stern / Has cruelly dealt."²⁰⁷ The extensive natural historical description in this fifty three-line poem far outweighs the moral charge, which reads as an afterthought, as though Mrs. Talbot herself were suddenly recalling the stated purpose of her poetic instruction. Her children read the poem in much the same way, and their subsequent commentary revolves around natural history. When Mrs. Talbot attempts to lead conversation to the poem's moral, Emily rejects it as a topic of discussion, beseeching her mother to "Pray tell me rather

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 179.

about birds. I did not know there was a thrush that lives on heaths.”²⁰⁸ As *Conversations* proceeds, the poems become more and more about the direct conveyance and internalization of natural history as a branch of knowledge rather than a means to moral guidance. In other words, the volume grows closer and closer to the sort of collection envisioned by Emily, in which poems and their natural referents are increasingly indistinguishable.

Imitative Organic Form

It now remains to trace out the implications of Smith’s poetics by situating it in the context of Romantic organicism. Whereas organicists generally considered a text organic insofar as its parts bear a certain interdependent relation to the whole, Smith tweaks that model to reflect the variability inherent in textual production and transmission through time. She arrives at a model that is “organic” in its own right, but one that is attuned and indebted to the burgeoning sense of developmental natural history articulated by her poetic mentor Erasmus Darwin.

Uncovering a latent sense of developmental natural history in Charlotte Smith’s poetic treatment of natural history is difficult, as her sonnets, like “Beachy Head,” often turn to the trope of botanical study as a respite from the vicissitudes of human history and personal tragedy, just as her children’s books turn to it for moral edification. Her sonnet “To the goddess of botany,” for instance, posits disciplined botanical study as a bulwark against “Violence and Fraud.”²⁰⁹ A note to the sonnet identifies this position with Rousseau in his *Reveries*, whose study of botany, according to Smith, was occasioned by

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 182.

²⁰⁹ *Poems*, 68.

“the causes that drove him from the society of men.”²¹⁰ Alluding to the suffering she endured as a result of her profligate husband’s extreme debt, she positions herself as the inheritor of similar adversity, claiming that “it has been my misfortune to have endured real calamities that have disqualified me for finding any enjoyment in the pleasures and pursuits which occupy the generality of the world.”²¹¹ To take Smith at her word at these moments, however, would be to miss the fact that botany in her poems does not promise a corrective, abiding stasis; rather, it provides a model of slow, incremental change that nevertheless mounts a defense against personal misfortune and political upheaval.

The final poem of *Conversations*, and the apotheosis of its didactic aims, is the poem “Flora,” Smith’s longest and most detailed catalog of botanical species. Like so many of the other poetic specimens of *Conversations*, “Flora” makes no secret of its poetic debts and residue. Between Mrs. Talbot’s commentary and the notes to the version published in the 1807 collection *Beachy Head, Fables, and Other Poems*, she acknowledges the presence of the usual suspects: Cowper, Thomson, Hayley and Darwin. But Darwin looms largest in a poem that seems so self-consciously modeled on the endless catalogs of *The Loves of the Plants*. And her primary figure in the poem, the titular, personified “Flora,” seated in her “Car” of plant life, appears in *The Temple of Nature*, published a year prior to *Conversations*. Crucially, Darwin’s Flora appears during his narration of “The Origin of Society,” in one of the most explicitly proto-evolutionary moments of the poem:

Yes! smiling Flora drives her armed car
Through the thick ranks of vegetable war;
Herb, shrub, and tree, with strong emotions rise
For light and air, and battle in the skies;

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

Whose roots diverging with opposing toil
 Contend below for moisture and for soil...²¹²

Even as Smith offers botany as a palliative study, Darwin's intertextual presence gestures towards a more disturbed vision of what botany reveals about the order of nature. It might, in fact, be the very sort of protean, competitive proving ground his grandson would imagine over half a century later. Accordingly, Smith's "Flora" concludes by recognizing the mutability of the botanical world that elsewhere seems to augur stability. This recognition, moreover, doesn't necessitate the sacrifice of nature's healing capacity. For the "Mourner" (such as Smith herself), botanical study

woos his grief, and cherishes regret,
 Loving, with fond and lingering pain, to mourn
 O'er joys and hopes that never will return,
 Thou, visionary Power, may'st bid him view
 Forms not less lovely – and as transient too,
 And, while they soothe the wearied Pilgrim's eyes,
 Afford an antepast of Paradise.²¹³

Smith borrows the language of Romanticism to express the "Power" of visible nature made available through botanical observation and recall. These natural "forms," just as the erstwhile "joys and hopes" they serve to supplement, are "transient," both in the sense of seasonal change and, perhaps, broader evolutionary development. Indeed, this aspect of natural forms emerges as the key characteristic rendering them effective in tempering sorrow, as they so neatly mirror the instability of one's emotional composition.

Smith's poetic forms, of course, are no less transient in their provisionality. Indeed, it is at the formal level that Smith intimates a developmental natural history, rather than in the content of the poems. Themselves the products of unique histories of

²¹² Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature* (Baltimore: Bonsal & Niles, Samuel Butler, and M. and J. Conrad & Co., 1804), IV.41-46.

²¹³ *Poems*, 288-9.

transmission and variation, her forms theorize a poetics that privileges incompleteness, hybridization, and change over unity and harmony. Melissa Bailes has recently argued that Seward's attacks on Smith were partially motivated by Smith's conflation of critical and scientific language. For Bailes, Smith's plagiarism represented a hybridity that violated Seward's sense of both the natural and poetic order.²¹⁴ What Bailes doesn't contend, however, is that Smith's poetic project was very much itself *about* reconsidering the poetic object as an organic entity. In this sense, Seward may have been quite right to object to Smith's poetry on the grounds of its rejection of Romantic organicism. Rejecting the notion of the individual poem as a harmonious, self-organizing, purposive collaboration of parts and wholes, Smith offers a vision of the poem as organism whose chief attributes are those most stridently rejected by organicists: incompleteness, imitation, and reproducibility. Poems are indeed akin to organisms, but in a manner that is more reflective of radical theories of development than the transcendental morphology with which organicism is more frequently associated.

Historians of the English organic tradition often gesture towards Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) as an early articulation of the organic ideal. The particular terms of his argument are second nature to post-Romantics; he sets the products of "originality" against those of mere "imitation." Imitations (of both other authors and nature itself) cannot increase the overall stock of knowledge, Young alleges, and must share credit with the original author or scene of nature (as nature consists entirely of originals). We owe the progress of literature instead to the originals, which are the "great Benefactors; they extend the Republic of Letters, and add a new province to its

²¹⁴ Melissa Bailes, "The Evolution of the Plagiarist: Natural History in Anna Seward's Order of Poetics," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 33:3 (2009): 105-126.

dominion.”²¹⁵ More interesting than Young’s argument itself, however, are the metaphorical terms in which Young casts his poetic antagonists. While he often resorts to lauding originals as products of nature opposed to the mechanical processes undergirding imitation, elsewhere he sees originality and imitation as different forms of nature. Most familiarly, “the original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made.”²¹⁶ The germs of more philosophically sophisticated conceptions of the organic are all present in nascent form: self-organization, emergent harmony, spontaneity. The imitator, however, is rendered as something less immediately familiar: a “transplanter of laurels, which sometimes die on removal, always languish in a foreign soil.”²¹⁷ Here the imitator is the agent of a certain form of ecological irresponsibility, wrenching a specimen (the symbol of poetic prowess) from its appropriate environmental context and leaving it to wither in “foreign soil.” Imitation isn’t so much mechanical here as it is a perversion of the natural order, whose representative is the original poet. Young elaborates:

by a spirit of imitation we counteract nature, and thwart her design. She brings us into the world all originals: no two faces, no two minds, are just alike, but all bear nature’s evident mark of separation on them. Born originals, how comes it to pass that we die copies? That meddling ape imitation, as soon as we come to years of indiscretion (so let me speak), snatches the pen, and blots out nature’s mark of separation, cancels her kind intention, destroys all mental individuality; the lettered world no longer consists of singulars, it is a medley, a mass; and a hundred books, at bottom, are but one.²¹⁸

For Young, nature is the realm of well-defined originals. It’s a providential vision of creation in which distinctions between individuals (and, we might say, classes or species)

²¹⁵ Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, ed. Edith J. Morley (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1918), 6-7.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

are rigorously maintained. To disrupt the natural order through imitation, like the transplanter of laurels divorcing a specimen from its proper environment, is to risk blurring natural categories into a chaotic “medley.” Young’s fears, then, largely echo the vision of nature promoted by transmutationists like Erasmus Darwin several decades later, whose particular model of transmutationism insists that nature is indeed “but one” in the sense that it all emerged from a single “filament,” and quite obviously undermines any conception of a natural world in which “nature’s evident mark of separation” is preserved.²¹⁹ Young’s conception of organic originality and relative dismissal of imitation thus inadvertently suggests the possibility to which Smith’s poetry responds: might a self-consciously imitative poetics be the answerable form to developmental natural history?

Of course, all organicist accounts of poetic creation are developmental, but only insofar as they track the completion of a single poetic object. For instance, here is Coleridge’s most well-known formulation of organic form:

the organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one & the same with the perfection of its outward Form.²²⁰

The end to which form aspires is a completed, harmonious whole. Literature, it seems, proceeds, or ought to proceed, according to the laws of nature, but only as it is expressed through an individual organism.²²¹ By contrast, Smith’s organicism refuses any notion of completion or wholeness; poetry is inevitably enmeshed in an ongoing flux that resists

²¹⁹ Again, the most detailed explanation of this process can be found in the *Zoonomia* (1794).

²²⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-19 Vol. I*, ed. R.A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 495.

²²¹ Certain German theorists of the organic, namely Kant and Schiller, also register organic development at the level of the universe, but the universe itself is conceived of in the same manner as the individual organism, not in terms of succession, as we find in Smith.

closure, or the fulfillment of the Coleridgean organic ideal. When Mrs. Talbot recites verse, it isn't with the expectation that the poem has achieved completion of any sort. Rather, it is but one temporary link in a historical, variable chain of development. Smith's sense of poetic development, then, is less mechanically imitative than imitative for the sake of being organic.

If Smith's children's books outwardly look like fairly anonymous examples of the late eighteenth-century children's literature genre, their form conceals a bold vision of nature that Smith only obliquely registered elsewhere. By self-consciously reflecting on the formal practices for which she had been previously maligned, Smith vindicates herself in the unlikeliest of literary settings while describing a Darwinian world of gradual mutability. While students of Smith's *Conversations* certainly took away its "Minor Morals," perhaps they were also impressed with its formal implications – that both poetic and natural collections are necessarily unstable formulations.

A “Mere Pin-Point”: Robert Browning’s Evolutionary *Personae*

"All that seems proved in Darwin's scheme was a conception familiar to me from the beginning: see in 'Paracelsus' the progressive development from senseless matter to organized, until man's 'appearance.'" – Robert Browning to Dr. Frederick James Furnivall, 1881

“Who wants a system on the basis of the four elements, or a book to refute Paracelsus?”
– George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 1874

In Chapter 22 of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, Dorothea approaches Will Ladislaw to inquire about her husband Casaubon’s academic handicap as a non-German speaker. Dorothea fears that Casaubon, unable to engage with contemporary continental thought without the help of translation, will produce substandard work in the eyes of his fellow scholars. Ladislaw confirms her anxieties by arguing for the futility of mounting an argument directly from primary classical texts while ignoring the important work on comparative mythology currently being done abroad: "The subject Mr. Casaubon has chosen is as changing as chemistry: new discoveries are constantly making new points of view. Who wants a system on the basis of the four elements, or a book to refute Paracelsus?"²²² The sixteenth-century physician Paracelsus here comes to rhetorically signify an outmoded system of thought overly indebted to now-obsolete classical knowledge. In the context of the rapidly evolving trans-continental scholarly advances made by nineteenth-century modernity, the thought of a book disputing Paracelsus is self-evidently preposterous.

And yet, Paracelsus’s Victorian afterlife was not limited to Ladislaw’s incredulous mockery but included a lengthy monologue by Robert Browning voiced by the physician himself. To write it was to risk similar derision, and not unlike Ladislaw’s response, many of Browning’s critics reacted negatively to the choice of Paracelsus for

²²² George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Broadview: Peterborough, 2004), 201.

dramatization. While the historical Paracelsus already had a reputation for drunkenness and vice, Browning's critics, like Ladislav, responded even more aggressively to his shortcomings as a man of science, especially when judged by contemporary criteria. An 1847 assessment in the *British Quarterly Review*, for instance, though sympathetic to Browning's early work, nevertheless faults him for choosing a "quack" as his subject.²²³ Similar sentiments were voiced in the *Metropolitan Journal*:

Mr. Browning has chosen his subject badly. Paracelsus was unworthy of him—and in the breast of Paracelsus never for a moment gleamed those high and lofty aspirations ascribed to him by his eloquent defender. Aureolus Philippus, Bombast de Hohenheim Paracelsus, then, was no other than an ignorant, unprincipled, debauched, and abandoned quack-doctor, of Basil, and born at Zurich.²²⁴

Despite Paracelsus's dubious historical reputation as a representative of pseudoscience or the occult, *Paracelsus* (1835) was one of the key texts that Browning would later turn to in an 1881 letter, in an attempt to establish an intellectual continuity with Charles Darwin late in the former's career. The principle piece of evidence, in fact, that Browning cites there to demonstrate his pre-Darwinian affinity for evolutionary thinking is the passage from *Paracelsus* in which the dying doctor attempts to chart what Browning calls in the letter "the progressive development from senseless matter to organized."²²⁵ The strange assumption embedded in such a claim, then, is that despite the sardonic scorn of someone like Ladislav, Browning allegedly expected his readers to both take his *Paracelsus* quite seriously on matters of progressive development as Browning's unlikely conduit.

²²³ E. Moxon, "Robert Browning and the Poetry of the Age," *British Quarterly Review* (November 1847): 496.

²²⁴ [Anonymous], *The Metropolitan Journal* (April 1836): 19–20.

²²⁵ Frederick James Furnivall to Robert Browning, October 11, 1881, in *Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. Thurman L. Hood (New Haven: Yale UP, 1933): 198.

In that letter of 1881, Browning would draw on other poems besides *Paracelsus* to vindicate his Darwinian bona fides – namely “Cleon” and *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Savior of Society*. None of these poems, as I will demonstrate, suggest that Browning had anything more than the most cursory or mistaken sense of Darwinism. But the very fact that Browning chose dramatic monologue as the venue for his evolutionary explorations, I will argue, is key to understanding his chief scientific concerns, something that becomes even more clear in the 1887 poem “With Francis Furini,” Browning’s final major treatment of evolution, and one that cannily links the mode of the dramatic monologue to scientific method.²²⁶ Dramatic monologue afforded Browning a flexible space in which to work out real intellectual problems without accountability, veering between the lyrical and the dramatic modes. But more interestingly, what “Furini” suggests is that dramatic monologue formally embodies one of the key questions Browning had about evolution; namely, how can one confidently embrace such an ambitious theory given the limitations of scientific evidence and observational experience? In other words, Browning’s dramatic monologues are the ideal venue in which to wrestle with both the content and the form of evolutionary theory. Browning may often seem to misunderstand the latest evolutionary trends, but attending to his formal decisions demonstrates the ways in which Browning’s evolutionary imagination was more sophisticated than we may otherwise give him credit for. We might not want an entire book to refute *Paracelsus*, but a dramatic monologue in which a *Paracelsus* (or any historical figure) speaks, as Browning realizes late in his career, might be the ideal formal

²²⁶ As Browning himself wrote before theoretical definitions of “dramatic monologue” were offered, and due to the variance in his poems that arguably fit the mold, I’ll simply abide by Alan Sinfield’s capacious definition: “first-person poems where the speaker is indicated not to be the poet.” See Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Methuen & Co., 1977), 42.

platform from which to voice a critique of scientific method belied by his often erroneous sense of evolutionary theory itself.

Evolution After the Fact: Dramatic Monologue in Retrospect

Importantly, Browning's late-career Darwinian self-defense appears in the context of a letter to Frederick James Furnivall, co-founder and first president of the London-based Browning Society. Furnivall, one of the original architects of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, established his Browning Society in 1881 with Emily Hickey, despite the poet's clear reservations about the project.²²⁷ In the same year Furnivall assembled an extensive bibliography of Browning's reviews, and was establishing himself as the most vigorously proselytizing and active manager of Browning's still-developing reputation.²²⁸ This is all to say that it isn't hard to imagine Browning's declaration of Darwinian allegiance as a shrewd bit of intellectual legacy management directed at one of his most ardent defenders.

But a close inspection of the Furnivall letter reveals something stranger: a complicated, self-contradictory, and volatile relationship with Darwin, one that often demonstrates an inaccurate understanding of natural or sexual selection. Moreover, Browning's claims are grounded in contradictory theories of dramatic monologue, demanding that a reader interpret certain passages as a direct transmission of authorial conviction, and others as the ventriloquized speech of historical personages. The letter makes, essentially, five propositions, some directly pertaining to the science of evolution

²²⁷ See William S. Peterson, *Interrogating the Oracle: A History of the Robert Browning Society* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1969).

²²⁸ The excessive zealotry of Furnivall's efforts were apparent to his contemporaries; one of his correspondents remarked skeptically, "My dear Mr. Furnivall, I think it is 300 years too early for a Browning society." See Furnivall, *How the Browning Society came into being* (Trübner & Co.: London, 1884), 2.

and some only elliptically so. Read alongside the poems to which they make reference, however, they provide a key for understanding Browning's relationship to evolutionary theory through the deliberate medium of the dramatic monologue. The propositions are as follows:

- 1) Readers misread Browning's speaking characters for himself.

Browning's initial defensive gesture in the letter stems from his claim that readers too often assume that the arguments of a character (especially, it seems, in the context of a long monologue) are to be read as though they were Browning's own. To bulwark this contention he offers an unusual piece of evidence: his poem *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Savior of Society* (1871):

Last, about my being 'strongly against Darwin, rejecting the truths of science and regretting its advance' – you only do as I should hope and expect in disbelieving *that*. It came, I suppose, of Hohenstiel-Schwangau's expressing the notion which was the popular one at the appearance of Darwin's book – and you might as well charge Shakespeare with holding that there were men whose heads grew beneath their shoulders, because Othello told Desdemona that he had seen such.²²⁹

While the source of the accusation from which Browning defends himself, as far as I know, has been lost, the poet makes a confident assertion as to where one would get such an ostensibly risible notion. He implies that his Hohenstiel-Schwangau voices ideas hostile to Darwinism, if "popular" in 1859, and thus one might arrive at the incorrect notion that Browning himself shares such a skeptical view. His poems, Browning's analogy argues, are no less dramatic than the plays of Shakespeare, and no one would ever mistake the views of a Shakespearean character for those of their creator. This proposition, obviously, depends on a reading of dramatic monologue that is unqualifiedly *dramatic*.

²²⁹ Furnivall, 198.

2) Browning has demonstrated an understanding of evolutionary principles in his poems, and expects his readers to recognize these moments as reflections of his own convictions.

Obviously, Browning's second claim is potentially, or perhaps inevitably, in conflict with his first. After all, one might recognize a *lack* of evolutionary understanding in *Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. He imagines a sort of clairvoyance by which a reader might instinctively sort out characters into those with whom Browning shares genuine intellectual sympathies, and those with whom he does not:

In reality, all that seems *proved* in Darwin's scheme was a conception familiar to me from the beginning: see in *Paracelsus* the progressive development from senseless matter to organized, until man's appearance (*Part v.*). Also in *Cleon*, see the order of 'life's mechanics,' – and I daresay in many passages of my poetry.²³⁰

There is, it should be noted, considerable hedging in Browning's argument here. All that his poetry reflects is that which has been "proved," a considerably muddy assignation.

But even if he adopts a very limited notion of what Darwin's "scheme" has "proved," he still faults his audience for not recognizing that Paracelsus (decades earlier) was making the same case all along, as was Cleon, as, apparently, were "many" of Browning's characters. Recognizing Paracelsus's evolutionism, it seems, should have clarified Browning's position as to Hohenstiel-Schwangau's alleged non-evolutionism.

3) One must assume evolution to be true, as we always expect the "gaps" of nature to be filled.

This is, though one of the most suggestive, the briefest of Browning's claims in the Furnivall letter, but it comes importantly to bear on the dramatic monologue as a choice of genre:

²³⁰ Ibid.

how can one look at Nature as a whole and doubt that, wherever there is a gap, a 'link' must be 'missing' – through the limited power and opportunity of the looker?²³¹

The first assumption here is a unity of nature, a harmonious whole lacking “gaps.” The second is the fact of these apparent “gaps” perforating not only the existing order of things (i.e. visible species distinctions) but an imbricated chronological record as well. In other words, given the fundamental fact of the “limited power and opportunity of the looker,” as well as the unity of nature, the apprehension of ostensible “gaps” equates to their non-existence. There is an unbroken chain that links all of nature, and as one limit of vision is the way that it is temporally determined and delimited, those “gaps” lead one to necessarily theorize evolutionary change.

4) An involved, active, constant, intelligent act of creation, however, is behind the process. It is not a product or apotheosis of the process.

Far from obviating the need for a deity, Browning's alleged “Darwinism” here amounts to a fairly orthodox version of nineteenth-century theistic evolutionism, though it's one that his own metaphor conspires to subvert:

But go back and back...you find...creative intelligence, acting as matter but not resulting from it. Once set the balls rolling, and ball may hit ball and send any number in any direction over the table; but I believe in the cue pushed by a hand.²³²

The degree to which Browning feels he is departing from Darwin is unclear, but he in any case posits a familiarly immanent, ongoing process of creation through which new species are crafted and proliferate. His billiards image, however, both contradicts that process by relying on a metaphor of chance (“any number in any direction”) and seems to betray some form of affinity with Darwin's *actual* evolutionary principles, which this

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

image seems to better illustrate. Despite this momentary confusion, however, Browning returns to his omnipresent deity by appealing to yet another character's voice:

When one is taunted (as I notice is often fancied an easy method with the un-Darwinized) – taunted with thinking successive acts of creation credible, metaphysics have been stopped short at, however physics may fare: time and space being purely conceptions of our own, wholly inapplicable to intelligence of another kind – with whom, as I made Luria say, there is an ‘everlasting moment of creation,’ if one at all, - past, present, and future, one and the same state. This consideration does not affect Darwinism proper in any degree.²³³

Imagining critics sneering at him for his belief in a continual, renewing creative act, Browning dismisses the idea that the physical sciences can in any sense be brought to bear on questions of theology. The laws of God, he argues, aren't subject to the laws of physics, or biology for that matter, which is why “Darwinism proper” (again, it's hard to tell exactly what this is) is perfectly compatible with what would otherwise seem to be the theory of development that Darwin's natural selection uprooted.

5) Darwin's real shortcoming is that he relies too heavily on Lamarckian principles of change.

If the letter to Dr. Furnivall had given earlier hints that Browning's self-proclaimed understanding of Darwinism was somewhat misinformed, its conclusion makes the case even more vigorously. While Browning's theism does not conflict with the truth of Darwinism, he argues, there are some aspects of Darwin's theory that he simply cannot abide:

²³³ Ibid. Here is the passage from *Luria*:

“The everlasting minute of creation
Is felt there; now it is, as it was then;
All changes at his instantaneous will,
Not by the operation of a law
Whose maker is elsewhere at other work.
His hand is still engaged upon his world –”

See “Luria” in *The Poems of Browning* vol. 2, ed. John Woolford and Daniel Karlin (Routledge: New York, 2014): 230-235.

But I do not consider that his case as to the changes in organization, brought about by desire and will in the creature, is proved. Tortoises never saw their own shells, top or bottom, nor those of their females, and are diversely variegated all over, each species after its own pattern. And the insects; this one is coloured to escape notice, this other to attract it, a third to frighten the foe – all out of one brood of caterpillars hatched in one day. NO – I am incredulous.²³⁴

To what argument in Darwin is Browning referring? The most plausible answer is the moment late in the *Origin* where he politely concedes the possibility of some Lamarckian change transpiring in nature. And yet Browning seems to regard this as a major component of Darwin's theory. The examples he proffers muddy the waters even further: even if a tortoise were to observe its own shell or those of its fellow tortoises, in what sense would that speak to evolutionary change in accordance with "desire and will"? And neither does his entomological argument have anything to do with evolutionary change brought on through intent. Rather, Browning is here attacking a kind of fallacious post-hoc reasoning about fitness that attempts to account for local variation. Not only does Browning demonstrate a poor comprehension of Darwinism, his polemical targets are wildly off-base or irrelevant.

Browning, over the course of the letter, shuttles between questions of genre and form (the interest in speakers and their relation to the poet) and questions of science (his disputations about desire, will, etc.). But what he makes clear is that extracting from one of Browning's monologues the poet's intellectual position on a question of science requires a keen sense of just *who* is being made to speak. Since Robert Langbaum's 1957 *The Poetry of Experience* inaugurated a series of critical conversations centered on what we loosely label "dramatic monologue," a rigorous distinction between the speaker and poet has been fundamental to our understanding of both the form and its functions. For

²³⁴ Ibid.

Langbaum, the dramatic monologue famously works to issue a moral challenge to its readers, who waver between attitudes of sympathy and condemnatory judgment towards the thoroughly fictionalized, and often historicized, speaker.²³⁵ A. Dwight Culler distinguishes Browning's dramatic monologues from those of Arnold and Tennyson by a similar calculus: "Far from having any inclination to enter into the experience of others, [Arnold and Tennyson] tended rather to shrink from experience, and the characters they created are largely versions of the self." In contrast, Browning "attempts to enter the subjectivity of others."²³⁶ J. Hillis Miller would go yet a step further, arguing that Browning lacks a coherent self to begin with, and thus outsources all his (non)subjectivity to his role-playing speakers: "Browning has no separate life of his own because he lives his life in his poetry."²³⁷ As Miller dismisses any notion of unified subjectivity, it is impossible to conceive of the dramatic monologue as a reliable reflection of the poet, as this reliable reflection is itself fictive. In other words, all these critics concur in that Browning is at best an elusive presence in his dramatic figures even as he is their necessary source.

Attempts at closing the gap between the subjective Romantic lyric and the ventriloquism of dramatic monologue have been few and far between. One such position can be found described T.S. Eliot, whose essay "The Three Voices of Poetry" seeks partly to distinguish the characteristics of dramatic monologue from that of the traditional drama. In effect, Eliot argues that the dramatist is formally bound to vary his style

²³⁵ See Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, (New York: Random House, 1957).

²³⁶ A. Dwight Culler, "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue," *PMLA* 90 (1975), 368.

²³⁷ J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Chicago: U of Illinois Press, 1963), 102.

dependent on the character speaking; each, in his words, has “claims upon the author.”²³⁸

The monologist, however, is freed from such formal strictures, but in voicing a single person, “The author is just as likely to identify the character with himself, as himself with the character: for the check is missing that will prevent him from doing so – and that check is the necessity for identifying himself with some other character replying to the first.”²³⁹ Without any other options for self-identification, the voice of the dramatic monologue, especially with regard to Browning, is more often than not “the voice of the poet.”²⁴⁰ What initially seems to be a formal limit on the part of the drama turns out to be a “check” that prevents the author from excessive identification with any one figure, a “check” that prevents, essentially, the dramatic monologue.

Eliot’s view of dramatic monologue as veering alarmingly close to a historically veiled Romantic lyric is certainly the exception to the rule. Deborah Forbes, for instance, despite going to far as acknowledging that “poems” (namely dramatic monologues) “that claim to separate the poet and the speaker are threatened by the propensity of these two individuals to collapse into each other,” nevertheless concedes that the poet is accessible only by a dubiously autobiographical process of determining what is *not* the poet in the speaking character, “a chart[ing] of his standard deviation.”²⁴¹ And Britta Martens, in a study otherwise interested in tracing Browning’s affinity for certain aspects of Romantic poetics, maintains that “Browning emphatically did not want to be equated with his dramatic speakers,” and rejected any suggestion these poems equated to “disguised self-

²³⁸ T.S. Eliot, “The Three Voices of Poetry,” in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1943), 103.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Deborah Forbes, *Sincerity’s Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 83-86.

expression.”²⁴² Browning’s own comments on *Paracelsus* make no attempt to link his “performance” with a personal poetic voice, and yet he still discourages any description of his work as “dramatic.” The preface to *Paracelsus* eschews the label by appealing to the poem’s fundamental lack of action, or what he calls the “external machinery of incidents.”²⁴³ What he will offer instead is a subtler poetry that represents not the events that drive shifts in mood, but only their effects on a particular consciousness: “I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout.”²⁴⁴ The “dramatic,” then, is here assumed to signify the incident that precedes feeling rather than a particular kind of interaction between characters, or even between poet and reader. Browning’s description calls to mind Tennyson’s description some thirty-five years later of his monodrama *Maud*: “different phases of passion in one person take the place of different characters.”²⁴⁵ The “mood,” however, remains distinctly not that of Browning, something he would aver more forcefully in the preface to *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), in which he declares that the poems in the volume are “always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine.”²⁴⁶ And in a later letter to Wilfred Meynell, Browning would describe his monologues as spoken by “some actor in it, not by the poet

²⁴² Britta Martens, *Browning, Victorian Poetics, and the Romantic Legacy* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 2-9.

²⁴³ “Preface” to *Paracelsus*, in *The Poems of Browning*, vol. 1, 113.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Qtd. in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 515.

²⁴⁶ Robert Browning, “Advertisement,” in *The Poems* vol. 1, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 347. “Browning’s “Essay on Shelley”(1851) offers a relevant distinction. “Subjective” poets (Shelley being the example) are visionaries that cannot be considered apart from their biography. The work of the “objective” poet, on the other hand, is one for whom “the work speaks for itself.” Though Browning doesn’t admit it, his theorization of his own poetry aligns him clearly with the latter camp, against what we’d call a “Romantic” sensibility.

himself.”²⁴⁷ There is, then, a gradual semantic drift in terms of what constitutes the “dramatic” for Browning. It’s not as though there are a great deal of “events” in the poems of *Dramatic Lyrics*, but his new insistence on their “dramatic” nature serves to underscore one of the implicit points of the *Paracelsus* preface: that the speaker should not be construed as Browning. It was a concern particularly for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who feared that her soon-to-be husband’s personality would forever be obscured (along with the poems’ meaning more generally) due to his commitment to what she called the “dramatic medium.” In addition to it being “too difficult for the common reader to analyse, and to discern between the vivid and the earnest,” she complained that “no one can know you worthily by those poems....*Now* let us have your own voice speaking of yourself.”²⁴⁸

Browning’s letter to Furnivall is a kind of belated concession to his wife’s concerns, insofar as he attempts to soften some of his earlier claims regarding the purely externalized, distinct nature of his speakers. It turns out that on the subject of evolution, his *Paracelsus* and *Cleon* *were* allegedly Browning’s “own voice speaking.” The moment at which Browning concedes a more traditionally lyrical approach to his monologues is coincident with a confrontation with Darwinism, suggesting not only a late-century anxiety about the accuracy of the evolutionary model, but the importance of poetic form with regard to Browning’s evolutionary speculations. First, however, I want to address the substance of these speculations by looking at Browning’s first confrontations with evolution in *Paracelsus* and “*Cleon*,” two poems whose evolutionary visions betray Browning’s later sense of his own Darwinian divination, but also demonstrate the

²⁴⁷ “The ‘Detachment’ of Browning,” in *The Athenaeum* (January 1890): 18.

²⁴⁸ Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Robert Browning, May 26, 1846, in *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: 1845-1846*, vol. 2, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899), 179.

seriousness with which he attempted, from his earliest poetry, to reconcile his Christian faith with some form of developmental change.

The Early Browning: Pre-Darwinian Visions

Paracelsus was Browning's first published poem, and its eponym proved to be a far more compelling subject for his early critics than his more recent ones. This extends to an interest in the poem's evolutionary imagination, which has yet to receive a protracted treatment despite the considerable lines in the poem dedicated to its description. The editor of a 1911 edition of the poem, for instance, calls the passages concerning evolutionary progression to "contain some of the most beautiful passages in the English language, as well as a foreshadowing of the science which to-day is dawning on the horizon of humanity."²⁴⁹ Perhaps due to the fact that evolutionary science is no longer one that is "dawning," these passages have largely dropped out of critical discussions of the poem.

Paracelsus, like Matthew Arnold's later *Empedocles on Etna* (1852), takes the form of a dramatic monologue punctuated by songs and dialogues voiced by secondary characters. It is these colleagues that the dying Paracelsus addresses at the end of the poem, when he embarks on a long speech that he suggests is the voice of God speaking through him. The speech, widely praised by Browning's nineteenth-century critics, proposes a Christian-inflected, broadly evolutionary history. But though Browning would claim *Paracelsus* as the prime exhibit when mounting his Darwinian defense to Dr.

²⁴⁹ Christina Pollock Denison, *The Paracelsus of Robert Browning* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1911), 221.

Furnivall, the poem in no way anticipates Darwin's disinterested natural selection.²⁵⁰

Rather, it promotes an immanent divine presence as the evolutionary mechanism:

...Thus He dwells in all,
From life's minute beginnings, up at last
To man the consummation of this scheme
Of being, the completion of this sphere
Of life.²⁵¹

This is a familiar nineteenth-century evolutionary model, of which Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History* is the most famous example. Theologian Baden Powell (who would go on to defend *Vestiges*) had also made a less detailed, but similarly charged argument in his 1838 *Connexion of Natural and Divine Truth*. He conceded that geological history is characterized by "a series of creations," and "the slow and gradual introduction of each new species as the older disappeared."²⁵² But at the same time, "the visible order and adaptations of the natural world" are legible as the "created manifestations of the Divine perfections."²⁵³ Comparable theories would only become more popular as the nineteenth century continued: the American botanist Asa Gray and Archbishop Frederick Temple are two other notable proponents of divinely-managed progress. Theistic evolution, in other words, was in the air, and Browning would seem an early adherent.

Accordingly, his Paracelsus refuses to articulate a naturalistic evolutionary mechanism. But Browning is far more reluctant than his fellow theists to directly confront the question of morphological evolution: his model is either explicitly spiritual,

²⁵⁰ It's worth noting that Browning himself asks for Paracelsus to be taken seriously as a figure of science, and increasingly over successive editions. The 1835 edition reads, "[moderns] have confirmed Paracelsus's title to be the father of modern chemistry." By 1849 Browning has added that "the title...is indisputable." See *The Poems of Browning*, 322.

²⁵¹ All quotations from *Paracelsus* from *Robert Browning's Poetry*, ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer (New York: Norton, 2007), V. 681-685.

²⁵² Baden Powell, *Connexion of Natural and Divine Truth* (London: John W. Parker, 1838), 149.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 118.

or described in terms designed to only gently suggest the possibility of actual species transformation. Indeed, the grand climax of his evolutionary narrative is not the “man” referred to above, but “Man”:

With apprehension of his passing worth,
Desire to work his proper nature out,
And ascertain his rank and final place,
For these things tend still upward, progress is
The law of life, man is not Man as yet.²⁵⁴

The poem invites one to consider the distinction between “man” and the final “Man” as one between biological and spiritual entity. A proper physical nature, in other words, precedes a proper sacred one. Paracelsus thus tasks himself with charting two concurrent but distinct evolutionary processes, and part of the poem’s imprecision arises from the way Paracelsus’s Christianity sits alongside his evolutionism. God inheres in nature in order to shepherd the evolutionary process, leading inevitably to “the consummation of this scheme,” which is successively the appearance of *homo sapiens* and then heavenly salvation, what Paracelsus calls “the happiness in store afar.”²⁵⁵ The primordial imperfections he mentions might be read as early, simple organisms, or alternatively as indications of post-lapsarian fallenness, moral attributes that must develop slowly over time in order for mankind to evolve spiritually. The poem hints at this tension early on, when Paracelsus describes his knowledge as

uncomprehended by our narrow thought,
But somehow felt and known in every shift
And change in the spirit, - nay, in every pore
Of the body, even.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ *Paracelsus*, V. 739-743.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 683, 650.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 639-642.

The implication is that the evolutionary trajectory Paracelsus will trace is something felt in both spirit and in one's physical form, though the poem can never bring itself to outright propose the evolution of bodies.

The figures that Paracelsus uses to illustrate his vision demonstrate the tension between heavenly and bodily transformation. Despite the unequivocally teleological elements of his historical model, Paracelsus relies on images of circularity to describe his vision. For instance, Paracelsus claims that the successive evolutionary steps leading to man's emergence only demonstrate their importance retrospectively, as they are revealed to be crucial precursors to the "consummation": "Illustrated all the inferior grades, explains / Each back step in the circle."²⁵⁷ Paracelsus's rhetorical reliance on circular figures would seem to contravene his progressive aims, insofar as a circle implies return. But Paracelsus's "consummation" is at once a return when you consider the theological narrative that, however uneasily, sits aside his evolutionary story. The apex of evolutionary progression, salvation, is a typological repetition, and thus, the circle comes to be more figuratively representative than the linearity of a strictly formal, biological evolution.

In discussing the operation of evolution, Paracelsus's difficulty in discussing mankind without alluding specifically to a divergent biological past leads him to fall back on the usefully diaphanous idea of "attributes":

[Man's] attributes had here and there
 Been scattered o'er the visible world before,
 Asking to be combined, dim fragments meant
 To be united in some wondrous whole,
 Imperfect qualities throughout creation,
 Suggesting some one creature yet to make,
 Some point where all those scattered rays should meet

²⁵⁷ Ibid., V. 715-6.

Convergent in the faculties of man.²⁵⁸

What antecedes humankind is not necessarily other distinct organisms, but rather a collection of “attributes” that are all “imperfect” insofar as they remain discrete. The visual opposite of the branching, tree-like patterns made familiar by Darwin and Chambers, the shape of evolutionary progress in *Paracelsus* more resembles a broom, a set of numerous initial attributes that converge over time rather than radiate outward. The end of evolution is not an entangled bank, but a monolithic and dominant humanity.

Paracelsus’s anthropocentric model is a far cry from Darwin’s heretical relegation of mankind to an incidental and temporary evolutionary endpoint. As Paracelsus gives his concluding speech, the variety of other animals and organisms that beginning of his own final oration, fall away as he describes a cosmic developmental history. Where his friend Festus’s preceding lyric takes careful note of the “shrew-mouse with pale throat,” the “speckled stoat,” and the “quick sandpipers,” Paracelsus’s evolutionary oration largely disregards the non-human, save the oblique suggestion that “life’s minute beginnings” might be something other than a morally stunted or immature man.²⁵⁹ In fact, the main use Paracelsus has for the non-human is as a blank screen upon which we project our own *prosopopoeia*. Following humankind’s initial emergence,

Man, once descried, imprints for ever
His presence on all lifeless things: the winds
Are henceforth voices, wailing or a shout,
A querulous mutter or a quick gay laugh,
Never a senseless gust now ban is born.
The herded pines commune and have deep thoughts,
A secret they assemble to discuss.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 685-692.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 437-9, 682.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 719-725.

Mankind's inception is concurrent with that of the language of personification, and hence a reinforcement of the rest of creation's "lifelessness." Requiring the imprimatur of human language to be worthy of recognition, Paracelsus's nature does little more than "fill us with regard for man."²⁶¹ This alienation from the surrounding environment speaks to the way in which Paracelsus's scheme refuses to link mankind's development to anything outside mankind, a move contrary to the spirit of the theistic naturalist tradition to which the poem seems to allude.

If one decides to be sympathetic to the Browning of 1881, however, there are more prescient glimpses of evolutionism in the *Paracelsus*. For instance, his concession at one point that development is guided by "Power – neither put forth blindly, nor controlled / Calmly by perfect knowledge"²⁶² seems to leave room for non-divine, human agency in the evolutionary process – a kind of transcendent Lamarckianism. At another point, Paracelsus seems to grasp something of the nature of extinction and the principle of natural selection. His sense of "human history" is "a scene / Of degradation, ugliness and tears, The record of disgraces best forgotten."²⁶³ Paracelsus does admit that the "dear child / Of after-days" will look on the past so as to see their own glorious moment in full relief, but his conception of a "record of disgraces" does seem to anticipate Darwinian notions of extinction, or the disappearance of unfit traits (though of course, the scale of "human history" is under-defined).²⁶⁴ Regardless, any reading of *Paracelsus* that tries to locate the Darwinism that Browning later stood by is bound to be a strained one. The text

²⁶¹ Ibid., 738.

²⁶² Ibid., 693-4.

²⁶³ Ibid., 812-4.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 826-7.

is more accurately described as a *mélange* of historical models, most theologically-inflected, others more indebted to contemporary naturalistic science.

But if we consider the historical context of the dramatic figure of Paracelsus (Browning's own reservation about the term "dramatic" aside), the jumbled evolutionary model sketched out here seems to serve a very specific purpose. Paracelsus is a figure historically situated between an era of untroubled religious faith and the rise of empirical science. Browning's poetic discussions of evolution, the impending paradigm shift of his own age, often emerge out of moments of liminality or historical transition, and comes to stand in for a broader shift in intellectual history. If nothing else, we can say that in this sense Paracelsus exemplifies the urgency with which Browning felt the implications of an evolutionary *Weltanschauung*.

Similarly, one of Browning's other explicit treatments of evolution, "Cleon" (1855), gives voice to an artist poised between pagan classicism and the dawn of Christianity, Hellenism and Hebraism. First published in *Men and Women*, the poem features a single speaker, Cleon, a Greek poet from the early years of the first century. He speaks in reply to a series of queries from Protus, a political leader and patron, that address their mutual fear of death and their anxieties over their respective legacies. In the waning days of classical Greco-Roman culture, Cleon feels his classical inheritance as increasingly moribund, and to this end the poem is often read in conjunction with Matthew Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna."²⁶⁵ But whereas "Empedocles" ends on a note of unremitting despair (or as Arnold would describe it in his 1853 "Preface," "a

²⁶⁵ See, for instance, Adrienne Munich's "Emblems of Temporality in Browning's 'Cleon,'" *Browning Institute Studies* 6 (1978), 117-136, Young Lee's "The Human Condition: Browning's 'Cleon,'" *Victorian Poetry* 7:1 (1969), 56-62, and John Coates' "Two Versions of the Problem of the Modern Intellectual: 'Empedocles on Etna' and 'Cleon,'" *Modern Language Review* 79:4 (1984), 769-782.

continuous state of mental distress”), “Cleon” offers a sense of hope by virtue of its ironic conclusion. After Cleon laments the ostensible non-existence of “Some future state...Unlimited in capability / For joy” he ridicules his contemporary St. Paul, a “barbarian Jew,” for preaching a doctrine that “could be held by no sane man.”²⁶⁶ Cleon, in his adherence to pagan philosophy, is blind to his own opportunity for salvation that lies with St. Paul’s “secret.”²⁶⁷ But Cleon’s longing for “some future state” also gestures towards the poem’s evolutionary concerns, which are, again, at the forefront of a poem about transition itself.

This transition is one of cultural decline, as well as the impending historical deaths of the poem’s chief actors. Faced with both these specters, we find out early that Cleon and his patron have both erected vast edifices (the latter literally) intended to provide the illusion of eternal life. Protus has constructed a vast tower, not “for mere work’s sake” but in the “hope / Of some eventual rest a-top of it.”²⁶⁸ Rejecting any Carlylean notion of happiness in labor, Cleon claims that Protus has built his tower instead for the “eventual element of calm,” and an implicit sense of mastery.²⁶⁹ Cleon too has insured himself against annihilation, by creating a vast corpus of artwork in mediums as diverse as sculpture, poetry, and music. “In brief, all arts are mine,” he states.²⁷⁰ It is precisely Cleon’s ability to master all arts that leads him into an extensive consideration about his historical moment, and the relative skill of his artistic forebears, that sheds light on the workings of evolutionary historical progress.

²⁶⁶ All quotations from “Cleon” from *Robert Browning’s Poetry*, ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer (New York: Norton, 2007), 325-7, 343, 353.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-3.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

Cleon's sense of history, which initially seems to oppose that of Paracelsus, sees progression as a process of variegation rather than consolidation. According to Cleon, modern man is a jack of all trades, yet master of none:

We of these latter days, with greater mind
Than our forerunners, since more composite,
Look not so great beside their simple way,
To a judge who only sees one way at once,
One mind-point and no other at a time, –
Compares the small part of a man of us
With some whole man of the heroic age,
Great in his way – not ours, nor meant for ours.²⁷¹

Cleon theorizes an earlier age of man, in which one's scope of accomplishments was small, but the level of refinement in that particular art was extremely polished. The principle that can account for the emergence of a Cleon, who possesses "all arts," is a process of "composition." In some sense Cleon's history anticipates the evolution promulgated by Herbert Spencer five years later: "a change from an incoherent homogeneity to a coherent heterogeneity."²⁷² The rule that governs the universe for Spencer is a gradual process of both integration *and* differentiation. It's a form of organicism, and Cleon's modern man is a sort of organic being, whose parts all operate for the sake of the whole. For him, man is

Intended to be viewed eventually
As a great whole, not analyzed to parts,
But each part having reference to all.²⁷³

History as the emergence of organic entities entails not only differentiation, but the integrative processes in which the *Paracelsus* is so interested. "Cleon" conceives of a

²⁷¹ Ibid., 64-71.

²⁷² See Herbert Spencer, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1870) Similarly, "Cleon's evolutionary attitudes have been linked to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the "Law of Complexity-Consciousness," which states that matter both becomes increasingly complex and increasingly conscious over vast timescales. See Guerin's "Browning's Cleon: A Teilhardian View."

²⁷³ "Cleon," 76-8.

more particular human history of the classical past and works to align it with *Paracelsus*'s broader, universal history. In a passage that echoes particularly sonorously of *Paracelsus*, Cleon asserts that modern man is a "combination" of the initial "perfect separate forms" of mankind – those predecessors with deeply specialized skills.²⁷⁴ But whereas Paracelsus sees this convergence of higher attributes as the consummation of human evolution, Cleon yearns for a return to mankind's mindless, primordial roots.

To illustrate his position, Cleon puts forward a sort of thought experiment. He asks Protus to imagine that Zeus could show him "all earth's tenantry, from word to bird" before man's appearance.²⁷⁵ He claims that Protus would "have seen them perfect, and deduced / The perfectness of others yet unseen."²⁷⁶ This perfection is chiefly a matter of environmental fitness. In a passage reminiscent of Paley's *Natural Theology*, Cleon records the seeming perfection with which various creatures make their way through the world:

All's perfect else: the shell sucks fast the rock,
The fish strikes through the sea, the snake both swims
And slides, forth range the beasts, the birds take flight,
Till life's mechanics can no further go-
And all this joy in natural life is put
Like fire from off [Zeus's] finger into each,
So exquisitely perfect is the same.²⁷⁷

Cleon offers a portrait of a natural world in which each creature is fit for its particular mode of transport, all of which is suffused with an unthinking, unselfconscious "joy." But there is a seeming limit to this perfection – "life's mechanics." The animal world is fundamentally mechanical, lacking the higher consciousness and self-awareness that

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 89-91.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 190.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 192-3.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 199-205.

exists in man. This is precisely the “else” to which Cleon is referring in the first line quoted above; one could conceive of an absence of self-awareness as an imperfection. So would it not, challenges Cleon, behoove Zeus to grant some self-consciousness to his creation? And this is exactly man’s role. If animal nature is perfect as “mere matter,” then a greater perfection will be reserved for man in the form of higher thought.

But just as Cleon’s account begins to sound like the ascendant path of *Paracelsus*, he pivots, suggesting that Protus “hadst more reasonably said: / ‘Let progress end at once.’”²⁷⁸ Cleon’s sense of evolutionary progression, leaving the “lower and unconscious forms of life,” only appears to be a forward motion: “we called it an advance.”²⁷⁹ And this is because self-consciousness enables us to perceive the unlimited possibilities for joy that the world offers, and this knowledge, in turn, stimulates desires mankind is incapable of fully indulging or satisfying. The needs of the “souls” gifted to humanity outpace “life” itself. And this is especially true given the simple fact of mortality, “our bounded physical recipiency.”²⁸⁰ Progression is ultimately regressive, then, a boundedness that imposes itself through the very means of what we consider to be the liberating power of self-consciousness. It is the unthinking animal life that offers an untroubled route to joy in life.

By voicing this evolutionary pessimism through Cleon, a pagan, Browning is partly setting the stage for his grand ironic reveal: the fact that Cleon knows of, and rejects, Pauline teachings, which would solve his fundamental dilemma of unlimited possibilities for joy in an essentially limited world. But if Browning’s contemporary reader is meant to recognize Cleon as misguided, or at least a blinkered victim of his age,

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 221-2.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 226-7.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 246.

then why does Browning point to the passage on “life’s mechanics” alongside *Paracelsus* as evidence of his Darwinism *avant la lettre*? After all, the passage in question seems to owe far more to discourses of natural theology and religion. It testifies to the “perfection” of creation in the mode of Paley, advances the notion of special creation à la Georges Cuvier - though with the curious exception of mankind - and through this exception emphasizes humanity’s special status as something other than “mere matter.” The entire model hinges on a distinct ontological separation between the human and animal worlds. In other words, Cleon ruefully admits a form of evolution that loosely approximates that of Paracelsus (and certainly doesn’t bear any resemblance to Darwinism), until the point at which he is unable to see the divine heights to which progress might take humanity.

“Cleon” is both a reiteration and modification of the position staked out in *Paracelsus*. By extolling the scientific virtues of the latter, Browning implicitly lends the latter a certain amount of authority, and by stressing the pre-Christian nature of the former, he provides a coherent explanation for his failure to reach the same conclusions. But the refinement of Cleon’s thought - his ability to think more deeply about questions of differentiation, integration, and organicism – suggest an ongoing intellectual engagement with evolution on Browning’s part, if one that still is a far cry from anticipating anything we would recognize as Darwinism. (After all, secular visions of progress more generally are what Browning takes aim at in *Cleon* – lacking Christianity, Cleon is unable to understand why progress will bring him something other than frustrated ambition.) And again, this engagement takes the form of a historically-situated dramatic monologue, which, in addition to providing resonant historical armature, suggests an unwillingness to confront the issue in something recognizable as a personal

poetic voice, a relinquishing of authority through both person and history. Only towards the end of Browning's career would the dramatic monologue retroactively emerge as a coherent and concurrent poetic and scientific strategy.

The Later Browning: Poetic Form and Evolutionary Critique

In the Furnivall letter, Browning seeks to distance himself from an unspecified claim embedded in *Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society*, alleging that the latter was intended to represent the dominant evolutionary view in 1859, at the "appearance of Darwin's book." For the first time in Browning's corpus, his character's espousal of a version of evolution could plausibly take the *Origin* into account. The poem imagines the emperor Louis Napoleon, who had just been released from German captivity when Browning wrote the poem, encountering a young woman in Leicester Square. Sitting down with her over a cigar, he makes some initially cryptic sketches on a napkin and proceeds to lay out the fundamental guiding principles of his life and political career in a peroration serving as an apologia to his political critics. Browning's Napoleon III is a dispassionate conservative, one who seeks to maintain the status quo for seemingly no other reason than that it's the status quo. As Edward Dowden notes in his unflattering take on the poem, "There is a spirit of conservatism, like that of Edmund Burke, which has in it a wise enthusiasm, we might almost say a wise mysticism. Browning's Prince is not a conservator possessed by this enthusiasm."²⁸¹ Rather, a refusal to embrace radical reform or change is simply the path of least resistance. "I like to use the thing I find," he remarks, "Rather than strive at unfound novelty: / I make the best of the old, nor try for

²⁸¹ Edward Dowden, *Robert Browning* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1902), 298.

new.”²⁸² He justifies the apparent atrophy of his imperial tenure by means of an appeal to cosmic order. Affirming the existence of a deistic God that “Does not interpose,” Hohenstiel-Schwangau argues that He’s nevertheless imprinted each element of creation with a purpose, but also with the free will to disregard that purpose, or fulfill it through any chosen means.²⁸³ He uses the metaphor of a courier, who, sent to deliver a message, is free to either snub his duties “at his peril,” and thereby risk punishment, or go about his journey in any way he sees fit – “stick[] to the straight road” or try “the crooked path.”²⁸⁴ The trick here is that Hohenstiel-Schwangau is explicitly both dispatcher and courier in this trope – he must act in accordance with God’s assigned purpose, but so too does he expect the polity he governs to act in accordance with his own. “You see?” he asks his interlocutor, “Exactly thus men stand to God: / I with my courier, God with me.”²⁸⁵ Because the figures of God and man merge in the emperor, he’s able to provide double justification for his actions. Like God, he maintains a kind of order at a distance, like man, he works to achieve his prescribed purpose, which is to maintain that same kind of order. He claims to have acted “to just one end: / Namely, that the creature I was bound / To be, I should become, nor thwart at all / God’s purpose in creation.”²⁸⁶

When Hohenstiel-Schwangau turns explicitly to the natural sciences, however, it becomes evident that both the physical universe and human society are more vulnerable to ruptures than he previously lets on. “God’s purpose in creation” contains breaks, fissures, and revolutions fundamentally at odds with what the emperor sees as his

²⁸² All quotations from *Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society* from *The Complete Works of Robert Browning Vol. X*, ed. Susan Crawl and Roman A. King, Jr. (Athens: Ohio UP, 1998), 265-8.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 154, 150.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 155-6.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 245-8.

determined lot. If one “ask[s] geologists,” he claims, one sees the record of an earth periodically riven by geological catastrophe, but leaving “New teeming growth, surprises of strange life / Impossible before, a world broke up / And re-made, order gained by law destroyed.”²⁸⁷ He envisions a periodic destruction of the basic natural order, to be replaced by new sets of governing laws. But Hohenstiel-Schwangau invokes such catastrophism only to draw attention to the idea that such moments are the exception; the world, both politically and naturally, tends towards a state of relative “immobility,” a state for which he sees himself as the appropriate sort of potentate.²⁸⁸ At this point in the poem then, the prince seems to harness the language of the natural sciences as vindication for a political position, an appeal to the state of nature to justify his rule.

But later, Hohenstiel-Schwangau resuscitates the discourse of nascent evolutionary science for political purposes distinct from the fantasy of stability he earlier articulates. Borrowing a strategy from Meredith's *Modern Love*, Browning's speaker reinscribes the historical evolutionary narrative (though one of a decidedly teleological bent), onto his own life so as to present both himself and the liberal state as its progressive endpoint. Man, Hohenstiel-Schwangau argues,

tends to freedom and divergency
 In the upward progress, plays the pinnacle
 When life's at greatest (grant again the phrase!
 Because there's neither great nor small in life.)²⁸⁹

Hohenstiel-Schwangau attaches evolutionism to theories of stadial historical-political development that regard all civilizations as striving towards industry, commercialism, and the free marketplace. At the same time, and much in the manner of the confusion in

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 331, 341-3.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 333.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 967-70.

the Furnivall letter, this theoretical claim is directly adjacent to a conflicting Darwinian claim: that what development teaches is an erasure of hierarchy, the disavowal of the categories “great” and “small.” In effect, Hohenstiel-Schwangau's incompatible models are a reflection of the difficulties of his political argument; he's both apogee and everyman. Even when he explicitly enumerates his (very singular) chain of biological development, he takes care to emphasize the importance of checking one's natural pride in the face of one's evolutionary ancestors.

Will you have why and wherefore, and the fact
Made plain as pikestaff?” modern Science asks.
“That mass man sprung from was a jelly-lump
Once on a time; he kept an after course
Through fish and insect, reptile, bird, and beast,
Till he attained to be an ape at last
Or last but one. And if this doctrine shock
In aught the natural pride”...Friend, banish fear,
The natural humility replies!²⁹⁰

Hohenstiel-Schwangau's dual visions are manifest throughout the entire passage; he can shake neither the language of progress nor that of heterarchy. Humanity “attained to be an ape,” and yet the emperor's reluctance to name “man” directly at the end of his chain, and the consideration implied by the repetition of “last,” suggests that he maintains reservations about an unambiguous vision of improvement. His punning on “mass man,” moreover, implies a collective evolutionary path for humankind that he personally transcends elsewhere in the poem. And “natural humility”'s response is ambiguous enough to accommodate different evolutionary models: either one ought to banish fear so as to be comfortable in a natural world with neither “great” nor small,” or because mankind still occupies a preeminent position despite the doctrine's implications. After all,

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 985-993.

if the feeling of humility comes naturally, perhaps it can still distort mankind's sense of itself in the cosmos.

After his implicit nods to a more rigorously Darwinian conception of development, Hohenstiel-Schwangau increasingly tends towards a progressive model to justify his reign, in effect regarding himself as the natural embodiment of both historical and biological evolution even as he claims that he is still an “embryo potentate.”²⁹¹

There's a pragmatic argument here: Hohenstiel-Schwangau argues that a king ought to have been a “cobbler once” so as to better understand his more humble constituents.²⁹²

Better yet, a king that has passed through every social strata: “I like the thought [God] should have lodged me once / I' the hole, the cave, the hut, the tenement. / The mansion and the palace...”²⁹³ The language here is a strange fusion of both social class and human history that he then follows even further into the biological:

Do I refuse to follow farther yet
I' the backwardness, repine if tree and flower,
Mountain or streamlet were my dwelling place
Before I gained enlargement, grew mollusc?²⁹⁴

Hohenstiel-Schwangau envisions a principle of progressive development at work in three distinct temporal categories, at the level of nature, the history of human society, and one's personal lifetime. What they share is their collective embodiment in the figure of Hohenstiel-Schwangau himself, naturalizing both his rule and the liberal state, as well as making him the living expression of the gamut of human social experience. This is all to say that the poem presents evolutionary theory agnostically. One could say its presentation is even slightly cynical; it's a set of ideas all too easily manipulated in the

²⁹¹ Ibid., 1004.

²⁹² Ibid., 1005.

²⁹³ Ibid., 1012-4.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 1019-22.

service of political ends.²⁹⁵ The poem introduces evolution as an instrument of propaganda, a justification of imperial rule.

Given the tendentious use to which evolution is put in the poem, where might we look in the poem for an expression of the idea from which Browning would later distance himself? The only critic I know of to discuss *Hohenstiel-Schwangau* in the context of the Furnivall letter has identified the relevant passage as a section in which the prince “speaks contemptuously of those persons who hold that Evolution disproves the existence of God.”²⁹⁶ This passage describes the observer of a chain, who regarding the final link, cannot imagine the governing intelligence that forged the initial link and accounts for the chain’s entirety. Hohenstiel responds:

why there’s forethought still
Outside o’ the series, forging at one end,
While at the other there’s – no matter what
The kind of critical intelligence
Believing that last link had last but one
For parent, and no link was, first of all,
Fitted to anvil, hammered into shape.
Else, I accept the doctrine...²⁹⁷

While the chain is representative of the various stages of Hohenstiel’s life contextually, the language of “link”s and “doctrine”s nevertheless gesture towards the evolutionary concerns of the poem. Hohenstiel acknowledges the persistence of those who would deny an atheistic, materialist form of evolutionism, but rejects their position while choosing to embrace the broader “doctrine” (which, of course, is central to his self-mythologizing).

So if this is indeed the moment in the poem to which Browning alludes - and indeed, it

²⁹⁵ Browning’s own feelings about the emperor were complicated. It seems that he was steadfastly opposed to his Louis Napoleon upon his assumption of power in 1852 (Elizabeth Barret Browning used the words “personal hatred,” but it seems that his indignation mollified by the time he wrote *Hohenstiel*. See *The Poems of Robert Browning: Volume Four*, ed. John Woolford, Daniel Karlin and Joseph Phelan (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 461.

²⁹⁶ Robert Fletcher, *Tennyson and Browning*, (Cedar Rapids: Torch Press, 1913), 176.

²⁹⁷ *Hohenstiel*, 1047-54.

seems the most plausible given the degree with which Hohenstiel's own model generally approximates those Browning sketched in *Paracelsus* and *Cleon* – then his concern is that the reader might ascribe a view *rejected* by the monologist to himself.

What discomfits Browning is the increasing complexity and implied polyphony of his dramatic monologues. *Paracelsus* presented a long monologue in which the voice of Paracelsus isn't in any significant way dependent on or interpretively reliant on the other voices – he articulates a vision that can easily be taken at its word. The context for *Cleon*'s utterances is more complicated, and the speaker there is more reflective about his own historical moment. But *Hohenstiel* is a self-conscious performance that takes fuller advantage of the dramatic monologue; Browning divests the speaker of authority by drawing attention to his techniques of rhetorical manipulation (it is, in this sense, an interesting companion piece to "My Last Duchess"). For the Browning of the Furnivall letter, there's a concern that he's drifted into territory that is too *dramatic*. He concedes as much in the letter, invoking the example of Othello's Blemmyes, headless creatures with faces on their torsos that no one would mistake Shakespeare for believing in. The trouble is more subtle in *Hohenstiel*, obviously, and Browning worries that he lacks a way to communicate with the reader *as* Browning. He is in effect trapped between the two poetic modes he outlines in his "Essay on Shelley": the subjective and objective. He may be able to impress a first-person, lyrical hermeneutic onto *Paracelsus* or *Cleon* when it suits him, but not with *Hohenstiel*.

Ironically, it is this concern with the form's limitations that leads Browning towards a fuller theorization of dramatic monologue with regard to evolution. "With Francis Furini" was published in 1887's *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in*

their Day, and thus goes unmentioned in the Furnivall letter; we lack an explanation for how it fits into Browning's contended Darwinism. The form of the poems therein is singular in Browning's *oeuvre*, as they are constructed as dialogues between an ostensible Browning, *in propria persona*, and a variety of historical figures. Browning's wry title keys into a central question of his monologues: the historical situatedness of knowledge and judgment, whether scientific, religious, or even aesthetic. And yet, by bringing these "People" into direct conversation with a contemporary speaker, Browning doesn't purport to make them speak from the past; rather, they speak with an apparently full understanding of Browning's Victorian society. Given the fact that their interlocutor is evidently Browning, there is a conservative formal bent to these poems, an apparently more direct route to Browning's poetic consciousness following a career of evading subjectivity. While Browning never explicitly identifies himself with the interlocutor in *Parleyings* (who appears to be consistent throughout), there's a historical critical consensus that this speaker is as proximate to direct lyrical subjectivity as Browning ever came. In terms normally foreign to Browning scholarship, Clyde DeVane's 1927 treatment of the volume was subtitled "The Autobiographical Mind," Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair have called it an "oblique poetic autobiography," and John Woolford and Daniel Karlin describe the narrator as being "so close to the poet as scarcely to be distinguished from him except in poetic terms."²⁹⁸ Britta Martens sees a total inversion of Browning's poetic practice in *Parleyings*, whereby the unmediated voice of earlier prefaces finds its way into the body of the poetic work: he "turn[s] the

²⁹⁸ See Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair, *The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning: A Literary Life* (Columbia: U of Missouri Press, 2007).

main text into the space for his own utterance.”²⁹⁹ In this way, *Parleyings* is a companion text to the Furnivall letter: a more definitive and legible articulation of his beliefs. But if this is true, then it marks a departure from the Furnivall letter in terms of evolutionary critique. Rather than sketch an evolutionary model in the vein of his earlier poetry, Browning takes aim at the methods undergirding evolutionary speculation in the first place, methods that, it turns out, share a lot in common with dramatic monologue.

Furini’s evolutionary diatribe feels notably under-motivated as the words of a painter-priest familiar to Browning’s public largely as a creator of scandalous nudes who was alleged to have ordered many of his paintings destroyed upon his decision to enter the priesthood. Indeed, much of the poem is concerned with a vigorous defense of the fleshly school of Renaissance painting, a kind of late-period “Fra Lippo Lippi.”³⁰⁰ Insofar as there’s an aesthetic principle underwriting this discussion of evolution, it is, as Patricia O’Neill has argued, that science is an attempt to circumscribe the human form in a way that art transcends.³⁰¹ Even so, the intensity of Furini’s outburst asks to be read as meaningful scientific debate, not just a corollary to an aesthetic claim.

The evolutionary lecture is prompted by Browning’s surrogate, who urges Furini to “try your powers of speech” on those “In actual London...the cultured, therefore skeptical.”³⁰² Browning’s irony runs both ways here; he is at once mocking his contemporaries’ claims to sophistication and understanding, but also the historically stunted perspective of a Renaissance priest accustomed to preaching to “simple-witted

²⁹⁹ Martens, 20.

³⁰⁰ Edward Berdoe’s *Browning Cyclopaedia* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1898), aspiring to be a compendium to all Browning’s works, doesn’t even mention evolution in the entry on “Furini,”

³⁰¹ Patricia O’Neill, “The Painting of Nudes and Evolutionary Theory: Parleyings on Victorian Constructions of Woman” *Texas Studies in Literature and Culture* 34:3 (1992): 541-567.

³⁰² All quotations from *The Poetry of Robert Browning*, ed. Vol. XVI, ed. Susan Crowl and Roman A. King, Jr. (Athens: Ohio UP, 1998), 251-2.

country folk.”³⁰³ But the speaker urges the reader to listen regardless, an injunction he issues with an appeal to Science:

...One and all
 We lend an ear – nay, Science takes thereto –
 Encourages the meanest who has racked
 Nature until he gains from her some fact,
 To state what truth is from his point of view,
 Mere pin-point though it be: since many such
 Conduce to make a whole, she bids our friend
 Come forward unabashed and haply lend
 His little life-experience to our much
 Of modern knowledge. Since she so insists,
 Up stands Furini.³⁰⁴

This passage marks the confluence of science, history, and poetic form. Browning’s speaker musters the authority of science, however ironically, and links its purportedly blinkered perspective to that of Furini, someone living in a historically remote period. But what’s more interesting here is that this notion applies self-consciously to Browning’s dramatic form, as well. The perspective of science and the perspective of Furini, speaking via the dramatic monologue, are both afforded the status of the “mere pin-point.” The work of science and the work of history both derive their value from the gradual accretion of perspectives, each of which is in its own way parochial or delimited. “Pin-points,” whether Furini’s experience or scientific observation, gradually cohere into the “whole” of truth or theory. And this is, in a sense, a breakthrough for Browning’s evolutionary thinking, as he’s connecting his poetic practice of dramatic monologue (or, perhaps, a reader’s consumption of it), with scientific labor. The richly drawn portraits that constitute the bulk of Browning’s poetic career are cast, at this late moment, as

³⁰³ Ibid., 250.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 255-65.

scientific data points of a sort, that promise to reveal a broader sense of the world when taken *in toto*.

This brief mention of the “pin-point,” taps into a whole strain of evolutionary objections with regard to scientific method that animated nineteenth-century debate. These particular disputes centered broadly around the role of inductive reasoning in science, which was positioned against a method that we might now call hypothetico-deductive, but was then labeled either “hypothesis” or simply “theory.” John Stuart Mill is the figure most closely associated with the inductive position, and his *A System of Logic* (1843) lays out a scientific method rooted in inferences one makes about the world that come to take the form of generalized laws. From these laws we might make further assumptions, which are themselves discardable based on further experience. In other words, Mill’s process is frequently eliminative, but the theses that emerge from induction are always grounded in empirical, enumerative judgments. Mill’s conviction that hypotheses must rely on observed causes, however, ran up against the methodology theorized by William Whewell, which didn’t stress the process by which a hypothesis was arrived at so much as its ability to account for all available data. Such a hypothesis, regardless of how well it might accord with the information at hand, would not be accepted by Mill as “true.” Without getting too deeply in the weeds, then, this conflict was primarily a question of the process that might lead one to theory or hypothesis – was it sufficiently inductive? Were enough pin-points peered through?

A letter to Darwin from geologist Adam Sedgwick in 1859 is a relevant and illustrative sample of the nineteenth-century iteration of the inductive position:

You have *deserted* – after a start in that tram-road of all solid physical truth – the true method of induction - & started up a machinery as wild I think as Bishop

Wilkin's locomotive that was to sail with us to the Moon. Many of your wide conclusions are based upon assumptions which can neither be proved nor disproved. Why then express them in the language & arrangements of philosophical induction?³⁰⁵

What Sedgwick sees in Darwin is an inductive mind seduced by theoretical extravagance. By abandoning "assumptions which can neither be proved nor disproved," Darwin becomes unmoored from Mill's foundations, and by allegedly maintaining the language of induction throughout, performs a kind of bait-and-switch on his readers. Four years later, he was professionally counseling a younger scientist, John Scott, to avoid "theory" altogether while his career was still budding:

I would suggest to you the advantage, at present, of being very sparing in introducing theory in your papers (I formerly erred much in Geology in that way); let theory guide your observations, but till your reputation is well established, be sparing of publishing theory. It makes persons doubt your observations.³⁰⁶

It's hard to imagine Darwin writing of "Geology" in this context without thinking of Sedgwick's critique. But he importantly doesn't repudiate "theory" at all; he's not really advising Scott to avoid theoretical thinking, but rather to render any theorizing invisible, at least in publication. Privileging theory, Darwin suggests, is often seen as enabling sloppy empirical work. The critic could ask: to what extremes would this scientist go, in order to fit the data to an extant hypothesis? Do what degree is theory driving the collection and interpretation of the data rather than letting one's inductions guide one's theoretical sense à la Mill?

Of course, these same questions had occupied Darwin when composing the *Origin*. As Francisco Alaya has noted, the very introduction to the *Origin* falsifies

³⁰⁵ Adam Sedgwick to Charles Darwin, November 1859 in *Selected Letters on Evolution and Origin of Species*, ed. Francis Darwin (Mineola: Dover, 1958), 229.

³⁰⁶ Charles Darwin to John Scott, June 6, 1863 in *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin* vol. 11, ed. Frederick Burkhardt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999): 483.

Darwin's process so as to seem less reliant on "theory"³⁰⁷. Darwin describes natural selection as emerging from a years-long accrual of empirical phenomena, whereupon he at last permits himself to "speculate on the subject," after which he "draws up some short notes" that would then be enlarged two years later into a "sketch of the conclusions which then seemed to me probable."³⁰⁸ While this introduction pins the very beginnings of his speculations in 1842, we know from his notebooks that the theory of natural selection was more or less in its final form four years prior. This insistence on the slow, cumulative inductive genesis of natural selection is even more manifest in his late-period *Autobiography*, in which he claims, remarkably, to have "worked on true Baconian principles, and without any theory collected facts on a wholesale scale."³⁰⁹ For an idea as bold as natural selection, the language of hypothesis or theory would have left him vulnerable to charges of insufficient empirical rigor or a failure to allow theory to emerge spontaneously from an unbiased accumulation of data. And indeed, this compensatory claim for an inductive process comes out of a long-held awareness that he'd be taken to task for being excessively hypothetical – the same argument that Sedgwick would make despite Darwin's best attempts to short-circuit that line of thinking in his introduction. In a 1857 letter to Asa Gray, Darwin would admit that "my work will be grievously hypothetical, and large parts by no means worthy of being called induction, my commonest error being probably induction from few too facts."³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Francisco J. Alaya, "Darwin and the Scientific Method," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106 (2009), 10033-10039.

³⁰⁸ Qtd. in Alaya.

³⁰⁹ *Selected Letters*, 42.

³¹⁰ Charles Darwin to Asa Gray, November 29, 1857, in *Charles Darwin's Letters: A Selection 1825-1859* ed. Frederick Burkhardt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 182.

I mention these moments not so much to point at inconsistencies in Darwin's public rhetoric relative to the facts of his method as to demonstrate the wariness that characterized his public articulations of it, and to locate this whole conversation in the mainstream of mid to late-century evolutionary discourse, the same discourse that Browning draws upon in "Furini," both in his proxy's speech and Furini's response. Up to this point, evolution hasn't been mentioned by name in the poem, but Browning ties the theory to his methodological critique by making it the very first word of Furini's reply:³¹¹

Evolutionists!
At truth I glimpse from depths, you glance from heights,
Our stations for discovery opposites, -
How should ensue agreement?³¹²

Furini borrows the perspectival language that Browning introduced with the "pin-point" to introduce two alternative epistemological models, both characterized by their restrictiveness, the "glimpse" and "glance." The first is a kind of epistemology of Christian humility rooted in an acknowledgement that "Ignorance exists."³¹³ There's a Cartesian modesty about this position; it professes "To know just one fact – my self-consciousness."³¹⁴ And it seeks improvement not through knowledge, given its necessary limitations, but through a moral improvement that looks forward to a reconciliation with God, the "Cause" from which man came and to which he now aspires.

³¹¹ "With Francis Furini" is one of two poems in Browning's body of work that use nominal forms of "evolution." The other is "Bishop Blougram's Apology," in which "evolution" is used colloquially. Its employment in "Furini" suggests both the increasing currency of the word (as opposed to "development") and Browning's desire to clarify the particular branch of inquiry to which his methodological critique is oriented.

³¹² "Furini," 265-68.

³¹³ Ibid., 348.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 351.

The manner of the maligned “evolutionists,” however, is characterized by a smug scientism that misguidedly seeks material origins for a divine cause:

Down perforce
Needs must your observation take its course,
Since there’s no moving upwards: link by link
You drop to where the atoms somehow think,
Feel, know themselves to be: the world’s begun,
Such as we recognize it. Have you done
Descending?³¹⁵

Browning plays on Darwinian notions of “descent” here to imply intellectual hubris on the part of those who purport to understand universal origins, and contrast this position with the “ascent” that his alternative epistemology promises. The evolutionist’s confidence in materialism’s explanatory capacity leads him “down,” both in the sense of moving back into the past, and attempting to account for the atomic level. The latter enterprise is doomed to frustrate without recourse to God, and the former neglects the potentiality of Furini’s forward-looking Christianity: “I climb you soar, - who soars soon loses breath / And sinks, who climbs keeps one foot firm on fact / Ere hazarding the next step.”³¹⁶ The opposed methods lead to an ironic reversal in position: the evolutionist starts from the “heights” but is cast down, Furini begins in the “depths” but gradually ascends.

What’s at stake here, importantly, isn’t the truth of the evolutionary doctrine in and of itself, but a more generalizable question of scientific method and the limits of empirical inquiry. Browning, tapping into widespread anxiety about the limits of hypothetical science, has his two speakers univocally take up this position and explicitly direct it towards evolutionary science. But what commentators on the poem’s “attack on

³¹⁵ Ibid., 272-8.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 367-9.

the methods of the evolutionists” fail to note is the way in which this is also a retroactive hermeneutics that enlists his earlier work in the service of methodological critique.³¹⁷ “Furini” is an attack on scientific method, yes, but it’s also a defense of poetic method as a useful critique of the former. Browning’s somewhat floundering defense of his Darwinian inclinations in the Furnivall letter, along with the corresponding passages in his early and mid-period poetry, paint an unconvincing portrait of evolutionary commitment. But “Furini” provides an escape valve for those anxieties – Browning finds a way to distance himself from the methods if not essential ideas of the evolutionists, while vindicating his poetic project in the process (and in a manner far more subtle than the Furnivall letter’s tactic of pointing out anything in his work that resembles a description of evolutionary processes). *Paracelsus*, “Cleon,” and *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* become the necessarily blinkered purveyors of incomplete understanding, because their position, like the scientist’s – like anyone’s – is demarcated by history, perspective, and experience. And that, in effect, is what dramatic monologue strives to achieve.

In a series of essays published in 1906, Edward Berdoo, one of the founding members of Furnivall’s short-lived Browning Society, made the prescient claim that Browning’s critical legacy would underestimate his personal investment in contemporary science. “I know no thinker on religious subjects so worthy of confidence as he,” writes Berdoo, “because he is well abreast of all the scientific thought of the age. Few even of Browning’s closest students are aware of how thoroughly imbued with science he is.”³¹⁸ And it’s precisely due to his scientific sophistication, Berdoo argues, that he can speak to

³¹⁷ Norton B. Crowell, *The Triple Soul: Browning’s Theory of Knowledge* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico Press, 1963), 108.

³¹⁸ Edward Berdoo, *Browning’s Message to His Time* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1890), 21.

the scientifically-oriented mind on matters of religion to which they would otherwise be inimical: “folks who have attended courses of science lectures...these are the sort of persons who would be vastly improved by a course on Browning.”³¹⁹ Berdoo envisions Browning’s poetry as a successful antidote to materialism, a demonstration of the ways in which Christianity and scientific inquiry might be reconciled. But Berdoo, along with subsequent readers, misidentified the most compelling aspect of Browning’s scientific thinking as the transmission or representation actual scientific facts.³²⁰ “No reader of Browning,” he writes, “can have failed to remark how great an accumulator of facts he is – facts of all sorts, and from every conceivable and out-of-the-way place.”³²¹ But Browning’s record on evolutionary facts in particular (by which I mean the facts of the *theory* itself), despite Berdoo’s protestations and the assertions of the Furnivall letter, is a lousy one. Like Browning, Berdoo plucks *Paracelsus* from the archive to be held as a paradigmatic example; “How wonderfully he anticipated recent discoveries in evolution and embryology,” Berdoo remarks, wrongly, of the poem.³²²

In truth, *Paracelsus*, like “Cleon” and *Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, was two things for Browning: a venue in which to discuss ideas about evolution within the relatively safe context of a historical vantage point, (that of a “quack,” no less), but also an example of the problem of perspective that plagues the contemporary evolutionist. In that sense, it’s a poem that *does* refute Paracelsus - his claims to effectual omniscience - by virtue of its

³¹⁹ Ibid., 6-7.

³²⁰ Browning’s skill at conveying his knowledge of these facts, apparently, is a separate consideration. Berdoo’s indulgent apology: “If at times he is unintelligible, it is because he knows so much more than we do”(93).

³²¹ Ibid., 92.

³²² Ibid., 135.

status as a dramatic monologue. And this was something that, by the end of his life, Browning, if not Ladislav, felt that his readers needed.

“One tremendous IF”: George Meredith’s Evolutionary Temporalities

“A sonnet is a moment’s monument” – Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The House of Life*, 1881

“[Darwinism] is a theory which does *not* privilege the present, which sees it as a moving instant in an endless process of change” – Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 1983

William Sharp’s 1888 anthology, *Sonnets of this Century*, contains but one “sonnet proper” by George Meredith, a modified Petrarchan sonnet entitled “Lucifer in Starlight” originally published in his *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883). Suggestively, portions of what has become Meredith’s most enduring poetic contribution, *Modern Love* (1862), are included in the collection’s appendix despite the fact that they do not adhere to more traditional sonnet form. While Sharp demonstrates admiration for the “poetic beauty” of *Modern Love*, he nevertheless expresses reserve at its “structural drawbacks,” namely Meredith’s choice to employ a 16 rather than 14-line form in its fifty “sonnets.” The appendix reproduces five of *Modern Love*’s constituent poems in their entirety, and by doing so suggests the separability and discrete coherence of the individual poems, whatever their form. But interestingly, Sharp’s particular selections evince a desire to maintain the overarching narrative integrity of *Modern Love* as a whole. The first two selections lay out the protagonist’s fundamental romantic dilemma: he has taken on a mistress while also suspecting his wife of infidelity. The third selection then sees the protagonist coming to the critical conclusion that his travails might be attributable to “passions” that are common to both sexes,³²³ and the last two narrate the poem’s melodramatic conclusion, in which it is hinted that the wife commits suicide by

³²³ John Holmes’s Darwinian reading of *Modern Love*, “Darwinism, Feminism, and the Sonnet Sequence: Meredith’s *Modern Love*,” *Victorian Poetry* 48:4 Winter 2010, 523-538, presses on this idea, arguing that the speaker comes to reject his own misogyny by acknowledging the evolutionary drives and passions common to both sexes.

poison.³²⁴ Sharp's curation makes manifest the entire "plot" of *Modern Love*, despite being a small fraction of the whole. The individual poems are considered as separable, then, but only insofar as they can be placed intelligibly within their larger narrative framework.³²⁵

Sharp's apparent difficulty at classifying *Modern Love* in the context of the sonnet tradition and accounting for its narrative element is by no means a purely nineteenth-century concern. Indeed, what remains the most immediately vexing question faced by any critic attempting to decipher *Modern Love* is one of generic description. Most obviously, *Modern Love* is a sonnet sequence, albeit one that deviates from established models in both its 16-line form and its self-conscious subversion of Renaissance tropes.³²⁶ And yet, the "sonnet sequence" label doesn't seem to sufficiently account for the poem's narrative complexity, the recurrent disorienting shifts of perspective and voice, and the poem's dexterous blend of retrospect and immediacy. These more "experimental" elements have prompted many critics to adopt a hybrid generic model, fusing sonnet sequence with drama, the novel, or dramatic monologue as a means of circumscribing the poem's peculiar essence.³²⁷ More often than not, describing *Modern Love* is less an attempt to pin it down to a particular genre than a matter of choosing the genres of which its hybridity consists. The poem has a unique ability to evade such

³²⁴ The relevant sonnets are XVI, XXIX, XLIII, XLIX, and L.

³²⁵ A contemporaneous collection, Samuel Waddington's *Sonnets by Living Writers* (1888), ignores *Modern Love* completely, choosing the Petrarchan "Let fate or insufficiency provide" as the sole representative of Meredith's oeuvre.

³²⁶ For readings that specifically treat *Modern Love*'s relation to the sonnet tradition, see Arline Golden's "The Game of Sentiment: Tradition and Innovation in Meredith's *Modern Love*" *ELH* 40:2, 1973 264-284, and Kenneth Crowell's "Modern Love and the Sonnet Caudato: Comedic Intervention through the Satiric Sonnet Form," *Victorian Poetry* 40:4, 2010, 539-557.

³²⁷ See Norman Friedman, "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in *Modern Love*" *MLQ* 18, 1957, 9-26 (drama), Arthur L. Simpson Jr., "Meredith's Pessimistic Humanism: A new Reading of *Modern Love*," *Modern Philology*, 67:4, 1970, 341-356, (dramatic monologue), Dorothy Mermin, "Poetry as Fiction: Meredith's *Modern Love*," *ELH*, 43:1, 1974, 100-119 (novel), Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

definitions, though, and tends to assert itself as an idiosyncratic anomaly for which critical vocabulary lacks an entirely adequate designator.

I will suggest in this chapter that much of *Modern Love*'s formal difficulty arises from Meredith's engagement with evolutionary science. While treating *Modern Love* in light of Meredith's evolutionary thinking has long attracted commentary, I think it can account for the poem's formal features in a way that has gone hitherto unrecognized.³²⁸ Specifically, Meredith's evolutionary concerns manifest themselves as a tension between lyrical utterance and narrative tension that Monique Morgan has located at the heart of many nineteenth-century long-form experiments in poetic genre.³²⁹ Her readings enable her to sidestep the question of genre by treating both "lyric" and "narrative" as "modes" that operate according to particular temporal principles, rather than genres. Lyric is defined by the absence of temporal succession, as a kind of fantasy of atemporality. Morgan describes it as "a timeless present, an indefinitely suspended moment."³³⁰ By neglecting past and future conditions, the lyric has a tendency to be self-reflexive, foregrounding both the moment of composition and the utterance's status *as* lyric. The

³²⁸ Readings of Meredith's verse that dwell specifically on his evolutionary interests include John Holmes, *Darwin's Bards* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), Georg Roppen, *Evolution and Poetic Belief* (Oslo: Oslo UP, 1956), Lionel Stevenson, *Darwin Among the Poets* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1932), and Ralph B. Crum, *Scientific Thought in Poetry* (New York: AMS Press, 1966).

³²⁹ See Monique Morgan, *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends: Temporality in the Nineteenth-Century Long Poem* (Columbus: Ohio State U Press, 2010). The most obvious instance of another nineteenth-century genre in which lyric and narrative contend is the "verse novel" as practiced by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*.

³³⁰ Morgan, 9. In defining lyric as such, Morgan both borrows from and pushes against the famous formulation of apostrophic temporality given in Jonathan Culler's essay on "Apostrophe," in which he claims, "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... a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say 'now.'" Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe" in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 149. While I agree that lyrical utterance often aspires to an escape from sequential temporality altogether, I will nevertheless primarily use lyric in Morgan's sense of the "suspended moment," as this seems to be Meredith's primary interest in *Modern Love*. As we shall see, however, Meredith's poetry becomes more and more interested in "special temporalities" as his career progresses.

narrative mode, by way of contrast, is distinguished simply by “temporal succession,” though she grants that this mode is more satisfying “if it invites the reader to infer causal connections.”³³¹

I realize that in adopting Morgan’s language I risk replicating a false dichotomy between lyric and narrative that has lately come under suspicion from literary critics. Heather Dubrow offers a particularly trenchant and nuanced critique of this bifurcated thinking in *The Challenges of Orpheus* (2008), in which she suggests the tendency of critics to privilege “lyric” or “narrative” over its apparently oppositional category has been deleterious to appreciating the nuances of poetic modes. Even so, an all-encompassing model of hybridity is equally untenable:

My purpose...is certainly not to suggest that a monolithic paradigm of hybridity should replace the equally rigid contrasts between lyric and narrative that are currently in use: their relationship assumes so wide a range of forms that no single pattern should be privileged as normative. Even when the line between lyric and narrative blurs, as it not infrequently does, hybridity, a concept used too readily and loosely in contemporary parlance, is sometimes but certainly not always the most apt description.³³²

For the purposes of my argument I too will eschew a paradigmatic hybridity, but neither will I shrink from attending to ostensibly “lyric” moments that imply or mask a narrative, as well as vice versa; indeed, much of my argument will depend on it. Dubrow’s argument is a good reminder, in any case, of the ease with which one might too neatly cleave a hybridized poem into its purely lyric and narrative components, and as such I will try to follow her example.

Nevertheless, *Modern Love* is, I will insist, a poem in which lyric and narrative modes might sometimes, but not always, be delineated from one another. Morgan

³³¹ Ibid, 8.

³³² Heather Dubrow, *The Challenge of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2008), 194.

ascribes the flourishing of such nineteenth-century long poems (for which *Modern Love* itself functions as a brief example), to the increasing popularity of the novel coupled with the cultural capital accrued by the lyric through its well-known Romantic practitioners. But while Morgan's claims can begin to explain why a writer like Meredith might feel comfortable, even obligated to work in a hybrid mode, I don't think her reasoning fully accounts for the way in which *Modern Love* in particular relies on the sudden oscillation between and the imbrication of lyrical and narrative modes.³³³ I will maintain that in Meredith's case, this strategy is employed as a response to anxiety surrounding evolutionary theory and its implications for narrative and temporality, some of the narrator's chief preoccupations. I will argue that the two temporal modes, staged in the context of a sonnet sequence, function as a response to a misguided conception of evolutionary temporality to which Meredith's later lyric poetry would serve as a thorough corrective.

Specifically, *Modern Love*'s narrator employs lyric time as a means to avoid what he narrowly perceives as evolution's narrative consequences for himself: a loss of control and teleological direction, and the triumph of the unexpected, the unplanned, and the contingent. The poem's alleged hybridity and modal shifts can thus be seen as a formal response to the psychological demands placed on the individual when confronted with a new, disorienting and displacing sense of evolutionary temporality. But as Meredith's later poetry, collected in *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883) and *A Reading of Earth* (1888) will reveal, such a formal response is mired in an egoism that his mature brand of evolutionism vociferously rejects. In its stead, Meredith will advance a lyricism

³³³ Morgan's adherence to formal reading ultimately leads her to regard *Modern Love* as a failure, as its dual formal ambitions run aground of one another; in her reading, his investment in the lyric moment, particularly at the poem's conclusion, contravenes the aims of the narrative.

that rejects both the primacy of the individual speaker and the narrow temporal scope of the individual life. This lyricism celebrates the joy to be found in subsuming oneself into what Meredith calls “Earth,” and devotion to the ultimate spiritual evolution of humankind. *Modern Love* thus functions as a negative evolutionary model whose formal strategies, on part of the poem’s speaker, are fundamentally misguided.

Darwin himself famously describes his conception of cosmic narrative as one in which “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”³³⁴ It’s a vision that, in Gillian Beer’s words, “does *not* privilege the present, which sees it as a moving instant in an endless process of change.”³³⁵ The fantasy of lyric stasis, in which *Modern Love*’s narrator is guilty of engaging, thus refuses to acknowledge this basic element of Darwinian temporality: the “are being” and sense of futurity that always inheres in the present moment. Dante Gabriel Rossetti famously declared a sonnet to be “a moment’s monument” at the opening of *The House of Life*. But the lyricism of *Modern Love*, by demonstrating its sonnets’ own failure to arrest the moment, or enshrine it as “monument,” reveal Rossetti’s adage as, at best, a false ideal. As lyric functions in *Modern Love* as a reminder of the moment’s essential contingency in a Darwinian universe, as well as the self-absorption that underlies the speaker’s formal motivations, the sonnet’s “monumental” status is exactly what Meredith challenges. Moreover, the inventive lyrics that he would come to write in his later career reject such poetry’s more nostalgic, sentimental trappings by being alive to and emboldened by the futurity and possibility that a Darwinian world entails.

Time, Narrative, and the Development Hypothesis

³³⁴ *Origin*, 360.

³³⁵ *Darwin’s Plots*, 10.

In October of 1862, Meredith attended a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Cambridge. What he observed that night was one of the infamously fervent debates between the anatomists and biologists Richard Owen and Thomas Henry Huxley. The subject of debate was nothing less than the legitimacy of evidence suggesting that mankind's cranial features had enough in common with corresponding attributes in simians as to constitute a convincing evolutionary link. Huxley, to much press attention, stridently attacked Owen at the Cambridge meeting for an alleged deliberate ignorance of homological facts, and the result, judging from contemporary accounts, was a resounding victory for Huxley.³³⁶ Meredith's own reaction echoed that of the periodicals: "Yesterday Huxley had such a tussle with Owen! The thinking men all side with the former. You will read of it."³³⁷ Implicitly allying himself with Huxley, Meredith demonstrates both an allegiance to evolutionary science and a sense of the debate's larger importance to the public's understanding of it ("You will read of it"). It seems evident, then, that Meredith had a sophisticated understanding of contemporary evolutionary debates, an understanding he would use to fashion the protagonist of *Modern Love*.

The most basic premise of Huxley's argument was a geological sense of deep time, a sense of a distant geological past far predating mankind that drastically undercut pervasive notions of mankind's centrality in the history of the earth. If this is obvious, it is nevertheless largely true, and its implications register in unexpected ways in *Modern Love*. Surprisingly, I will argue, deep time and the accompanying theory of

³³⁶ See Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Richard Owen: Victorian Naturalist* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994) for a full account of that particular evening's debate and its repercussions for Huxley and Owen's rivalry and evolutionary science more generally.

³³⁷ *The Letters of George Meredith Volume 1*, ed. C.L. Cline (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970), 165.

uniformitarianism are precisely the aspects of evolution that the speaker fails to properly understand, by locating fear of the unpredictable change Darwinism implies at the level of his individual life. The doctrine of uniformitarianism affirms the consistency of the laws governing change throughout the earth's history, and rejects sudden, saltational transformation. George Levine has described it as a glacial process of development in which "extremes are to be regarded as the consequences of the gradual accumulation of the ordinary."³³⁸ But while there's plenty of "the ordinary" in *Modern Love*, the narrative vicissitudes described by the speaker are anything but lawfully accumulative. What Meredith's speaker portrays is something more akin to a personal catastrophism, the doctrine of precipitous, massive geological upheaval against which uniformitarianism positioned itself in the first place. His is an almost synecdochal vision of evolutionary time, in which the exigencies of large-scale evolutionary history are displaced onto the speaker's own personal life narrative.

It is worthwhile, then, to consider why Meredith's speaker, a nominal Victorian spokesperson for "modernity," would misinterpret, willfully or not, certain premises of contemporary scientific thought. I will suggest that while Meredith will ultimately identify the speaker's position with egoism, an ethical failure, it is nevertheless an anxious attitudinal stance with some roots in contemporary evolutionary debate. If Meredith's speaker often lacks moral fortitude and remains mired in egoism, he also demonstrates a nascent, if sometimes misguided, sense of evolutionary science, in which his sense of life narrative is rooted. There are two particular elements of scientific thought I want to address to this end: The somewhat muddled sense of the role of

³³⁸ *Darwin and the Novelists*, 15.

“chance” or the “random” in accounts of evolutionary development, and the scientific discourse surrounding the related theory of recapitulation.

Particularly in the early editions of the *Origin*, Darwin was at pains to describe the mechanism for the “laws of variation,” that is, an explanation for why exactly certain offspring differ phenotypically from parents. If natural selection could explain for the most part the persistence of certain advantageous traits, the more local operation by which a new trait appears in offspring was unclear. As he admits:

Our ignorance of the laws of variation is profound. Not in one case out of a hundred can we pretend to assign any reason why this or that part differs, more or less, from the same part in the parents. But whenever we have the means of instituting a comparison, the same laws appear to have acted in producing the lesser differences between varieties of the same species, and the greater differences between species of the same genus.³³⁹

His speculations on just what this “law” might be run the gamut of contemporary theory; most concerted he entertains Lamarckian notions of both environmental effects (“climate and food, etc.”) and habits of behavior that result in the “strengthening” or “weakening” of particular organs.³⁴⁰ This hodgepodge of provisional speculation and admissions of ignorance suggests a deep uncertainty about the role of chance in a natural world that Darwin wants to present as materially ordered, if not teleologically so. George Levine makes a similar case when he describes Darwin’s laws as “a very strange combination of the random and the orderly.”³⁴¹ While large-scale processes follow a predictable logic, the minute alterations and particular conditions that both aggregate to

³³⁹ *Origin*, 127.

³⁴⁰ Darwin would ultimately propose a particle called a “gammule” to be responsible for transmitting inherited traits in *The Variation of Plants and Animals Under Domestication* (1868), but the particular mechanisms by which they functioned were still relatively unclear, as he himself would admit.

³⁴¹ *Darwin and the Novelists*, 93.

constitute these processes and enable observers to infer their operation, rely on an obscure element of chance.

Earlier iterations of the development hypothesis that assumed a far more teleological bent than Darwin's nevertheless relied partly on principles and metaphors of randomness to make their case. The most infamous of these was 1844's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. The anonymous treatise was authored by Robert Chambers, co-publisher with his brother William of *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, where Meredith himself would first be published.³⁴² *Vestiges*, which would outsell the *Origin* until the twentieth century, promoted a model of evolutionary progression in which God is ever-present through established natural laws, but refuses to directly intervene in the process of speciation and development.³⁴³ Such a system, like Darwin's, accounts for broader patterns of progression at the expense of the predictability of its specific components, which for Chambers is the individual:

Everywhere we see the arrangements for the species perfect; the individual is left, as it were, to take his chance amidst the *mêlée* of the various laws affecting him. If he be found inferiorly endowed, or ill befalls him, there was at least no partiality against him. The system has the fairness of a lottery, in which every one has the like chance of drawing the prize.³⁴⁴

Chambers articulates what would become a common Victorian trope, the anxiety of a cosmic indifference towards the individual. This indifference, which is always accompanied by randomness (here, the "lottery"), takes two forms in Chambers. The first, familiar from Darwin, is that one will be born "inferiorly endowed." And while

³⁴² Meredith's first published poem, in fact, "Chillianwallah," was published in *Chambers's* on July 7th, 1849.

³⁴³ See James Secord's *Victorian Sensation* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2000) for the most complete account of *Vestiges's* reception and impact.

³⁴⁴ Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 281.

Chambers provides an explanatory mechanism (partially borrowed from Erasmus Darwin) that pertains to the exact conditions of gestation, one's fitness is a matter of dumb luck. The second, and more interesting, instance of randomness is that the constant laws of nature might happen to conspire against one in unfortunate ways. The example Chambers furnishes is that of a boy with natural "love of violent exercise" who suffers a fall and is injured as the law of gravitation dictates.³⁴⁵ The injury is an unforeseeable yet necessary consequence of two laws, both benign in their independent operation, coming into unlucky conflict with one another. Even when laws are at play then, the fallout from their complex interactions cannot be altogether anticipated.

This is all to say that evolutionary "laws," in both Darwin and Chambers, have a nasty habit of impinging upon the individual in ways that seem like, and might actually be, chance. In a sense, this is how the speaker of *Modern Love* sees his own life narrative, as inflected with chance encounters and decisions beyond direct control. In his hands, evolutionary chance potentially becomes an excuse for bad behavior and gross egoism; in a world governed by chance, after all, it's easy to shirk responsibility. Importantly, however, the speaker's adoption of the workings of evolution across deep time as a synecdochal model for his own life has its own curious foundation in nineteenth-century embryology. As I will argue, models of embryological development, which were often at the same time models of species transmutation, are the scientific corollary to the speaker's synecdochal imagination, in which the individual life narrative takes the shape of evolutionary history through deep time.

The early nineteenth century saw the gradual demise of preformationist theories of embryological development, in which all the features of the adult organism were

³⁴⁵ Chambers, 272.

thought to be locatable in the embryo from its conception. In its wake, two competing, but related models of ontogenic development took its place. The first, codified in the laws of Karl Ernst von Baer, claimed that embryological development was a process of increasing differentiation, from homogeneity to heterogeneity. All organisms begin in one of several shared, undifferentiated archetypal forms, which gradually individuate into various species. Von Baer explicitly positioned himself against the second school, that of the recapitulationists, chief among them Etienne Serres and Johann Friedrich Meckel. The recapitulationists insisted that the embryo passes through adult stages of lower life forms through the course of its ontogenic development. Ernst Haeckel in 1866 then would formulate what he called the “biogenetic law,” which stipulated the following: “Ontogeny is the short and rapid recapitulation of phylogeny...During its own rapid development...an individual repeats the most important changes in form evolved by its ancestors during their long and slow paleontological development.”³⁴⁶ Rather than a pattern of differentiation the recapitulationists saw in gestation the actual forms of its evolutionary predecessors.

While the brief histories I’ve sketched here might seem recondite, they were in fact topics of public debate following the publication of Chambers’s *Vestiges*, which, as James Secord argues, “forced these esoteric questions of embryology onto the public stage...because the text was unusually well-informed about the latest findings from the Continent.”³⁴⁷ Well-informed as it certainly was, the *Vestiges* followed the continent’s lead in suggesting that “lower life forms” might be seen not only as elements of a great chain of being, but placed into the context of the evolution of species. That is to say, the

³⁴⁶ Qtd. in Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977), 76-7.

³⁴⁷ Secord, 252.

ontogenic process of recapitulation reenacts the phyletic history of species development. In the *Vestiges*, Chambers provides a muddled version of von Baer's laws (which he encountered through W.B. Carpenter's 1839 *Principles of General and Comparative Physiology*) and recapitulation theory in a way that explicitly yokes both models of embryological development to a broader history of speciation. While in early editions Chambers presented himself as a rank and file recapitulationist, his later emendations simultaneously voice support for von Baerean differentiation.³⁴⁸ What these formulations of embryological development share in Chambers is an analogical correspondence with species evolution. As Stephen Jay Gould succinctly puts it with regard to Chambers, "Ontogeny then becomes a metaphor for progressive evolution; the vertical path is a prospective cosmic ontogeny."³⁴⁹ Chambers proposes two parallel biological histories in which ontogenic development rehearses the phyletic transformations of its species. Robert Richards draws attention to the very way in which the word "evolution" points towards this analogy:

[“Evolution”] came to refer to this sort of progressive embryological development and then, as the theory of recapitulation matured, to progressive species development. Indeed by the 1830's, the word “evolution” had shifted 180 degrees from its original employment and was used to refer indifferently to both embryological and species progression.³⁵⁰

Tracking the usage of “evolution” points towards the imbrication of embryology with species development in the very years during which Darwin was formulating his influential theory. And despite a neo-Darwinian insistence on keeping Darwin's theory

³⁴⁸ See Robert Richards, *The Meaning of Evolution: The Morphological Construction and Ideological Reconstruction of Darwin's Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1992), 133, and James Secord, “Behind the Veil: Robert Chambers and *Vestiges*,” in *History, Humanity, and Evolution*, ed. James Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 165-94.

³⁴⁹ Gould, 110.

³⁵⁰ Richards, 15.

carefully insulated from charges of an antiquated recapitulationism, Richards has made a convincing case that recapitulation was critical for the shaping of Darwinian natural selection in its early forms, as embryological development provided a model of progressive development that could simultaneously demonstrate common descent.³⁵¹

Natural history, then, already had long since adopted individual life as an analogy for or outright rehearsal of phyletic evolutionary history.³⁵² By literalizing the implications of such a relationship, Meredith's speaker envisions his life as fraught with alarming, stochastic narrative ramifications more appropriate to deep time than the personal life story. In effect, *Modern Love*'s protagonist projects the causal principles of Darwinistic species evolution onto his personal life history in a crass appropriation of the biogenetic law. If for Haeckel and others "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," for our protagonist his marriage is doomed to recapitulate the rough exigencies of cosmic development. Thinking he is faced with what Gillian Beer calls, in reference to Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* a "vertiginous relationship to the future," in which unpredictability, the severance of cause from effect, and unfulfilled possibilities are ruling narrative principles, Meredith's speaker, we will see, gestures towards a lyric stoppage of time as a solution to narrative, evolutionary anxiety. First, however, I want to examine *Modern Love*'s treatment of the evolutionary principles just described, so as to diagnose the problem for which the speaker thinks lyric will be at least a provisional panacea.

Recapitulating Evolutionary History in Modern Love

³⁵¹ Ibid., 97.

³⁵² Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850) most familiarly takes up recapitulation by giving Locke a dream in which he evolves successively to his present self from primitive life forms.

In sonnet XXX, the sonnet that most explicitly invokes evolutionary history, the question of scale seems deliberately ambiguous. The speaker's ostensible aim is to draw on evolutionary narrative to scientifically justify his attempts to "live but with the day":

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.³⁵³

Reaching the evolutionary moment at which "Intelligence and instinct now are one," the sonnet goes on to argue, humankind has become conscious of mortality.³⁵⁴ This, in turn, produces a desire for "Love" as a redemptive force, which itself fails to compensate due to nature's desire for her "children" to "suffer." To live attending only to the present seems the reasonable course of action. In one sense, then, the history outlined in those first two lines seems to gesture towards large-scale, phyletic evolution; our simian ancestors motivated by pure instinct have evolved into self-aware, modern man. But need one read this in these particular historical terms? Is it possible that this is a life narrative being charted out, beginning with "animal" and leading towards "intelligence"? The poem, after all, charts the speaker's increasing assured conviction that nature is indeed fickle, and even malign at times; the process by which the speaker gains this "intelligence," and the incidents that lead him to it, is thus partly a function of the poem's much more limited narrative. This tiny moment serves to articulate the conflation of individual and phyletic chronologies that animate the poem as a whole.

Resultantly, the speaker often presents himself as at the mercy of impersonal, impenetrable principles of causation. In the same way that Darwin and Chambers saw the

³⁵³ All quotations from George Meredith from *Poems* (London: Constable and Company, 1910). *Modern Love*, XXX, 1-4.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

role of chance in producing species change over vast geological eras, *Modern Love*'s husband perceives these chance events as permeating the everyday. Towards the middle of *Modern Love*, the speaker makes a defense of literary realism by challenging his wife's opinion of a salacious "French novel." Describing the plot's triangular love affair that obviously echoes his own precarious romantic situation, the speaker laments their native English literature's prudishness and unwillingness to represent sexual infidelity that society writ large deems "unnatural." But the "unnatural," of course, is the exact character of "modern love": "Unnatural? My dear, these things are life: And life, some think, is worthy of the muse."³⁵⁵ These lines can clearly read as a defense of a grittier, middle class realism and a clear proclamation of the poem's allegiances to the novel. Yet Meredith's characterization in this passage of the French novel's key moment also gestures towards the evolutionary concerns at the heart of *Modern Love*'s conflicted temporalities.

In the (unspecified) novel's plot, the "wife" is faced with absconding with her decadent lover, or returning to her forgiving husband. This choice, according to Meredith is central to the novel's power: "Then hangeth on one tremendous *If*: - / *If* she will choose between them. She does choose; / And takes her husband, like a proper wife."³⁵⁶ The narrative relies on a moment of contingency, what Beer with regard to Darwinism calls the ever-present "possibility of mutation and change."³⁵⁷ At this moment, the narrative poses for itself alternative futures – will the wife choose the lover? The husband? Reject them both? And while, in this instance, we're immediately told what happens (in a thinly veiled moment of wish-fulfillment, the wife returns to her husband), the same can't be

³⁵⁵ Ibid., XXV, 15-6.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 12-4.

³⁵⁷ *Darwin's Plots*, 118.

said for the speaker's own experiences, for whom the "If" is a much more pressing and unpredictable concern. This "one tremendous *If*" is the pivot point of a personalized dysteleological vision that characterizes not just the form of this particular novel, but the narrative in which the speaker himself is enmeshed. That which is "life," then, isn't simply the sordid reality disguised by mid-Victorian propriety, but a narrative experience governed by local happenstance, fortuity, and potentially irreversible decision-making: all varieties of the destabilizing "If."

The speaker asserts the novel's accuracy in depicting the "If" as a quintessential aspect of "life," but that doesn't make the potentially limitless and uncontrollable nature of dysteleological possibility any less a cause of anxiety. Rather, he himself is preoccupied throughout *Modern Love* with insisting on the role contingency has played in the sour turn his life has taken. At times, the speaker ascribes blame to a nebulous sense of chance by which he is buffeted about:

No state is enviable. To the luck alone
Of some few favoured men I would put claim.
I bleed, but her who wounds I will not blame.
Have I not felt her heart as 'twere my own
Beat thro' me? could I hurt her? heaven and hell!
But I could hurt her cruelly!³⁵⁸

The reason "no state is enviable" is its liability to change, its inherent instability. And even for those with whom the speaker would willingly exchange "state"s, their "favoured" status is a result of "luck alone," and itself potentially subject to undoing. This denial of agency leads the speaker to absent human intention from the tragedy that's befallen his own relationship; he can no more blame his wife for her infidelity than he can come up with an explanation for his own willingness to "hurt her cruelly," an

³⁵⁸ *Modern Love* XIX, 1-6.

admission he declares with more perplexity than guilt. Romantic love, in his sense here, amounts to nothing more than a perilous game of chance into which “The maddest gambler throws his heart.”³⁵⁹ Love, in effect, takes the same shape as that mysterious principle of inheritance for which Chambers and Darwin so struggled to account.

This is not to say that the speaker isn’t occasionally prone to more typically Victorian assertions of self-determination along the lines of William Ernest Henley’s later “Invictus” (1875). Using the same seafaring metaphor that Henley would later more famously employ, Meredith’s speaker professes:

...I take the hap
Of all my deeds. The wind that fills my sails
Propels; but I am helmsman. Am I wrecked,
I know the devil has sufficient weight
To bear: I lay it not on him, or fate.
Besides, he’s damned. That man I do suspect
A coward, who would burden the poor deuce
With what ensues from his own slipperiness.³⁶⁰

In choosing to liken himself to the figure of the helmsman, the speaker is already negotiating agency; he mans the helm, but is nevertheless partly (probably mostly) subject to the unaccountable winds. And while the speaker professes to accept some form of responsibility for his wrecked vessel by rejecting the “devil” or “fate” as coward’s excuses for one’s own personal failings, the passage affirms “hap” as what emerges from the speaker’s own presumably intentional actions. That is to say, the speaker still refuses to fully affirm his own role in causality; he is a mere “helmsman.” “Fate,” here, is a complete straw man; it is the terrifying openness of Darwinian futurity that both frightens the speaker and serves as his excuse. While fate enables one to eschew responsibility by virtue of preordination, Darwinism seems to sanction the same by appealing to causes

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., XX 3-10.

that are, in some part, random. This is, in a sense, “hap,” which the form of contingency that implies the most arbitrary of “If”s. Thus, at the moment the reader expects the speaker to fully own up to his actions, the “slipperiness” of his own figuration affirms the preeminent role of the open-ended “If” in determining his life’s own narrative.

Meredith’s own editorial practices in finalizing the published edition of *Modern Love* speak similarly to his narrator’s complete internalization of Darwinian history. The original version of the tenth poem offers a vision of experience fundamentally at odds with the Darwinian concerns that animate *Modern Love* as a whole.

Contest not, we learn much from misery.
I knew not women till I suffer’d thus:
The things they are, and may be, unto us.
She gives the key with her inconstancy.
They must see Love to feel him, & no less
He dies if his pursuing gaze they miss:
Lo, if you break the habits of a kiss,
And it comes strange, so comes their bashfulness!
Narrow’d in that hot centre of their life
Where instincts rule, they bind you to its laws,
These shifting sandbanks which the ebb-tide draws!
You have a one-month’s bride, & then a wife
Who weens that time deposes her; rebels;
While you are living upward to the air,
Those passions that are spawn of low despair,
She clasps, & gets the comfort that is Hell’s.³⁶¹

These excised lines find the speaker attempting to make sense of his suffering by imbuing it with beneficial educational side effects: “Contest not, we learn much from misery. I knew not women till I suffer’d thus.” The general sentiment is keeping with the casual misogyny and evasion of responsibility that characterizes the speaker’s attitudes generally, but the particular lessons he professes to have learned about women from his “suffering” bear closer scrutiny. He claims that the “key” to the “things they are” lies in

³⁶¹ George Meredith, *A Tragedy of Modern Love* autograph manuscript poem. Box 13. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

their “inconstancy.” Women retreat into “bashfulness” when one breaks free of romantic “habits.” There is something inevitable about this very inconstancy, however; habits remain entirely predictable as part of a broader network of “laws.” Further contributing to the confused nature of the passage is the fact that “instincts” are themselves, according to the *Origin*, inheritable, and thus variable. Yet said “instincts” are a “law,” a conviction that cuts against the grain of his sense of contingency elsewhere; women are “shifting sandbanks which the ebb-tide draws!” That is, women are subject to an inexorable, but entirely regular force beyond themselves. There is nothing mysterious or arbitrary about the dissolution or erosion of male-female relationships, then; it’s as regular as the tides.

Meredith writes himself into a dilemma here. For the speaker to acknowledge, even through figuration, the *regularity* and *predictability* of romantic relationships is to acknowledge the regularity of his own narrative of modern love, the very narrative that he claims is permeated with cruel arbitrariness. It should be no surprise that Meredith would ultimately exclude this sonnet from publication, for it presents a vision of temporality fundamentally at odds with the narrator’s internalized Darwinism. I suspect it’s no accident that the sonnet Meredith substitutes for this original poem is the one beginning, “But where began the change; and what’s my crime?”³⁶² The very first line corrects the deleted stanza by declaring the poem’s concern to be the kind of causal and epistemological uncertainty that is the narrator’s primary preoccupation. It is a question for which he has no answer in the absence of discernible cause. Moreover, it is a question that will lead him to adopt lyricism as a way to sidestep both his sense of recapitulatory evolution and its attendant (lack of) causality.

Modern Love’s *Uses of Lyric*

³⁶² *Modern Love*, X, 10.

While I will argue that *Modern Love* contains passages of self-conscious lyricism, the poem also quite baldly describes its own strategy more locally by indulging in the fantasy of the “suspended moment.” As the speaker’s marriage dissolves due to (apparently) mutual infidelity, he craves for an escape from narrative progression by halting time altogether. For instance, when towards the end of the poem the speaker’s marriage seems to enjoy a brief renaissance, he reflects that “Love, that had robbed us of immortal things, / This little moment mercifully gave.”³⁶³ The relishing of the “moment,” the instant that defies narrative, is a relieving, if ultimately impotent, gesture that attempts to impede narrative progression and forestall further undesirable possibilities. If “love” is destined to disappoint as time proceeds, the moment (and its “monument” the sonnet) might provide access to a compensatory “immortality.”

Elsewhere, the suspended moment functions as a more specifically tactical deferral, as when the speaker marshals banality to forestall further conflict in the midst of a marital spat: “With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense. / Niagra or Vesuvius is deferred.”³⁶⁴ Explicitly, the speaker uses image of geological catastrophism to describe the potential fallout from their quarrel; “Niagra or Vesuvius” corresponds to the “Deluge...or Fire” with which he identifies his wife’s likely response to another disagreement earlier in the sonnet. His figuration both promotes an anti-gradualist sense of change in time and insists on the necessity of the “freezing” of his wife as a means to evade catastrophe’s consequences. Finally, at yet another point the speaker is struck by a memory of earlier marital bliss as a restorative measure that seeks not so much to relive the past as to mobilize it as a defense against futurity. Detecting an obscure image of his

³⁶³ Ibid., XLVII, 13-4.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., XXXIV, 15-6.

wife in the mirror, “‘The What has been’ a moment seemed his own.”³⁶⁵ Not exactly a conventional form of nostalgia, the past is conjured by the speaker not so he might return to it, but so that it might serve to resist time’s passage in the present moment. Such articulations of the speaker’s own psychological torments thus veer close to being reducible to a formal dilemma: shall he dwell in lyrical bliss, savoring individual moments as a means to stave off or ignore past and future misfortune or mistakes? Or must he accept narrative uncertainty and contingency as an essential condition of being?

To circumvent such a difficult question it would be better, the speaker decides at the conclusion of sonnet XIX, to be an “idiot,” “who, as days go by, / Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly, / In a queer sort of meditative mirth.”³⁶⁶ The fantasy of the idiot’s existence is that of a subjectivity not conscious of change, a “meditative” state without actual meditation that gives rise to a “mirth” only possible if change isn’t apprehended. But aside from such impossible wishes, the frighteningly under-motivated aspects of change in *Modern Love* give rise to certain lyric strategies designed to stage a resistance to a narrative beyond the speaker’s control. As the speaker cannot assume the consciousness (or lack thereof) of the idiot, he turns to lyric modes that can approximate the same opposition to evolution’s “If” narrative. The yearning to “defer” the explosive unpredictability of “Niagra or Vesuvius,” in other words, is a formal strategy as much as an expressed wish. Lyric is exactly what emerges in *Modern Love* as the distressed response to the speaker’s sense of evolutionary narrative, and the provisional answer to the problems it poses for “modern love.”

³⁶⁵ Ibid., V, 10.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., XIX, 14.

One such lyric strategy is a turn to pastoralism. The eighteenth sonnet opens onto a scene of English pastoralism the speaker claims to once have “known” in his younger days. The narrative of his own life is cast as a kind of fall from an Edenic, timeless, pastoral bliss into a consciousness of the vicissitudes of narrative: “Here Jack and Tom are paired with Moll and Meg. / Curved open to the river-reach is seen / A country merry-making on the green.”³⁶⁷ The illusory space of English pastoral is, of course, despite the speaker’s autobiographical identifications with the scene, one perennially outside history, in which the frolicking lovers can remain in perpetual innocent bliss. Indeed, the speaker himself seems to recognize the impossible, fictional status of the pastoral world he conjures:

I have known rustic revels in my youth:
The May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease.
An early goddess was a country lass:
A charmed Amphion-oak she tripped the grass.
What life was that I lived? The life of these?
Heaven keep them happy! Nature they seem near
They must, I think, be wiser than I am.³⁶⁸

As the English pastoralism of the sonnet veers towards the classical, the speaker is forced into a recognition that he never really enjoyed “the life of these.” What Jack, Tom, Moll and Meg enjoy are “May-fly pleasures,” in that they must soon give way to the sober knowledge that an ignorance from change isn’t tenable (ie, they last as long as the May-fly’s transient lifespan). But the “May-fly” also invokes the fly of the following stanza, the condition of the idiot that the speaker will never be able to resemble. This pastoral is a version of the fall, but one that also rejects the plausibility of the Edenic condition to begin with. The “nature” with which these pastoral figures are allied is a naïve

³⁶⁷ Ibid., XVIII, 1-3.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 8-14.

formulation that stands in contrast to the more menacing, Darwinian “nature” with which the poem is mainly concerned. When the speaker dismisses the natural wisdom of the rustics at the close of the sonnet, he attributes their thoughtless mirth to “beer.” But this flippancy belies the momentary relief the lyric moment affords. Even as he acknowledges the unreal nature of the pastoral fantasy, the speaker marshals pastoral as a formal stay against the narrative pull of the sequence as a whole. This makes all the more sense when one considers Darwinism’s relationship to the nostalgic imagination more generally. As Gillian Beer argues, in evolutionary thinking “Nostalgia was disallowed, since no unrecapturable perfection preceded man’s history. Ascent was also flight – a flight from the primitive and the barbaric which could never quite be left behind.”³⁶⁹ The embrace, however brief, of the pastoral by the narrator thus constitutes a denial of evolutionary reality that is broken when he feels obligated to acknowledge the rustics’ reliance on drink, a residual element, perhaps, of their “primitive and the barbaric” origins. This acknowledgment unavoidably breaks the pastoral trance, forcing the speaker once more into a confrontation with narrative.

Elsewhere, the speaker turns to ekphrastic description as a similar means of evading narration. Specifically, he both describes and introspectively dwells on Raphael’s *St Michael trampling Satan* (1518):

‘In Paris, at the Louvre, there have I seen
 The sumptuously-feathered angel pierce
 Prone Lucifer, descending. Looked he fierce,
 Showing the fight a fair one? Too serene!
 The young Pharsalians did not disarray
 Less willingly their locks of floating silk:
 That suckling mouth of his upon the milk
 Of heaven might still be feasting through the fray.
 Oh, Raphael! when men the Fiend do fight,

³⁶⁹ Darwin’s *Plots*, 119.

They conquer not upon such easy terms.
 Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms.
 And does he grow half human, all is right.'
 This to my Lady in a distant spot,
 Upon the theme: *While mind is mastering clay,*
Gross clay invades it. If the spy you play,
 My wife, read this! Strange love-talk, is it not?³⁷⁰

The passage signals itself as lyric speech relevant to but distinct from the main narrative action of the poem. The previous sonnet concludes with the speaker admitting to himself that the affection of his mistress cannot entirely compensate for the loss of his wife's warmth and devotion. In a disorienting transition, this sonnet then begins with the quotation marks that signal speech, but both speaker and addressee aren't revealed until the thirteenth line. While it might be easy enough to assume the poem's protagonist as the speaker of this particular bit of dialogue, the content of the speech, which describes the difficulty of maintaining a pure conscience and sense of morals in the midst of conflict, is equally applicable to both mistress *and* wife. In this sense, the sonnet's very status as speech that can't be narratively located wrests this moment out of the poem's narrative.

But more important, perhaps, is the speaker's critique of the painting itself, for the passage's turn to evolutionary language leads the reader outside the painting, and away from the descriptive moment. The principal flaw with Raphael's painting, as the speaker sees it, is its insincere representation of the conflict between Michael and the Devil. As rendered, the archangel is unflappable and "serene," immune to the moral foibles that emerge out of mortal "struggle." Poised, confident, and righteous, Michael displays none of the "serpentine" qualities the speaker believes to be a necessary result of confronting the "Fiend." The truths the painting sidesteps, then, are the truths of evolution, most explicitly that men bear traces of their evolutionary history as "worms" or "serpents," that

³⁷⁰ *Modern Love*, XXXIII, 1-16.

reveal themselves in moments of struggle (itself the chief marker of evolutionary existence). Far from the ethical certainty and equanimity exemplified by Michael, mankind's own sense of self-possession under duress is quite literally more slippery. This recognition of inescapable evolutionary freight leads the speaker to depart from the work of describing, reducing his consideration of Raphael to aphorism: "*While mind is mastering clay, / Gross clay invades it*" and a cryptic provocation directed towards his wife: "If the spy you play, / My wife, read this! Strange love-talk, is it not?" Even as the final line creates its own sort of narrative stasis by posing an unanswerable question to an absent audience, the direct, immediate rhetorical turn towards the wife serves as an implicit recognition of the ongoing saga of infidelity that refuses to stop for lyric.

The speaker finds both these lyrical moments, of pastoral and ekphrasitic description, to be difficult or impossible to maintain. The former ultimately rejects nostalgia, and the latter can't help but discover the implausibility of Raphael's vision in the context of a Darwinian universe. But in another sense, the sonnet form itself relies upon the complex interplay, and sometimes interpenetration, of lyric and narrative modes: the same interplay that Sharp intimated when selecting sonnets from *Modern Love* for his appendix. In other words, while the poem frequently retreats into lyric moments as a way of forestalling the implications of evolutionary time, *Modern Love's* modified sonnet form itself contains within itself the tensions the sequence as a whole embodies. Kenneth Crowell has recently argued for the centrality of the playful *sonnetto caudato* tradition for Meredith as a vehicle for social satire. The *sonnetto caudato*, however, relies on a particular kind of formal reversal that *Modern Love* frequently resists: utilizing the extra lines to provide ironic commentary on the preceding verse, or

comically “amplify[ing] the poem’s sentiment in a surprisingly abrupt manner.”³⁷¹ The verse form’s structure, then, bears a certain preexisting relation to narrativity, in which we read for a humorous “resolution.” In this sense, the *sonnetto caudato* mimics the formal patternings of both Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets, both of which similarly are inscribed within logical strictures that imply a certain narrative, even as they often strive for lyric ends (the immortality of the speaker or the beloved, for instance).³⁷²

Meredith’s sonnet form, however, often resists the teleological drive and narration that even the most “lyric” of Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnets demonstrates, by virtue of the unstable nature of its “turn,” or even its absence. The rhyme scheme itself suggests this instability by providing no formal indication of when one might reasonably expect such a reversal. Each sonnet is a series of four self-contained, circular quatrains, rhyming ABBA. In its refusal of a formal Petrarchan volta or Shakespearean couplet, Meredith’s sonnet form more closely approximates the similarly circular stanzas of another great poem of evolutionary anxiety: Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, in which the cyclical repetition of its rhymes enact the annual cycle of grief experienced by the poem’s narrator. In a similar act of mimesis, Meredith’s form functions to both suppress and express his speaker’s evolutionary anxieties. In their act of endlessly returning back to themselves, Meredith’s quatrains resist the teleological and narrative drive that even the most “lyric” of Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnets contain. And yet, this same return promises a predictable, even comforting homecoming at the conclusion of every quatrain, a sense of inevitability that the demands of evolution refuse to grant.

³⁷¹ Kenneth Crowell, “Modern Love and the Sonnetto Caudato: Comedic Intervention through the Satiric Sonnet Form,” *Victorian Poetry* 48:4 2010, 546.

³⁷² See Heather Dubrow’s *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

The specter of narrative, as Heather Dubrow argues, lurks in many of the most “lyric” of early modern sonnets. Even so, the fact remains that many of them thematize the lyric’s capacity for enshrining one’s self or one’s beloved in a state of immortality through the lyric itself. Appropriately, *Modern Love*’s most explicit nod to the early modern tradition, in the thirtieth sonnet, alludes to this very aspect:

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.³⁷³

Here the speaker makes clear what his formal intentions have been throughout the poem, to escape narrativity by “living but with the day,” a tactic that manifests itself through lyric. But more interestingly, the lessons of “science” are aligned with both those of “nature” and the practice of sonneteering.³⁷⁴ The anxieties of science, in particular evolutionary natural history, are, as we’ve seen, the guiding force behind the speaker’s lyrical practice. His own personal observations concerning the workings of nature confirm this desire to wrest himself from narrativity, which in turn finds expression through early modern lyrical practice, newly relevant in light of his evolutionary angst. While the speaker’s Petrarchan language initially strikes one as ironic or bathetic, the lyric modes of *Modern Love* strive quite sincerely to mimic the effects of a “sonnet to your eyes.”³⁷⁵ Romantic love taking place in a universe governed by Darwinian unpredictability requires similar poetic tactics, even if the speaker’s ultimate conclusions

³⁷³ *Modern Love*, XXX, 13-6.

³⁷⁴ An earlier version of the poem had “love-chanson” in the place of “sonnet.” The edit, it seemed to me, was designed to foreground Meredith’s investment in a more particular generic history.

³⁷⁵ Interestingly, Meredith chooses the “eye” as his stand-in for the broader Petrarchan conceit of the blason. The “eye,” of course, since William Paley’s *Natural Theology* was a principal source of evidence for anti-evolutionary advocates, who saw it as an example of what would now be termed “irreducible complexity.” The poems of *Modern Love* are sonnets to eyes in the sense of their thematization of evolution generally, but the moment also seems one of light satire, in which the speaker’s reference to eyes functions as yet another example of his fear and resistance to evolutionary narrative.

concerning their utility or efficacy are drastically different. If the Petrarchan sequence holds out hope for a form of immortality, *Modern Love* insists on narrative's eventual triumph. Meredith's later poetry, however, would try to move beyond the question of lyric and narrative entirely, and in doing so, advance a uniquely Meredithian understanding of evolutionary history.

Evolutionary Joy: Beyond the Lyric

Meredith frequently finds himself positioned alongside Tennyson as an evolutionary partisan, who both accepts the basic doctrine of the variability of species as tragic empirical truth and molds a broader philosophy and ethics from its basic principles. But while "Nature red in tooth and claw" remains just that for Meredith, the contentious battleground of an evolutionary universe is nevertheless both a cause for joy in nature in his later lyrics as well as the site for exercising individual moral virtues that themselves can propel human evolution in terms of mind or spirit. Joy and progress, however, come at the cost of the gratification of egocentric desire, which impedes humankind's ability to meld with what Meredith calls Earth (a slippery term that denotes both material nature and the spiritual elements with which it is infused). In Meredith, as Lionel Stevenson notes in his classic study of poetry and evolution, "man's only philosophy must be submission to the inevitable law of Earth, accepting his place in the general process of evolution without petulant questioning."³⁷⁶ Obviously, what critics like Stevenson have accepted as Meredith's "philosophy" (correctly, I think), runs contrary to the speaker of *Modern Love*, for whom "petulant questioning" might be seen as one his main discursive modes, and a symptom of the individual haunted by the contingencies and lack of directionality inherent in his particular recapitulationist formulation of evolution. I want

³⁷⁶ Stevenson, 219.

then to suggest that the version of evolutionary development promulgated in Meredith's later verse is an attempt to avoid its disturbing narrative implications for the individual subject. In doing so, Meredith's later verse promotes a vision of evading or transcending Darwinian narrative that is distinct from *Modern Love*'s, by attempting to go beyond the individual lyric speaker, aspiring to a universal song in which all of Earth might participate. While *Modern Love* seeks to delay evolution's inevitable, arbitrary march through lyric, the later verse reconfigures lyric time as something that transcends individual experience entirely, giving voice to a Earth for which narrative time is unspeakably vast and inexpressible.

Meredith in his later lyrics returns again and again to notions of evolution and temporality that subvert Darwinian narrative's most unpleasant byproducts: unpredictability, dysteleology, arbitrariness. To begin with, these poems often paint a Malthusian picture of mankind's history while invoking a conception of gradualistic evolutionary progress that allows for human agency by virtue of a Lamarckian exertion of will and labor. "Earth and Man," from the 1883 volume *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth*, describes an early mankind forced to be "Contentious with the elements, whose dower / First sprang him; for swift vultures to devour / If he desists."³⁷⁷ And while his evolution has resulted in a civilization that largely exempts him from such natural threats, he nevertheless faces an inward strife, a struggle against one's ego or "Self" that prevents a joyous reconciliation with Earth. This development, importantly, is emphatically *not* one of natural selection, but rather a function of dedicated labor. As Meredith argues in "Hard Weather," "Behold the life at ease; it drifts. / The sharpened life commands its

³⁷⁷ "Earth and Man," 10-12.

course.”³⁷⁸ Here a leisured existence invites the consequence of Darwinism, a rudderless, purposeless drifting defying individual control. Personal exertion, the “sharpened life,” is that which imbues the evolutionary narrative with an upward trajectory that elsewhere Meredith describes as a “spiral,” a gradual, inconsistent process, but one that travels in the direction of improvement.³⁷⁹ Not only is Darwinism given the progressive course that Darwin so assiduously eschewed in *The Origin*, but Meredith also recasts the “struggle” for existence central to natural selection as one over which the individual has the ability to declare victory, by dedicating himself to both work and the suppression of the ego. “Contention is the vital force,” Meredith declares, and “[Earth’s] children of the labouring brain, / These are the champions of the race.”³⁸⁰ This form of spiritual “struggle” is that which leads to the next stage of development. Meredith envisions, as it were, a select group of individuals that exert, in Lamarckian manner, certain virtues that lead to the eventual betterment of mankind. Such a vision privileges choice over chance, and will over accident, without denying the essential, gradual mutability of species.

There is a certain paradox at the heart of such a philosophy as regards the individual, who is author of the evolutionary future that itself is dependant on the extinction of the individual’s own ego. Meredith’s late poetics, as Nicholas Frankel has observed, scarcely foreground a lyric “I,” a commonplace feature of most poetry one would customarily regard as lyric. In Frankel’s reading, Meredith’s nature poetry “generally eschews the conventions of both lyric and narrative poetry, inhabiting a formal universe of its own invention...in which individuals transcend their selfish concerns

³⁷⁸ “Hard Weather,” 71-72.

³⁷⁹ “The World’s Advance,” 9.

³⁸⁰ “Hard Weather,” 75, 93-4.

through identification with a simple rhythmic pulse.”³⁸¹ For Frankel, Meredith strives to articulate a “nature” in which boundaries between poet, reader, and text are all elided. At the very least, Meredith breaks with lyric convention through his avoidance of the lyric “I,” much preferring a “you,” as in “The Woods of Westermains,” or a “we,” as in “The Lark Ascending,” a poem also included in *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth*. The speaker of “The Lark Ascending” never presents himself in the singular, but always in first person plural. Moreover, the collective speaker is throughout the poem a listener or audience first and foremost, one who beholds the song of the lark rather than singing themselves:

For singing till his heaven fills,
 ‘Tis love of earth that he instills,
 And ever winging up and up,
 Our valley is his golden cup,
 And he the wine which overflows
 To lift us with him as he goes.³⁸²

While the lark is an individual speaker, he is capable of channeling the voice of Meredith’s Earth, in the process inviting speaker(s) and readers to join “with him as he goes,” much in the manner Frankel describes. The bird manages this lyrical sleight-of-hand by virtue of his own rejection of lyric subjectivity. His is a “song seraphically free / Of taint of personality.”³⁸³ The lark signifies the very suppression of ego that Meredith sees as essential to mankind’s spiritual evolution, and serves as the poetic model to which his own verse aspires. But the stifling of the lyric subject for Meredith isn’t entirely enough. The universal song offered by the lark remains beyond reach for mankind:

Was never voice of ours could say

³⁸¹ Nicholas Frankel, “The Textual Environment of George Meredith,” *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 47 (2007).

³⁸² “The Lark Ascending,” 65-70.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 93-4.

Our inmost in the sweetest way,
Like yonder verse aloft, and link
All hearers in the song they drink.³⁸⁴

Rather, those who will enable the emergence of such universal music among mankind are laborers, who “grinding wheels on flint, / Yield substance, though they sing not.”³⁸⁵ And yet, Meredith’s own poetic practices still strive to approximate those of the lark, whose song, it must be noted, is described in generic terms: “Without a break, without a fall, / Sweet-silvery, *sheer lyrical*.”³⁸⁶ Meredith’s lark invokes a more traditionally classical notion of lyric, in which the lyrical voice is both singing and communal, or “pluralistic,” as Sharon Cameron describes certain instances of lyric speech. As she argues,

The proposition of lyric vision and speech as pluralistic is most compelling when we recall, on the one hand, the lyric’s affinity with the chorus of the Greek drama, and on the other, some of its more recent spokesmen, as for example, the self-professed pluralistic speaker of Whitman’s poems who is nothing if not multiple.³⁸⁷

The lyricism that the lark exemplifies through its song is such a “pluralistic” conduit for the spirit of joy that, along with exertion and effort, leads to spiritual improvement and progress.³⁸⁸

A similar bird is at the center of “The Thrush in February,” published in *A Reading of Earth*. The poem opens with an unsettling and unrepresentative claim of

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 85-89.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 102-3.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 39-40. Emphasis mine.

³⁸⁷ Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 207.

³⁸⁸ Adam Potkay’s *The Story of Joy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) provides some useful criteria for the category, all of which might apply to Meredith. As “the experience or apprehension of union or fulfillment, of desire laid at least temporarily to rest”(10), joy involves a necessary exorcism of desire. Moreover, this “apprehension” is not necessarily just that of the moment, but “as much a form of memory as of anticipation.” Joy, in his formulation, embodies the same temporal double vision as Meredith’s appropriately titled “Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth.”

mastery on part of Meredith's lyric subject: "I know him, February's thrush."³⁸⁹ But as the speaker's "study" of the bird commences, his sense of the thrush as knowable object is frustrated by the bird's identification with a vaster Earth of which the speaker only has partial knowledge. As the "herald of the million bills," the thrush remains stubbornly "Remote, not alien; still, not cold."³⁹⁰ This recognition of the bird's qualified otherness, along with a sense of commonality that the speaker can't entirely articulate, coincides with a shift in subject: the speaker becomes an "us" to which the thrush's song and eye are directed. This first person plural isn't operative for long in the poem, but when the "me" reemerges, it's in a curious context that seems to subsume that individual voice into the expansive voice of Earth:

He sings me, out of Winter's throat,
The young time with the life ahead;
And my young time his leaping note
Recalls to spirit-mirth from dead.³⁹¹

In Meredith's somewhat convoluted figure, the speaker transforms into pure song, song from "Winter's throat" channeled through the thrush itself. Lyrical utterance here is not the exclusive property of the ostensible speaker, but the familiar shared, pluralistic song that reverberates throughout all of Earth. If there can be said to be a "speaker" of this song, it is Earth itself, which sings both through and for its constituent components.

Moreover, this lyrical moment opens onto narrative: history becomes palatable as soon as one accepts him or herself as part of Earth rather than an individual, an ego, or here, a speaker. Having appreciated the ego's continuity with a broader Earth, the speaker can imagine a life-history without anxiety, indeed with joy, a "leaping note." Harmonized

³⁸⁹ "The Thrush in February," 1.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 7, 33.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 45-48.

with the vast temporalities of Earth, the speaker's own life narrative loses the tragic, Darwinian dimensions of *Modern Love*. As Georg Roppen argues, "Meredith...sees no tragedy in the individual life being merely a brief flowering and season in the endless regenerative process of life."³⁹² Accordingly, this vision affords new possibilities for joy in the lyric moment as the speaker describes those who "pitch / Their joy in this old heart of things":

Who feel the Coming young as aye,
Thrice hopeful on the ground we plough;
Alive for life, awake to die;
One voice to cheer the seedling Now.³⁹³

The consciousness described in this stanza attends equally to the joyful present moment, in which one feels "Alive for life," and inevitable temporal progression. While flux, change and narrative more generally are inescapable, this is precisely the reason to feel joy in the "seedling Now," rather than a cause for retreat into the lyric stasis of *Modern Love*. The very phrase "seedling Now" ingeniously encapsulates the double duty that Meredith's depersonalized lyrics perform: a joyful "Now" that refuses to be compromised by, and indeed, *must* take account of its contingent status. Every "Now" is a "seedling," forever giving way to upward evolutionary progress. And it is the moment at which the ego is transformed into the Earth's "we" that this double vision becomes accessible for the subject, as evolutionary narrative ceases to be threatening.

Meredith's mature, depersonalized conception of evolution as a governing life philosophy does find its way into the thirteenth sonnet of *Modern Love*, albeit in a perverse form, in which nature is cast as a quasi-malevolent, governing force:

'I play for Seasons; not Eternities!'

³⁹² Roppen, 234.

³⁹³ "The Thrush in February," 61-64.

Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must
 All those whose stake is nothing more than dust.'
 And lo, she wins, and of her harmonies
 She is full sure! Upon her dying rose
 She drops a look of fondness and goes by,
 Scare any retrospection in her eye;
 For she the laws of growth most deeply knows,
 Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag – there, an urn.
 Pledged she herself to aught, 'twould mark her end!
 This lesson of our only visible friend
 Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?
 Yes! yes! – but, oh, our human rose is fair
 Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love's great bliss,
 When the renewed for ever of a kiss
 Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!³⁹⁴

The speaker seems at first to approximate Meredith's own brand of stoic evolutionism, by suggesting that man can "learn" from nature to cope with its fickleness. Nature here is cast as well-schooled in the ephemerality of natural things, and thus able to disregard the significance of the particular. But the speaker's Nature is a much more sinister presence than Meredith's Earth; her laughter is not an effect of joy, but a sardonic mocking of a subject fated to be mere "dust." Indeed, joy is absent in Nature's opinion of her own works. A "dying rose" elicits an insignificant "fondness" of which Nature will retain no memory. And it is here, perhaps, that the Nature of the thirteenth sonnet departs most severely with Earth. While Nature ostensibly instructs the speaker to forsake "retrospection," and thus history, she offers nothing in terms of a compensatory indulgence in the present. Nature rather seeks to avoid the "Now" along with history and narrative, coming to represent an atemporal disposition that is so suffused with the knowledge of change that it refuses any notion of temporality at all. The poem's spatial deictics testify to this notion: "here, a seed-bag – there, an urn." Located in a non-temporal, non-narrative relation to one another, the seed-bag and urn's coexistence

³⁹⁴ *Modern Love*, XIII, 193-208.

affirms inseparable relation between birth, growth, and loss that motivates Nature's departure from narrativity. Of course, the speaker finds it impossible to adopt this outlook regardless, as it leaves no room for the sensual delights through which he thinks he himself can escape narrativity. The "renewed for-ever of a kiss" promises temporal salvation through the vulgar egoism of erotic indulgence. In a sense, this is the same delusion the speaker suffers from throughout *Modern Love*: the ability to evade the exigencies of a Darwinian universe. The immediacy of sensualism is in a sense another version of the speaker's dominant formal strategy of lyric delay. And while Nature offers another strategy through a resigned nihilism, the speaker is too committed to individual pleasure to adopt it.

Despite the thirteenth sonnet's dramatization of the limits of an egocentric evolutionism, it, like later Meredith, speaks in the first person plural, and is thus largely anomalous in the greater context of *Modern Love*. When the speaker asks, "Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?" however, the "our" is invoked as a justification for his own self-regard. In other words, he identifies himself with a larger collective so as to ascribe his own inability to learn Nature's lesson to an essential condition of humanity writ large, thereby excusing himself. The poem thus functions much as the other lyric moments in *Modern Love* do: as an effort to halt the narrative of evolution at the level of the individual lyric subject. More interestingly, though, it self-reflexively meditates on this strategy of lyric delay, only to find it wanting. As a lyric, the poem is much like the "renewed for-ever kiss," promising a way out of narrative through an alternate temporality. But "kisses," specifically those that the speaker and his wife exchange with their relative paramours, are precisely what propel the narrative of the poem; it's a saga

of infidelity and its consequences. In the same way, the speaker finds it impossible to remain in lyric time forever, and turns to narrating the repercussions of these kisses only two sonnets later.

Chief among these consequences, of course, is the suicide of the speaker's wife, the concluding narrative event of the poem, though it takes place obliquely. The entire sequence of *Modern Love*, then, is reliant upon an individual life-cycle for its narrative power. To a certain degree, *Modern Love* as a whole is complicit in the speaker's blinkered worldview, dedicated to narrative principles structured around the life of the individual rather than the liberating, all-embracing life of Earth. Before Meredith's mature evolutionism is ever fully laid out in verse, *Modern Love* serves as its proleptic *via negativa*. The concluding sonnet (spoken in an unidentified third-person that could be either an external narrator or the protagonist adopting a different voice), speaks to the limitations of the speaker's evolutionary vision:

Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life! –
In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!³⁹⁵

These final lines articulate the true "tragedy" of the poem: the search for "certainties in this *our life*" in the context of the speaker's dogged insistence on framing evolutionary problems at the level of the individual life. This search, as the poem dramatizes, is doomed to failure. But what the poem doesn't quite describe is the solution Meredith's larger corpus settles upon: to recognize the certitude of mutability and progress at the expense of the individual, and thereby reconcile one's self with Earth and rejoice.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., L, 795-800.

Formally, then, the sonnet sequence stages a conflict between first person lyric and narrative modes that prove equally ineffective, the former due to its delusions concerning its escape from narrative, and the later due to its fixation on individual human lives as dominant narrative subjects. Meredith's later verse attempts to move beyond these limitations to describe a sense of being that needn't contend at all with that "one tremendous IF." If a sonnet cannot be a moment's monument in any satisfying way, perhaps Meredith's late lyrics can still manage to account for the pleasure of the moment while heeding its inherent futurity and the magnificent vastness of evolutionary timescales.